

# *The Lady Called Nita*

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**Freeditorial** 

## **1. — THE LADY CALLED NITA**

THE lady, called by her intimate friends Nita, stopped at the end of the crowded path which leads to the bandstand.

"Mary, I do not think you need come any farther. Take a park chair and wait for me. I may be an hour—I may be longer. If you see me with—with the gentleman, you will not recognise me by a sign."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"If you think I am being followed, then you may warn me. But I do not think that is likely. M. Goucouldis has no idea that—er—the Prince has any entanglements. But if it should be so that I am watched, then very likely his—agents—will try to get into touch with you. In that case you will tell them that I am Mademoiselle Lemair from Paris. That I am the daughter of M. Lemair, the leader of the Popular Party of Sergovia. If your questioner has a fit at this, send for a policeman: I understand that the English police are trained in first aid."

"Yes, mademoiselle."

It was not an unlikely contingency that the agent of M. Goucouldis, Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Kingdom of Sergovia, would grow a little faint at even second-hand contact with the daughter of M. Lemair. For M. Lemair's was a name that is only whispered in Sergovia. For fifteen years he had been exiled from his native land, and though his followers were numerous, they were, under the iron régime of the Chancellor, a trifle inarticulate. What was

known as "The Law of 1909" was a comprehensive measure, so framed that it was humanly impossible for a member of the Popular Party to eat, drink or sleep within the confines of the kingdom. The Law of 1909 was a modernised version of the Ten Commandments, created for the preservation of the ruling dynasty, and M. Goucouldis was at once its author and avenging angel.

It might be explained, lest the Chancellor be shown in an unfavourable light, that the Law of 1909 merely replaced the Law of 1903, which made it a penal offence to be a Constitutionalist, and was designed to preserve an altogether different dynasty, and that the high priest of the Popular measure was M. Lemair. In Trans-Balkania, policies are poles apart, and the warmth and comfort of an equatorial toleration is an unknown experience.

On this particular night of July, M. Goucouldis had many worrying thoughts, but the spectre of M. Lemair did not intrude its grisly shape. It was disturbing to him that he was in London, away from his comfortable villa and his subservient bridge partners; more disturbing that he was in attendance upon his Prince; most disturbing of all that his Prince at that moment had dispensed with attendance.

"Diplomacy," said the Chancellor oracularly, "is the art of stating unpleasant facts inoffensively. It is an unpleasant fact that His Serene Highness refuses to marry; it is a pleasant interpretation of his obduracy that he is wedded to the interest of Sergovia and its people. He may be secretly married already; he may be in love with the unattainable—God knows. In a court like ours I think that it would be impossible that such secrets could be kept. And what constitutes the unattainable to a Serene Highness, I would ask you? Not any woman in this world. Dear no!"

The English of M. Goucouldis was of the best, except that in the matter of idioms he was occasionally at fault. He was a tall, melancholy man, big headed, big nosed, hard mouthed. His blue-grey beard was stiff and uncompromising, his tired eyes held something of tragedy. For he had spent seven years in a fortress prison in the busy days of the Slavola dynasty, when the Popular Party held office, and had seen good men die for their patriotism. That was far away and long ago. The Michaeloffs were firmly established on the throne of Sergovia—there had not been a revolution in fifteen years. In these days he could appear publicly wearing the hated cerise and green ribbon of Sts. Michael and Sofia, without fear that a fanatic's bullet would spit a viperish protest against his unorthodoxy.

Nowadays the rival Churches of Sergovia dwelt together in harmony—had joint conferences to reconcile the Nestorian theory with that of the Monophysites, and were tolerant of Orders named after unqualified saints.

The Chancellor stared out over the darkening park. From somewhere beyond the flaming rhododendrons came the soft "humph-humph" of an euphonium—the band was playing, and in the gloom, starred now with yellow lights, London was finding relief from the hot work-day.

"It is not easy to watch a Serene Highness," he grumbled, "and in London especially. In Germany it would be simple, but for the moment Germany is ... And all the time Paul is growing older, and there appears ever before my eyes the nightmare of *mésalliance*! *Sa!* At nights I wake up in a sweat, dreaming that I must announce to the Diet that he has contracted marriage with some little dancer from the—the Lyceum? No—Gaiety? These things happen. A Serene Highness is human. He loves and desires; before him is the barrier of virtue and principle. There is no way past but a little door called 'marriage'... it so often happens. And John is so very English. Here he was educate', here he was for his boyhood, here he imbibed democracy and similar new movements. Where does he go to-night, you think? To the opera. Ha, ha! If I laugh, excuse! He is there!"

He pointed his strong, stubby finger toward the yellow lights.

"He promenades to the band. Perhaps with an equerry—more likely alone. And a man of romance, you understand? In spite of English training, the cricket game, and the box-fighting! To him the Caliph of Bagdad who wandered incognito amongst his subjects is an adorable figure. But how could any caliph make a *mésalliance*? Or if he did, having so many wives, it would be a matter of percentage—five per cent, of frightful marriages would hardly be noticeable in a well-arranged harem... and there was always the bow-string and the sack and the Tigris—or is it the Euphrates? I have got so mixed in my geography since the English have been in Mesopotamia—they alter things so."

His *vis-à-vis* on the balcony of the Grand Knightsbridge Hotel was a sympathetic Excellency from the Balkans en route to report to Washington his success in the matter of a commercial treaty—a dried-up little man with big white teeth which he showed permanently. Joshua Higginbotham was the most easily amused Excellency that had ever occupied an European Embassy.

"Wa-al," he drawled, flicking off the ash of his cigar, "romance has its place—especially in court circles. I guess the people like it. It looks fine in two-inch type across the front page—sort of makes the whole world kin. Did you expect to meet the Duchess here in London?"

Goucoulidis nodded.

"She is here. Of the most exclusive family, poor but royal. The most desirable of all the matches, though one hears stories of her levity. But that is youth. They say that she plays pranks, has something of the same peculiar obsession

of my Serene Highness."

He reached out blindly for a cigar, found it by touch, and did not speak until he had puffed the end to a glowing red.

"There is sufficient romance for him. Marriage with a lady of such ingenuity would supply him with an interest in life beyond the ordinary."

"The Duchess Marie—I have heard of her. She is the girl who worked for three months in a West End milliner's."

M. Boucouclis grunted.

"She desires to shock. That was a passion of her sainted mother, to tease, to alarm. Did not that same sainted mother once run away to Siberia and live alone in a tent, with twenty *sotnyas* of Cossacks of the Don searching for her? Yes, she is full of pranks. But marriage will steady her. And the Michaeloffs are wealthy. Better to be a Crown Princess of Sergovia than a pensioned Duchess of Lemberg. If the accounts I have of her be true, they are made for one another, John and she. And such a marriage would have enormous effects in Sergovia: it would end for ever the poisonous propaganda of the viper Lemair, who from his foul Parisian gutter issues a vile and scurrilous sheet which still circulates in Sergovia, in spite of the efforts of my police."

They smoked in silence, and then the American asked:

"What are the chances of a *mésalliance*?"

For a second the hard mouth of M. Goucouclis relaxed.

"Happily, none," he said, with a comfortable sigh. "By the constitution, no marriage of a Prince of the House is recognised unless it bears the approval of my signature—or the Chancellor for the time being. When I framed the constitution I foresaw everything. In the prison at Albana one has time to think."

He stared wistfully out into the darkness.

"I could wish to know what my Prince was doing," he said.

His Prince at that moment was most harmlessly occupied. He sat in a park chair, his hands folded on his lap, listening and yet not listening to one of those descriptive pieces which bandmasters love to concoct from the popular and half-forgotten airs of yesterday, his eyes searching every passer-by. He was young, good-looking, and the girls who paced arm-in-arm to the tempo of the music voted him distinguished-looking.

Presently he saw what he sought, and, springing out of the chair, went rapidly towards the slim figure that had come out of the darkness.

"I was so afraid you weren't coming," he said.

She laughed softly as she fell in by his side and walked slowly back the way she had come.

"Really afraid?" she asked.

"Really afraid," he repeated. "My time in London is so very short that I am simply terrified at the prospect of missing any opportunity of meeting you. You're not English?" he asked suddenly.

She shook her head.

"Or American?"

"No, I'm neither English nor American."

"I knew you weren't," he nodded. "I haven't been able yet to place you. If you were French, I think I should detect your accent."

"Does it matter what I am?" she asked carelessly, slipping her arm into his as they turned into a by-path and solitude. "Now tell me what you were going to tell me last night."

It required some courage, but John of Sergovia was not lacking in that quality. She listened without interruption until he had reached a period of protestation.

"Your Duchess may be rather nice," she said softly, "and you may be very happy with her."

"Happy!" he said scornfully. "Could I be really happy with anybody but you, Marie?"

"They tell me she is very pretty."

"She's freakish," he said impatiently. "Even Goucouldis admits that. And she has no dignity. Have you not heard of her escapade at Tranter's? To act as a shop-girl! I could not submit to be married to a buffoon, however attractive and charming she might be. No, I am going to tell Goucouldis that in no circumstances will I marry the Duchess."

"That is definite?" she mocked him, and in another instant she was in his arms.

Presently she pushed him away.

"You're mad," she said. "Do you realise what it would mean to you if you were to marry a woman unknown... unknown to you... a chance acquaintance? I might be anything—nothing."

"You're everything to me," he breathed. "I've loved you from the very first moment I saw you."

"The very first moment you saw me"—she laughed quietly—"was in the river. John, dear, it is all very romantic, and it began beautifully with a handsome young man rescuing a not unattractive young woman from imminent death—not that I should have died, because I can swim like a fish, and the river was so shallow that I could have walked ashore. But—"

"There are no buts," he said almost savagely.

"There's a big but. If you marry me"—she was watching him closely—"you may lose your throne. And at this moment, Johnny, there are so many dethroned monarchs in Europe, and they are so undistinguished!"

"I'd lose the world for you," he said, gripping her by the arm, "the world and all hope of heaven! Don't you know what you are to me, Marie?"

"And your Duchess?" she murmured.

"Curse my Duchess! Suppose" he began, but she put her hand on his mouth.

"Suppose," she said gently, "suppose your Duchess isn't such a fright as you think—I do so want to be fair to her. Suppose her vulgar escapades are just expressions of her high spirits—"

"I'll suppose nothing," he said doggedly. "Marie, I've applied for a marriage licence at the registrar's."

Her mouth was an O of amazement, but he went on:

"We'll be married to-morrow. Goucouldis has to go to the Foreign Office to a reception, and I'll have two hours free in the afternoon. I want you to come to dinner to meet him afterwards."

"Do you know what you're doing?" she whispered.

"I know what I am doing. Will you?"

"Suppose I was somebody terrible—suppose I was a girl called Lemair? M. Lemair has a daughter!"

He laughed.

"Not the militant Sergius?" he asked.

"Suppose I were... well, suppose I were she... would you prefer me to your Duchess?"

He nodded slowly.

"If you were the daughter of the most bloodthirsty of revolutionaries," he said solemnly, "I would prefer you to my Duchess!"

A patrolling policeman saw them five minutes later, sitting on a garden seat, and discreetly looked the other way.

M. Goucouldis was a very patient man up to a point. He was also a very discreet man, and, knowing something of the ways of young men, did not press his inquiries too far.

He was dressed for the Foreign Office reception when Prince John met him in the private dining-room for a *tête-à-tête* meal.

"Your Serene Highness will be glad to know that our dear friend, the Duchess, is in London: she has been here for a week," he said.

"Indeed?" said John indifferently.

He had only known Marie for a week. How wonderful it seemed! A week—seven days—a hundred and sixty-eight hours—and yet it was as though he had known her for all eternity.

"I have written to her illustrious uncle, the Prince Paul of Georgia, requesting the honour of an interview."

"Do you know the Duchess?" asked John, with sudden interest.

"I have not met her, but there is no question of her charm. Her photographs—"

"Every one of her photographs looks different," said John contemptuously. "I shouldn't know her if I met her. Chancellor, you are romantic!"

"Romantic?" demanded the astounded Minister, against whom such a charge had never been brought.

"Of course you are! You are for ever weaving stories and imagining tender situations! You have jumped to the conclusion that because the Duchess is eccentric she must necessarily be a desirable wife for me. You think, because she loves to move incognito, she would be a fit mate for one who is also keen on hiding his identity. I'll bet you've thought how wonderful it would be if I met her thus, and, ignorant of one another's identity, we fell in love!"

M. Goucouldis blinked.

"I have thought nothing so absurd, Highness," he said, and knew that he lied.

Since his charge turned the conversation in the direction of a race meeting he wished to attend, he did not return to the subject.

John went out before the Chancellor took his departure—otherwise the adventure might have had a different ending.

M. Goucouldis went into his own private suite to finish his preparations for the

reception, and there he found an agitated Chief of Sergovian Police. One glance at the sallow face of the man brought the Chancellor's heart into his mouth.

"Well, well," he snarled, "what is this bad news?"

"It is about the girl—the lady," stammered the officer.

"The girl he was talking with last night? Remember this, Sava, that His Serene Highness is a young man, and his flirtations are of no great consequence. I tell you this for fear you exaggerate the importance of any little recreation which His Highness may enjoy during his stay in this dismal city. Moreover, I seem to remember that you told me that they walked and they talked and they parted. That is how all flirtations should end, Sava—with a walk and a talk and a parting."

"I have traced the woman and her maid."

"If she had a maid with her, that is all the more proper," said Goucouldis. "Well—and having traced her, what do you find?"

"She is Mademoiselle Lemair," blurted the man.

For a second Goucouldis could not take in the awful 'significance of the discovery.

"Lemair?" he said incredulously. "Lemair? Which Lemair?"

"Sergius Lemair."

The Chancellor staggered back and held on to a chair for support.

"Sergius Lemair?" he croaked. "You're mad! You're trying to frighten me, you scoundrel!"

"Excellency, I swear that I have taken every care to learn the truth," pleaded the man. "She lives in a large flat in Cumberland Place, and her servant told me that her name was Lemair, and that she was the daughter of Sergius Lemair of Sergovia."

M. Goucouldis sat down heavily.

"This is terrible," he said, dry-lipped, "terrible! It is a plot! Oh, for one glimpse of Her Serene Highness the Duchess, for all her pranks and her shocks! Go quickly, find if His Highness has left the hotel, and ask him if I may wait upon him."

The Chief of Police departed, and returned with the announcement that Prince John had left a few minutes before.

All that happened on that afternoon seemed like a nightmare to the distracted diplomatist. It is said that he shook hands with a Foreign Office footman, and addressed a waiting chauffeur as "Your Grace." It seemed an eternity before the exigent rules of etiquette released him to hurry back to the hotel. The Prince had not returned, but ominous news came from his valet, who had been ordered to pack two suit-cases and reserve a compartment on the Continental Mail, which left that night.

At six o'clock came the Prince, flushed, exalted, bright-eyed. M. Goucouldis pulled himself together with an effort. He brought to his dissimulation the experience and training of a lifetime, and outwardly there was no evidence of the horror which consumed him when he knocked at the door of the Prince's suite and walked in, to greet his master with a profound bow.

"I have to tell Your Serene Highness that the Minister for Foreign Affairs was most sympathetic in regard to the question of our frontier, which will be adjusted... "

"I've got something to tell you of much more interest than the demarcation of our frontier," said John, "and I've a feeling that I'd better tell you without any preamble. Goucouldis, I was married this afternoon to the most beautiful woman in the world!"

The Chancellor's face was a mask.

"Your Highness has taken an extraordinary step, one which is not usual without conference with Your Highness's officers of state," he said.

"This is a matter which concerns me much more than my officers of state," said Prince John briefly.

His jaw was set, there was a look in his eyes which did not encourage the Chancellor's continuance; but Goucouldis had very much at stake, and princes to him were at best but pieces in a game.

"Your Highness is aware that, by the constitution of 1909, no marriage of the ruling Prince of Sergovia is recognised unless the marriage certificate bears my signature, or the signature of the chief officer of state, for the time being?"

The Prince looked at him oddly, took a cigarette from his case and lit it before he spoke.

"I am fairly well acquainted with the procedure," he said coolly. "But be that as it may, my marriage is irrevocable, and if the Diet does not accept—"

"It is not a question for the Diet, Your Highness," said the other suavely. "If I approve the marriage, the Diet approves. We are fortunate in possessing parliamentary institutions, even more fortunate in the fact that they count very

little."

Their eyes met.

"I am bringing my wife to dinner to-night, Goucouldis," said John quietly. "Whatever views you may have upon the wisdom or unwisdom of my marriage, I trust that you will not communicate your disapproval to the lady of my choice. She was a Mademoiselle Lemair."

"So I understand," he said quietly.

"Oh, you knew, did you?" The Prince laughed. "What a sly old devil you are! Isn't she lovely? Am I not the most fortunate man in the world!"

The Chancellor was thinking rapidly; all the resources of diplomacy were not yet exhausted. Mademoiselle Lemair, patently an adventuress, might prove a more tractable subject than her husband. Moreover, he had most thoughtfully provided for such a situation as this, for in the constitution it was decreed that, if an undesirable wife voluntarily renounced her husband (for a consideration not stated), the marriage was *ipso facto* annulled. The Chancellor was no seer, but he had had a long and bitter experience of the matrimonial adventures of Sergovian princes, and this clause in the constitution had been accepted without comment by other Sergovian statesmen, who remembered a certain dancing-woman, taken from a low cabaret and elevated to the throne, in the 'seventies.

"I shall be most happy to meet Her Highness," he said, almost pleasantly. "But at the same time I must ask permission to explain to her, in my own way, the consequences to Your Highness which must necessarily follow this act."

John looked at him suspiciously.

"If by any chance you are thinking of inducing her to sign a renunciation, you may save yourself a whole lot of trouble," he said.

The Chancellor spread out his hands in a gesture of self-depreciation.

"I am an old man, Highness," he said. "Surely it is within my province to give advice to those who are younger and more inexperienced?"

It was eight o'clock when the new bride arrived, a tall, radiant being, dressed a little more daringly than the old-fashioned Chancellor cared to see; a dark-eyed, smiling girl, who met the challenge of his glance without faltering.

"A snake," he said to himself; "a green-and-yellow snake!"

Yet he was most friendly and most deferential through the meal that followed. It was not until the end that John of Sergovia began to feel uneasy. He took the Chancellor aside.

"Is it necessary that you should see the Princess?" he asked. "We are leaving by the eleven o'clock train—"

"It is very necessary, Highness," said the old man sorrowfully; "necessary for your happiness and for the happiness of Her Highness."

She was a Lemair all right! The boldness of her, the ready wit of her, the mercenary cunning of Sergius Lemair's daughter were all too apparent. Perhaps she shared some other of her father's qualities. He was a man not unsusceptible to the influence of money—the Chancellors of Sergovia seldom are. His price would be high, his daughter's price even higher; but the house could stand even their exorbitant demands.

John went upstairs to change, and the girl and the old man were left alone, and he thought he saw her bracing herself for the coming struggle.

He walked to the door and closed it after the Prince, and then came slowly back to the writing-table, on the side of which she was sitting.

"Highness, I am a very plain man, with only one tongue. You must realise, both from your associations with your illustrious father, and your knowledge of my country, that this marriage is disastrous to Sergovia."

"I am not thinking of Sergovia," she said quietly. "Does it occur to you that I may really love the Prince?"

That possibility had not occurred to the Chancellor, and he dismissed such an unlikely factor with a wave of his hand.

"I will not tell you that it is my earnest desire, and the desire of my colleagues, that this marriage should be instantly dissolved," he said. "I am a plain man, as I remarked before, and I talk the language which is understandable in every country."

He took from his pocket a paper and laid it on the table. One glance told her that it was the carefully prepared renunciation which she had expected to see, and she laughed.

"You will sign this, Highness," said the Chancellor, "and you will name your own price."

She looked up from the paper to him.

"The gold isn't coined that would buy my signature," she said.

And then, in a softer tone:

"Do you realise what you are doing?" he mouthed.

"Very well indeed I understand," she said.

She walked to where she had left her bag, opened it, and took out a long slip of paper, which she brought back to the table and laid before him. He saw that it was her marriage certificate, so recently written that the ink had not yet darkened.

"Your name across that certificate would make our marriage legal," she said softly. "Am I not a desirable princess for the people of Sergovia, or must they have"—she spoke deliberately—"a young and unknown Duchess, rather freakish in her habits... rather inclined to shock... even hardened Chancellors, with her disguises and masquerades?"

He stared at her and gasped.

"What—what?" he stammered.

"I met your Prince by accident," she said. "I had no design, no intention, of making him love me or of loving him. It was one of those queer strokes of fate that cannot be accounted for.... I told him my name was Nita. And the fun of this very vulgar flirtation so appealed to me that—"

"You're the Duchess!" The trembling finger pointed at her almost in accusation. "What a fool I've been!... Romance, of course... you wanted to shock me, you—you—Your Highness!"

His trembling hand took up the pen, his signature scrawled across the marriage certificate. She blotted it carefully.

"Romance, of course!" he babbled on. "I ought to have known that something like that would have happened.... How wonderful! And to think that I was worrying my head because I couldn't arrange a meeting with the Duchess, and all the time she was arranging matters ever so much better than an old blunderer like myself could have done! It is wonderful!"

The telephone bell rang at that moment, and a well-known voice called Goucouldis.

"My friend, I have arranged that meeting for you with the Duchess. She is here —"

"Here!" shrieked Goucouldis. "You're mad! I beg your pardon, Highness. I mean... the Duchess is here."

"Then she's in two places at once," said the jovial voice.

The Chancellor dropped the receiver and turned his ashen face to the girl.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Marie Lemair," she said. "Didn't you read the marriage certificate?..."

why, Chancellor, I really believe that you are romantic after all!"

"Married . . . and approved!" he said hollowly.

"And your father..."

She nodded.

"Father will be pleased," she said, "and Sergovia will be pleased. Be a dear and say that you are pleased too."

But the Chancellor could say nothing.

## 2. — THE MAN WHO MARRIED HIS COOK

ONE afternoon in May, in such a season as the mind of youth turns upon tender matters, Professor Tremlow interrupted his study of *Dactylopterus volitans* and sat staring in his absent way at a piece of yellow paper outspread upon the desk before him.

He remained in this attitude for the greater part of ten minutes, then he rose, walked slowly across the threadbare carpet which covered the floor of his study, and gazed upon himself in the mirror which overhung the mantelpiece. Whether he remained staring at the lined face, the horn-rimmed spectacles, and the thin grey-shot beard for more than a second is doubtful. It happened that perched upon the frame was a peculiarly interesting specimen of May-fly. He did not think of this tiny stranger as a May-fly, but automatically placed it within the *pseudo-neuroptera* sub-order of *Orthoptera*.

He was back at his desk before he realised that he had not taken stock of himself, and sighed. He got up again and walked to the mantelpiece, forgot what he had risen for and pushed the bell which was embedded in the wall.

His one man-servant answered and found the professor with his short-sighted eyes glued to the treatise he was writing.

"You rang, sir?"

Professor Tremlow blinked up.

"Eh?" he said, startled. "What do you want, Thomas—William?"

"Ernest, sir," said the patient butler. "You rang?"

"Did I?" The professor sat up and screwed up his forehead. "Yes—yes—cook—tell the cook I want to see her."

"Certainly, sir," said Ernest, and went kitchenwards hoping.

"Wants *me*?" said Mary Ann, paling a little.

She was a plump, red-faced woman, with small eyes, and had kept her family for ten years on the overplus from the professor's kitchen. She had a conscience, it seemed, for there had been butchers' bills throughout Lent.

"It's my day out, too. How did he know I was back?"

"Gawd knows!" answered Ernest piously.

She slipped off her best coat and put an apron over her best skirt, patted her hair before the kitchen mirror, and pattered out.

"If Willie knew what I know about the grocer's account," said Ernest to the kitchen-maid, "he'd take that old geezer and kick her into the middle of next week."

The professor's name was William, and did Ernest but know, he was at that precise moment planning to kick his cook into the middle of next week—figuratively.

The professor swung round in his chair as the cook came in, the chair having been designed for such an operation, and he glared at Mary Ann Dobbs in so ferocious a manner that the poor woman had a cold feeling in her stomach and speculated frantically upon who had turned traitor. Was it the coalman or the religious Mr. Smith, the grocer? Such is the sceptic tendency of modern thought that she had unjustly condemned a good Christian man when the professor spoke.

"Er—Martha—" he began.

"Mary Ann, sir," smirked the cook apologetically.

"Oh yes, Mary Ann. I knew it was a Biblical name. Er—sit down, Mary Ann."

In all the ten years she had preyed upon the professor he had never asked her to sit down, and she obeyed quakingly.

"You have been with me several weeks now," he began. "When was it you came?"

"Ten years ago last February," said Mary Ann gently.

"Indeed, indeed," said the absent-minded professor. "Yes, of course, it was ten years ago."

He ruminated, looking down at his boots for some time, and then:

"Clara," he said, "I have decided to get married."

She gasped. That meant an end to all her forays and barratries.

"I have decided to get married," said the professor, in a tone of surprise, as though he had only just realised what a remarkable decision he had reached.

"I want somebody who is faithful to me, Alice—Clara, I mean."

"Mary Ann," murmured the cook faintly.

"Somebody who knows my ways," said the professor. "I am not a young man, I am not a rich man, Mary," he said, and added, "Ann" with an effort.

"No, sir," said the wondering Mary Ann.

"I cannot give you the—er—affection and demonstrations of affection which are peculiar to the youthful mammal."

"Me, sir?" Mary Ann got up, her mouth open, and the professor nodded.

"But I can give you my name. I can make you Mrs.—er—er—"

"Tremlow," squeaked Mary Ann, mouth and eyes at their widest.

"My lawyer shall come down—I have been trying all day to remember his name—and he shall fix—er—a mutual deed of gift. That will be—er—more satisfactory, Annie—Clara, I mean."

Mary Ann said nothing, but swallowed hard.

"I believe in community of interest," said the professor. "Er—that is all, Clara—" and he waved her out of existence.

Mary Ann went down to the kitchen like a woman in a dream and gave the kitchen-maid notice.

Next day came a lawyer who fixed deeds of gift and settlements, bestowing upon the Mrs. Tremlow-to-be one-half of the professor's fortune, amounting to nearly £500, some well-worn furniture, and his copyrights in three volumes dealing with the science of Zootomy.

She, for her part, gave him a half-right in two silk dresses, certain other articles of wear, a cameo brooch and two gold drop ear-rings, and such other property as she might acquire.

They were married by a horrified cure of souls, and Ernest gave the professor away. He would have preferred giving the new Mrs. Tremlow away.

A week later, despite his attachment to the house and fortune of Professor Tremlow, Ernest came to the professor's study and asked for his wages. Mechanically the professor paid him a full month, not realising that he had paid him a full month only the week before.

"I'm going, sir," said Ernest, with a tremor in his voice.

"That's right; shut the door," said the professor.

"I am leaving your employment, sir," said Ernest.

Professor Tremlow looked round in astonishment. If Ernest had said that he was developing into a chrysalis, the professor would not have been astonished, because such things happen.

"Going, Thomas?" he said mildly. "Going to leave me, Thomas?"

"Yes, sir," said Ernest, not troubling to correct his master. "I can't stand the missus."

The professor looked at him over his spectacles and through his spectacles. He lifted his glasses to his forehead and looked at him under his spectacles. Then he sighed and turned to the table.

"She's a good cook, Thomas; a very good cook. I think you will admit that?"

"She's roasted us all right," said Ernest bitterly.

"You must be patient—er—I don't know your name—you must be patient, William, isn't it? She's a woman of character, is Mary Ann—er—I'm married to her? You should study patience; study the bees, Thomas!"

Ernest choked.

"She's a proper bee, she is," he said, with a trace of venom. "She's made this 'ive 'um."

"Well, it's a great pity—a very great pity—Snellgrove is your name, isn't it?"

"Marshall, sir—Ernest Marshall."

The professor nodded.

"I knew it was something to do with tobacco."

And then it was that Mrs. Tremlow flounced in, and Mrs. Tremlow, at the sight of Ernest, trembled with wrath.

"What are you nosing and prying around my 'usband for?" she demanded.

"I have come for my wages, madam," replied Ernest, emphasising the "madam" so that it was almost an offensive word.

Her little eyes screwed up till they were almost invisible.

"You're leaving, eh? A lady can't go into her own kitchen but the servants give notice." She jerked her thumb to the door. "Push off!" said Mrs. Tremlow, and

followed him to the door. "Go 'ome and take your mother out of the workhouse!" she advised him humorously. "If I had a face like yours, I'd have the gas cut off."

The professor, roused by voices pitched higher than the ordinary, turned.

"Are you saying good-bye, my love?" he asked.

Mrs. Tremlow had come stalking back, fists on hips, triumphant.

"My brother is coming to-day," she said brusquely, and rather wondered how he would take the news.

Professor Tremlow accepted the tidings in the same spirit as he would have accepted the news that there was a rainbow in the sky or that a flight of locust had fallen upon the kitchen garden.

"How interesting!" he said vaguely. "So you have a brother, and I think you told me you had a mother too! That's remarkable."

He took up his pen and wrote a few words, and she watched him in silence.

"Look here," she said desperately. "Willie!"

"Willie?" said the professor in amazement.

"That's your name, isn't it?" she was not quite sure of herself.

"Yes, I think it is," said the professor; "but you may continue to call me Mr. Tremlow as heretofore."

She seated herself upon the identical chair on which she had received the marriage proposal.

"I can't make you out," she said. "Of course, I know these things happen in books, Willie—Mr. Tremlow—a gentleman marrying beneath himself, so to speak—but I don't understand why you married your cook."

"Ah yes," nodded the professor; "a very good cook."

"Mind you," said Mrs. Tremlow, "I'm not expecting you to gush over my relations. They ain't the kind of people you would gush over, anyway; but Tom's a very nice-spoken young feller, and you needn't see him if you don't want to."

The professor did not reply. He had reached the interesting stage in his monograph on *Chocrocampa tersa* where the caterpillar develops into the *pupae suspensae*, which is analogous to that stage in the cinema film where the murderer is discovered to be, not the masked butler, but the bishop, whom nobody suspected, except the people who had seen the film before.

She had other things to say about her relations, for she felt it wise to prepare him for Tom, who had not reached the stage of sartorial refinement where he was prepared to abandon his variegated choker and adopt the white dicky of civilisation. But she missed her chance.

A tall man was ushered into the room by the new housemaid, and he greeted Mrs. Tremlow with that geniality which is part of the stock-in-trade of the family lawyer.

"Well, Mrs. Tremlow," he said, with a smile, "you are settling down, I see. Have you got quite used to the new life?"

The professor turned his head.

"Bless my life, Still!" he said, and looked at his watch. "It's half- past five, and you said you weren't coming until Tuesday. You know my cook?"

"Your wife, Willie," said Mrs. Tremlow, with gentle savagery.

"Yes, yes," said the professor hastily. "My wife, to be sure."

"I have met you lots of times, Mrs. Tremlow," said Still, putting down his bag and snapping open the catch.

Mary Ann smiled archly.

"You're the gentleman who used to like my apple fritters," she said.

"A very good cook," murmured the professor, his pen poised in his hand.

"I see I am not going to get anything out of you," laughed Still, and walked to the long French windows which afforded a view of the professor's restricted demesne.

"I suppose you were surprised, Mr. Still," Mary Ann joined him and lowered her voice, though there seemed no necessity for this precaution. "It was a bit of a surprise to me."

"I expect it was," said Still, who had been concerned in so many divorce cases, criminal conspiracies, and actions to restrain nuisances that he was surprised at nothing.

Mary Ann coughed, feeling that her own condescension called for a word of approval.

"He's a bit old in the tooth, you understand, Mr. Still, but I've lost a lot of chances through being too particular."

Mr. Still was staring out into the garden.

"Your husband is under sixty," he protested in a spirit of loyalty to his client.

"His father lived to eighty-nine and his grandfather was ninety- three when he was killed in a wrestling match."

Mrs. Tremlow's jaw dropped.

"You're a ray of sunshine, ain't you?" she said, and Still laughed.

"He is very much in love with you, isn't he, Mrs. Tremlow?" he asked, as he began to sort out the contents of his bag.

Mary Ann sniffed.

"I wouldn't say that. You see, it is a sort of morganatic marriage."

"A what?" asked the startled lawyer.

"I mean," said Mrs. Tremlow, whose knowledge of the English language was hazy, "he might be Johnny Morgan, so far as I am concerned."

Still shot a swift glance toward the bowed head of the professor, and Mary Ann sniffed again.

"Oh, don't worry about him," she said. "When he gets into his books, he's as deaf as a bat."

"I'm rather glad of that, Mrs. Tremlow, for I want to speak very plainly. May I?"

"Plain speaking is my vice," said Mary Ann truthfully.

"Well, I'm going to be frank," the lawyer was half serious and half humorous. "I have known you led the professor a—er—well, not the cheeriest of lives as his cook. When I came down here two years ago to look into his affairs, I found that you had been systematically—er—"

"Say overcharging him," said Mary Ann placidly. "It sounds better. Well, I admit that. A girl has got to look after herself in this world, Mr. Still, and I hadn't any idea that I was going to get my chance. A girl throws away lots of opportunities."

"A girl," said the puzzled Mr. Still. "What girl are you talking about?"

"Me," said Mrs. Tremlow, with some asperity.

"Oh yes, I suppose so. You used to twist him rather round your finger, Mrs. Tremlow."

Mrs. Tremlow smiled proudly.

"And yet," mused the lawyer, "he knew this and married you?"

Mary Ann drew a long breath.

"Well," she said, "love's a funny thing."

Mr. Still scratched his chin.

"He hasn't shown any other form of—er—I mean he hasn't been hearing voices at night or acted strangely in any way?"

"What do you mean?" demanded the bridling Mary Ann. "If you mean to suggest that my husband is off his rocker—pardon the vulgarity—daft—"

"I don't mean anything of the sort," the lawyer was balancing a paper in his hand. "Here is the deed of gift, Mrs. Tremlow, a fair copy, whereby he transfers half his property and fortune, which by the way amounts to very little, to you. Was that your idea?"

"Well, it was and it wasn't," Mrs. Tremlow was on safe ground. "He's a bit near, Mr. What-d'ye-call-it, you understand. A bit difficult to get money out of, so I didn't object when he made over his bit of property to me. Being a lady now," she coughed, "I've got to live up to my station, if you understand, and he's that absentminded he would see me walking about the house without anything on and take no notice."

"That is his salvation," said the lawyer earnestly. "I mean his—er—ability to abstract himself from the humdrum mundane affairs of life and bury himself in science."

He laid his hand on the professor's shoulder.

"Mr. Tremlow," he said, and the professor looked up with a start.

"Hello, Still," he said. "When did you come?"

Mrs. Tremlow made a clucking noise with her tongue to express her good-natured tolerance.

"Here are the deeds we settled the other day. This is your wife's, which she had better keep, and this is yours, in which she transfers half her property to you. You quite understand that you have given over to Mrs. Tremlow half your worldly possessions. You will see the schedule attached."

"Yes, yes," said the professor, glancing at the paper and thrusting it into a pigeon-hole. "Good-bye, Still. I hope you have a pleasant voyage."

The lawyer shifted uncomfortably.

"My train doesn't go for an hour," he said.

"I'm sure it doesn't," said the courteous professor, applying himself again to his paper. "Trains never do go for an hour."

Still shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"All right, then, I'll go along," he said. "Good-bye, Mrs. Tremlow."

"Good-bye, love," said the professor.

"Ain't he the most absent-minded man you ever saw in your life?" asked Mary Ann, in tones of admiration as she stood upon the front-door step of the house. "He's always telling me to be careful how I cross the road because it's so dark. He don't know the war's started, let alone over."

Still offered his hand.

"I think you ought to have a very quiet and peaceful life, Mrs. Tremlow," he said. "I don't think you will have a very luxurious life, because the professor's income is not as large as it was."

"We'll manage," replied Mrs. Tremlow determinedly, meaning thereby that she, at any rate, would manage.

He walked down the flagged path to the garden gate and collided with a young man who was coming in. He was a burly young man in a ready-made suit, and his hair, as the lawyer saw, for in the collision the stranger's hat had been knocked off, was parted symmetrically in the middle, so that one long but well-plastered curl dipped over his forehead and then, as though repenting its rashness, curled backward to his almost shaven head.

"Whinecherlookwhereyagoin?" said the young man rapidly, and Mr. Still, who understood the language, for his practice had extended even to the lower courts of judicature, replied courteously after his kind.

At the sight of the newcomer Mrs. Tremlow had come rapidly down the three steps from the door.

"Why, Tom?" she said, holding out her hand. "Well, I am glad to see you. How did you leave mother?"

"She's all right," said Tom in a tone of disgust, as though the matter of his mother's good health were a sore point with him. "I want—" began Tom.

"Come and see my husband, Professor Tremlow," said Mary Ann, shivering with pride. "He's a real gentleman, Tom, though he's a bit over the age limit."

She dragged the reluctant young man into the study, and it happened that the mind of the professor was momentarily disengaged.

"Willie, this is my brother Tom." She introduced the young man with a certain defiance.

"Your—er—brother? Glad to see you. Sit down, will you? Have you any

sisters?"

Mrs. Tremlow looked sidelong and significantly at her relative.

"Absent-minded," she whispered.

"So you're married?" said Tom, who was a slow thinker and on whom the news had just dawned.

"Married? Of course I'm married," said Mary Ann with a toss of her head. "I sent you a bit of the wedding-cake."

A light broke in upon Tom, whose other name was Dobbs.

"Oh, that's what it was!" he said ungraciously. "But what did you get married to him for? Did you get my telegram?"

"Well, he's better than nothing," said Mary Ann tartly, "and I didn't get your telegram."

Tom looked at the professor who had resumed his work.

"Don't take any notice of him," said Mrs. Tremlow, lowering her voice. "He don't belong to this world in a manner of speaking, though from what I've heard from his lawyer to-day—" she shook her head.

"Well," said Tom grudgingly, "I don't think you've done a bad thing. After all, you had to marry a gentleman of position, and I don't know any other gentleman of position who would have married you, with your disposition."

"Don't you say anything against the professor, Tom," said Mrs. Tremlow virtuously. "As soon as I was married he handed over half his property to me and I handed over half of mine to him, so you might call it a love match."

"I might and I might not," said the careful Tom.

He was a slow thinker, as has been remarked before, and suddenly he rose and clasped his forehead.

"You gave him half yours?" he said in a hollow voice.

"Yes. What's up?" asked the alarmed Mrs. Tremlow.

"When did you marry?" said Tom in a deep-set voice.

"Last Friday."

"And last Wednesday I sent him a wire," emotion prevented his continuing for a moment, "asking him," he went on, "to break the news to you that old Uncle Joe in Australia had died and left you £100,000. You was always his favourite, Mary Ann."

Mrs. Tremlow grasped the window for support. The room spun round and round, and then her shaking knees brought her to her husband's side.

"Willie," she said, and her voice was very shrill and squeaky, "he sent you a wire telling you I was worth £100,000!"

The professor looked at her and looked at her brother, then he looked at his boots, and then he looked at the ceiling, and then he scratched his nose.

"Dear, dear," he said, in a tone of surprise. "Yes, yes, I remember."

"But you—you didn't tell me," wailed his wife. "No, I didn't," admitted the professor. "Absent-minded, my love, absent-minded. Take your brother down to the kitchen and give him a good time, Mary Ann. You know the way."

### 3. — MR. SIGEE'S RELATIONS

MR. ALBERT SIGEE'S attitude toward his lawless relations is one which has been a source of constant puzzlement to me.

I know that he regards their peculiar brilliancy with something akin to pride. I know, too, that he retails the exploits of his innumerable brothers, cousins, and uncles with that modest reserve which may be taken as a sign of approval, yet, notwithstanding these indications of his goodwill, I have never yet met, in the little bird and beast shop over which Mr. Sigee presides, a single member of the family other than Albert himself.

It would seem that ample opportunity exists, did Mr. Sigee desire to employ an odd man or so. Were he fired with the reformer's zeal, and anxious to provide honest, if casual employment for his larcenous relatives, he might set their minds on the dignity of labour, at little cost to himself. For there are bird-cages to be mended, hutches to be manufactured, aquaria to be tended, dogs to be cleaned, and a thousand-and-one odd tasks to be performed.

"Relations are best apart," said Mr. Sigee philosophically. (I had ventured to question him on the matter and this was his answer.)

"I've got an uncle," he went on carefully, scraping his short clay pipe—"when I say uncle, he's a sort of first husband to my Aunt Bella—who's one of them fellers that's all for harmony. One of the pleasantest chaps the police have ever had to deal with is my uncle— Mr. Downs, the inspector, told me so hisself.

"S'pose a couple of splits call at his 'ouse one night about twelve.

"Down comes his daughter Em, with a shawl over her, an' opens the door.

"'Hullo, Emma!' sez the chief split; 'father in?'

"'Yes, sir,' sez Em, 'want him?'

"'Yes, Emma,' sez the split, an' in they go, into the old man's room, sleepin' away as peaceful as a perfec' angel.

"He wakes up an' sees the splits.

"'Good evenin',' he sez, as polite as can be; 'd'you want me, Mr. Simmonds?'

"'A little matter of a pony an' cart wot was left outside the "Blue Lion ",' sez the split.

"'Oh, that? ' sez my uncle, gettin' up an' dressin'. 'I thought it was somethin' serious.'

"All the time he's dressin' he's as polite an' talkative as possible.

"'I'm afraid I've kep' you out of bed,' he sez. 'I wish I'd known; I'd have walked round to the station an' explained matters. Em,' he sez, 'send my breakfast round to the station to-morrer, an' if I'm put away, see that I get my tea before the van goes—six o'clock, ain't it, Mr. Simmonds?'

"'Five,' sez the split; 'five o'clock when the Black Maria goes.'

"'You surprise me,' sez my uncle; 'what changes we see goin' on all round, don't we, Mr. Simmonds?'

"'Hurry up, father,' sez Em; 'I'm gettin' cold.'

"It got to be quite a sayin' in the 'R' division that a child could take Ropey—that was my uncle's name at the time—an' they used to give the job to a young split who wanted gentle practice.

"He used to go so quietly that some of my cousins thought he wasn't quite right in the head, an' when he came out after doin' six muns for a ladder larceny, they got up a sort of friendly lead to get him enough to go away into the country. They arst me to go, an' I went—that's why I say relations are better apart.

"The friendly lead was held in a little pub called 'The Frozen Artichoke,' in Camden Town, an' my brother Ern got some cards printed. 'Many can help one, but one can't help many,' the card sez, an' asked one an' all to rally round George Ropey (better known as 'Ginger'), who had recently suffered a severe bereftment. What they didn't put on the card, an' what they might have put, was: 'One can't help many, but he can help hisself.'

"For they helped theirselves pretty handily to a silver watch an' chain that was give me by a seafarin' man in liquor.

"I won't go so far as to say that any of my relations did the 'click,' but a few days after that my father got run for bein' in possession of a silver watch an' chain, an' not bein' able to give an account of where he got it from.

"I was, in a manner of speakin', tore between love an' duty, for if I claimed the watch, I'd own up to my father bein' a thief; an' if I didn't, he'd get a month.

"'Honour thy father,' sez I to myself, so I let him do the month. I'd have let him do six munse.

"Well, to go on about my uncle with the gentlemanly manner:

"About a year ago he come roun' to see me about Emma. She's a nice perky little girl, an' she knows just about as much as most respectable people know when they get to be a hundred.

"'Bert,' sez my uncle, 'I've been thinkin' about Em. She's a good girl.'

"'You've been thinkin' too deep,' I sez; 'in fact, you've been dreamin'!'

"'She's a good girl,' he sez, very firm, 'an' she'll make some man a good wife.'

"'I dessay,' I sez; 'it's not for me to deny miracles.'

"'What do you say?' he sez.

"'Nothin',' I sez, 'except if I happen to see a likely chap goin' cheap I'll buy him—there's nothin' in the monkey-house just now except the baby chimpanzee, an' it struck me he was feelin' lonely.'

"'What do you say to yourself?' he sez.

"'My prayers mostly,' I sez, 'an' my private opinion of me pore relations.'

"'Plain and plump,' sez Uncle Ropey, 'will you marry my girl?'

"'Not,' I sez, 'so long as I keep from drink and am responsible for my actions.'

"'Well, lend us a shillin',' sez my Uncle Ropey, an' we parted good friends—me an' the shillin'.

"I didn't see him again for a week or more, an' then him an' young Ern came in to see me.

"'Thought we'd look you up, Bert,' sez my brother. 'I don't think brothers ought to lose touch of each Other,' he sez.

"'No more do I,' I sez; 'but if you've come to touch me, it's me early closin' day, an' I've just paid the rent.'

"Ern said he'd got a chance of makin' a couple of quid honest on a profitable deal, an' all he wanted was half a sovereign for stock money.

"'What race does it run in?' I sez. I've lent stock money to Ern before now, an' seen the profitable deal stop to kick at the wrong side of the winnin' post. But Ern took his oath that this was real toil-and-trouble business, buyin' and sellin' a horse.

"'I can get it for half a sovereign,' he sez; 'it belongs to a butcher who thinks it's got spavins.'

"He was so serious about it an' told me so much about this butcher, an' the butcher's brother who got married to a girl down in Essex, an' what sort of a house the butcher lived in when he was at home, that I parted with the ten.

"I was a bit surprised the next day, when Ern came back an' brought the money back in silver an' offered me a couple of shillin's interest. But I'm not the sort of feller to take interest from a brother, so I sold him a chaffinch for the two bob—it was worth two bob to a man who likes birds that don't sing.

"A few days after that him an' Uncle Ropey came again. It 'appens they'd seen a kind of cart that they could buy for a pound an' sell for three pounds, an' would I be so kind?

"I noticed that when they come the second time they stood at the door an' did most of their talkin', an' I had to ask 'em to come in, because I didn't want my shop to get a bad name.

"Although this place is only a little 'un, I do a big trade, an' it's a poor day when I don't take a couple of pounds, an' so I had the money to hand over.

"Next day, punctual to the minute, they brought back the money—eight half-crowns—an' asked me to have a drink.

"Three days later I saw Ern walk past the shop very quick, an' I gave him a bit of a nod, an' he sort of hesitated.

"He didn't come in, but stood outside.

"'How's business?' sez Ern.

"'So-so,' I sez; 'where's uncle?'

"'He's round the comer,' sez Ern, very eager; 'he's talkin' to a man about a set of 'arness he wants to buy—the chap won't take less than two pounds, but I know where we can sell it for five.'

"'Go an' see how he's got on,' I sez, an' away he nipped, an' presently back he come with Uncle Ropey.

"'It's all right, Bert,' sez Ern; 'we can get it for two—can you lend us the money?'

"So I fished out two sov'reigns, an' Ern had tears in his eyes when he took 'em.

"'You're a true brother, Bert,' he sez, 'an' you've helped me to get an honest livin'—honesty's the best policy,' he sez; 'ain't it, uncle?'

"'Yes,' sez Uncle Ropey. 'I've always said that Bert was the pick of the bunch.'

"They went away tellin' me how I'd saved 'em from sinkin' to the level of the rest of the family.

"About eleven o'clock Em come an' knocked me up.

"'Father's pinched,' she sez, 'an' so's young Ern.'

"'What for?' I sez.

"'For passin' counterfeit gold,' she sez; 'two Sovereigns.'

"She shook her head very disgusted.

"'It's father's own fault,' she sez, 'an' it comes of not keepin' his word. He said he was goin' to pass all the snide money on to a mug—borrer a good sovereign and return eight snide half-crowns and let the mug do the circulatin' act.

"'What surprises me,' she sez, 'is their tryin' to pass gold. Dad always works silver—he gets it from a man in Middlesex Street.

"'Where d'ye think he got the bad quids from?' she asked.

"'I dunno,' I sez; 'probably from the mug.'"

#### **4. — THE KNIGHT WHO COULD NOT KNEEL**

DANIEL GREE was grey and old and broken.

May Excels was young and beautiful. This is a bald claim, yet such a claim could be made with greater detail and less accuracy. Of her nose one had the vaguest recollection, which is as it should be. A woman whose nose one remembers is not beautiful. She may be pretty, piquant, and saucy, noble and commanding, but if you remember her nose she is not beautiful. Her eyes were big and lustrous, violet of hue; her hair jet black, and her eyebrows painted by Nature when the good lady was in her finicking miniature mood. She was so, I say, radiant and beautiful, and Daniel Gree was grey and old and broken.

How dare he lift his eyes to her? As a matter of absolute fact he did not lift his eyes at all, for he was on the hefty side of six feet, and she was just the right height for a girl, which is about your size.

He was grey and old and—

Well, he was nearly twenty-six, and in certain lights the hair at his temples was almost greyish.

And as for being broken, would not you be broken if you loved the daughter of a millionaire and she loved you, and her father, with a passion for titles, had his eye on the scion of a noble house as a prospective son-in-law?

"I can't stand it, May," said Daniel Gree desperately. "I feel that if I'm not made a duke in a month or two I shall go really grey. I am old and broken—"

"And stout?" she suggested.

"No, not stout," he denied indignantly. "I am just old and grey and broken."

"I expect that is why it is," she said thoughtfully, "father thinks the disparity in our ages is too great."

"Why!" he gasped, "there is only five years between us. When I said 'old,'" he went on carefully, "I was referring rather to the care-harrowed soul than to the arithmetical standard of years. May, what am I to do?"

They were sitting on a bench in Hyde Park, and her pretty forehead was puckered with the tremendous character of the problem.

"If you could only earn a title, Danny," she said, "I am sure father wouldn't mind your humble birth"—she arrested his exasperated protestation—"you see, dear, father was a foundryman before Mr. Carnegie made him a millionaire, and grandfather used to peddle laces, so naturally pa is rather particular. I don't think he'd mind your being the son of a clergyman, because he's really awfully broad-minded, but you're so terribly American."

"My great-great-grandfather was on Washington's staff," he said, with a hint of gloom.

"I shouldn't mention that," she said gently; "not to father, anyway. One has to live these things down. Now, if your father had made his appearance in New York about the same time that the Archduke Orth disappeared—"

"Who's he, anyway?" he grumbled.

"The Archduke Orth was, or is, the relative of the Austrian Emperor," she recited, "who, having incurred the displeasure of his parents, sailed for a foreign land. It is believed by some that the ship on which he sailed was sunk, but authentic evidence exists that he reached American soil."

Daniel Gree looked at the girl suspiciously. "Where did you learn this little piece?" he asked rudely, for he loved her and there was no necessity for

conventional politeness.

"Miss Zimmerberger taught me that," she said, "when I was at the Pittsbury Preparatory College."

He was silent, then : "We Moors of old Castile—" he began bitterly.

"Moors?"

"Moor or less," he said gloomily, "we are descended from Christopher Columbus."

"He wasn't a Castilian," she scorned; "he was an Italian!"

His eyes met hers in pained reproach.

"Didn't I say 'descended'?" he asked, with exemplary patience. "Dearie, let us think these things out. Maisie," he said, looking down at her tenderly, "I've reached that stage of love where I cannot live without you. I know it is absurd," he went on; "I know that life will go on as heretofore even if you are snatched from me by the rapacious hands of Fate; that I shall stand on the corner and watch your wedding cortege depart for Paris without batting a lid—I didn't take a degree in Philosophy for nothing."

She looked at him gravely.

I feel the same," she said. "If papa forces me to marry that dreadful Baron—"

"Count," he corrected.

"There are two," she said. "I was thinking more of the Baron because he is the least objectionable; besides, he does parlour tricks and can produce a rabbit out of a tall hat at a moment's notice. One would never be quite bored with him if one kept a silk hat handy, and oh! he can smash eggs in a paper bag and produce guinea-pigs."

"Ah!" the young man nodded, "an evolutionist."

"Where was I?" she went on. "Oh yes, I remember—I say, if I am forced to marry either, I shall be heart-broken—I am perfectly certain I shall do something dreadful... cry, and all that sort of thing."

"Will you, really?"

His voice implied doubt.

"Of course I shall!" she said indignantly; "do you think I am heartless?"

He made no reply.

Side by side they paced the path, patterned with shifting arabesques of light.

"Why don't you get a title?" she asked suddenly. "You can easily find one here in England—it would be splendid!"

She clapped her hands gleefully, but awoke no responsive spark of enthusiasm.

"I'd have to become English," he said, "and it isn't so easy. Now, in Italy I could buy the Red of High Resolve for the price of a taxi fare."

She shook her pretty head.

It must be English," she said, with a definite air. "Daddy is just mad on real titles, and the Baron's chance would die the death before the glory of Sir Daniel Gree! Doesn't it sound lovely?" she demanded, with shining eyes. "Oh, Danny, *do* try!"

They were in an unfrequented part of the Park, amidst trees that offered some sort of privacy. The awakening vigour of spring was in her blood, the bursting green of the trees, the call of the wild fowl on the little lake, the very wildness of life in her heart.

Suddenly she raised two hands and laid them upon his shoulders.

"My boy!" she whispered, as she lifted her warm lips to his.

"Mark me down as a duke," he trembled, as he left her at the Park gate, "and be careful of your skirt the next time you see me, for I shall be wearing my knightly spurs."

Daniel Gree was a man with a large imagination. He was a dreamer of dreams, and in moments when finance did not absorb his attention (he was the London representative of a great American Finance Corporation) he was highly romantic.

Now the imaginative man has a pull over all other types of men in that he is bound by no earthly ties and is chained to no age or clime.

Picture Daniel a perfectly dressed young man, with the shiniest of silk hats and the best fitting of morning coats, striding along the Mall, swinging his ebony stick. An ordinarily pleasant-looking young man deep in thought, you guess, and place him in the category of thinkers who are deciding whether it shall be a devilled sole at Simpson's or a chop at the Charlton Grill. Yet, at that precise moment, Daniel has a sword strapped to his side and a white topee on his head.

He is facing a horde of Phillipinos with flashing eyes, or rescuing a beautiful lady from the clutches of an Arab slaver. Or, influenced by the latest book he has read, he is a calm commissioner holding palaver with his unruly cannibals.

"I am perfectly certain," said Daniel to his unimaginative broker that morning, "that one of these days I am going to have an adventure which will alter the whole course of my life."

"Run over by a motor bus or something?" asked Joyson.

"An adventure," continued the enthusiastic Daniel, "which, in the flash of an eye, will change my whole status, will introduce me to another sphere of action, change my outlook on life, and all that sort of thing."

"I suppose you will," agreed the other. "I've often thought you'd get married sooner or later."

"Your views on life," said the exasperated Daniel, "are appallingly commonplace."

"I'm a commonplace man," admitted the other placidly; "in the city we deal with realities—"

But Daniel waved him to the devil in one comprehensive gesture. It was not a morning for business. He dealt with two urgent letters, and an hour after his arrival in his office he was returning westward.

A pale sun shone through the misty blue of a London sky, and the branches of the trees which tinged the embankment were just speckled with green. The flower-beds in Temple Gardens were yellow with crocus and daffodil, and there was in the air the electrical magic of spring, and Daniel's heart sang a wild barbaric song, which careless youth and healthy manhood can alike interpret, and which May Excels might equally have understood. The spirit carried him through the day; it brought in the trail of its splendour fragmentary visions in which he figured heroically; it enlarged his love of humanity and brought for him the adventure which would not come, yet which, with every passing moment of time, seemed the more inevitable.

He was passing New Scotland Yard when a man came hurrying out.

"Sorry," said the stranger, disentangling himself.

He was a big florid man, jovially stern of demeanour, and his attitude of politeness was tinctured with authority.

"Hullo," said Daniel curiously, "where the devil are you going in such a hurry?"

The stranger held out a big hand.

"Mr. Gree, isn't it?" he asked.

"Gree it is," agreed the other. "Is it murder, bank robbery, or the activity of the

Woman's Suffrage Party which hastens the laggard feet of law?"

Detective Superintendent Mosser smiled.

"I am trying to catch 1.18 for Newbank," he said.

They had met on more occasions than one, for it was part of Daniel's business to check the circulation of illicit bonds which were at that time in circulation in Europe, and such work brought him into touch with the heads of the police department.

"And what is happening at Newbank?"

The detective explained. A new hospital was to be opened by His Royal Highness the Prince of Midlothian. His Highness journeying down from Yorkshire would stop at Newbank Station, would receive an address of welcome on the platform from the Mayor and Corporation of Newbank, would press an electric button which would open the doors of the new hospital at Canbury—a town some five miles away.

"And you will be there—how wonderful," said the admiring Daniel. "I suppose nothing would happen if you failed to turn up?"

The genial police officer smiled. Then he groped into an inside pocket.

"It will be interesting in a way," he said, as he pulled out a card. "I mean, to an American—you'll see a man knighted—the fellow that gave the hospital—if you'd like to see it I can give you an admission to the platform."

"Is that a ticket?" asked Daniel quickly. "Yes—I'd like to go," he went on, as he grasped the pasteboard and looked awe-stricken upon its prim surface. "To what does this entitle me? Not to a knighthood—gee! Don't say it does!"

"It entitles you to refreshments," said the practical servant of law. "You ought to catch the 2.15 to be in time—good morning."

Daniel watched the departing figure, saw it suddenly stop and walk slowly back. There was a puzzled frown on the detective's face.

"Gree?" he said.

"Mr. Gree," corrected Daniel reproachfully.

"I'm not thinking about you—I suppose you're not related to *the* Gree?"

"I'm him," said Daniel, without regard to the niceties of grammar. "There is only one real Gree, all other Grees being spurious imitations. Look for the Gree label, without which none are genuine. I will injunct any unauthorised Gree with great severity—who is *the* Gree?"

"It doesn't matter," said the unsatisfying Mr. Mosser, and went off with rapid steps, remembering that N.W.R. expresses wait for no man.

Daniel looked at the ticket, then he stole a furtive glance at a little portrait which he carried as near his heart as made no difference.

"If I can't be a knight, at least I can learn how they are made," said he firmly; and after a hasty lunch he boarded the 2.15.

Newbank, in the language of the local reporter, was *en fête*. It was *en fête* in italics and *en fête* in the black headlines of the *Newbank County Chronicle*.

Flags were flying in the streets, and the station platform was a blaze of bunting and gilt-work. Flowers real and flowers so artfully artificial that you could not distinguish them from real unless you had paid for them were "displayed in lavish yet ordered confusion" (I look over the shoulder of Mr. Mansem, reporter-in-chief to aforesaid *County Chronicle*, and quote him word for word as he writes so busily in the waiting-room), and the precincts of the little station were alive with notable people in their most notable clothes.

Daniel, feeling terribly commonplace amidst such magnificence, had the foresight to hunt up the reporter.

"Say, Bud," said Daniel, dropping his hand upon the scribe's shoulder, "put me wise to the programme."

Mr. Mansem, a fierce young man in gold-mounted spectacles, glared up at his interrupter.

"You'll find the programme in the paper." He jerked his head to an open sheet on the table.

"Son," said Daniel gently, "before I became a degraded financier I was a newspaper boy—just like you; doing stunts at three cents a line, and never failing to describe a strawyard blaze as 'a holocaustic and terrifying conflagration.'"

Mr. Mansem looked at him with a new interest.

"It's a hospital five miles away—eccentric sort of devil built it—there he is."

The waiting-room opened out into a smaller room into which only first-class passengers were admitted (so said the laconic legend on the door), but through the glass panels of which the occupants of the common or third-class room might view their betters without extra charge. The smaller saloon was beautified by the addition of palms and flags. There was, too, a draped pedestal, and on that was the electric switch with which, by the pressure of his august finger, His Royal Highness would unseal the distant hospital.

The solitary occupant of the room at that moment was a shy-looking man, with ragged whiskers and an antiquated frock-coat, who looked horribly ill at ease.

"I'm about the only person here who knows him," the reporter went on. "He hates this business—a sort of recluse, y'know, but immensely wealthy."

"Is he the man who is to be knighted?" asked Daniel keenly.

The reporter nodded.

"He doesn't want to be," he said simply; "he just told me he hates the idea of kneeling—he has rheumy knees or something."

Didn't want to be knighted! Daniel raised his eyes to heaven. Here was a gentleman—for a gentleman he was, undoubtedly, despite his whiskers—who had an opportunity for which Daniel would have cheerfully paid one-half his fortune.

There he stood, that impious man, with honour hovering above him and he didn't want—

"I'm going to have a chat with him," said Daniel resolutely.

The reporter looked alarmed.

"Be careful; Gree is an awful bear—" he began.

"Gree?"

Daniel gasped.

"Don't tell me his name is Gree—what is his front name?"

"Dan Gree," said the other.

In two strides Daniel was across the room. In two more he was through the door and confronting the confused philanthropist.

"My name is Gree," he said rapidly. "I believe we're related—one of my ancestors emigrated to England at the time of the *Mayflower*; he didn't want to be mixed up with the Pilgrim Fathers—how are you?"

He shook hands desperately with elder Gree; he talked him silent, giving his namesake no chance to disclaim relationship. The antiquated Mr. Gree found himself on terms of confidence before he realised that he had even met this pushful stranger.

"I wish I could get out of it," he said, apropos of the coming trial. "I can't tell you how horrible I feel; I hate crowds.... I think I shall faint... when he comes. Besides, I can't kneel"—he rubbed his knees aggressively—"I've got a twinge of rheumatism and I shall look a fool—oh, confound it!"

"Remember," said Daniel solemnly, "that your cousin is by you to help you up—and if you only introduce me to His Royal Highness, I shall ask no other reward for my service."

From outside came the far-away "bang!" of fog signal. In this simple and inexpensive manner did Newbank salvo royalty.

"My heaven!" said old Gree fretfully, "here comes that damned train!"

He looked round hopelessly for some means of escape. There was a door giving way to the station courtyard and the key was in the lock.

"I can't stand it!" wailed the recluse. "I didn't expect this when I built the infernal hospital. I can't kneel—and I won't kneel!"

He tried the door furtively, snapped back the lock, and peered cautiously forth. The courtyard was deserted, for the public had chosen places of vantage where they might secure a better view of majesty.

His Royal Highness, a tall, agreeable young man, stepped out from his saloon and listened with the utmost gravity whilst an agitated town clerk read an address of welcome, which clearly indicated that Newbank was one of the loyalest, true-heartedest, and most noble township on the Red Map; that the coming of His Royal Highness was something in the nature of a phenomenon, which would at once place Newbank in the forefront of the world's cities, and solidify that empire upon which the sun never sets if it can possibly avoid the necessity.

His Royal Highness expressed the extraordinary pleasure it gave him to step out of his saloon and meet the bald-headed representative of a free and enlightened borough. He didn't say so in as many words, but he probably thought as much.

"I am sorry we are late, Mr. Mayor," he said, as, entirely surrounded by the municipality, he made his way along the platform. "Mr. Gree is here, I understand?"

"I am told so, Your Royal Highness," twittered the mayor; "but... very shy man... this is the saloon, Your Royal Highness. . ."

"It is a pity I cannot visit Newbank," said the Prince; "but the train is late... is this the electric button? Thank you..."—he laid his hand on the switch—"I have pleasure in dedicating the Gree Hospital to the service of humanity, and I declare the hospital to be open."

He pressed the button and simultaneously the thunder of guns on Newbank Common announced the completion of the ceremony.

The Prince looked round with a smile and beckoned his plumed aide-de-camp.

"Mr. Gree?" he asked inquiringly, and a dozen voices whispered urgently, "Mr. Gree!"

A young man, rather pale, but immensely self-possessed, pushed his way to the front. A chief reporter and a certain Detective Superintendent who saw him stood hypnotised into inaction at the sight.

"Will you kneel, please?" smiled the Prince.

Daniel sank on one knee upon the velvet cushion that had been thoughtfully placed for the purpose. A sword glittered over his head, the damasked blade touched his two shoulders lightly.

"Rise up, Sir Daniel Gree," said His Royal Highness.

He shook hands with the new knight, uttered a few pleasant things, and made his way back to his saloon, leaving Detective Mosser staring helplessly at the pale but triumphant young man.

"Gree!" he gasped.

"Sir Daniel—if you please," said the new knight sternly.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The strange error by which the wrong Mr. Gree was knighted," said the *Newbank County Chronicle*, "has been rectified by the bestowal of a baronetcy Upon the founder of the Gree Cottage Hospital. The accolade, having once been given, is irrevocable, and the younger Sir Daniel Gree is free to enjoy the title of Knight Bachelor."

Daniel read this with infinite scorn. "Knight Bachelor, indeed!" he said; "we'll show 'em!"

He was speaking to the future Lady Gree, under the approving eyes of her father.

## 5. — HER FATHER'S DAUGHTER

### § I

IN the old days, the Howarths and the Mandrilios "worked" Europe independently of one another, and Tony Mandrillo would have laughed at the

suggestion of co-operation between the rival "firms."

A sordid phrase this to describe the operations of world-famous robber barons who descended from their fastnesses at irregular intervals and passed through Europe, from Lisbon to Bukharest, leaving behind them a trail of "smashed" banks and police theories.

Yet in some respects the illustration of two rival commanders would more nearly describe the relationships between Teak Howarth and Antonio Mandrillo. Portuguese Joe could stand for a liaison officer known to them both, yet, strictly speaking, under the command of neither.

The difference between Tony Mandrillo and "Teak" Howarth was the difference between the general and the guerilla leader. Tony planned his raids years in advance, worked out every detail of the robberies he contemplated, so that he knew to a minute where he would be on any given day. "Teak" Howarth usually came unexpectedly from somewhere in the south (it was generally conceded that he was an Australian) and made his plans as opportunity offered.

The war had seriously interfered with the operations of both gangs. Mandrillo had kicked his heels in Brazil during the period of the conflict. Teak had kicked the heels of the enemy, having been successively private, sergeant, lieutenant, captain, and private again of Australian infantry. The startling reduction from captain to private is explained by the fact that Teak as a captain fell foul of a certain provost-marshal and was dismissed with ignominy from the service. This despite certain great happenings which brought honour to Sergeant T. Howarth, A.I.F.

He enlisted again in another battalion, and was in line for promotion when the war ended. And when the war ended, Teak left his battalion without so much as "by your leave," and actually spent Armistice Night in Paris, having reached that capital by the first available train.

He was technically a deserter, but such matters did not interest him. He was on his way south to meet "Boobu" Clark and another amiable partner who had been waiting in Oporto cursing the war (at least Boobu had been) and every other circumstance which interfered with the opening of a certain bank strong-room, the plans of which had been passed and approved by Teak on his last leave, when he and Boobu met under the auspices of the Young Men's Christian Association and completed the final details.

It was an unhappy circumstance that Tony Mandrillo had also marked down that bank, being in possession of certain facts concerning its weakness, the habits of its manager, and such-like. Had Portuguese Joe been in Europe, he would have exchanged confidences with Teak, and the matter could have been

amicably arranged; but Portuguese Joe was back in Rio, sick unto death. And, moreover, Portuguese Joe had warned both Mandrillo and Teak Howarth that the Banco Commerciale was a nut that would never be cracked.

The first that Tony Mandrillo knew of Teak's presence was revealed to him in a special edition of the *Correspondentia*, the front page of which was suffering from a very bad attack of typographical hysteria.

Mandrillo read the news in his comfortably appointed sitting-room at the Briganza Hotel, and forthwith summoned his principal lieutenant. His annoyance was justified, because his raid on Europe had barely paid expenses and would certainly show a deficit when the cost of the *Pealigo* came to be added to the profit-and-loss account.

From his room at the Briganza he could see the *Pealigo* lying at anchor in the Tagus, a trim steam-yacht of 600 tons. And at the sight of it he passed into a mild condition of irritation. He was a pleasant-looking, broad-shouldered man with a slight moustache and suspicions of a growing beard—you might take him as a type of a successful Portuguese merchant with Anglophile tastes.

He puffed at the short brier which he held between his strong, white teeth, and thought hard. He was not blaming Teak Howarth. At the same time he was not prepared wholly to exonerate him. He felt rather that the blame was his own, but that admission did not make him feel any more kindly towards his competitor.

Silva, his dapper assistant, came in quickly, closing the door behind him.

"Well?" he asked in English—it was one of Mandrillo's affectations that he spoke no other language.

"Have you seen the newspapers?" asked the chief shortly.

"I've glanced at them. Who did it?"

Mandrillo grunted.

"Teak," he said. "Who else? Nobody but Teak would work that way. If he left his name and address on the safe you couldn't be more certain that it was he. Look at the account of it! The watchman gassed—Teak used to use ammonia before the war. The front of the safe burnt out—all the work done on Sunday afternoon—that's Teak's method all over."

"Did he take much?" asked the interested Pedro Silva.

"More than I thought was there," said the other gloomily. "About £100,000, mostly in American gold certificates. The Banco Commerciale held this stock as part of its reserve."

Silva sat by the table and drummed his fingers thoughtfully.

"Well, that settles that," he said. "The best thing we can do is to get away. When is the girl due?"

"She went on board this morning."

Silva looked at his compatriot oddly.

"She took some persuading," Mandrillo went on; "but I guess she's tired of sitting in a Lisbon *pension*. Anyway, she's going."

"What is the idea—about the girl?" asked the other, and Mandrillo shrugged away the question.

"Have you told her her father is dead?" persisted Silva.

It was not a discreet moment to cross-examine Mandrillo, as Silva was to discover. The big man had a tongue that stung, a vocabulary that was both extensive and vitriolic.

"That's all right," said Silva easily, when he had finished. "Maybe she knows, for she's a clever girl— only I was pretty fond of Joe, and I don't like to feel that his daughter is running any extra risk."

"The matter does not concern you," said Mandrillo. "The only thing you need worry about is that this swine Teak Howarth has galvanised the police department into life, and they'll be sneaking round here, making inquiries."

"Damn the Portuguese, anyway!" said Silva cheerfully. He had the true Brazilian's contempt for the mother-country. "Our own loot is on board, isn't it?"

"Loot?" sneered Mandrillo. "Such as it is!"

He went walking that afternoon and was duly pointed out by the loafers on the Grand Square as the rich Brazilian who came occasionally to Lisbon; a man of unnumbered millions whose wealth rivalled that of the late Administrator of the Tobacco Monopoly—the Portuguese equivalent for Croesus—as he progressed towards the Alemida.

*En route* he called at the police office, because the chief of the police was known to him. It was Mandrillo's practice to know chiefs of police, who, as a rule, are most communicative persons. This time the chief was not in his usual cheery mood. He was depressed to the depths, and his hands, which usually flickered so expressively, rested on a desk which was covered with documents.

"There has been a great tragedy," he explained to Mandrillo. "Ah, these foreign anarchists!"

"Is anything wrong?" asked the Brazilian innocently.

"The Banco Commerciale was robbed last night of millions!" wailed the policeman. "By a stranger, an *estranjero*, you understand. Everybody in Lisbon is suspect—everybody!"

He looked significantly at the Brazilian millionaire.

"Nobody must leave, either by train or by boat, until we have discovered the paltry-minded villain who abused our hospitality."

"How do you know it was an *estranjero*?" asked Mandrillo, who was interested.

"Because he left behind him tools of foreign make," said the chief of police curtly. "This is a tragedy for me, my friend. To-day the Minister of the Interior has called for my resignation."

He wept noisily.

Mandrillo continued his stroll to the Alemida, where all that was fashionable in Lisbon promenaded or took the air at this hour. He sat down on one of the benches and surveyed the passing stream of fashion. He was not interested, either in local beauties or in local opulence, and was impressed by neither. He was interested in a slim young man who wore a Stetson hat and a striped shirt, and who, lolling back in a victoria, smoked a long cigar with the air of one who was at peace with the world.

Mandrillo saw him coming and turned to the edge of the broad sidewalk, lifting his finger with an almost imperceptible gesture. The young man stopped the *cocher* and bent forward with a flashing smile.

"Why, if it isn't my old friend Mandrillo!" he said. "Welcome to Lisbon!"

He edged aside to make room for his guest, and Mandrillo stepped into the victoria. The hard-faced Australian positively beamed upon the other.

"What have you been doing all these years, Tony?" he asked.

"Cut out all that polite stuff," said Tony Mandrillo. "There's going to be bad trouble for you, Teak."

The other sucked at his cigar and did not immediately reply.

"Where is Boobu Clark?" asked Mandrillo unnecessarily, since the weeping chief of police had told him.

"Dead," replied Teak Howarth shortly; "the watchman shot him."

"But—" began Mandrillo.

"They'll find the body all right," replied the other, grimly anticipating the question. "I locked it in one of the safes. All the keys were in the strong-room. You know the Portuguese method?"

Mandrillo nodded.

"As a matter of fact, they found the body this morning."

"It is rather awkward," said Teak, scratching his chin. "Boobu had all the plans to get away. This is foreign land to me. Have you got your yacht here? Of course you have."

Mandrillo nodded, and waited.

"Well?" said Teak Howarth, after a while. "What do you think?"

Mandrillo squared round at him.

"I'll tell you straight, Teak," he said. "I'm willing to get you out, but you've got to pay me Boobu Clark's share."

"That's all right," said Teak, after consideration. "I'll promise anything. I'm mighty keen on getting away."

It wanted more doing than Mandrillo had imagined, and it was five days before the *Pealigo* steamed past the batteries at the mouth of the Tagus and set her nose for the shining west.

## § II

"Will you tell me, please, what is that land?"

Teak Howarth turned as if shot. He stared down into the brown eyes upturned to him, and lugged off his hat.

The girl laughed musically at his surprise.

"You didn't expect to see me?" she said.

"Well, to tell you the truth," said Teak, "I didn't."

"And you don't know me?"

He shook his head.

"I've got a glimmer of an idea I've met you before," he said, "but when, where, or how, I don't know."

"I was a little girl," she said, "and I saw you at our house in Rio."

"I've got you," he cried quickly.

"You're the daughter of Portuguese Joe!"

She nodded, still smiling.

"Why, you've grown out of all knowledge," he said, "and your English is quite perfect. Where have you been?"

"I've been to a school in England," she said, "and then I was in a convent in France. And now—why, now I'm going to Rio!"

She was prettier than he could ever have expected the dark-skinned little child he knew to be. She had slipped from childhood to womanhood at an age when most English girls are at their gawkiest.

She prattled on, and Teak listened, a thoughtful look on his face. She was taking some wonderful mantillas back to Brazil with her. Would Senhor Howart' see them some day, and if the ship was wrecked, would he help save these?... Teak grinned.

Women made little appeal to Teak, who held that no man can live two crooked lives at once and be a success at either. He listened with an odd little pain at his heart as the girl talked of her father and his business successes. Did she know that the name of Portuguese Joe was inscribed in every police record in Europe, or that the five years he was absent from Brazil on urgent business in Europe were passed on the bleak downs of Dartmoor?

He questioned her as to her friends in Brazil and her relations in that country. Apparently she had had nobody but her father, and Teak Howarth was more worried than ever.

That afternoon there was a little gathering under the awning on the diminutive quarter-deck of the yacht. Tony Mandrillo occupied the place of honour. Ferrera, the Dago skipper, who was captain aboard and confederate ashore; Soper, Mandrillo's Scottish engineer, steeped in sin; Pedro Silva, and Teak Howarth—this was the party.

The *Pealigo* was one day, out of Dakka, where the boat had called to coal. The sea was like oil, the cloudless sky a bowl of hot blue, and there was scarcely a breath of air. All the conditions were against a pleasant ending to the inquisition which Teak in his masterful way, and in face of Silva's warning glances, had initiated.

Mandrillo pulled at his pipe and listened in silence.

"No," he said at last, knocking out the ashes and speaking with great deliberation, "she doesn't know that her father is dead, and what's more, I am

not going to tell her."

There was an awkward little silence.

"But what is the general idea?" asked Teak. "She was safe enough in Portugal or in England. Joe had a balance at the Bank of Lyons, and so far as I can find she hasn't a friend in the whole of South America. Why are you taking her out?"

Mandrillo refilled his pipe.

"On this ship," he said slowly, "nobody says 'why?' or 'wherefore?' to me."

Teak Howarth leaned back in his cane chair and chuckled.

"Little God A'mighty!" he said, and made no attempt to keep the contempt out of his voice. "All that pirate king talk never did interest me, Tony. What are you going to do with the girl?"

Another awkward pause, then:

"I am sending her to the Villa Francisca," he said shortly, and Teak whistled.

Hitherto he had not been interested in the manner in which Tony Mandrillo occupied his leisure hours. He was neither prude nor moralist, and had never regarded the notorious country estate of Senhor Mandrillo in any other light than a likely cause for the Brazilian's ultimate downfall. For all men in this crooked game know that the clever ones are undone by women and fools.

But now—it was different. This girl with the brown eyes was entitled as by an inheritance to the protection and the loyalty of the pack which ran with her father.

"Villa Francisca," he said slowly. "That doesn't seem right to me, Tony. I've never run in with your gang, and I've always heard you spoken of as a high-class lot, and Portuguese Joe was running with you, wasn't he?"

He looked first at Mandrillo, who stared back, and then at Pedro Silva, who shifted uncomfortably and did not meet his eyes.

"Put that little girl ashore, Tony," he said gently. "I've offered to share fifty-fifty, but you can make it sixty-forty with the sixty in your own favour. Let her go back to Portugal or England, or wherever her school is—"

Mandrillo interrupted him by rising.

"We're going to Rio, Teak," he said, "and you be very glad that you're getting your fifty-fifty."

The menace in his tone was unmistakable, but Teak laughed. A few minutes

later he went down to the hot little cabin that had been apportioned him, and bolted the door before he drew his suitcase from beneath the bunk and opened it.

Teak looked for a long time, then closed the box, relocked it, and pushed it back beneath the bunk. Then he sat down and considered the position. The two long barrelled revolvers and the cartridge belt and the Colt automatic which he had put on the top of the money had disappeared.

Presently he went out of the cabin and went in search of Mandrillo; and Tony evidently expected him, for his first words were:

"There'll be no gun play on this ship, Teak; we're going to Rio, and there's nothing on the earth or on the sea that can put us back. Do you understand that?"

"I understand," said Teak.

"And the girl goes too," Tony went on; "and if it comes to a rough house, it'll be worse for you and worse for her."

"I see," said Teak, and Mandrillo smiled.

"I suppose you're thinking out some way of inducing me to go back to the last port," he said. "You've got a reputation for ingenuity, Teak, but the scheme isn't discovered that will make me put back."

"Maybe not," said Teak, who did not fail to observe that Mandrillo was armed. "But I'm giving you this little bit of information to go on with. I did not take a red cent from the Banco Commerciale."

Mandrillo gaped at him open-mouthed.

"You didn't get a red cent?" he replied incredulously. "You're lying! You are trying to kid me to get back to the coast to put you off."

Teak chuckled.

"Well, it's your ship," he drawled. "You can search my cabin, and if you find more than ten dollars set, you are welcome to it. I haven't even got my beautiful guns," he added whimsically.

"But you said you'd give me fifty-fifty!"

"Quite right," said the other coolly. "That works out at about five dollars. I didn't say I robbed the bank. You said that. I didn't tell you anything except that Boobu Clark was killed."

"Well, what do you mean?" demanded Mandrillo. "What's the idea?"

Teak rolled his cigar from one side of his mouth to the other.

"It means that somebody was there before me. Honest, Tony, I thought it was you."

The other looked at him searchingly, but Teak's eyes did not flinch.

"Well," said Mandrillo slowly, "there will be plenty of time to investigate this matter before we get to Rio."

"In the meantime," pleaded Teak, "I should greatly appreciate the loan of one small gun."

Mandrillo laughed unpleasantly.

Teak saw no more of the girl and, apparently, it was only by accident that he had seen her at all, for she was kept almost a prisoner in her cabin. That night he crept from his bunk on a foraging expedition, and was challenged at the end of the alleyway by one of the Portuguese deck-hands. Mandrillo was taking no risks.

The next morning he greeted Tony with a sunny smile.

"You've won, Tony," he said.

Tony looked at him suspiciously.

"This'll be a pleasant voyage for you, Teak, if you behave yourself," he said. "You invited yourself on board this ship. Nobody asked you to come. Get it into your head that I'm the only boss here and what I say goes, and we'll talk real business—which is money."

This conversation took place on the little navigating bridge, and Ferrera, a smile on his pendulous face, was the audience.

"It's not a bad little packet," said Teak Howarth. "You've got her up regardless, Tony."

Tony nodded, pleased. He had spent a great deal of money on the *Pealigo*, and she was one of the fastest of her class. Teak stared into the binnacle, watching the compass dial turn slowly from side to side.

"What happens," he asked, "suppose your compass goes wrong? Have you a means of checking it? I read in the paper the other day—"

He told a long and not too convincing story of a ship that had gone on the rocks, but Mandrillo saw nothing in this sudden interest beyond a desire to make conversation.

"Ferrera has another compass, haven't you?"

Captain Ferrera nodded.

"But how do you test your compass?" asked Teak curiously.

Ferrera explained at length. He was a good seaman and a born navigator. To illustrate his lecture on the art of compass-testing he disappeared into his little wheel-house and came out in a moment with a small square case of boxwood, which he opened, disclosing a second compass.

Teak took it in his hand.

"Are these all the compasses you have on the ship?" he asked.

Ferrera grinned.

"That is all that is necessary, Senhor Howarth." And then he stared at the other open-mouthed, for Teak, with a twist of his wrist, had flung the compass into the sea. Then, before he could realise what was happening, before Mandrillo could pull the gun from his pocket, Teak had lifted an iron pin from the rail and had sent its point smashing through the face of the binnacle into the compass bed.

Twice, three times he thrust, and then Mandrillo, purple in the face, had his gun in position, and Teak's hands went up.

"You're a hell of a navigator, Ferrera," he said. "Get to Rio without a compass, will you?"

They pushed Teak Howarth back into his cabin, and the method of the men who handled him was not gentle. Then followed a council of war, and curiously enough it was old man Soper whose advice was followed.

"If ye shoot him there's going to be trouble, and if he goes over the side one night there's going to be trouble," he said. "These deck-hands of yours are bound to talk, Tony, and I'm not going into the collar for you or twenty like you. Keep him in his cabin and starve him sick. By the time we reach Rio—"

"By the time we reach Rio?" sneered Tony. "How are we going to get to Rio?"

"Get back to the coast," said the old man. "We can navigate down to Benguela without a compass by keeping the coastline in sight. Or better still, I know a creek south of St. Paul de Loanda that's got thirty fathoms of water. It's as good as Lobito Bay but not so healthy. We could put the ship in there and send overland to St. Paul for new compasses. You can buy all you want there in the ship chandler line."

"Why not go into St. Paul?" asked Ferrera, troubled. "I do not like these African creeks."

"Ain't I telling you that this is the same as Lobito?" nodded old Soper. "Thirty fathoms of water, and you can bring the ship right alongside the spit. Go into St. Paul and you'll be overrun with consuls and port officials."

It was at that moment that Silva put his head into the door of the captain's cabin, where the conference was being held.

"There's a sort of red fog on the sea behind us, and the wind seems to be blowing all ways at once, Ferrera. What does that mean?"

Ferrera's yellow face went green.

"Mother of God!" he breathed. "That! And without a compass..."

Mandrillo leapt to his feet with a roar.

"I'll settle with Teak!" he shouted, and as he spoke the *Pealigo* lay over gently on her side as though she were tired.

Mandrillo never got nearer to Teak than his own cabin, where he lashed himself to his bunk. For thirty-six hours the *Pealigo* dipped and bucked and pirouetted dizzily in the very vortex of one of those rare red storms which are born in the primeval forests of the African tableland and shriek down a hundred ravines, finally uniting their furies in far-off seas.

At the fifty-ninth minute of the thirty-sixth hour the *Pealigo* took a harder knock than any, and a haggard Ferrera, lashed to his wheel-house stanchions, saw beneath the tumbling clouds, scarcely palm-high, the lather of white breakers upon a shore...

### § III

Mandrillo reached dry land, or land which was dry an hour after the wind dropped and the sun shone out, his sole possessions consisting of a pair of duck trousers and belt, and a packet of cigarettes which were in a waterproof cover in the trousers pocket. Therein he was so many cigarettes ahead of Teak, though he was one knife to the bad.

All that was left of the *Pealigo* littered the beach. Silva and old man Soper, the remnants of the ship's company, had gone with a providential native guide on an eighty-mile trip along the coast to the nearest white man's town.

They sat opposite to one another, and between them smouldered a small fire which the natives had lit for them. Mandrillo was smoking, and he was amazingly polite.

"That's the end of the adventure, Senhor Howarth," he said, flicking off the ash

of his cigarette, "and I hope you like it."

Teak laughed shortly.

"There have been worse ends," he said. "I remember after we cleared the Bank of Borneo—"

He stopped. Mandrillo's eyes were staring past him and upward, and those eyes held a certain savage hunger which the Australian had seen before.

The girl was standing by a palm, looking disconsolately out to sea. They had found her a hut on a little hillock, and it had been Teak who bargained for the gay shawl that now covered shoulders which had been wholly bare when he dragged her through the surf. She might have drowned, for she had clung to her infernal box of mantillas to the last. (Teak had not remembered the mantillas until after he had ravished the shawl.)

He turned his head back to the man, and there was danger in the cold grey eyes.

"Tony," he said, "you know just where I stand about money, but give me twelve months and I will pay you your share and the cost of your yacht."

Mandrillo smiled and pulled at his cigarette.

"If you had left us one compass, Ferrera could have got away," he said softly. "I don't understand you, Teak. I have worked with you and against you, and I have never seen this mushy side of you before. I think something must have happened in the war." His eyes were watching the other, and he saw Teak shift uneasily. "Something must have happened in the war," he went on, "to put ideas into your head. Five years ago you'd have sold the girl for a bunch of gold pesos. There's a reason for all this gallant old knight stuff."

Suddenly his face became fixed and he stared at Teak.

"I remember. They made you something. I remember seeing your portrait in one of the London papers when I was in Brazil. That's how I knew you were in France. Sergeant T. Howarth, V.C. Now what in hell is 'V.C.'? Virtuous Crook?"

He dodged the straight blow that the white-faced man aimed at him, ducked in under his guard, and with one swift jerk snatched the knife from the other's belt. For a moment they swayed, locked together, breast to breast, the muscles on their backs rippling like the muscles of two great Andalusian bulls. Twice Mandrillo struck and twice missed, and then the watching natives saw the blade fly from the hand of Tony Mandrillo.

Swiftly down the little declivity came the daughter of Portuguese Joe, with set

face and wide eyes. She circled the struggling men until she came to the place where the haft of the knife stuck up from the sand.

She plucked it forth and stood for a moment hesitating, then she slipped a carefully calculated half-inch of the point between Mandrillo's ribs and he wrenched back with a yell.

"Let up," she said tersely. "Haven't you had enough fighting and wrecking?"

She bent reproachful eyes upon Teak, and for the first time he saw that they held real and genuine laughter.

"You are very nice, Senhor Howart'," she said, "and I know my youth and innocence have appealed to you, and Senhor Mandrillo is a very wicked man. But you are both wrong. I know my poor father is dead. He was dying when I left Rio six months ago. He sent for me to give me his blessing and—the plan of the Banco Commerciale. May he rest in peace!" She crossed herself. "It was a very good plan. I was in the bank before you"—she nodded to the dumb-stricken Teak—"and I was only worried because I was not sure how I could get away. I don't think I should have got away at all, only Senhor Mandrillo was so wicked—wicked. There is a beautiful little box in my cabin," she said. "Do you remember my mantillas?" She turned her laughing eyes to Teak. "It floated," she said. "I spent all last night putting lifebelts round it. It was very wrong of you"—she shook her head sadly—"very wrong of you, Mr. Howart'. You nearly lost me that, and lost your share and Tony's share. Wait, I will show you."

She turned and ran lightly up the little sandy hillock, and the eyes of Teak Howarth and Tony Mandrillo met.

"Portuguese Joe always said—" began Teak.

"—that that bank couldn't be cracked," finished Tony, and they both shook their heads.

"Joe was a rare fellow for keeping things in his family!" said Teak.

## 6. — THE DRAMATIC BUTLER

WHEN Barbara Long called at No. 704 Avenue Road, which is on the fringe of Regent's Park, she had no other idea in her head than to escape the drudgery of office work, and secure a secretaryship which would give her sufficient leisure to follow her art course, and supply her with a modest salary that would eke out an even more modest income from her dead father's estate.

No. 704 Avenue Road was a substantially built, if small, house, designed in the pleasing style which came into favour in the late Victorian period. It had its tiny garage, which, she subsequently learnt, was solely occupied by the butler's motor-cycle and side-car. The windows were specklessly curtained, and the garden was bright with sulphur-coloured chrysanthemums the day Barbara called.

A popular work of reference told her that Mr. Harbord Brownwill was a lawyer, that his age was seventy-five, and that his recreations were none. He was a member of no clubs, and he had either no heir or his property, being of the portable kind, was not, in the opinion of his biographer, of sufficient importance to justify the inclusion of heirship into the brief history of him.

She rang the bell and met, for the first time, Mr. Jennings, the butler. A man in the irreproachable livery of his trade, middle-aged, melancholy, eminently respectable. Later she was to meet that thin and vinegary woman his wife, and Mr. Brownwill's house-keeper and nurse.

"The job?"

He looked at her dubiously, scratched his chin, gazed vaguely past her to the trim box hedge that ran parallel with the garden wall.

"Yes, miss—will you come in?"

He ushered her into a drawing-room that was furnished with some luxury. And only then did he ask her name, and brightened visibly when she replied.

"That's the name!" he nodded. "Mr. Brownwill said, 'Take her on—if she's agreeable.' Wait a minute, miss; I'll see him."

She gathered that Mr. Brownwill, because of his age and eccentricities, was not visible, and waited until the soft thud of the butler's feet came to her from the floor above. Listening, she heard the rumble of voices, and presently he came back.

"Five pounds a week—hours, ten till three?" he asked rather than stated.

And there and then began Barbara Long's acquaintance with the House with the Dramatic Butler.

That he had dramatic tendencies she learnt right away, but she had to wait some months before The Man on the Bus came into her life and she witnessed Mr. Jennings' star performance.

Mr. Jennings had three rooms at the top of No. 704 Avenue Road, and the walls of these apartments advertised the one interest he shared in common with his painfully silent wife. For they were devotees of the drama and great

admirers of the acting profession.

He showed the photographs to Barbara then and subsequently.

"They're art, and, in a manner of speaking, they're class," said Mr. Jennings soberly. "It's a bit melancholy livin' in the same house as an invalid, and they sort of take you out of yourself."

That Mr. Brownwill was something of a trial, Barbara came to know. She had never been inside the room where he lay ("grouchin' an' cursin' something fierce," said the mournful Mr. Jennings), and only his vinegary wife and himself had any association with him.

"He's nearly eighty an' worries my life out," said the butler. "He won't have a doctor, he's got no lawyer an' no relations except a grandson—a wild feller.. I don't know a wilder. I've never seen him, but Mr. Brownwill often talks about him."

Only once had Mr. Brownwill spoken to her. There was a house telephone connecting the rooms, and she was in the midst of copying an interminable lease when the bell rang and a harsh voice asked her to "send that woman Jennings to me."

"Yes, Mr. Brownwill," she answered, guessing the identity of the caller.

"Are you Miss Long?" growled the voice, and, when she had answered: "Humph! Got all you want?"

"Yes, thank you."

That was all: the receiver was hung up and never again was she called.

Her work was light. A business letter or two, the substance of which was conveyed to her by Mr. Jennings, the finished copy being taken away for signature by Mr. Jennings and posted by him; an enormous number of old deeds to copy, and a weekly visit to a city bank to cash a cheque, comprised her duties. She never saw the interior working of the establishment. There was a housemaid, who had some secret trouble, for her eyes always seemed red from weeping, and once she arrived to see a hired charwoman departing. But the housework was finished before she came in the mornings, and the establishment seemed to run very smoothly without a very large staff.

She had been in her position six months, and the first green was showing on the limes in the garden one morning when Mr. Jennings came in, as was his custom, to bid her good morning and give her the letters that were to be answered.

His task completed, Mr. Jennings lingered at the door of the little library and

looked pathetically at the girl, who was feeding a sheet of paper into her typewriter.

Barbara had not known many butlers, but she was satisfied that Mr. Jennings was as near being the ideal family retainer as she was likely to meet.

"Let him have those letters as soon as you can, miss—he's a bit tryin' this mornin'."

He sighed heavily and shook his head.

"Short-tempered—invalids get that way. An' the language! For an old gentleman he's wonderful! Did you write to Miss Alma Devinne, miss?"

Barbara Long smiled.

"Yes, Mr. Jennings. She telephoned me yesterday. She is having some new photographs taken and will send you one."

He nodded, his sad face lighting.

"That will be a hundred and forty-two," he said proudly. "I don't suppose there's a better collection in London. I'd have been in the profession if I'd had my way. So would Mrs. Jennings."

Barbara kept a straight face. The mental picture of Mrs. Jennings on the stage was not without its humour.

"I saw *Twisted Lives* last night," he went on. "What a play! That bit where the young gel accuses her uncle of murder...! And the scene where Rudolph gripples Ernest and flings him down the well—wonderful! Mrs. Jennings is seeing it to-night."

"Gripples" was a new verb to Barbara.

"You like melodrama, Mr. Jennings?" she asked.

"Love it," he said, with an ecstatic sigh. "Makes you think—puts ideas in your head—"

Suddenly the butler's face clouded; he hesitated, and, closing the door, came towards her; hesitated again, and, putting his hand in his pocket, took out a key. She recognised it as the key of the big safe that stood in one corner of the library.

"I'm going to ask you a favour, Miss Long. Could you keep this key... sort of 'ang it on a chain or strong ribbon or something... I mean so that it never leaves you day or night?"

Barbara stared at him in amazement.

"You want me to keep it?" she asked incredulously.

He nodded.

"There's a letter in that safe in a red envelope... sealed up." He was breathless, almost incoherent. "If anything happens to me... get it out."

Barbara was incapable of speech. There was a suppressed eagerness an almost vehement sincerity, in his voice. She could not believe that his passion for the dramatic was wholly responsible. She took the key a little reluctantly, and slipped it on to the ring which held the key of the house—for nowadays she let herself into No. 704.

"I've got another," he assured her, and showed her the duplicate.

With a deep and mysterious nod, as though he were emphasising something that he had forgotten to tell her, he went softly from the room.

It was on the afternoon of this day that Barbara met the young man on the bus. She was unaware of his existence, though he sat at her side, for her mind was occupied by an advertisement which decorated a passing omnibus, which showed the picture of legs and feet, and was an absurdly incongruous continuation of the human heads and shoulders that appeared above the advertisement. She was going to the theatre that night with a girl who lived at her boarding-house, for two free stalls for a none too successful play had come her way.

And then the young man on the top of the bus suddenly stood up. He might have chosen, thought Barbara Long, a more secure foothold than the toe of her patent shoe.

She uttered a little squeak of warning, and he turned a guilty and startled face to hers.

"I'm so awfully sorry!" he said.

She thought he was blushing, but afterwards saw that the blush was permanent, and wasn't red at all but the sort of brown blush that a tropical sun lays on the faces of all who go out of doors on a summery day.

"Please don't worry—you didn't touch my toe. I was silly to make a fuss."

But there was a distinct dent where his heel had rested.

"Sorry... awfully. But I saw a man I wanted to kill!"

He said this without a smile, and without evidence that he was talking for effect. Somehow she knew that he *had* seen a man he wanted to kill.

He was about twenty-seven, she judged, with a straight nose, a determined

mouth and chin, and the greyest and most beautiful eyes she had ever seen in a man.

For his part, there was no need to analyse her attractions feature by feature. She was very pretty, very alive; he thought that she might also be very capable. Naturally, every woman looked beautiful to him, for he had come back from a land where white women are few, and pretty white women who live within calling distance are to be counted on the thumb on one hand.

Now, Barbara Long had the sixth sense of the business girl—she knew instantly the man you can talk to and the man whose conversation must be cut short. And she had no qualms about talking to this grey-eyed stranger.

"Do you really want to kill him?" she asked.

"Yes—but I shan't, of course!" he said. "I have a wholesome respect for the law. Otherwise—"

Otherwise, she gathered, the unknown would be in some peril.

"You've been abroad, haven't you?"

He looked surprised, and laughed.

"Yes, I've been abroad. If I hadn't, I shouldn't want to kill anybody. A sleek fellow that"—he winced, as though he remembered something that hurt him—"and I'm a fool—I believe the best of everybody. I'm seeing him to-night, and I've got the feeling that any self-respecting fly would have if he were invited to dine with a spider."

She laughed.

"That sounds fearfully dramatic."

They got down together at the corner of Addison Road. He helped her with her drawing-board, but made no attempt to improve the acquaintance. She had made errors and had profited by them, and she would have been amazed if he had asked her the conventional questions: where she lived, did she like the pictures, etc.; and yet, being human, she rather wished it was possible that he could have asked such questions without losing caste.

The boarding-house at which Barbara Long lived was in the Earl's Court Road, and it differed in no respect from any other boarding-house, except that it was run on the lines of a business girls' club. Her room was a large one, sparsely furnished with such salvage of her father's furniture as had been saved from the sale which followed his death and the liquidation of his many debts.

She had her tea and, going up to her room, dressed leisurely—and all the time

she could not get out of her head the memory of that brown face and those miraculously grey eyes. She wondered who he was, and the identity of the sleek man against whom he harboured homicidal plans.

She chose, from a recently replenished wardrobe, her best gown in honour of the occasion, for she had not been to a theatre for months. Then she remembered, with a twitching lip, Mr. Jennings. She should have asked that great connoisseur of the dramatic his opinion of the play, she thought, as she gathered from a locked drawer the few jewels which her mother had left her.

Going down to dinner, she learnt that the girl who was to have accompanied her had retired to bed with an influenza cold. Nevertheless, the prospect of going alone did not greatly perturb Barbara. In a sense it was a relief, for she had thoughts enough to occupy her.

Her landlady was talking to her across the table.

"Did Louise give you the message, Miss Long?"

"Message?" asked the girl in astonishment. "No; what was it?"

The landlady uttered a weary exclamation of impatience and Louise, the unlovely handmaiden of the house, was summoned from the nether regions.

"He telephoned after you come in, miss," she said. "I thought you was out."

"Who was it?" asked the girl.

"Mr. Pennings."

"Jennings?" corrected Barbara quickly. She had never before received a message from the butler.

"That's right, miss—Jennings. He said something about, would you come—I couldn't hear him very well, because there was a lot of wuzzy noises on the 'phone. But that's what he said—'Tell Miss Long to come.'"

"Did he say when?"

Louise considered, a frown on her vacuous face. "To-morrow?" she suggested.

"It couldn't have been then," said Barbara, rising. "I'll telephone him."

She got on to Avenue Road, but there was no answer. She tried again, still without success, and, returning to the dining-room, finished her dinner. Going upstairs, she got her cloak and allowed herself the unaccustomed luxury of a taxicab. Probably it was some letter that Mr. Jennings wanted typed for the night post.

When she got to the house she found the hall in darkness, but she knew her

way, and, passing into the dark passage, switched on a light and turned into the library. She had expected to find Mr. Jennings waiting for her, but the room was empty. She went back to the door and listened. Not a sound broke the stillness of the house. Perhaps there was a message on the desk? But no sign of writing was there. The telephone was there—the receiver off the hook. She understood why her call had not been answered.

What should she do? Even as she considered, she heard a key turn in the lock of the front door, and Mr. Jennings' voice.

"Come in, sir, come in," it said. "There's nobody in the house but Mr. Brownwill and me, and we can say what we have got to say without a soul being any the wiser."

What should she do? Behind the blue velvet curtains in the corner of the room was a door leading to a smaller room where she had her luncheon. She slipped behind the curtain as Mr. Jennings ushered his visitor into the room.

But here a new difficulty awaited her. The door into the small room was locked, and she was in the position of an unintentional eavesdropper.

Her first inclination was to walk boldly into the library, and there was no reason why she shouldn't, because she had been sent for and her presence was explainable. But a natural reluctance to appear at a moment when Mr. Jennings and his friend were to engage in a conversation which "nobody could hear," restrained her.

"The secretary goes home at three," said Mr. Jennings' voice. "I thought you might want to come and talk it over again, so I telephoned her not to come tomorrow."

So that was the message that had been sent and which the bungling Louise had muddled!

"Sit you down, Mr. John; please, sit you down," said Jennings. His voice was shrill with anxiety; but for certain peculiar intonations she would not have recognised it.

"How is my grandfather?" asked a deeper voice.

Where had she heard it before? she wondered. She dare not look for fear her presence were discovered.

"Very poorly, very poorly," sighed Mr. Jennings.

"I'm afraid the old gentleman isn't very long for this world."

There was a pause, and then the stranger said:

"Jennings, I'm going to ask you a straight question. Have all the letters I sent been given to my grandfather?"

"Every one of them," said Mr. Jennings fervently. "Every one of them, Mr. John."

"You lie!"

And now curiosity overcame her: she drew the curtains softly aside and saw—the young man of the omnibus!

He was in evening dress; nevertheless, she recognised him. As she looked she could see that his head turned towards the curtained recess and she drew back in a panic.

"None of my letters has reached him," said "Mr. John" sternly. "You've always hated me, Jennings, and you never lost an opportunity of telling lies to Mr. Brownwill about me. Three months ago I sent him a letter with a line of Greek, which told him that I thought the letters were being intercepted and asking him to reply. If he had had that letter, I should have had an answer."

Mr. Jennings was silent. The girl heard his laboured breathing, could almost see the tenseness of him.

"You've got a bad idea about me, Mr. John," said Jennings at last. "I've done all I could for you and for your grandfather, and it's hard that I should be insulted—"

"I want to see him."

She could imagine Jennings shaking his head.

"I'm sorry, sir, but I can't allow you to do it, sir. His last words to me only this day were, 'Never let that fellow into my sight. He only wants my money.'"

Barbara was looking again. She saw the young man start up from the chair on which he was sitting.

"That's another lie," he said.

"I'm sorry, sir," murmured Jennings' apologetic voice.

They were out of her sight now; they had moved nearer to the curtains, and the voices came louder.

"I'm very sorry, sir. I never thought that you'd say a thing like that to me," Jennings went on in his even, monotonous voice. "And in this room, sir, with your grandfather's picture looking down on you—"

There was no picture of Mr. Brownwill in the room; that was the first thought

that struck the girl. Evidently the statement surprised the young man, for he must have turned. And then to the girl's ears came the sound of a dull thud. She heard Mr. Jennings take a step forward and grunt.

"That will do for you!" said Jennings, his voice tremulous with triumph.

A few seconds later she heard the dining-room door closed, and, peeping round the curtain, almost fainted at the sight which met her gaze.

Lying almost at her feet was John Brownwill, as she guessed him to be. There was no sign of a wound, but he was unconscious, and the explanation was to be found in the short club that lay within a few inches of his head. She had seen the club once before, hanging in Jennings' pantry.

She had hardly looked before the handle of the door turned, and she had just time enough to conceal herself when Jennings came in, this time accompanied by his usually silent wife.

"Help me get him down to the cellar," he said, and his voice was sharp and commanding.

There came from the passage without the sound of sobs.

"And stop that damned girl of yours!" snarled Jennings.

"Shut up, you!" snapped the woman.

"Oh, my Gawd!" sounded a hollow voice from the hall. "We shall be hung for this! Oh, why did you let Father do it, Ma?"

"Come in and lend a hand!" rasped Mr. Jennings.

The weeping girl came awkwardly into the library and, still sobbing, stooped and helped support the legs of the stricken man.

Barbara listened and watched, petrified with terror. She heard the basement door open and the hesitant steps of the bearer party pass down to the cellar, and then, running from her place of concealment, she fled to the street door. But it had been locked on the inside and the key had been taken away. Mr. Brownwill! He was an old man, but he might help.

She flew up the stairs and tried the door of his room. It was open.

"Mr. Brownwill!" she whispered agitatedly, but there was no answer, and she switched on the light.

The room was empty. It was not even completely furnished; the very bed was unmade. She turned out the light, her brain in a whirl, and made towards the head of the stairs. As she did so she heard the voice of Jennings and his wife in the hail below. It was Mrs. Jennings speaking.

"I thought you'd come in earlier: I heard the door open. This place gives me the creeps, Isaac. I'm always hearing noises... what are you going to do with him?"

"I don't know... got to do something," said Jennings in a low voice. "We've all day to-morrow to think about it. That girl isn't coming."

The kitchen door opened and slammed. She must make her way back to the library, she decided. There was a French window which could be opened, and would afford her a way out of the house. Silent as death, trembling in every limb, she crept down the stairs into the library, and as she did so she heard a faint tinkle.

She was still clutching her bag—the keys! And then there came back to her with a rush the recollection of Jennings' remarkable request. The red envelope in the safe! She did not hesitate; with shaking hands, she inserted the key, turned the knob and groped in the inside. Presently her fingers touched a folded packet. There was enough light from the fire to distinguish the colour of the envelope: it was red.

She gently stirred the coals to a blaze and read the writing. It was addressed: "To Whom it may Concern. Proof of Innocence of Isaac Jennings."

She was straightening up when suddenly the room blazed with light. Jennings was standing in the doorway, blank-faced, staring, his mouth working convulsively.

"What—what are you doing here?" he gasped.

And then he saw the open door of the safe and the envelope in her hand, and he reeled back.

"Give me that," he gasped, and took a step towards her.

What made her do it she could never understand. Perhaps her mind had suddenly tuned to his, and she read the shuddering fear in his heart, and jerked back her arm so that the letter was held over the fire.

"Don't come near me," she breathed, "or I will burn this!"

He stood blinking at her, white-faced, a picture of fear.

"Don't—don't do it!" he articulated at last.

And then she saw the woman appear from the passage.

"I'll do anything! I'll do anything!" screamed Jennings. "But don't burn that! For God's sake, miss, don't burn it!"

"Open the front door and fetch a policeman!"

It was a mad request, and, like a woman in a dream, she saw him turn to his wife.

"Get a policeman—quick," he quavered and then to her, with a gesticulation of terror: "Not so near the fire, miss—keep it away from the fire!"

The woman had disappeared. From somewhere below came the dull sound of hammering.

"Give it to me!" Jennings stretched out his shaking hand. "I'll give you a thousand pounds for it! I won't hurt you—I swear I won't hurt you!..." He was still supplicating when a tall, broad-shouldered policeman walked into the drawing-room.

It was three days later that Mr. John Brownwill dined with Miss Barbara Long at the Ritz, and in those three days a great deal had happened.

"The main fact," said the bus man (as she thought of him), "is that Jennings will not hang! If you'd burnt that envelope I don't see what could have saved him from the gallows. My grandfather, who was a very morose and misanthropic individual, had neither lawyer nor doctor. Otherwise, he would have known, first that he had a swindling servant, and secondly that he had a pretty bad heart. He was in the habit of taking long walks at night, and in the course of one of these constitutionals he was taken ill and dropped dead in the street. The body was removed to the workhouse, and there was nothing in the pockets to identify him. Jennings missed him that night and went out in search of him, and by accident heard that an unknown man had been found in the street.

I suppose his first impulse was to identify my grandfather, but that meant that he and his wife and daughter were going to leave a very comfortable job, and possibly there would have been exposed the fact that he had been forging my grandfather's name for small amounts during the year before his death. So poor old Walter Brownwill, worth five hundred thousand pounds, was buried in a pauper's grave, unknown, unclaimed. The certificate of his death and all particulars about that burial were in the red envelope. Jennings feared the day of reckoning; feared also that the time might come when he would be accused of murder.

"After my grandfather was buried, Jennings' job was an easy one. He had merely to pretend that Mr. Brownwill was still in the house, and to carry on as though he were alive. A private secretary was engaged to strengthen his position. She became known to the bank, from which large sums were drawn, and that made things even easier for him. Unfortunately, I turned up and insisted upon seeing my grandfather. Jennings put me off—by the way, he was the fellow I saw from the top of the bus—but to-night, when I was dining with

some people, he called me up and asked me to meet him—he said he had been looking for me all the evening. I met him actually outside the house where I had been dining, and he brought me here. And it was nearly my final social call! The man was a consummate actor: I can't understand where he got his inspirations."

Barbara remembered the serried rows of signed photographs, but said nothing.

"I think I owe my life to you," the young man went on quietly, "and I've bought you a little present. I wonder if you'll mind?"

She shook her head. It was a beautiful ring, and, remembering that he had no great experience in such matters, it was remarkable that he put it on the right finger!

## 7. — DIANA HELPS

JACK SAVERLEY had serious thoughts of asking Diana how she regarded such a happening. Diana's point of view would be interesting. Presumably she would give a more charitable verdict than he was prepared to offer. Of course Prendenbury was not ruined, as he so extravagantly claimed to be; men and women are kinder and bigger than we think they are in such moments of crisis. And because a man's wife is guilty of vulgar shop-lifting and is sent to prison for a month, they do not visit her sins upon him.

Jack paused in his work and gazed thoughtfully at the primitive beauty-type who was shaping on the canvas before him. Mrs. Prendenbury was a great friend of May's.... He scratched his nose with the stick of his brush and smiled. May...! Still, he would like to have Diana's view. Would she look at the matter broadly and diagnose this mania of Ethel Prendenbury as a disease, as three eminent specialists had done—for Prendenbury had money and could afford expert evidence?

Once he stopped, half intending to call Diana from the coal-cellar where she had been most of the morning, but the thought of May stopped him. May disliked Diana and was not amused when, at his urgent and insistent request, she had given an amazing imitation of a certain great actor in *The School for Scandal*.

Diana had behind her the record of twenty years' honourable association with the stage. She was no more than a dresser, it is true, but she had dressed and admired the great. She was a stumpy, middle-aged woman, waistless and heavy-cheeked. And being no longer needed by the theatre folk she had

served, she went out as a daily help. May hated her shrill Cockney voice, but Diana had moments when her voice was languidly refined. Her imitation of Mrs. Salter-Pasaro, that great tragedienne, was amazingly convincing; sometimes (when she was cleaning the silver was her favourite occasion) she gave as startling a representation of Miss Vivian Marsham, "than whom" (as an eminent critic has said) "there is no greater Desdemona."

Jack Saverley tore his mind from Diana; there was a catalogue cover to be finished and he wanted the money. Otherwise he would have gone out, as he said he would, to lunch at the club. May, at any rate, thought he was there. She stood in the doorway of the living-room-studio, consternation in her face.

Jack, looking up, saw her.

"Hello, darling; been shopping?"

"Y-yes. I thought you were going out, Jack?"

"I had to finish this beastly cover," he said, rising to knock out his pipe and to contemplate at a distance the work of three hours. "Not so bad. Why don't you take your things off, duckie? Let me take that muff."

She drew back quickly.

"No, no. Jack, will you get me a glass of water? I am feeling a little faint."

His jaw dropped. Now he saw how white she was, and—"I'm sorry, darling," he said, and flew out of the room.

She waited until he was gone, then drew from her muff two small bundles and thrust them under the cushion of the arm-chair. Then, with a sigh of relief, she threw her muff to the settee and slipped from her heavy coat.

"My dear, you ought not to wear these heavy clothes. It is quite warm to-day. I am glad I was in. You look ghastly."

"Oh, it is nothing," she said. "It is beastly shopping. There are so many people about. I went into Tapperleys, and I was nearly an hour before I was served."

"Tapperleys!" His surprise was justified, for Tapperleys was the most expensive shop in town. "I suppose you went to look round," he said, and his arm slid round her. "I wish I could afford to give you the run of every shop in London. I will, some day, when my fortune's made."

Holding her at arm's length, his smiling eyes surveyed her.

"How you manage to dress on the miserable little allowance I give you is a mystery to me! Oh, by the way, Tapperleys—do you know that man Smithers? He came here the other day with the manager of Tapperleys' art department. I

am doing some dress designs for them."

"Smithers?"

"No, I remember you were out. Smithers is a Scotland Yard man—"

She clutched at the edge of the table, and Jack, busy at his palette, did not see the effect of his words.

"Scotland Yard?"

"Yes. There has been quite a lot of shop-lifting at Tapperleys lately, and they employed him to hunt down the principal offender. I cannot understand how a woman can bring herself to commit a petty crime like shop-lifting, can you, May? As a normal woman, can you get into the mind of that kind of creature?" he asked.

"N-no. Why do you talk about such horrible things?"

"I don't know. I suppose Tapperleys reminded me." He was at work again, and the easel and canvas were between them. She gathered up her coat from the chair, and, as she did so, slipped her hand underneath the cushion. Under cover of the coat, she brought out the bundles she had put there earlier, and, wrapping them inside the coat, she walked to the door.

"I am going to lie down. Where is Diana?"

"Diana? I think she has gone down to the cellar. Do you want her?" he asked.

She shook her head, a frown on her pretty face.

"No. Jack, do you think we shall ever be able to afford to have a real nice servant? Diana is impossible."

"She's not a bad old sort," he said tolerantly.

"Oh, Jack, she's terrible"—she was always irritated by his championship.

"Look at the dust on everything."

"But—"

"If you are going to rhapsodise about Diana, I'm going!"

Jack heard the slam of the door and grinned. Then, putting down brush and palette, he went out on to the landing and called a name. A second later, Diana's slippared feet shuffled in the hail below. Diana had never been beautiful. At forty-eight her plainness was accentuated. She never looked her best in the morning, and she was absolutely at her worst after sifting coal. She had been sifting that morning, and staggered into the room with a laden scuttle in her hand and a carboniferous deposit on her face.

"That mine where this coal comes from has got a slate roof," she grunted. "Is the missus back, Mr. What's-yer-name?"

Diana never remembered names unless they were names which graced a playbill.

"Yes, Mrs. Saverley is back. Diana, you really must have this room dusted earlier. Mrs. Saverley has been complaining again."

"Dusted, sir?" asked Diana incredulously.

"Yes. Why, I wrote my name on that shelf this morning."

"Why? Ain't you got a pen and ink?" asked Diana. She hobbled across to the piano and ran her fingers along the top. "I don't call that dusty. Why, I only did it last Monday! I've lost three dusters lately. I don't want to say anything against anybody, but since that woman who works downstairs has been working d'oylies for a church bazaar I can't keep a duster by me."

"She seems very respectable," said Jack, "if you mean the charlady at No. 6."

"Respectable!" scoffed Diana. "I should say she was! Why, she's buried three husbands!"

Jack, watching her, wondered whether he should broach the subject of Mrs. Prenderbury and her sin.

"I suppose you think I'm fastidious for artist?" he asked.

Diana shrugged her ample shoulders, and applied herself to her dusting with great energy.

"I don't know," she said. "I did work for a fastidious lady once. She was a sword swallower at the circus. She'd spend all the night putting swords into her inside, and then come home and complain about the flies in the milk!"

Jack laughed softly.

"I often wonder you never went on to the stage, Diana."

"I did have a chance once," said Diana grimly. "Wilson Barrett was going to give me a part in the *Sign of the Cross*."

"What part was that?" he asked, interested.

"I was to be one of the early Christian martyrs that was eat by the lions before the curtain went up," said Diana, and he leaned back and roared.

Diana came to the arm-chair, rubbed its polished back, and banged the cushion. As she turned this over she saw something. It was a pair of stockings, and she looked suspiciously at the innocent Jack.

"Hello, what's that?" he asked, looking round.

"Looks like stockings to me," said Diana dryly. "You ain't been painting anybody without their stockings, have you, Mr. What's-yer-name?"

"Of course not."

"H'm," said Diana.

She was still examining them when they were snatched from her, and she turned to meet the flaming face of her mistress.

"What are you doing with those?" she demanded wrathfully.

"What are they?" Jack reached out his hand. "I thought you said you didn't buy anything May?"

"I didn't. These were a present from a girl I know. They didn't fit her. I wish to goodness you'd leave things alone."

Diana had a disconcerting trick of bowing. It was no more than a stately inclination of head, but it exasperated May beyond all endurance. Before she could snap the words which were on her lips, the telephone bell rang and Jack answered.

For a little while he spoke in monosyllables, and then she heard him utter an exclamation of horror.

"You're mad, Frank. Yes, yes; she's just come in. It is absurd!"

He hung up the receiver, and turned a face, frozen with horror, to the pallid girl.

"What is it?" she whispered.

Jack passed his hand across his forehead as though he were in a dream.

"Tell me, Jack. What is it?"

When he did speak his voice was broken and hollow.

"They say that you have been shop-lifting, that they saw you steal something and identified you. They are going to search the house."

Diana's eyes bulged. Her hands clasped across her broad person, she could only stare.

Jack walked quickly to the window, and looked out.

"Yes, there is Smithers watching the house."

He turned to the girl.

"What is the truth, dear?" he asked gently, and in a second she was in his arms.

"Oh, Jack, it is true!" she sobbed. "I have ruined you! Oh, I was mad, mad!"

"True!" he gasped. "May, darling, you don't mean it! Where are the articles you have stolen?"

"It has been going on for a long time, Jack," came her muffled voice. "I don't know how I can look you in the face!"

Jack sprang to the door and turned the key.

"We must get the stuff out of the house. Where is it?"

She had flung herself face downward on the sofa, and her sobs were heart-rending.

"In my—wardrobe," she gulped.

He dashed into the room, and came back in a minute, a bundle of miscellaneous articles in his arms. They ranged from a fur coat to stockings.

"They—" he began, when there came a knock at the door. He dropped the bundle with a groan.

"Too late!" He gathered the girl in his arms and kissed her. "My poor little girl!"

"Here!" It was Diana's hoarse whisper, and he looked round.

"What about getting all these clothes out of the house?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"It is impossible now."

But Diana had already made her plan. She caught up the bundle and made for the bedroom door, pausing only to make a snatch at the lay figure which, adorned with hat and wig, had been his inanimate model.

Again came the knock at the door.

"Hush," he said gently. "Dry your eyes quickly. We have to hold this man until Diana gets rid of the clothes."

"But, Jack, she can't," wailed the girl. "There is no way out of that room, and if she drops them from the window the people in the street will see her."

A third knock, this time sharply, and after a second's hesitation Jack crossed the room and opened the door.

A square-built man stood in the doorway.

"Morning, Mr. Saverley," he said briskly. "Morning, ma'am."

"Good morning, Mr. Smithers," said Jack. "I think we have met before?"

"Yes," said Mr. Smithers, with his professional manner, "and we shall probably meet again. I've come on a very unpleasant business, Mr. Saverley." He added that he was not the sort of man that gloated over anybody's misfortune, but that the law was the law, when all was said and done.

"Is this lady your wife?" he asked.

"Yes," said Jack, "she is my wife."

Mr. Smithers shook his head.

"H'm. Very bad business this. You guess why I've come, I suppose? I am from Tapperleys." This time he spoke direct to May.

"Why the devil should my wife guess anything about you?" snarled Jack, and the man raised a restraining hand.

"I'm here in the execution of my duty. I'm a police officer from Scotland Yard. From information received, I have applied for a warrant to search your flat."

Jack took a step forward.

"Warrant or no warrant, you'll search nothing here!"

Mr. Smithers was pained. "What's the good of making a fuss? I've got to do duty."

"May I ask why you have taken this extraordinary action?" asked Jack more quietly.

"That's the easiest thing to explain," said Mr. Smithers. "Tapperleys have been preyed upon by shop-lifters for twelve months. I have reason to believe that your wife is one of the principal offenders. They have lost goods to the amount of three or four hundred pounds to her alone, and she has been watched. To-day she was seen taking certain articles from the bargain basement."

"You dare to say that my wife—"

May's arms were round his neck; her wet face to his.

"Oh, Jack, what is the use?" she begged.

"Exactly; what is the use?" urged Mr. Smithers.

He wanted everything done quietly and in order. He respected Mr. Saverley, who was a gentleman, and no doubt an artist. He was prepared to wait until

Jack came to a reasonable frame of mind. He sat down to argue the legality of his position. Jack was content that he should talk.

Mr. Smithers concluded:

"What is the good of making all this fuss, Mr. Saverley? If I can't find the goods, why then, I owe you an apology. If the goods are there—well then, there's going to be trouble!"

"Reahly—what is it all about? Do tell me."

She had come into the room without their hearing her—a magnificent woman, expensively arrayed. No longer in the first bloom of youth, despite her golden hair and her fresh complexion, she carried herself imperially. Through a pair of lorgnettes she examined the company critically.

"Which *is* the artist?" she asked, in the tired tone of one who had grown weary of thinking.

"I am the artist," said Jack shortly.

"I'm so glad. I called in with a commission. Is this a friend of yours? Oh, good morning. I am so much obliged to you for opening the door." She surveyed the detective through her lorgnettes. "You are so like dear Lord Harthur Hallen that you quite startled me. Poor dear, he was took away to 'Anwell, suffering from water on the brain, through standing in the rain without 'is 'at. I'm Lady Mary Goldenbird."

"My God!" whispered Jack, recognising the hat and the wig.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon, I am sure—but the fact is, I am a detective," said Smithers.

"Reahly? How very extraordinary, amazingly and remarkably strange! How perfectly fascinating! So you're a slop—a rozzer—to use an Italian expression. Do you like Italy, Mr. Smithers? I think it is simply lovely and charming and delightful. You must come and see me in my little villa."

"I'm sure your ladyship's very kind," said Smithers, overcome.

He respectfully came to her side and lowered his voice.

"I hope your ladyship won't mind my making a search. Are these friends of yours?"

Her ladyship shrugged.

"Not exactly friends. I've met them at whist drives. You know the kind of people one meets when one is out on one's own?"

"The fact is, my lady," said Smithers confidentially, "this young woman is suspected of shop-lifting."

"Reahly? Does one lift shops? How perfectly, splendidly marvellous! I think I'd better go if—er—you're searching."

He saw her to the door, watched her go grandly down the stairs, but did not see her vanish into the flat which at that time was occupied solely by the respectable woman who had buried three husbands, the mistress of the house being on a holiday.

Then he went back to his search—but found nothing. For he had escorted the stolen property to the door.

Downstairs in the respectable woman's kitchen, Diana fanned herself with a blond wig, and the respectable woman, seeing her rouged cheeks, was both shocked and curious.

"To go dressing up at your time of life, Mrs. What's-yer-name!" she said disapprovingly; "and how 'ot you look!"

"So would you if you were wearing six pairs of stockings and corsets that didn't half meet," protested Diana.

"But why?"

"I was posin' for him—he's an artist, as I've often told you."

"She's not much, is she?" asked the respectable woman disparagingly.

"Mrs. S.?" brindled Diana. "As nice and respectable a lady as you'd meet in a month of Sundays, Mrs. What's-yer-name! And a perfect lady!"

The respectable woman was impressed. For Diana did not give good characters lightly.

## **8. — CON-LACTO IS STRENGTH**

BETWEEN the Kentish coast and the town of Ashford is a large, square, green field, bordered about with a white fence, and in the centre of the field, picked out in stones, which are limewashed every month, are the words:

### **CON-LACTO IS STRENGTH**

Giles Broad had often zoomed Z.HLM—Q into the clouds that he might avoid that offensive sight. On clear days Con-lacto was plainly visible for fifteen miles at 10,000 feet, and Giles had got into the habit of flying low so that he

might pass this evidence of Mr. Conway's shame and complacency so rapidly that the words could not be read.

At least, he did until one day, when he dropped so near that he narrowly escaped touching the spire of Linthorpe church.

Not that his passengers knew anything about their danger. They were usually so busy being sick, or praying for Croydon, that, death seemed a pleasant alternative route to comfort and stability.

Four days a week Giles piloted the London-Brussels air packet of the Cloudway Route. It was a dull life compared with those thrilling days of war, when you might not cross the Belgian coast line without inviting permanent disablement.

Sometimes he would make a wide detour and cross the old battle-fields, barging into the salient in his endeavour to pick out such of the places as had immediate interest for him.

The old farm where Willaker crashed; that patch of undamaged wood which sheltered the most vicious of the German "Archies"; the little town where he brought down Muller, the German ace, after an epic fight which lasted twenty minutes. Muller was not killed; he sometimes met that stout and smiling German, and they forgathered in a low Brussels *estaminet*, and drank confusion to all soldiers who walked on their feet. Muller piloted a bus which plies daily between Amsterdam and Cologne, taking in Brussels *en route*.

Giles drew so many pounds per month for his services. He often wondered whether Mr. Josiah Conway had planted that infernal advertisement in his path out of sheer malice and spite. Certainly it was not to convince this sceptical air pilot of the value of Con-lacto. Giles was beyond conviction. He had expressed his views with such force that he had expected to be forbidden the house.

"And you're really marvellously lucky that you're not," said Leslie Conway reproachfully. "Why on earth didn't you keep off the subject of Con-lacto, darling? It is fearfully difficult for me as it is. Daddy sent for an *Almanach de Gotha* last week, and he's been hunting up Filitera's pedigree."

Giles snorted. But this fair-haired and pretty daughter of Josiah Conway was used to snorts. Her father was one of the most effective snorters in the canned food business.

"If he's in the *Gotha*, I'm a Dutchman!"

"He *is* in *Gotha's*," she said sternly. "He's the Count of Filitera and the Marquis Walmer-Rotalio."

"What's the idea? Is he to be the Duke de Con-lacto?" asked Giles savagely.

"Daddy's very partial to him," said Leslie, with something of the family complacency. "He speaks well of Con-lacto, anyway, and he is translating some of our labels into Italian."

Giles laughed sardonically.

And yet the matter was a very serious one for him. The fact that Leslie Conway was the only daughter of an extremely rich man scarcely counted. He did not seriously blame Mr. Conway for thrusting down the throats of helpless invalids and innocent infants a slimy, shivery, creamy fluid that contained the concentrated values of the best cream plus the stimulating qualities of the finest cane sugar, plus Vitamine A, B, or C. And Con-lacto was the daily food of thousands—hundreds of thousands. It stood by many an invalid's bedside and reconciled him to his dissolution; it appeared in babies' bottles; it had been recommended by doctors, and formed the staple diet of infantile royalties. And because of this Mr. Josiah Conway had a castle on one of the upper reaches of the Thames—a great red-brick place that stood on a high hill and overshadowed a bend of the river. It gave him the right of warning trespassers that they would be shot at sight; it filled his massive marble garage with cars of a delicate breed, and enabled him to fish in Scottish rivers and shoot on Yorkshire moors, and sleep beneath the roof of a flat in Carlton House Terrace.

"I merely stated—" began Giles.

"Giles, my darling, you talk too much. I suppose you really talk all the time you're flying, but the noise of the engine is so loud that you're hardly aware of the fact. What harm would it have done you to have told Daddy that Con-lacto once saved your life? Instead of which, you say that the only time you'd ever used it was to drop a tin on to the head of a German staff officer; and as if that wasn't enough, you told him that immediately everybody in the neighbourhood put on their gas masks!"

"I cannot lie—" began the virtuous Giles.

"You lied on one side, why not lie on another? Giles, dear, I'm terribly afraid that unless something can be done I shall wake up one morning and see my picture in an illustrated weekly—"The Beautiful Miss Leslie Conway, who is to marry the Count of Filitera."

Giles sighed.

"The next time I come to dinner I'll try to make amends," he said.

"If there is a next time," she warned him.

There was a next time, as it happened. Mr. Conway might despise the views of

Giles Broad on the nutritive values of Con-lacto, but he had a high respect for him as a pilot, and since business took him abroad every month, it was, he argued, very desirable that he should travel with the greatest assurance and safety.

"But you quite understand, Leslie, my dear, that there is to be no nonsense with this fellow? Naturally, I do not wish wholly to determine your future to meet my own views of what is right and best for you. There must be a certain independence of selection. Just as in our business we choose only the milk—"

"Daddy, let us keep to our subject," she interrupted gently. "Whatever Giles is, he isn't a cow."

Mr. Conway agreed. He wanted to see her happy and settled. But then, he had wanted to see her happy and settled on every occasion that an eligible young man (from his point of view) had loomed on the horizon. And always, it seemed to Leslie—happily, for his peace of mind, Giles did not know this—there was an extraordinarily good reason why her own selective qualities should be brought into play.

"He is foolish," said Mr. Conway, "and a little uncouth. Such a business as ours could not have been built up except on a scientific basis. Eliminate science from Con-lacto, and what have we?—nil, nothing! When this young man sneers at Con-lacto he sneers at science—at—er—Faraday and Lister and Newton. Such a man must have an unbalanced mind; such a man is no fit mate for my daughter," etc. etc.

Leslie never really worried about her father's plain statements of the fact. The etceteras were, however, very trying. If Mr. Conway had been a sensible creature he would have kept off his favourite subject that night at dinner; but the narrow-headed and swarthy young man who sat on his daughter's right hand, and who spoke in such excellent English that you might never have dreamt his Levantine origin, was mainly responsible for the introduction of the topic.

Giles listened and was bored. He was not only bored, but he showed that he was bored, which was extremely tactless. He was sitting so far away from Leslie, and so near to her father, that occasionally his interest wandered.

"... Now I never travel without a case of The Food," Mr. Conway was saying, addressing his possible relative of the near future. "So far from being ashamed, I am proud of the universal benefit which I confer upon mankind. Why? you ask me" (the Count had not asked him). "First"—he ticked off on his thumb— "Vitamine A," and on his forefinger, "Vitamine B," and then rapidly in succession the best cane sugar, the product of happy cows, packed under ideal conditions...

"Mr. Broad, you will perhaps agree to this. An airman's health is his chief asset. Now suppose, instead of scoffing, you were to make the experiment. A spoonful dropped into a cup of tea..."

"I don't drink tea," said the very trying young man.

"Or coffee..."

"Keeps me awake when I'm flying," said Giles recklessly. "I take my little nap from Dover to Dunkirk." And, as Mr. Conway's eyes opened in horror, the girl intervened hastily.

"Don't take any notice of Giles. Of course he doesn't sleep on duty!"

Mr. Conway shrugged his shoulders and muttered something about "flippancy."

When they were alone, Leslie took her lover by the ear and led him to a quiet corner in a very old-fashioned and earth-smelling conservatory, which was Mr. Conway's idea of a winter garden.

"You deserve to be smacked," she said seriously "I was simply on pins and needles right through dinner, for fear you'd tell that ridiculous story about having blown up a dump with two tins of the wretched stuff! Can't you be good, for my sake?"

Giles shook his head in despair.

"The trouble with me is," he said mournfully, "I can't be a hypocrite. Every time I see an advertisement of Con-lacto—'Me for Strength'—I want to shy something at it. If it was beer it wouldn't be so bad: I could respect a brewer."

A few days later he stood in the aerodrome discussing matrimony with Fred.

Fred was his mechanic, tall and thin and gloomy, with a long lead-coloured face and pale blue eyes.

"... You can reckon yourself lucky, Mr. Broad, that you're single. I don't know how I come to get married. A good woman, but wantin' me to live her life. She believes in cotton next to the skin. I never have anything but wool. She likes tomatoes—they make me ill... there they are every day on the table—tomatoes! She says I'll get to like 'em in time—if I'll only try! She says I ought to be properly fed. Food's poison to me. Every trip she brings me enough meat sandwiches t' sink a ship. I always drop 'em out over the Channel. She means well. Oh Gawd!"

A stout and charming woman was hurrying across the aerodrome and on her arm was a basket.

"My snack!" groaned Fred; "heavy enough to break her arm."

Giles strolled away discreetly; he wondered if Leslie would come every day with his dinner-pail.

And then he saw the big car run in from the road and recognised his passengers. Mr. Conway he expected, but the attentive young man who walked by Leslie's side was an eyesore.

"Who's your boy friend?" asked Giles, and, when she told him, "Good lord! Is he going up?" He grinned fiendishly. "I'll tell you the spot where we'll do one of the neatest little crashes—"

"Don't be absurd. He's terribly scared. If he wasn't so fond of me he wouldn't make the trip."

Giles watched with a sardonic smile the careful disposal of a square black case.

"Is that the Fairy Food?" he demanded. "I can't get away from that high explosive!"

Mr. Conway was looking at the sky with an anxious frown. Low clouds were scurrying up from the southwest; it had grown colder since the morning.

"It looks a bit rough, my dear—er—Giles," he said.

Giles cocked an eye aloft and shook his head.

"Absolutely nothing. We'll do Brussels in record time."

The Count was already looking yellow.

"I suppose there's no danger, Mr.—er—?"

"None at all," said Giles curtly. He looked at his watch. "Are you the only two passengers, I wonder?"

Mr. Conway looked around.

"There only seem to be us three."

"Three?" said Giles sharply. "Leslie isn't travelling?"

"Of course I'm travelling."

He hadn't carried her for two years. Usually she was in the habit of coming to the aerodrome to say good-bye to her father, and the knowledge that she would now be behind him was not very comforting. He hurried over to the office and met his immediate chief half-way.

"They're your only passengers, Giles. The weather report has scared the other

people away."

Giles looked up at the sky again.

"Do you think it'll be all right?" he asked, with a frown.

The other nodded.

"The weather's pretty good over the Channel. You'll get half a gale to- night, which means you'll have to stay on in Brussels, but I don't think you'll have a very uncomfortable time."

Giles scratched his chin thoughtfully. He was by no means as optimistic.

He hurried back to the girl.

"Leslie, darling, I want you to give up this trip. I don't think either your father or your pie-faced friend ought to go flying on a day like this."

She shook her head.

"Father has to be in Brussels this evening. He has a very important conference."

"With Con-lacto?" he asked irritably, and was instantly penitent. "I'm terribly sorry, but I really wish you weren't coming up. It looks like being a very jumpy voyage, and you'll be sicker than three cats."

"Don't be coarse," she said.

Five minutes later he went up in the teeth of a wind of rapidly increasing strength.

Clear of Croydon, he began to have an idea of what the weather really was like. The south-west was a black wall, and he noticed, as he followed the direction of the wind, that the clouds were moving very little slower than he. At one minute the countryside was plainly visible, the next it was blotted out by a tumbling, swirling mass of grey cloud. His wireless began to chatter. He picked up his number and the message: "Return to aerodrome. Cyclonic disturbances southwest... "

The machine was now bumping and swaying alarmingly. He banked round at an unnerving angle, and fell into a spin, which he corrected. Fred, the mechanic, pulled a long face, and pointed downwards with a fiendish leer. Giles had an impression of hope on that long unhappy face. He decided to take the risk and darted down with all his engines running.

At any moment something might loom out of that mist and bring him to destruction. He decided to take no risks and climbed up again. The machine steadied, though the wind had increased in strength. After five minutes it

seemed a little clearer below, and cautiously he slid down. And then beneath the machine he saw the white feathers of wind-blown waves. He was over the sea, and instantly he turned westward toward the coast.

"A cyclonic disturbance" was a mild description of the storm. It treated his huge monoplane as if it were a piece of paper. The speed indicator told him nothing; the compass jiggled furiously. Suddenly on his right flickered a broad, jagged crack of blue flame, and the reverberation of the thunder almost shivered his head.

Exactly what was his position he could not tell. He sent out a wireless to request the direction, but received no reply. Again and again he brought the 'plane down, always to find raging water beneath him and no sign of land.

The reserve of petrol was not a very large one. He looked at his watch; for two hours he had alternately battled and gone with the wind. He was moving north all the time—he was only too conscious of this—and going north at a terrific rate. The third hour passed, and the mechanic made a report on the petrol supply that struck him cold with fear. Again he dipped, came almost to sea-level, and zoomed up again. Higher and higher he climbed, and well for him. Suddenly, out of the confusion ahead, he saw a white jagged cliff, cleared the crest of it with a foot to spare.... Beneath, he saw a level boulder-strewn plateau, ran wide of it, and, coming back into the wind, battled in the teeth of the gale.... The wheels struck the ground, just missed a devastating boulder, and came to a standstill abruptly. Only for a second, then he found himself going back, and restarted his engines.

"Get out and tack her down," he yelled.

He seized a tool-box and followed the mechanic. They were in a saucer-like depression, almost bare of vegetation, and around them circled a shrill cloud of gulls.

The aeroplane was being slowly blown back to the end of the cliff as Giles trundled a boulder beneath the wheel and reinforced this with another. He climbed up, wrenched open the door of the "saloon," and the Count Filitera almost fell into his arms.

"Get out — quick!" he commanded, lifted the white-faced girl clear, and assisted Mr. Conway to solid earth.

Giles looked round. At one end of the plateau he had seen a square wooden hut, and, taking the girl's arm in his, he piloted her through the driving rain. There was need for his support, for the force of the wind was so terrific that they could scarcely keep their feet. And when he spoke to her he had to shout at the top of his voice.

"Island of some sort... quite small... I thought I saw an automatic lighthouse."

The force of the wind was broken as they came under the shelter of the sloping crater. The house was closed and shuttered; there was no sign of life; even the squat stone chimney had its cover firmly lashed. On the thick, weather-beaten door was an inscription. He peered at this and deciphered the almost obliterated words.

"It seems to be a sort of a bird sanctuary. I've read about it. And this is the watcher's crib."

He knocked at the door, but did not expect an answer. Leaving the girl in the shelter of the hut, he returned to collect Fred and the tools, and in a very short time they had wrenched open the lock and had entered the close-smelling cabin.

It was surprisingly well furnished. There was a bed, a table, an easy-chair, and on a shelf a number of books. Evidently the guardian of this lonely rock only spent a few months of the year in his or her enforced exile.

The small room leading off the main apartment was the kitchen. There was a Primus stove, but no immediate sign of food. By the time he had finished his inspection Mr. Conway had supported his sick-looking guest to the hut.

"Well, well, this is very unfortunate," quavered the master of Con-lacto. "Terribly unfortunate! I'm not blaming you—"

"Why not?" snarled Giles, but an appealing glance from the girl restrained him.

"I suppose we can get off here?" suggested Conway.

"You can swim off," said Giles, more politely. "I don't know how near the mainland is, but I have an idea it's somewhere in the region of nine miles."

"But we shall be seen—"

"I doubt it," said Giles coolly. "Ships give this rock a wide berth. They hate it so much that they never look at it. My wireless is out of order—at any rate, we can't possibly be rescued until this storm ceases, and it looks like lasting two or three days."

Conway's jaw dropped.

"But—but we shall starve!" he stammered. Giles looked at him with grave, thoughtful eyes. "Con-lacto is Strength," he said gently, and saw Mr. Conway wince and the face of Count Filitera lengthen.

"But, my dear fellow, we can't live on—"

"Con-lacto," said Giles firmly. "Con-lacto is Health—a Meal in a Table Spoon—Vitality in a Wine Glass."

Mr. Conway and the Count looked at one another, and in Josiah's eyes was a challenge.

"I agree." His tone lacked heartiness, but his voice was firm. "And I am very glad, my dear Giles, that you remember the shibboleth of our—of my—in fact, of Con-lacto."

"Con-lacto Builds Big Boys," said Giles mechanically.

They retrieved the case from the aeroplane and brought it into the hut. Leslie's search of the kitchen had been most successful, for she had found, not only crockery and Spoons in a cupboard, but, most wonderful find of all, a large tin of tea and sugar, a round box of petrified cheese, and two unopened tins of biscuits.

"We haven't any milk—"

"One teaspoonful in a cup of tea," murmured Giles, avoiding her eyes.

"What about you—er—Giles?" asked Conway diffidently, "In the circumstances we can hardly expect him to live on a diet he—urn—loathes."

To the girl's amazement, Giles nodded.

"Con-lacto for me—The Food of Giants," he said, and when the tin was opened he took a spoonful of the viscid mass and swallowed it without a grimace.

And only then did Leslie Conway understand how he had come to win the Distinguished Flying Cross.

Mr. Conway took up his teaspoon and looked long and earnestly at the white contents of the tin.

"Splendid!" he said, but there was no enthusiasm in his tone. "And what about you, my love?"

"The biscuits and the tea, I think, will sustain me," she said. "They're sweet biscuits, too, and a box of cream cheese."

Mr. Conway dipped in the spoon and filled it.

"Not for me," said the Count hastily. "I have no hunger."

"This will prevent hunger," said Mr. Conway gently.

The Count swallowed, shaking his face many times in the process.

When Giles went back to the 'plane, the gloomy Fred had important news for him.

"I made a mistake about the juice, sir: there's enough in No. 2 tank to get us to land as soon as the wind drops, and she ought to be able to take off from here; we're three hundred feet above sea-level, and after I've cleared away a few of these stones there's a straight run to the edge of the cliff."

Giles waited to consult him about another matter, and returned with his news. The machine was not damaged at all, except that a couple of stays had been broken, but Fred had put these right. Giles consulted the girl.

"You and your father had better sleep in the hut. This other bird can make himself comfortable in the kitchen, and Fred and I will use the saloon of the 'plane."

There was plenty of water on the island; great rain-pools were forming, but, better than this, attached to the hut, a filter-fitted water-butt. The first night spent on this island was alarming enough for the two men who slept in the 'plane. The wind increased in fury. Twice in the night they felt the 'plane moving under them, and made a hurried descent to strengthen its moorings; but the wind dropped before dawn, and though visibility was still bad, and it rained heavily, much of the discomfort of the marooned party disappeared.

Giles arrived at the hut to find two of his passengers at breakfast, and in time to witness the revolt of one of his passengers. He heard the Count's voice raised before he reached the hut.

"I will not have it! It is muck! I would sooner starve! Last night I drank it, but it nearly killed me!"

"I am sorry to hear you say that," said Mr. Conway gravely.

He stirred the thick white contents of the tin and his face wore a thoughtful expression. "I'm sorry to hear you say that about Con-lacto. Don't you think it would be better if you followed friend Giles's example and took a tin with you so that you could eat it as you wished? Have you had your morning ration?"

"At six o'clock," said Giles promptly, "and thoroughly enjoyed it!"

Leslie was staring at the smirking young man.

"If I may say so, I have never felt better in my life," he went on. "There is something about this concoction—and Heaven forgive me for my cruel doubts!—that puts vim and vigour into one. At first the taste is curiously sickly; then, as one feels one's needs supplied, there is a suavity—"

"Yes, yes," said Mr. Conway absently.

He took not quite a teaspoonful, looked at it for a long time, and pushed the spoon with a great effort into his mouth. Giles had the impression that he found some difficulty in swallowing.

Later in the day Giles shared a secret cup of tea with the lady of his heart.

"Do you really like that stuff?"

"It's wonderful! I'm taking back all I said against Con-lacto. Fred is simply raving about it; he's going to take a tin back for his wife, and force her to eat it."

Towards evening, Mr. Josiah Conway came to Giles with a sad story.

"I am perfectly sure I saw that wretched foreigner throw a tin over the cliff. Something startled the seagulls."

"That was Con-lacto," nodded Giles. "I can imagine nothing more startling."

"And I found him," Mr. Conway went on soberly, "sucking eggs—seagulls' eggs!"

Giles was interested. But before he could make any comment, Mr. Conway rounded off his information with a query.

"Very dangerous, isn't it? Are they nutritious— seagulls' eggs?"

"If you get them fresh. But I don't think they can be seagulls' eggs; it's rather early in the season."

"They are not dangerous?" asked Mr. Conway anxiously. "Would you call them—um—nutritious?... A little fishy, perhaps?"

At lunch-time he was missing from the festive board. Leslie munched her biscuit and cheese and drank her tea.

"Daddy's taken his Con-lacto with him. He says it tastes better in the open."

"I saw him as I came in," said Giles firmly.

He did not wish to hurt her with a too vivid description of a middle- aged gentleman squatting behind a rock, entirely surrounded by the cracked shells of eggs ravished from maternal nests.

The wind dropped very gradually. There was a sea fog the second day. By the third day, and when the Count and Mr. Conway were not on speaking terms, and when the sight of a tin of Con-lacto set Mr. Conway shuddering, the sea mist cleared off, and far away on the west they could distinguish a coast line.

"We'll chance it," said Giles, after consultation with his mechanic.

They packed their baggage again into the air-plane, all except one wooden case three parts full of circular tins.

"I'd better take one of these," said Giles, pocketing it.

"I think you're a hero!" she breathed. "And Daddy thinks so, too. He was saying this morning that a man with your power of—something or other—"

"Digestion?" suggested Giles.

"No; it was something rather nice... ought to be a partner. And really, darling, there must be something in it: I've never seen you looking better."

"Con-lacto is Health," said Giles absently.

They drew the aeroplane back as far as it would go, to give them a longer run, and, with the passengers locked in the saloon, Fred swung the propeller and clambered in-board. The engine ticked over for a little while, and then, with a deafening roar which was music to the pilot's ears, the big "prop" swung to a blur. Faster and faster the machine leapt forward, nearer and nearer to the edge of the cliff, and just before solid earth fell away from under the wheels, Giles felt her lift, and with a happy sigh turned her head for the mainland.

They found a car to take them to the nearest mainline station. Even then Leslie was not sure whether they were in Northumberland or Scotland. Just before she left, Leslie went in search of the mechanic to tip him.

"It's all right, miss," he said, waving away the note.

"It's a pleasure, I assure you. After all, I've done nothing—only me dooty. It might have been worse if there hadn't been any food—"

"You *do* like Con-lacto, don't you?"

His face was a blank.

"Con what, miss?"

"You know—the food in the little tin. Mr. Broad said you liked it."

He shook his head.

"But," she insisted, "Mr. Conway had it."

"I don't remember seeing it, miss; but, as I was saying, all them sandwiches my missus brought come in handy after all. They lasted me and Mr. Broad three days, which only shows that my wife's got the rummest ideas about a person's inside—"

But Leslie did not stop to listen. She hurled a fleeting "Hypocrite!" at Giles as she took farewell of him. But apparently she said nothing or did nothing to

prevent her father nominating Giles Broad as a director of Con-lacto Limited, and did not so much as raise her voice in protest when Mr. Conway suggested that it wouldn't be a bad idea if a fellow like that—should be a member of the family...

THE END

***Freeditorial*** 

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