THE EDGAR WALLACE READER OF MYSTERY AND ADVENTURE

BY

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Freeditorial

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1. THE GOVERNOR OF CHI-FOO

In Chi-Foo, as in the Forbidden City, the phrase Iang-knei- tsi, which means "foreign devil," was one seldom employed, for Colin" Hemel, who in the days of the Manchu dynasty had the august and godlike ear of the Daughter of Heaven, was as terribly quick to punish now that he served a democratic president. As for Chi-Foo, Augustus Verrill sat there, and, brute as he was, he had still enough of the white man in him to resent Iang-knei-tsi.

So it was Iang-ren that people said, meaning (so we persuade ourselves) "honorable foreign."

What they call foreigners in Chi-Foo nowadays I do not know, for Augustus Verrill is not there, and for this reason.

On a bright spring morning the interested but fearful people of Chi- Foo, straining their ears for the sound, were rewarded with the word they awaited. It was the word "shul!" which means "kill!"

A Chinaman with a thick padded coat of blue, his hands concealed in his sleeves, was picking a delicate way along the untidy street which leads to the Gate of a Thousands Regrets, when he heard the guttural whisper, and saw the crazy door of a house come flying outward.

He spun round on the heel of his felt boot, his eyes blinking in the strong sunlight, his lean brown face tense, and a grin of expectancy showing the white even rim of his teeth.

"Kill!" said the dog-faced leader.

The blue-coated Chinaman squared his elbow and a straight splinter of fire leaped from his hand.

The dog-faced man, with a grimace like one who swallows a noxious draught, went lurching against the white wall of the house, leaving it smeared and disfigured when he finally collapsed to his knees.

This was against all arrangement, for the Devil in Blue had left the inn outside the city gates, and in a second's space the Street of Going Forth was deserted save for the bluecoated Chinaman and the gurgling thing that was huddled in the mud by the wall. The blue Chinaman looked down, frowning.

"Insensate Chink," said he. "Blind and prejudiced instrument of fate —quo vadis?"

He took a white handkerchief from the fold of his sleeve and blew his nose, never removing his eyes from the dying man.

"Better you than me, by gad," he said earnestly, "from all over the world to die like a pig in a wallow of mud? That's no death for a gentleman."

All the time he spoke aloud in English, yet so cleverly was he made up, so scrupulous was the attention he had devoted to his toilette and the et ceteras of his character that none in the city of Chi-Foo knew him for any other than Li Wan, a small-piece mandarin charged by the Daughter of Heaven to inquire into certain irregularities at the Court of Mandarin Wen-Ho Hong, Governor of the Province of Chi-Foo.

He waited until the man was dead, then looked up and down the deserted street. The Gate of a Thousand Regrets was closed, though it was long before sunrise. The Captain of the Guard would explain the unusual happening, would also swear by his domestic gods that he saw no sight of brawling and heard no sound of shot.

At the other end of the street a little knot of small boys had gathered with folded arms, frowning curiously, and relaxing their attitude from time to time to point out, with their thin little arms stretched stiffly, the tragic consequences of the attack.

These melted as the man in blue, twirling his long-barreled Browning, walked slowly back the way he had come. The bazaar was alive with people—the bazaar which ran to the right from the street end to the very gates of the Yamen.

But even this crowd, silent and watchful, stepped on one side to give him a free passage. Once he heard a half-hearted "Shul!" and his quick ears caught the rustle of movement which is so ominous a sequence to such an urgent suggestion. Then a jagged stone whistled past his ear, and he heard the "Ugh!" of the man who threw it.

He was half-way to the Yamen, and did not turn until another stone caught him in the middle of his well-padded back.

He whipped round as the thrower was stooping for further ammunition, and covered him.

"Oh, man," said he, in the queer dialect of the river province, "I wish you a safe journey."

The thrower dropped his stone as if he had been shot.

"Come nearer to me," commanded the Blue Man, and the coolie shuffled forward through the mud, staring without expression into the gray eyes of the other.

"There is a wind on the river tonight," said the man with the pistol.

"I sail my sampan in the wind," stammered the other; and then, "Let me die if I have offended your honorable body."

"Walk behind me, brother," said the blue Chinaman, and continued on his way. The trembling coolie who had followed him did not see him grin, or know that the Devil in Blue was armed. He had used the password of the Mournful Owls—not for the first time—and here was a member of the secret society humbly serving him, though Chung-Win-Ti, the local head of the Order, lay stiffening in the mud not a stone's throw away.

The man in blue passed hastily through the gates of the Yamen, and entered the outer Court of Justice.

He swept aside an imploring secretary full of murmurs about the Mandarin's indisposition, and came without ceremony to the presence of the Governor.

Wen-Ho-Hong looked up as the Blue Man entered, and started.

"It is an honorable happening that you condescend to come to my hovel," he murmured. "Does your graciousness desire something?"

"My miserable carcass has come," said the Blue Man, a snarl on his lips, "despite the fact that your honorable assassins endeavored to send me on the journey; also, my noble prince, I fear that I have villainously slain an honorable servant of yours, Chung-Win-Ti, in the Street by the Gate."

The aesthetic face of the other did not so much as twitch.

"If you had brought your nobleness with the other honorable members of your Commission," he said gently, "I, unworthy as I am, would have sent forth my miserable guard to bring your felicity to the Yamen."

For a moment they sat, two Chinamen with shaven heads and plaited queues, their hands upon their knees, watching one another; then the Governor spoke:

"Will your lordship deign to enter my poverty-stricken inner room?"

The stranger hesitated a moment, then rose without a word and followed the Mandarin through the great lacquered door, which the Mandarin closed carefully behind him.

"Now, Mr. Hemel," he said, in English, "we can talk—what is the idea?"

Colin Hemel, the President of China's Secret Service, lit a cigarette.

"A few slight irregularities, Augustus," he said slowly, between his puffs. "Robbery of troops' pay—"

"That's nothing," said the other lightly. "Betrayal of the Government to the rebels—membership of a secret society."

"That's nothing either," snarled the Mandarin. "Isn't there anything else?"

Colin Hemel looked up at the beautiful carved ceiling of the sanctuary.

"When we were very young men," he said slowly, "long before you went Chinese—I suppose the fact that we were both born in the land makes our jobs natural—there was a girl at Shanghai; do you remember?"

The other licked his lips.

"I was rather fond of her, and so were you," Colin went on, "and when Li Hang took you up, made you his English secretary, and finally gave you a province to rule, I was jolly glad—it sort of left the way open to me."

The other smiled faintly, but Colin seemed not to see him.

"I heard all about your wonderful success at Pekin, how you had pleased the Daughter of Heaven, and your fine new appointment—the only American to hold such a job, aren't you?"

The Mandarin nodded.

"I used to talk about it to her, and she was a little wistful. One day she disappeared."

The man before him averted his gaze.

"She disappeared," repeated the Secret Service man, blowing out a cloud of smoke, "and she came here."

There was a dead silence, which the Mandarin broke.

"Well?" he asked defiantly.

"Well," said the other, "I have added to your crimes—that."

The man he called Augustus—he was an Augustus Verrill before his Chinese days—nodded.

"I somehow fancied you were on the track when I heard the Commission was appointed," he said; "naturally I tried—to stop you. I am rather a big chap with the Owls, and they do, well—they do things for me."

"Naturally," said the blue-coated man dryly.

"As for Miss—er—Mrs. Verrill, for, of course, I married her—you are quite mistaken if you think she is unhappy. You shall see her if you care—after this trial. I suppose it is a trial?"

Colin nodded. "The Commission will arrive in an hour. I came on ahead for reasons of my own."

"To secure news of her?" The Mandarin's eyes narrowed.

"Exactly. Can't I—can't I see her now?"

The Mandarin shook her head.

"Be reasonable, my dear fellow," he said suavely. "She is in the very best of health—lives like a princess and all that sort of thing—servants—and she's awfully happy."

Colin rose, and paced the parquetted floor of the room, his hand on his breast.

"That is all I want," he said, a little huskily. "I wronged you, Verrill—I'm sorry." He held out his hand. "I always thought there was a beast in you. Somehow I never thought of her as being happy. That—that was conceit, I suppose. I'll arrange the Commission for you."

Later he was to remember the attempt on his life, and wonder why —if the man had nothing to fear. But perhaps he feared for her, that this masterful officer, who now enjoyed the confidence of the Daughter of Heaven, would carry her back to her people perhaps.

He went to the sitting of the Commission with a light heart.

He who was called Wen-Ho-Hong swore by all his domestic gods, and by every sacred thing save his dead father—he was too much of a gentleman to

so perjure himself—that he knew nothing of the world of the Owls, nor of any,other secret society. He was charged also with having been the cause of a mutiny in the army by withholding his soldiers' pay for a year, but here he saved himself without difficulty.

The Owls' business was more difficult to explain away to the commissioners from Pekin. Though he thrust responsibility upon a smallpiece mandarin named Ho-shi-lai, though he arrayed witnesses by the thousand—producing a sample hundred in the flesh before the grave Commission who sat, hands on knees, spectacled and impassive, in the court- house-to testify to his innocence, neither Li-hung-sao nor the teak-faced Mandarin with the winking eye, who sat at the end of the row of judges, were visibly impressed.

"The Daughter of Heaven" (they still preserve the faction of Royal Government in China), murmured Li-hung-sao apologetically, "is disturbed, and miserable sycophant as I am, and unworthy to discuss such high matters with Your Excellency, yet I must humbly ask for a better story to carry to the gate of the Celestial City."

"Prince," said the Governor lightly, and he glanced meaningly at Colin Hemel, "I have sworn by the Noble Dead, and I have brought witnesses to prove that I know nothing of thb killing of the Sesu folk—I can do no more."

Li-hung-sao had glanced from time to time at the third member of the Commission.

"What does Your Excellency say to this?" he asked timidly, for president though he was, the last word was with the blue-coated man at the least important place.

Colin Hemel twisted round.

"I am unworthy to give an opinion," he said, and he was occupied in his mind with the important question—how little could he with decency fine this peccant Mandarin, before he delivered a mild admonition?

For he was anxious to have done with this farce of a trial—a farce which he had planned so tragically—and go to some place where he could see her over again and for the last time. How strange she would seem in the Chinese costume she would wear! She with her flaxen hair and gray eyes.

"Your Excellency knows," he began, when there was a stir in the crowd, a howl like the howl of a beast, and a figure dived head down between the soldiers. It fell on its knees before the grave court.

A coolie flung after and lashed at the quivering figure in his fear and rage.

"Excellencies," he stammered, "a woman from the kitchen—shameless."

"Mercy, 0 judges!" the thing on the floor mumbled and blubbered in Chinese, and raised its head and caught the staring eyes of the Mandarin in blue. He saw the cropped hair, the gray eyes, the wasted face, the skinny arms stretched in supplication.

"Mr.—Mr. Hemell" sobbed the wreck, and collapsed.

"Let this woman be taken to my chair," said Hemel softly; "in the name of the Daughter of Heaven, let no man harm her."

The court was very still; only the shuffling feet of the man who lifted the figure and the heavy breathing of the Governor of Chi-Foo were the sounds heard.

Then Hemel, white as death, leaned forward, consulting no man, and struck a gong with his bare knuckles. Through the side door curtained with gold and black tapestries came a man bare to the waist, dull-eyed and brown. He ran forward and sank on his knees before the judge, sweeping his lithe body till his shaven forehead touched the ground.

"Go, Fa-ti-sing," said Colin Hemel huskily, "taking with you His Excellency Wen-Ho-Hong, the Governor. Outside the city gate, near by the Plain of Ten Thousand Sorrows, you shall strike the head of Wen-Ho-Hong from his body. In the name of the Daughter of Heaven, tremble and obey."

So they took Augustus Verrill to the appointed place, and snicked off his head before an incurious crowd, and the members of the Commission went back to Pekin in their chairs.

All except the teak-faced Mandarin, who, with three soldiers at his back, rode out of the Gate of Great Assistance, and took the bumpy road for the hospital at Foo-sang, riding beside a palanquin wherein lay a Chinese kitchen-wench who was all the world to him.

2. THE COMPLEAT CRIMINAL

Mr. Felix O'Hara Golbeater knew something of criminal investigation, for he had been a solicitor for eighteen years and had been engaged in work which brought him into touch with the criminal classes, and his ingenuity and shrewd powers of observation had often enabled him to succeed in securing a conviction where ordinary police methods had failed.

A spare man, on the right side of forty, he was distinguished by a closely cropped beard and shaggy eyebrows, and in the cultivation of these he had displayed extraordinary care and patience.

It is not customary, even in legal circles, where so many curious practices obtain, to bother overmuch with one's eyebrows, but O'Hara Golbeater was a far-seeing man, and he anticipated a day when interested people would be looking for those eyebrows of his, when their portraiture would occupy space on the notice boards of police stations—for Mr. Felix O'Hara Golbeater had no illusions and was well aware of a most vital fact, which was that you cannot fool all men all the time. Therefore he was eternally on the qui vive for that mysterious man who would certainly appear on the scene some day and who would see through Golbeater the lawyer, Golbeater the trustee, Golbeater the patron of field sports, and last and greatest of distinctions, Golbeater the intrepid aviator, whose flights had caused something of a sensation in the little Buckingham village where he had his "country seat." And he had no desire to be "seen through."

He was sitting in his office one night in April. His clerks had long since gone home, and the caretaker, whose duty it was to clean up, had also left.

It was not Felix O'Hara Golbeater's practice to remain at the office until 11 p. m., but the circumstances were exceptional and justified the unusual course.

Behind him were a number of japanned steel boxes. They were arranged on shelves and occupied one half of the wall space from floor to ceiling. On each box was painted in neat white figures the name of the man, woman, or corporation for whose documents the receptacle was reserved. There was the "Anglo-Chinese Pottery Syndicate" (in liquidation), "The Erly Estate," "The Late Sir George Gallinger," to name only a few.

Golbeater was mainly interested in the box inscribed "Estate of the Late Louisa Harringay," and this stood wide open on his polished desk, its contents sorted into orderly heaps.

From time to time he made notes in a small but stout book by his side, notes for his confidential guidance apparently, for the book possessed a hinged lock.

In the midst of his inspection there came a sharp knock at the door of his sanctum.

He looked up, listening, his cigar stiffly held between his even white teeth.

The knock came again, and he rose, crossed the carpeted floor softly, and bent his head, as though by this process he could intensify his auricular powers.

Again the visitor rapped on the panels of the door, this time impatiently. He followed up his summons by trying the door.

"Who's there?" asked Golbeater softly.

"Fearn," came the reply.

"Just one moment."

Golbeater stepped back to the desk swiftly and bundled all the documents into the open box. This he replaced in the rack, then returning to the door, he unlocked it.

A young man stood in the doorway. His long Raglan was splashed with rain. In his plain, kindly face embarrassment as at an unpleasant mission struggled for mastery with the expression of annoyance peculiar to the Englishman kept waiting on the door-mat.

"Come in," said Golbeater, and opened the door wide.

The young man stepped into the room and slipped off his coat.

"Rather wet," he apologized gruffly.

The other nodded.

He closed the door carefully and locked it.

"Sit down," he said, and dragged forward a chair. His steady black eyes did not leave the other's face. He was all alert and tense, obeying the atavistic instinct of defense. The very angle of his cigar spoke caution and defiance.

Frank Fearn seated himself.

"I saw your light—I thought I'd drop in," he said awkwardly.

There was a pause.

"Been aeroplaning lately?"

Golbeater removed his Havana and examined it attentively.

"Yes," he said, and spoke confidentially to the cigar.

"Queer that a fellow like you should take it up," said the other, with a glint of reluctant admiration in his eyes. "I suppose studying criminals and being in touch with them... helps your nerves... and things."

Fearn was marking time. You could almost hear the tramp of his intellectual boots.

He began again.

"Do you really believe, Golbeater, that a chap could—could escape from justice if he really tried?"

A wild thought which was half a hope flashed through the lawyer's mind. Had this young fool been adventuring outside the law? Had he overstepped the mark too? Young men do mad things.

And if he had, that would be salvation for Felix 0'Hara Golbeater, for Fearn was engaged to the young heiress who had inherited Miss Harringay's fortune—and Fearn was the man of all men that the solicitor feared. He feared him because he was a fool, a stubborn fool, and an inquisitive fool.

"I really believe that," he answered; "my contention, based on experience, is that in a certain type of crime the offender need never be detected, and in other varieties, even though he, is detected, he can, given a day's start, avoid arrest."

He settled down in his chair to pursue hts favorite theory—one which had been the subject of discussion the last time he and Fearn had met at the club.

"Take myself for instance," he said. "Suppose I were a criminal —one of the swell mob—what could be easier than for me to mount my machine, sail gaily away to France, descending where I knew fresh supplies awaited me, and continuing my journey to some unlikely spot. I know of a dozen places in Spain where the aeroplane could be hidden."

The young man was eyeing him with a glum and dubious expression.

"I admit," Golbeater went on, with an easy wave of his cigared hand, "that I am exceptionally placed; but really in any case it would only have been a matter of prearrangement: elaborate and painstaking preparation which any criminal could take. It is open to him to follow the same course. But what do we find? A man systematically robs his employer, and all the time he is deluding himself with the belief that a miracle will happen, which will allow him to make good his defalcations. Instead of recognizing the inevitable, he dreams of luck; instead of methodically planning his departure, he employs all his organizing power in hiding today the offense of yesterday."

He waited for the confession he had encouraged. He was aware that Fearn dabbled on the Stock Exchange; that he was in the habit of frequenting racecourses.

"H'm," said Fearn. His lean brown face twisted into a momentary grimace.

"It's a pretty good thing," he said, "that you aren't on the lawless side, isn't it? I suppose you aren't?"

Now Felix O'Hara Golbeater was a man very shrewd in the subtleties of human nature and very wise in the reading of portents. He knew the truth which is spoken with a smile, and may be taken either as an exhibition of humor or a deadly accusation, and in the question put to him with quizzical good humor he recognized his finish.

The young man was watching him eagerly, his mind filled with vague apprehensions, so vague and so indefinite that he had spent four hours walking up and down the street in which Golbeater's offices were before he had screwed himself up to the interview.

The lawyer laughed. "It would be rather awkward for you if I were," he said, "since I have at this moment some sixty thousand pounds of your fiancée's money in my possession."

"I thought it was at the bank," said the other quickly. The other shrugged his shoulders. "So it is," he said, "but none the less it is in my possession. The magic words, 'Felix O'Hara Golbeater,' inscribed in the south-east corner of a check would place the money in my hands."

"Oh!" said Fearn.

He made no attempt to disguise his relief.

He got up from his chair, a somewhat gauche young man, as all transparently honest young men are, and spoke the thought which was uppermost in his mind. "I don't care two cents about Hilda's money," he said abruptly. "I've enough to live on, but—for her sake, of course—one has to be careful."

"Oh, you're being careful all right," said Golbeater, the corners of his mouth twitching, though the beard hid the fact from his visitor; "you had better put a detective on the bank to see that I don't draw the money and bolt."

"I have," blurted the young man in some confusion; "at least—well, people say things, d'ye know—there was a lot of talk about that Meredith legacy case—really, Golbeater, you didn't come well out of that."

"I paid the money," said Golbeater cheerfully, "if that's what you mean."

He walked to the door and opened it. "I hope you wont get wet," he said politely.

Fearn could only mutter an incoherent commonplace and go stumbling and groping down the dark stairs into the street. Golbeater stepped into an adjoining room, closing the door behind him. There was no light here, and from the window he could observe the other's movements. He half expected Fearn to be joined by a companion, but the hesitation he showed when he reached the street indicated that he had no engagement and expected to meet nobody.

Golbeater returned to the inner office. He wasted no time in speculation. He knew that the game was up. From an inner drawer in his safe he took a memorandum, and glanced down it.

Twelve months before, an eccentric Frenchman, who had occupied a little country house in Wiltshire, had died, and the property had come into the market; not, curiously enough, into the English market, because its late owner had been the last of a line of French exiles who had made their home in England since the days of the Revolution. The heirs, having no desire to continue residence in a land which had no associations for them, had placed the sale of the property in the hands of a firm of French notaries.

Golbeater, a perfect French scholar and an earnest student of the Parisian papers, came to know of the impending sale. He had purchased it through a succession of agents. It had been refurnished from Paris. The two servants who controlled the tiny ménage had been hired and were paid from Paris, and neither of these staid servitors, who received remittances and letters

bearing the Parisian postmark, associated M. Alphonse Didet, the employer they had never seen, with the London solicitor.

Nor did the good people of Letherhampton, the village adjoining the property, trouble their heads overmuch about the change of proprietorship. One "Frenchie" was very much like another; they had grown up accustomed to the eccentricities of the) exiled aristocrats, and regarded them with the same indifference which they applied to the other objects of the landscape, and with that contempt which the bucolic mind reserves for the ignorant fellows who do not speak its language.

Also there was in the neighborhood of Whitstable a little bungalow, simply furnished, whither Golbeater was in the habit of making week-end excursions. Most important and most valuable of its contents was a motor cycle; and in the cloakroom of a London terminus were two trunks, old and battered, covered with the labels of foreign places and the picturesque advertisements of foreign hotels. Felix O'Hara Golbeater was very thorough in his methods. But then he had the advantage of others' experiences; he had seen the haphazard criminal, and had profited by the lesson to be found in the untimely end which rewards carelessness in flight.

He walked to the fireplace, struck a match, and burnt the memorandum to ashes. There was nothing else to burn, for his was the practice of clearing up as he went along. From the safe he took a thick package, opened it, and revealed a tightly compressed wad of banknotes, English and French. They represented the greater part of sixty thousand pounds, which, if every man and woman had their own, should have been at the bankers of Miss Hilda Harringay.

The whole of the sixty thousand was not there, because there were other deficiencies which had claimed more urgent and pressing settlement.

He pulled on a raincoat swiftly, put out the light, artistically left a half-finished letter in the open drawer of his desk, and went out. The advantage of being a bachelor occurred to him as the theatre train pulled out of Charing Cross Station. He had nothing to trouble his conscience: he was the ideal defaulter.

From Sevenoaks Station he made his way on foot along the two-mile road which led to the hangar. He spent the night in the shed reading by the light of a portable electric light. Long before dawn he had changed into his mechanic's kit, leaving his everyday working clothes neatly folded in a locker.

It was a perfect day for a flight, and at five in the morning, with the assistance of two laborers on their way to work, he started the aeroplane and rose easily over the sleeping town. It was his good fortune that there was no wind, more fortunate still that there was a mist on the sea. He had headed for Whitstable, and when he heard the waters washing beneath him in the darkness, he came down and found the shore; he recognized a coast-guard station and went on for a mile, keeping touch with the beach.

The newspapers which published an account of the aeroplane tragedy described how the machine was found floating upside down two miles from shore: they described the search by coastguards and police for the body of the unfortunate Felix O'Hara Golbeater, who in an endeavor to reach his bungalow had evidently got lost in the mist and was drowned. They observed in guarded language that he was making for the French coast and with good reason.

But none of them described how Felix O'Hara Golbeater had set his planes at a sky-climbing angle when only a few feet from the water—and from the water's edge by the same token and had dropped into the sea with close on sixty thousand pounds in the waterproof pocket of his overalls.

Nor how, with surprising swiftness, he had reached the isolated little bungalow on the shore, had stripped his wet things on the verandah, had entered, changed, and reappeared to make his sodden mechanic's kit into a portable bundle: nor how he had placed this in a specially weighted bag and dropped it down a well at the back of the house. Nor how, with incredible rapidity, he had removed his beard and his eyebrows with such tidiness of operation that not so much as a single hair was ever found by the police.

None of these things were described, for the simple reason that they were not known, and there was no reporter sufficiently imaginative to picture them. In the early hours of the morning, a clean-shaven, young- looking motor cyclist, goggled and clad in a shapeless mackintosh kit, went spinning back to London, stopping only in such towns and at such hostelries as motor cyclists most frequent. He reached London after nightfall. His motor cycle he left at a garage, together with his wet waterproofs. He had considered a more elaborate scheme for disposing of them, but he did not regard it as necessary, nor was it.

Felix O'Hara Golbeater had ceased to be: he was as dead as though indeed he lay swaying to and fro on the floor of the ocean.

M. Alphonse Didet, from the porter of the Baggage Department, demanded in French good, and in broken English not quite so good, the restoration of his two trunks.

As for Letherhampton, the expected Frenchman had arrived or returned (they were rather vague as to whether or not he had already stayed at the château), and it served as a "fill" to conversations, heavily charged with agricultural problems and the iniquities of Welsh statesmanship.

In the meantime, London, with breathless interest, discussed the story of Felix O'Hara. Scotland Yard conducted a swift examination of Mr. Golbeater's Bloomsbury offices, and of Mr. Golbeater's Kensington flat, and of Mr. Golbeater's banking account, but though they found many things which interested them they did not discover any money.

A white-faced girl, accompanied by a lean and homely young man, interviewed the detective in charge of the case.

"Our theory," said the policeman impressively, "is that in endeavoring to effect an escape to the French coast he met with a fatal accident. I think he is dead."

"I don't," said the young man.

The detective thought he was a fool, but considered it inexpedient to say so.

"I'm sure he's alive," said Fearn vigorously. "I tell you he's too diabolically clever. If he wanted to leave England, why should he not have gone by last night's mail-boat There was nothing to prevent him."

"I thought you employed private detectives to watch the boats?"

The young man blushed

"Yes," he confessed; "I had forgotten that."

"We'll circularize all the stations," the detective went on, "but I must confess that I do not expect to find him."

To the credit of the police it must be said that they went to work in no half-hearted fashion. The bungalow at Whitstable was searched from end to end without result; there was no trace of him; even the mirror at which Golbeater had shaved was thick with dust; this had been one of the first articles of furniture the detective had examined.

The ground about had been searched as systematically, but it had been a wet day when the fugitive had departed, and moreover he had carried his motor cycle at some discomfort to himself until he had reached the road.

His flat gave no indication of his whereabouts. The half-finished letter rather supported the theory which the police had formed that he had had no intention of making his hurried exit.

Fortunately the case was sufficiently interesting to the French journals to enable Felix O'Hara Golbeater to acquire a working knowledge of what was going on. Punctually every morning there arrived at his château Le Petit Parisien and Le Matin. He did not patronize English papers: he was much too clever for that. In the enterprising columns of the Matin he discovered something about himself: all that he wanted to know, and that all, most satisfactory.

He settled down to the comfortable life of his country house. He had planned the future with an eye to detail. He gave himself six months in this beautiful little prison of his; at the end of that time, he would, by an assiduous correspondence tactfully and scientifically directed, establish his identity as M. Alphonse Didet beyond any fear of identification. At the end of six months he would go away, to France perhaps, by excursion, or more elaborately, by sailing yacht.

For the moment he gave himself over to the cultivation of his roses, to the study of astronomy, to which the late owner's tiny observatory invited him, to the indictment of a voluminous correspondence with several learned societies situated in France.

Now there was at Letherhampton in those days a police superintendent who was something of a student; there were unkindly people who expressed the opinion that his studies did not embrace one necessary to him in his profession—the study of criminology.

Superintendent Grayson was a self-made man and a self-educated man. He was the sort of individual who patronizes Home Correspondence Schools, and, by a modest outlay and an enormous capacity for absorbing in a parrot- like fashion certain facts obscure to the average individual, he had become in turn an advertising expert, a civil engineer of passable merit, a journalist, and a French and Spanish scholar. His French was of the variety which is best understood in England, preferably by the professors of the Home Correspondence Schools, but of this fact the superintendent lived in blissful ignorance, and he yearned for an opportunity of experimenting upon a real Frenchman.

Before the arrival of M. Alphonse Didet he had called many times at the château and had spoken in their native language with the two servants who were established there. Being poor ignorant menials, they did not, of course, understand the classic language he spoke, and he dismissed his uncomprehending victims as being provincial, though as a matter of fact they were Parisian born and bred.

With M. Alphonse on the scene, Superintendent Grayson searched round for an excuse to call, in the same helpless fashion that the amateur picture-hanger looks round for the hammer at the critical moment. The ordinary sources of inspiration were absent. M. Didet, being a French subject could not be summoned to a jury, he paid his rates duly, he had never run any person down in his motor car, and, indeed, did not possess one.

The inspector was in despair of ever finding an opportunity when an unfortunate member of the constabulary was badly injured in the execution of his duty, and the county started a subscription for the man, with the permission of the Chief Constable. Inspector Grayson was entrusted with the collection of local offerings.

Thus it was he came to the Château Blanche.

M. Alphonse Didet watched the burly figure arriving, booted and spurred, frogged across the chest, and beribboned, as a superintendent with some army experience should be, and tapped his teeth with his pen speculatively. He opened a drawer of his desk and took out his revolver. It was loaded. He threw open the chamber and extracted the cartridges, throwing them, an untidy handful, into the wastepaper basket. Because if this meant arrest, he was not quite sure what he would do, but he was absolutely certain that he would not be hanged.

Paul, the elderly butler, announced the visitor. "Let him come in," said M. Alphonse, and posed easily in the big arm-chair, a scientific work on his knee, his big spectacles perched artistically askew on his nose. He looked up under raised eyebrows as the officer entered, rose, and with true French courtesy offered him a seat.

Clearing his throat, the superintendent began in French. He wished Monsieur good-morning; he was desolated to disturb the professor learned at his studies, but hélas! an accident terrible had befallen a gend'arme brave of the force municipal. (It was the nearest the good man could get to county constabulary, and it served.)

The other listened and understood, breathing steadily through his nose, long, long sighs of relief, and feeling an extraordinary shakiness of knee, a sensation he had never thought to experience.

He too was desolated. What could he do?

The superintendent took from his pocket a folded sheet of manuscript. He explained in his French the purport of the appeal which headed it, giving the ancestry and the social position of the great names which offered their patronage. Huge sprawling names they were, monstrously indistinct save in the money column where prudence and self-preservation had advised that the figures of the donations should be unmistakable.

What a relief! Alphonse Didet squared his shoulders and filled his lungs with the air of freedom and respectability.

Very gaily within, though outwardly sedate and still the French professor with spectacles askew, he stepped to his desk. What should he give? "How much are a hundred francs?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Four pounds," said the inspector proudly.

So M. Alphonse Didet signed his name, put four pounds carefully in the column allotted for the purpose, took a hundred franc note from his drawer, and handed it with the subscription list to the inspector.

There was some polite bowing and complimentary sentiments murmured on both sides; the superintendent took his departure, and M. Alphonse Didet watched him down the path with every sense of satisfaction and pleasure.

That night when he was sleeping the sleep of the just, two men from Scotland Yard entered his room and arrested him in bed. Yes, they arrested this most clever of criminals because on the subscription list he had signed "Felix O'Hara Golbeater" in a hand which was bold and exuberant.

3. ON THE WITNEY ROAD

Tom Curtis said nothing. He fiddled with his bread-knife, stared out of the window, apparently absorbed in the phenomena of nature, in the gray of flying clouds, in the drunken lurchings of poplars, in everything except the enormities of Chesney Blackland. When he did speak, it was to remark that it was going to be a real snorter.

"I suppose," he said thoughtfully, "that one ought to have a snowy Christmas once in forty years to justify the Christmas cards."

Margaret pressed her lips tightly together, and her fine eyes glittered ominously.

"You're a slug, Tom," she said.

Tom closed his eyes in patient resignation. He was a slug, and was proud of his lowliness. He stood six foot three, was broad in proportion, and had little interest in life outside the fluctuations of the industrial market and the very excellent pack he hunted in the Cresmore country.

"There will be no hunting for weeks," he said pathetically.

"Hunt Everstein," she snapped. He looked at her in mild reproof.

"Really, Margaret, you're unreasonable," he said. "Everstein has been acquitted by a jury of his fellow-countrymen, and there's an end of it. I admit he's a poisonous little beast; I'll go so far as to say that if every man had his due, Everstein would be breaking coke in Dartmoor —or whatever they break. Which reminds me that I've been asked down to Devonshire Hunt on Thursday. It's a pretty sporting country—"

Margaret leant back, a picture of despair.

"I can't get father to see it, but it's little short of a crime —it is a crime—that this horrible man should be basking in the sunlight at Monte Carlo, his wretched pockets filled with our money. I think Mr. Blackland is as bad as he. Everstein is a criminal, but at least Mr. Blackland has some pretensions to being a gentleman."

She looked to her father for confirmation, but the Colonel did no more than shift uncomfortably in his chair and fidget with his serviette.

Colonel Robert Curtis had been described as "a beautiful old man." He was gentle, sweetnatured, weak. He hated trouble of any kind, and Heaven knows he had had trouble enough this past six months; for there had come

into his life, a little more than two years before, a most plausible financier, with a scheme for amalgamating industries, and the Colonel had joined his board. Some of the industries were represented by genuine factories which prepared and distributed real commodities that people bought, but there were a few which were little more than derelict buildings and rusted machinery. They did not appear that way on the balance-sheet: they were most important assets, and few people realized their utter worthlessness until the crash came and Mr. Everstein was arrested.

The Colonel had been a director of the parent company, and the smash had cost him a lot of money. How much, Margaret did not know. She did know that after Everstein's arrest her father had taken to his bed, and for three weeks had talked brokenly of the ruin which faced him, and had even gone as far as inviting an estate agent from Oxford to value Deeplands and its contents. But he did not go any further than this: the threatened sale was never held, and the only servant dismissed was a chauffeur who disposed of two worn tires without his master's permission.

"Everstein brought father to the very verge of ruin," said Margaret tragically. "If father hadn't been able to borrow money from his friends, we should have been living in some wretched little villa and owing the landlady money."

"Rot!" said her practical brother. "Suppose Blackland hadn't defended Everstein, or suppose he had defended him and Everstein had been sent to jail for seven or eight years, what difference would that have made? Chesney is one of the best fellows in the world, and anybody but an idiot knows that it's the duty of a barrister to defend his client to the best of his ability. He would have been a skunk if he hadn't."

"And you call him a friend of yours" said Margaret witheringly. "He's a very good friend and a ripping fine fellow! If you weren't such an unreasonable goose, I should have asked him to come over to spend Christmas Day with us."

It needed but this to drive Margaret over the edge of reason. She got up and, her hands clutching the cloth, leant over the table towards him.

"Tommy!" she said intensely. "If you bring Chesney Blackland here, I will leave the house! I would not spend an hour under the same roof with him. Have you read his speech for the defense?"

She flung towards the little secretaire which stood in a corner of the room, wrenched open a drawer and brought out a folded newspaper.

"Listen: "'There is no doubt,' counsel went on, 'that Everstein had amongst his shareholders some of the most credulous and simple-minded people in England. In effect, however, whatever onus attaches to the prisoner from that cause is attached also to Everstein's fellow- directors.'"

She put the paper down and glared at her brother. "In other words," she said deliberately, "this wretched man said that father was as big a thief as Everstein... and this reptile is your friend!"

Tom rubbed his nose and looked at his father. That aristocratic gentleman shook his head and closed his eyes, as though he could not bear either the contemplation of his son or the thought of Blackland's enormity.

"Anyway, counsel have got to say all sorts of things," said Tom stoutly. "It's silly to bear malice against a barrister for what he's said in the defense of a—" He fizzled out lamely.

"If you dare ask Chesney Blackland here, Tom, I will never forgive you." She pointed a minatory finger at the big young man. "Father would forgive him, of course, because father forgives everybody, and he's a Christian and all that sort of thing."

"It's Christmas time," murmured Tom.

"It would make no difference to me if it were August Bank Holiday," said Margaret. "If you bring Mr. Blackland to Deeplands, I will go out. I would rather die than be in the same room with him. He has slandered father, he has let this scoundrel loose upon society, he is worse than Everstein himself; and if you had any self-respect you would write to him and tell him just what you think of him."

Tom grinned. "Why not send him a Christmas card and write all these admirable sentiments on the back?" he demanded, and Margaret shivered at his vulgarity.

She had to go into her father's study soon after breakfast to consult him about the following day's arrangements. The Colonel stood with his back to the fire, a pipe in his mouth, a look of settled gloom on his fine-cut face.

"I don't think I should bother Tommy about this man Blackland if I were you," he said. "Blackland's really a nice fellow. Didn't you meet him when you were up at Cambridge last May week?"

She gazed at him blankly. "The thing is finished and done with," her father went on hurriedly. "I see no advantage in bearing malice. We shall —er— battle through. Blackland was a good fellow: I liked him."

Colonel Curtis was one of those fortunate people who can convey the most subtle of expressions by an innuendo. You never realized that he had enemies until he forgave them. He had borne his troubles bravely and silently, and Margaret had not realized how badly he was hit until there came the valuer with his notebook, examining legs of chairs and weighing the silver on the palm of his hand. It is true that the legs of the chairs were still planted on the carpets of Deeplands, and that the silver graced the table at every meal, but the atmosphere of near ruin was established.

The Colonel had never complained about Everstein's duplicity or Blackland's treachery, but in those simple words, "Blackland was a good fellow: I liked him," she read the Colonel's crushing disappointment when he had discovered that this good fellow whom he liked had stood up in a crowded court and had basely hinted that Everstein was not alone in his guilt. And Margaret loathed Chesney Blackland more than ever.

"You will be in this afternoon, Margaret?" said the Colonel, changing the subject. "I have asked the Walshes to come over, and I thought we might have a rubber of bridge."

Margaret shook her head. "Tom can make a fourth," she said. "I am going to drive over to Cheltenham to see old Mrs. Gurney and take her Christmas present."

The Colonel's face fell.

"The post, of course, is gone—it might have been sent direct from the shop— "

"I want to take it myself, Father," said Margaret decisively; and when she spoke in that tone of voice, the Colonel seldom opposed her.

She had intended going that morning, but old Mrs. Gurney's woolen coat did not arrive until after lunch; and by the time she had packed the little hamper with the whisky, and the plum pudding, and the body of a cockerel slaughtered that morning, it was three o'clock.

Tom, who had taken his gun out on to the Priory fields, came into the hall as she was making her preparations for departure. He was sheeted white from head to foot.

"It's snowing like the dickens," he said. And then, as she was fastening her coat: "You're never going out in this weather?" he added in amazement.

"I'm running over to Cheltenham," replied Margaret, with that note of finality which as a rule suspended all argument.

"You're driving to Cheltenham in that wretched thing?" Tom's blue hands pointed to the two-seater at the door.

"Don't be silly," said Margaret. "You don't imagine a little snow will stop me?"

Tom walked out into the road and looked up at the skies, which were filled now with whirling white specks.

"You really oughtn't to go, Margaret," he remonstrated. "Send Downes over—or, if you must go now, let me drive you. You'll get snowed up as sure as fate."

"It will be even more certain if a fat man like you is in the car," she said, with a smile.

"If you want to be helpful, put that hamper and parcel into the boot."

As she settled herself in the little car and drew a fur rug over her knees, she raised a warning finger to Tom.

"I'm very serious about Chesney Blackland," she said, "and if you have some Machiavellian plan for bringing him here tomorrow"—Tom wriggled uncomfortably—"I want you to alter your plan, Tommy: if he comes here, I shall go to town and spend Christmas Day with the Readings."

"Beastly prejudice," muttered Tom, and from his guilty demeanor she guessed that she had not been far wide of the mark when she suggested that he had already formed a plan for inviting the hateful Blackland.

She smiled triumphantly as she sent the little car down the snowy drive and turned on to the Witney Road. The hood of the machine was raised, but the snow blew persistently under the canvas, and although her tiny electric screen-wiper worked frantically, it was difficult to see more than a few yards ahead, and that through a blurred surface.

The road was fairly good, and the car held its way without any more than an occasional skid, and she came through the deserted streets of gloomy Witney in excellent time. She had left the town and was climbing up on to the plateau which separates Witney from Cheltenham when she experienced

her first sense of misgiving. It was nearly dusk. The storm had abated just before she reached Witney, and there was little or no wind, but the snow was falling thicker than ever, and once she plunged into a drift which lay athwart the road. It was not very formidable: the bonnet of the car sent the fine powdery snow flying, and she was through almost, before she realized she had hit an obstruction.

Her spirits rose when she came on to a stretch of road which was almost free of snow, being protected by a belt of trees which ran for half a mile along the roadside; but her satisfaction was shortlived. Dipping down into a valley, she met a recrudescence of the storm, and she slowed almost to a crawl, for now it was absolutely impossible even to see the road, and she could only guess her position by observing the stone wall which marked the boundary of a farm on her right.

It grew dark with surprising suddenness, and, looking at her watch, she saw with dismay that it was past four o'clock. Where she was she could only guess, but the road she followed went downhill and that did not seem right. Presently she came to a place where another road joined that on which she was traveling, and, getting down from her seat, she plodded to a sign-post, the face of which was so covered with snow as to be indecipherable. Taking her umbrella from the car, she managed to clean the face of the indicator, and her jaw dropped in consternation. She was on the wrong road: by following the stone wall she had been led miles out of her track.

Margaret took counsel with herself and decided that the only sane thing to do was to return to Oxford. She got into the car and backed up the road, intending to return on her tracks. But to come downhill was one thing, to go back up that long and tiring slope was another. She had accomplished less than a third of her journey when the car struck. She must continue along the wrong track, hoping to work her way back to the main road.

Hers was a very small machine, ordinarily easy to turn, but in thick snow the smallest of motor-cars becomes a little unmanageable. Backing to the hedge to give herself room to turn, she suddenly felt the wheels sinking, and before she could reverse, the back part of the car settled gracefully into a ditch.

"Blow!" said Margaret.

She might have said something stronger, but it was very dark and she felt rather frightened. She felt that this was not the moment for profanity. Nearly a mile farther on she had passed a small lodge and a pair of big gates, suggesting that somewhere behind the pine and the laurel was a human

habitation. With what philosophy she could summon she trudged up the hill, slipping and sliding in the snow, and came, hot and weary, to the lodge gates.

The lodge proved to be empty; but the iron gates opened readily, and she followed a serpentine path which led her at last to a white lawn that stretched before a small Elizabethan mansion. She sighed with relief when she saw a light glowing in one of the windows, and with great labor made her slow way across the lawn and knocked on the old-fashioned double door.

It was immediately opened by a middle-aged woman, obviously, from her sedate alpaca and her trim lace cap, the housekeeper. In a few words Margaret explained her predicament.

"Come in, miss," said the housekeeper. "I will send a man down to get your car. Why, you're wet through!"

Margaret gazed ruefully at her sodden feet. "You have a telephone here?"

She saw the instrument standing on a table in the wide, flagged hall. "I want to telephone to my people—"

The housekeeper shook her head. "I'm afraid, miss, the line must have broken. The master was talking to a gentleman in Oxford a quarter of an hour ago when he was cut off. But you must change, miss. I will see Mr. John."

She disappeared through an open door, and Margaret had a glimpse of a cozy library, the lights of which she had seen from the drive. There was a murmur of voices, and the housekeeper came back.

"Will you come this way, miss?"

She led the way up the broad stairs and opened the door into a comfortable bedroom, which was obviously a man's room, for she saw certain striped garments folded on the bed.

"I may be able to get you some silk stockings, miss, but I'm afraid I can't give you anything better than the maid's shoes. We have no lady in the house," she said. "Mr. John is a bachelor."

There was a bright fire burning, and before this Margaret changed as many of her garments as were necessary, accepting the unknown maid's skirt and stockings with gratitude. She strolled to the open casement window, and by

the light which streamed from the room she saw that the snow was still falling heavily.

The housekeeper, who had been to make inquiries, returned with somewhat disconcerting news.

"There is no possibility of a car getting away from here tonight, miss," she said. "Mr. John will send the gardener to the nearest telephone with any message you wish to send to your parents."

Margaret gazed at her in amazement.

"Do you mean to say that I shan't be able to get away from here tonight?"

The housekeeper shook her head.

"No, miss, I'm afraid you won't," she said. "The roads are quite impassable and it's still snowing."

"But I must!" insisted Margaret. "I simply can't stay here... in a bachelor's house."

"I stay in a bachelor's house, miss," said the middle-aged lady, with dignity.

"Yes, yes, I know. But don't you see—" began Margaret. And then the absurdity of the situation struck her and she laughed. "I'm afraid you and Mr. John will think I'm very ungrateful," she said. "I'll write a message."

She scribbled a note to her father, headed with the telephone number, and then: "But I can't stay here: this is Mr. John's own room, is it not?"

"I'm having a room made ready for you, miss," nodded the housekeeper, "and Mr. John has asked me whether you would like to come down to tea."

"I'd like to come down, if only to thank him," she said. "Will you send this message?"

She handed the paper to the woman, who went away and came back almost immediately to announce that tea was waiting.

A slim man, soberly attired, rose as she entered the library. He might have been thirty, but might as easily have been forty. He was very tall, with a slight stoop, and her first impression of him was that he was rather goodlooking. She guessed, from his preter-natural solemnity, that he was a doctor.

"I ought to bless the snow for bringing me a visitor, Miss Curtis," he said. (He had rather a charming smile, she thought.) "But I expect at this moment you are hardly sharing my view?"

"I am not," she said frankly. "Is it really impossible for me to get away tonight?"

"I'm afraid it is," he answered, with a return to his grave manner. "I have sent a man out to telephone to your people, and I can only hope that the snow will stop falling, and that tomorrow morning we shall be able to get you back to Oxford. In the meantime, are you partial to muffins?"

He raised the lid of a dish, and Margaret, who by this time was very hungry, speared a crisp brown morsel to her plate.

"Do you live here alone?" she asked.

He nodded. "I usually spend winter in Switzerland," he said, "but this year my work has kept me at home. You see, the Christmas vacation is a very short one."

She put down her cup. "Are you a lawyer?" she asked, and he laughed softly at the dismay in her voice. "You don't like lawyers?"

"I like some lawyers," she admitted, and adroitly he turned the conversation into another channel.

It was a jolly little house. She could quite understand that even solitude had a charm in these paneled, low-ceilinged rooms. Once or twice between tea and dinner she sounded him about her bête noir, but Mr. John skilfully evaded discussion of Chesney Blackland and his villainous deeds.

It was after dinner; they were sitting before the log fire in the library, she in one deep armchair, he in another, when—

"Do you know Chesney Blackland?"

He did not answer.

"Mr. John, do you know Chesney Blackland?"

"You don't like him?" said the lean-faced man, looking into the fire. "And yet, he likes you rather a lot. He once saw you, though he never spoke to you, and carried the memory in his heart for years and years—"

"You do know him?" She sat up.

"Yes," said the man quietly; "I am Chesney Blackland."

Margaret gasped.

"Then you—you told them to call you Mr. John... to deceive me..."

She was on her feet now. "No; I am Mr. John to Mrs. Buckingham. My name is John Chesney Blackland."

She was looking down at him with a deep frown.

"I am very grateful to you for your hospitality," she said stiffly, "and I can only regret that I have given you so much trouble."

"Where are you going?" he asked, jumping up as she moved to the door.

"To get my coat, and then Im going to walk back to Witney," she said.

In two strides he was between her and the door.

"You'll do nothing of the kind," he said violently. "Why, it is madness! You will be caught in the storm: you haven't a ghost of a chance of getting back!"

"I am going to Witney," she said steadily. "Will you please let me pass?" And then, in a sudden burst of resentment: "I would rather die than remain in the same house with you, Mr. Blackland! You have insulted my father, you have helped a blackguard to escape justice. I hate you!"

For a second she saw the bleakness in his eyes and shivered.

"I don't mind your hatred," he said in a low voice, "but I cannot allow you to leave this house."

"But if I insist?"

He was silent.

"Will you please let me pass?"

For answer he pointed to the chair before the fire. "You may go, of course, but before you go I want to tell you something that apparently you do not know."

"Nothing you can say will alter my view, Mr. Blackland—" she began.

"At least I am entitled to a hearing," he interrupted. "I cannot prevent your leaving this house. I suppose you would make it so unpleasant that I had no

other course. But if you go, I must accompany you, whatever be the consequences."

"If I go, I go alone."

He nodded slowly.

"At least you will allow me to tell you the secret that lay behind the Everstein case?"

She hesitated. "Nothing you could say would convince me—" she began irresolutely, and then, to her own amazement, went back to the chair she had vacated.

"May I smoke?" He filled a pipe from a silver box, lit the tobacco carefully, and, settling down in his chair, puffed for a moment or two, his eyes fixed on the blazing logs.

"The man you call Everstein is my brother," he began, and her eyes opened wide.

"Your brother?" incredulously.

He nodded.

"But he is a Swiss—"

"I am Swiss, too," said Chesney Blackland. "Isaac Everstein is my brother, though I am not proud of the relationship. He is a swindler! I knew him to be a swindler. But he has a child—she is in the house at this moment."

"Here?" He nodded again. "A sensitive girl of fifteen, who had no illusions about her father, and yet loved him passionately. By some mischance she learnt that Isaac was under arrest, and the shock nearly killed her. Had he been sent to penal servitude—"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"I know you hate me," he went on. "Your brother was on the telephone to me a few minutes ago: I was coming over to spend Christmas in your house. I suppose you didn't know that? It was a scheme of Tom's, who knew you disliked me, but thought that if we met, you might modify your point of view. I defended my brother, and was prepared to involve any person in the world rather than that he should be sent to prison. If you ask me whether I like him, I reply that he is utterly loathsome to me. I should not have turned a hair if he had been sent to the scaffold. But all the time I was pleading in

that fusty court, I had one thought and one thought only—the child, stretched upon a bed of pain, who was waiting, waiting.. dreading the sound of the telephone bell..."

He stopped abruptly. Margaret was listening open-mouthed.

"But nobody knew this?"

He shook his head. "You are the first person I have ever told."

"And the child?"

He sighed.

"She is slowly recovering. The trial will have left its mark upon her—that is natural. But imagine, Miss Curtis, what would have been the consequence if—Isaac had been sent to penal servitude for a term of years?"

"I'm sorry," said Margaret, and on the impulse of her emotion leant forward and laid her hand on his arm.

He shrank back at the touch.

"No, no, please don't sympathize with me," he said, as he rose quickly, and she thought she understood.

"I'm sorry I've been such a fool. Won't you forgive me?"

She held out her hand and he took it.

"I wonder if you will forgive me?" he asked.

"Why, of course. And now you can teach me picquet, as you promised: I am quite sane. May I see your little niece?"

He shook his head.

"She will not be fit to see visitors for many weeks," he said gravely.

Margaret was wakened from a dreamless sleep by a hideous view-halloa from the garden below, and, jumping out of bed, she ran to the window and looked down. It was Tom, and, standing before the porch of the house, was an old victoria and the four horses that he had hired from a livery stable. Snow had ceased to fall; the world lay under a thick carpet of white.

"Merry Christmas!" yelled Tom. "Can't you get down and let me in? Nobody seems to be up in this establishment."

In ten minutes she was dressed and downstairs, but one of the servants had already opened the door, and Tom was warming his chilled hands before a hastily kindled fire.

"How do you like Chesney?" asked Tom. "You did stay under the same roof, after all, old girl."

She raised her hand in quiet protest. "I know a little more about Mr. Blackland than I did," she said. "I'm afraid I was rather uncharitable."

"He's a nice-looking fellow," said Tom. "What about having him over for dinner tonight?"

Margaret had already decided that her uncharitable ban should be lifted, and her invitation to "Mr. John" had been given and accepted.

"The governor's worried to death about you," said Tom. "He made me get up in the dark and commandeer this old bus to bring you back to civilization. Hullo, Chesney!"

Chesney was coming downstairs in his dressing-gown.

"I've got to rush my sister back to Oxford: the Colonel is all nerves about her," said Tom. "No, no, I won't stop to breakfast. Something hot to drink, and a bite for the young lady..."

Coffee and rolls were forthcoming almost immediately. They stood before the hall fire talk ing, Tom apparently oblivious to the signs Which his host had given him, until, in desperation, Chesney Blackland said: "I'd like to see you for a moment before you go, Tom. Will you come into the library?"

"Not now, old boy," pleaded Tom, putting down the cup. "You're coming over to dinner—I must get back: there's some more snow coming."

"I wanted to tell you—" said Chesney, but Tom was out in the open, giving directions to the ancient driver of this extemporized four-in- hand. "We dine at seven, but you'll come to tea," said Margaret, as she held out her hand with a smile. "And you really do forgive me?"

"I'm wondering whether you're going to forgive me," groaned Chesney Blackland, as he took her hand in his.

"For what? You mean, for the things you said about father? Of course!"

There was a roaring invitation from Tom outside, and the girl hurried into the victoria. The flakes were beginning to fall again, and there was reason for hurry, Tom explained, as they began their climb to the Witney Road.

"If we can make Witney we shall be all right, but the road is rather like High Street, Siberia."

To their intense relief, they reached the main road without mishap, and in a quarter of an hour Witney lay beneath them, a gray, cheerless town in a hollow.

"That's a quaint place of old Chesney's," said Tom.

"It's a very pretty house: has he had it long?" asked the girl.

"Lord, yes," said Tom, lighting a cigarette with some difficulty. "It's been in the family hundreds of years. It was a gift from King Charles to one of the Blacklands."

Margaret's pretty face came round, the picture of amazement.

"A gift of King Charles? But they're not English: his brother is—"

She stopped. Obviously Tom was not interested in Blackland's confidence.

"His brother!" scoffed Tom. "Why, he never had a brother. I knew the family: I was with Chesney at Eton."

The girl did not speak till they were clear of Witney, and then:

"Are you sure?"

"What about? About Chesney? Why, of course I'm sure. Old man Blackland only had one son and five daughters."

"What nationality was Mr. Everstein?" she asked, with outward calm.

"He was a Swiss Jew."

With an effort Margaret controlled her voice. "Has he any children?" she asked.

"Fourteen, I am told."

"Will you stop the carriage? I want to walk a little way," she said unsteadily.

Tom roared a direction to the driver and got out, a very much perplexed man.

"Now what on earth—?"

"Tom," she said, when they had walked some little distance from the victoria, "you must send to Mr. Blackland and tell him he cannot come to the house."

"Great Moses!" he gasped. "Why?"

"Because—he is a liar! Oh, the brute, the brute! To play on my feelings..."

Bit by bit the story came out. Tom listened, and, to the girl's surprise, did not laugh.

"Yes, that's a lie," said Tom. "Chesney has no brothers. Of course, he told you that story to prevent you from making a fool of yourself, as you undoubtedly would have done."

"He's hateful!" she stormed.

Tom shook his head. "He's not so hateful as you think, Margaret," he said quietly. "And now I'm going to tell you the truth. What he said about father was true."

She stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Father was in the Everstein swindle right up to his neck," Tom went on. "He was a party to the faking of the balance-sheet, and it was only by a fluke that he didn't stand in the dock with Everstein."

She was white and shaking now.

"Is that true" she asked in a low voice.

Tom nodded.

"When Everstein was sent for trial, and Blockland went to Brixton Gaol for consultation, Everstein told Chesney the truth, and said that if he was convicted he'd bring down father... that he wasn't going to suffer alone. And Chesney played the game: he came to see me and told me this. Of course, it was no use telling the governor; anyway, he was in bed, sick with fright."

"But why did—Chesney—take all that trouble?" she asked unsteadily.

Tom's reply was rather like Tom, frank to the point of brutality.

"Because he saw you a few years ago, and, like a chump, fell in love with you. That's the truth! Chesney was unscrupulous in his defense: it was the talk of the Bar. But he fought like a demon to save Everstein from conviction, because he knew father would be involved, and, through father, you."

The snow was falling heavily now. She looked back to the old victoria and the steaming horses. "He is a liar, anyway," she said, as she walked slowly towards the carriage.

"Tom, will there be any shops open in Oxford this morning?" she asked, as the victoria bowled along the homeward road.

"There may be: why?"

"I'd like to buy a present—for Chesney Blackland's niece," she said, with pleasant malice.

4. THE PICK-UP

First published in John Bull's Summer Annual, 1927

It was the day before Mr. Vernon Strate went back to town, where his multifarious activities demanded attention, that he proposed in his quiet way—so quietly, so unemotionally, that at first Margaret Brand did not realize what he was saying.

"I am, of course, your senior by ten or twelve years, and I realize that in many ways I am not the kind of husband you would have chosen."

She listened, at first dismayed, and then in a state of confusion. She was twenty-four, and the kind of man she would have chosen had not appeared. And the future, to this daughter of an Infantry Colonel who had left her the thousand pounds she so jealously hoarded, was growing a little bleak. She held a position that brought her £200 a year and no prospects.

"I really can't think what to say, Mr. Strate—I hardly know you."

Which was true: they had met in the train to Brightsea—his courtesy and attention had been charming, and she was quite sure that he had exchanged the luxury of the Marine Hotel for the bare comforts of Acacia House in order to be near her.

He had admitted as much. "I am a fairly rich man," he went on, "and I have no ties and no relations..."

He spoke of travel, of Italy and the Riviera and the beauties of his Canadian ranch.

"I am going to town tomorrow. I would like you to give this matter your earnest consideration. On the day we marry, I will settle ten thousand pounds upon you."

He was, despite his denial, an attractive man of forty, tall, and in a way fascinating. His queer trick of dropping his "h's" occasionally used to amuse her at first, but when he told her of his early struggles against poverty, his selfeducation, and his lack of opportunities for acquiring polish, the amusement became sympathy.

Most of the day he spent indoors with his work: his eyes were not strong, and the sun gave him a headache. Sometimes they would stroll together at nights, but that was before he proposed.

In his absence she found herself considering the offer seriously. And yet... it was an ugly thought: Mr. Strate was a "pick-up"—a man who had come into her life without introduction.

Of "pick-ups" Margaret Brand had heard. You found them on the promenade, on the pier, sometimes in trains. They asked you whether you would like the window up or down, would you prefer this shady chair to the one in which you sat; they spoke about the weather or the calmness of the sea, or the oddness of other people. And gradually you came to know them and went char-a-banc rides to ruined castles, or the pictures—soon you found yourself discussing quite intimate things like relations and appendicitis.

Margaret had been two weeks at Brightsea when the real "pick-up" loomed on her horizon. He was not an inmate of Acacia House, that spotlessly clean and economically furnished boarding-house where middle- aged ladies who knitted jumpers in London came to knit jumpers in Brightsea; he did not drop carelessly into a chair by her side on the front, nor stroll past her several times trying to catch her eye.

The meeting was unusual.

She was sitting on one of the hard bench seats, a slim figure in beige, the red of her open sunshade giving a deeper tinge to her tanned and pretty face, when he came swinging along the deserted pier—it was eight o'clock in the morning, and only energetic fishers were up and about.

A rather tall, brown-faced man in flannels and a dark blue blazer, on the breast-pocket of which was a white dove.

He passed her without a glance, and she looked up from her book and watched him idly till he disappeared round the side of the Pavilion at the far end of the pier. She was reading when he came back, so engrossed in the story that she would not have noticed him had he not tripped and fallen, sprawling at her feet.

"Damn!" he said calmly, as he picked himself up. "Shoelace... terrible sorry!"

He put one foot on the bench and jerked savagely at the long lace that had tripped him. She said nothing—turned her eyes to the book again, though she was not reading.

"If I were trying to scrape acquaintance with you I should attempt something less painful." He was dabbing a scratched hand with a handkerchief.

"But I'm not. And I won't tell you that we've met before, because we haven't. It's a glorious morning, isn't it?"

"Is it?" She barely raised her eyes from the printed page.

"You know jolly well it is." Without invitation he sat down. "You're Margaret Brand. My sister went to school with you. My name is Denman —Ian or John, according to taste. She pointed you out yesterday and tried to attract your attention."

In the old days at St. Mary's, when Margaret Brand was senior prefect and Helen Denman was head girl, there arose the legend of The Awful Brother. He was Helen's, and his awfulness lay in his undiscipline, his rowdiness, his propensity for breaking precious vase. and windows, and his disinclination for morning baths.

Finally, in the last year he did something that was so awful that Helen (something of a prig, Margaret remembered) would not even tell her dearest friend. All that she could recall was that it was disgraceful.

The Denmans were rich and County. Pa Denman had acquired a baronetcy: Mrs. Denman was a lady who was very particular about the people she knew. And the awful brother had been guilty of an act of supreme awfulness. Did he marry a barmaid or run away with the wife of a butcher?... Margaret couldn't remember—perhaps she had never been told.

"You're not the—awful brother?" she blurted.

He nodded unsmilingly.

"That's me," he said calmly. "Now will you behave?"

She laughed in spite of her momentary fright.

"Yes, I'm the awful brother—I'm in a devil of a tangle. The poor old governor died last year, and I've been trying to hide up my past... You see, I'm a baronet of the United Kingdom, and that doesn't go with certain things. If the newspapers got hold of the story they'd splash it! I'm turning over a new leaf next week, though... chucking everything. I'd like one last fling, though—gosh! how I'd like one big thundering punch before I cleared out!"

He spoke rapidly, jerkily—to her, incoherently. She hadn't the slightest idea of what he was talking about. As suddenly as he had sat down he rose again. "I'll toddle along," he said; "awfully glad to have met you: don't give me away!"

She saw him again in the afternoon, and he carried her off to tea —insisted upon taking her to the theatre that night, and met her early in the morning to instruct her in the art of sea-fishing.

She thought it expedient at the end of the third day to tell him.

"Engaged?" His rather good-looking face was suddenly blank. "Really... I didn't know."

"Well, not exactly engaged," she explained quickly, and told him as much as she thought necessary, changing the subject as quickly as she could.

"Have you had your big punch?" she asked him; "and what is your big punch?"

He shook his head. "No—I don't suppose I shall. Brightsea isn't the sort of place you'd expect to get it."

This puzzled her. What was the dreadful thing he did when he disgraced his family? Was he a jewel thief or... somehow she knew that the barmaid theory was wrong.

That afternoon Mr. Strate returned from London, and she plucked up courage to make her decision.

"Can you come out—I want to speak to you?"

He hesitated. "The sun is rather strong for my eyes," he began.

"Wear your smoked glasses," she suggested. "You did one day, and you didn't get a headache."

He agreed to this, and ten minutes later they were walking slowly along the pier.

"Let us sit here." She sat down, and he at her side.

"Mr. Strate, I want to tell you something. I don't think I can marry you. I am very appreciative of the honor you do me, but I am not anxious to marry—"

"But, my dear," he began, "I've set my 'eart on this—"

And then there appeared in the distance the lank figure of the awful brother.

He saw them, and waved his hand.

"This is a friend of mine," she said—"Ian Denman. I knew his sister—"

To her amazement, the man by her side leapt to his feet with an oath.

"I don't want to meet anybody!" He almost shouted the words. "Tell him I'm not well." But it was too late. Ian Denman had come up.

"This is Mr. Strate," she said haltingly, "a—a friend about whom I spoke to you."

The awful brother was glaring down at them.

"Good Lord!" he groaned. "Here's my chance and I can't take it —beat it, Smith!"

To her horror and amazement the placid Mr. Strate rose and ran at top speed toward the entrance of the pier, the awful brother running after him.

"You've spoilt it, my dear!" he said, as he fell into the vacant seat. "I wanted to go out of the force in a blaze of glory And now I can't!"

"Who—who are you?" she gasped.

He chuckled.

"Didn't you know I disgraced the family by joining the police. I'm Detective-Sergeant Denman of Bow Street, and I've been looking for Smith —alias Bocosco, alias Strate—for months. He's a professional bigamist, and wanders round looking for lonely young ladies who have a few hundred pounds in their bank.

"Come and have a lemon squash, and I'll tell you where we'll spend our honeymoon."

5. MOTHER O' MINE

They called Ian Cranford "Iron" Cranford.

Lest it be thought that the employees of the Cranford Manufacturing Corporation were possessed of the sense of poetry, or that they bestowed a romantical and even heroic nickname upon their managing director because they loved and admired him, it may be explained that there was about this time another and a more public "Ian," a popular figure in London boxing circles who was also addressed as "Iron," less as a tribute to his robust constitution than in the exercise of the Cockneys' immemorial right to give any pronunciation he chooses to any word he employs.

And Ian Cranford was not beloved. He was likewise called by other names.

A girl, red of face and trembling with suppressed wrath, came out of Cranford's private office, and slammed the door behind her. Six pairs of youthful eyes surveyed her in joyous anticipation. The seventh pair of eyes did not look up from the note she was transcribing, and her typewriter, alone, clattered and clicked through the buzz of eager inquiry and heated reply which followed.

"If he thinks he's gotta slave to deal with," said the red-faced girl as she banged the cover down on her typewriter, "he's made a mistake so far as I'm concerned! I ses to him, 'If a young lady can't take a day off when her head's splitting so that she could get a doctor's certificate for the asking, you'd better get somebody else!' 'Oh,' he ses, in his sarcastic way, 'and is it necessary to take the 9.55 for Brighton to cure your headache? I happened to see you getting in the train.' 'Well,' I ses, 'if I can't go down to Brighton and see my poor dear mother, it's pretty hard,' I ses. 'You can go and live with your poor dear mother at the end of the week,' he ses. 'I'll go now,' I ses, 'and as for you, you can go to hell!' I ses."

A most gratifying chorus of admiring gasps.

"'Yes, you can go to hell!' I ses. That's the way to treat 'em," said the red-faced girl, with trembling pride. "There's no other way for fellers like that! He hasn't got a heart, that Iron Cranford; he's not human! If ever I tell my young man the things he said to me—"

A sudden and violent rattle of space-bars and six fluffy heads dropped, as though at the word of a drill sergeant, over six banks of complicated keys. A man stood in the doorway of the private office, the type of man who wears rough blue serge, soft loose collars, and smokes a straight, short pipe. He

was nearing the forties, with gray at the temple, hard-jawed and resentful of eye.

"Haven't you gone?"

His voice had a snap and a bite which sent shivers down six young spines.

"No, I haven't gone yet, Mr. Cranford," said the girl in a milder tone than might have been expected.

She was all for a dignified exit, but her knees wobbled annoyingly.

"I am going when—I am going when—" she choked.

"You are going when you please, I suppose?" said the man in the doorway. "You should worry about me, ha, ha!"

There was no mirth in his "ha, ha1" but a hint of sardonic laughter.

"Now, you girls!"

Six backs straightened to attention, the seventh was still bent over the machine, though her hands were idle.

"I am firing Miss Wilkinson, as she has probably told you," said Cranford. "You ought to be told the reason I am discharging her. It is not because she took a day off; any girl can take a day off if she has a headache. I am sending her away because she lied, and because on Saturday morning I saw her in company with a type of man with whom I do not want any of the girls in this office to associate."

Miss Wilkinson's trembling became a visible ripple of wrath. It was a ripple which swayed her shoulders and her head and produced an alarming elongation of neck.

"Be careful what you're saying!" she shrilled. "You take people's character away, and you can be had up in the court. You—you—"

"Get on with your work," said Cranford shortly. "Miss Glynn!"

The seventh stenographer rose at his nod, gathered her notebook and pencil, and followed him into the office. She was a slight, pretty girl, rather white of face and tired of eye. There were some in the office who feared Ian Cranford. Some perverted souls who adored for the very reputation of brutality which was his. Some, like the shivering Miss Wilkinson, who

alternately loathed and fawned upon him. But Doris Glynn, his confidential secretary, alone hated him consistently and silently.

She never joined in the chorus of abuse, which at intervals rose against him; she never identified herself with those informal services of absolution that followed some act of justice on the part of Ian Cranford, which bore the appearance of generosity.

She hated him for all that he was, and all that he had. She hated him for his undeviating ruthlessness because he kept to his way, walking down the strong and the weak who stood between him and his objective. And mostly she hated him for what he would some day think of her.

She sat meekly by Ais desk, her notebook on her knees, and Ian Cranford stroked his trim moustache thoughtfully.

"Wilkinson is keeping bad company," he said. He always referred to the girls by their surnames, another abominable practice of his. "She is a poor, brainless, flighty fool, without a single decent instinct which I have been able to discover."

He scratched his big jaw, then he reached for the telephone and gave a number, which she recognized as police headquarters.

"I want to speak to Mr. Holding," he said; and after a minute's silence, "That you, Holding? It's Cranford speaking. You remember that long-firm man, Sawerson, who runs fake selling-agencies and did a term in jail some time ago... you remember him? Good. Well, he's taken up with a girl in this office whom I have just dismissed. A Miss Wilkinson, I will send you her address. She had access to my list of customers, and I should say that was what he is after."

Evidently the man at the other end of the wire asked a question concerning Miss Wilkinson, whose complaining voice was still audible through the closed door of the office.

"No, no, she is nothing," said Cranford. "Just a Nothing. She hasn't the brains to be a crook. Good-bye."

He hung up the receiver and swung round to the waiting girl.

"Now, we'll get on with that correspondence with Mrs. Bristow," he said. "Write to Harbury and instruct to call in all the mortgages on the quarries. I hear that Mother's darling son has been sent down from College and has arrived home with a sackful of unreceipted bills."

He stared down at his desk awhile, then:

"I shall never ruin Mrs. Bristow," he said, "nor pierce her of her colossal vanity."

A pause.

"I don't know that I want to ruin her anyway," he said. "I merely want to—" He stopped. "That woman had had too much money anyway."

The girl made no reply, merely jotting down a note in her book; then suddenly, and to her surprise, he said: "I understand you are married — Mrs. Glynn?" She was taken aback for a moment.

"I have been married," she said quietly. "I am a widow."

He frowned at her.

"Any children?"

"One," she said, her anger rising.

His frown grew deeper.

"You are very young. Why didn't you tell me you were married when you came? Why did you call yourself Miss Glynn? There was no need to lie about it."

"I didn't lie about it," she said hotly. "I was only marreid for a year—somehow I never think of myself as married."

She might have added that that year was the most wretched year of her life. The street accident which ended the life of her drunkard husband was the only happy memory of three hundred and eighty days of purgatory —she used to count the days.

"Some employers do not like married women in their offices," she went on, more calmly, "especially young married women, and that is why, when I was addressed as Miss by your cashier, I did not correct him."

"All right," he said, and as she rose:

"I am going down to South Devon in the morning."

She listened, holding her breath. "Come to me before I go for the key of my safe. The tender for the Shaftesbury Power House must be delivered personally at five minutes to twelve, not a minute before or a minute later, to

the architects at Winchester House. They are received up to twelve o'clock, but you ought to allow yourself five minutes in case of accidents. Not before, you understand? I don't trust that architect of theirs, and he'll be tipping off our price to somebody else if he gets it too soon. You'll find it in the bottom drawer in the safe."

She nodded, and again made a note in her book.

"Benson leaves for Rio in the afternoon: give him three hundred pounds in banknotes; you'll find them in the same drawer. Note the numbers and get a receipt. Remind him to telegraph... Send Wilkinson's address to Inspector Holding, New Scotland Yard..." He fired a dozen other instructions before he dismissed her with his curt nod, and she went back to her desk with the last of her qualms seared out of existence.

He was not human, there was nothing human about him. His talk of Mrs. Bristow, that aged widow whom she had once seen in the office... A pompous, white-haired lady, insolent it is true, but still a woman—and an old woman. His lighthearted blackening of poor Lilly Wilkinson's character, his slander about an architect—these things were as a tonic to strengthen her in her resolve.

She hated him, she hated him! She wanted to hate him more. She could not hate him enough. For hatred was a narcotic which was to deaden the pain and drown a voice that whispered "No, no no!" all the day and all the night.

The office staff was allowed an hour for lunch—no more and no less. Doris Glynn alone was given an extra half-hour, that being the additional time which Cranford allowed himself. The half-hour was especially desirable today, and she permitted herself the unaccustomed luxury of a taxi-cab. She had to get from the city to Devonshire Street by a quarter-past one. Of course, she could have asked for extra time, but the idea of making such a request to Cranford was in itself abhorrent.

She reached the house of the great chest specialist at the same minute as a woman turned the corner of the street, leading a little boy by the hand, and Doris walked toward them with a smiling welcome for the child.

"It is awfully good of you to come, Mrs. Thomas. I don't think I could have got home in time."

I The motherly woman with the child arrested the flow of thanks with a bluff "Nonsense!" and together they walked up the steps and passed into the specialist's house and into the gloomy waiting-room. He did not detain them

very long. Presently a nurse came in and beckoned the mother and child, and they followed into Sir George Crisly's consulting-room.

The specialist shook hands with the girl and led the boy to the window, scrutinizing him sharply.

"Well, Mrs. Glynn, when are you going?" he asked. She was fidgeting with her handkerchief, and started as he spoke. "I—I don't know," she stammered. "I have the passports—thank you, doctor, for getting those for me. I shall never be able to repay you for your great kindness. Do you really, really think that a year will make all that difference to the boy?"

He nodded. "I not only think, but know," he said. "Of course the child is very young to have a crisis, but undoubtedly he is in that pathological condition when the next twelve months will make all the difference in the world to his future health. There is undoubtedly a dispostion to tuberculosis. The mountain air is absolutely certain to destroy that tendency and give him something to build up on. I suggest Argentière because the air there is particularly good for such cases. There are nice pensions where you will be able to live very cheaply, and the journey is an easy one." He smiled. "I think you are exceedingly fortunate in being able to go at all. So few people have saved their money as you have against a rainy day."

She nodded slowly, and had he looked at her closely he would have seen her bosom rising and falling as though she found a difficulty in breathing.

"I don't mind telling you, now that you have decided to go," Sir George went on, "that to have lived in England would have killed your boy."

She closed her eyes, and he walked quickly to her side and took her arm.

"I'm awfully sorry; I thought you knew," he said gently.

Oh, I knew, doctor," she smiled bravely. "Of course I knew, only I wouldn't let myself know, if you understand."

"I think I do," said he. "Anyway, you've nothing to worry about now."

He turned to the child and patted him on the head.

"Good-bye, little man," he said. "Come along and see me in twelve months' time and I shan't know you!"

The girl waited until the child and his motherly guardian had turned the corner before she began her walk in search of a cab to take her back to the office. She was numb with fear, with apprehension, with doubts, but the

greatest doubt of all had vanished. No longer could she hesitate or allow any false ideals to stand in her way.

At parting she had made her final preparations. For a small sum paid weekly the goodnatured Mrs. Thomas, who occupied an apartment on the same floor in the tenement where Doris had her home, took charge of the small boy during the day. She was to bring the child and the two portmanteaux, already packed, to Waterloo Station that night in time to catch the Havre boat-train. Doris had allowed herself two hours to do what she had to do. She closed her eyes tight, with a little wince of pain, as she thought of what those two hours would hold.

Passports, time-tables, tickets, little notes on the route, all these were in her bag. She would tell Mrs. Thomas that she was going to Italy, and had already hinted as much to her.

That afternoon the office was purgatory to her. She was filled with an immense sense of desolation and loneliness. It was as though she was living in'another and a more enviable world, and she did envy these light- hearted girls with homes of their own, mothers and fathers who cared for them and would worry about them if they were late. She envied their freedom from care, their silly chatter about boys and clothes. Somehow the office appeared in a more pleasant light than she had ever viewed it, a more homelike place than she had ever dreamed it could be, and she was amazed to discover the tears rising to her eyes at the thought that she would not again see this big prosaic room with its rows of desks. Cranford was out until half-past three, and he came back more truculent than ever. He dictated three slashing letters, a bite in every line: one to his works' manager at Bletchley, one to the solicitor of the unfortunate Mrs. Bristow, and a third to a second solicitor, no less than the advocate chosen by the discharged Miss Wilkinson to vindicate her character.

"Delivered by hand, was it?" he growled. "I know the solicitor, a dirty little police-court practitioner. A decent man wouldn't have had the time to sit down and write straight away. Sue me for slander, will she! Huh I take this...!"

Her pencil flew over the paper, and there was need for speed, for when Ian Cranford was annoyed he spoke very quickly. She was in the midst of taking a milder correspondence when he stopped and said suddenly:

"That passport..."

It seemed that her heart stopped beating. She could only stare at him open-mouthed.

"Passport?" she managed to say at last.

She was as white as death, but he was not looking at her.

"That diplomatic passport which I received from the Government during the war," he said, "you are to return that to the Foreign Office. I am not engaged on Government business in France now, and there is no need of it. Remind me tomorrow that I return it."

She could have swooned with relief. As it was, her limbs felt like water and her mouth and throat were dry. One of the girls saw how pale she looked and, much concerned, brought her a cup of tea, and she drank it and felt refreshed. At half-past five the staff left, and she was still taking down Cranford's notes, now upon some new construction in which he was interested, now an article for a technical newspaper, always at top speed in a voice which seemed to hold an everlasting complaint.

At half-past six he finished, tidied his desk neatly, and closed it with a bang. He looked at her as she turned over the leaves of her notebook.

"You've got two hours' work there," he said. "You may go early tomorrow to make up."

She nodded.

"I think that is all," he said after a while. "You know my address in Devonshire. Here is the key of the safe; don't lose it. Good-night."

The "good-night" was his usual curt farewell, and only her lips moved in response. She went back to her desk and tackled her work. 82

Her fingers flew over the keys, and by eight o'clock she had gathered together the typescript, signed and enveloped such letters as she had authority to send, laid the copy of his article on his desk, and had covered her own machine.

It was dark. There was only the light above where she sat and the solitary light which she had switched on in Cranford's office. Save for the caretakers, whose brooms she heard thumping in the corridor without, she was alone in the building.

She opened her bag, dived her hand into its depths, and took out the key. She felt surprisingly calm. Did other criminals feel the same? Often she had wondered how burglars and murderers could have brought themselves to commit their cold-blooded deeds, but now she understood. There was no tremor in her hand, and when she walked into the inner office, her step was

steady and she felt no inclination to faint as she had feared. It was very easy. She did not know what reserves of strength she was exhausting.

She opened the safe, pushed back the heavy door, and pulled out a drawer. On the top lay the sealed envelope containing the tender for the Shaftesbury Power House.

This she carried to the desk, wrote on a slip of paper, "To be Delivered by 12.5 certain" even underlined the 'certain'—pinned it to the envelope and laid it in the chief stenographer's basket. Then she went back for the money. it lay in two wads, the money that was usually kept there, supplemented by the £300 which had been drawn from the bank that morning to pay the expenses of Benson, who was leaving for South America. It was this £300 she took, and it was when those notes were in her hand that her nerve broke. She felt the break coming and tried to fight it off, but in an instant she was leaning against the safe, sobbing softly.

"Oh, it's wrong, it's wrong," she sobbed. "Nothing can make it right, nothing, nothing!"

"Nothing!"

The voice was behind her, and she turned round, her mouth open to scream.

Cranford had come in and had half closed the door behind him. His remorseless face was a mask, his steady gray eyes were fixed upon her. She did not faint, she did not scream; she clutched the hard steel corner of the safe to hold her erect and looked at him. She could not even think, though she had a picture of a little boy who would be waiting for her in two hours' time at a London terminus, and there was the winter ahead, and the greatest specialist in London had said frankly that the winter would kill him. She did not think of herself or what it meant to her. If she saw anything, it was only the supreme and horrible tragedy which centered round the white-faced little boy who was her greatest treasure and her greatest sorrow.

"Nothing can make it right," said Cranford in even tones.

She lurched forward, but he caught her before she fell and propped her into a big chair at his desk.

"I'm sorry," she muttered.

He watched her for a while in silence, then reached for the telephone, and she shrank back as though he were going to strike her. He called a number.

She was faintly familiar with it. Cranford was on speaking terms with the police and knew somebody at almost every station, and she braced herself to hear her doom.

When the call came through, she recognized the man whose name he mentioned as a business associate of his.

"I'm not going down to Devonshire tonight," said Cranford. "Just let me know what happens."

He made no explanations as to his change of plan, because that was not Cranford's way. Slowly he removed his light overcoat, hung this and his hat on their usual peg, and pulled up a chair to the position which she usually occupied when she was taking notes. She was still holding the money in her hand, unconscious of the fact, indeed, her arm was still rigidly held as it was when he had surprised her.

"Well, what is this all about? he asked, and she looked at him wonderingly, and he repeated the question.

"I was stealing your money," she said.

"I guessed that," said Cranford dryly; "but you're not the kind of person who steals money, Mrs. Glynn?"

She shook her head. "No—I'm not," she 'answered helplessly, "but I was stealing. What are you going to do?"

"Why were you taking that money?" demanded Cranford. "That is the first point. I will decide what I am going to do afterwards. By the way, I will relieve you of that."

He took the notes from her unresisting hand and slipped them into his pocket. Then he got up, closed the door of the safe, and locked it.

"Well?" he said.

She told him simply. It was the story of a mother's fight for her delicate boy, told without excuse, without emphasis, and might have moved any man. Apparently it did not move Cranford, and she would have been surprised if it had.

"You were taking money to send your boy into the mountains?"

She nodded.

"Who was the doctor?"

She told him, and he nodded. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"In Clerkenwell," she said, and he rose.

"Get your things on," he said. "We will go to your house in Clerkenwell."

"But—" she began.

"Put on your coat," he said in a voice which allowed no argument.

She obeyed, delaying her return to his room just long enough to wipe the evidence of tears from her face. He was dressed waiting for her, and without a word led the way from the office and the building. No word was spoken on the journey. For the second time that day she had the unusual experience of traveling by taxi-cab, but this time in a different mood.

She mounted the narrow, ill-lighted stairs, and ushered him into a tiny flat. Two bags stood packed in the hall, and in the little living- room the child was being dressed for the journey. At a sign from Doris Mrs. Thomas came to the passage.

"I just want a few minutes," whispered the girl. "Mr. Cranford wishes to see my boy."

She came back to find Cranford and the child solemnly surveying one another.

"That's your boy, eh?"

She nodded. "He doesn't look very ill. He's white, but I wonder how children can be anything but white in London."

Presently his survey ended, and he turned his impassive face to the girl. "I suppose you have your passport and ticket?"

Her lips trembled, and she could only assent with a gesture.

"All right," he said, rising. "You are going by the Havre boat, I presume?"

She assented again.

"Well, I'll meet you at Waterloo at half-past nine," he said. "You had better look for me by the bookstall. Give your trunks to a porter and he will register them for you." She stared at him wildly.

"Mr. Cranford!" she faltered.

"Do as you are told," he said, and was gone before she could gather her scattered thoughts.

He was waiting for them at the station, and had secured a carriage. To her amazement he himself got in with them, also to her embarrassment, because she held third-class tickets, whilst the carriage he had reserved was first-class.

"But you are not going, Mr. Cranford? You have no passport."

"I came up to bring my diplomatic passport to you for you to return," he said. "That is why I called at the office. I have it in my pocket."

She found a bundle of papers, and on arrival at Southampton she was to learn that he had reserved a cabin for her and the boy.

There never was, perhaps, so strange a journey or such queer fellow-passengers as these two who journeyed through France, from Havre to Paris and from Paris to the golden valley of Chamonix, without speaking any more than was necessary to announce that dinner was served or that a change of trains was scheduled. And so they came to Argentière, the girl still in a maze, still without understanding, and it was not until they were lunching at La Planet that he discussed any aspect of their amazing journey.

"I know one of the Alpine guides who lives in this village," he said. "He has an extremely nice home, and his wife is a very kindly sort of person. I have arranged for your little boy to stay with them for a year. He is old enough to enjoy the life and too young really to miss you. He will have excellent food, and there is no reason why you shouldn't come out two or three times a year to see him."

She smiled at him through her tears.

"Why have you done this, Mr. Cranford?" she asked. "Why have you been so—so wonderful to me?"

And then for the first time in her life she saw him smile, and it was a smile of singular sweetness and, too, singular sadness.

"Mrs. Bristow will tell you one of these days," he said shortly, and changed the subject, leaving her more bewildered than ever.

She left the boy without a pang. He waved her so cheery a farewell from the brow of the little hill on which La Planet is built, that it would have been the

sheerest selfishness if she had felt grieved at the parting. So far she had been upheld by the tremendous novelty of the situation, by the gratitude which had welled and bubbled up from her heart, gratitude to the man who had saved her boy and had saved her. She was beginning to understand all that her act and her plans had meant. She could look down from the brink of the precipice and see herself, a strange and remote figure engaged in an act which she could neither understand nor sanction in her normal mood.

But most astounding of all the experiences which had been crowded into three days, Ian Cranford was indefinably changed, though still monosyllabic of speech, silent and unsmiling.

So far she had borne herself well, but the reaction came that night on the way back to Paris. They were alone in a first-class compartment. He was dozing in a corner, a traveling rug over his knees, and she was vainly attempting to sleep, lying full length upon a seat. Then she began to cry, softly at first, but, as she lost control, melting into a very passion of tears. Before she knew what had happened he was sitting by her, his arm about her, her head upon his shoulder.

"Poor little mother, poor little mother!" his soft voice came to her ear. "You've stood it splendidly, you brave dear soul!"

She felt his lips brush her cheek, and sank into delicious unconsciousness. She spent the night in his arms, sleeping like a child.

Two days later Doris Glynn was back at her desk in the room which she had not expected to see again, as grave, as imperturbable as ever, yet with a certain softness of voice and manner which was remarked upon. None knew the turmoil of her mind or the film of half-answered questions which flickered through her head.

Why had he done it? Why for her? Why of all the women in the world had he chosen a weakling who saw no way out of her difficulties other than the way of theft?

She could only think with awe of that awakening in the gray light of an autumn dawn with her cheek against his, his strong arm around her, and the low-spoken words of homage and love...

The recollection of it caught her breath, and she stopped with her hand poised over the keyboard. Then the door of Cranford's private office flung open and his bull-voice roared for her. She went meekly, notebook in hand, and the door closed behind her.

"My Gawd!" said one stenographer to another, "I wouldn't have that girl's job for a million a week!"

Inside the office Mr. Cranford had visitors: one, a stately, gray woman who did not deign to notice the girl. Mrs. Bristow was accompanied by her solicitor, and evidently the least pleasant part of the negotiations had been concluded before Doris was called in.

"I think you've been extremely hard," the lady was drawling, "and really your terms are ruinous. After the quarries are gone I shall hardly have £5000 a year to live upon."

She shook her head mournfully.

"People have starved on less," said Cranford, and the old lady's eyebrows rose in resentment at the flippancy.

"You have been very hard, Mr. Cranford," she said. "By the way, are you one of the Cranfords of Cranford Bassett?"

Ian Cranford shook his head.

"And yet the name is familiar to me," said the old woman as she rose. "I have known many Cranfords. There was Stanley Cranford. You remember, Stiles "—she addressed the elderly solicitor—"a perfectly charming boy. And then there was a Mrs. Cranford; who was she? Oh, I remember," she nodded; "a very estimable person. My housekeeper, for some time. What happened to her, Stiles? I seem to remember that there was something disagreeable."

"You prosecuted her for theft," said the solicitor.

"Of course, of course," said Mrs. Bristow complacently. "She had ideas far above her station, poor soul; stole jewelry, did she not, to educate her son, or some such nonsense? Did she go to prison?"

"For six months," said the solicitor.

"So she did, so she did! Good morning, Mr. Cranford."

She held out her hand, but Cranford did not take it.

"You have been harsh with me, very harsh indeed. I hardly know which way to turn, and my poor boy..."

She was still talking to herself when the girl opened the door for her, and they heard her complaining voice growing fainter.

Doris turned to meet Ian Cranford's eye.

"A nice woman," he said grimly; "she believes she is ruined with £5000 a year."

"I think she was trying to be horrid," said the girl.

"Sit down, dear." Cranford's voice was unusually soft. "You've been wondering why such a disagreeable beast of a man—" she put her hand on his to stop him, but he went on: "You wonder why I have been..."

He stopped himself and was at a loss for words. "I always liked you, but I loved you that moment when I came in and found you sobbing as if your poor heart would break with my money in your hand."

"But why?" she asked in amazement.

"For your sacrfice," he said, "because you were doing what another woman did, what Mrs. Bristow's housekeeper did for my sake, that I might go to a good school and start fair in the battle of life."

"For you?" said the girl, staring at him, and he nodded.

"For me," he said simply. "My mother was Mrs. Bristow's housekeeper. She stole to keep me at a decent school, and Mrs. Bristow, though she knew all the circumstances, prosecuted her."

He looked out of the window and licked his dry lips.

"My mother died in prison," he said softly. "She died in prison!"

And then Doris Glynn understood.

6. THE KING'S BRAHM

There is a certain type of man, common to both hemispheres, and possibly to all races, though he is more sharply outlined when he is English or American, who thrives on disaster.

You meet him today seedy and unshaven, and slip him the trifling loan he asks; you turn aside tomorrow to avoid him, but beware how you cross the street the next day lest his lacquered limousine strike you into an unconsciousness whence even the fragrance of his considerable cigar shall not recall you.

For weeks, months even, such men occupy suites furnished like the model offices that look so well in catalogues. They have clerks and managers, and their names are painted on glass doors. Elevator boys respect them, and even policemen smile at them as they pass.

Then of a sudden they vanish. New names appear on the office indicator, new staffs occupy their suites; and inquiry as to their whereabouts elicits brusque and negative replies. Months afterwards you meet them unexpectedly in country towns, a little shabby, a little furtive, but immensely enthusiastic about the new patent cinder-sifter that they are selling on commission. Then they seem to vanish out of life, and their acquaintances, when they think of them at all, wonder whether they are in the poorhouse or only in gaol... and we continue in our speculation until one night the flash of a diamond shirt-stud in a box at the Opera betrays their presence in the role of the newest millionaire.

They live in a world of their own; in some mysterious way they carry their own population. Neither the men they meet nor the businesses they operate touch, even remotely, the everyday life of ordinary people.

As a rule they are wistful, relentless men, with a gift for telling circumstantial lies in an easy absent-minded way, which is the only way lies can be told convincingly.

Mr. Benjamin Thannett was such a phenomenon. He was a commercial magician at the wave of whose slim hands mining corporations grew in a night, and substantial boards of directors were created in the wink of an eye. He himself never accepted a directorship. His name was absent from the innumerable prospectuses he had composed, nor did it appear as the holder of any important blocks of shares.

In such companies as he promoted there were only two classes, and only one that mattered. These were the shareholders and the moneyholders. He

seldom held shares. He appeared usually as the "vendor" of the property to be incorporated. He invariably had a property to sell—even in his day of dire necessity he could produce an oil field from his pocket-book with the surprising celerity of the conjurer who extracts a rabbit from a top-hat.

Sometimes, so alluring were these properties that the mere announcement of their possession filled the letter-box of his office with the appeals of would-be sharers of fortune. Thereafter came a period of prosperity which invited the envy of the honest poor. A period of luncheon parties, at which the principal stockholders of the new company received their first and only dividend in the shape of a full meal and faultless cigars.

Mr. Thannett's path through life was littered with the crippled remains of little optimists who had reached greedily towards him for easy wealth and had been shrivelled at a touch.

There were probably widows amongst the debris; very likely there were orphans too, though this is doubtful, for the widow and the orphan with money have trustees and guardians to protect them. More pathetic were the fat and comfortable little men of business whose accumulations had vanished into the magician's pocket. There was a suicide or two, but such things are inevitable.

Mr. Thannett grew prosperous after many vicissitudes which involved occasional disappearance from the haunts of men, and he might have reached the summit of his ambition (there was an unreachable woman upon it) but for the fact that in the course of a certain operation he came into conflict with the imponderable factor of tradition.

In the year 1920 Mr. Thannett, returning from a tour of Europe, the possessor of five square miles of forest land whereon was sited an oil well of dubious value, was seized of a brilliant idea. From this, and the five square miles of Bulgarian territory, purchased from a drunken farmer for a song, grew "The Balkan Oil and Timber Corporation." The originator of this great idea had a confederate whom he described variously as "my partner" and "our General Manager," one Steelson, a man as stout in build as himself but less presentable—for Thannett prided himself upon his gentlemanly appearance.

On the day after his return to Paris, which for the time being was his headquarters, he sat with Mr. Steelson in his room at the Grand Hotel, a large scale map of Northern Bulgaria spread on the bed, and outlined the possibilities of the new venture.

Steelson's puckered face creased discouragingly.

"You can't do much with eight square kilometres, Ben," he said, shaking his head, "not in Europe anyway. Why not go to New York? It'll look bigger from there."

Ben Thannett pulled at his cigar thoughtfully. He was a tall, full- blooded man with faded eyes and a moustache of startling blackness.

"I think not," he said carefully. "There are a whole lot of reasons why I don't want to go to America just now."

Mr. Steelson wrinkled his nose. "They've forgot that Cobalt Silver proposition of yours by now," he said contemptuously. "A sucker is born every minute, but one dies every thirty seconds."

"Maybe they do, but there are enough left alive to tell the tale," said the other decisively. "No, it's London or nothing. They don't feel very bad about Bulgaria in England, and besides, nobody knows anything about the country. I met a man on the Orient Express—he was English—who raved about Bulgaria; said it was the finest country in Europe, full of minerals and timber and oil. That got me thinking. At Milan I got into conversation with two or three other men who were coming through and passed on all this oil and mineral talk. They lapped it up, Steel-like puppies round a dripper of cream. It appears that Bulgaria is one of the nine promised lands—like Mesopotamia used to be and Central Africa, until they found 'em out."

"Five square miles," murmured Steelson, shaking his head. "Now if it was five hundred...!"

Benjamin had taken off his coat for greater comfort and was pacing the floor, stopping now and again to survey the roofs and chimneys of Paris. He stopped and started to smile.

"There's a million hectares of land to be got," he said deliberately; "a million good hectares, worth twenty leva a hectare before the war—"

"What's a leva?" asked the other. "I don't know these Balkan monies."

"A lev is a franc, roughly," explained Benjamin patiently.

"Twenty million francs! Where are we going to get twenty million francs?" demanded Mr. Steelson disgustedly.

"There may be oil on it: a lot of people think there is," Benjamin went on, sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands in his trousers pockets. "You can't buy land in that part of the country just now under two pounds sterling a hectare."

"Then what in hell are you talking about?" asked the exasperated Steelson. "We've got under eighty thousand francs at the Foncier."

Mr. Benjamin Thannett resumed his pacing. "I have no sympathy with Germans," he said, with seeming inconsequence; "it will be one regret of my life, Steelson, that I was detained in the Argentine by that Cattle Syndicate of mine during the war. I'd have given anything to have been in the Hindenburg line, or in the Argonne, Steelson—"

"Oh, shut up," snarled his partner. "What's Germany got to do with it?"

"And I'm a democrat at heart, Steelson—you know that? I hate these hereditary institutions. They're tyrannies, Steel. They crush the masses into—into pulp, and batten—that's the word—batten on the likes of me and you. Do you agree?"

But Mr. Steelson was speechless. He could only stare, and Benjamin, who had drama in his system, beamed delightedly at the sensation he had created. Now he produced his climax. Unlocking the bag that had accompanied him on his travels, he opened it, and after a search, brought out a small red box, not unlike a jewelcase. Inside, reposing on a plush bed, was a big irregular chunk of amber.

The fascinated Mr. Steelson rose and examined the trophy. "Amber," he said wonderingly. "What is that inside?"

"That," replied Benjamin, in his most impressive tone, "is a small butterfly. It's rare. There are only about ten pieces of amber in the world that contain a butterfly; it cost me five thousand francs, Steel."

And then Steelson exploded, speaking, it would seem, in his capacity as partner rather than General Manager.

"... we'll be down to our last cent at the end of this week," he said violently, "and you fool away money..."

Benjamin allowed his friend to exhaust himself before he explained.

"You're a fool, and you always have been a fool," he said calmly. "Finding that was the biggest luck I have had in years. I saw it by accident in Milan as I was strolling through the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele. It came from heaven, that bit of amber, when I was puzzling my brains sick as to how I could get an introduction to King Gustavus..."

"All right," said Steelson helplessly, "let's all go mad together."

The light faded in the sky, and the streets of Paris were aglitter with light before Mr. Benjamin Thannett had concluded the narrative of his scheme. When they went down to dinner together, The Balkan Oil & Timber Corporation was born.

The chief asset of the Company, in happy ignorance of the part for which he had been cast, was at that moment listening to an excellent municipal orchestra some seven hundred miles from Paris.

The good people of Interlaken, who gathered on warm evenings to drink beer or sip at sugary ices in the big open Kursaal, knew the gray man very well, for, unlike his fellows in misfortune, he was a permanent resident. Guides, escorting gaping tourists, lowered their voices and with a sidelong jerk of their head indicated the thin figure which sat near the orchestra and eked out one china mug of beer so that it lasted the whole evening. He was always shabbily dressed, generally in a faded gray suit that was worn at the elbows. His wrist-bands were frayed, his collar was usually in the same condition. Generally he came alone, but occasionally a pretty girl came with him, a delightful lady who upset all local traditions by the invariable luxury of her dress. For her very expensiveness confounded that section of public opinion which would have it that King Gustavus XXV of Hardenberg was reduced to starvation, that he slept miserably in the cheapest room at the Victoria, and that only by the charity of the proprietor.

The other section having taken the trouble to make inquiries, refuted this statement.

His Majesty had a suite of ten rooms: his bill was paid with punctilious regularity, and there was no need to explain away either the extensive wardrobe of the Princess Stephanie, his daughter, or the poverty of his own attire. It was notorious that in the palmiest days of his prosperity the king had amongst others, a weakness for old clothing, nor was his air of abstraction and melancholy peculiar to his present situation.

"No doubt the poor man is thinking of his magnificent castles and palaces," said the burgess of Interlaken pityingly. "Such is the penalty of defeat and revolution."

But Gustavus, sitting with his chin in the palm of his thin hand, his gloomy eyes staring into vacancy, regretted nothing except the loss of his wonderful collection of butterflies.

The king's passion for collecting was commonly paragraphed through the press of Europe; the folks of Interlaken should at heart have known as

much as Mr. Benjamin Thannett discovered when he began to read up the character and history of the owner of the Hardenberg Concession.

Kingship of a small German state had meant little to Gustavus. It had been something of an embarrassment. Chief of the advantages was that, as the head of the state, he was not amenable to certain rigid conventions, and might dispense with the interminable business of wearing stiff uniforms. Only on state occasions, at great Potsdam reviews, or council meetings, did he groaningly dress himself in the skin-tight. uniform of the Hardenberg Fusiliers of theGuard (of which he was Colonel), and for the rest of the time, wearing an old knickerbocker suit, with a butterfly net in his hand and a specimen-box slung at his side, he prowled the Steinhart Forest in search of notable additions to his museum.

More kingly in the power he wielded was the tall, stout man who sat, a month or so after the Paris meeting, at the king's little table, smoking a cigar of great size and quality. The habitués of the Kursaal, who were growing accustomed to the stranger, decided that he must be an ex- minister of the deposed monarch, and probably one of the highest birth, for his manner was free and his laughter at times loud and unrestrained. And every time he laughed, the king winced a little, and his hand went nervously to his white moustache with an embarrassed gesture.

Mr. Benjamin Thannett was neither well born nor well mannered. He was very sensitive to his own conceptions of humor, and his laughter meant no more than that he said something or thought something which was amusing to himself.

"I don't know why I take so much trouble," he said, with a gesture of indifference; "your forest land is not really worth a great deal to me; none of these Bulgarian concessions can be worked for years. Why, there isn't a railway for two hundred kilometres, and you can buy land at a lev a hectare, and leva work out at two hundred to a dollar!"

The king shifted uncomfortably.

"Yes, yes," he said nervously. "I am greatly obliged to you, Mr. Thannett, for taking so much trouble."

"It is a pleasure," said Benjamin, with truth. He had ceased saying "your Majesty" three weeks before, and had now dispensed with the "sir."

The measure of this gentle exile had been taken. Mr. Thannett's personality was dominant, and instinct told him that he was near to an achievement.

"I've bought a lot of land lately," he went on, flicking the ash of his cigar upon the polished floor. "I acquired a tract in the Ukraine the other day for a million. I don't suppose I shall ever see the money again," he added carelessly. "At the same time I don't want you to be a loser. Given the time, I can get big money for your land. That is why it interests me. Money to people like me means nothing. It is the thrill of the battle: pitting my genius against my business rivals—that is the thing that keeps me going."

"Naturally, naturally," said the king hastily, in terror of hurting the feelings of his guest. "I appreciate all you have done, Mr. Thannett, In fact, I am delighted that I have had the opportunity of meeting you —I am rather conscious-stricken about having taken your beautiful gift. By the way, I have verified the genus of that insect—it is the Lycena Icirus."

"That was nothing," said Mr. Benjamin Thannett airily. "Absolutely nothing. I heard of your interest in Lepidoptera, and as I happened to have an amber in my collection, I thought, as a fellow-collector, it would be an act of courtesy to pass it on to you."

The king murmured his thanks.

"Now what I should suggest," said Mr. Benjamin Thannett, suddenly the practical business man, "is for you to sell your land at a nominal figure to the company I have formed for the purpose. We would market that property in England, and I feel that we should get a better price if your name was not associated with the sale. You quite understand there is still a great deal of prejudice in Europe against Germany."

The old man nodded.

"That is quite understandable," he said, and then with a note of anxiety, "Would not your method mean a protracted negotiation? Of course there is no need to hurry, but—I have been considering the sale of this land for some time. It was given to my grandfather by his cousin, the Emperor of Austria, and although it has not been a profitable possession, the land has always been highly spoken of. I'm sure you realize, Mr. Thannett," he went on, with some evidence of reluctance, "that my position here in Switzerland is a very anxious one. I left my country at short notice, and my funds are not inexhaustible."

Benjamin nodded slowly.

"I can promise you," he said impressively, "that the sale will be completed within a few weeks. I will credit your estate with half a million sterling, and

that amount, less a trifling fee for conveyance, will be in your hands within a month."

The king studied the interior of his beer mug, as though it contained a solution to all his problems.

"Very good, Mr. Thannett," he said; "I will arrange the transfer to your company tomorrow. May I ask you," he said, as they descended the broad stairs leading into the garden, "not to mention this to Her Serene Highness? She has|—" he hesitated, "other views."

He was too polite to tell Mr. Benjamin Thannett that Her Serene Highness disliked the company promoter instinctively; indeed, it was unnecessary, for Benjamin was sensitive to atmosphere.

As they walked along the dark avenue, a man came from the shadows of the trees and fell in behind them. Thannett looked round quickly.

"It is my Stirrup Man," said the king. "He always accompanies me; you must have noticed him before, Mr. Thannett."

Thannett breathed a sigh of relief.

"No, I haven't noticed him before," he said, more respectfully. "Why do you call him a stirrup man, sir?"

The king laughed softly.

"In Hardenberg they call him the King's Brahm. The Brahms have been in the service of our family, as personal attendants, for eight hundred years, Mr. Thannett, and one of the family has always stood at the king's stirrup for all those years. They have followed them into exile,'for I am not the first of my race to be driven from Hardenberg, and they have stood with them in their prosperity. This is John Brahm, the eldest of six brothers, and he has a son who will serve my daughter and my daughter's son when I am gone. They are the common people in Hardenberg who have a coat-of-arms and a motto—'To do all things, to risk all things, and suffer all things for the King's Comfort.'"

"Very interesting," said Mr. Thannett.

He accompanied the king to the hotel and took his leave in the lobby.

A girl who was sitting curled up in a chair reading a French magazine rose as the king entered, and dropped a little curtsey.

"Your millionaire kept you late tonight, father," she said, with a smile.

"You don't like my millionaire," said the king grimly. "My dear, we cannot afford to have likes or dislikes. He is an extremely useful man."

She came and put her arm round his shoulder and gently shook him.

"He gave you a beautiful butterfly in a beautiful piece of amber," she said, with gentle mockery, "and he probably bought it out of a curiosity shop in order to get an introduction to you."

"My dear, it came from his private collection," he said, a little testily. "Why are you so prejudiced, Stephanie? I suppose because he is an Englishman?"

"Is he?" she asked carelessly. "No, it would make no difference to me if he were a Turk, and Heaven knows I dislike the Turks intensely. But I feel that he is an adventurer."

"You mustn't say these things," said her father seriously. "I tell you he is a very useful man. We need money very badly, dear; besides—"

"Does John Brahm like him?" asked the girl quietly.

The king looked at the stolid figure standing stiffly in the doorway. John Brahm was a tall man 6f tawny complexion and dull yellow hair. He wore the gaily embroidered waistcoat, the spotless linen shirt open at the neck, and the knee-breeches and heavy shoes which formed the peasant garb of Hardenberg.

"Well, John Brahm," asked the king, a little impatiently, "you saw the excellency who was with me tonight. Is he a good man or a bad man?"

"Majesty, he is a bad man," said John Brahm.

"You're a fool, John Brahm," said the old man, but the girl's eyes were dancing with laughter.

"Listen to the words of the king's Brahm," she said. "Really, father, aren't you just a little too trusting?"

King Gustavus frowned, and then a twinkle came into his eyes also.

"In a month you will be very sorry that you have maligned my poor friend," he said, and the girl suddenly became serious.

"In a month?" she repeated. "Why, what is going to happen, father?"

But he would not satisfy her curiosity, and went off to his room with his stolid retainer walking in his rear.

The Princess Stephanie stayed up very late that night. She was uneasy to a point of panic. Her father had never discussed business affairs with her, but she had some idea of the state of his finances.

Her dislike of Benjamin Thannett was instinctive. It was not his vulgarity, his blatant assertiveness, or the apparent meanness of his birth which made her curl up in his presence—it was not that queer sixth sense which warns women of personal peril; his presence brought a vague unease and feeling of resentment which she could not analyze. He had come to dinner soon after his presentation of the introductory butterfly, and she had felt repelled, sickened, almost frightened by him. He seemed to embody a terror to her future and the future of her house.

She rose early in the morning after a restless night, and, going to the telegraph office, dispatched a wire to a lawyer in Geneva who had acted for her father. He arrived at Interlaken in time for dinner, a meal which King Gustavus did not grace by his presence.

"I am sorry my father is out," said the troubled girl. "He went to the Kursaal soon after five and told me not to wait dinner for him."

The old lawyer laughed.

"You're not worried about His Majesty," he said. "I presume he is accompanied by that gigantic guard of his."

"John Brahm," she smiled. "Oh yes, John will be with him. No, I'm not worried about father's bodily comfort," and she proceeded to relate something of her fears.

"Thannett," repeated the lawyer thoughtfully. "I seem to know that name; yes, of course; he is the company promoter. We had some trouble with him in Geneva three years ago. He bought a clock factory for promotion purposes. I don't think the factory proprietors ever received their money. We had several inquiries about him. Yes, yes, I remember now very well indeed. The man is a swindler, but one of those swindlers who keep on the right side of the law. I had no idea he was in Switzerland. But His Majesty has nothing to sell?"

The girl had gone suddenly white. "We have land in Bulgaria," she said slowly. "I never thought of that! It is the only property we have. We left Hardenberg with a few thousand marks, and His Majesty had some property

in Switzerland which he sold after we arrived. Oh, Doctor Vallois, if we have lost the Hardenberg Concession, we are ruined!"

And then King Gustavus arrived, unusually cheerful, a smile on his gray face, and a certain jauntiness in his air, which made the girl's heart sink still further. Without any preliminary she demanded:

"Have you sold the Hardenberg land, father?"

He looked astonished.

"Yes, my dear," he said, with a little chuckle. "I have been worrying about the value, and I am happy to tell you that I have received a magnificent price. Hello, Doctor?"

He greeted the lawyer almost jovially.

"What brings you to Interlaken?"

"I sent for the doctor," said the girl quietly. "I had a feeling that something like this would happen. Father, did Mr. Thannett pay you much money?"

"To be exact, he paid me a thousand francs," said the king humorously.

"A thousand francs!" she said, horrified. "Surely you are joking?"

"No, I'm teasing you," said the king. "I certainly received only a thousand francs, but that was the nominal sum we agreed upon."

He explained the situation more fully, and the lawyer listened open-mouthed.

"But surely your Majesty has not sold this property? You retain some lien on it?"

"I have shares in the company," said the king impatiently, "shares which I think will most probably produce more than I anticipate."

There was a dead silence.

"Have you a copy of your agreement or contract?" asked the lawyer.

The king passed the paper across the table, and watched the lawyer a little uneasily as he read line by line and clause by clause. Presently he finished.

"You have no claim whatever upon Mr. Thannett nor upon his company," he said. "He has the power without consultation of so increasing the capital that your shares will be valueless. It is an old trick of his."

"Do you mean—" cried the old man, half starting up.

"I mean that your Majesty has been swindled," said the lawyer, "and this paper is not worth the stamps that are on it. Thannett undertakes to do nothing except to sell the property to the best advantage. To whose advantage it will be I can guess."

"I will notify the police," gasped the king.

The lawyer shook his head. "This document is legal. The man has acted legally. He is within the law, and your Majesty cannot touch him," he said. "The agreement has been drawn up by one who is skilful in such matters, as I can testify."

"You mean I shall get nothing more than the thousand francs I have received?" asked the old man huskily.

"I mean," said the lawyer, "that the document to which you have signed your name, and which is in Mr. Thannett's possession, deprives you of every right you have to your Bulgarian property, without conferring any advantage or rights whatever upon yourself."

The girl looked from her father to the lawyer, and then her eyes strayed to the tall, broad figure of the king's Brahm standing stiffly behind his master's chair. She rose.

"John Brahm," she commanded, "you will attend me."

She turned and walked from the dining-room, and John Brahm followed heavily.

Mr. Benjamin Thannett had left Interlaken by the evening train. He stopped at Spiez to snatch a hasty meal, then boarded the electric train that connects with the Oberland railway. He came to Montreux at eleven o'clock that night, and Mr. Steelson greeted him on the platform.

"You're late," said Mr. Steelson fretfully. "Did you get it?"

"Did I get it?" repeated the other scornfully. "Of course I got it. These damn Swiss railway officials kept the train back an hour at Zweisimmen to pick up an aeroplane passenger who had lost the train at Spiez. I'd like to have the reorganization of these railways, Steel."

"I dare say you would," said the unimpressed Steelson. "Come over and have a bite; there's time before the Simplon comes in. She's late too."

They went down the stairs to the Suisse Hotel, and over their coffee Mr. Thannett told his story.

"There ought to be a society for the protection of kings," he said humorously. "It was the easiest thing. Do you think he'll kick? That daughter of his won't take it without a fight."

"What can she do?" asked the other, examining the contract with an expert's eye. "We can sell in Paris on this. There are three men on the Bourse who'll take this contract, and make as much out of it as we shall. Bulgarian land is booming just now."

"It makes you think, Steel," ruminated Mr. Thannett. "Here's a fellow who was a king, had all the power that a man could have. A real king, Steel! And here am I—a nothing, so to speak, and I bested him—it was like taking money away from a child. And I've got the law behind me." He laughed till he shook at the thought. "It's a wonderful thing, the law," he added piously.

"Give you three brandies, and you'll preach a sermon," said the practical Mr. Steelson. "No, you needn't worry about this contract; it meets ninety-nine contingencies out of a hundred and I can't think what the hundredth could be. Come along if you want to catch that train."

They boarded the northern express, and took their places in the two sleeping-compartments which Steelson had reserved.

"It's brains that win," was Benjamin's last remark as he turned into his cabin.

"I dare say," said the other. "Good-night."

Mr. Benjamin Thannett stretched himself luxuriously upon the bed. He did not want to undress until the frontier station had passed, and the Custom House officials had made their inspection; but the gentle jogging of the train made him doze. He woke suddenly; a man was in his compartment; he must have come in and closed the door behind him. Benjamin had a momentary glimpse of a tall, uncouth figure in ready-made clothes which did not ouite fit, and then the lamp was switched out.

"What are you—" he began, but a hand, large and heavy, closed on his throat.

When the Custom House officials came to search the carriage, they found it in darkness. Switching on a light, they saw a man lying on his side. Mr. Benjamin Thannett was quite dead when they found him, for his neck had been broken, and Steelson, searching the clothes in frantic haste, failed to discover the contract over which they had gloated an hour before. That was in the pocket of John Brahm's coat. John Brahm at that moment was tramping back to the Swiss frontier station.

Mr. Benjamin Thannett had provided for all contingencies except the tradition of the House of Brahm, which was to do all things, and risk all things, and suffer all things for the king's comfort.

7. THE GREEK POROPULOS

Published in The Weekly Tale-Teller, November 19, 1910

At Carolina, in the Transvaal, was a store kept by a man named Lioski, who was a Polish Jew. There was an officers' clubhouse, the steward of which was a Greek sportsman named Poropulos, and this story is about these two men, and about an officer of Hampton's Scouts who took too much wine and saw a pair of boots.

I have an intense admiration for George Poropulos, and I revere his memory. I admire him for his nerve; though, for the matter of that, his nerve was no greater than mine.

Long before the war came, when the negotiations between Great Britain and the Transvaal Government were in the diplomatic stage, I drifted to Carolina from the Rand, leaving behind me in the golden city much of ambition, hope, and all the money I had brought with me from England. I came to South Africa with a young wife and £370—within a few shillings—because the doctors told me the only chance I had was in such a hot, dry climate as the highlands of Africa afforded. For my own part, there was a greater attraction in the possibility of turning those few hundreds of mine into thousands, for Johannesburg was in the delirium of a boom.

I left Johannesburg nearly penniless. I could not, at the moment, explain the reason of my failure, for the boom continued, and I had the advantage of the expert advice of Arthur Lioski, who was staying at the same boarding house as myself.

There were malicious people who warned me against Lioski. His own compatriots, sharp men of business, told me to 'ware Lioski, but I ignored the advice because I was very confident in my own judgment, and Lioski was a plausible, handsome man, a little flashy in appearance, but decidedly a beautiful animal.

He was in Johannesburg on a holiday, he said. He had stores in various parts of the country where he sold everything from broomsticks to farm wagons, and he bore the evidence of his prosperity.

He took us to the theater, or rather he took Lillian, for I was too seedy to go out much. I did not grudge Lillian the pleasure. Life was very dull for a young girl whose middle-aged husband had a spot on his lung, and Lioski was so kind and gentlemanly, so far as Lil was concerned, that the only feeling I had in the matter was one of gratitude.

He was tall and dark, broad-shouldered, with a set to his figure and a swing of carriage that excited my admiration. He was possessed of enormous physical strength, and I have seen him take two quarreling Kaffirs—men of no ordinary muscularity—and knock their heads together.

He had an easy, ready laugh, a fund of stories, some a little coarse, I thought, and a florid gallantry which must have been attractive to women. Lil always brightened up wonderfully after an evening with him.

His knowledge of mines and mining propositions was bewildering. I left all my investments in his hands, and it proves something of my trust in him, that when, day by day, he came to me for money, to "carry over" stock—whatever that means—I paid without hesitation. Not only did I lose every penny I possessed, but I found myself in debt to him to the extent of a hundred pounds.

Poor Lil! I broke the news to her of my ruin, and she took it badly; reproached, stormed, and wept in turn, but quieted down when I told her that in the kindness of his heart, Lioski had offered me a berth at his Carolina store. I was to get a £16 a month, half of which was to be paid in stores at wholesale prices and the other half in cash. I was to live rent free in a little house near the store. I was delighted with the offer. It was an immediate rise, though I foresaw that the conditions of life would be much harder than the life to which I had been accustomed in England. We traveled down the Delagoa line to Middleburg, and found a Cape cart waiting to carry us across the twenty miles of rolling veldt. The first six months in Carolina were the happiest I have ever spent. The work in the store was not particularly arduous. I found that it had the reputation of being one of the best-equipped stores in the Eastern Transvaal, and certainly we did a huge business for so small a place. It was not on the town we depended, but upon the surrounding country. Lioski did not come back with us, but after we had been installed for a week he came and took his residence in the store.

All went well for six months. He taught Lil to ride and drive, and every morning they went cantering over the veldt together. Me he treated more like a brother than an employee, and I found myself hotly resenting the uncharitable things that were said about him, for Carolina, like other small African towns, was a hotbed of gossip.

Lil was happy for that six months, and then I began to detect a change in her attitude toward me. She was snappy, easily offended, insisted upon having her own room—to which I agreed, for, although my chest was better, I still had an annoying cough at night which might have been a trial to anybody within hearing.

It was about this time that I met Poropulos. He came into the store on a hot day in January, a little man of forty-five or thereabouts. He was unusually pale, and had a straggling, weedy beard. His hair was long, his clothes were old and stained, and so much of his shirt as was revealed at his throat was sadly in need of laundering.

Yet he was cheerful and debonair—and singularly flippant. He stalked in the store, looked around critically, nodded to me, and smiled. Then he brought his sjambok down on the counter with a smack.

"Where's Shylock?" he asked easily.

I am afraid that I was irritated.

"Do you mean Mr. Lioski?"

"Shylock, I said," he repeated. "Shylockstein, the Lothario of Carolina." He smacked the counter again, still smiling.

I was saved the trouble of replying, for at that moment Lioski entered. He stopped dead and frowned when he saw the Greek.

"What do you want, you little beast," he asked harshly.

For answer, the man leaned up against the counter, ran his fingers through his straggling beard, and cocked his head.

"I want justice," he said unctuously—"the restoration of money stolen. I want to send a wreath to your funeral: I want to write your biography—?"

"Clear out," shouted Lioski. His face was purple with anger, and he brought his huge fist down upon the counter with a crash that shook the wooden building.

He might have been uttering the most pleasant of compliments, for all the notice the Greek took.

Crash! went Lioski's fist on the counter.

Smash! came Poropulos's sjambok, and there was something mocking and derisive in his action that made Lioski mad.

With one spring he was over the counter, a stride and he had his hand on the Greek's collar—and then he stepped back quickly with every drop of blood gone from his face, for the Greek's knife had flashed under his eyes. I thought Lioski was stabbed, but it was fear that made him white.

The Greek rested the point of the knife on the counter and twiddled it round absentmindedly, laying his palm on the hilt and spinning it with great rapidity.

"Nearly did it that time, my friend," he said, with a note of regret, "nearly did it that time—I shall be hanged for you yet."

Lioski was white and shaking.

"Come in here," he said in a low voice, and the little Greek followed him to the back parlor. They were together for about an hour; sometimes I could hear Mr. Lioski's voice raised angrily, sometimes Poropulos's little laugh. When they came out again the Greek was smiling still and smoking one of my employer's cigars.

"My last word to you," said Lioski huskily, "is this—keep your mouth closed and keep away from me."

"And my last word to you," said Poropulos, jauntily puffing at the cigar, "is this—turn honest, and enjoy a sensation."

He stepped forth from the store with the air of one who had gained a moral victory.

I never discovered what hold the Greek had over my master. I gatherered that at some time or another, Poropulos had lost money, and that he held Lioski responsible.

In some mysterious way Poropulos and I became friends. He was an adventurer of a type. He bought and sold indifferent mining propositions, took up contracts, and, I believe, was not above engaging in the Illicit Gold Buying business. His attitude to Lillian was one of complete adoration. When he was with her his eyes never left her face.

It was about this time that my great sorrow came to me. Lioski went away to Durban—to buy stock, he said—and a few days afterwards Lillian, who had become more and more exigent, demanded to be allowed to go to Cape Town for a change.

I shall remember that scene.

I was at breakfast in the store when she came in. She was white, I thought, but her pallor suited her, with her beautiful black hair and great dark eyes.

She came to the point without any preliminary. "I want to go away," she said.

I looked up in surprise.

"Go away, dear? Where?"

She was nervous. I could see that from the restless movement of her hands.

"I want to go to—to Cape Town—I know a girl there —I'm sick of this place—I hate it!"

She stamped her foot, and I thought that she was going to break into a fit of weeping. Her lips trembled, and for a time she could not control her voice.

"I am going to be ill if you don't let me go," she said at last. "I can feel—?"

"But the money, dear," I said, for it was distressing to me that I could not help her toward the holiday she wanted.

"I can find the money," she said, in an unsteady voice. "I have got a few pounds saved—the allowance you gave me for my clothes—I didn't spend it all—let me go, Charles—please, please!"

I drove her to the station, and took her ticket for Pretoria. I would have taken her to the capital, but I had the store to attend to.

"By the way, what will your address be?" I asked just as the train was moving off.

She was leaning over the gate of the car platform, looking at me strangely.

"I will wire it—I have it in my bag," she called out, and I watched the tail of the train round the curve, with an aching heart. There was something wrong; what it was I could not understand. Perhaps I was a fool. I think I was.

I think I have said that I had made friends with Poropulos. Perhaps it would be more truthful to say that he made friends with me, for he had to break down my feeling of distrust and disapproval. Then, again, I was not certain how Mr. Lioski would regard such a friendship, but, to my surprise, he took very little notice of it or, for the matter of that, of me.

Poropulos came into the store the night my wife left. Business was slack; there was war in the air, rumors of ultimatums had been persistent, and the Dutch farmers had avoided the store.

A week passed, and I began to worry, for I had not heard from Lil. I had had a letter from Lioski, telling me that in view of the unsettled condition of the

country he was extending his stay in Durban for a fortnight. The letter gave me the fullest instructions as to what I was to do in case war broke out, but, unfortunately, I had no opportunity of putting them into practice.

The very day I received the letter, a Boer commando rode into Carolina, and at the head of it rode the Landrost Peter du Huis, a pleasant man, whom I knew slightly. He came straight to the store, dismounted, and entered.

"Good morning, Mr. Gray," he said. "I fear that I come on unpleasant business."

"What is that?" I asked.

"I have come to commandeer your stock in the name of the Republic," he said, "and to give you the tip to clear out."

It does not sound possible, but it is nevertheless a fact that in two hours I had left Carolina, leaving Lioski's store in the hands of the Boers, and bringing with me receipts signed by the Landrost for the goods he had commandeered. In four hours I was in a cattle truck with a dozen other refugees on my way to Pretoria—for I had elected to go to Durban to inform Lioski at first hand of what had happened.

Of the journey down to the coast it is not necessary to speak. We were sixty hours en route; we were without food, and had little to drink. At Ladysmith I managed to get a loaf of bread and some milk; at Maritzburg I got my first decent meal. But I arrived in Durban, tired, dispirited, and hungry. Lioski was staying at the Royal, and as soon as I got to the station I hailed a ricksha to take me there.

There had been no chance of telegraphing. The wires were blocked with government messages. We had passed laden troop trains moving up to the frontier, and had cheered the quiet men in khaki who were going, all of them, to years of hardship and privation, many of them to death.

The vestibule of the Royal was crowded, but I made my way to the office.

"Lioski?" said the clerk. "Mr. and Mrs. Lioski, No. 84—you'll find your way to their sitting room."

I went slowly up the stairs, realizing in a flash the calamity.

I did not blame Lil; it was a hard life I had brought her to. I had been selfish, as sick men are selfish, inconsiderate.

They stood speechless, as I opened the door and entered. I closed the door behind me. Still they stood, Lil as pale as death, with terror and shame in her eyes, Lioski in a black rage.

"Well?" It was he who broke the silence.

He was defiant, shameless, and as I went on to talk about what had happened at the store, making no reference to what I had seen, his lips curled contemptuously.

But Lil, womanlike, rushed in with explanations. She had meant to go to Cape Town—the train service had been bad—she had decided to go to Durban—Mr. Lioski had been kind enough to book her a room——

I let her go on. When she had finished I handed my receipts to Lioski.

"That ends our acquaintance, I think."

"As you like," he replied with a shrug.

I turned to Lillian.

"Come, my dear," I said, but she made no move, and I saw Lioski smile again.

I lost all control over myself and leaped at him, but his big fist caught me before I could reach him, and I went down, half stunned. I was no match for him. I knew that, and if the blow did nothing else, it sobered me. I picked myself up. I was sick with misery and hate.

"Come, Lil," I said again.

She was looking at me, and I thought I saw a look of disgust in her face. I did not realize that I was bleeding, and that I must have been a most unpleasant figure. I only knew that she loathed me at that moment, and I turned on my heel and left them, my own wife and the big man who had broken me.

One forgets things in war time. I joined the Imperial Light Horse and went to the front. The doctor passed me as sound, so I suppose that all that is claimed for the climate of Africa is true.

We went into Ladysmith, and I survived the siege. I was promoted for bringing an officer out of action under fire. I earned a reputation for daring, which I did not deserve, because always I was courting swift death, and taking risks to that end.

Before Buller's force had pushed a way through the stubborn lines to our relief, I had received my commission. More wonderful to me, I found myself a perfectly healthy man, as hard as nails, as callous as the most- experienced soldier. Only, somewhere down in my heart, a little worm gnawed all the time; sleeping or waking, fighting or resting, I thought of Lillian, and wondered, wondered, wondered.

Ladysmith was relieved. We marched on toward Pretoria. I was transferred to Hampton's Horse with the rank of major, and for eighteen months I moved up and down the Eastern Transvaal chasing a will-othe-wisp of a commandant, who was embarrassing the blockhouse lines.

Then one day I came upon Poropulos.

We were encamped outside Standerton when he rode in on a sorry- looking Burnto pony. He had been in the country during the war, he said, buying and selling horses. He did not mention Lioski's name to me, and so studiously did he avoid referring to the man, that I saw at once that he knew.

It was brought home to me by his manner that he had a liking for me that I had never guessed. In what way I had earned his regard I cannot say, but it was evident he entertained a real affection for me.

We parted after an hour's chat—he was going back to Carolina. He had a scheme for opening an officers' club in that town, where there was always a large garrison, and to which the wandering columns came from time to time to be re-equipped.

As for me, I continued the weary chase of the flying commando. Trek, trek, trek, in fierce heat, in torrential downpour, over smooth veldt and broken hills, skirmishing, sniping, and now and then a sharp engagement, with a dozen casualties on either side.

Four months passed, and the column was ordered into Carolina for a refit. I went without qualms, though I knew she was there, and Lioski was there.

We got into Carolina in a thunderstorm, and the men were glad to reach a place that bore some semblance of civilization. My brother officers, after our long and profitless trek, were overjoyed at the prospect of a decent dinner—for Poropulos's club was already famous among the columns.

My horse picked up a stone and went dead lame, so I stayed behind to doctor him, and rode to Carolina two hours after the rest of the column had arrived.

It was raining heavily as I came over a fold of the hill that showed the straggling township. There was no human being in sight save a woman who stood by the roadside, waiting, and I knew instinctively, long before I reached her, that it was Lillian. I cantered toward her. Her face was turned in my direction, and she stood motionless as I drew rein and swung myself to the ground.

She was changed, not as I expected, for sorrow and suffering had etherealized her. Her big eyes burned in a face that was paler than ever, her lips, once so red and full, were almost white.

"I have been waiting for you," she said.

"Have you, dear? You are wet."

She shook her head impatiently. I slipped off my mackintosh and put it about her.

"He has turned me out," she said.

She did not cry. I think she had not recovered from the shock. Something stirred from the thin cloak she was wearing; a feeble cry was muffled by the wrapping.

"I have got a little girl," she said, "but she is dying." She began to cry silently, the tears running down her wet face in streams.

I took her into Carolina, and found a Dutchwoman who put her and the baby to bed, and gave her some coffee.

I went up to the officers' club just after sunset and met Poropulos coming down.

He was in a terrible rage, and was muttering to himself in some tongue I could not understand.

"Oh, here you are!"—he almost spat the words in his anger —"that dog Lioski—?"

He was about to say something, but checked himself. I think it was about Lillian that he intended to speak at first, but he changed the subject to another grievance. "I was brought before the magistrate and fined £100 for selling field-force tobacco. My club will be ruined —Lioski informed the police—by—?"

He was incoherent in his passion. I gather that he had been engaged in some shady business, and that Lioski had detected him. He almost danced before me in the rain.

"Shylock dies tonight," he said, and waved his enemy out of the world with one sweep of his hand. "He dies tonight—I am weary of him—for eighteen—nineteen years I have known him, and he's dirt right through—?"

He went out without another word. I stood on the slope of the hill watching him.

I dined at the club, and went straight back to the house where I had left my wife. She was sleeping—but the baby was dead. Poor little mortal! I owed it no grudge, but I was glad when they told me.

All the next day I sat by her bed listening to Lillian's mutterings, for she was very ill. I suffered all the tortures of a damned soul sitting there, for she spoke of Lioski—"Arthur" she called him—prayed to him for mercy—told him she loved him—

I was late for dinner at the club. There was a noisy crowd there. Young Harvey of my own regiment had had too much to drink, and I avoided his table.

My hand shook as I poured out a glass of wine, and somebody remarked on it.

I did not see Poropulos until the dinner was halfway through. Curiously enough, I looked at the clock as he came in, and the hands pointed to half past eight.

The Greek was steward of the club, and was serving the wine. He was calm, impassive, remarkably serene, I thought. He exchanged jokes with the officers who were grumbling that they had had to wait for the fulfillment of their orders.

"It was ten to eight when I ordered this," grumbled one man.

Then, suddenly, Harvey, who had been regarding Poropulos with drunken gravity, pointed downward.

"He's changed his boots," he said, and chuckled. Poropulos smiled amiably and went on serving. "He's changed his boots!" repeated Harvey, concentrating his mind upon trivialities as only a drunken man can. The men laughed. "Oh, dry up, Harvey!" said somebody.

"He's changed—?"

He got no further. Through the door came a military policeman, splashed from head to foot with mud.

"District Commandant here, sir?" he demanded. "There's been a man murdered."

"Soldier?" asked a dozen voices.

"No, sir—storekeeper, name of Lioski—shot dead half an hour ago."

I do not propose to tell in detail all that happened following that. Two smart C.I.D. men came down from Johannesburg, made a few inquiries, and arrested Poropulos. He was expecting the arrest, and half an hour before the officers came he asked me to go to him.

I spent a quarter of an hour with him, and what we said is no man's business but ours. He told me something that startled me—he loved Lillian, too. I had never guessed it, but I did not doubt him. But it was finally for Lillian's sake that he made me swear an oath so dreadful that I cannot bring myself to write it down—an oath so unwholesome, and so against the grain of a man, that life after it could only be a matter of sickness and shame.

Then the police came and took him away.

Lioski had been shot dead in the store by some person who had walked in when the store was empty, at a time when there was nobody in the street. This person had shot the Jew dead and walked out again. The police theory was that Poropulos had gone straight from the club, in the very middle of dinner, had committed the murder, and returned to continue his serving, and the crowning evidence was the discovery that he had changed his boots between 7.30 and 8.30. The mud-stained boots were found in a cellar, and the chain of evidence was completed by the statement of a trooper who had seen the Greek walking from the direction of the store, at 8.10, with a revolver in his hand.

Poropulos was cheerful to the last—cheerful through the trial, through the days of waiting in the fort at Johannesburg.

"I confess nothing," he said to the Greek priest. "I hated Lioski, and I am glad that he is dead, that is all. It is true that I went down to kill him, but it was too late."

When they pinioned him he turned to me.

"I have left my money to you," he said. "There is about four thousand pounds. You will look after her."

"That is the only reason I am alive."

"Did you murder Arthur Lioski?" said the priest again.

"No," said Poropulos, and smiled as he went to his death. And what he said was true, as I know. I shot Lioski.

8. KID GLOVE HARRY

Mr. Solomon Parsons was a lawyer of sagacity and genius. He had beneath the polished dome of his pink head something of the qualities of a great general. There might be added to this catalogue of his qualities an instinct of equilibrium which assisted him, despite many temptations, to walk inside the true line which divides legitimate from questionable practice. This instinct of equilibrium enabled him to walk straightly even upon the line. Once he toppled to the wrong side, taking no harm, as it happened, except the demolition of every castle he had builded; but there was some excuse for him, for he had invested heavily upon a falling market, a form of insanity not uncommon in men of the learned professions, as our curb broker will tell you. He was not ruined. There was no need for embezzlement or the transference of his clients' assets, such as he controlled, to his own accounts. It just meant that he had to sell loan securities and write to his son, telling him that he must give up all idea of going into the army, come home, and work.

Mr. Solomn Parsons paid his differences like a respectable man, and was honest because honesty is the best policy. And then it was that old man Glenmere died and left to Solomon the proving of his eccentric will. Any will which contains a condition or request may be classified as "eccentric." Mr. Parsons spent one afternoon reading over the provisions which made the will remarkable, and then sat down and wrote for the second time to Miss Dorothy Trent.

His principal clerk came in whilst the letter was in process of completion.

"Oh, by the way," said Solomon, looking up, "I am writing to Miss Trent about her legacy."

"Do you want the letter copied, sir?" asked the clerk.

"No, no, it's not necessary," said his employer airily. "It's merely an informal note of congratulation."

"A very fortunate young woman," said the chief clerk, "she's worth nearly half a million. He's left a lot of holdings in Canada, hasn't he, —land and all that sort of thing?"

"Yes, yes," this time Mr. Parsons was impatient. "All right, Jackson, I'll attend to this matter. Ask Mr. Reginald to come in and see me."

Reginald made his glum appearance and dropped into a chair on the opposite side of his father's writing-table. He was a pallid, willowy, young man, with hair on his upper lip.

"How are you getting on, my boy?" asked Solomon benevolently, as he licked down the envelope of his letter to Miss Trent.

"I hate this place," grumbled his hope and pride. "Really, governor, it's pretty tough on me. I never dreamt that you were so hard up."

"My investments unfortunately went wrong," said Solomon smoothly. "Still," he went on, "I hope you're going to make yourself as comfortable as you can, Reggie. At the back of my head is an idea which may develop very favorably for you. A large fortune and a pretty wife, eh, my boy —how does that strike you?"

Mr. Reginald sniffed. "That sort of thing only happens in books," he said irritably.

"It happens in real life, believe me." His father nodded his head emphatically. "I am a much older man than you, and in my profession I have seen many strange happenings. Post this letter for me."

His son took the envelope and glanced at the address. "Who is she?" he asked.

"She's the girl who came into old Glenmere's fortune. Half a million, my boy!" said his father archly.

His son looked up quickly.

"Is this the girl you're thinking about?"

Mr. Parsons nodded.

"Bosh!" said his ungrateful son. "What chance have I? She'll be simply surrounded by all sorts of fellows the moment it is known that she has money; and a girl like that who has been poor is pretty certain to jump at the first likely man who come along—and besides the will makes a quick marriage pretty easy for her."

Mr. Parsons smiled.

"Post the letter," said he, "and have a little faith in your father, my boy."

The quiet Newhaven household of Dorothy Trent and her mother had been prepared for the sensation which was coming. There had been no secret that Grandfather Trent, though he offered little assistance to his one relative whilst he was living, had made ample provision for her when he had passed beyond the responsibilities of the real estate business, and a brief note from the lawyer asking for authority to administer the estate, had announced the disposal of the old man's fortune, "with conditions."

"Which, of course, my dear," said the mild Mrs. Trent, "you will carry out."

"That entirely depends upon what they are, mother," said the girl quietly. "If it is one of those curious wills which directs me to marry the orphan child of his favorite butler, you may be sure that dear grandfather's money will go to the old ladies' home or The Society for Promoting International Discord or whatever the alternative is."

"I'm sure your dear grandfather—" began Mrs. Trent apologetically, and the girl laughed.

"My dear Mary Ann," she said, "you're not sure of anything in the world or anybody. I await the wicked lawyer's letter—I'm sure he's wicked; all lawyers are, who handle wills—with a great deal of interest. In the meantime I'm not going to the office—I feel I ought to get something out of this."

Mrs. Trent made her usual weak protest. She had spent her life protesting against the inevitable, in which category she placed her daughter's inflexibility of purpose. The Trents lived in a little house on the outskirts of the town. Dorothy was employed as stenographer in Newhaven's biggest store, and her horizon had been largely determined by the urban boundaries. Yet there was within her a surging desire to burst out into a large world, and now that it seemed that all her long-cherished dreams of travel were to be fulfilled, she felt that the "condition" must be unusually severe before she refused.

"Mother," she asked, "if—if this money did not come, would you be terribly disappointed?"

Mrs. Trent smiled, which Dorothy, reading the signs by long practice, knew meant that she hadn't given the matter a great deal of thought, and was busy making up her mind at that moment.

"It would mean a lot to me, Dorothy dear," said the older woman; "one always feels that one is living on the brink of a volcano."

It was a favourite expression of hers, and Dorothy, long inured and tired of speculating why her mother chose so tragic an illustration, said nothing, waiting for her to continue.

"Of course, dear, it would save you from work, and give you a very happy time," Mrs. Trent went on, gathering her arguments en route.

"Never mind about me, mother, I'm thinking of you. Would you be horribly disappointed?"

"I think I should," said Mrs. Trent, nodding her head, and employing a tone which suggested that she was surprised to find herself taking this decisive opinion.

"I should be disappointed—but, my dear, there is no question of your not getting the money, is there"

"I'm thinking of the conditions," said the girl.

The garden gate clicked, and the girl turned her head to see the postman with a solitary letter.

"Special delivery," she said grimly. "This must be from Solomon the Wise One."

She went to the door and took it in, and a glance at the superscription on the envelope verified her surmise. She sat down at the table, her mother peering anxiously at her over her glasses, and read the letter through carefully, then read it again.

"Humph!" said Dorothy.

"What is it, my dear?" asked Mrs. Trent tremulously.

"It's the condition, and really it isn't a terrible condition after all. Shall I read you the letter?"

Mrs. Trent nodded.

"'Dear Miss Trent,'" began Dorothy, "'I have already communicated to you that fact that your grandfather, James Trent, deceased, has left a will appointing me to be his sole executor and you his sole legatee save for a small sum which is left to me, his lawyer, as a token of his regard and affection.'" (Mr. Solomon Parsons might have written "very small" sum and underscored the qualification.) "'Your grandfather, as you may know,

married very late in life, and had strong views upon the postponement of matrimony. He desires that you should marry—"

Mrs. Trent all of a twitter sat up.

"Good gracious, Dorothy, who is the young gentleman?"

"There is no young gentleman," said Dorothy coldly, without looking up. "Listen. 'Desires that you should marry early in life. He stipulates that you shall inherit one-tenth of his legacy immediately, and the other nine-tenths upon your wedding day, and he directs that if you do not marry before your twenty-fourth birthday the remainder of his estate shall go to the Railway Benevolent Fund. Yours faithfully, etc.'"

The girl folded the letter and sat with her hands clasped on her lap, looking across to her mother. "Well, that's fairly reasonable," she said; "that means another"—she calculated quickly—"well, over a year of freedom."

"And in that time, my dear," said Mrs. Trent, "maybe you will discover somebody on whom your affections may rest as a house upon a rock."

Trent shook her head, for girls had changed sadly since her youth. As she often remarked.

A month later, Dorothy Trent with the light of joy in her eyes sat in Mr. Solomon Parsons' office. And Mr. Solomon Parsons was talking.

"I think it is necessary that you should see the property," he was saying, "and particularly if you are going to sell it, that you should be on the spot to sign the necessary documents—you have the administration of the estate, you know," he added, "until you fail definitely to fulfill the conditions of the will."

"Who wants to buy it?" asked the girl again. "Sir John Storey. You see, he owns the greater part of the adjoining property, and why he wants yours, Heaven knows! Your grandfather's Canadian agent writes me that he already possesses about five hundred square miles of his own."

"Perhaps he wants to keep chickens," said Dorothy. "Does he live there?" asked the girl.

The lawyer nodded.

"That an English baronet should isolate himself from the amenities of society and bury himself in the wilds of the Canadian Rockies, I cannot understand," he said, "but, there the fact is, he's been living there for, six

years. He has a vast estate and seems to be satisfied, so it is no business of ours."

Dorothy thought for a moment.

"I'd simply love to go," she said, "but I can't see how I can go alone."

Mr. Solomon Parsons smiled. "I'll arrange that, my dear lady," he said. "I am making up a party, my son and, myself. You've met my son in the outer office as you came through."

The girl shook her head.

"There was only an elderly gentleman, who I think is your clerk, and the office boy," she said.

Mr. Solomon Parsons bridled.

"The office boy, my dear Miss Trent," he said, with some acerbity, "was my son Reginald."

She murmured her apologies.

But the business was too important for Mr. Solomon Parsons to take very deep offence.

"As I was saying, we will go out with you, see you to Sir John's house—he has, by all accounts, a very beautiful house—and he wrote some time ago saying that he would make us very welcome if we came. By the way, there is a two or three-day journey across the—er—mountains and things, and I understand it's a rather difficult country. You don't mind that?"

"It will be lovely!" said Dorothy, her eyes shining.

So it came about that one chilly morning in early October, the lake steamer, The Nelson, set down three passengers at Little Pine Beach. To two of these, Little Pine Beach was a most inhospitable village of tin buildings, which promised little in the way of creature comfort. To the third, this shelf of land under the towering gray scarp of Mount Macgregor was a veritable fairyland. She had ceased to gurgle with joy at the sight of snow-capped mountains or vast wheat lands. Ship and train and boat had been vehicles of enchantment. She had lived for weeks in a sort of dumb wonder.

The clean tang of mountain air; the fragrance of pine and balsam; the delicious incense of burning wood—she had stood on the observation platform of the car in the early mornings and snuffed them ecstatically. And

she had seen the sun rise on virgin snows, and heard the thunder of milky torrents crashing furiously through deep ravines, and had lived with a God she knew and worshipped.

"It is precious chilly," grumbled Mr. Parsons, "and I suppose there won't be a thing here fit to eat," looking around anxiously, and when a middle-aged man in mackinon coat and top boots detached himself from a group at the door of one of the dwellings, he went toward him, and met the newcomer half-way.

"Your father arranged for somebody to be here to meet us, didn't he, Mr. Parsons?" said the girl.

"Reggie," murmured that gentleman; "why don't you learn to call me Reggie, Dorothy?"

"Because it would encourage you to call me Dorothy," said the girl tartly.

Mr. Reginald Parsons was the one blot upon an otherwise perfect trip. The lawyer she could tolerate, but this sleek youth and his half- hearted love-making was getting on her nerves.

"I wish you wouldn't be so unpleasant toward me," he said plaintively. "I really didn't think I'd like you when I heard I was coming on the trip, but at the first sight of you I was head over heels—"

"Will you tell me, is this the person your father expects to meet here?"

"No, it isn't," snapped Reggie. "He's a fellow who is going on a trip with us, a lawyer or something."

"Do we start from here?" asked the girl, interested.

"I hope so," said the gloomy youth, "and the sooner we start the better."

Mr. Parsons was coming back now with his companion.

"I want to introduce you to Judge Henesey," he said, "He's going to make the trip with us."

The stranger, a sober-looking man of fifty, shook hands solemnly with the party.

"Your horses and traps are ready for the journey," he said. "You know it is a three days' hike?"

"Is the journey a pretty one?" asked the girl. "Of course it is, it couldn't be anything else."

"Well," said the other cautiously, "I don't know whether it's pretty, but it's certainly intteresting. The trail is a mighty difficult one to follow unless you know it. None of the boys round here ever go up. You reckoned on getting a guide here, didn't you?"

He addressed the lawyer, and Mr. Parsons nodded.

"A man named Harvey."

The Judge raised his eyebrows. "Joe Harvey! Why, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed. Harvey broke his leg a week ago and they sent him down to Nelson; but I dare say I'll find somebody, though nobody around here ever goes on to the fellow's estate."

He went back to his tin hut from whence he had come. The curious group about the door was now increased to half a dozen men, and with these he spoke.

"There's a man who came in last night, but I don't know whether you'll care to take him."

"Who is he?" asked Solomon.

"Well, we call him Kid Glove Harry. He's a trapper or something, though he never seems to have any pelts for sale. He turns up regular every six months, and some say he's a bad character, though I've never heard anything definitely against him."

Mr. Parsons hesitated.

"Why do they call him Kid Glove Harry?"

"Because he wears kid gloves, I guess," said the other dryly; "he ain't much to look at. You'd better see him."

He whistled and crooked his finger, and a man detached himself from the group. Judge Henesey had no more than told the truth when he described the newcomer as unattractive. His hair was long, he had a six months' stubbly growth of beard, and one eye was obscured by a dirty bandage. His clothes were stained and worn, and his rusty boots were gaping. A pack was swung over his back, and held by a bandolier of rope, and the general ferocity of his appearance was heightened by the Winchester he carried under his arm and the long-barrelled Colt which swung at his hip.

He did not speak, and made none of the gestures of humility which Mr. Solomon expected from all men he engaged for service, but stood surveying the party calmly out of his one undamaged eye.

"Does he know the trail?" asked Mr. Solomon doubtfully.

The man nodded.

"What is your name?"

The girl was staring at the wild man with glee. Somehow he matched the scene and satisfied her artistic requirements. In curiosity she looked at his hands as Mr. Parsons spoke, and sure enough they were encased in tight-fitting gloves which might have been kid and at one time were probably white.

"That'll do, Harry," said the lawyer, and the man without a word turned his back upon the party and strode away.

"You'll not get him to talk. In some of the camps they call him 'Dummy.' He hates talking."

"Does he hate shaving, too?" said Reggie. "Couldn't we get him trimmed up a bit"

The Judge bit off the end of his cigar and lit it.

"The only barber at Little Pine Beach has had delirium tremens for a week," he said deliberately.

"I suppose we'll have to take him," decided Mr. Solomon Parsons, "though I can't say that he impresses me very favorably."

To the girl, Kid Glove Harry was the one fascinating figure of the party. She rode behind him on the trail, and speculated upon the kind of life that this type of man would live. To her he was something out of a book, a figure from the land of fiction. She wondered if that revolver which flapped at his side as he jogged along had ever been used offensively; how he had got that injury to his eye. Between her speculations and the loveliness of the scene which burst into view as the little party climbed higher and higher toward Dead Horse Pass, she was so fully occupied that nightfall came too quickly.

The horses were unpacked and camp made for the night. Judge Henesey had a consultation with their guide, and came back to the party shaking his head.

"We shall have to pitch our own tents and cook our own food," he said. "He says he will cook for the young lady but nobody else."

"You can tell him from me," said Mr. Parsons, with dignity, "that if there's any cooking to be done, we'll cook for the young lady."

"And you can tell him from me," said the young lady in question, with some determination, "that I shall be most happy to test his powers as a chef."

Mr. Solomon Parsons said nothing, but looked significantly at his son. Kid Glove Harry might be the greatest villain unhung, but he made an excellent soup and a no less excellent cup of coffee; and Mr. Solomon Parsons, who was a good trencherman, eyeing the remains of his canned beef meal, sniffed the fragrance of the soup and broke the tenth commandment.

The trail widened, and the girl was able to ride side by side with her wild man the next morning.

"Is your eye very bad?" she asked.

"Not very," replied the man gruffly. She wanted to ask how it had happened, but did not dare, and as though reading her thoughts he said,

"Back-fire from my rifle—shooting a lynx."

They rode on in silence which the girl again broke.

"This is wonderland to me. I suppose it is very ordinary to you, and you do not see the beauty as I see it."

He did not reply to her question, but after a while asked:

"Why are you going up to the Storey's?"

She told him frankly, and he listened without comment. She noted that his beard was shot with gray, nevertheless she found it difficult to tell his age. His skin was burnt brown, and there were wrinkles about his eyes—he might have been fifty or thirty. She was taking a surreptitious survey of him when he turned suddenly and looked her full in the face.

"You needn't have come out anyway," he said. "Lawyers could have signed those documents or whatever it is you have to sign."

"My lawyer said it was necessary," she said. She might have added that she did not question her lawyer's decision, and had leapt at the opportunity of seeing a new world. Suddenly she uttered an exclamation.

"Why, tomorrow's my birthday," she said. "I shall be twenty-three. It would be rather awkward if I was twenty-four."

He took no notice of her, and she was piqued. They rode for half a mile in silence, and then unexpectedly:

"Why not twenty-four, eh?"

"It is of no importance," she said coldly, and he did not urge her to any further confidence.

That night was a trying one for her. Reggie was unusually affectionate, and his father seemed to give his son every opportunity to be alone with his client. The climax came when Mr. Solomon Parsons strode off with the Judge to explore a wooded slope. The girl had finished her meal and was getting up when Reggie 's hand caught her arm.

"Don't go," he said, clearing his throat; "there is something I want to say to you, Dorothy."

His tone was so changed that she looked at him in astonishment.

"Dorothy, I love you," he said huskily—"I just love you like the devil!"

"I don't want to be loved like the devil!" she said calmly enough, though she was quaking. She sat with her hands on her lap looking at him, as Reggie described afterwards, as though he were some new kind of insect, and he grew desperate.

("Carry the citadel by force, my boy," his father had urged him that afternoon.)

"Dorothy," said the young man, gripping her by the hand, "I am not worthy of you."

"Thank Heaven we agree on something," she said, and tried to rise, then before she knew what had happened, she was in his arms, his lips pressed to hers. She struggled, but the strongest and most determined of girls would have been caught at a disadvantage. It was then that a finger and thumb pinched Reggie's right ear urgently, and he released his hold of the girl and looked up, white with passion.

"Damn you, what do you mean" he snarled.

He tried to leap to his feet, but since his rate of rising was governed largely by the will of the man who held his ear, his progress was slow and painful.

Kid Glove Harry released his grip, and with a slight push sent the young man reeling back. He said no word, but looked at Mr. Reginald Parsons, and there was something in that look which fired whatever red blood the young man possessed.

With an oath he tugged at his belt. "Put that gun down," said Kid Glove Harry quietly, and the scowling youth obeyed.

"What is the matter?" It was Mr. Solomon Parsons, who came stumbling through the undergrowth at the sound of his son's angry voice.

The girl, breathless and a little frightened, stood aloof, and heard Reggie give his account of what had happened—an account by no means unflattering to himself. To her amazement, Mr. Parsons heard the story without exhibiting anger for the palpable boorishness of his son or apologies to the victim. Only Judge Henesey standing in the background looked a little puzzled.

The lawyer turned with a bland smile to the girl.

"My dear young lady, this is unfortunate, doubly unfortunate, because of a discovery of mine the day we left Nelson." She said nothing, but a sudden sense of dismay filled her, for what reason she could not understand.

"There was a telegram there," said the lawyer, and he took a folded paper from his pocket.

"What was the telegram?" she asked steadily. "How does it affect me?"

"It affects you rather nearly," said Mr. Solomon Parsons slowly; "it appears that in my reading of your grandfather's will, I made a slight mistake. You are to be married," he spoke distinctly, "before your twenty- third birthday, not your twenty-fourth."

She gasped. "My twenty-third!" she said incredulously. "Surely you are wrong."

"I deeply regret the error, but it was your twenty-third birthday that the will stipulated. I wish now that I had shown it to yon," he said, with unctuous regret, "but there the matter stands."

The girl pressed her hand against her forehead and thought.

"Then you mean," she said slowly, "that unless I am married today — tonight—I forfeit the remainder of my grandfather's estate?"

He nodded, and smiled a little.

Kid Glove Harry, a silent spectator, saw the blood mount to the girl's cheeks.

"It was a plot!" she cried, her voice trembling a little; "that is why you wanted me to come to the wilds of Canada. I needn't have come here at all. You planned to have me here in the woods, here in the wilderness on the eve of my twenty-third birthday so that you could marry me to —that!"

She pointed to the scowling Reginald. She thought a little while, evidently trying to piece together the details of Mr. Parsons' strategy.

"And you're a lawyer, of course," she said, nodding to Judge Henesey, "and you could marry me."

"That was the idea, miss—I understood from this gentleman," Judge Henesey spat as he spoke, "that you wanted a wedding in the hills."

She looked round desperately. She knew now what that money meant to her, the freedom, the happiness it would give to her, the opportunity for travel—for life; and looking, she saw Kid Glove Harry, tangle- bearded, bandaged eyed, and poverty stricken, and her heart leapt. She walked toward him.

"May I speak to you for a moment?" she said, and led him aside.

She was red with embarrassment when she spoke.

"Are you married?" she asked jerkily.

He shook his head.

"If I gave you ten thousand dollars—a hundred thousand dollars," she said breathlessly, "to marry me, would you promise to leave me when you have brought me back to Pine Beach"

He thought a while. "Yes; I would leave you when we came back to Pine Beach

if you wished," he said.

She looked at him keenly, but his eyes never wavered.

"And you will marry me?" she said.

He nodded.

"I don't see why not," he drawled. "I'm doing nothing particular this evening."

She came back to the fire.

"You can marry me, Judge Henesey, can you not?"

He nodded.

"With or without a license?"

"Yes," he said.

Very good."

She put her hand in Kid Glove Harry's.

"Marry me," she said.

Mr. Solomon Parsons sprang forward.

"You can't do it," he roared.

"You can't prevent it," said the girl.

"You bet you can't," said Kid Glove Harry. "Go right ahead, Judge..."

That night Dorothy slept in the tent of her husband, and Kid Glove Harry, rolled in a blanket, slept before her door.

It was a silent party that rode over the hills and down the slope to the big wooden mansion which was their destination.

Mr. Solomon Parsons spoke only once that morning when he asked the Judge:

"What's that fellow's name?"

"Torker or Morley, or something," said the Judge. "I didn't catch it correctly, but I'll get it when I give him the certificate today."

The girl rode ahead with her husband, and beyond an observation about the weather they, too, were silent. It was when they had come into view of the eccentric baronet's mansion that the girl asked:

"Have you ever met Sir John Storey?"

He shook his head.

She asked another question, and he replied with a nod; a further, and again he shook his head.

"You don't like talking very much, do you?" she asked.

"Not very much," he replied. "I'd just hate to say what was in my mind."

She looked at him in alarm.

"I guess I'll part with you when we get to the homestead," he said. "You won't want any Kid Glove Harrys hanging around."

"You promised to see me to Little Pine," she said, "and besides, I must find out where you live to send you that money."

"I don't want any money," he said.

"You promised," she said, and he made no reply.

The homestead was a revelation to her. As they grew nearer, she saw it was a dwelling which combined the architectural beauties of the colonial house with the ornate decoration of a Swiss chalet. And there were servants—real servants—in white starched dress frontswho helped the party to alight, and showed them into the great hall, the walls covered with skins and trophies.

There was a butler, a pompous stout man, who treated them with a courtesy and punctilio which, remembering the surroundings, would have seemed to the girl ridiculous but for the awe he inspired in her. She looked around for Kid Glove Harry, but he had disappeared.

Reggie, with a sneer on his face, saw the look and asked:

"Where's your husband. Mrs.—I don't know your name?"

The girl flushed. She turned to the butler.

"Will you see if Mr.—Mr.—if my husband is outside?" she said. She hated that smile on Reggie's face—hated it more bitterly when she realized that she, too, did not even know her own name.

The butler came back. "He will see you later, madam," he said deferentially.

"Is Sir John here?" asked the lawyer.

"No, sir, he is not in the house at present. I will let you know when he returns. I have sent your suit-cases to your bedrooms, gentlemen. Will you dress for dinner? Sir John invariably does."

The two men had brought their dress-suits. Judge Henesey had parted company at the door, and only stopping to fill the marriage certificate with Kid Glove Harry's name, was on his way back to Little Pine.

The girl did not meet her husband that afternoon. Once she saw him riding back from the trail, where he had left the Judge, and she noted with a little pang that he had made his way to the back of the house, where she guessed the servants' quarters were.

She dressed for dinner with more than usual care. There was a fun and a novelty of dressing here in the wilderness, and there was—

"Pshaw!" she said, and dismissed the idea. It was too absurd to be entertained. Why should she want to dress to please a brigand like the guide, who probably had no other thought in his head than a desire to get away to the nearest town and drink the money she would give him? And yet she looked forward with something like pleasure to his appearance.

She came down to dinner radiant, and into the dining-room with its shaded electric lamps (the eccentric baronet had a water-power plant, and generated his own electricity from a waterfall three miles away, she discovered), happy in the consciousness that she was not displeasing.

Reggie looked at her with a grin.

"Where's your husband?" he asked, and chuckled at her obvious exasperation.

The girl looked up to the butler, who stood by a chair at the end of the table.

"Will you tell my husband that dinner is served?" she asked a little huskily.

She would play the game out to the end, she thought.

"Kid Glove Harry is his name," added Mr. Reginald Parsons.

The butler bowed and went out. He came back in a few minutes, and standing by the door, his head erect, conscious of the importance of the occasion, announced:

"Kid Glove Harry."

And at the sight of the man who came in, Mr. Solomon Parsons gasped, and the girl rose from her chair wide-eyed.

It was a clean-shaven man with fine eyes (these she recognized), and he was dressed in the conventional smoking-jacket and starched shirt of civilization. He came forward with a little smile and a bow, and seated himself at the head of the table.

He surveyed the men with grim amusement, then he turned to the girl.

"I hope you're not shocked," he said, "but do you know I had been in the wilderness and haven't had a hair-cut or shave for six months."

He looked up at the butler.

"Mr. Tibbins," he said, "bring her ladyship some ice water."

Then Mr. Solomon Parsons recovered his power of speech. He asked in a hollow tone:

"Then you're Sir John Storey?"

"That is what I am called."

"But nobody knew you at Little Pine."

"I never go there in state," said Sir John, with a little smile. "I shoot at the back of that country, and sometimes go into the village. I happened to arrive there, the day before you came, in a very deplorable condition, Lady Storey," he said gravely, addressing the girl, and she colored. "They know me as Kid Glove Harry from an eccentricity of mine."

"Why do you wear kid gloves?" demanded the curious Mr. Solomon.

"To keep my hands clean," said the other calmly. "That's a curious reason, isn't it?"

That night, when the men had gone to bed, he walked with the girl along a long porch overlooking the moonlit valley. Fifty miles away, above white peaks of his lowly fellows, rose the hoary head of Macdonald.

"It's a wonderful place, this," said the girl.

It was the first time she had spoken to him that evening.

"I don't wonder that you hide yourself away, but isn't it very lonely?"

He flicked the ash from his cigarette before he spoke.

"It is very lonely," he said; and after an interval of silence, "It will be a thousand times more lonely after I have taken you to Little Pine Beach."

She laughed, a soft gurgling laugh, and leant over the rail of the porch.

"I think you're very quixotic," she said, "but I think, if you take me to Little Pine, you'll be—"

"What?" he asked.

She didn't make an immediate reply.

"I promised you I would take you to Little Pine," he said doggedly, "and I must keep my word.'"

"You also said, 'if you wish,'" she said softly.

"And do you wish?"

She was playing with the tendril of a vine that twined about one of the verandah supports, and what she said was in so low a tone that he did not hear her. But he took a chance and caught her in his arms, and it seemed that he had just guessed right.

9. THE TREASURE OF THE KALAHARI

Romance may come on the heels of tragedy.

So it came to Mirabelle Maynard at Red Cot farm in Sussex; for when the shock of her brother's death had passed, she found a certain tender interest in the letters which arrived, sometimes from Bulawayo, sometimes from Kimberley, but as often as not bearing the postmark of the mail- sorting van. They were well expressed letters in a crabbed handwriting, and they told her of things that left her a little breathless; and when she had read them through she would sit down and indite epistles almost as voluminous, and these she addressed to the Rev. George Smith at a little store in Mafeking. She did not know that it was a little store, but the Reverend George very kindly told her so.

He did not tell her that it was a Kaffir store, and that the letters, by arrangement, were sent on to him, since his own addresses were uncertain and shifting. But he did hint that he was young and single and that he was good-looking. He said, amongst other things, that he had left the ministry and was devoting his life and energy to securing justice for her and punishment for the venal officials who were endeavoring to rob her of her inheritance.

Upon a certain day, Mirabelle Maynard mortgaged and let her farm, booked a first-class passage to Capetown on the Dover Castle, and disappeared from England. She was destined never to meet the romantic clergyman whose summons brought her feet to the corridors of adventure...

There was a time, in the queer days following the rising and the subsequent rush to the diamond diggings westward of Fourteen Streams, when the citizens of a certain Bechuanaland town decided that one Walter Vellors, who was awaiting execution at the fine and new stone gaol for the murder of a storekeeper, was not really a bad fellow as fellows went; and anyway, these damned storekeepers... Peruvian Jews most of them... too bad that a fellow like Walter... or was it Jim...? should swing, eh, boys?

They got up a petition, and they had a meeting, and they telegraphed the legislature at Capetown, and finally they held up Zeederberg's coach eighteen miles outside of Geelow, and took therefrom the official and only hangman the country possessed. Him they made so gloriously drunk that his name appears first of the signatories to another petition, which begins:

"We free men of Bechuanaland, holding capital punishment in abhorrence—etc.," and may be seen to this day framed in the office of the Minister of Justice.

Then the same free men seduced from their lofty duty the chief warder (who was Governor) and three common warders (two half-colored), so that the Governor and warders and condemned prisoner fraternized in maudlin fashion.

Into this electric atmosphere rode Captain Bill Stark, a lean, brown, expectant man.

He came into Adderley Street (so they had christened a strip of dust that divided one line of tin shanties from the other), and they turned out of the Grand Hotel in such a great hurry to tell the news that the Grand Hotel swayed crazily.

They told him, all speaking at once.

"Poor feller, he's suffered, Sheriff... damned storekeeper robbed him, you bet.... Why, one feller I know robbed another feller I know.... Anyway, everybody's against it, that's all."

"Is that so?" said Bill Stark. "And the gaol staff, you say?"

"Everybody," doggedly, but not without triumph.

"And the hangman?"

"That's God's truth.... Now, Captain..."

But the Captain was riding for the gaol. He was Chief Constable, Sheriff, and Tax-Collector. He rode through the gate, and the warder held the rein as he flung off and into the guardroom.

"Properly speaking, Captain Stark," said the chief warder, on his dignity and in that falsetto which the illiterate regard as a tolerable imitation of high-class conversation, "properly speaking, you have no status in this. I am responsible, sir, to the High Commissioner..."

"Turn round," said Stark wearily. "You colored men go first. Open the door of the first cell.... In you go. Now your keys, Schultz—all of them. Thank you."

They did not argue, not even the chief warder, partly because the long barrel of a service Webley was sticking into his belt, and partly because it was not until he subsequently indicted his "Report on Outrageous Happening in Geelow Gaol" that he thought of appropriate repartee.

So Stark locked the men in the cell and went in search of Walter Vellors. Him he found, and Walter protested indignantly.

"My dear man," said Captain Bill Stark testily, "if you go shooting up storekeepers and robbing their safes, you can't complain about being punished."

"I refuse to be hanged until I have an accredited minister of the Gospel," said Walter Vellors, within his rights.

"Why argue?" pleaded Bill, as he strapped the man. "You'll be seeing Peter in a second or so."

"Half a minute," said Vellors, his unshaven face twitching. "There's something I want to get off my chest. It is about a mine and a girl—"

Bill Stark's lips curled until he looked like an angry dog.

"If you get sentimental I'll cry," he said, "and crying never did improve my appearance—"

"There's no sentiment about it," said Vellors, surprisingly cool. "I did up this Peruvian, and I was the fellow that killed Jan van Rhys at Laager Sprint. I shot Pieter Roos down in the Lydenberg district, and —oh, I've done a lot and I guess I'm fully entitled to the company of the saints. But this girl's in the Kalahari by now. I sent her a fake plan—all jumbled up... got an idea she's come up to Bulawayo to see me, because, from what her brother said and her picture, she's a good looker, and... I'm a lady's man myself."

"Get on to the mine," snarled Stark, "and remember that serial stories bore me stiff."

But Mr. Walter Vellors was not to be hurried. He and a man named Maynard had located a "pan" in the Kalahari desert—a ten-mile stretch of alluvial gold.

"I'm willing to admit that it was a miracle," he confessed. "I met Maynard, who was a new chum just out from England, looking for a new home for him and his sister. I told the tale about the alluvial. I've told it a hundred times to suckers, and some have fallen and some have passed me by. But Maynard took up the idea, and him and me went out into the bush country for a two days' trip. It lasted a month because we lost ourselves, and if it hadn't been for striking a Hottentot village I'd have died natural. And then we found the 'pan.' Maynard found it and took samples —we had no water to wash it, but he said there was a new way of dealing with that kind of stuff. Anyway, we got back to Vryburg and washed the samples, and then Maynard got a heat stroke and pegged out. That looked as if I'd got an easy job, but it wasn't. He'd registered the claim in his own name, and that

damned Commissioner wouldn't listen to me when I told him I was Maynard's partner. It appears that in a will he'd left everything to his sister.

"It was tough luck on me, Sheriff—there was a million, or maybe ten, and I couldn't touch it. The chief of police at Vryburg gave me twenty-four hours to get out of town, so I dodged up to Mafeking and got a grand idea. I wrote to the girl and told her all about the gold claims me and her brother had, and asked her to come out to Bulawayo. I called myself Smith—George Smith."

"Well?" asked the Sheriff coldly, as the man paused.

"Give us a gasper, Sheriff," begged Mr. Vellors. "This story is worth the makings... I'm not kidding you. I told the girl not to go to the Government office at Vryburg—I said there was a plot to swindle her. I wanted to see her first, you understand, to get my share. Well, she wrote a lovely letter thanking me for my kindness, and said she'd meet me, not at Bulawayo, but at Kibi Cubo—that's a 'tot' village near the supposed property. You see"—the prisoner drew the smoke into his lungs and paused before he exhaled—"you see, I had to give her a second place where we could meet, but I never dreamt that she would go into the desert. Being young, maybe, and romantic..."

"When is she due?" asked Stark quickly.

"Today."

Again the Sheriff's lips curled back.

"You're lying, I guess—"

"If I die this minute—" protested the other indignantly.

The Sheriff looked at his watch. "In five minutes," he said tersely, "whether you speak the truth or lie..."

And when it was all over he went down town and rode his horse to the group before the Grand Hotel—silent, uneasy, fearful.

"I've hanged your friend," said Bill, staring coldly down on them, "and he's completely dead. Got anything to say?"

Somebody had, after a long and speechless while.

"No good crying over spilt milk, Captain."

"That's so," said Bill Stark. "And now, you miners and loafers, get back to your huts; and whilst I'm in my best admonitory mood, I want to tell the gentleman who is buying diamonds from the natives working the Boyson field, that if I catch him or any other man engaged in I.D.B., I'll put him on the Breakwater at Capetown for seven years."

He rode away.

"Bullying swine," said a voice. Captain Stark did not turn in his saddle. He rode at a hack canter to the telegraph office, and found the operator drinking neat whisky and cheating himself at patience.

"Get me a through line to Vryburg," he said, and the operator, who knew him, did not argue.

"Ask this..." said Bill, and waited until the answer came:

"Gold claims registered in Maynard's name. No sign of sister. Ask Brakpan Halt, nearest railway stop to claims."

Brakpan Halt was more difficult to reach. No answer came for half an hour, and then:

"Young lady detrained, bought Cape cart, three horses from Tyl, and trekked west this morning."

"Tell him," said Bill, "to send somebody out to bring her back to the rail."

And, when that message had gone through:

"Get Masabili and tell the stationmaster to hold the Bulawayo mail for me—"

"You won't get any mail train at Masabili," interrupted the operator, with the satisfaction of one possessing superior information. "It's thirty-five miles from here to Masabili halt, and the train goes through at midnight."

Bill Stark scratched his long nose thoughtfully.

"I may make it with two horses," he said.

Riding the one and leading the other, he cantered out of town, watched by resentful citizens. He was ten miles on his road before he remembered that, in his capacity as Coroner, he had not held the necessary inquest on the late Mr. Walter Vellors.

The road was bad, and half-way one of his horses fell lame and had to be left at the mule station where the coaches changed teams. He reached the brow

of the hill overlooking Masabili in time to see the faint red lights of the mail dimming in the desert.

At four in the morning a leisurely goods train drew in, and he made the journey northward in a truck which was carrying a huge dynamo for a new power station at Bulawayo.

"It is the only covered truck, Sheriff," said the train guard apologetically. "My caboose is full of parcel mail."

"It will do," said Stark. The sleep he enjoyed in that car nearly cost him his life.

He was turned out at Brakpan Halt at two o'clock on a blazing afternoon.

"No, mister, she hasn't come back. As a matter of fact," said the stationmaster frankly, "I didn't rightly get your instructions. And if it comes to that, I can't take no orders from Geelow—where in hell is Geelow anyway?"

"Did you send out to search for this lady or didn't you?" asked Bill Stark, and the slightly, but only slightly, colored official told the truth.

"I didn't. I've got enough trouble of my own. There were four cases of cigarettes stolen from the 17-down yesterday, and I've been worried to death about it. They couldn't have been pinched at this siding. How could they have got 'em away—the thieves, I mean? And I get reported twice a week because the Bulawayo mail can't get water. She sits here and hoots for hours, and I live four miles away and have to come in. Why don't they take their water at Mahagobi? That's what I say... settin' here hooting all night for water... I have to come in and set the pump going..."

Bill Stark cursed him evenly but fearfully.

"Damn you and your pump and your hooting locos," he snapped. "You'll have a life on your hands, you coffee-colored son of a Hottentot. Get me a horse and don't argue, or I'll skin your head!"

The station premises adjoined an ancient farm belonging to the Dutchman from whom the girl had secured her Cape cart and horses. The Sheriff interviewed Mr. Tyl, and learnt little save that the girl had paid twice the value for her purchases.

"Ach! She seemed a capable young woman. She said she was going to meet friends, and, man, she could drive. She had a little farm in England and she sold it to come out.... I told her where the water holes were..."

"I want two horses, baas," said the Sheriff briefly.

He stopped long enough to load one animal with biscuit and biltong and two great waterbags, and as the sun slipped down behind the dwarf thorn trees, he headed westward, following the tracks of wheels.

He went on till darkness failed, and then, lantern in hand and leading his horses, he followed on foot until the tracks grew more difficult to read. Before daybreak he was on the trail, and when daylight came at last he extinguished his lantern, snatched a hasty meal, and rode on at a jog-trot. A minor cause for annoyance was the discovery that his watch had gone dead. Thereafter he had to judge the time by the position of the sun.

He had passed the thick belt of wachteinbitje bushes, and had come to sheer, unadulterated desert, where the tracks no longer appeared. There had been a gale of wind in the night—he had heard it with something like fear in his heart—and fine sand had drifted over the wheel tracks. After two hours' search he picked up the trail, only to lose it again. Once he passed a solitary Hottentot woman tramping unerringly to her kraal. She had seen no white girl, nor Cape cart.

On the third day he halted finally and definitely. His horses were exhausted, and his stock of water was running low.

And then, at the moment when he was taking a compass bearing for the first stage of his retreat, there came over a low ridge of sand a weary horse and rider. At first he thought it was a boy—she sat astride, a slim figure in white, her head bowed dejectedly on her breast.

He stood staring at her, and she would have passed unnoticing if he had not found his voice. At the sound of his yell she reined in her horse, and, shading her eyes, looked toward him.

Another second, and she turned her horse's head in his direction, and the half-dead animal made an heroic effort to trot.

"Thank God I've found you, Mr. Smith!" she called hysterically as she slipped from the saddle. "Oh, I'm so frightened of this place! I've been two nights... I missed the village... If I had only gone on to Bulawayo..."

She stumbled and would have fallen, but his arm was about her.

"Sit down, Miss—er—Maynard," he said awkwardly.

It would have been an awkward meeting in any circumstances. He had never troubled to think what she was like. She was just a woman—somebody's

sister. He certainly had never thought of her as pretty, with a mop of golden hair and a skin like milk and peaches.

"Everybody thought I was mad to come out, but of course I didn't tell them about the horrible way the Commissioner at Vryburg had behaved," she went on a little breathlessly. "And I've done a whole lot of desert travel—my poor brother and I spent every winter in Algeria before things went wrong, and we... You are Mr. Smith, aren't you?"

Bill Stark blinked like a man waking from sleep.

"To be perfectly honest, I'm not," he blurted. "Smith, whose real name is Vellors, is dead—hanged. I hanged him. I'm the Sheriff of Geelow..."

He cursed himself when he saw the horror in her face. In an instant she was on her feet, staring at him, terrified. "Hanged... oh no! Mr. Smith was my friend—how horrible!"

"I'm a dam' fool for telling you," said Bill Stark, a trifle incoherently. "Excuse the language.... Yes, Vellors was a murderer and he had to go. He told me all about you and the fake mine—there's a real mine somewhere, but the Commissioner at Vryburg will tell you all about that—told me just before—just before his"—he coughed—"untimely end."

This time she really fainted, and Bill Stark, in a panic, dashed to his pack horse, and, unstrapping the last water-bottle, poured an improvident quantity over her face.

"You must forgive me if I'm a little shaken," she said unsteadily. "I think I am—what called yourself just now. Hadn't we better be getting back?"

Bill nodded slowly.

"Mr. Smith said that they would stop at nothing to get the claims," she said. She seemed to be speaking her thoughts aloud. "I suppose you have told me the truth?"

He did not answer. He was looking at her in amazement.

"That is why he asked me to meet him without letting anybody know," she continued listlessly. "So you have killed him!"

Bill cleared his throat, but before he could protest she went on:

"I don't for a moment imagine that you want to kill me, though if you would kill a clergyman—"

"A what?"

"You know Mr. Smith was a missionary," she said. "That is how he came to meet my brother."

"Good GodI" gasped the awestricken Sheriff. "Did Wally tell you that?"

"Don't let us talk about it," she said. "Shall we go back?"

"One moment." Bill Stark was aroused. "This Vellors was a notoriously bad character and a triple murderer. I hanged him because there was nobody else there to do it—and he wanted hanging badly!"

She sighed and looked across the waste of bush and sand, and it hurt him to read the scepticism in her drawn face.

"I didn't believe him when he started telling this story—about the gold-pan and you and your brother. It was the only decent thing he ever did—to tell me, I mean."

She was not convinced; such is the contrariness of women, she could smile when he asked her what had happened to her Cape cart.

"I don't know. One of the horses died. And then my riding horse died too. I think they must have been sick. I saddled the other."

"Oh!" said Bill, and then, gravely: "I think we'd better get back."

They rode side by side almost in silence. Twice he halted to consult the map he had borrowed from the stationmaster, and set a course with the help of his compass. And on the second occasion, when they had stopped to eat a frugal meal and drink sparingly of the rapidly diminishing stock of water, she saw him frown and shake a little instrument.

"That's funny," he said.

"What is funny? I should like to be amused."

She looked over his shoulder as he laid the compass on the map. "That isn't the north," she said. "Look! The needle is pointing to the west!"

"So I observe," he said quietly. "I've been using this infernal thing by night, otherwise I should have seen it was wrong."

He took out his watch and looked at the dial.

"That went wrong the day I left the rail," he said, "and—"

He stopped suddenly.

"I traveled up in company with a big dynamo that was being shipped up to Bulawayo—Miss Maynard, do you know what a dynamo is?"

"I know what a dynamo is," she said. "It is a machine for making electrical current."

He nodded. "It is also a powerful magnet," he said," and my compass isn't worth three grains of sand."

They looked at one another in dead silence.

"Is that so?" she said mechanically, and then: "I think I believe you. Mr.—Mr.—" "Stark," he suggested.

"About Smith—ugh!" she shuddered. "I'm glad... in a way. What shall we do now?"

He had already considered that problem and had found no satisfying solution.

"We will strike east," he said. "You haven't a compass, of course?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing so intelligent," she said, and there was a note of bitterness in her flippancy. "Nothing but unlimited faith in humanity and a taste for adventure. Did it... was he hurt? How dreadful that you had to do it!"

Her mind was still on the hanging.

"We'll go east," he said. "We can judge roughly, but where we'll land eventually, the Lord He knows!"

Morning brought them to the end of the water. He dug down into the sandy soil, using his broad-bladed hunting-knife, and she stood holding her horse's head, watching him curiously.

"We're lost, aren't we?" she said, and with her words there came to him in full force the terriffic danger in which she stood. The hanging sheriff sat down with a groan as he realized that the real treasure of the desert stood before him, a white-faced girl in whose eyes was dawning the fear of death.

"No, no, not lost," he said huskily, and struggled to his feet. "Over there..."

He pointed with a hand that shook, and somehow his momentary weakness gave her courage.

That night they lay down side by side, their tongues parched, their throats harsh and dry. He heard her soft weeping in the darkness, and, putting out his arm, drew her toward him until her head was pillowed on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"I'm sorry, too," she said, with a little catch in her voice. "And I'm not sorry... though I wish we could... could die less thirstily!"

She sat up suddenly.

"What was that?" she gasped.

There came to his ears a faint and eerie wail of sound.

"I'm glad you heard it," he said in a low voice. "I thought I was imagining things—listen!"

They stood up, straining their ears. And then it came again—a thin, sobbing shriek. With trembling fingers the Sheriff lit the candle in his lantern.

"What is it?" she asked in an awful whisper, but he did not answer, striding ahead, his lantern throwing long shadows on the gray sands and revealing the yellow blossoms of the dwarf trees. An hour, two hours passed, and she was ready to drop with exhaustion, when suddenly she found herself climbing the steep sides of an embankment, and she stumbled over a long obstruction.

"The railway!" she gasped.

But he did not speak. Standing in the center of the track, he was waving his lantern to and fro, and presently she was blinded by the glare of a head-lamp as the engine of the Bulawayo mail came round the shoulder of a sandy hill, and the howl of her siren, heard nearer at hand, was very pleasant music

"It was the engine hooting for water at the halt," he said.

He sat by her side, one arm about her, her head again on his shoulder. "And of course we walked in a circle. I'll start you off for Vryburg in the morning, and then what will you do?"

"I don't know." She looked up at him. "What are you going to do?"

He considered a moment.

"I've got something to clear up at Geelow, and then I'm at your service," he said.

He had remembered his duties as a coroner.

10. THE WEAKLING

Rex Madlon was a nice boy—one of those charming young persons who made friends more easily than he could make money. Mostly, his friends were other charming folk: somehow he had no affinity for hard-faced men who wore impossible neckwear and could put you on to the good things of the market.

On those occasions when he strolled into Denny Horli's office just before one o'clock, Denny knew that young Mr. Madlon had come out in a hurry and wanted a couple of pounds for lunch, or else had come to consult him in a professional capacity in regard to some wretched tailor who refused to wait longer than two years for the settlement of his bill.

Dennis Horll paid good-humoredly when it was a matter of a few pounds: once he had made a compromise with a tailor in regard to an overdue account. He liked the exquisite young man: more to the point, he loved the sister of this amusing youth.

Norah Madlon was hardly ever amused by her adored brother's shiftlessness.

The six hundred a year which her mother had left her, plus the eight hundred which had been settled on Rex, might have made life rather comfortable for them both. But Rex's eight hundred seemed to have no existence. His half-yearly dividend was earmarked months ahead. He had a vague idea that he could marry money; and he ended by promising to marry an unspeakable young lady whom he met in a night club.

From this entanglement Denny rescued him.

"I really don't know what to do." Norah's pretty face was paler than usual. "Rex is such a darling fool, but if anything happened to him I think I should die. Denny, surely you can advise him? He would listen to you."

She was very pretty and appealing, with red lips that quivered pathetically in moments of distress. And she was distressed now as they sat in the drawing-room of the little Queen's Gate flat.

"Darling, you must do something—Rex is in a terrible mess. He's given I.O.U.'s... debts of honor... and this horrible man threatens to go to Uncle Lewis."

Uncle Lewis was very old and very wealthy—a churchwarden and church trustee. He held definite views about the Revised Book, and had nothing but

gas lighting in his house. He believed that dancing was an invention of the devil in the time he could spare from inventing playing- cards.

"Some day Rex will be awfully rich, but I'm terrified that Uncle will find out... you know, about that dreadful girl and the gambling."

Denny looked glumly into the fire.

If the truth be told, the vagaries of Rex had ceased to raise a smile. Though this she did not know, Rex was already in his debt to the extent of close on five hundred pounds, and Denny was not a rich man.

"My darling, I don't know what to suggest. Rex is such a waster—"

He saw her stiffen at this. The sanest, dearest girl in every other respect, she could not endure the least suggestion of disparagement applied to Rex.

"Well, he certainly isn't a saver, is he?" He tried to turn the phrase to its least offensive meaning.

"Rex isn't a waster!" Her voice was very cold. "He is just thoughtless, and depends too much upon Uncle Lewis and his money. It isn't very kind of you, Denny!"

Happily or unhappily, Rex interrupted the conversation at this point. He came in, a figure of gala, perfectly tailored, perfectly valeted —a tall, fair-haired young man with a disarming smile. Norah looked at the clock: it was a quarter after eleven.

"Are you going out again, Rex? I thought you said you were going to bed early?"

Rex laughed. "I'm going to have an inexpensive evening—Lord Levon's little dance. I must go—I promised."

"Nowhere else?" she appealed.

"Don't be absurd." His left eye closed humorously in Denny's direction. In a few seconds he was gone.

Denny walked to the window, pulled aside the shade and looked out into the street. Rex's little coupe was already moving at break-neck speed along the broad, deserted road—he had a passion for fast and costly machines.

"You can do something, Denny?" Her nerves were on edge, her voice more than a little impatient. "I always thought that lawyers could raise money."

"This lawyer can't," he said good-humoredly. "Is it much?"

She hesitated. "Four or five thousand pounds," she said, with an attempt at airiness; and Denny Horll groaned.

"My dear, I couldn't raise that except on very good security."

"On Uncle Lewis's will?" she suggested.

He shook his head. "Your uncle may change his will at any moment. Four or five thousand pounds?" He whistled. "My dear, that is impossible!"

He saw the red lips go tighter.

"Very well," she said. "But I did think you could help. You mustn't imagine, because you saw Rex so cheerful, that he isn't worried to death about it."

He pressed her for some particulars of the debt. Here she was rather vague, and he guessed that she knew very little. He did gather, however, that Rex was in the habit of playing baccarat at the house of "a friend."

She seemed unwilling to supply any details, if there were any she could supply. Their parting was a little distant, and he went home to his lodgings near Regent's Park a very unhappy young man.

Life had not been very easy for Denny Horll; he had followed his father, only to clear up the tangle which that light-hearted man had left behind. Ben Horll had had something of the temperament of Rex, and Denny found his practice more of a responsibility than a profit. For three ghastly years he had worked to right the number of wrongs, with the rectification of which his father had saddled him. He had to live down suspicions, that were in some cases certainties, attached to the name of Horll. But at last the nightmare struggle was over, and he had cleared away the wreckage, and was building on a new and solid foundation.

He was in the midst of a heavy morning's work next day when Rex came in.

"You had a bit of a row with Norah, didn't you—all about me!" He screamed with laughter. "You're a silly old ass! But honestly, Denny, what's the chance of raising that money?"

Denny shook his head. "Precious little, my son."

Rex pulled a long face, but was instantly his smiling self. "It's going to be deuced awkward," he said. "If old Lewis—who is pretty ill—would have the decency to pop off... but I suppose he won't."

"Are things really so bad?"

Rex strolled to the window and looked out.

"Ghastly place, Baker Street," he said. And then, carelessly: "Yes, the fellow who's got my paper is an absolute cad. I told Likstein, and he's furious."

"Who is Likstein?" asked Dennis.

"He's the fellow that runs the game—I mean, he's a friend of mine whom I meet occasionally." Rex became suddenly vague. "Come to lunch?"

Dennis shook his head.

"I'm afraid I can't. I've got a very important job," he said, and explained what it was.

That afternoon he had to go to the city to a consultation with another solicitor. When he came back he learned that in his absence Rex had called, and, after waiting a quarter of an hour, had gone again.

That night he had another interview with Norah, and this time she was a little more unreasonable. But he was not prepared for the sequel. On the following afternoon there was delivered to him a curt note and a half- hoop of diamonds. Denny Horll felt that the world had suddenly become a bleak, colorless place.

As he sat with his head in his hands by his desk, the telephone bell rang.

"Is that Mr. Dennis Horll?... Scotland Yard speaking. Inspector Boscombe... We have information that you've got a lot of money in your safe... never mind how we know. I should like to warn you, there's a fellow in town who specializes in burgling the offices of solicitors. A fellow named Darkey Cane. You want to be very careful. There was a burglary in Lincoln's Inn last night."

Denny listened with a smile, expressed his gratitude, and, restoring the receiver to the hook, he went to the safe to make absolutely sure.

Ten hours later...

Denny Horll walked slowly to the desk, opened a drawer, and took out the loaded Browning.

"Put that down—and lively!" He spun round, the pistol still in his hand. The long curtains that covered the window looking out on to Baker Street had

parted. A man was standing there, an overcoat buttoned to his chin, his face hidden behind black silk—the top of a woman's stocking, in which two irregular ovals had been cut level with the eyes.

"Drop it—quick!" Mechanically he dropped the pistol to the floor.

"Stand over by the fireplace, put your hands on your head, and don't make a fuss, or you'll get it where the hen got hers!"

The mask reached behind and pulled the curtains close.

"Keys of the safe—throw 'em on to the table!"

Denny put his hand in his pocket, and flung the keys as he was ordered. The intruder backed to the safe and, with one eye on his victim, turned the key and the big door swung open.

"Stand over by the window where I can see you—thank you; sorry to bother you."

The tone was ironical; here was an experienced practitioner with a sense of humor.

He made a quick scrutiny, pulled out a thickly packed envelope marked "Steffan Estate". On its flap was the name of the Northern & Southern Bank.

"This will be a lesson to you—never keep real money in your office. You drew this three days ago to pay John Steffan when he arrived from America. If there hadn't been a fog, I'd have been late, shouldn't I? Still, that's part of the luck... we didn't know anything about it till last night. You've got a talkative friend—he's young, and he'll grow out of it."

Denny said nothing. He watched, fascinated, and saw the envelop disappear into the pocket of the burglar.

"I'll be on the other side of the curtain for two minutes. If you move I'll shoot you without warning. I may not be there—you've got to take that risk."

"Go ahead."

Denny's voice was unnaturally calm and steady. The burglar saw the pallor of the thin, aesthetic face, and chuckled to himself. "Color is the one thing you can't control," he said. "Good-night!" 190

He was through the curtains in a flash. Denny did not move, though he knew that his visitor would hardly wait a second on the balcony. He heard a

shot, and then another, from the street below, and the shrill blowing of a police whistle. He leapt through the curtains and peered down into the fog. A man shouted up at him. Dimly he saw the helmet of a policeman.

"Man got over the balcony. lost anything?"

"I'll come down."

He went down the dark, uncarpeted stairs two at a time. No. 804 Baker Street was once a dwelling-house, but business had moved north from Oxford Street, and the house was now a collection of office suites. Denny Horll had his on the first floor—two rooms sufficed to carry on the dwindling solicitor's practice which his father had left him.

"You're working late, Mr. Horll." The policeman evidently recognized him, though he could not remember the man.

"Yes—clearing up before my Christmas holiday. Denny spoke quietly, monotonously; like a man dazed. He walked up the stairs before the policeman. The safe was still open. He indicated this with a gesture, and the policeman walked over and stared helplessly at the phenomenon.

"That's what he did, eh?" He saw the revolver on the table. "Held you up?"

"That's my pistol," said Denny. "I'm afraid I was a little late on the draw."

"Held you up!" repeated the policeman owlishly.

He put his electric lamp on the weapon. It was such a ludicrous, unnecessary action, for the lights were burning, that in any other circumstances Denny would have laughed.

"I—saw him coming down from the balcony on a rope, and nearly got him. He shot at me and missed—twice he shot. I couldn't chase him on a night like this—I ask you."

Then he became dimly aware of his responsibilities.

"Anything lost?"

Denny licked his dry lips.

"There was a packet in the safe containing twenty-three thousand pounds, or rather a hundred and ten thousand dollars. It was the proceeds of the sale of the Steffan Estate. I drew it from the bank a few days ago. Mr. Steffan

should have arrived tonight, but I think his ship has been held up in the Channel by the fog."

The policeman looked at him and shook his head. He was now out of his depth. The immensity of the theft brought the matter into the purview of high official Scotland Yard. The fact that the money was in dollars bewildered him: he could remember no formula in regard to foreign monies.

"Banknotes—American banknotes? I suppose you've got the numbers?"

Denny shook his head slowly.

"I'll use your 'phone."

His story to the station-house was a little incoherent. A balcony, a rope, a man, a shot: he insisted upon this; mentioned the theft as an afterthought. Somebody asked him a question at the other end of the wire, and he went over it all again—a man, a rope, a balcony, a shot in the fog...

"Absolutely impossible to chase a man in this weather, sir. You couldn't see your hand before your face in Baker Street... the man shot twice."

He sighed, hung up the receiver, and turned to Denny.

"Boscombe's there. He's been in our division all the night, looking for the gang that smashed Avington's, the jewelers. That's a bit of luck —Mr. Boscombe, I mean."

"Very," said Denny.

Boscombe, tall, thin, constitutionally sceptical, came in ten minutes' time, and with him two assistants. After he had questioned the constable, he sent the man back to the station to make his report.

"You didn't recognize the man, of course? Masked, wasn't he? The policeman thought so. Who knew you had this money in the office?"

Mr. Boscombe wrote down his name and address. "My clerk," said Denny.

"Anybody else?"

Horll shook his head.

"Any of your relations?"

"I have no relations," curtly.

"Friends Are you married, Mr. Horll? No! Engaged, of course?"

A sour reply was on the tip of Denny's tongue.

"I am engaged, yes."

Mr. Boscombe looked at him, pulling at his nose thoughtfully.

"The young lady, now: would she know you had the money in the office?"

"No." The reply was sharp.

The sceptical Mr. Boscombe took a swift glance at him, folded up his notebook, and dropped it into his pocket before he went across to the safe and made another examination.

"The man wore gloves, you say? Cotton gloves"

"They looked like gray suede, but they could easily have been cotton."

Boscombe took the keys from the safe, laid them on a sheet of paper, and wrapped them up.

"I'll have a couple of men down to examine the safe door and photograph it," he said. "Anything in the safe of value? You can trust 'em, of course."

Denny shook his head.

Boscombe changed his mind, unwrapped the paper, and took out the keys, and locked the safe door; then he put the keys back in the paper.

"Bad luck on you, Mr. Horll. You're not insured, of course? Insurance Companies will not take risks on money. How is it you were working so late in the office?"

"I was doing a little work, clearing up for Christmas. I wanted to take a holiday."

The detective glanced at the desk: it was very orderly; there was no appearance of documents or books; the basket on the table contained a tied brief.

"You mast have finished your work when he came in. The revolver, of course, you had in your drawer? You expected burglars?"

"I expected burglars after you had warned me," said Denny. He spoke with a great effort. "Naturally, having this money in the office, I took no risks."

"Naturally," murmured Boscombe. "I forgot that I 'phoned you—Darkey's work this: very typical."

He walked to the fire: it had burnt very low. On the top was a litter of ashes.

"You burnt that recently, I presume? What was it? It looks like a letter to me."

The ashes still bore the shape of a letter. There were innumerable black charred scraps that indicated the letter had been a long one. It required all Denny Horll's effort to maintain his assumption of indifference.

"Nothing particular; just a begging letter, as far as I remember."

The detective looked down at the ashes. The letter had not only been burnt, but it had been broken up by a poker. There was a suspicious depression in the low fire, as though it had beenr stirred especially for the purpose of destroying this document.

Boscombe looked at the table again, then into the wastepaper-basket, stooped, and took out a crumpled sheet of paper. Smoothing it flat, he read:

"Dearest, I don't know how—"

He found another sheet, and a third and a fourth, all the same size, and one began without address:

"You will understand—"

The detective looked at him hard for a long time.

"You've been trying to write a letter to somebody, Mr. Horll?"

Dennis nodded. "A friend of yours?"

There was no reply. Inspector Boscombe folded the sheets of paper and put them in his pocket.

"I'11 come round and have a talk with you in the morning.

The fog still held, but was thinner on the outskirts of London. Not even the fastest of cars, chosen and stolen for the purpose, could contend against the handicap which nature imposed upon the brightest of "snap burglars."

Darkey Cane and his two companions threaded their way painfully through the misty streets.

"If it hampers us it hampers them," growled a confederate; and by "them" he meant those custodians of law and order whose duty and pleasure it was to checkmate such as he.

Darkey, who was sitting by his side, his heavy overcoat turned up to his ears, grunted.

"Fog has never stopped the working of a telephone yet. It's clearing —hit her up, Augustus!"

It was certainly clearing; one could see two street lamps ahead. Beyond Kennington Oval the fog was a thinnish mist; the car increased in speed. They flew through Deptford and up Blackheath Hill. At the crest of the hill the road was almost clear. The car increased its speed. Suddenly ahead of them they saw a red lamp waving.

"That's 'phone work," said Darkey philosophically, and added jocosely, "Kid him—he's only a copper."

The machine flew past the signaller at fifty miles an hour.

"I think—" began Darkey.

That particular thought was never expressed. They were a hundred yards past the red lamp when there were four explosions so loud that they seemed as one. The Flying Squad that was looking for Darkey had thrown a band of canvas across the roadway, and that canvas was heavily laden with upturned nails. The machine swerved left and right, crashed into a lamp standard, and turned a complete somersault. By the time Darkey was on his feet he was entirely surrounded by blue uniforms. A hated voice—for he knew this particular detective-inspector—hailed him as a friend.

"I want you, Darkey, for a job in Baker Street. Fan him, somebody."

Big hands fanned Darkey very carefully. They ran down his vest and under his vest, his back and legs, but they did not find the revolver, for he had thrown that over the balustrade of Westminster Bridge as they had crawled across.

"All right, it's a cop," said Darkey. His hand stole stealthily to his inside pocket, but before he could reach the packet the inspector had deftly removed it.

It was in Greenwich police station that the contents of an envelope marked "Steffan Estate" were examined. Fifty sheets of quarto notepaper were revealed before the astonished eyes of Darkey Cane.

"Well, I'm—" he exploded.

"You seem to have been caught," said the inspector, and examined the flap of the envelope again. He had not been surprised to find it open, thinking that Darkey had already made his investigations.

Darkey sneered.

"I ought to be murdered for trying to hold up a crook firm like Horlls. His father was a twister, and I'll bet he's worse. It's disgraceful, the way these lawyers are allowed to steal."

"This is a matter, I think, which will interest Mr. Boscombe," said the police officer...

At half-past two Dennis was still sitting at his desk. He picked up the revolver again, looked at it for a long time, then dropped it into a drawer of the desk. The old agony was to begin anew: the suspicion attaching to the name of Horll & Son was solidified into a grisly fact. He could hear them saying, "Like father, like son." The Law Society would hold an inquiry, of course, and he would be struck off.

He pulled open the center drawer, brought an envelope into view, and brought out the half-hoop of diamonds. The cruel little letter Norah had sent he had destroyed. He gazed, fascinated, at the jewel....

He heard the knock on the outer door, looked up; the hands of the clock were pointing to a quarter after three. It was the police... Boscombe again.

He went slowly down the stairs, stopping to switch on the light, and opened the front door. Standing, a shadowy figure in the fog, was a girl. For a moment he could not believe the evidence of his senses.

"May I come in?" Her voice was little above a whisper.

He opened the door wider. Norah went swiftly past him up the stairs. She had disappeared before he reached the first landing. He found her standing by the dead fire, white-faced, hollow-eyed. "I'm sorry, Denny." Her voice was husky and low. "Will you forgive me?" Her hands closed on his, and their iciness shocked him to wakefulness.

"For God's sake, what are you doing out at this time of night Have you heard—"

She nodded. "Rex told me. He came home two hours ago. and, Denny, he was terribly—drunk! He was so boastful and weak that I couldn't even be

sorry for him. And then he told me that the man he went to pay the money to wasn't there, and he gambled and won thousands. Denny, you've got to forgive him."

Her numb fingers fumbled at the catch of her bag; she opened it, and took out a large packet of American bills. She laid them on the table.

"He didn't touch a penny. He came in when you were out and took the money from the safe, and put a packet of writing-paper in its place. He knew where you kept your duplicate keys. It was horrible... beastly of him. And everything happened last night, Denny. Poor Uncle Lewis died."

Dennis took up the notes like a man in a dream.

"They are all there: I counted them—a hundred and ten thousand. You've got to forgive him, Denny: he's a weakling."

"We are all weaklings," said Dennis Horll slowly; and his mind went to the last long letter he had written to her, the letter that had taken so long to compose and which was an agony to put on paper, and absent- mindedly his hand touched the drawer where lay the revolver with which he had planned a swift end to all his troubles.

There were compensations other than the palpitating girl he held in his arms. The mental picture of the notorious Darkey cursing over a packet of valueless letter-heads was one of them.

11. BULFOX ASLEEP

People say that Bulfox was a fool. Only, like many another man, he stopped being a fool when he married.

The marriage was all wrong, I grant you. It was wrong from the point of view of intellectual disparity, it was wrong because Lady Eva Thonsen was very beautiful and he was very plain, it was wrong because he was a rich American who married a poor English peeress—I use the word "peeress" wrongly, because, of course, Lady Eva Thonsen wasn't really a peeress, but a younger daughter of an impecunious Irish earl.

Especially wrong was this inversion of a conventional situation. We could not sneer at Eva Thonsen as we should have sneered at her elder brother had he contracted an alliance with an American heiress, and the humorous papers had an aggrieved and proper sense of disappointment.

Bulfox had had a father with large and tenacious hands: his motto was an adaptation of the singularly English maxim, "What we have, we'll hold." He Americanized it to the extent of adding, "What I haven't, I'll have."

Bulfox was a fool anyway, you remark. Say it again and I'll heave the ink-bottle at you.

You don't know that he was not a fool because you've only a garbled version of the affair.

He was an only son. Old man Bulfox rode him for a tender-mouth. Gave him all the breakfast foods that were advertised—Flaked Oats for phosphates, Skinned Barley for gray matter, Malt for brawn, and Dr. Olebuck's Boy Booster—I forget the real name of the muck—for stamina.

You see, the boy's mother had died of t.b.c., and the old man was in a blue funk lest the boy developed any symptom of the same disease. In those days tuberculosis was supposed to be as much hereditary as bad temper. He had the kid nursed on a farm in what he called Gard's own country, in Gard's fresh and beautiful air, surrounded by such of Gard's natural phenomena as would be calculated to bring the squalling son of a Pittsburgh iron-master to maturity.

His approval of Providence was a beautiful and a touching thing.

So young Bulfox had a pleasant path to manhood, and passed via a succession of nursery governesses and tutors to a condition where he could read the plays of Molière and play a reasonable game of golf.

Now, the last of these tutors was in every way the most vital and potent influence that had ever come into Percy Bulfox's life. I don't know where the old man picked him up. Unkind folks say that he salvaged him from the wrong end of the hunger-line. His name was Clarence. I am not putting this on to you as a fairy tale, though it sounds like it; for he was a Clarence by name, by nature, and by appearance.

A weed of a young man with a bulgy head and a weak chin and a feather-stitch of a moustache.

Bulfox, who never did a kind action in his life that didn't eventually pay dividends, discovered in Clarence a man of erudition and tone. Clarence knew Lord H—and Countess 0—; he had spoken to the King of England or the King of England had spoken to him. It is immaterial. Possibly he was standing in the way of the King's 90 Mercedes and the King—who, I understand, was a seafaring man at that time —had twenty-twoed him. It is, as I say, immaterial, and is certainly not a point to go to war about.

Clarence was acquainted with Botany, Astronomy, Art, Science, Chemistry, Eugenics, Psychology, Literature, and Etiquette. He had a curious little cockney twang and sounded the 'h'" in "honor." I believe that the secondary schools and polytechnics of England turn out thousands of Clarences per annum, but the majority of them steer clear of the hunger- line, because the majority keep away from Chicago.

I have no word to say against Clarence. He was the most wholesome influence in young Bulfox's life. If he imparted to his pupils the habit of making "a" sound like "i," he taught him something which is not included in the curriculum of the average college—a rigid chivalry, an austere appreciation of duty, and a sense of honor which most gentlemen are born with, which some have kicked into them by the born-rights, and others picked up from observing the kicks and profiting thereby.

Clarence, with his romances and his "h's" everlastingly playing tag, instituted the bushido spirit into Percy; made him a dear little Samurai —if you can imagine a Samurai who says "I siy, ole feller"—and prepared him, unconsciously, for the great moment of his life.

When Percy was twenty-two, Papa Bulfox took him to Europe, and Clarence, who had preceded them by a year with a dressing-case full of good money—old Bulfox was a spendthrift on all matters nearly affecting his son—met them in London and, true to a long-standing promise, introduced the old man to Countess 0—, who proved to be Countess Oharahn, the wife of the Irish peer before mentioned, and the mother of Lady Eva Thonsen.

I do not hazard a guess how Clarence had come to be acquainted with these high-tone folk. Some people say that the Oharahns were poor enough to know anybody except their servants, but the most likely explanation is that these good souls had been interested in the Democratic Educational Movement, of which Clarence was the rare and refreshing fruit.

Anyway, the Bulfox's were installed in the visiting list of Countess Oharahn, and that is how the youngster came to meet Lady Eva.

A straight, slender girl, with all the fire and tenderness of her Irish ancestry in her face, all the grace and beauty of line which her English grandmother had grafted to the mould. She was, I think, the most beautiful creature I have ever seen.

You may accuse me of being wise after the event, but I swear that I saw at that first meeting a hint of tragedy in her eyes, a strained, hunted look that came furtively at odd moments and vanished with her quick smile.

Bulfox took me to one of the Countess's shabby little "At Home's," and that is how I came to meet my lady. Percy at this time was a curious Thing. le was neither good American nor passable English. He was shy, diffident, awkward; ready to blush for the slightest reason, gauche to a painful degree, yet withal altogether charming.

He was good-looking too, in a fresh, healthy, boyish way, and he fell head over heels in love with the girl.

It was most hopelessly foolish, he said (he used nice gentle words that impressed by their very mildness), he was in despair (these were his own words), and yet he was happy in his secret heart. I doubt whether he ever thought of marriage: he desired no tangible, no concrete expression of so divine a thing. You can't understand that? I never thought you would.

But Percy understood: he had a soul, and at first he had no more idea of possessing the girl than a poet has of having a sunset stuffed for his sideboard, or putting the aurora borealis in a gilt frame, or, say, cleaning his teeth with the Moonlight Sonata.

He worshipped her, and it came as a shock to him to learn that practical, hard-nutted old Bulfox had opened pourparlers with Countess Oharahn for the hand of her daughter.

My own view is that the idea came from the Countess via Clarence.

The girl was submissive: Percy dumbfounded. He found himself driving away from St. George's, Hanover Square, with a white angel by his side, before he realized that the angel was the Lady Eva Bulfox.

It was a strange marriage, the strangest ever witnessed. Percy just settled down to worship her, to compose sonnets to her hair, her eyes, and her grace. She never suspected this. For her part, she set herself to do her duty to a kindly, diffident American with a cockney accent. It was a difficult task she undertook, because the boy did not want duty of any active kind: he just wanted her to Be.

And all the time there lay deep down in her heart a realization of the wrong she had done this husband, a nagging, aching hunger for truth... There had been an "affair" years before when she was little more than a child. The man

...was gallant and gay,

Had loved and laughed and ridden away."

He had wrenched her young heart for his pleasure, had taken greedily with both hands less than she could give, more than she had thought to give.

Every day that she thought of him—and she thought of him every day—she hated him a little more.

As at first her respect, then the mother-love which inclines all women toward the simple, the good, and the helpless, grew for her husband, so her hatred for the man who had laid his black hand on her life intensified and concentrated within her.

Percy had taken a big house near Tonbridge, and it was here that the first year of his married life was spent. The girl was content to forgo the London season: happy, save for the gnawing of that little devil in her heart, in the society of her husband. She came near to loving him in the dark days when he mourned his father, whom he had idealized in his romantic way, until old Bill Bulfox, hard of head, hand, and heart, had become a shining figure of kindliness and chivalry.

Eva Bulfox had no such illusions, for she was a woman with a woman's uncanny trick of detaching actualities from their wrappings. But Percy's pure grief was a revelation to her. She went into mourning for the old man, and the boy adored her for her graciousness.

The death occurred three months after their marriage, and Percy paid a flying trip to America to settle up the estate.

It was during that period that Captain Gregory Cassilly reappeared upon the horizon.

I only saw him once, but I retain a very vivid impression of the man, possibly because he was a vivid man—vivid in coloring and in certain qualities which need not be enumerated.

He was announced one spring afternoon.

Eva took the card from the salver and read.

She held it for quite a long time in her hand, as though she did not really understand the three words of title and the two words of club which were inscribed upon it.

"Ask Captain Cassilly to come up," she said.

She stood by the fireplace as he entered, a much finer thing than the angular girl he had left. Black became her, intensifying the pallor of her cheeks, making her a little pathetic and wholly adorable.

So, I presume, six feet of muscle and breadth thought as it stood hesitating in the doorway.

"Why, Eva," he said heartily, "you look delicious."

She did not take the outstretched hand.

Instead, she pointed to a chair.

"Sit down, please, Captain Cassilly," she said.

There was no hint of the storm that raged in her heart, nor the bitter self-contempt which dominated all other conscious emotion, in her voice or gesture.

"Captain Cassilly?" he reproached. "My dear child! You're angry with me! And I can explain everything..."

He spoke jerkily, with almost visible marks of exclamation at the end of each sentence. He was a whirlwind of a man, cyclonic in address, a maelstrom in passion, a romanticist of a kind.

"I have no interest in explanations," she said quietly. "I cannot undo what is done: I am glad you came, though I dreaded seeing you."

He smiled to himself.

"I thought I hated you," she went on, "but that must go with my other illusions—I have no feeling of hatred for you, only a sense of curiosity."

"Curiosity," he began, and was preparing an epigram when she spoke.

"I am glad you have come," she repeated, "because I wanted to tell you this: I have not told my husband all—all—"

It was not an easy thing to abash Cassilly, as I know. You might have thought such a freezing welcome would have sent him—a wilted and dispirited man—down the long avenue, his soul in harmony with the east wind.

But he stood there as if deliberating a commonplace business problem. He pulled at his long yellow moustache; his head drooped on one side, his eyes on the carpet.

He was a perfectly dressed man, a handsome man, by certain standards. He had grown a little bovine with the years: the subtle qualities which had attracted her had matured by crude and well-defined phases.

She had no illusions about Captain Cassilly—nor he about her, it seemed.

"You have not told him, eh?" he said thoughtfully.

He said no more. Turning without a word, he left her.

She might have thought she was rid of him, but he turned up again. This time Bulfox was at home.

He greeted her with the familiarity of an old friend. It was in a roomful of people: she could do no less than acknowledge his civility: no less than introduce him to her husband. She was bewildered and a little frightened; his line of attack was a new one, it was as though he had agreed in a fit of magnanimity to sweep out the past and to start afresh.

Bulfox liked him: he admired his ease, his worldliness, his command of the situation, his vitality.

If she had any doubt as to why the gallant captain continued his attentions despite rebuffs, she had the matter made clear to her very soon.

Bulfox, as you know, was an amiable, kindly man, with simple tastes and bourgeois habits, which he had acquired from Clarence. His simple tastes lay in the direction of gramophones and amateur gardening: he could prune

roses, and had uncanny scraps of knowledge about flowers. He was a potterer par excellence.

If Lady Eva required his attendance be sure he would come guiltily from the gun-room, his. hands behind him like a naughty child, stained with oil and grasping a wash-leather polisher. Or from the garden, with a pair of huge gloves testifying to his bourgeois upbringing. But worst of all, from the aesthetic point of view, was his practice of taking forty winks after lunch. Usually he chose the drawing-room and the long, low chair in the window. Here he would settle himself, with a bandana handkerchief over his face—a habit acquired from Clarence—and enjoy his siesta.

Cassilly must have learnt of this practice; he chose to call for a little talk with Lady Eva Bulfox, one afternoon, at a moment when he knew the master of the house would be snug and unconscious.

Instinctively, she knew the object of his visit. She chose the library for the interview: he came to the point with the promptitude of a man who realizes the value of time. She sat at one side of the library table, he at the other.

"I came to see you today," he began, "because I am in a hole."

She made no reply. "I am in a hole," he repeated carefully. "I have been losing a lot of money lately; my people seem to have got rather tired of extending to me that helping hand, the possession of which is the main reason for their existence."

"I am afraid I do not take a great deal of interest in your private affairs, Captain Cassilly," she said clearly.

"You will," he said; "I think you will. I want twenty thousand pounds next Monday. I'm going abroad for a year or so, and it is essential to my happiness that I should have the money. Listen, Eva"—he leant across the table and shook an admonitory finger in her direction"when I ran away with you in—I forget the year—you swore to love me, honor me, and obey me. It is unimportant," he went on carefully, "that the marriage was illegal owing to my first wife being at that time in the land of the living. An oath is an oath, and I have a claim upon your services."

She rose from the table, desperately white.

"You have no claim upon me," she said steadily; "not even a claim for forgiveness. You tried to wreck my life and succeeded in part."

"I want the money," he went on, taking no more notice of her than if she had not spoken. "You have a very rich husband, an adoring husband, and, I think, a sensible husband, who will hand you a check without pressing inquiries."

"I shall ask him for nothing," she said. "I shall tell him—everything."

He inclined his head slowly, almost approvingly.

"Then I shall tell everybody else—everything," he said. "I know a number of excellent journalists on the other side of the ocean who would welcome a tit-bit of this description. That will do your husband no good."

He watched her, standing there, with the curiosity which had been his undoing.

"I shall call on Friday," he said; "you have an 'At Home,' I believe —just an informal affair with tennis. I shall expect you to give me the money."

He rose from the table deliberately.

"And we will have no nonsense," he continued, "when I want money, you must get it for me—you are rich, I am poor."

She said nothing, fingering a rose at her belt nervously.

"If you take a sensible view," he went on, "you will not have one moment's unpleasantness."

Did she dare tell Percy? Did she dare? That was the thought in her mind as she stared out of the window. She knew in that moment of trial that she loved her husband; that his opinion counted more than anything else was suddenly evident to her.

She opened her mouth to speak, and then stopped dead and staggered back, a look of horror in her eyes.

Stretched in the cosiest and most shady corner of the room, his legs outstretched on a chair, his bandana over his face, his hands clasped on his waistcoat, was Percy, taking his siesta. He did not move; save for the regular rise and fall of his breast he gave no sign of animation.

She looked back at the man, his eyes had followed hers.

"He's asleep," he whispered; "don't forget—Friday."

For the first time there was a menace in his voice.

She did not see him go; her eyes were fixed on her husband, then she went softly from the room, closing the door behind her.

Now, here you have a situation which the experienced dramatist could handle to advantage. Suppose she told her husband everything; defied this blackmailing scoundrel—in what way would it serve her? Save for the easing of her conscience, in no way. Percy would pay the money, because the good name of his wife was in violent hands. Percy would pay cheerfully.

Whilst Cassilly lived there was this black shadow over her life; and you cannot in these enlightened days hire assassins to still tongues inconveniently glib.

I went down to Carulm on that Friday. She had not told her husband. She was bright, ready to laugh, a phase of nervousness peculiar to some temperaments.

There was an electric thrill in the air, a certain tingling which made itself felt. It is difficult to describe exactly what I mean. I think it was she who infected the more sensitive of us with a sense of coming storm.

Cassilly was there, dressed for tennis, and there were a heap of other people—the Bryans of Bryanlaker, Sir George Tandall, a judge of the King's Bench, the chief constable of the county, Major Fairfax, two or three well-known barristers, an author or two, a few members of the hunting set who gathered in little groups and talked hounds from the moment they arrived to the moment they departed. An extraordinary representative gathering, and I wondered how Lady Eva had got them together. Then I learnt, to my surprise, that although she had issued the invitations, the more distinguished members of the party had come at Percy's request.

It suited Cassilly well. It made the situation more tragic for Lady Eva, for she had not spoken to her husband. There was no difficulty so far as the money was concerned, because Percy had settled a million on her, though Cassilly did not know this.

I went to look for Percy and found him, as usual, pottering. Tennis had no attractions for him; his duties as a host he had never taken seriously. He was farm-bred and thoroughbred.

I found him in the gun-room, and he told me a really amusing joke which was good enough to repeat when I joined the party at tea in a big marquee which had been set up on the lawn near the gun-room.

There was a clatter and a tinkling and a ripple of light laughter as I went in. Lady Eva was very silent and very white. Near her stood Cassilly, composed and cheerful. He was curling his moustache absent- mindedly.

"Have you seen my husband?" she asked. "I wish you would ask him to come."

At that moment Percy came in, and there was a roar of laughter from his friends, because in his absent-minded way he carried a treble barrelled shot-gun in one hand and in the other a square of wash- leather.

"I—I'm so sorry," he stammered.

I saw Cassilly smile. He was still smiling when the gun exploded, and I saw the face of the tall man go suddenly red and horrid.

A coroner 's jury brought in a verdict of "Accidental Death," and Percy was censured by the coroner for his carelessness.

People say he's a fool who ought not to be trusted with weapons: that aspect has never occurred to me.

He may be a fool, but I am certain he's a chivalrous fool, who would risk his neck for the woman he loved.

The only thing I am not certain about, and upon which I seek information is: Was he asleep in the library? I have never asked Percy, and indeed the opportunity has never occurred. He and his wife have been traveling for the last three years—four years if you reckon the twelve months they spent in Virginia where their child was born.

12. THE PERFECT GENTLEMAN

Mrs. Leverton Cam really reached her decision long before her legacy came, and when she was just plain Mrs. Wainford, the widow of a very gallant officer, who had died fighting on the Somme.

Plain Mrs. Wainford she had never been. At twenty she was beautiful; at thirty-five hers was that ethereal loveliness which would have inspired poets had she lived in a poetic age. The news of Willie's death had shocked her—or rather, she was shocked by her own attitude, for her first sensation had been one of incredible relief. It was a painful shutting down of an unpleasant story. The magnificent heroism of his passing should have wiped out all bitternesses—memories of crude infidelities, of shameless dishonesty, of that one open-handed blow he had struck her.

But somehow these ugly pictures remained in her mind. And then came Slick, handsome, tall, debonair; a young man who met trouble, for which he was mainly responsible, with s smile. She thought she loved him; she was sure he loved her. There was no earthly reason why they should not marry. Marriage stood for bondage in her mind, and the prospect was not alluring. Yet she would have married Slick; her real humiliation was that he had always found a good reason against such a course. And Slick Dawlish became involved in the Maidstone baccarat scandal and narrowly escape prosecution.

Misfortunes do not come singly. Within a month he figured in yet another unsavory affair. One of his horses was most palpably pulled; there followed an inquiry, and a few weeks later that deadly notice in the Racing Calendar:

"Following upon an inquiry by the Stewards of the Jockey Club into the running of 'Dictionnaire,' the Stewards warned Mr. Basil Winden Dawlish off Newmarket Heath."

Slick read the announcement with some amusement and got on to the telephone to his friend. Apparently she had read about it in the evening newspaper. "I suppose I'd better pop off to the Continent somewhere, Bunny. What do you say to a trip—"

"You go alone, Slick." The voice was very cold, very even. For a moment he was shaken out of his indifference.

There is no need to put on record his expostulations, the story of his many journeys to Cheyne House, only to find that Mrs. Wainford was out. Five years passed. The Leverton Cam fortune and the Leverton Cam diamonds came to Bunny Wainford. He read one day the announcement that she had

changed her name by deed poll, and went smiling to bed—he had been up all night trimming an opulent young Guardsman who had the misfortune to sit in a game with him. Slick's manipulation of a pack of cards was his most amazing accomplishment.

He used to read of her movements in the society columns of the newspapers:

"Mrs. Leverton Cam, the widow of a very gallant officer..."

When he read this he laughed till the tears came into his eyes. For Slick had a secret which he shared with none.

They met occasionally, but he paid no further visit to the flat until a certain 24th of December...

The dinner had been a good one; the game which followed had been short and profitable. Slick came out of a club which was not too particular as to its membership, feeling at peace with the world. How much of his benignity was traceable to that excellent '19 wine and that marvelous old brandy, and how much to his momentary affluence, it may be difficult to separate.

He hailed a cab with a lordly gesture, his first intention being to go home to his flat in St. James's Street, yet, when the cabman asked for orders:

"Cheyne House, Chelsea Embankment," he said.

The cabman drew a long face.

"The fog's thick along the Thames, sir. I've only just come from Westminster."

Slick was dimly conscious that the fog was thick where he stood —a yellow, blinding mist through which the street lamps glowed wanly.

"Cheyne House," he repeated, and got in.

Their progress was slow. Somewhere in the region of Chelsea, as they guessed rather than knew, the cabman stopped and Slick got out.

"The Embankment can't be very far from here, sir," and added: "It's a wonderful night for The Cat."

At the moment Slick was not interested in fashionable burglars, though The Cat's exploits had been a general topic of conversation at most of the dinner-tables he had visited in the past week or two.

"All right," he said, and paid the cabman magnificently.

He had a knowledge of topography and a surprising memory. He remembered, for example, certain big, acorn-shaped rail-tops that surrounded a museum, and when, groping in the dark, he felt one of these, his progress to Cheyne House was simplified. It was five years since he had put his foot inside that flat of hers... If she was rotten to him, he could go away again. After all, a fellow had an excuse for calling at this season of the year. He had still got her key on his ring... He ought to return that. Perhaps the hall porter would not admit him... He wished he could climb like that cat bird, and chuckled for a long time at the thought of the surprise it would give Bunny. He was not quite sober.

Marjorie, the maid, opened the door to him Her face was a little pallid; one hand was behind her. "Oh, Mr. Dawlish!" she gasped, and seemed very relieved. She opened the door wider. "Won't you come in?"

He walked into the lighted hall, hung up his hat and coat, and followed the girl, who backed before him, into the drawing-room—the same room, but beautifully decorated. The furniture was new, terribly expensive; the lamp brackets on the wall were of silver; the glass chandelier was new. He grinned.

"Mrs. Leverton Cam is out," said the girl. "She went to the theatre with Lady Lorford."

"Oh!" He stroked his chin gravely, saw that the maid's hand was still behind her.

"What have you got there?" he asked. Silently she produced the thing she was holding—a small poker.

"Are you expecting a friend?" he asked good-humoredly.

It was the cat burglar she feared; her defensive attitude was not an unusual phenomenon. Had not old Mrs. Curter recently invested in a large Navy revolver to protect her eneralds? And that pink-faced woman who lived with somebody or other—he couldn't remember whom—invested in police whistles and burglar alarms?

The maid was talking. "It's like out of a book, isn't it, sir? Fancy a burglar wearing evening dress—"

"Good Lord!" said Slick." All burglars wear evening dress some time or other; it's part of their punishment."

He walked to the French windows, opened them with some difficulty, and stepped out on to the balcony. Below was unrelieved murkiness.

"It's a ghastly night, eh? Get me a spot."

She went out and came back with a tray, and he helped himself liberally, though he remembered that whisky goes badly on top of champagne.

Now that the maid had recovered herself, she remembered certain prohibitions, and was a little uneasy. This he detected, and he anticipated the cause.

"Excuse me, sir... Madame will be rather angry, won't she, when she finds you here?"

He was looking at her. Marjorie had got older; all the bloom had gone. He took a pack of cards from his pocket, and, sitting down to a little table, began to shuffle and cut almost mechanically.

"Marjorie, do you remember the old times when nobody had a bob in the world?" he asked. "I bet they've put up the rent of this flat since I left. Somebody told me Cheyne House had become quite fashionable."

He offered the cards to the girl.

"Cut," he said laconically.

She hesitated and presently obeyed, a little awkwardly, a little timidly. He dealt five cards quickly to her and five to himself.

"Don't pick them up," he said. "You've got three aces and two kings," and when she turned the cards up he roared with laughter. "I learnt that at Sunday school," he said, and suddenly bent his head, listening. "There's a car."

He opened the window again and walked on to the balcony, and presently heard the whine and rattle of an ancient machine. A taxi. He came back, closing the window, and found the girl still waiting a little apprehensively.

"Mr. Dawlish, I wish you'd try to persuade Madam to keep her jewels at the safe deposit," she said. "It terrifies me having those diamonds in the flat. And everybody knowing that she's got them here. There was a bit in the paper the other night; I cut it out."

She searched the mantelpiece, where apparently she had deposited the cutting. He took the slip from her hand and read:

"Mrs. Leverton Carn is one of the society women who do not fear cat burglars. Most ladies would keep the Carn diamonds in a bank, but Mrs. Leverton Carn prefers the security of her own safe."

"Silly," was his comment. "She's asking for it."

"With this burglar around—" began the girl, and then the bell rang.

Slick poured himself out another whisky. He heard Bunny's voice, the click of an opening door, but did not look round. He knew she was standing in the doorway surveying him, and guessed that that survey had in it nothing of approval. Presently he turned his eyes.

"Come in, Bunny. Don't stand on ceremony; we're all friends here," he said.

She was lovely—he expected nothing less—lovelier than he had ever seen her.

She took off her wrap and handed it to Marjorie.

"I will ring when Mr. Dawlish has gone—which will be very soon," she added.

And, when the door had closed on the maid: "Did you come to see me or Marjorie?"

He laughed quietly.

"Your tastes are so catholic that one is never sure—tea-shop waitresses, grass widows ready for the haymaker, chorus-girls."

Her shrug completed the category.

"And widow ladies down on their luck, eh?" said Slick, amused.

She walked to the little settee near the fire and sat down, offering her cold hands to the blaze.

"I deserved that," she said, without looking up, "but I thought you could resist the temptation. Marjorie tells me you did have the decency to ring. You have never returned the key."

He was on the point of telling her that it was in his pocket. Instead:

"Lost it," said Slick.

She looked at him thoughtfully. "You haven't improved."

"When my little reformer got tired of improving me, I lost interest," he said flippantly.

She might have told him that it was impossible to improve a man who would rather steal than work.

"I often wonder why you didn't turn cat burglar," she said; "it is the fashionable branch of your profession."

He shivered.

"Cat burglar—any kind of burglar—horrible life! Out of doors in all kinds of beastly weather—climbing up spouts —ugh!"

She smiled faintly.

"Card-sharping is easier—picking up stupid young men of your own class and fleecing them."

He laughed.

"You're frightfully amusing tonight. What have you been seeing —a musical comedy? Not that that would depress you. You can't hurt my feelings, Bunny darling."

Her shoulders moved imperceptibly. Then, as his hand strayed to the decanter: "Don't drink any more, Slick."

"Call me Basil," he mocked her. "Basil! Fancy giving me a name like that! No wonder I went wrong."

He splashed some soda into the glass.

"If they'd christened me Percy, I'd have had a chance."

"Where did you get the name 'Slick'?" she asked him, and it occurred to her that it was amazing she had never asked that question before.

"At school—" he began, and stopped short. "When I was a kid."

She almost gasped with astonishment at her discovery. She had known him all these years, and for the first time in her life she had discovered his raw spot.

"I wonder what they'd think of you at your school—now?" she asked innocently, and saw the scowl gather on his face, and guessed she was right. Here was the chink in his armour.

"I don't want to discuss my school," he said gruffly. "Do you mind? We'll keep that out of the conversation."

She looked at him in amused wonder.

"That's your tender spot, is it? I never knew that before. The perfect gentleman!" She mimicked him. "'We will not discuss my schooldo you mind? We are old Festonians.'"

She saw the angry red come to his face.

"Drop it! I mean that," he said.

She might call him a thief, and he would laugh; a card-sharper, and he would be amused. She had called him worse than either, and he had done no more than make her an ironical bow. But at the first reference to his school...

"Why have you come?" she asked quietly. He felt in his pocket, took out a note-case, laid two banknotes on the table.

"The last time I saw you I borrowed a couple of hundred. Here they are."

She looked at the money contemptuously.

"Who was the victim?" she asked.

"A fellow from America," said Slick easily. "They've got all the money except that bit."

He put the cards back. "The perfect gentleman!" she said.

He nodded and smiled. "I was good enough for you once, old girl," he said, as he reached for the decanter.

Her hand fell on his wrist, but he shook it off.

"You've got foolish ideas, Bunny," he said. "You think everybody's honest except the pros. Why, there isn't a club in London that hasn't got its sharps—only they pretend that it's temperament. You know the feller who wriggles about in his chair if you don't return his spade? He's a sharp, but doesn't know it."

She waited, and, when he had put down the glass:

"I don't know that I want you to stay, Slick, I suppose Christmas is the excuse that brought you? Well, I will accept your kind wishes—and now you can go."

He tried to take her hand, but she drew back; and then, before she realized what had happened, she was in his arms, and he was kissing her. She broke loose furiously, white as death.

"You brute!" she breathed. Slick Dawlish was not smiling any more. He stood glowering down at her, his hands in his pockets.

"Brute! That's been my trouble—I've been too gentle with you! If I'd treated you as your husband treated you—"

"We'll leave his name out of it!" she cried, in a cold fury. "Slick, haven't you any decent feeling, that you can mention the name of a man who died honorably in action—a man of your own regiment—a man you pretend was a friend of yours?"

He was off his guard now. Anger, wounded vanity, a tremendous sense of grievance, a desire to hurt as he had been hurt, dominated him, to the exclusion of all the considerations which had governed him during all the long years.

"He was no friend of yours, Bunny," he said brutally. "Don't see him in a halo because he passed out."

His voice was tremulous with anger.

"He never hesitated to take a hunting-crop to you—you told me that yourself. Your life was a hell upon earth with him—don't forget it!"

"He's dead," she said in a low voice.

Slick Dawlish swallowed his whisky at a gulp.

"I'm talking about him alive. You sneer about me being unfaithful —good Lord!"

And now she turned on him in a fury.

"I don't want to hear what you're going to say," she said tensely. "I forgave him all when the news came—you yourself brought it. Have you no shame, no decency? He treated me badly—I've never said he didn't—but his sacrifice wiped that out and left him a clean memory. If you had only gone with him!"

"I'm jolly glad I didn't," said Slick, and his tone infuriated her.

"The perfect gentleman! The old Festonian!"

Now he turned with a snarl.

"Drop it!"

"That hurts you," she taunted. "I'd like to print your record on every wall of your old school. I'd like to have a banner on the playing field—'Slick Dawlish, an old boy of this school, is a card-sharper —a man without honor to comrades living or faith to the dead!'"

He was livid with fury.

"Faith to Bill Wainford—that damned coward1"

He saw her eyes open wide with horror, but nothing could check him now.

"I'll tell you! Bill Wainford deserted in the face of the enemy the night before the big push."

"That's a lie"

"He went to save his skin," he went on remorselessly. "He'd have been court-martialled for robbing the regimental funds if he hadn't. I told the lie about his being killed—I swore I'd seen it—they found out the truth after they'd granted your pension, and they hushed it up."

She came nearer and nearer to him, her beautiful face distorted with anger. Then suddenly he felt the sting of her palm on his cheek.

"You liar! You horrible liar! Get out!"

He was sober now; watched her, unmoved and silent, as she almost ran to the wall and pressed the bell...

Marjorie came in.

"Show that man to the door and never let him come in again."

Slick Dawlish went out into the fog, stood for a long time by the ornamental wall which surrounded the block, and then, his fingers moving mechanically through his pockets, he touched a key. This key was one of the excuses he had had for calling. He must see Bunny again, tell her a lie, swear to her that he had never meant what he said, that old Bill had died honorably...

He went upstairs again very slowly. It was nearly half an hour after he had left the flat that he inserted the key and opened the door. The hall was in darkness; in the drawing-room, one small globe, overlooked by the maid, still glowed.

He was a little muddled now. Incursion into the night air had made his legs curiously weak. And then he heard a queer scratching noise, and turned his head towards the curtained window.

Crack!

He drew back against the wall, and a little later the curtains parted and the bearded face of a man appeared.

Who the devil was this? Slick frowned. Was there another man? The intruder was in evening dress, the white front slightly soiled—The Cat!

As he stepped into the open, Slick Dawlish's hand gripped his collar and swung him round. That left of his was drawn back to strike, when—

"My God! Bill!" he whispered. "Bill Wainford!"

Was he dreaming? His head was reeling. It may have been a drunken fantasy.... Then he heard the voice.

"Slick!" He saw the glint of a knife in the intruder's hand.

"Is this your place?"

Slick shook his head, for the moment incapable of speech.

"It belongs to a woman, doesn't it? Mrs. Leverton Cam. Funny—my wife had relations of that name. Are you—er—a friend of hers?"

He picked up the hat he had dropped and put it on the sofa. Slick nodded.

"You're the cat-man, eh?"

Wainford laughed softly.

"Yes. It would have been bad luck if I'd been pinched. I only came out of Dartmoor six months ago. Can I have a drink?"

Slick pointed to the decanter.

"Don't talk too loudly," he said. Wainford looked round at him as he was pouring out the whisky.

"Is there anybody here? Mrs. Leverton Cam?"

Again Slick nodded.

"She's as rich as the devil, isn't she?"

"Don't talk so loud," Slick warned him again.

The newcomer had had many adventures, and spoke of them with that old, pitiable pride of his. He had reached America after his skip from Cambrai, got into trouble in Connecticut, and was gaoled. When he came out, he fell into the association of a bank smasher and was caught again. Together they broke gaol and got across to Canada.

"Ever heard of Toby Lands—the man who held up the cashier in Leicester and got away with three thousand? That was me—they caught me on the next job: I got three years."

"Fascinating," said Slick, and Wainford looked at him suspiciously.

"What are you doing?"

Slick smiled slowly.

"All the tricks you taught me, old boy. I'm the best pupil you ever had, Bill."

"The cards, eh? You haven't seen my wife?"

"She's abroad," said Slick quickly.

"Good luck!" said Wainford, raising his glass with an ironical gesture.

"She was a bit of a weeper. Still sweet on her?"

Slick did not answer this question. He indicated the door.

"You had better go while the going's good."

"I thought I'd leave decorated with diamonds."

Wainford was looking round the flat. He saw a photograph, and before Slick could stop him he had picked it up.

"Bunny!" he whispered. "Mrs. Leverton Carm—she's Bunny!"

"Don't be a fool," said Slick.

Wainford looked round at him with his sly smile.

"Dont be a fool, eh? Mrs. Leverton Cam is the late Mrs. Wainford. I heard that this woman had changed her name when she came into the stuff, but I never guessed. She'll hear my voice in a minute "—and then, extravagantly—"and will come running into the arms of her loving husband!"

"She'll hear nothing," said Slick quietly. "There's a double door and a lobby beyond that. She thinks you're dead."

Wainford smiled crookedly.

"She'll know I'm alive! A quarter of a million, wasn't it? With all that money, old boy, we'll buy peace with the world—Monte and Egypt and a nice quiet little flat somewhere up west, eh?" He chuckled.

Slick's eyes did not leave him.

"The old life, with her money—is that the idea?" he asked slowly. "The old hunting-crop and the girls?" He whistled softly.

"Have you gone pious?" sneered Wainford.

It was a mistake to have asked such a question. Slick had not gone pious; his mind at that moment was with the dead; the good fellows whom this man had deserted.

"Bill"—his voice was very, very soft—"you know what happens to deserters in the face of the enemy? They die."

Wainford grinned at him.

"There's no war on now."

"Yes, there is," said Slick, and his voice was very, very low.

"I'm the enemy. You think you're going to Bunny, don't you, to break her heart all over again?" He shook his head. "You're going back into the dark where you belong, Bill."

"Do you think so?" hissed Wainford.

As the other's hand reached for him, Slick saw the flick of a knife and caught the man by the wrist. For a second they swayed and struggled, and then...

What happened, Slick never knew. Only he felt the man gripped in his arms go slack; saw the blood well over the white shirt-front. Then he heard Bunny's voice.

"Who's there?"

Wainford had fallen on his knees, kneeling against him. A dead man... Slick had no doubt of that. Stooping, he lifted him, carried him to the sofa, and sat him in the corner, jamming a hat upon his head.

"Who is that man?"

Bunny was standing in the doorway leading to her bedroom; she wore a dressing-gown, hurriedly fastened, over her night-clothes. Slick looked up stupidly.

"Hello!... Old friend of mine. We met after separation of years. Doesn't speak very much," he said, with grim humor. "He'll never say anything—or do anything to hurt you, Bunny."

Bunny rang the bell.

"Tha's all right." Slick's voice was thick and drunken. He was talking to the dead man, lolling, his arm supporting. "I've been telling her a lot of lies, old boy, and I've come back to apologize. All right, Bunny."

He put a hand under the arm of the inanimate thing and lifted it. It was grotesquely alive, stupidly drunken. He dragged it as he walked unsteadily with his burden to the doorway.

"Goo'-night, Bunny... always a perfect gentleman."

Outside the fog was thicker than ever. He could cross the road, and there was a parapet that divided him from the river, where a dead man might drop quietly out of sight and be no more seen by him.

He heard a splash, and then the chiming of Big Ben as it struck twelve.

"Merry Christmas!"

He waved his hand towards where Bunny sat weeping in a room somewhere at the back of the fog.

13. THE PRISON-BREAKERS

It was the sort of thing one might expect would happen in the Intelligence Service, and may be briefly related.

Alexander Barnes, who enjoyed a mild fame as a man about town, a regular first nighter at all the new plays, a familiar figure at private views, was arrested on a charge of wilfully shooting Cristoforo P. Supello. With him was also charged an American who gave the name of "Jones."

The facts elicited at the trial were briefly as follows:

Barnes and Jones had been dining at the "Atheneum Imperial" and had strolled out into Pall Mall. A few minutes later the officer on point duty at the end of Waterloo Place heard three shots fired in rapid succession. The shots came from the direction of the Duke of York's statue, and the constable ran towards the sound and was joined by two other policemen who arrived from the other end of the thoroughfare. The man, Supello, was lying on the ground dead. Barnes and Jones were caught at the top of the Duke of York's steps leading down into St. James's Park, and were secured without difficulty.

The fact that they attempted to escape did not support the story which Barnes told, namely, that he had been attacked by Supello and had fired in self-defense. Undoubtedly a revolver was found in the dead man's hand with one chamber discharged. In Barnes's possession was an automatic pistol from which two shots had been fired (the shells were discovered on they following morning), but no weapons of any kind were found on Jones. Both Jones and Barnes swore they were attacked first, and the fact that three shots were fired and that two of them had been found in Supello's heart proved that the first had been fired by him, since medical evidence demonstrated that he could not have used a revolver subsequent to receiving the wounds which killed him.

With such evidence it seemed humanly impossible that the charge could be persisted in, yet Barnes was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to ten years' penal servitude, whilst Jones was discharged.

The conviction was secured on the evidence of a homeless man who said he was dozing on the steps of a house when he heard an altercation and saw Barnes draw and flourish his pistol in the face of Supello, and by the further evidence of the butler of Mr. Stieglemann, the international financier, who alleged that he, too, was a witness of the affair, and said that he heard angry words between the parties, and corroborated the statement of the night-waif in so far as the flourishing of weapons was concerned.

The occurrence created something of a sensation, for Barnes was a fairly well-known man who lived a blameless and—save that he had a trick of disappearing from London at odd intervals, nobody knowing whither —an unsuspicionable life.

Alexander Barnes accepted his sentence philosophically, although he had a young wife to whom he was passionately devoted. He possessed that serene faith in his department which makes up nine-tenths of the moral equipment of the Intelligence Man.

He did not tell the judge that he and "Jones" of the Washington Secret Service had intercepted Supello on his way to a certain Embassy with the full text of the Salem-Ponsonby Treaty in his pocket, or that they had followed Supello, a most notorious trafficker in government secrets, from the hotel; or that they had sat watching him at dinner until the lady from the Embassy had passed Supello's table and had dropped a white rose as a sign that his Excellency had agreed to pay the stiff price which the Mexican had asked.

They shot him and had ripped the treaty from his inside pocket, and Jones had dropped the document into the nearest street sewer, but, honestly, Supello had fired first. Barnes could not tell this interesting and romantic story, partly because he would not have been believed, and partly because it is the rule of the Higher Intelligence Circle never to bleat. If you are caught you must take your medicine with a smiling face and send no S.O.S. messages to your unknown chiefs for succour.

"Mr. Jones" was informed that his presence in England was no longer an absolute necessity, and he departed for New York and was accompanied to his cabin by police officers.

When the big liner was fifty miles from Mersey mouth, he was visited by a quiet man who talked with him for a long time. This man was Bland, Chief of the Intelligence Service, who left the boat at Queenstown and made his way back to London.

He sought an interview with the Minister of the Interior, and the result was not especially successful.

At the end of a very hopeless quarter of an hour, he shrugged his shoulders. "I quite understand, sir," he said as gently as he could, "my suggestion is very irregular, but then the situation is a little extraordinary. We are on the verge of war—"

"That is a matter of opinion, sah," said the other gruffly.

He always said "sah," and as "Sah" he was known throughout the services.

He was a thin man with a towsy mop of pure white hair, his face was thin, his mouth was thin, and he looked out onto the world through the narrowest slits of eyes that Bland had ever seen in a man.

Sir George Mergin had been Minister off and on over a period of twenty years in one administration or the other. He was known as narrow, but safe.

He ran his department on rigid regulation lines, wrote with a quill pen, and drank a glass of sherry at eleven in the forenoon.

Small wonder then that he regarded the Chief of the Intelligence Bureau and his preposterous schemes with resentment.

"You see, Mr.—er—Bland, you have no—er —official status. You are in no vote and come under the—er —administration of no department."

"In fact, we're nobody's darlings, sir," smiled Bland, "and have no Chief to whom we can appeal. The Interior loathes us, the P.V. police are jealous of us, the Foreign Office, whom we serve, pretend that they do not know that there is such an organization as the Secret Service—"

There came a gentle tap at the door and a secretary entered. He crossed to his Chief and said something in a low voice.

"Ah yes, ah yes," said Sir George, "tell the Commissioner to come in."

Bland concealed a smile. It was no coincidence that Assistant-Commissioner Goldring should make his appearance at that moment. Goldring had control of the Political Department and ran a secret service of his own. It was little more than a glorified detective force, which was employed in tracing dangerous aliens and keeping an unfriendly eye upon the comings and goings of known anarchists. It was a department which boasted of its linguistic gifts and was known at the Yard as the "P.V. Division "—"P.V." standing for "parlez-vous."

And here it may be said that the regular police force entertained a most profound contempt for the P.V.'s, their prescience and their capacity, and invariably favored Bland's department when a decision had to be made for one or the other.

Goldring came in, bowed graciously to the Chief, and favored Bland with a little nod.

"Ah, Commissioner, I am glad you have come, sah! Now I will put it to you, Mr. Goldringor perhaps, Mr. Bland, sah, you would like to explain your—er—curious project."

Bland knew as well as any that Goldring was well aware of the business and that he had already been consulted.

"I suggest that Alexander Barnes should be set at liberty," he said. "Mr. Goldring knows all that Barnes was doing. He was out to find the man who had bribed a Foreign Office clerk to supply him with a copy of the Salem-Ponsonby Treaty."

"And shoot him?" suggested Goldring, shaking his head with an assumption of gravity. "Surely there is a law in the land to deal with such crimes as you suggest Supello committed; surely he could have been arrested?"

Bland looked at him with a pitying smile which made the other hot and angry.

"No, sah!" said the Minister shortly; "I can do nothing, sah—nothing. It is absurd to ask such a thing. Bring me a request from my excellent friend, the Foreign Minister, or let the Under-Secretary substantiate your statement, and in the public interest I might bring Clause 475 of the Act of Defense into operation, but otherwise—no!"

Again Bland smiled.

"You know very well, sir, I cannot do that," he said.

"Personally," interrupted Goldring, "I doubt the whole story. I am not exactly without information, Mr. Bland; you don't suggest that you know any more of what is happening in England than I?" he asked archly.

Bland nodded.

"I know that our friend Stieglemann gives. excellent dinners," he drawled. "I know that after dinner his guests play roulette, and that if Stieglemann wishes he can always win—it is useful."

"What do you mean?" demanded Goldring, very red.

"By 'useful'? I'll tell you. Suppose a police official lost five hundred pounds at a sitting, and Stieglemann tore up that police officer's I.O.U. for that amount, would not this officer be under some obligation to his admirable host? You ask me what I know more than you—I'll tell you. Stieglemann's roulette board is faked. You didn't know that, did you?"

Goldring met Bland's challenging eyes and dropped his own before them.

"I am going now," Bland went on, picking up his hat, "but before I go I will say this. The two witnesses against Alexander Barnes were planted. Stieglemann's butler is an alien agent; the tramp who saw everything is another. But they don't count, because Alexander would have killed Supello anyway sooner than allow the Salem-Ponsonby Treaty to go to its purchaser. You refuse me help to release Barnes—I will release him myself and take him through England under the nose of your police."

Sir George rose in a trembling fury. "You threaten me, sah!" he quavered.

Bland nodded.

"I will break you, sah! I will arrest you, sah! Mr. Goldring, take him into custody!"

Goldring hesitated, then stepped forward, and Bland laughed. He laughed as he accompanied his captor down the stairs, and was chuckling in the locked room at Scotland Yard when they came to him (after an hour's stay) and told him that he was free.

For there had come to Sir George Mergin a High Government Personage who had said at the end of an aimless and innocent conversation:

"Oh, by the way, release Bland."

"Release him—release him, sah!!" spluttered Sir George. "Why, sah?"

"Oh, I don't know," said his visitor vaguely, "only I think... I should release him if I were you. By the way, all the evening newspapers have a story about your resigning—it's in the stop-press. You aren't thinking of taking that step, are you?"

"Certainly not!" gasped the Minister. "Who dare put such a thing in the papers?"

"Goodness knows—you know what newspapers are," said the Personage carelessly, and strolled to the door.

He stood for a moment irresolutely playing with the handle of the door. Sir George saw him frown and purse his lips.

"I think I should release Bland," said the visitor thoughtfully, and went out, closing the door behind him.

Sir George wrote the order for release.

"But Barnes shall serve his time," he said viciously, as he flourished his signature to the document.

Bland went back to his office, where he had a little work to do. He recognized that he had put Goldring and his department upon their mettle and that the Parlez-Vous Brigade would be watching him like a hawk. Two of them had followed him to the office and were now—ostentatiously innocent—examining the windows of a fruit store on the opposite side of the street.

They followed him to his flat—Goldring had put a car at their disposal—and Bland watched them from his window with great enjoyment for some time. Then he sent for them, and they came sheepishly enough and stood in front of the big desk in his study.

"I don't want you boys to get cold feet watching me," he said kindly; "you can sit up here if you promise not to make a noise. You'll get a much closer view and be able to docket my varying emotions."

"Mr. Bland," protested one, "you're quite in error"

"I am never in error," interrupted Bland. "Just sit where you are. I'm expecting a visitor, and you'll be able to report the whole wicked plot."

The visitor was Shaun Macallum, a bright young man wise in the ways of the Intelligence Service.

"Sit down, Shaun. I phoned you to come—oh, by the way, these are two of Goldring's men, Sergeant Jackman and Sergeant Villars. I have no secrets from them."

The two men grinned uncomfortably.

"Alec Barnes is in Clewes Gaol," Bland went on; "I want you to go down and arrange to get him out. When he is released I want you to bring him to London and take him to Liverpool by train. Put him on a boat that is leaving for the United States—our friends on the other side will arrange for him to join his wife, who leaves for the U.S.A. next week."

"How are we to get him out of prison?" asked Shaun. Bland leant back in his chair and gazed thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"That is fairly simple," he said slowly.

The two men seated uncomfortably on the edge of their chairs leant forward a little.

"That is fairly simple," repeated Bland; "on a certain day we will cut all telephone and telegraph wires leading to the prison. Within half an hour our friend will be free. If he is not, then he will be within twenty-four hours."

"Oh," said Shaun blankly.

Bland rose.

"That's as much as I can tell you," he said; "and now, Shaun, you can take these two active and intelligent members of the P.V. Division and lose them."

That evening Commissioner Goldring sought the Minister of the Interior at his house in Portland Place.

"It is absurd, sah," said Sir George irritably. "The whole thing is absurd and wholly irregular. Confound the fellow! If I had my way—by Jove! The thing is a bluff, sah."

Goldring shook his head. He was a badly scared man, for if Bland's intelligence men knew of private transactions as between himself and Mr. Stieglemann, what else might they know?

"If he says he will do it, he will," he said.

"Let him try," answered Sir George grimly.

This was on the Wednesday evening. On the Thursday morning the Governor of Clewes Gaol received very detailed instructions regarding the care of his prisoner.

On Friday morning, Goldring was in attendance on Sir George when officials brought word that the telephone wire between the office of the Minister of the Interior and Clewes Gaol had been cut in three places.

"Rush an XX message through to Clewes town," said Sir George. "Tell the Governor to hold Barnes in readiness for transfer to Stanmoor—anything may happen in these little country gaols, sah."

Bland lunched with Shaun Macallum that day.

"Exactly what is the idea—cutting the wires and all that sort of thing?" asked Shaun.

Bland glanced swiftly round and lowered his voice.

"We can do nothing in these little country prisons," he said; "our only chance is to scare Sah into transferring Barnes to Stanmoor."

This was, as I say, on the Friday morning.

On Saturday those idle folk who lingered about Stanmoor's tiny railway station after the arrival of the 3.7 from London would have witnessed the coming of a tall, good-looking convict.

He was unshaven but cheerful, for he had faith in his Chief and in the hundreds of gallant men who, as he knew, were working for his salvation. His wrists were enclosed in handcuffs and he was accompanied by the inevitable assistant warder, carrying the inevitable blue envelope containing transfer papers. This was no unusual sight for the townsmen of Stanmoor. No day passed which did not witness the coming or going of sinister figures in yellow livery. Sometimes they appeared singly, but more often they arrived or were dispatched in gangs of twenty, fastened together by a long steel chain which passed between each couple.

The warder beckoned a cab, and into this he bundled his prisoner, following and seating himself opposite. There was no need to give the driver instructions. He whipped up his horse, passed through the little market-place and Stanmoor's one street, and breasted the long hill which leads to the dreary moorland, in the very center of which is situated Stanmoor Convict Establishment.

It is the boast of successive governors that never once in its long and mournful history has Stanmoor Prison lost a convict save by death, discharge, or transfer. Escapes there had been, but no man had ever succeeded in getting away from the moor.

This is not to be wondered at. Physically, Stanmoor is bleak and bare save for three definite wood groups named, ominously enough, Hiding Wood, M'Greery Wood, and Trap Wood. M'Greery, who gave his name to the second of these, was a sometime fugitive from the granite prison and met his end in its bosky glades. Hiding Wood is so called because it was the clump for which the majority of escaped prisoners made; and Trap Wood has only two outlets, one to the moor and the other to the village of Boley-on- the-Moor and presents no difficulties of search.

The roads are few, the farms scattered and difficult to come by, the edges of the moor are patrolled by guards, and when to these difficulties is added the fact that the Governor had recently secured the right to requisition a military aeroplane patrol in case of need, it is not necessary to urge the strenuous character of the problem which Stanmoor offered to the

unfortunate wretch who sought freedom over its bare and treacherous waste.

Barnes and his custodian passed under the arch of sorrow, through the black gates, and were taken to the office of the Chief Warder.

That official was evidently well advised as to the responsibility which his new charge represented.

"You're the prison-breaker, are you?" he said pleasantly. "Well, we shall have to give you extra attention, my friend."

It was an extraordinary speech for a Chief Warder to make (so thought the Assistant Warder, in charge of the prisoner), for men holding that position are sparing of speech, laconical, and stony. They do not address a prisoner as "my friend," nor do they volunteer information as to the necessity for keeping him under observation.

"Do you speak any foreign languages?" asked the Chief Warder.

"Yes, sir, several."

"German?"

"Yes, sir." The Chief Warder nodded. "I can find you work here," he said; "there are a number of German prisoners—let me hear how much German you know."

And then he spoke rapidly in a language wholly incomprehensible to the attendant warder, and the prisoner replied, speaking as quickly.

All these facts came out at the subsequent inquiry (details of which will be found in the Blue book "Prison Commissioners' Report, No. 764 A") into the part the Chief Warder played.

What he said in German, and what Barnes replied, is a matter of conjecture. The Chief Warder's version was that he merely asked a few questions in the language to test the prisoner's knowledge. The Ministry of the Interior alleged that he was a "member of a certain organization," the character of which did not transpire.

Three days after the admission of Alexander Barnes to Stanmoor, Goldring came by special train to Stanmoor town, bringing with him twenty of the smartest men of his special corps, for Alexander Barnes had escaped.

Sir George Mergin had a brief interview with his Commissioner before he left London, and to say that Sir George was angry is putting the matter with studied moderation.

"The prisoner is on the moor, he escaped an hour ago, and there is a cordon round the district."

"But how—how, sir?" demanded the bewildered Goldring.

"He went out with a party of German prisoners to work in the fields, leapt the stone wall on to a waiting motor-cycle, and got away, sah, under the eyes of the warder!"

"But the cycle?"

"Had been put behind the wall by some person unknown—how the devil he knew it was there—"

At Stanmoor, Goldring found a telegram waiting for him from his Chief:

BLAND HAS BEEN SEEN. HE SAYS THAT BARNES IS STILL ON THE MOOR, AND HE WILL LEAVE FOR LONDON VIA STANMOOR STATION.

"Will he!" muttered Goldring between his teeth; "will he!"

No man passed from the moor that day who did not come under the vigorous scrutiny of police and guards. Farmers' wagons were halted and searched—even the sacks of potatoes that some carts carried were emptied before the wagon was allowed to proceed.

Night brought no relaxation of the watchers' vigilance. A battalion of soldiers was brought from Taverton to assist the guard, and big motor head-lamps flooded every road with light.

A weary-eyed Goldring paced irritably up and down in the lemon yellow sunlight of morning.

"I'm going to have that fellow if I keep awake for a week!" he said, shaking his fist at the unoffending moor. "You know me, Barton. These secret service people, these amateur policemen, are not going to get away with it. We'll have Barnes!"

"What like of man is he in appearance!" asked his subordinate.

"A six-footer and broad—you can't mistake him," said Goldring. "Look at that poor little devil!"

"That poor little devil" sat in an open wagonette which was passing down from the moor to the town. His drab convict dress and certain distinguishing marks showed him to be a man whose time had nearly expired, so that Goldring might have spared his sympathy.

He was a merry little fellow, with a bullet head and a bright eye, and he jingled his manacled hands as he hummed a song under the disapproving eye of the warder who sat on the opposite seat.

As he passed Goldring he turned his head and called:

"Catch him, Boss! Don't let him go!"

The warder snarled something and the little man relapsed into silence.

"Going to Wormwood Scrubs for discharge," said Goldring's companion, with a professional glance at the prisoner; "they always get fresh the last week or so."

A motor-car came streaking down the road from the moor and pulled up with a jerk by Goldring's side.

"We've located him, sir," said the occupant, a "P.V." man. "We've found the cycle and the convict clothes in Hiding Wood, and the warders are beating it."

Goldring rubbed his hands.

"I'll send a wire to the Chief," he said, and walked back to the station.

He had dispatched his telegram from the tiny office, and had returned to the platform, when the London train drew in, and he stood watching idly.

He saw the diminutive convict (he was well under five feet and so thin that he looked no more than a boy) hustled into a third-class carriage, and saw the blinds pulled down. Then, as the train drew slowly out and the carriage with the convict came abreast, the blind was flung up, the window fell and the little prisoner poked out his head, resting his handcuffed fists on the window edge.

"Don't you look for that lad in Hiding Wood, Mister Busy-fellow!* He went up in one of them Zepp'lins. He's—"

[* "Busy-fellow"—"Detective" in thieves argot.—E. W.]

At this point a uniformed sleeve crossed the man's chest and he was flung backward, the blind was pulled down and the train sped on.

The stationmaster, a witness of the occurrence, smiled at Goldring.

"That fellow is a bad lot," he said; "the warder told me that he was one of the people who had assisted this convict you are looking for, to escape. Name of Jerry Carter."

"The warder had no right to tell you anything," snapped Goldring.

He had more reason for shortness of temper an hour later, when Hiding Wood drew blank.

Throughout the day the search went on and was continued on the morrow and the next day, but without result.

At the end of a week Goldring returned to London a very sick man, and sought Sir George.

What happened at that interview has never been revealed, but if he went into the Minister's room sick, he emerged, figuratively speaking, a chronic invalid.

He saw Bland at his office, and after the fashion of men in disgrace was prepared to accept sympathy even from his most implacable enemy.

"Come to me this day week," said Bland, "and I may be able to tell you something. But you must give me your word that what I tell you doesn't go any further. Otherwise you shall know nothing."

Curiosity and pique induced the promise, and took him to the appointment.

Bland was sitting in his big arm-chair smoking a comfortable ciga.

"Sit down, Goldring," he invited cheerfully; "have a cigar—you'll find them in the silver box."

He leant over and pushed a bell, and after a short delay the door opened and a man came in.

Goldring sprang to. his feet with an exclamation of surprise, for the newcomer was the little convict he had seen leaving Stanmoor Station.

"One of us," introduced Bland largely, waving his hand. "Mr. Martin Caxton of the Intelligence."

"How do you do?" said the little man, offering his hand. "I'm afraid I was awfully impertinent to you the other day."

"But what—what?" stammered Goldring.

"I'll explain," said Bland. "Oh, by the way, Barnes has arrived safely in the United States, you'll be sorry to learn. I won't tell you how he actually got away from the gaol or give you the names of the people who helped. Getting away from the prison was child's play. It was leaving the moor that was the difficulty. I knew that every kind of person who attempted to reach the town would be stopped and examined—every kind of person save one."

"And which was the one?" asked Goldring curiously.

"A handcuffed convict," said Bland. "Martin Caxton was the convict —he was waiting in Hiding Wood for two days."

"Letting my horrible whiskers grow," said the little man complacently.

"But Barnes?" asked Goldring. Bland blew a ring of smoke and watched it dissolve.

"Barnes was the warder," he said.

14. THE STRETELLI CASE

Detective-Inspector John MacKenzie has retired—the newspapers are filled with stories of his exploits. His immediate chiefs are equally filled with wonder, suspecting many reasons for his premature withdrawal from the services of his country, but never by any chance hitting upon the real cause, which was the unquenchable antagonism between his sense of duty, his sense of justice, and his grim sense of humor.

And this conflict of emotions arose over the Stretelli case, which most crime experts and the majority of people consider as having been rounded off on a certain cold December morning in Nottingham Prison.

In a sense this was true; yet, with the compliments of his Chief in his ears and with the knowledge that there was a vacant post for a new superintendent to be filled, duty, justice, and humor battled it out so briskly in his mind that he sat down in his office and wrote his resignation.

In one sense Mackenzie was old-fashioned, and when a card was brought into his office inscribed "Dr. Mona Stretelli, Madrid," he sniffed. He was prejudiced against women doctors, though this was the first lady who had ever called upon him professionally.

"Show her in," he said, and wondered exactly what had brought a Spanish lady doctor to Scotland Yard.

She was in the room before his speculations were carried far—a girl of middle height, dark, capable, and even pretty.

"I am very honored to meet you, doctor," he said conventionally, speaking in French. "What can I do for you?"

She smiled faintly at the brusque greeting.

"You can give me ten minutes of your valuable time, Mr. Mackenzie," she said in perfect English. "I have rather an important statement to make."

She handed him a letter bearing the Home Office stamp. It was an introduction from a high official, and Inspector Mackenzie ceased to wonder.

"Do you know Mr. Peter Morstels?" she asked, and he shook his head.

She hesitated.

"In London you must hear... rumors about people—in the West End, I mean. Have you ever heard of Margaret Stretelli?"

Mackenzie frowned. "Of course! I thought the name was familiar. Stretelli! You are related?"

She nodded. "She was my sister," she said quietly.

"Was—she's not dead?"

The girl nodded again, and he saw that her eyes were wet.

When Margaret Stretelli disappeared from London, nobody at police headquarters was either relieved or sorry, but the event did not pass unnoticed. Margaret belonged to the bobbed-hair set that had its meeting-place in a Soho restaurant. She was known to be an associate of questionable people; there was talk of cocaine traffic in which she played an exciting but unprofitable part; there was one wild party into which the police had intruded, and a minor court case where she had figured, a little vulgarly, as the driver of a car which had charged a lamp-post. Police headquarters was mildly interested in her vagaries, knew her to be well off in the matter of money, and when she was no longer seen at her haunts they made discreet inquiries, to discover that she had married a gentleman farmer in the Midlands, and had run away from him a very few weeks after the marriage, and had gone to New York.

A very uninteresting and commonplace story, hardly worthy the attention of Scotland Yard's recording angel, yet, since all crime has its basis in the commonplace, the circumstances were duly noted and filed.

"Perhaps I had better tell you our story," she began. "My father was a doctor of Madrid, and on his death he left five million pesetas between his two daughters, myself and Margaret. I had taken up my father's profession, the profession of medicine, and was in my third year when he died.

"Poor Margaret loved life—as she understood it. Three months after father's death, she left Madrid for Paris, ostensibly to study music. From Paris she went to London, and, so far as I can learn, she got into a very undesirable set. How she came to meet Mr. Morstels, I have never been able to discover. It is certain that she had wasted a great deal of money when she came under his influence. He proposed to her and they were married at Marylebone Registry Office, and she left with him for his home at Little Saffron.

"She was seen there by some of the villagers, and, so far as can be ascertained, lived with him for three weeks. How much longer she was a resident is not known. It may have been three months, it may have been no longer than a month. But, when she disappeared, the story that she had run

away from her husband was accepted as true by the villagers of Avignon, who had got quite used to the unfortunate character of Mr. Morstels' marriages."

"He had been married before?" asked Mackenzie.

"Twice," said the girl; "and each time his wife ran away and was divorced by him. Mr. Mackenzie, I am satisfied that my sister has been murdered!"

Mackenzie sat up in his chair.

"Murdered? My dear young lady, that sort of thing does not happen—"

He stopped suddenly, realizing that this was the type of crime that did happen.

"Possibly his story is true, and your sister ran away," he suggested.

She shook her head.

"That is impossible. Had she run away she would have come to me. We were always the best of friends, and though she was wilful and headstrong, she never got into a strait when she did not ask me to get her out of it."

"Have you seen Mr. Morstels?" asked Mackenzie. "I have seen him: I saw him yesterday for the first time," she said, "and the sight of him convinces me that my sister has been murdered."

"That's rather a serious statement to make, but I realize that you would not advance such a theory unless you had good grounds," said Mackenzie, with a smile. "After all, doctors as a profession are not easily influenced or given to making rash statements, are you?"

She shook her head. "I am not, certainly," she said, rising and walking up and down the room, her voice rising agitatedly. "Forgive me, Mr. Mackenzie, but I am so convinced that poor Margaret is dead that, if she walked into the room at this moment, 1 know that I should be suffering from an illusion."

"But why do you feel this?" Mackenzie persisted. "Beyond the fact that Mr. Morstels seems to be, by your account, a much,married man, nothing is known against him."

"I have been making inquiries," she said.

"The local police speak well of him, but I think that I can furnish you with some details which may be of interest. Before Margaret left London, she

drew from the bank the sum of six thousand five hundred pounds. Where is that money?"

"Did you ask him?"

"I asked him, and he said that one of his greatest misfortunes was that the lady, when she left him, had taken with her not only her own money but some of his. He had the audacity to ask me if I was prepared to refund it."

Mackenzie sat hunched up at his desk, his chin in his hand, a heavy frown on his face.

"It grows more and more like a conventional murder story," he said. "I hope for your sake, Miss Stretelli, that you are mistaken. I will see Mr. Morstels."

On a wintry morning, when the frost showed whitely on the bare branches in Mr. Peter Morstels' orchard, Detective-Inspector Mackenzie made his leisurely way from the little railway station, a pipe between the teeth, the furled umbrella, without which he never moved, under his arm. In sight of Hill Cottage he stopped and carefully inspected the rambling house with the ugly concrete extension that had recently been completed. It stood on the slope of a hill, a picturesque dwelling, owing something of its charm to distance. Five minutes later he was inspecting the building nearer at hand, and he was not impressed.

The man who answered his knock was unusually tall and broad, a veritable giant of a man. His thin hair was flaxen, his big face ruddy with the glow of health. Standing square in the doorway, he looked down upon the detective with a scowl of suspicion.

"Good morning, Mr. Morstels. I am Inspector Mackenzie from Scotland Yard."

Not a muscle of the big man's face moved. No flicker of lid hid for a second the pale blue of the saucer eyes.

"Glad to see you, officer. Come in."

He led the way to a stone-floored kitchen, low-ceilinged and clean.

"I'm wondering if Miss Stretelli sent you? She did, eh? I thought it was likely. If I haven't had enough trouble with her sister without her coming to me with fantastic stories about my wife!"

"Where is your wife?" asked Mackenzie bluntly.

"In America somewhere—she never told me the town she was going to, naturally. I've got her letter upstairs."

He was gone a few minutes, returning with a sheet of gray paper. It bore no address.

I am leaving you because I cannot endure the quietness of the country. I am writing this on board the "Teutonic." Please divorce me. I am not traveling in my own name.

Mackenzie turned the letter over in his hand.

"Why didn't she use ship's stationery?" he asked pleasantly. "A women in a hurry to get away does not usually unpack her trunks in order to get stationery that is available in the saloon. I suppose you traced her through the passenger list—oh, of course, you couldn't. She was traveling in another name. I wonder how she got over the passport difficulty?"

He said all this musingly, watching the man before him, but if he expected to irritate Peter Morstels into an indiscreet statement, he was to be disappointed.

"That was her business," said the other calmly. "She did not take me into her confidence. Her sister thinks I have killed her!"

He laughed quietly. "Fortunately, I was alone when she called the other day. A nice story would have gone through the village if my servant had heard her!"

His eyes never left the detective's face as he spoke.

"I suppose she told you something of the sort?" he queried. "If she did, you're at liberty to search the house, dig up the ground, and pull the place to pieces. I can say no fairer than that. The only things I have of hers are some clothing she did not take away. Would you care to see it?"

Mackenzie followed him up the stairs to the big bedroom at the front of the house. In a wardrobe closet he found a fur coat, two or three dresses, and half a dozen pairs of shoes. These latter he examined carefully, one by one, and found a pair that had not been worn.

Mackenzie, who knew something of women, drew his own conclusions. An examination of the garden and the grounds brought him no nearer to a solution of the girl's disappearance.

"What are you building there?" he asked, pointing to the half- finished concrete annex. The man smiled slowly.

"That was to have been a new bathroom for my lady! Hill Cottage wasn't good enough for her. I wasbuilding this place as a sittingroom for myself, but she made me remodel it for her use. I'm a poor man, Mr. Mackenzie, but I would have spent my last sou for that woman! She had plenty of money—thousands—but not a penny did she give me. Not that I wanted it."

Mackenize drew a long breath.

"You've been rather unfortunate in your matrimonial affairs," he said, and had nothing but a grunted agreement.

The detective went back to town that morning in a thoughtful mood. He found Mona Stretelli waiting for him in his office.

"I see by your face that you have learned nothing," she said.

"You must be a thought reader," he smiled. "The only thing I am satisfied about, and this is unofficial, is that Morstels is a liar. He may be a murderer, too, but—there is a 'but'!"

"Do you think that, if you had authority to search, you should find anything?"

Mackenzie shook his head.

"I don't think so," he replied regretfully. "This man is more than an ordinary criminal. If he has killed these unfortunate women—"

He saw her turn white and stagger, and ran to her assistance.

"It is nothing," she said, and suddenly her black brows met, and there came a fire in her eyes that startled him.

"I swear to you," she said, in a low, vehement tone, "that this man shall not escape! He shall suffer for his crimes—"

Suddenly she stopped, and her compressed lips gave some indication of the self-restraint she was exercising. She held out her hand.

"I shall not see you again," she said.

That afternoon, Mackenzie reported to his Chief, and put the matter plainly to him. The Commissioner was not hopeful.

"I am afraid we can do nothing. Naturally, this unfortunate Spanish girl is excited by the loss of her sister, but these disappearances are very common, particularly when the person who disappears is—let us say Bohemian. She will very likely turn up at Monte Carlo next season."

Mackenzie disagreed. He did not see Mona Stretelli for a fortnight, though, to his surprise, he read about her. There had been a sale of some old jewelry, the property of a deceased Marquis, and she had purchased a famous paste ring, which had been the property of Marie Antoinette, for £200.

A picture of the ring appeared in some of the London newspapers, the editors being possibly attracted by the quaint and even bizarre setting. It was such a ring as no woman could wear—it was enormously large —and he was puzzled that she had overcome her distress so that she could indulge in a frivolity of this kind.

Then, about a week later, a most amazing thing happened. She went to Scotland Yard unannounced one evening, and he expected some news, but certainly not the news she gave him.

"Mr. Mackenzie," she said, "I have been very ungenerous in reference to Mr. Morstels, and I am perfectly satisfied that my suspicions were ill- founded."

He looked at her in amazement. 'Have you seen him?" he asked.

She nodded; there was a flush in her cheek and her voice was unsteady as she answered him.

"I am going to be married to Mr. Morstels this week."

He looked at her, speechless with astonishment.

"Married?" he gasped. "But, knowing what you do—"

"I am afraid we were both very prejudiced against Peter," she said calmly. "I have found him a most charming and fascinating man."

"I should imagine you have," said Mackenzie grimly. "But do you realize what you are doing?"

She nodded.

"And you're really going to marry him?"

"Yes," she replied. "I am marrying him when—when his divorce proceedings are through. I am staying with him for a week. His aunt is coming to chaperon me. I told you I would not see you again," she said, with a half-smile, "but this time I mean it!"

With a curt farewell she was gone. As she was leaving the room, the bag she was carrying under her arm slipped and fell. She picked it up hurriedly and passed out of the room, but in falling the bag had opened and a long moiré silk purse had fallen out.

He did not notice it until she had gone. Picking it up, he opened the purse, thinking to find a card bearing her Paris address. All there was in the purse was an oblong receipt form which interested him considerably.

A few seconds later she was announced again. Evidently the girl had discovered her loss.

"I know what you have come for," said Mackenzie, looking at her flushed face. "I found it on the floor a few seconds ago."

"Thank you," she said, a little breathlessly, and without another word she turned and went away. The next morning he received a wire telling him she was leaving for the country.

Mackenzie thought many things—but mostly his mind was occupied by one problem: what value would the homicidal Peter Morstels place upon the eccentric ring of Marie Antoinette? The reason for the purchase of the ring was now clear.

On the second morning after the departure of the girl, he strolled down to Waterloo Station to see the passengers off and to watch the departure of the boat-train for Southampton. There was a very big trans- Atlantic passenger list, and so many people were crossing to America that the train was run in two sections.

"Queer how these Americans travel," said the station inspector, recognizing him. "Look at that old lady."

He pointed to a bent figure in deep mourning, walking painfully along the platform with the aid of two sticks. "At her time of life to be risking a sea voyage!"

"Extraordinary," agreed Mackenzie.

When he returned to the house that afternoon he found a letter waiting for him. The envelope was soiled and muddy, the address was in pencil. Inside

was a visiting-card—Mona Stretelli's—and scrawled on its face were the words: "For God's sake come to me!"

Mackenzie carried the news to his Chief, and from that moment he was out of the case, though he had credit for all that followed.

"But, my dear fellow, you must take the case!" insisted his Chief, but Mac was adamant, and to Inspector Jordan belongs all the immediate credit for the discoveries.

It was near midnight when Jordan arrived at the farm, and this time he went armed with authority, for he had seen his Chief and had impressed him with the seriousness of the possibilities. Peter Morstels, half dressed, opened the door himself, and turned a little pale when he saw his visitor.

"Where is Mona Stretelli?" asked Jordan curtly.

"She has left," said Peter. "She left me the night she arrived here. My aunt could not come, and she would not stay without a chaperon."

"You're lying," said the detective shortly, "and I am going to place you under arrest while I make a search of the house."

The search of the house revealed nothing, but in the morning Jordan questioned the villagers, and produced evidence which made the case against Morstels look black. Two men who, returning from a neighboring village, had passed by a short cut within a quarter of a mile of the house, had heard a woman's sharp scream at nine o'clock that night. It came from the direction of Hill Cottage. No further sound was heard, and apparently the villagers took little notice of the occurrence. When questioned by the detective, Morstels admitted that, for some unaccountable reason, which he had put down to hysteria, Mona Stretelli had started screamiug.

"She was like a lunatic," he protested. "Must I be arrested because a woman screams? I gave her an hour to calm down, then I went to her room and knocked at her door, but there was no answer. I opened it, and she was gone—possibly through a window, for it is a window from which she could drop easily to the ground."

"That story isn't quite good enough," said Jordan. "I am going to remove you to the police station, pending an examination of the ground."

The whole of the estate, such as was not covered by trees, was very carefully probed and dug, and on the third day of the investigation the big discovery

was made. Under about four feet of earth was found a heap of charred bones; but, most damning of all, the ring of Marie Antoinette!

Jordan came back to London and woke Mackenzie with the news.

"He evidently disposed of the bodies by burning," he said exultantly. "There is a huge fireplace in the kitchen, and the bodies could be burnt without detection. We have our pathologist, who swears that the bones are human."

"They are not necessarily the bones of Mona Stretelli," said Mackenzie warningly.

"But there is the ring!" he said in triumph. "That is sufficient!"

Throughout the trial that followed, Morstels preserved a sangfroid which was remarkable. The only time he broke down was when the death sentence was pronounced, and then it was only for a few moments.

On the morning before his execution, Mackenzie went to Nottingham Prison to see him, at the condemned man's request. He was smoking a cigarette and chatting with one of the warders, and he greeted the detective with a little nod.

"You brought me bad luck, Mackenzie, but I'm going to tell you something. I did kill several women—three or four, I forget," he said, with a shrug of indifference. "They are all in concrete, the foundations of my new house," he chuckled. "But Mona Stretelli I did not killthat I swear. It is a bit tough on me, Mac, that I'm to swing for a murder which I did not commit!"

He brooded for a minute, then:

"I should like to see this girl Stretelli and congratulate her."

Mackenzie did not reply until he wrote his resignation. He had seen in Mona Stretelli's purse a receipt from a Steamship Company for her passage. To make doubly sure, he had gone to Waterloo and recognized her, though she was well disguised, as she boarded the train.

The night after she was supposed to have been murdered, she was on the broad Atlantic, bound for a new home, a new land, and a new life, leaving behind her, in a hole which she herself had dug, the calcined bones which she had purchased from an anatomical establishment, and the ring which was to bring Morstels to the scaffold.

And Mackenzie knew it, and let a man hang for a crime he had not committed. His conscience and his sense of justice were appeased. His sense of humor was entirely satisfied.

15. THE LOOKER AND THE LEAPER

Foley, the smoke-room oracle, has so often bored not only the members of the club, but a much wider circle of victims, by his views on heredity and the functions of the hormones—for he has a fluent pen and an entree to the columns of a certain newspaper that shall be—nameless—that one is averse to recalling his frayed theories.

He is the type of scientist who takes a correspondence course in such things as mnemonics, motor engineering, criminology, wireless telegraphy, and character-building. He paid nothing for the hormones, having found them in an English newspaper report of Professor Parrott's (is it the name?) lecture. Hormones are the little X's in your circulatory system which inflict upon an unsuspecting and innocent baby such calamities as his uncle's nose, his father's temper, and Cousin Minnie's unwholesome craving for Chopin and bobbed hair. The big fellows in the medical world hesitate to assign the exact function of the hormones or even to admit their existence.

Foley, on the contrary, is prepared to supply thumb-nail sketches and specifications. When you go to the writing-table in the "Silence" room, and find it littered with expensive stationery, more or less covered with scrawly-wags, it is safe betting that Foley has been introducing his new friend to some wretched member whom he has inveigled into an indiscreet interest.

But Hormones apart, there is one theory of evolution to which Foley has clung most tenaciously. And it is that the ultra-clever father has a fool for a son.

Whether it works the other way round he does not say. I should think not, for Foley senior is in his eightieth year, believes in spiritualism, and speculates on margins.

Foley advanced his theory in relation to Dick Magnus.

John Seymour Magnus, his father, is popularly supposed to be in heaven, because of the many good qualities and characteristics recorded on the memorial tablet in St. Mary's Church. Thus: He was a Good Father, a Loving Husband and a Faithful Friend, and performed Many Charitable Deeds in This City.

There is nothing on the memorial tablet about his Successful Promotions or Real Estate Acquisitions. He was bracketed first as the keenest business man of his day. A shrewd, cunning general of commerce, who worked out his plans to the minutest detail, he ran his schemes to a time-table and was seldom late. All other men (except one) would comprehend the beginning

and fruition of their schemes within the space of months. John Seymour Magnus saw the culmination of his secret politics three years ahead.

There was one other, a rival, who had the same crafty qualities. Carl Martingale was his contemporary, and it is an important circumstance that he supplied, in his son, a complete refutation of all Foley's theories. Carl and John died within twelve days of one another, and both their great businesses went to only sons.

Dick took over the old man's chair, and was so oppressed by his uncongenial surroundings that he sold it for a ridiculous figure to Steven Martingale. The two were friends, so the sale was effected over a luncheon for which Dick paid.

Steven had arranged the lunch weeks ahead, had decided upon the course of conversation which would lead up to the question of sale, and had prepared his reply when Dick was manceuvered into offering the property. For Steven was his parent, and worse. Old Carl was a selfmade boor, with no refined qualities. Steven had the appearance and speech of a gentleman and shared certain views on life with the anthropoid ape.

Ugly stories floated around, and once old Jennifer came into the club in a condition bordering on hysteria and drank himself maudlin. He had hoped to bag Steven for the family, and had allowed his pretty daughter Fay a very free hand.

Too free, it seems. Nothing happened which in any way discommoded Steven. The old fellow owed him an immense amount of money, and Steven knew to a penny the exact strength of these financial legirons.

He was a strikingly handsome fellow, the type the shop-girls rave about—dark, tall, broad of shoulder and lean of flank, an athlete and something of a wit. A greater contrast to Dick could not be imagined, for Dick was thinnish and small, fair haired, rather short-sighted (Steven's flashing eye and long lashes were features that fascinated) and languid.

But he did not develop his left-handedness until after he was married.

Both Dick and Steven courted Thelma Corbett, and never a day passed but that their cars were parked in the vicinity of the Corbett ménage. Corbett being on the danger-zone of bankruptcy was indifferent as to which of the two men succeeded in their quest, and Thelma was in a like case.

She was one of those pretty slender creatures whom. meeting, leave you with a vague unrest of mind. Where had you met her before? Then you

realized (as I realized) that she was the ideal toward which all the line artists who ever drew pretty women were everlastingly striving. She was cold and sweet, independent and helpless, clever and vapid; you were never quite certain which was the real girl and which was the varnish and the finishing-school.

To everybody's surprise, she married Dick. Steven had willed it, of course. He half admitted as much one night between acts when we were smoking in the lobby of the Auditorium. Dick had at that time been married for the best part of a year and was childishly happy.

"I can't understand how Dick came to cut you out, Steven," I said. He was feeling pretty good toward me just about then, for I had pulled him through a sharp attack of grippe.

He laughed, that teasing little laugh of his.

"I thought it best," he said, a statement which could be taken two ways. That he was not exposing his modesty or displaying the least unselfishness, ho went on to explain:

"She was too young, too placid. Some women are like that. The men who marry them never wake them up. Some go through life with their hearts asleep and die in the belief that they have been happy. They have lived without 'struggle,' and only 'struggle' can light the fire which produces the perfect woman. I figured it that way."

I was silent.

"I figured it that way"—a favorite expression of his—explained in a phrase the inexplicable.

"That is why you find the most unlikely women running away with the most impossible men," he went on; "the heavens are filled with the woes of perfect husbands and the courts shudder with their lamentations. They are bewildered, stunned, outraged. They have showered their wealth and affection upon a delicate lady, and in return she has fled with a snubnosed chauffeur whose vocabulary is limited to twelve hundred words and whose worldly possessions are nil."

I said nothing, and soon after the bell rang and we went back to our seats. He drove me home that night and came up to my den for a drink, and I reopened the subject of Dick and his wife.

"Dick is one of Nature's waste products," he said. "He has neither initiative nor objective in life. How could old Magnus breed such a son? He was the cleverest, shrewdest, old devil in the City. Dick is just pap and putty—a good fellow and a useful fellow for holding my lady's wool or carrying my lady's Chow, but—"

He shook his head. "No 'struggle' there, Steve?" I asked. "Foley's theory works out in this case."

"Foley is a fool," smiled Steven. "What about me? Aren't I my father's son?"

I admitted that.

"No, Dick lives from breakfast to supper, and could no more work out a scheme as his father did than I could knit a necktie."

"And there is no 'struggle' in the establishment?" I repeated, and he nodded gravely. "There is no 'struggle,'" he said, and although he never said the words I felt him saying "as yet."

Steven became a frequent visitor at the Magnus' house—Dick told me this himself. "He's an amusing person," he said—I met him in the Park, and he stopped his car to talk"—and I can't help feeling that life is a little dull for Thelma."

It was much duller for people who were brought much into contact with Thelma, but I did not say so. She was the kind of hostess who wanted entertaining.

Everybody loved Dick in those days, and he was welcomed wherever he went. Later, when he passed through that remarkably awkward stage, a stage which we usually associate with extreme adolescence, he was not so popular, and I was a little bit worried about him. It grieved me to see a man with all the money in the world making a playtime of life, because people who live for play can find their only recreation in work, and he never expressed the slightest desire to engage himself in the pursuit which had built up his father's colossal fortune. He rode well, he shot well, he played a good game of golf, and it was a case of "Let's get Dick" for a fourth at bridge.

"The fact is," said Dick, when I tackled him one day, "heavy thinking bores me. Maybe if I had to, I would. Sometimes I feel that I have a flash of my father's genius, but I usually work out that moment of inspiration in a game of solitaire.

"One afternoon he took me home to tea, arriving a little earlier than usual. He was evidently surprised to find Steve's car drawn up near the house. He should have been more surprised when he walked through the French windows opening from the lawn to the drawing-room, and found Steve and Thelma side by side on a settee examining Medici prints. It may have been necessary for the proper study of Art that Steve's hand should be upon the girl's shoulder. Evidently she did not think so, for she tried to disengage herself, but Steve, much more experienced in the ways of the world, kept his hand in position and looked up with a smile. As for me, I felt de trop.

"Hello, people!" said Dick, glaring benignly into the flushed face of the girl, "do my eyes behold a scandal in process of evolution? Or have I interrupted an exposition on the art of Michael Angelo?"

Steve rose with a laugh.

"I brought Thelma some pictures," he said, "they're a new lot just published; they are rather fine, don't you think?"

Dick looked at the pictures and, having no artistic soul, said that they struck him as a little old-fashioned, and I saw the girl's lips curl in disdain of her husband, and felt a trifle sad.

Another time (I have learnt since) Dick found them lunching together at Madarino's, a curious circumstance in view of the fact that she had said she was going to spend the day with her mother.

Then one afternoon Dick went home and sounded his motor-horn loudly as he swept up the drive, and discovered his wife at one end of the drawing-room and Steve at the other, and they were discussing Theosophy loudly.

After tea Dick linked his arm in Steve's and took him into the grounds.

"Steve, old boy," he said affectionately, "I don't think I should come and see Thelma unless somebody else is here, old man."

"Why in Heaven's name shouldn't I?" asked Steve. "What rubbish you talk, Dick! Why, I've known Thelma as long as I've known you."

Dick scratched his chin.

"Yes, that seems a sound kind of argument," he said. "Still, I wouldn't if I were you. You know, servants and people of that kind talk."

But Steve smacked him on the back and told him not to be a goomp, and Thelma was so nice that evening that, when during a week-end Dick

surprised his wife and Steve one morning walking with linked hands along an unfrequented path through the woods, he did no more than give them a cheery greeting, and passed on with a grin.

It was about this time that Dick started on his maladroit career. He became careless in his dress, could not move without knocking things over, went altogether wrong in his bridge, so that you could always tell which was Dick's score by a glance at the block. There was usually a monument of hundreds, two hundreds, and five hundreds erected above the line on the debit side, and when men cut him as a partner they groaned openly and frankly.

Harry Wallstein, who is a lunatic collector, gave him a rare Ming vase to examine, and Dick dropped it, smashing the delicate china into a hundred pieces. Of course he insisted upon paying the loss, but he could not soothe Harry's anguished soul. He had a trick too, when he was taking tea with some of his women friends, of turning quickly in a drawing-room and sweeping all the cups on to the floor. In the street he escaped death by miracles. Once he stood in the center of a crowded thoroughfare at the rush hour to admire the amethystine skies. A motor lorry and two taxicabs piled themselves up on the sidewalk in consequence, for it had been raining and the roads were slippery.

Dick footed the bill for the damage and went on his awkward way. It is extraordinary how quickly a man acquires a reputation for eccentricity. People forgot the unoffending Dick that used to be, and knew only the dangerous fool who was. When he called on Mrs. Tolmarsh, whose collection of Venetian glass has no equal in the country, the butler was instructed never to leave his side, to guide him in and out of the drawing-room, and under no circumstances to allow him to handle the specimens which Mrs. Tolmarsh invariably handed round for the admiration of her guests. Nevertheless he managed to crash a sixteenth-century vase and a decanter which had been made specially for Fillipo, Tyrant of Milan, and was adorned with his viperish crest.

And in the meantime Steven gave up his practice of calling three times a week on Mrs. Magnus and called every day.

Dick did not seem to mind, although he took to returning home earlier than had been his practice. I might have warned Dick. I preferred, however, to say a few words to Steven, and I got him alone in a corner of the library and I did not mince my words.

"I shall not moralize, Steven," I said, "for that is not my way. You have your own code and your own peculiar ideas concerning women, and so far you've got away with it. I do not doubt that you will get away with this matter because Dick seems to be drifting down the stream towards imbecility—but there are, thank Heaven, a few decent people in this town, and if you betray Dick you are going to have a pretty thin time. I won't commit the banality of asking you to look before you leap, because I know you're a pretty good looker!"

"Leaper!" he corrected. "No person who looks very carefully leaps at all. The world is divided into those two classes—lookers and leapers. Anyway, I am not very greatly concerned by what people think of me. If I were, I should have entered a monastery a long time ago. You've been straight with me, Doctor, and I'm going to be straight with you. My affairs are my affairs and concern nobody else. I shall do just as I think, and take a line which brings me the greatest satisfaction."

"Whosoever is hurt?" I asked.

"Whosoever is hurt," he said, and meant it. "I know just what is coming to me. I have figured it out."

There was no more to be said. To approach Dick was a much more delicate matter, for he was impervious to hints.

A week after I had talked to Steven I met Hariboy, who is a banker of standing and the president of my golf club. I met him professionally, for I had been called into his house to perform a minor operation on one of his children, and I was cleaning up in his dressing-room when he strolled in, and after some talk about the child he said:

"Steven Martingale is going away."

"Going away?" I repeated. "How do you know?"

"I know he has taken steamship accommodations for Bermuda. My secretary and his secretary are apparently friends, and she told my girl that Steven is doing a lot of rush work, and that he is leaving for a long holiday on the 18th."

"Do you know by what line?" I asked, and he told me.

Luckily the manager of the shipping office was a patient of mine, and I made it my business to call on him that afternoon.

"Yes, the ship leaves on the 18th," he said, "but I haven't Mr. Martingale on my passenger list."

We went through it together, and I traced my finger down the cabin numbers and their occupants.

"Who is this in No. 7 suite?" I asked. He put on his glasses and looked.

"Mr. and Mrs. Smith. I don't know who they are. It's not an uncommon name," he added humorously.

So that was that!

I do not think I should have moved any further in the matter if I had had the slightest degree of faith in Steven's honesty. But Steven was not a marrying man. He had once told me that under no circumstances would he think of binding his life with that of any woman, and had expounded his philosophy with that cold-blooded logic of his, which left me in no doubt at all that whatever fine promises he might make to Thelma Magnus, only one end of that advenlure was inevitable.

I sought Dick all over the town, and ran him to earth in the first place I should have looked—the card-room of Proctor's Club. I entered the room in time to hear the peroration of a violent address on idiocy delivered by Dick's late partner. His opponents were too busy adding up the score to take any interest in the proceeding.

Dick sat back in his chair, his hands in his pockets, a little smile on his thin face.

"Fortunes of war, old top," he murmured from time to time.

"Fortunes of war be—" roared Staine; who was his victim. "You go four spades on the queen, knave to five, and not another trick in your hand...!"

"Fortunes of war, old top," said Dick again, paid his opponents and rose, upsetting the table and scattering the cards in all directions.

"Awfully sorry," he murmured; "really awfully sorry!"

That "awfully sorry" of his came mechanically now.

"Now, Dick," said I, when I'd got him into my car, "you're coming straight home with me, and I'm going to talk to you like an uncle."

"Oh, Lord!" he groaned. "Not about Thelma?" I was astounded, and I suppose looked my astonishment. "Everybody talks to me about Thelma," said Dick calmly. "She's a dear, good girl, and as honest as they make 'em. I'm not a very amusing chap, you know, Doctor," he said mournfully, "and Steven is the kind of fellow who can keep a room in roars of laughter."

"But, my dear, good man," I said impatiently, "don't you realize that a man of Steven's character does not call daily on your wife to tell her funny stories?"

"I don't know," said Dick vaguely. "Thelma seems to like him, and I've really no grudge against old Steve. He's a leaper too," he said, with a quick, sidelong glance at me, "and that makes him ever so much more interesting to the women." lie chuckled at my astonishment. "He was telling us the other night about that amusing conversation he had with you."

"He did not tell you the whole of the conversation, I'll swear," said I dryly, but Dick showed no curiosity.

"Old Steven is a good fellow," he repeated. "I like him, and I tell everybody who comes to me with stories about him and Thelma that he is my very best friend."

I groaned in the spirit.

"Then," said I in despair, "it is useless telling you that Steven has booked two berths by the steamer which leaves on the 18th for Bermuda."

He nodded. "I know; he is taking his aunt," he said. "I got the same yarn from Chalmers, and I asked Steven, and he told me, yes, he was going away—"

"In the name of Smith?" I asked pointedly.

"In the name of Smith," repeated Dick gravely. "After all, he's a big power in the financial'world, Doctor, and it is not good business for him to advertise his comings and goings."

After that there was no more to be said.

"We're having a little party on the 17th at the house. I wish you would come along," said Dick before I left him. "I've particularly asked Steve to come. It will be a send-off for him, though of course nobody must know that he is going abroad."

The dear, simple fool said this so solemnly that I could have kicked him. What could I do? I had a talk with Chalmers, who is as fond of Dick as I am, and he could offer no advice.

"It's hopeless," he said, "and the queer thing is that Dick has arranged to go out of town on the night of the 17th. So we can't even drag him to the ship to confront this swine!"

"Do you think he'll marry her?" I asked after a long pause in the conversation.

"Marry her!" scoffed Chalmers. "Did he marry Fay Jennifer? Did he marry that unhappy girl Steele? Marry her!"

It was a big party which Dick gave. His house lay about twenty miles out of town and is situated in the most gorgeous country. It was a hot autumn day, with a cloudless sky and a warm gentle breeze, the kind of day that tempts even the most confirmed of city birds into the open country.

I do not think it was wholly the salubrious weather that was responsible for the big attendance. Half the people, and all the women who were present, knew that on the following day Steven Martingale was leaving for Bermuda, and that Thelma would accompany him.

I saw the girl as soon as I arrived, and noted the bright eyes, the flushed cheek, and the atmosphere of hectic excitement in which she moved. She was a little tremulous, somewhat incoherent, just a thought shrill.

All Dick's parties were amusing and just a little unconventional. For example, in addition to the band and the troupe of al fresco performers and Grecian dancers, he usually had some sort of competition for handsome prizes, and the young people, particularly, looked forward to these functions with the greatest enjoyment. On this occasion there was a revolver-shooting competition for ladies and gentlemen, the prize for the women being a diamond bangle, and for the men a gold cigarette case.

Most men imagine themselves to be proficient in the arts which they do not practice, and nine out of ten who have never handled a gun boast of their marksmanship.

Dick sought me out and took me into the house and upstairs to his own snuggery.

"Doctor," said he, as he dropped into an easychair and reached for his cigarettes, "spare a minute to enlighten me. What was the Crauford smash?

I only heard a hint of it last night, and I'm told that dad was positively wonderful."

It was queer he had never heard of Ralph Crauford and his fall. Old Man Magnus and he were bitter enemies, and whereas Crauford must nag and splutter from day to day, Magnus was prepared to wait. As usual he laid his plans ahead, and one morning failed to turn up at his office. The rumor spread that he was ill, and there was suport for the story, because you could never pass his house without seeing a doctor's waiting car. It was a puzzling case, and I myself was fooled. So was every specialist we brought in. For weeks at a time Magnus would be well, and then he would have a collapse and be absent from his office for days.

And all the time the Crauford crowd were waiting to jump in and smash two of the stocks he carried. We had advised a trip abroad, but it was not till the end of a year of these relapses and recoveries that he consented. He went to Palermo in Sicily, and after a month it was announced that he had died. Then the fun started. Crauford jumped into the market with a hammer in each hand, figuratively speaking. Tyne River Silver fell from 72 to 31, and all the time the executors of the estate were chasing one another to discover their authority to act. This went on for three days and then the blow fell. Old Man Magnus appeared on 'Change, looking a trifle stouter, a little browner, and infinitely cheerful.

Crauford had "sold over." It cost him his bank balance, his town house, and his country estate plus his wife's jewelry to get square with Magnus.

Dick listened to the story, his eyes beaming, interrupting me now and again with a chuckle of sheer joy.

"Wonderful old dad!" he said at the end; "wonderful old boy! And he was foxing all the time. Kidding 'em along! The art of it, the consummate art of it! Specialists and sea voyages and bulletins every hour!"

He stood up abruptly and threw away his cigarette.

"Let's go and see the women shoot," he said.

There was the usual fooling amongst the girls when their end of the competition started. In spite of their "Which-end-shall-I-hold-it?" and their mock terror, they shot remarkably well.

I had caught a glimpse of Steven, a silent, watchful, slightly amused man, who most conspicuously avoided Thelma, but came down to the booth and

stood behind ier when she fired her six shots for the prize. Incidentally not one bullet touched the target, and the wobbling of her pistol was pitiful.

Steven's shooting was beautiful to watch. Every bullet went home in the center of the target and the prize was assuredly his.

"Now watch me, Steve," said Dick, and at the sight of Dick with a gun in his hand even his best friends drew back.

He fired one shot, a bull's-eye, the second shot was a little bit to the left, but nevertheless a bull's-eye, the third shot passed through the hole which the first had made, the fourth and fifth were on the rim of the black center—and then he turned with a smile to Steven.

"My old pistol is much better than the best of the new ones," he said.

He had refused to shoot with the weapons provided, and had brought a long ungainly thing of ancient make; but as he was not a competitor in the strict sense of the word, there had been no protest.

The sixth shot went through the bull and there was a general clapping.

"How's that?" said Dick, twiddling his revolver.

"Fine," said Steven. "The Looker shoots almost as well as the Leaper," laughed Dick, and pressed the trigger carelessly. There was a shot and a scream. Steve balanced himself for a moment, looking at Dick in a kind of awed amazement, and then crumpled up and fell.

As for Dick he stood, the smoking revolver still in his hand, frowning down at the prostrate figure.

"I'm sorry," he muttered, but Steven Martingale had passed beyond the consideration of apologies. He was dead before I could reach him.

That old-fashioned revolver of Dick's had seven chambers, and people agreed both before and after the inquest that it was the kind of fool thing that Dick would have.

"He ought to have seen there were seven shots when he loaded the infernal weapon," said Chalmers. "Of course, if it was anybody but Dick I should have thought that the whole thing was manoeuvred, and that all this awkwardness of his had been carefully acted for twelve months in order to supply an excuse at the inquest and get the 'Accidental Death' verdict. It is

the sort of thing that his father would have done. A keen, far-seeing old devil was John Magnus."

I said nothing, for I had seen the look in Dick's eyes when he said "leaper."

At any rate, the shock wakened Dick, for his awkwardness fell away from him like an old cloak, and Thelma Magnus must have found some qualities in him which she had not suspected, for she struck me as a tolerably happy woman when I met her the other day. But I shall not readily forget that hard glint in Dick's eyes when he spoke the last words which Steven Martingale was destined to hear. I had seen it once before in the eyes of John Seymour Magnus the day he smashed Crauford.

Maybe some of the old man's hormones were working. I should like to ask Foley about it.

16. THE MAN WHO NEVER LOST

The man in the gray cashmere suit who lolled with his face to the Hotel de Paris was dimly conscious that from one of the balconies he was being particularized. He guessed also that he was in process of being described, but he was hardened to notoriety. He could almost hear the man tell the girl, "That is the celebrated Twyford—the fellow with the system who breaks the bank regularly every week."

Too lazy and somnolent to raise his head even to identify the newcomers to Monte Carlo (as he guessed they were), he stretched his long legs to the sun and settled sideways for greater comfort.

He was forty and grayish. A lean, clean-shaven face; large, regular white teeth that showed readily, for he was easily amused; eyes of steady, unwinking blue, and a gun-metal nerve: these were some of the features and qualities of Aubrey Twyford, The Man Who Never Lost.

"That's Aubrey Twyford," said the envious young man on the balcony. "I wish to Heaven I had half his luck or a tenth."

"Poor Bobby!" said the girl. Her eyes were sympathetic and kindly, and at the pressure of her hand on his arm he turned.

"Whose luck?"

The middle-aged lady who came through the French windows and joined them on the balcony had no sympathetic quality in her tone, nor was there kindliness in her nod.

"Hello, Bobby," she said, and gave him her cheek; "I heard you had arrived. Who were you talking about?"

He nodded to the square and, shading her eyes, Mrs. Brane took in the lounging figure, from the tips of his white shoes to the crown of his gray hat.

"That's Aubrey Twyford—they call him The Man Who Can't Lose. He comes to Monte Carlo every season from February to May and never leaves the table except as a winner."

"Wonderful man!" said Mrs. Brane dryly. "Are you thinking of emulating his example, Bobby?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, aunt," said Bobby Gardner with a laugh, "I had hopes."

She sniffed.

"I hate gamblers," she said shortly. "He must be a very horrid person." She looked again at the object of their conversation.

Twyford had risen and was walking slowly to meet a short, stout man who had come down the steps of the Hotel de Paris.

"That's Souchet, the big Paris banker. He is a millionaire, and I wouldn't change places with him for all his money. His daughter ran away with the chauffeur this week, and the poor old gentleman is quite knocked out. He is losing money at the tables, but the beggar can well afford it," said Bobby gloomily.

The girl had gone into the room, and his aunt walked closer to him.

"Why did you come to Monte Carlo, Bobby"

"Why?" His pretence of surprise was very transparent. "Why, I come here every year."

"But why have you come now?" she asked.

He did not immediately reply nor meet her eye.

"I am getting very tired of this business, Bobby," she said quietly. "You are making a fool of Madge. The girl is simply worried to death. Why don't you propose to her if you are going to?"

He laughed a little bitterly, for Bobby had occasional moments when he was sorry for himself.

"With £400 a year?"

"Bah," she said contemptuously, "as if money made any difference!"

He swung round.

"It makes a lot of difference. Madge is a very rich girl and I am a very poor man. When I can meet her on something like equal terms, I will ask her."

"That is just your vanity," said the elder woman; "man's vanity It would not worry you if she were poor and you were rich. You would not regard it as being an undignified thing for her to accept your wealth."

"That is different," he said.

"Only from a man's point of view," said she, and walked back into the sitting-room.

A quarter of an hour later all three passed into the rooms, through the big and terribly serious public room into the ornate Cercle Privée. They passed along the roulette tables and came to the crowd about the trente-et-quarante players.

"That is the only game he ever plays," said Bobby in an undertone. "Look at him packing it up!"

Before this man in gray, with his expressionless face and his lean, white hands, was a thick pile of thousand-franc notes, and whilst they looked he had added 24,000 to his stock. On the opposite side of the table Bobby saw the dour, bearded face of Souchet the banker. He was not gambling, unless betting in louis can be so described, but five out of every six stakes he played were raked to the croupier.

"Who is Aubrey Twyford?"

"It is a rum story," said Bobby, leading the girl to one of the seats by the wall. "He used to be a professor of psychology, a man who never gambled and took his modest holiday every year in Monte Carlo. People who knew him here twenty years ago say that he never risked as much as a five-franc piece on the table until he discovered his system."

"Has he a system?" she asked.

Bobby nodded.

"The Casino authorities have tried to find what it is. They have had detectives and officials watching him for years. All his coups have been recorded and examined by the best system experts in Europe, but apparently there is no system at all. I have reason to believe they have searched his baggage time and time again to discover some clue which will put them on to his scheme of play, but they found nothing."

"That is very strange, Bobby," she said.

"This is his last season, by the way. He told me yesterday he was chucking it up."

At that moment there was a stir at the table. Souchet and Twyford rose together and walked away, Souchet explaining something with a little smile and The Man Who Never Lost nodding his reply as he pocketed his winnings. Bobby noticed that he needed two pockets.

"Go on about him," said the girl. "I am fearfully interested."

"About twelve years ago he started playing, and since then he has never looked back. The Casino officials say that he has taken nearly £700,000 from the tables in the past ten years."

She frowned.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked quickly.

"I had an idea," she said. "That is all."

He did not press her. Mr. Aubrey Twyford entertained on a lavish scale. His table, in a corner of the Café de Paris, was always crowded for dinner, and when Bobby and the girl came in that night they found the usual throng about him.

"I forgot something about Twyford, and I ought to tell you this in justice to him," he said. "He is most awfully good to people who have bad luck. I have known him to go down to see off a man who has gone broke, and to hand him an envelope containing every penny he had lost. You see," said Bobby, with a smile, "one is frightfully communicative at Monte Carlo, and one knows just how the other fellows are doing at the tables. Last season a widow came down with £3000 and lost it in four days! She had come down because she wanted to raise enough money to buy her son a business. It was a mad sort of idea, and Twyford told her so when he got into conversation with her the first day she played, and do you know what he did? He gave her £6000 on the day she left Monte Carlo on the promise she would not gamble again."

"It is incredible," said the girl. "Who is that man next to him?"

"That is young Stanton. His father is a very rich Manchester merchant. He won 200,000 francs this afternoon."

She laughed.

"Is the financial position of anybody in Monte Carlo secret?" she asked.

"Not a bit," laughed Bobby. "I bet you, the croupiers could tell you your income to within a pound."

Mr. Stanton had taken a little too much wine. He was loud and talkative.

"I'm going to set 'em alight tonight," he said, with a laugh. "Stand by, everybody, and wee me break the bank."

Twyford raised his glass of Vichy water and sipped.

"It is very unlucky to talk about breaking the bank," he said.

"Luck?" said the other. "My dear chap, there isn't any luck in it! One has only to keep one's head—"

"Don't despise luck," said Aubrey. He had a rich mellow voice and spoke slowly and deliberately. "There are three lucky moments in every twenty-four hours, no more. I have studied the subject very carefully. If you get in on the flood-tide of your luck, you can't lose. If you strike any of the other minutes you cannot win."

"Do you suggest that you only win for three minutes in every twenty- four hours?" scoffed Stanton.

"I am not talking about myself," said the other quietly. "I work on a system, and by my system I cannot lose."

"But if you've got a system," persisted Stanton, gulping down a glass of champagne, "why is it you are not playing all the time? Why, you go for days without making a bet!"

"I shall bet tonight," said Twyford quietly, "and I shall win and win heavily. I am going to play maximums of twelve thousand francs."

"What we ought to do"—it was Souchet the banker who spoke —"is to follow our friend, but how? He does not play his stake until they start dealing the cards, and then it is too late to follow him." Twyford smiled.

"That is also part of my system," he said dryly.

The girl leant across the table to Bobby.

"Bobby," she said, "take me back to the Casino when Mr. Twyford goes. I am most anxious to watch his play."

"I'll get you a seat near him," said Bobby. "There are generally one or two sleepers who will give up their seats for a louis."

"Sleepers?" she said, puzzled.

"That isn't the name, I don't think," he said, and explained that there was a class of habitué at the rooms who did nothing but sit on the off-chance that somebody would put down a stake and either walk away or forget to take his winnings. In this case the wily watcher reaches out his hand and rakes in

the "sleeper" unless the croupier is extra vigilant and has noticed who staked the money.

Presently the big party broke up, and they strolled through the café across the deserted square. With very little difficulty Bobby secured a seat, two removed from Twyford, for the girl. immediately opposite her sat the optimistic Stanton, flushed and voluble.

True to his word, Twyford produced a bigger pad of notes than he had taken away in the afternoon. His first stake was for twelve thousand francs, and this he lost. He lost his second stake on black. He staked again on black and won. The girl watched him, fascinated. He dodged from black to red, from red to couleur, from couleur to invers, and five out of every six coups he won. It was enthralling to the girl, possibly because the scene and the setting were so novel and bizarre. She watched the dealer as with amazing dexterity he led out the two lines of cards...

"Rouge perd et couleur."

A clicking of counters against rakes, a flutter of mill notes, and invariably it seemed it was toward Aubrey Twyford that the notes fluttered. She kept note of the colors in a little book which Bobby had provided. There was no method in the run of the cards; they dodged from black to red and from red to black. They ran three times on black before they started zig-zagging from black to red again, and it seemed that everybody at the table was losing—except The Man Who Could Not Lose.

Mr. Stanton was no longer voluble. His big pile had steadily decreased until it was the merest slice. He was losing his nerve. He would put a big stake upon a color, then change his mind and withdraw the greater part of it before the cards were dealt. Once he put down a maximum, hesitated, and took it off, substituting 500 francs on the red. The red won, and he cursed audibly. Aubrey Twyford, who had had his maximum on the red, smiled.

At eleven o'clock Stanton pushed back his chair and walked round to Twyford.

"They've cleaned me out," he said. "I've lost 300,000 francs. You don't seem to have done so badly."

Twyford smiled.

"Do you want any money?" he asked.

"No, I've finished for the night," said Stanton. "I'll try again in the morning," and walked past him to the bar.

Twyford caught Bobby's eye and nodded.

"Come and drink orangeade," he said. "I am bloated with wealth."

"May I introduce Mr. Twyford?"

The girl looked into the half-smiling eyes of The Man Who Could Not Lose, and saw a whole wealth of humanity and humor in their depths.

"You must drink orangeade, Miss Radley," he said; "everybody does it."

"It sounds yery innocuous," she laughed.

"That is just what we want," said he. "I have been watching your wonderful system, Mr. Twyford," she said.

He chuckled.

"I hope you are not going to tell people how I do it," he said dryly. "Everybody watches my wonderful system and I fear they are as wise as ever, though why they should not understand it from the first, Heaven only knows."

They sat down in the big, comfortable armchairs with which the buffet was well furnished, and the waiter brought them great tumblers of fragrant orange-juice packed to the brim with cracked ice.

"When I have finished at Monte Carlo, I must write a book about my system," said Twyford.

"And I will be one of your first readers," said the girl. "I am sure I shall come straight to Monte Carlo and win a fortune."

He shook his head, and the smile vanished from his face.

"It requires a heart of iron to work my system," he said. "It is just because I am getting human that I am giving it up."

Bobby went to the bar to get some sandwiches, and the girl turned to the man.

"Mr. Twyford," she said, speaking rapidly in a low voice, "there is something I want to say to you. You are really leaving Monte Carlo for good?"

He nodded.

"And you are not going to work your system again?"

"I am not," he said; "that you may be sure."

"Suppose, Mr. Twyford," she dropped her eyes and fingered the arm of the chair nervously, "suppose somebody offered you a big sum for your system, would you sell it?"

She looked up sharply and saw he was smiling.

"Not for myself," she said, going red, "but there is somebody —somebody I want to see well off."

"I could not sell it," he said shortly. "I am very, very sorry, and I am really acting in the best interests of the—er—somebody you want to help, but it is impossible."

She bit her lip.

"May I ask you not to tell—?"

He raised his hand to stop her and regarded the returning Bobby with more interest. Her aunt came into the buffet at that moment and claimed her.

"You ought to be in bed, Madge," she said. "Bobby, why do you keep Madge up so late?"

Then she saw Twyford, and the girl introduced them.

"Have you been teaching them your system, Mr. Twyford?" she asked, with a little smile.

"I teach all Monte Carlo my system," he laughed, "and really the Casino should charge a fee to see me play."

When the women had gone, Twyford turned to Bobby and favored him with a long scrutiny.

"Mr. Gardner," said the elder man, "you aren't playing today."

Bobby shrugged as he sank back in his seat.

"What's the use?" he said. "I fool about with louis, and I neither make money nor lose money. I haven't the nerve to be a gambler, and yet I never have been so tempted to risk every cent I have as I am today.

Twyford sucked at his straw.

"Bad news?" he asked.

"No," said Bobby, "just a realization of what a perfectly useless ass I am!"

"That sort of thing does upset you," said Twyford.

"Do you know what I am going to do?" asked Bobby suddenly, and his fresh young face fired at the thought. "I'm going tb have a real old gamble tomorrow. I've got a couple of thousand pounds which I've been putting aside for—for—well, for something, and I'm going to play thousand-franc stakes!"

"You will lose," said Twyford, without hesitation. "Every man who goes out to win big money because he must win big money loses."

"How do you know I must?" said the other sharply.

"I gather from your tone that it is necessary for you to have a lot of money," said Twyford, "and when a man goes out to win that money he loses."

"Always?"

"In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred," said Twyford; "I think the percentage is a little higher. I kept very complete psychological data during the first few years I was at Monte Carlo, and I think it works out at ninety-nine point four per cent."

Bobby stared at him.

"Then I am going to be the point six per cent. that wins!" he said, and rushed off to see the girl before she retired for the night.

Twyford looked after him with a little smile, then with a shrug of his shoulders he beckoned the waiter.

Bobby Gardner came down to the vestibule of the hotel the next morning and found Twyford reading a newspaper. "I was waiting for you," he said. "Do you think you could persuade your ladies to take an auto ride to Grasse?"

"It is awfully kind of you," said Bobby gratefully.

The girl was at first reluctant. She had felt the last night's refusal as a rebuff, but Mrs. Brane wanted to go to Grasse to buy some perfumes, and Madge consented.

It was a much more pleasant ride than she had anticipated. The beauties of the Grand Cornich had been so often described to her that she was prepared to be bored, but the wonder of hill and valley, of narrow mountain roads and dizzy precipices, filled her with amazement and delight.

It was on the journey back, when they had stopped at the Gorge du Loup for afternoon tea, that Aubrey Twyford beckoned her more with a look than a gesture, and she detached herself from Bobby and went to him.

"I have been thinking of what you said last night," he said. "Will you walk a little way up the Gorge with me?"

"About the system?" she said quickly.

He nodded.

"You will sell it?"

"No, I will not sell it," he said, "but I will give it to you. I have decided to leave Monte Carlo tomorrow. All the stories they tell about me are perfectly true. I am a very rich man, and there is no further need for me to gamble. First," he said, turning and facing her, "you must promise me that you will not reveal my secret until after I have left Monte Carlo."

"I promise," she said, "but—"

"There must be no 'buts,'" he said, "not even to Mr. Gardner!"

He saw the colour mount to her cheek, and smiled inwardly, then, taking her arm, he slowly paced the road, and the system of The Man Who Could Not Lose was revealed.

At first she was incredulous. Then she felt a sense of revulsion. Then, as his calm, even tones related the story of his years at Monte Carlo, she recognized that he was speaking as a doctor might speak about his cases, cold-bloodedly and scientifically. At the end of the revelation she held out her hand.

"I am awfully obliged and grateful to you, Mr. Twyford. No, I shan't tell Bobby, and I don't think I shall tell anybody else."

"You will see tonight," he repeated for the second time.

She inclined her head gravely. They were nearing the party again when he said suddenly:

"Miss Radley, Bobby Gardner is a real good fellow, as clean a specimen of a boy as I have ever met. I have seen him here year after year, and I have particularly studied him."

She had gone very red, but it was with a smile that she asked:

"Why do you tell me this, Mr. Twyford?"

"It was quite unnecessary," he agreed. "I am sure you have noticed those qualities yourself."

The trente-et-quarante table was crowded when Twyford took his seat. Bobby, bright of eye and inordinately cheerful, laid his modest fortune before him, and nodded brightly to Twyford. Then the gambling began. Bobby started with a stake of a thousand francs and won. He increased his stake and won again. With the exception of three he won twelve successive coups, and suddenly Twyford rose from the table with a little laugh, picked up the remainder of his money, and left the trente- et-quarante table for good.

He stood watching Bobby, and Bobby was winning heavily until the girl whispered something in his ear when he, too, rose, both hands filled with notes and counters.

Twyford was sitting on a bench smiling, and he jerked his head inviting them, but he was only looking at the girl.

"Come and sit down," he said. "I want to ask you a question."

He shook an admonitory forefinger at her, and she laughed. "I am not going to ask you whether you told Bobby Gardner my precious secret," he said.

"I thought you were," she replied in surprise. "I am merely going to ask you this. Have you become engaged to Bobby since I saw you last?" She nodded.

"That explains it," said the other. He rose and shook hands with both of them, and The Man Who Could Not Lose left the gaming rooms, never to reappear.

"You see," began the girl, "Mr. Twyford was a great psychologist."

"But do you mean to say," said the incredulous Bobby, "that he told you his system before he left?"

She nodded.

"By the way," he added, "do you know he lost nearly 200,000 francs last night!"

She nodded again. "I guessed that," she said, "but I don't think that will worry him very much."

"What was the system?" said Bobby.

"I was telling you," said the girl severely, "when you interrupted. He studied the people of Monte Carlo, especially the gambling people, for eight years, and the thing he discovered was that there are conditions under which a gambler cannot win. If a man is worried about some outside matter, if he is losing steadily and cannot afford to lose, or if he comes to the tables and simply must win money, Mr. Twyford knew that whatever else happened, his money would go, and the majority of his stakes would vanish. And when he found this out he took the trouble to discover who at Monte Carlo was in trouble, who wanted money very badly, who was playing with their last stakes—and he played against them. If they backed red he backed black, if they backed couleur he backed invers."

"Good lord!" gasped Bobby; "was that playing the game?"

"That's what I asked him," said the girl, "and he had no difficulty in convincing me that it was. It was not he who was influencing the bad luck of the others, their bad luck was simply influencing him to fortune. Sometimes the man with the bad luck would only lose a few thousand francs, and Mr. Twyford would win hundreds of thousands by betting against him. If he knew a man or woman whom he 'had played against was ruined, he always made good their losses before they left—he said he could afford to, because he was very often playing twelve thousand francs against their forty. He said it is the only system in the world, and I believe it is."

"But why did he lose last night?" asked Bobby, and the girl smiled.

"I suppose it was because he was playing against somebody who ought to have been radiantly happy," she said. "Didn't you hear him ask me if I had accepted you?"

THE END