THE LAST ADVENTURE

BY

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Freeditorial

The Last Adventure

BIG LITTLE BROTHER

CHAPTER I. — THE MAN FROM THE FOREST

JOHN CALTHORPE stood seventy-two inches in his stockinged feet, and he was cursed with the good looks and muscular equipment which should rightly go with seventy-two inches and so seldom do. He had been apostrophized by a distant relation, a poetical spinster, in a poem which likened him to the Apollo Belvedere and other good-looking gentlemen of mythology, and, by a fatality which he never ceased to curse, a copy of the poem, cut from the poets' corner of the Westchester Times (to which his maiden aunt was a regular contributor) found its way to Oundle School, and he became variously "Polly" or "Polo".

Being in trade, he broke no hearts, because the opportunities for social recreation were few and far between: being the brother of the Earl of Heverswood and nephew of the Duke of Taunton, people wondered that he was in trade at all, for not even the surpassing value of yaga wood, of which he was the sole importer, shifted the basis of his standing from the commercial to the scientific.

When people talked to Selwyn he shrugged his shoulders, and suggested, rather than stated, that Johnny was on the eccentric side, that there was no need at all for his peculiar incursion into the wood trade, and that both he and his mother were a little annoyed.

And here he spoke the truth in one respect: the Dowager Lady Heverswood was in a perpetual state of annoyance with her stepson. The position in the Heverswood household was a peculiar one. The late Lord Heverswood had married twice. He and his first wife had separated after a painful period marked by violent quarrels and long intervals during which this gentle-minded man had not been on speaking terms with his wife, whose acrimony and malignity of temper were notorious. There was a divorce: one of those accommodation arrangements by which people sometimes overstep the boundaries of justice; and Lord Heverswood had married again. For five years he was supremely happy, and then a railway accident had taken away his desire for fife.

He was left, a broken man, with a small baby of fifteen months, and it was whilst he was in this state of depression and unhappiness that friends of the family reconciled him with his former wife and there was a quiet marriage at Heverswood church. Within six months Lord Heverswood was laid in the

family vault by the side of his second wife, and Selwyn, Earl of Heverswood, reigned in his place.

That her ladyship resented Johnny, the small child she was called upon to mother, was understandable in a lady of her temperament. But for her wholesome fear of the boy's fiery uncle, Johnny's association with Heverswood Castle would have been a very slight one. As it was, she never saw him for seven years, and as soon as he was old enough had bundled him off to a preparatory school.

At five o'clock one summer's morning, when the night mist still lay on the Port of London, John Calthorpe stepped down from his ancient car at one of those narrow entrances near Dockhead which lead to the water, and found waiting for him, by a rickety and rotting wharf, a ship's lifeboat manned by two nondescript individuals (one of whom wore a derby hat) who, while they did not approach the ideal of the British Mercantile Marine, were, in spite of their griminess and their strange attire and lack of smartness, typical of the sailor men who man the tramps which have gone up and down the oceans of the world for all time.

His agent was aboard; Johnny found him in the captain's cabin, and interrupted a glowing dissertation on the merits of yaga wood.

"... Any fool could have found the trees, but he discovered the only way to season it. We've had yaga wood on the market here for fifty years: good stuff, but it powdered on the first cold day...."

"Good morning, Captain."

The master of the Pealego rose and found a chair for the newcomer.

"Just telling the captain——" began the plumpfaced Mr. Dibbs.

"I heard you—you are appointed publicity manager from this moment," smiled John, taking the preferred chair. "Good voyage, captain?"

"Yes, sir ... got into a snorter round the Horn, and this stowaway rather rattled me. I don't know what to do with him. I suppose I'd better hand him over to the police, but he'd be worth a fortune to one of these showmen."

"A stowaway—what sort of a man?" asked John, interested; and the old captain scratched his head.

"I don't know—he may be one of these Belize Creoles rim wild; he's not Carib or pure Indian. My mate says he comes from the other side of the Manatee

Hills, but that's bosh! They're civilized. He's a Deep River man and a long way up!"

"When did you find him?"

"We were coming through the Cays when my bo'sun spotted him in number one hold: lyin' doggo between two parcels of vanilla that I bought for my owner. He doesn't speak any language I know; my second tried him in Yucatan Spanish, but it was no good."

"Let me see him!" said John, and a few minutes after there was pushed into the cabin the most extraordinary creature that he had ever rested his eyes upon. Save for a pair of blue shorts about his waist the brown-skinned man was naked. His black hair fell in a mane over a face that was puckered and creased with apprehension. Below middle height, the breadth of his massive shoulders gave him a squat appearance which his stooping attitude accentuated. But his arms ...!They were so long that his finger-tips were below the level of his knees—the muscles lay in swathes under the skin, the biceps, even inactive, were the size of a grown boy's thigh.

Johnny stared at the apparition. He was not Carib or native Indian. The fillet of cloth about his long hair suggested his origin, and the white man began to speak in a language which the captain and the curious mate had heard but had never correctly spoken. At the first word the native raised his head and his little eyes twinkled. "Man, why did you come on this ship?"

"To look at the world, caballero—also to follow the stars that moved. Where they fall is paradise."

Johnny knew the old Yucatan legend about the shooting stars and smiled.

"Your mysterious man is a woodman—I'm afraid Mr. Greyson's Yucatan Spanish needs a little polishing— he speaks the language all right. What are you going to do with him?"

Again the captain rubbed his grey hair.

"I'll hand him over to the police," he suggested. Johnny looked at the man again and hesitated. He knew the tribe, the one wholesome race he had met in Central America. Mighty woodmen, who had that peculiar contempt for agriculture in all its branches which distinguished the forest dwellers. They were something more than this: there were no trackers in the world like this tribe, for, although they had the queer gifts of the Australian aborigine, they enjoyed a civilization higher than any of the purely native peoples of South America.

“He’s as strong as an ox—couldn’t you make a porter of him?”

The agent shook his head.

“There would be trouble with the union,” he said.

“We must either have him arrested or else take him back.”

The brown man was listening, turning his head from speaker to speaker as though to read in their faces the meaning of their strange words.

“Master, I will go with you,” he said suddenly. “I could serve such a man as you: you have the face of a god. I am a good cook and once I was servant to a caballero from Mexico and cleaned his clothes with a long brush.”

John laughed.

“Also,” the man went on eagerly, “I am a hunter of men! If the caballero has an enemy I will track him; for I can smell the blood of a man on the hands of his killer I”

John was not laughing any more, though his eyes were troubled.

“O hombre, I am a poor man and I clean my own clothes with a long brush. And I have no enemies—such as you could track. In this country there are men appointed by the Government to do these things.” Then, to the captain: “He really would make an excellent bodyguard if one needed such a thing. Keep him here; give him all he wants. His people were good to me when I had fever on Deep River.” He patted the man’s shoulder. “Here you stay till the ship goes back to your land—the men will be land to you. In this land you would die: la helada is terrible for men like you. Adios.”

He waved the conventional farewell and the brown man went out sullenly.

“What do you think of him?” asked the captain.

John smiled.

“An unusual type of native—I was surprised that he understood Spanish. Is he tractable?”

“He gave no trouble at all,” said the captain; “and I’m glad. You’d have to take a capstan bar to that fellow if he started a rough house!”

For the next two hours John Calthorpe was a busy man. The Pealego carried a record cargo of yaga logs—black, unshapely billets of wood, as hard as ebony and almost as light as ash—and since he was in the position of

monopolist, the fixing of its market price was not the least delicate of his operations. And he was due at Heverswood that morning. This was the only unpleasant feature that the day promised

CHAPTER II. — AT HEVERSWOOD

THOMAS, the footman, sidled into the library, stood for a moment surveying the room with a critical eye, then, walking slowly to the fireplace, took up the silver tongs and daintily lifted three pieces of coal from the old-fashioned wooden scuttle. This done, he arranged the newspapers on the long table, pulled back one damask curtain which arrested a few inches of spring sunshine, and was gazing through the long window across the stretch of the deer park when the muffled click of the door-handle turning brought him round, alert and busy.

The member of the household who came into the big panelled room did not so much as look at the servant. He crossed wearily to the chair behind the empire writing-table and fell rather than sat into it.

A thin, weedy man, ungainly of build and awkward of movement, his yellow, haggard face was disfigured by a perpetual frown; the eyes under the straight black brows were small, lustreless, suspicious. This morning there were two distinct pouches beneath them, and the hand that reached out to take his letters was shaky. A weak chin, disfigured with a deep cleft, and a lower lip so full that it seemed to be swollen, added to his unattractiveness.

He opened one letter and threw it aside with an exclamation of disgust, and for a while sat staring across the room at the fire, stroking his little black moustache.

“Has my—has Mr. Calthorpe been in?”

“No, my lord.”

Selwyn Earl of Heverswood never spoke of Johnny Calthorpe as his brother except in moments of absent-mindedness.

“What the devil do you want?” he snapped, as Thomas waited.

“Your lordship asked me to remind you of something.”

Selwyn’s frown grew deeper.

“Was it you who let me in … umph … pretty well stewed, wasn’t I? Did my mother hear me?”

“No, my lord. I have not seen her ladyship this morning, and she did not ask her maid what time your lordship returned.”

One side of Lord Heverswood’s mouth twisted up in an unpleasant smile.

“If my—if Mr. John asks you, you can say I came in early—that will do.”

Long after the footman had gone, he sat with his head in his hand. Even when his mother came into the room he did no more than look up.

A tall, stout woman of sixty-five, with a dead white face, her Ups were a vivid carmine, her hair as vivid a red. People meeting the Dowager Countess of Heverswood for the first time were repelled, then amused, by her blatant artificiality—their last impression was one of vague fear, for there was a malignity in her coal-black eyes, a cruel purpose in the set of her thin lips, that made sensitive men and women shudder.

Her servants hated her; the very woman who spent an hour making up her mistress’s face had a secret loathing of the work which transformed this ugly virago into the semblance of beauty.

She walked to the fire. Not all the massage in the world could make plump the withered hand she held to the warmth. Her fingers were laden with costly rings that twinkled and flashed in the light of the dancing flame. About her neck was a double row of exquisitely matched pearls. There were diamonds in her ears, on her broad bosom, in the thickly jewelled bangles about her wrists.

“What time did you come home, Selwyn?” she asked harshly.

“About one o’clock “ he began.

“You’re a liar.”

She did not turn her head or raise her voice: she spoke without heat or passion.

“It was near four, and you were drunk. I heard you. Be careful!”

Again that unpleasant smile of his as he smoothed his sleek black hair.

“Mary Predelle took a lot of landing, Selwyn,” she went on. “Even now, if she hadn’t a father who is itching to get his daughter into the peerage, she would be man-shy—if you were the man.”

He was biting his nails nervously.

“I’m not a bit keen on marriage—I have a lot of good women pals “

“Keep them.” Lady Heverswood’s eyes went back to the fire, and he experienced a sense of physical relief. “Be discreet—but keep them. You will be able to afford your little amusements. Has John been here?”

He shook his head.

“I hope he has fallen into one of his barges and broken his neck,” she said calmly, and he was neither shocked nor amused: he had heard those ungentle sentiments before.

“I wish to God he’d get some sort of fever and die,” she went on in her high, even tone. “He is always on and off these foreign ships, but he catches nothing.”

“What’s the trouble now?” asked Selwyn curiously. His mother never attacked even the hated John at random.

“The command performance—I wrote for tickets and got a polite letter from the duke: he regretted, et cetera. He is John’s uncle. It was the same when I applied for the Royal Enclosure tickets for Ascot. ‘The Duke of Taunton regrets that all the available tickets have been allotted’,” she mimicked, and then, with a snarl of rage which undid all the beautifying processes of her overworked maid:——”They never forgive—never forget! Cursed lackeys like Taunton! I wish John Calthorpe was in hell!…”

The girl who came into the room at that moment was pretty in a pale, disdainful way, a girl of languid carriage and mien.

“Well?” Lady Heverswood snapped the query.

“The secretary of the New Arts Club wishes to know how many tickets he is to reserve for your ladyship: they are two guineas “

“None!” Lady Heverswood fired the answer without looking up at her private secretary. “Have I nothing to do but to waste my money on that kind of nonsense? They ought to be glad to send me tickets for their wretched ball free! Two guineas indeed!The advertisement of having us there should be enough.”

Still Alma Keenan waited.

“I ordered them, mother,” said Selwyn. It required an effort to say this. “Everybody will be there. I thought of going as a pierrot—”

“An original idea!” sneered her ladyship. “If you want them, buy them. If you imagine that I am going to mix with the scum of the earth, you’re mistaken.

Buy one for John Calthorpe! He will be in his element! All right—don't drape yourself over that chair, Miss Keenan. Order the tickets for his lordship. And for God's sake shut the door after you."

The secretary glided from the room.

"She's not a bad girl, that," grumbled Selwyn. "I wonder you're not a little more decent to her."

"She is leaving next week," was the unexpected reply, and Selwyn's eyebrows rose.

"Why, for heaven's sake?"

The old woman glowered round at him.

"Because she's too pretty—and you're too impressionable."

Lord Heverswood's face went red.

"I've never spoken a dozen words to her," he protested hotly, "and she's engaged to some fellow in London."

"Let her marry him," said the woman icily. "And here is John Calthorpe—smelling of wood shavings!" John came into the room unannounced. His visits to the castle were few and far between—he would gladly have dispensed with those, but the announcements he had read in yesterday's newspapers had made the call an urgent necessity.

"Shut the door," snapped the woman, scarcely raising her eyes, "and the next time you come in, have the goodness to ask the footman to announce you!"

John Calthorpe said nothing in direct answer to this. He was that exasperating kind that could not be exasperated. He strolled across to a shelf and took down a book, examining the pages idly. Lady Heverswood had seen that action before. John had something to say— something unpleasant. She trembled with anger in anticipation. The sight of him never failed to arouse in her a storm of unreasoning hate. One fear obsessed her, that Selwyn would die before he had a son to take the title. It was a fear that kept her awake at nights and was accentuated every time the tanned, healthy face of her stepson came into her vision.

"Answer me when I speak to you I" She mastered her insane rage with an effort. "You come in and out of this house as though you owned it. My God! Things have come to a pretty pass if the son of a brainless interloper "

He turned and met her malignant gaze: black eyes glowing and smouldering with hate; grey eyes as cold and merciless as death. And yet the words he said were in themselves without offence.

“I would like you to think kindly of my mother, Lady Heverswood; if that is impossible, and you cannot even speak kindly, would you please give her the charity of your silence?”

There trembled on the edge of her tongue a phrase coarse, vile, hurting, but his gaze did not falter. She saw something bleak, as though his eyes mirrored an Arctic desolation, and that froze the words on her lips.

Followed a long and awkward silence.

“How is the timber business?” Selwyn was heavily jocose.

“Flourishing,” said John with the faintest of smiles. “We had another consignment of yaga wood this morning, and it was sold before the ship made fast at Dockhead; come up to-night and I’ll show you some encouraging figures.”

Lord Heverswood’s face lit up with a new interest.

“Put that infernal book down and talk,” he complained. “I can’t see you to-night; I am dining at Madame Bonnigea’s—a party of friends. Can’t you bring the figures down here? After all, it is our business, John. I mean, the mater and everybody is in it. We put up the money.”

John replaced the book he had been reading.

“It really doesn’t matter who found the money,” he said good-humouredly, “and even the question who found and tamed the yaga tree “

“Of course you found that, old man,” said Selwyn, with an apprehensive glance at the old woman by the fire. She displayed no resentment at his friendly tone, though he was certain she was listening. “Deuced clever of you, too. At the same time, anybody else who went mucking about in British Honduras would have found it—if he went far enough into the forest—but you were lucky. You’ll admit we put up the money for the trip. I scraped together a hundred and the mater promised a hundred.”

“And the trip cost me ten thousand.”

John Calthorpe’s eyes twinkled.

“Well, you had it!” protested his brother. “Your… er … your mother left you money—“

“There will be a dividend next month,” the other cut short this everlasting wrangle.

There was no company—none knew that better than Selwyn. This amazing wood which his brother had found, and which sold at fancy prices to the furniture-makers, was his own concession, bought, shipped and landed with his own money. The business for which his half-brother expressed an amused contempt was nearly the sole source of revenue which the family enjoyed.

“Next month,” grumbled Selwyn, “and I’ve got a bill from my bookmaker that must be settled before Friday or he’ll post me!”

“In that case you shall have money before Friday,” was the good-natured reply.

And then the tone of the second son changed.

“Is it true that you’re engaged to Mary Predelle? I only saw it in the morning paper.”

“True?” The still figure at the fire asked the question shrilly. “Why shouldn’t it be true?”

John turned to look at her ladyship before he answered.

“There is no reason, madam. She is a very charming girl. It will be a distinction to claim her as a sister-in-law. Only …”

“Only what?” The thin voice was almost a hollow whistle of sound.

“She seems rather …” He paused.

“Too good for Selwyn?” she rapped.

“No … I hardly know Selwyn’s degree of excellence—nobody is too good for anybody if they love each other.”

He had taken a second book from the shelf and was turning the leaves as he spoke—an action that roused the old woman to a cold fury.

“Be so good as to give me your entire attention, John Calthorpe!” Her voice had the menacing quality of an enraged wasp. “What do you mean when you say, ‘She seems rather …’?”

He put down the book and stood looking at the powdered face of the woman.

“She seems rather too tender a plant to grow in this cactus bush,” he said deliberately. “I’m sorry if I annoy you, but you asked me. She has a lot of money, hasn’t she? At least, her father has. Madam, in two years I shall—we shall be rich. I could even rush things so that the big money came next year. Is it necessary to sacrifice this girl for the sake of a few hundred thousand pounds— which is certain to come, anyway?”

“Sacrifice!”

Lady Heverswood was standing bolt upright, her black eyes blazing.

“Sacrifice… to marry your brother?”

Selwyn watched the scene apprehensively.

“Is that what you mean? A sacrifice for any girl to marry an Earl of Heverswood? Explain yourself.” “That is what I meant.” John Calthorpe’s voice had a metallic ring: the grey of his eyes was drear and comfortless; she hated him worst when he had that look —hated him worst because she feared him most. “Her father adores her: he’s the type of American who lives for his children, spoils them with his generosity, cloys them with service. She isn’t spoilt so far as I’ve been able to learn from those who know her. She’s just a sweet, natural, sensitive girl. What sort of husband are you giving her? Selwyn!”

The natural red was showing through her cheeks: her mouth drooped till he saw the line of her teeth, clenched in a grin which in any other person would have been ludicrous. And the second son went on:

“Selwyn’s all right—he’s a man-about-town with his own code and his own ideas of decency. I have hoped he would meet some hard-riding woman of his own class —his own ideals: somebody with the intellect of a master of foxhounds and the broad view of a society lawyer “

“Stop!” She foamed the word, and her skinny hands clawed at the air. “Stop I You …!”

Only for a fraction of a second did the corner of his lips twitch.

“I’m not that, madam—whatever else I may be. And I’m not being wilfully offensive. I like old Selwyn— I’d go a long way to help him to happiness. And I know my position. I’m the second son. I’m proud of it. I’d rather be the son of Adelaide Countess of Heverswood than I’d be the duke, her brother. But I want no brokenhearted woman to curse this house. If she is to be happy—

all right. If Selwyn is the kind of man she would marry, if she were a kitchen maid and he the footman— God bless ‘em, let them get on with it! But this exchange of money for title, and title for money—it is unclean, beastly.”

She did not speak as he walked to the door.

“I’m going to my room,” he said. There was a challenge, in the words if not in the tone.

CHAPTER III. — THE LADY BEAUTIFUL

THAT tiny room of his, by which he maintained his connection with the home of his ancestors, was the sore place in Heverswood. She never passed the door without a curse; the servants were forbidden to describe it as “Mr. John’s”, and she had stripped it of every article of furniture to which he could not lay personal claim.

Outside in the hall he met the private secretary. Alma Keenan had been closely associated with the aristocracy long enough to envy and hate the men and women with whom she was brought into daily contact as an inferior, and to loathe and despise the class whence she was drawn. Johnny had no illusions about the girl’s feelings for him, for she shared Lady Heverswood’s views very completely. She was passing him with a cold nod when he stood squarely in her path.

“Miss Keenan, her ladyship sent me a note the other day telling me that you are leaving her at the end of the month? I hope that it is to better your position, and if I can be of any service to you “

“Thank you, Mr. Calthorpe”—her tone was resentful; “I can look after myself. There is no reason why I should bother you.”

“Not a bother, I assure you,” said John good-humouredly, “but there is a vacancy in my office.“

She tossed her head.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Calthorpe,” she said, “but I’m not at all keen on being a wood merchant. If you will allow me to pass, please …”He stepped aside, looking after her. He found Alma Keenan one of the minor tribulations of life, overshadowed a little in her importance by the booming hostility of his stepmother, but none the less a speck of grit in the smooth machinery of life. He hated to see a woman in the position that Alma occupied; the boorishness of Lady Heverswood was notorious; her insolence knew no bounds. He had seen the girl flush and pale alternately under her scathing tongue, and had admired the restraint which Alma had shown. Her ladyship’s note had been characteristic.

Keenan is leaving here on the 30th. Find her a job in your wood-yard. She is very honest, so far as I am able to judge.

Just that, no more, signed with an “S”, which stood for “Sophia”. Lady Heverswood had made many attempts to get round the necessity for signing even that intimate initial.

John went slowly up the wide oaken staircase, down which a Queen of England had walked to her death at the headman's hands, till he came to the broad landing.

The sun shone through a great stained-glass window, dappling the polished floor with arabesques of rich colour. Centred in the window were the Calthorpe arms, the bloody arm and raised sword of the first Baron Hanford and Heverswode.

He stood for a moment gazing thoughtfully at the fantastic scroll on which the motto of the house was inscribed:

Veritas Odium Parit.

Truth arouses hatred! Not inappropriate, he thought, as he went to his cupboard of a room that stood at the head of a further flight of stairs. There was nothing for him to do except to rearrange his books, to take from locked drawers the portraits that were so precious to him—and to think.

He pulled a chair up to the window and looked out over the impoverished acres of wood- and meadow-land. Was he being a little ridiculous about this marriage? After all, these things happened again and again. And such marriages, though they had added to the fringe of that decadent set which suppurated society, had also many happy sequels. He had seen the girl—he could not say that he had met her, though in truth he had.

Selwyn was no match for a woman of refinement and native delicacy—a woman with dreams that circled about the ideal.

He saw a big limousine come into sight through Ridley Copse and disappear behind the angle of the wall which obstructed all view. Selwyn was a problem. He seemed to eat up money as fast as it was made for him, and gave no return, not even the tribute of his gratitude.

He went back to his books. Somebody had been in the room, handling them—and handling them carelessly. And a drawer had been opened by the intruder —the lock had been thrown partially out of gear. He was not hurt, nor yet annoyed. He knew the pettiness of his stepmother—it was not necessary to employ a detective to discover the prying intruder. And then slowly a smile dawned on his face as a fantastical idea came to him. Suppose he employed an agent to detect the malicious visitor—that monkey man from the wilds of Paraguay!

He chuckled as he thought of Lady Heverswood's face at the appearance of this barbarian who was "a hunter of men".

Half an hour later, Johnny closed the door of his room behind him and went down the stairs. The door of the library was ajar as he drew opposite, and the sound of a fresh young voice came out. He hesitated. His intention had been to leave the house, but now something more than curiosity impelled him to turn.

Lady Heverswood stood stiffly before the fire, talking to a girl, Selwyn hovering somewhere in the background.

At the sound of John Calthorpe's voice the slim figure turned, and he looked into a face of such ethereal beauty that for a moment he was without words.

He had seen Mary Predelle before, had met her in the half- dark vestibule of the gloomy County Hall on the night of the charity ball, and had carried away with him the elusive impression of prettiness. He remembered that she wore a dress of silver tissue, and there were pink roses on her corsage; he recalled the shimmering background of a cloak ... she was pulling it on and he had helped her, and a strand of fair hair had caressed his lips....

But now she challenged the light of morning that would have found the least crevice in her defence. A straight-backed girl, rather taller than the average—a being to be drawn in the most delicate of curves. The grey eyes were darker than his own, more ready to laugh —they were laughing now.

"You're John Calthorpe? I recognize you, though we only met once."

She glanced quickly across to Selwyn and withdrew her eyes almost immediately.

"You know ... I am to be ... a sister of yours?"

John could have sworn that it required an effort in her to say this; that the red lips for a second hardened. Again that swift glance at the smirking Selwyn, and when her gaze came back he saw something in her face that made his heart sick with pity.

"You haven't congratulated Selwyn." Lady Heverswood cut into his thoughts like a knife. "John Calthorpe hasn't the best of manners, Mary."

John turned to his brother with outstretched hand.

"You're a lucky man," he said mechanically. "I— I do congratulate you." He faced the girl. "Selwyn is a good sort, Miss Predelle—I hope you will be very happy."

There was no heartiness in his tone; the words Bounded insincere, even to himself. Only in certain circumstances could John Calthorpe hide his feelings, and this was not one of them.

He felt a fool—a gauche, awkward fool, as he took a clumsy farewell of the girl and walked out into the hall. He did not know that his stepmother had followed him until she called him by name, and he turned round guiltily, as though she were reading his inmost thoughts.

“Are you returning to-night?”

He shook his head.

“No, madam. The Pealego is going into dock with the tide, and I must see the master.”

Her stare had the fascinating quality of a snake’s. John Calthorpe hated snakes, but was not afraid of them, and he met her eyes without a tremor.

“Too good for Selwyn?” she asked softly.

He nodded without hesitation.

“Too good for any man short of a saint,” he replied.

“Too good for a Countess of Heverswood? But she’s going to be that, John Calthorpe! She’s going to share him with the rest. Nothing is too good for Selwyn! And if she’s the kind of girl I think she is, my boy will make her—the other kind!”

And now she saw his frosty smile.

“I hope not, madam,” he said gently. “If he did, we should find another Earl of Heverswood.”

The old woman, standing on the worn doorstep of the castle, watched the man she hated until his car had disappeared behind the elms, and the terror of death was in her heart.

CHAPTER IV. — DOUBTS

WHEN John Calthorpe's shabby two-seater reached the lodge which guarded the entrance to the park the iron gates were closed. He sounded his klaxon and waited patiently for the appearance of the one servant of the house who shared his stepmother's hatred of him.

Li Sawder, with his bushy black beard, was one of the unhappy memories of his childhood; it was Li Sawder who had, by his stepmother's orders, administered the most painful flogging he had ever endured. John was a boy of fourteen at the time, and his offence had been a trivial one. His father was lying dangerously ill; there was no appeal from Caesar's wife. He had taken his beating without a murmur. A hint to his uncle would have sent Elijah Sawder packing; if he had complained to the groom, or to Fisher, the head gardener, Sawder would have had blow for blow; but he said nothing, nursed his hurts, and bore no more resentment towards the brutal lodge-keeper than he felt towards his dentist. But Li Sawder's dislike of the boy grew on the fear which the years brought that one day Master John would repay his thrashing with interest.

John sounded his signal again. Li knew he was there; John had seen the white curtains move at the first raucous notes. He got down and walked to the gate, and was trying the lock when the man appeared. There were streaks of grey in his beard, and the little boy to whom he had taken the strap towered head and shoulders above him."Didn't hear thee," growled the lodge- keeper.

He came from a line of Quakers and grafted to his west- country speech not a few of their idioms.

John accepted the fiction with his wintry smile.

"His lordship's getting married," said the man, as he leisurely fitted a key to the gate. "There won't be any room at the hall for thee, Master John, when the babies come along."

"I shall have to turn you out of your lodge and live there," said John with a quiet laugh, and the man accepted the jest literally.

"Ay! That's the way of the rich—to turn the poor into the kennels!" He glowered round at the hated figure. "Keep us in the mire so thee can walk on us and keep thy feet clean!"

"You're a cantankerous old gentleman," said John good- humouredly. "I was merely joking—open the gate, Sawder, I'm in a hurry."

But by mischance the lock had jammed. It was a genuine accident, though, from the satisfaction on the bearded face, Li Sawder might have planned it all.

“Thee’ll have to go out by Bailiff’s Gate, young master. Thicky old lock’s g’in me trouble afore. I’ll get the village smith up; must have the gate open in time for the bride. A grand lass, master, like ripe picking. A firm-figured lass—”

“Sawder.”

John Calthorpe’s voice was never so soft, yet in that one word the man heard warning and threat, and he scowled into the young man’s face with the resentment which a bitter insult might have aroused.

“You will not discuss Miss Predelle with me or with anybody else—that way!Is there a short cut to the Bailiffs Gate? I have forgotten. How are your children, Sawder?”

Li was breathing heavily, and it was some time before he could find his voice.

“My children are in good work and none the better for thy curiosity, Master John.”

It was curious how the mention of the children John had known when he was a child of six invariably aroused the old man to wrath. Sometimes his piercing eyes would search John’s face as though he suspected an ill-timed jest.

He swung the car about.

“Is the dyke bridged?” he asked.

He did not wait for the answer, but sent his machine along the rough cart-track that ran parallel with the high wall, and soon there was no need for an answer. A tiny stream tumbled down the sloping lands of Heverswood Castle and had its overflow under the wall. And the deep gully where he had sat as a boy and dreamed and planned and given rein to his imagination was unbridged. He sent the car sharply up the slope until he came to a place where he knew the stream was fordable. Five minutes later he came in sight of the Bailiff’s Gate, which was no more than a big wooden door which gave access from the road to the home farm. Turning on to the gravelled drive, he saw over his shoulder a big limousine sweep down through the elms that hid the house and follow behind him. It overtook him just as the gate was

opened by the keeper's wife, and he turned his head to meet the smiling eyes of Mary Predelle. As the car came abreast she leant over the side.

"Won't you come up to Feathers and meet my father?"

The invitation staggered him.

"I'd be delighted, Miss Predelle—but I'm due in London this afternoon——"

"This afternoon?" she scoffed. "London is only an hour's run—and you have to pass the house. Will you follow? I promise we will not go too fast."

Johnny chuckled.

"You cannot go too fast for my chariot of fire," he said, and had reason to regret his boast, for it required the most careful nursing of his old machine to keep her car within sight.

Feathers lay eight miles away on the London road—a sprawling red building that had once been a farmhouse, but which now, with its marble swimming-pool and Italian garden, was one of the show places of the county.

He swung through the bronze gates and reached the portico in time to see the car turning towards its hidden garage. Mary was talking to a stout and florid man, who he guessed was her father. Paul Predelle was an English-born American subject, who had been wealthy before the discovery of oil on his Texan properties made him one of the ten richest men in the world.

"Daddy, this is John Calthorpe—Selwyn's brother." "Glad to know you, Mr. Calthorpe. As we are coming into your family I guess we shall see a whole lot of each other. Mary, love, get Mr. Calthorpe a long drink. I admire your family, Mr. Calthorpe … been reading Timm's History of the Old British Nobility … you go way back to the Fulkes of Normandy…."

He talked rapidly, firing questions and statements in a staccato rattle of speech, waiting neither for answer nor agreement. A flabby man, thought John, and lethargic. He had the manner and the abrupt decisiveness of the successful American industrialist, but that was a trick he had acquired by association. Beneath the energy and vigour of his Americanism was a deep layer of fatty bourgeoisism of the most pronounced British type.

John neither liked nor disliked him. He could picture this clean-shaven face, minus the cigar, beaming across the counter in a bacon store—why bacon, he could not for the life of him understand.

“It is certainly an elegant family.” Mr. Predelle’s eloquence flowed like a shallow stream above a pebbly bed. “Now, in our country we pretend all that family stuff is bunk. And yet we are proud of our own aristocracy. Now, Mary’s father was one of the grandest Southern gentlemen—”

“Mary’s father?” John was surprised into blurting the question.

“That’s so. Lady Heverswood, your respected ma-in-law, knows. Mary’s my adopted daughter. Never had any children—never married. In our country adoption is a legal process….”

Johnny listened for ten minutes to an exposition of the laws governing the State of Idaho, and during the recital made his slow way to the prettily furnished drawing room.

At last, silenced and a little depressed by the eloquence of his host, he was left alone with the girl. She had been watching him throughout his ordeal, sympathy and mischief in her eyes, and when Mr. Predelle’s dynamic force was spent and he had disappeared to recuperate (as John gathered) at the billiards-room buffet, Mary took the young man’s arm and led him to a deep window-seat that overlooked the terrace, gay with golden daffodils and the purple and white of hyacinths.

“Do you mind? Daddy is rather an enthusiast … but I am not apologizing for him so much as for this familiarity of mine. You’re my dream come true I”

He stared at her open-mouthed, and she laughed into his crimson face.

“Poor man … he thinks I am making love to him!” “I think nothing of the kind I” he protested indignantly, growing redder than ever.

“You’re my dream come true,” she nodded soberly. “The big little brother I have always wanted and that money couldn’t buy!”

The relief which his sigh revealed made her sway with silent laughter.

“It was too bad of me to shock you that way.” A pause, and the smile left her face. “How do you think you will like your new sister?”

He nodded.

“You’re also my dream come true,” he said solemnly. “I’ve always wanted a pretty sister.”

“That’s not fair.” She held up her hand in protest, and John saw the flash of a large emerald on her third finger, and for some reason or other felt a little

twinge at his heart. She was so lovely, so unspoilt. An Easter lily of a girl, too delicate a thing for the coarse hands of a man whose love affairs were the talk of theatrical London. “Johnny—I’m going to call you Johnny—do you mind?” He shook his head. “Shall I be terribly happy? Daddy thinks I will. He sees me in a coronet and robes and is aching to instruct the servants to call me ‘my lady’—but shall I be happy?”

He did not answer. The glib platitudes to which his brain gave shape were beyond the power of utterance. She was looking at him, searching his very soul with those truth-compelling eyes of hers. There was a tenseness in her attitude, in the sudden anxiety of expression, which stilled the light-hearted equivocation which came to his lips. It would have been easier to jest with a dying man.

“Shall I?”

“Is that fair? I do not know your capacity for happiness. I know nothing of what you require in a man, Mary. Selwyn”—another pause—”has his points.”

For the life of him he could not think of one.

“Are they ‘points’ which would make a woman—me —happy? I’m dreadfully worried, John. It seemed so easy to say yes, and daddy was so pleased about it. And there is nobody I can ask—except you. I knew, the moment I saw you to-day, that—well, that I had a friend —a good brother.”

He was silent—hating himself because his very silence was a disloyalty to the House. The money was needed if Heverswood was to recover its glories. He had spoken hastily of money he could bring into the estate in two years—in a year. But there were many “ifs”. He had discovered an unsuspected source of revenue, but its continuance depended upon so many contingencies. The three estates of the family were heavily mortgaged. He had freed the home farms; was in a fair way to releasing the tentacles that were strangling Heverswood itself. It would be years, however, before he could clear the estate of its debt, for there were current demands which ate into the profits of his business. The money was necessary. Heverswood came first in all his considerations. It was his fetish, his obsession. Pride in the House, a passionate love for the fair lands that men of his name had lorded for centuries ... he looked, and his heart ached for her.

“I don’t know. Men—are queer. All men are queer in some respect. Selwyn is neither worse nor better than the average man in his position—and with his limitations. You know men, Mary? They are careless, happy- go-lucky creatures. The drones of the world who gorge themselves with the honey of

life. God made them that way. They flit from flower to flower and think no wrong of it." He was basely libelling his sex, but Selwyn must be excused in advance.

"I see," she nodded slowly. "One does not expect an angel from heaven. I suppose a past is indispensable in a man. I take that for granted. But the drones are killed after a year of riot and looting, and man lives on. Does he stay a drone, or does he give up his wanderings from flower to flower? That is what I want to know, Johnny—I'm growing terrified—terrified!"

Johnny drew a long breath.

"He will settle down—marriage changes a man—and children," he added awkwardly.

Her eyes were on his, searching, probing. She was biting her red lower lip thoughtfully.

"I wonder," she said; and then Mr. Predelle came in with a pink cocktail in either hand.

All the way to London the girl's face showed dimly through the windscreen; she appeared on the hoardings, incongruously intruding into flaming advertisements. He saw her on the gold-fretted waters of the Thames as a dinghy brought him to the weather-stained side of the big black tramp. He had lied to her—wickedly,treacherously lied to her. He was thrusting her into the slow fire that would burn out her heart and shrivel her youth.

CHAPTER V. — THE INIQUITOUS PLACE

HE lived in the unfashionable neighbourhood of Soho, in an ancient house which was part of the legacy his mother had left to him. He occupied the first floor, the ground space being let to a firm of lawyers. The floor above was in the occupation of a police sergeant, who lived rent free and acted as caretaker to the building. It was not a profitable arrangement, but it suited John. The rent of the lawyer more than paid the rates and taxes, and left a little over for renovations. The sergeant's wife kept his little suite speckless and cooked what meals he had in the house.

He was at this time making a clear profit of eight thousand pounds a year. All of this, with the exception of a few hundred pounds to maintain him in the bare necessities, went to the relief of Heverswood. He grudged himself his club subscription, rode third-class when he journeyed by train; lived on a few shillings a day. His one luxury was his car. It had been his brother's, and he had bought it from him at twice its value when Selwyn got his new Rolls.

In this spacious sitting-room John Calthorpe frequently sat up half the night studying the trade journals in all languages—he had learnt German to keep in touch with the foreign market. A busy afternoon awaited him at the docks, and it was nearly nine o'clock that night when he came into his ugly house in Fitzroy Square and went up the stairs a trifle wearily. When he rang the bell for his meagre meal he was surprised to see Sergeant Lane carry in the tray and arrange plates and cup man-clumsily on the table.

"My good lady has gone out to the pictures," he said. "I hope I haven't made the tea too strong, sir?"

John was reading one of the letters that were on the table, and shook his head.

"I didn't think that I should be here at all," the sergeant went on, setting knives and forks. "There's a big job on to-night."

"What sort of a job?" asked John, looking up. "Raid," was the laconic reply. "I can tell you, sir, because you're not one of these flighty gentlemen."

"What are you raiding—a night club?" asked John. The sergeant rubbed his chin.

"Well—it is and it isn't. It isn't supposed to be a club, but Madame Bonnigea—"

Madame Bonnigea! John Calthorpe was paralysed with amazement. It was to Madame's that Selwyn was going that night—'a very dear friend of mine'.

"Madame Bonnigea—in Harrow Square?"

The sergeant nodded.

"But, my dear man, she is a very decent member of society!"

And then the sergeant explained, and John Calthorpe's eyes opened. That the place was a gambling-hell did not shock him. It was of Selwyn he thought—Selwyn and the girl—she in whose eyes he had read something of terror. Selwyn must not be there when the raid was made.

"We've had the place under observation for a long time, and we've given them warning," the sergeant was saying. "I can't understand good- class people going to what I might describe as a haunt of vice."

The young man forced a smile.

"That sounds almost terrible," he said, with an attempt at joviality. "And talking of haunts of vice, I've just remembered a theatre engagement. Would you of your kindness put out my dress suit?"

He wanted to be alone to think out the crisis. The police would not spare Selwyn if he were the heir to a dukedom. To-morrow his name would be in the newspapers, associated with that drab haunt—and Mary Predelle would see it and there would be the end. Suppose it were? His lips tightened at the thought. What better way of smashing this horrible bargain?

When Lane called him he did not move. It would be best for her; who knew that it would not be best for Heverswood in the long run? The girl would be saved from the humilation and shame that awaited her.

"Your clothes are ready, sir."

He turned and walked into the bedroom, slipping off his jacket automatically. Heverswood must be first.

Madame Bonnigea rented a tall house in Harrow Square. Madame had never conducted a club—she gave parties to her friends. You could become a friend of Madame's by the simple process of slipping a five-pound note into the hand of the footman who opened the door, and remain a friend by tipping the waiter who brought you your wine—providing the tip were big enough. If you complained at his extortions, Madame, a fleshy French Jewess with many chins and brassy hair, was patently shocked, and said

that she would discharge the man toute suite—but the complainant was never admitted again. She liked young people around her—nice boys and nice girls. They could dance in the vast drawing room, play a little chemin de fer upstairs, flirt almost anywhere. A negro orchestra played with muted instruments (Madame never invited complaints from neighbours) and the floor of the silk-panelled dancing-room with its rosy lights was crowded with dancers whose loud voices quite drowned the music.

The waiters, swift-footed and deft of hand, moved along the settees that lined the walls, opening bottles, changing glasses. In the middle of the swaying dancers a stout man lurched drunkenly with his fair-haired young partner, whose hard lips were upturned in a smile appropriate to his folly. Pierre, Madame's manager, a sulky giant, stood by the door watching the fat man's antics with an expressionless face, ready to pounce on him and hustle him from the room when he grew too boisterous.

Two men were sitting. Selwyn had dined royally, but the thin-faced man who sat by his side was coldly sober. He had the pinched face of a jockey; his keen, small eyes surveyed the company as Selwyn spoke, though his mind was intent upon the stammered excuses of his companion. The man was a little overdressed; wore two glittering diamonds in his shirt-front, and had a trick of smoothing his face with his whole hand.

"It is a pretty serious position, old man," he said, when Selwyn stopped to sip at his champagne. "This marriage, I mean. Certain people don't believe it; they think you're faking to keep your mother quiet. But if you mean it "

"I mean it," said Selwyn doggedly. "There is big money in this. Why I'm explaining to a damn' cad like you, I don't know!"

The jockey-faced man did not move.

"Don't lose your temper—I shall have to do a lot of persuading. You ought to be able to borrow a lot of money on the strength of this engagement. That would help."

Selwyn cursed softly.

"They cleaned me out upstairs," he said, with drunken gravity. "Ruined me, Jim—took the last of the family plate."

"You shouldn't play baccarat," said the wizened man. "You can't afford to lose."

Selwyn grinned foolishly.

“That’s why I’ve got to marry—I’m sick of going hat in hand to that damn’ brother of mine—half-brother. If you knew the airs he gives himself—it’s humil—humiliating!”

“Who’s this bird?” the little man interrupted to ask.

The man who had come into the room stood out from that frowsy crowd. Tall, straight, perfectly modelled, his evening kit gave him an added dignity. Aristocrat to his finger-tips, John Calthorpe came like a clean ray of sunlight into a space where candles were burning.

Selwyn turned his head to follow the man’s eyes, and leapt up with an angry oath. In a second he was facing his brother, half sobered by the shock of his appearance.

“What do you want?” he asked. He seemed to forget that he had invited John that very day.

“You—come outside.”

The footman who guarded the front door had appeared and was talking excitedly to Pierre.

“Outside—what do you mean?”

“I want you to come with me, Selwyn—out of this filthy hole.”

The band had stopped playing; the dancers stood watching the man—too interested to demand the inevitable encore.

“Is that so? Wondered why you turned up,” sneered Selwyn, swaying unsteadily on his feet. “Father, dear father, come home with me now.” He wailed the old song, and then, with a ferocity that John had only seen him display once in his life: “Get out of here! Go to your spelling-bee or your sewing-circle, or wherever you get your fun, and leave me alone.”

“Pardon, m’sieur.”

Pierre’s hand dropped on to the young man’s shoulder.

“You are not a friend of Madame’s, I think—you pressed your way into this house. You will now retire, please.”

John did not turn his head.

“Take your hand from my shoulder.”

“You will now retire.” The grip tightened, but only for a second.

With a wrench John Calthorpe freed himself. Nobody saw him strike the blow that sent the big man crashing against the wall. There was a scream of fear from the women, and then two waiters sprang at him, but he stepped back, landed on the jaw of the first, and in another instant was at the curtains which covered the window at the far end of the room.

“I advise you ladies and gentlemen to get away before the police arrive,” he said, and his answer was a tipsy laugh.

“Bluff!” shrieked Selwyn. “You’re going through it, Johnny, and you’d better take your licking … lesson to you … you interfering fool! …”

Pierre was advancing, a champagne bottle in his hand, his pallid face working convulsively. And the crowd stood and watched; evil faces of men and women grew eager at the feast of pain that threatened. The waiters had secured bottles; Madame, livid with rage, forgot the good name of her house and urged them on with little incoherent squeaks of fury.

John sidestepped as the first bottle came crashing to splinters against the wall. He lunged, and drove his left under the manager’s chin, and at that moment the nearest waiter struck.

John staggered back, the blood running down his face—and he put up his hand to guard his head as the second bottle rose….

And then somebody shrieked in fear—a woman. Through the open window came such a Thing as men only see in dreams: a half-naked brown man of terrible strength. He seemed to leap from the window-sill straight at the throat of Pierre. There was a strangled cry, a momentary vision of a flying body, and the big manager fell, a crumpled heap, against Selwyn, knocking him senseless.

“The police!”

The voice and the sound of a scuffle came from below. John dashed to the half-conscious Selwyn and dragged him to the window.

“Quick, hombre! What is your name?” John spoke breathlessly in Spanish.

“Quio, master.”

“Can you get him out—that way?” He pointed to the window.

Quio stooped and lifted Selwyn as though he were a baby. His short brown legs swung over the window-sill, with one arm he drew the bemused man through, and then, gripping the man's collar with his teeth as a St. Bernard might hold a drowning man, he disappeared into the darkness, and in the pandemonium which followed the arrival of the police nobody noticed.

John turned to meet a familiar face.

"You, Mr. Calthorpe? I didn't expect to see you here."

"I might say the same to you, sergeant," smiled John. He was white and shaking, but he could smile.

"I was called out after you left," said Sergeant Lane in a low voice. "I'm afraid I can't do anything for you, Mr. Calthorpe; you'll have to go to the station. And they tell me your brother is here—Lord Heverswood. His name's in the visitors' book."

John Calthorpe looked the policeman in the eyes.

"My brother has not been here this evening," he said steadily. "I always sign his name—for the swank of it!"

CHAPTER VI. — MARY UNDERSTANDS

MR. HOLMAN PREDELLE was a man who believed in straight talking. He had with the best of intentions stripped the beauty from mystery and labelled the raw understuff “knowledge”. And Mary sat at her sewing, with the dainty cambric close to her face, and listened to all the news that was fit to print.

She was not shocked; hurt a little, bewildered by the wide difference between her conception of John Calthorpe and the gross reality.

“That’s Selwyn’s brother,” he said grimly. “Hooch an’ everything! Well, that cuts down our acquaintance with Mr. John to ‘Good morning’ and ‘Good night’. It’s tough on Selwyn, just as the engagement was announced—in the same journal, by Christopher! And I guess you’d think that butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth! Hit one of these guys with a bottle, too—it’s certainly tough on your beau, Mary.”

“I don’t understand it,” she said, shaking her head helplessly. “John isn’t that kind of man, daddy. He must have got into the place by mistake.”

“I’ll bet he did!” Mr. Predelle smiled unpleasantly. “Biggest mistake he ever made. Did I tell you what her ladyship said when she heard about it?”

“I don’t want to know.” She rose quickly. “Have you seen Selwyn?”

“Yuh I” he nodded. “The poor lad’s in bed—sick. Says the disgrace has made him ill. Do you wonder, honey? And he looks ill.”She said nothing to this.

“What did they do to John—you didn’t tell me that?” she asked at length.

“Fined him forty shillings—that’s about eight dollars. Can you beat it? Why, if that happened in New York he’d have been sent to the Island. They’re death on that kind of joint in our country, Mary. And rightly. Well, well ... and I thought he was a real nice boy!”

She put the sewing into her basket and closed the lid. “I’m going to Heverswood,” she said definitely, and he agreed.

“You’ll find Selwyn knocked out. A word from the girl he loves would do a whole lot to bring him on to his feet. Just say that it won’t make any difference....” She made a hurried exit, and going up to her room, rang for her maid.

“Tell Steele I want the car at once, Alice,” she said. “I want him to stop in Belford village. I have a telegram to send.”

“Yes, miss.” The maid was all a-twitter with her news. “Have you heard, miss, about Mr. Calthorpe— and him a gentleman, too, and brother to his lordship?” Mary’s face and manner were alike frigid.

“Alice, do you like this situation?”

“Why, yes, miss….”

“Then please don’t talk yourself out of it!”

Mary nodded to the door, and the affrighted maid escaped gladly. She had never encountered her mistress in this mood.

An hour before this John Calthorpe got down from his old car and, brushing the dust from his knees and sleeves, went leisurely into the hall. The face of Thomas the footman was inscrutable.

“Is her ladyship about, Thomas?”

“Yes, sir. Shall I …?”He hesitated.

“Yes, tell her I am here.”

Thomas appeared in a short time at the library door, and the visitor walked in. Lady Heverswood was in her favourite attitude, bolt upright on the edge of an armchair drawn near the fire. Her coal-black eyes swept him as he drew near.

“Well?” she asked harshly. “You’ve got yourself into a mess, John!”

“Yes, I have rather.” His tone was airy, his manner indifferent. “Young blood, madam. Youth will be served.”

The eyes snapped at him, but she made no rejoinder. “And Selwyn has taken to his bed—dear, dear!”

He knew well enough that she was aware of the truth. She did not disguise her knowledge.

“How did you get him away? He says when he woke up he was lying in a yard with an ugly black man squatting by his side!”

John laughed softly.

“Bit of a shock for Selwyn. He must have thought that he had passed over and was getting acquainted with his new host!Poor old Selwyn!”

“Why did you go there at all—what right had you?” He seldom interrupted her. He broke his rule now.

“I knew the place was to be raided—it was high time the police took action. There was gambling in every other room. Madame will be lucky if she escapes imprisonment. I went to warn Selwyn, and somebody started something—I rather think it was I, but I have always hated people pawing me. The black man got Selwyn through the window and climbed down a drainpipe with him.”

Lady Heverswood shivered.

“He might have been killed!”

“Not he; these woodmen climb like cats. Oh, you mean Selwyn? There was no danger. Quio had his teeth in Selwyn’s collar.”

A silence.

“I presume your uncle does not know—yet,” she said. “He wouldn’t believe it, anyway,” was the disconcerting reply. He looked at her thoughtfully. “I want you to do something for me, Lady Heverswood.”

So unusual a request opened her eyes.

“You see….” He was at a loss how to begin. “I don’t want Miss Predelle to believe that I’m the rascal I appear to be. After all, it is natural that I wish to preserve a little of her respect. I’d like you to tell her that—that it was quite an accident I was in that wretched house at all.”

“Why should I?” boomed the old woman.

“Well, if you don’t”—he seemed reluctant to put the alternative to her—”I’m afraid I shall have to tell her the truth.”

“She wouldn’t believe you—any more than your uncle would believe wrong of you.”

John smiled.

“Oh, yes, she would,” he said gently. “And there is Selwyn’s right roman handwriting in the visitors’ book—he must have been mad to sign his name. You couldn’t confuse his writing with mine. And Mary Predelle isn’t a fool.”

She pondered this, glooming into the fire.

“I’m sending you a cheque to-morrow for a thousand,” he went on. “The mortgage on Low Meadow was cleared to-day. And the trees are safe; I’ve finished paying off the bank, and that’s another little pillow lifted from the infant face of Heverswood—we’ll have the old place breathing naturally in a year or two. Can I see Selwyn? ‘ ‘

She jerked her head to the door impatiently.

Selwyn looked ill. The face that was upturned on the pillow was yellow in contrast to the snowy linen. John chuckled joyously.

“I’m ill,” snarled the invalid. “Fever or something “

“If ever I saw a man who looked like a poisoned monkey!”

“See here, John”—Selwyn struggled up on his elbow and spluttered in his wrath—”I didn’t ask you to come here. You damned gaolbird!”

The tantalizing laughter of the other roused him to madness.

“Get out I” he screamed. “Get out!”

His mother was in the room in a second; she must have been waiting outside the door, John thought.

“What is this—don’t you realize that Selwyn is ill? You great oaf! Come out or I’ll call the servants and have you beaten from the door!”

The man spun round.

“Call Li Sawder,” he said softly. “You found him useful once before, madam. Let him flog the man as he flogged the child.”

There was a deathly stillness in the over-furnished room.

“Get out,” whimpered Selwyn from his bed, and this time his brother obeyed. He preceded Lady Heverswood to the hall.

“I am staying here to-night. Unfortunately my— conviction has rather upset my plans. Even my constabulary bodyguard has lost faith in me and fears for his reputation at headquarters.”

She shrugged her massive shoulders.

“I will have your room put ready,” she said, and swept into the library.

A little later, John went up to his room.

“Keeper of the family conscience, guardian angel to rich American ladies, petty Don Quixote! I’d give a hundred for another punch at somebody’s head!” He spoke his thoughts aloud.

He had a bath and changed, for the journey down had been an unusually grimy one. He did not know that Mary Predelle was in the house until, coming downstairs, he saw her getting into her car and walked out to her. Lady Heverswood was standing by the door of the limousine and heard the footsteps behind her.

“Good-bye, my dear,” and, to the chauffeur, sharply: “Drive on, my man.”

“Wait!” Mary had seen him in the gloomy entrance hall and beckoned him. There was nothing of guilt in his face or mien. “I read … all about it—at least, daddy read it.” She was a little breathless. “I’m so sorry.”

She held out her hand; he took it with great deliberation.

“I’m rather sorry, too,” he said, as deliberately he looked round at Lady Heverswood. “Her ladyship has probably explained? …”

It was a question rather than a statement, and the girl’s embarrassment was all too significant.

“I told Mary that you were probably more sinned against than sinning,” said the old woman, defiance in her eyes and in her tone.

“Is that all?” he asked gently.

Lady Heverswood stiffened. She played the House— an unfailing card.

“It is not a subject that I cared to discuss with Miss Predelle,” she said. “Either you were an habitué or Selwyn was. His name was in the book and you admitted that it was your signature, John Calthorpe “

She had said too much; she realized it as she saw the sudden look of understanding in Mary Predelle’s face—a quick lighting up of the dark-grey eyes, a going and coming of the pink in her cheeks.

“Oh … I didn’t know that … about the book, I mean. Selwyn’s name was there!” She laughed softly, although she was not entirely amused. “How very funny!”

And with her understanding John fell into a panic. His own cursed vanity (so he called it), his desire to stand well in the eyes of has brother’s fiancee,

had led him to betrayal of the House. He was undermining the foundation on which she was building her life.

“It was I all right,” he said, incoherent in his haste to correct the impression she had received. “I’m rather a night-club lizard. They have a fascination for me— the only thing I want you to believe is that I—that my interest in the establishment was a fairly wholesome one. It is very unfortunate, the whole thing. I went there to gamble …”

Her eyes never left his face throughout his unconvincing narrative. When he had finished:

“Drive back with me to Feathers,” she said peremptorily.

Lady Heverswood was alarmed, and showed it.

“I will ask you to excuse him,” she said. “Selwyn is very anxious to see him—at once.”

“I’ll wait until he has seen Lord Heverswood—I have heaps of time.” And she settled herself back against the cushions of the car.

Lady Heverswood fixed her stepson with a baleful stare. Her lips were a little tight, the straight lines that ran from her nose to the corners of her mouth were hard ridges of flesh.

“I can spare you—John,” she said. The words almost choked her.

It was not until the car was clear of the Bailiffs’ Gate that John Calthorpe spoke.

“I’d rather not see your father, if you don’t mind,” he said, and she nodded.

“I will stop the car and we will walk a little way—I want to talk to you.”

She pressed the indicator; the machine drew up by the side of the road and they alighted, walking on to the place where the stile of a fieldpath gave them an excuse for stopping.

“Now—what is the truth about your arrest?”

John Calthorpe had his story ready. He had called at Madame Bonnigea’s intending to pass an idle hour. There had been a fight and then the police had arrived. He was a poor inventor, she thought, and, thinking, said as much.

“Selwyn was there,” she accused, and now, when a plain, unadorned he was called for, he was silent.

“You are not being the kind of big little brother I wanted, John,” she went on, and the gentle reproach in her tone hurt him.

“I’m in the position of being big little brother to two people,” he was stung into replying. “Two people whose interests are in conflict.”

She was leaning backward against the stile, her elbows on the top rail, one hand playing with the rope of seed pearls that supported a splash of carved jade. Her eyes were on the ground; a thoughtful little frown furrowed her forehead.

“I hardly know what to do.” Her gesture was a despairing one. “I think I like Selwyn well enough—to make the experiment. I think so. But I want a lead, Johnny—somebody’s assurance besides father’s. It is a horribly dangerous experiment. Madame Bonnigea’s —well, that is part of a bachelor’s history. I wonder what advice your father would have given me if he … were alive to discuss this thing?”

With a sinking heart John Calthorpe admitted to himself the ghastly truth.

“Miss Predelle, I will tell you what I think. If I were you … I think I should go back to America and find a man of my own kind … a decent-living gentleman.…

He saw the millions fading from the Heverswood coffers and groaned in spirit.

“You mean that?” She had the uncanny gift of reading his mind. “You are trying to be horribly mercenary and selfish—and you are trying just as hard to be fair to me?”

“That isn’t so much of a trial, Mary,” he said quietly. “I don’t want to do Selwyn an injustice. Marriage may make him. He used to be quite a decent fellow—especially to me, and during a time when I hadn’t many friends. And marriages that look all wrong to the outsider are so often wonderfully successful. I’m vacillating like an old weather vane! And I admit that I am selfish. I’d be very proud to have you be my sister-in-law. That is only natural.”

She sighed and drew herself erect.

“I’ll go through with it,” she said, “only it seems—all wrong. I wish … daddy weren’t so rich.”

There was a wistfulness in her tone which melted him. For a second he had the impulse to tell her the truth— that her fears were his certainties; that Selwyn had the mind and soul of the brute beast.

She turned away abruptly and walked ahead of him to the waiting car.

"You'll not come to Feathers?" she asked, indifferently, it seemed. "Well—good-bye, Johnny. You are just a wee bit too unselfish, I think."

And with this she left him, and he made his leisurely way back to the house.

He stood for a moment on the crest of the slope, admiring the big grey house. The evening sun had thrown the shadows of the tall poplars across the face of the castle so that it was barred black and orange—a prison-house, he thought. Here might a sensitive girl captured in marriage eat out her proud heart and none would guess her secret.

He was walking on when he saw, just ahead of him, skulking in the shadows of a box hedge, a man whom, despite his shabbiness, he instantly recognized, although he had lost sight of him for years.

For a moment he was too astonished to speak. Bertie Thrennigen was at one time a leader of the more hectic sets of society. He came of a good family, and although he had been expelled from his school, unfortunately for him he was never allowed to realize the seriousness of that happening. He was cursed with a fond mother who saw no harm in him; doubly cursed by reason of the great wealth which he inherited at her death, and dissipated a few years after he had gained control of the considerable property which came to him. A clever amateur, he had gone on to the stage, and had been moderately successful in a production which he himself had financed. The play was less successful than he; it ran for a few weeks, and took with it almost the last of his mother's money.

All this John knew; but that the Beau Brummel of other days, the squanderer of thousands, should have come down to tramp level was astounding. He called him by name and the man turned quickly.

"And what the devil are you doing here on this fine day?" asked John.

Mr. Thrennigen was at first startled.

"How do you do—John Calthorpe, isn't it? To tell you the truth, old boy," he said, with great frankness, 'T'm trying to touch Selwyn. I'm broke. There's some money coming to me from Canada, but for the moment… I want to get next to old Selwyn."

“Then why don’t you go up to the house and see him? He’s in bed.”

Bertie stroked his unshaven chin. He was one of the least desirable of Selwyn’s associates, and had not been to Heverswood Castle for years. In spite of the jaunty set of his hat and the startling brilliance of his cravat, John guessed him to be down and out.

“Well, the truth is, old dear”—he hesitated—”I don’t want to go up just now. What I wanted to do was to send a note up to the old boy. I want a hundred. Look at my clothes! Good Lord … if people saw me!”

He went on to explain that he had just arrived from France. He had in truth returned from Germany, with consular aid.

As he was talking a girl came into view. She was walking slowly down a path towards one of the coverts which dotted the park.

“Who’s that, old boy?” asked Bertie with some anxiety as he peered short-sightedly at the figure.

“That is Miss Alma Keenan,” said John, and the words produced an extraordinary effect upon the man. He turned a shade paler, and the hand that went to his mouth was shaking.

“She’s not coming this way, is she?” he asked huskily. “She’s the one demnition female I don’t want to meet!”

“Why not?” asked John, astonished.

Bertie put his hand in his pocket and took out a crumpled letter.

“Give this to Selwyn, will you?” he almost pleaded. “I’m broke, Johnny—broke to the wide world! Tell him to send anything he can rake together by special messenger.”

“Do you want some money?”

Great as was his evident need, Bertie Thrennigen was in such a hurry to be gone that, with a wave of his hand, he jumped over a stile and half ran, half walked across the meadow.

What was behind this? Why was this man in such terror at the prospect of meeting Lady Heverswood’s secretary face to face? John speculated all the way back to the house.

CHAPTER VII. — A STRANGE VISITOR

JOHN CALTHORPE had often wondered who was the rat-faced man he had seen with his brother on the night of the raid. He had time for thought, for with the clearing of the Pealego there was a lull in his business, and since the demand was so heavy, and the supply of wood determined by the period of its seasoning, there was no immediate necessity for finding new markets.

He thought about the girl, but not too often. That was one of the painful subjects of meditation that had to be dismissed almost before it was raised. But the rat-faced man was really worth thinking about. He saw him once by accident crossing Trafalgar Square. Johnny was in his car, otherwise he would certainly have stopped him and claimed acquaintance, if only to discover what association his brother had with so unprepossessing an individual.

Selwyn had apparently recovered. John saw him one day, coming out of a famous furnisher's, in company with Mr. Predelle, and he smiled grimly. The castle could stand a lot of refurnishing, he thought.

One of the lesser embarrassments of life for John Calthorpe was the attachment of the Indian, Quio. Having demonstrated his ability and willingness, he seemed to have taken it for granted that any question of his employment had been definitely settled. That he was a "tracker" John discovered when he learned that Quio had never really lost sight of him from the moment he left the ship, except for the period he was at Heverswood, and then, with that uncanny instinct, and without speaking a word of the English language, he had found his way to Fitzroy Square.

Calthorpe suspected, not without reason, that the Indian, who spoke fluent Spanish, had gravitated to Soho, and had there discovered, through one of the many who spoke the language, his address. That he knew his name was at first a puzzle to John, until he remembered the years he had spent in Paraguay, where he had been as well known as the native chiefs.

The policeman-caretaker was reluctant to share a house with so wild a savage, but as his wife had gone away into the country the objection was not insuperable, and Quio was installed in a garret room at the very top of the building.

He was so useful a man with the "long brush", so docile and humble a creature, that Sergeant Lane became reconciled to his presence, and even supplied him with cast-off articles of clothing; but it was John who insisted upon the hair-cut, which was performed by the sergeant himself, not without trepidation.

On one other point John Calthorpe was implacable. He had discovered that the Indian carried a knife; he saw the shape of it as he bent down to take off his master's boots one night.

"In this land, Quio, no man carries the espada, big or little."

With some reluctance the Indian took it from his body-belt; a long, slender poignard, with a curiously thin handle covered with thin scales of gold. John took the knife and examined it curiously. Its two edges were razor-keen, its point like a needle.

"Master, I keep this for your enemies," pleaded the brown man.

John smiled.

"We must try something less drastic, Quio," he said in English, and the man looked puzzled.

When he had gone, John put the knife away in one of the drawers of his open desk. He was a little worried about Quio; but he was uneasy about so many things that Quio deserved, and received, no more than a few seconds' thought.

He had received a polite intimation from the secretary of his club calling upon him to resign as a result of the police-court exposure. That he expected. What he did not anticipate was a call from Alma Keenan. If he had enumerated all the people in the world most likely to visit him, he would have placed Alma a long way last. Lane, who acted as a sort of keeper of the sacred door when John was in residence during the daytime, brought the card, and, reading it, John gasped.

"Miss Keenan?" he said.

"Yes, sir; a very pretty young lady."

"I know she's pretty all right," said John dryly. "Are you sure she wants to see me?"

Yet whom else could she want to see? he thought. The end of the month had come and gone. He knew the girl had left the employ of Lady Heverswood, and in many ways was glad for her sake. He had been willing to find a job for her, and thought perhaps she might have repented of her haughty rejection of his offer.

"Show her in, sergeant," he said.

The girl who came through the door was obviously no suppliant for a humble post in his office. It was Alma, but a transfigured Alma; Alma severely but beautifully dressed in an embroidered costume that must have cost three months' salary. Her hat was a Paris mode; about her neck was a long string of pearls, which might have been artificial but which looked remarkably real. She had two sparkling rings upon the finger of the hand that was bare, and in her ears were diamonds of the first water.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Keenan," he said, as he pushed forward a chair for her.

"Is it?" she said languidly, as she sat down bolt upright on the edge.

He was secretly amused, knowing little of the exigencies and requirements of modern fashions; all that occurred to him was that she had copied exactly the peculiar attitude which Lady Heverswood adopted in his presence.

"I have left Heverswood, you know?" she said.

He nodded. Then he asked good-humouredly:

"Have you found a suitable job?" And she raised her eyes in languid surprise.

"A job, Mr. Calthorpe? Great heavens, no! I am not taking any more jobs. The truth is"—she played with the silver handle of her squat umbrella—"I have had a legacy left me. That is why I gave up my position with Lady Heverswood."

All the time he was cudgelling his brains to find an excuse for her visit. The girl did not like him. It would be more true to say that the measure of her dislike was only exceeded by the attitude of mind which his stepmother displayed on all possible occasions. Why had she come? Was it to flaunt her new prosperity? The natural desire of the under-dog to advertise her independence?

"I congratulate you," he said politely, and waited.

Evidently she found it difficult to begin.

"Mr. Calthorpe, you know Mary Predelle, don't you?"

"I know Miss Predelle—yes," he said.

"She's an awfully nice girl," drawled Alma; "one of the sweetest I know. You're rather fond of her, aren't you?"

The question took his breath away, and then, with a little smile:

“I’m sure you haven’t come here out of curiosity to pry into the melancholy secrets of my young heart, Miss Keenan,” he said. “I like Miss Predelle, but I don’t think we need discuss her, need we?”

“Yes,” was the astonishing reply. “You see”— she did not raise her eyes to his, was watching the ferrule of her umbrella as she traced patterns on the carpet “—you see, Mr. Calthorpe, I am in rather a dilemma. I have been very well brought up, although I occupied a menial position in Lady Heverswood’s house. My father was a gentleman....”

She proceeded at length to detail her ancestry, and John listened with patience and not a little astonishment. Of her origin he knew nothing. She had appeared in the Heverswood household during his absence in South America. Beyond the fact that for some reason her face had appeared in a dim way rather familiar to him, he had never had the opportunity of getting interested in her.

“All this is very interesting, Miss Keenan,” he interrupted her gently, “but I don’t see exactly what it has to do with me.”

Only for a second did the old resentment show in the flash of her eyes, but she curbed whatever dislike she felt and gave him the sweetest of smiles.

“I only wanted to tell you that I’m not the kind of girl who would play a low-down trick upon another woman,” she said. “Of course, if you’re very fond of her, it makes a lot of difference, if you’d ...” She hesitated. “Well, if you wouldn’t look down upon her, and you’d do the honourable thing.”

He stared at her, open-mouthed.

“I don’t know what you’re getting at. Will you speak a little more plainly?”

But evidently, so far from speaking plainly, she did not intend to speak any more, for she rose and offered her charmingly gloved hand.

“Good-bye, Mr. Calthorpe. It’s been such a pleasure to have this little talk,” she said.

He did not take the hand, but, walking to the door, stood squarely between her and the exit.

“Before you go, Miss Keenan,” he said quietly, “I want to know exactly what you’re trying to tell me.” Again the languid eyebrows rose.

“Really, Mr. Calthorpe, I have nothing more to say,” she said; and when he did not move a tinge of red came to her pale face.

“I want to know what you mean by’doing the honourable thing’,” said John, without moving. “And what do you mean by ‘you’re too much of a lady to play a trick upon Miss Predelle’? What trick is intended?”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I merely wanted to make sure—”

“Wanted to salve your conscience in advance, eh?” And the shrewd shot hit home.

“What do you mean?” All the languor was out of her voice; she was something approaching her precious model. “How dare you talk to me like that? Let me pass, please.”

Her gesture was regal. John, in any other circumstances, could have laughed. He did, however, realize how unprofitable any further questioning would be, opened the door for her without a word, and watched her over the balustrade until the nodding paradise of her hat had disappeared from view. Then he went back to his room and thought.

CHAPTER VIII. — ALMA ASKS A QUESTION

THE PREDELLES were in town. They had come up to their little house in Clarges Street in preparation for the wedding, which was, to quote Mary's letter, to be a quiet one. Her note showed no sign of her inward perturbation.

Dear Big Little Brother (it ran),

You will come to this interesting ceremony, won't you? You will, of course, be the cynosure of disapproving eyes, and poor daddy is determined to say no more than "Good morning" and "Good night" to you—as the wedding will be after lunch, you will be spared even this indignity unless he adds "Good afternoon" to his repertoire! I am reconciled to—things. It is so much easier to go along the new road which somebody has obligingly laid for you than to break through the tall hedges and stumble in the ditches that are such obstacles in the path of self-determination—blessed word! I shall need your moral support, big little brother. I have my moments of panic, in common with all young ladies who flutter on the brink of matrimony. Come and see me. Daddy has been elected to a very exclusive club, and is a little dazed by his good fortune. He goes there every day in the hope of finding somebody who will take pity upon and talk to him. Yesterday a man nodded, and daddy came home quite pleased, though I'm sure that the nodder was looking at somebody else.

There was a postscript.

Come at four to tea: I shall be alone.

He was on his way to Clarges Street, walking down Piccadilly, when he met Selwyn, who was in his most genial and expansive mood. Selwyn he could have endured, but Bertie Thrennigen he neither expected nor approved. The change in Bertie's appearance was little short of wonderful. He was again in his more gorgeous raiment. Evidently Selwyn had been generous—Selwyn, who was generous to nobody. What queer secret did Bertie hold? he wondered.

He would have hurried on, but his brother detained him.

"You're coming to my bachelor party to-morrow night, old bird?" he said. "I'll take no denial, in spite of your hideous past." The jest afforded him such amusement that he literally screamed with laughter, to the amazement of passers-by. "Dinner at Rigiali's, and on to the Arts Ball. Rigiali's is practically given over to the revellers, so you've got to turn up in fancy dress, old bird."

John shook his head.

“No, thank you, but I shall be at your wedding.”

Selwyn’s face changed.

“The devil you will! Is the old lady sending you an invitation?”

“I don’t know—but I have promised Miss Predelle that I will be there.”

John would have passed on, but Selwyn put a detaining hand on his sleeve.

“I can’t prevent her asking you, of course,” he said, and there was in his small, beady eyes a glint of suspicious distrust that accentuated the weak viciousness of his features; “but after we’re married …”

John shook his arm free with unaccustomed roughness; he could not trust himself to reply, and, with a curt nod to the two men, passed on his way.

He had gone only a few strides further when the shrill, cacophonous shriek of powerful brakes applied violently made him instinctively jerk his head towards the roadway. The sight that met his eyes brought him to a standstill. A girl, well dressed, slimly built, had been crossing the road in an obvious hurry, dodging a precarious way through the Piccadilly traffic, dense yet fast-moving. The driver of the big limousine had had to utilize every ounce of braking power his car possessed in order to avoid running her down.

John recognized the girl instantly: it was Alma Keenan, and he was obviously her objective. Ignoring the scathing comments of the chauffeur, she reached the pavement and, making for John, clutched his arm with a feverish grip.

“Mr. Calthorpe,” she gasped, “I want—I want to speak to you!”

He had never seen man or woman so distressed as she. Her teeth were chattering, and the hand that gripped his sleeve trembled so convulsively that his arm shook.

“Why, what on earth “ he began.

“I want to speak to you—only for a second!”

She half pulled him into the comparative quiet of Berkeley Street.

“Who was that? I saw you just now with a man,” she went on incoherently. “Yes, yes”—with impatience—”I know that you were talking to … Lord Heverswood, but who was the other man?”

“The other man?” said John in surprise. “Why, that was Bertie Thrennigen, who is a better actor than he is a gentleman, and a worse actor than any other man on the stage.”

“Bertie Thrennigen?” she repeated slowly. “An actor?” And then: “Are you sure? Will you swear that?”

“Why, of course,” said John, trying to soothe her. “With those reservations I am prepared to guarantee that he’s an actor.”

Something made him look round. At the comer of Berkeley Street a little man was standing watching them, and he recognized this flashily attired individual instantly as the man he had seen with Selwyn at Madame Bonnigea’s on the night of the raid.

“Who is that?” he asked.

“Never mind about him,” she wailed impatiently- “You’re sure … about what you said?”

“Now listen, Miss Keenan”—John patted the poor, trembling hand kindly—”you’re in some kind of trouble. Won’t you tell me what it is?”

People were looking at them curiously as they passed; but John had none of the self-consciousness which would have made a man of lesser breeding feel uncomfortable.

“I can’t tell you … I will come to your house some time. You’re very good.…”

Suddenly she squeezed his hand, and before he realized what had happened she was flying back towards Piccadilly. He saw her stop and speak to the little watcher, and together they turned the comer and passed out of sight.

“Curiouser and curiouser,” said the perplexed John as he continued his slow way to Clarges Street.

CHAPTER IX. — THE HANDKERCHIEF

MARY came into the hall as the butler opened the door to him, and he thought he had never seen her look so beautiful. And yet ... was she not a little finer-drawn? And behind the smile could he not trace evidence of distress beyond expression? Her mien and voice were gay enough as she took him into the little drawing room.

“Sit down. I haven’t seen you for a week,” she said, and almost pushed him down on to the settee. “First of all, I want to ask you something. Is it true they have turned you out of your club?”

“I was resigning anyway,” he said airily.

John Calthorpe was not a good liar.

“That’s one thing,” she said. “Another story I heard is that you are keeping bad company.”

“I?”—in amazement.

She nodded, her eyes twinkling.

“They tell me that you have a cannibal valet.”

John laughed softly.

“Quio is not a cannibal; in fact, he’s rather a highly educated Indian,” he said. “Who knows that he may not lead me to one of those undiscovered treasuries of the ancient American people, whose ruined temples fill his part of Paraguay?”

He told her about the man and the queer way in which Quio had come into his fife, but omitted the story of the Indian’s startling appearance at Madame Bonnigea’s.

But this she did not want telling. Alice, the maid, had a sister in rather a gay household, and Mary knew the story of the raid and all that had preceded the appearance of the police, for Alice was something of a gossip, and for the first time in the period of her service had received encouragement to talk.

Mary listened without comment to the lame narrative, and, when he had finished:

“I have written to your club,” she said quietly.

John gasped.

“You’ve written? But, my dear girl—!”

“I’ve written. You can be as angry as you like with me, but I found out the names of the committee of your club, and I have written to every one of them separately, telling them the true story of what happened, why you were in the club and why you were arrested. I know it is an unpardonable thing to do, but you must explain my lack of reticence by the fact that I’m a wild American girl. I have no doubt it is very embarrassing for you to have a strange woman writing to your committee, but, Johnny, I do not intend allowing you to make this sacrifice. You took the blame to yourself because you thought it might spoil Selwyn’s chances of marriage if it were known. Well, I’m marrying him. Please don’t talk. I’m ringing for the tea.”

He sat in silence till the tea-table was wheeled in, and, when the maid had withdrawn, he said:

“Does your father know?”

She shook her head.

“I didn’t think it was necessary that he should know,” she answered quietly; “and it is equally unnecessary that your—what do you call it?—conviction should be erased. The thing that counts for the moment is your club.”

Again he was silent, until:

“It was splendid of you, Mary, and I really am not embarrassed by your action—that is to say, I suffer no loss of dignity by having the loveliest lady in the world writing on my behalf. When is the marriage to take place?”

“The day after to-morrow,” was her surprising reply—surprising because he had taken it for granted that there would be the usual long engagement, followed by an autumn wedding.

“Daddy may have to go back to America in September,” she said, “and he wants the thing over before he goes. For my own part”—here her voice was a little less steady than it had been—”it cannot be finished and done with too soon—your tea is getting cold.”

“Has Selwyn been here?” he asked. “I met him a little time ago. I hope he didn’t bring the unutterable Bertie to call upon you?”

She shook her head.

“No, that is our arrangement—we do not see each other until the wedding-day. Lady Heverswood was here to lunch. She doesn’t like you.”

A ghost of a smile trembled at the corner of his mouth. “No, she doesn’t,” he admitted. “Did she express her dislike more openly than usual?”

Mary settled herself back in the corner of the settee and laughed.

“You’re the worst man in the world,” she said solemnly. “You have the heart of a murderer and designs upon the title!”

“Good Lord!” gasped John, aghast. That aspect of his iniquities had never occurred to him.

“She is very pleased that the marriage is taking place so soon,” Mary went on. “She feels there ought to be— children”—the word came with difficulty—”to carry on the title. She said you had threatened to murder Selwyn.”

Johnny’s grin was one of sheer delight.

“I certainly told her that we should be looking for a new Earl of Heverswood in certain eventualities,” he admitted, “but I suggested nothing more than “

It was a little difficult to explain that what he had meant was a chastisement which he calculated would bring about a revolution in the character of Selwyn.

“I think that is all the mischief I can do to-day,” she said, a smile in her eyes. “Oh, yes, I must tell you that Selwyn has been borrowing money on the strength of his forthcoming alliance.”

“You don’t mean that?” said John, shocked. “From moneylenders?”

But she was serious.

“One of their agents came to see daddy to confirm the engagement. Fortunately, I was here, and was able to assure him that there would be a most generous settlement.”

“But why on earth does he want money now?” he asked, in perplexity. “I sent him a big cheque a few days ago.”

She sighed.

“I’m afraid Selwyn’s the kind of man who wants money in large quantities all the time.” And then she shook off the unpleasant subject of her thoughts. “You’re coming to the wedding, Johnny?”

He hesitated.

“I—would rather not.”

“Why not?” she challenged.

He could give no direct reply.

“Just now, I was talking about the old temples of the Aztecs, the original inhabitants of the South American continent,” he said slowly. “I believe they were in the habit of offering human sacrifices upon their altars. Had I lived in those days, I feel I should not have received an invitation to one of those functions with any great pleasure.”

Her eyes were fixed on his.

“I am the sacrifice—in a way, yes. You’re weakening, Johnny,” she said softly.

He nodded.

“Yes, I am weakening. It is horrible to think that the wedding-day is so close at hand.”

There was a long silence.

“Suppose”—she was playing with the fringe of a silken scarf that was over her shoulder, and was not looking at him—”suppose it were not Selwyn,

Johnny? Suppose that holy of holies, Heverswood, were not involved, and you knew I was going to be married to somebody … I loathed… and you … loved me … what would you do?”

John Calthorpe’s face was white.

“Is it fair to ask me?”

She shook her head gently, and then, raising her eyes, met his.

“It was grossly unfair.” She got up. “It’s a funny world, Johnny, isn’t it? And now I’m sending you away in a great hurry. Are you joining Selwyn’s party at the Albert Hall to-morrow night?”

“Are you going?” he asked.

“Daddy has already a box. It seems a better way of spending one’s wedding-eve than to pass the time in meditation and prayer.”

There was a faint tinge of bitterness in her voice, which she was the first to recognize.

“I’m being sorry for myself,” she said, and held out her hand.

CHAPTER X. — ALMA'S DISTRESS

IT was a very troubled young man who walked back to Fitzroy Square, and he was so absorbed in the problem of this radiant girl that he had almost forgotten the existence of Alma Keenan, until Sergeant Lane came out of his little pantry in his shirt-sleeves, with a polishing-cloth in one hand and a silver candlestick in the other.

"The young lady came: I showed her into your room, but she didn't wait, sir."

"Which young lady?" demanded John, momentarily at sea.

And then it was that he remembered Alma.

"She seemed pretty upset, too," said Sergeant Lane, with a professional interest in morbid conditions. "In fact, I've never seen anybody look worse than she did. Eyes all red and everything."

What had she wanted, John wondered, as he went into his room. The first thing he saw on his open desk was a sheet of paper covered with a scrawl of handwriting.

I'm sorry I was so rotten to you. Forgive me.

There was no signature.

He heard a shuffle of slippered feet behind him and turned to meet Quio, wearing about his middle an incongruous green baize apron.

"Master, I found this on the long ladder. May I keep it, for it is so beautiful?"

In the palm of his huge hand was a crumpled lady's handkerchief, a delicate thing of lace and cambric. John took it in his hand and shook out the folds.

"Some lady must have dropped it, Quio," he said, and, curiously enough, he did not associate Alma Keenan with the find, "as she went down the stairs. Keep it in your room, and if it is asked for, return it."

"It is very beautiful," said Quio, in sober ecstasy. "Not in all my days have I seen such a wonder."

His master, however, was less than usually in a mood for gossip, and sent the man back to the pantry, where he was assisting Sergeant Lane in his renovations. He wanted to think out this business of Alma without interruption. Frankly, he was worried, and after long consideration he

decided on an action which was repugnant to him. He took up the telephone and gave the number of Lady Heverswood's house in Hill Street. A new and a strange voice answered him.

"I am Lady Heverswood's secretary. Can I give her ladyship a message?"

"Will you tell her ladyship that Mr. Calthorpe wishes to speak to her very urgently?" said John.

He did not have to wait so long as he expected. In a minute Lady Heverswood's harsh voice spoke.

"Well?"

"It is John speaking, Lady Heverswood. Miss Keenan has left you, has she not?"

A pause.

"Yes. Why do you want to know? Have you a job for her?"

"I don't think she wants a job," said John dryly. "What I wanted to know was, did she leave in any exceptional circumstances? I mean, was she discharged?" Again a pause before the reply.

"Yes; I told her I thought that she had better find another position."

"Was there any reason?"

"No reason that I can give, except that I wanted a change. Why?"

"I saw her in town," said John, "and she seemed very distressed. She hasn't"—he did not know exactly how to put the question "—she hasn't formed any attachment at Heverswood, has she?"

"I am not interested in the love affairs of my servants," said her ladyship coldly.

"I am not talking about your servants. I am talking about—Selwyn."

He heard the snort of anger at the other end of the wire, and at other times would have been amused.

"I don't understand you."

"Well, I'll put it as plainly as I can," said John slowly. "Did she know that Selwyn was going to be married? What I mean to ask," he went on

desperately, “is, did Miss Keenan know that Selwyn was about to be married?”

“Of course she did!” exploded Lady Heverswood. “How dare you make so villainous a suggestion! … She sent out the cards of invitation … if you want to know, it was she who tore yours up after your disgraceful conduct….”

Click!

Lady Heverswood in her wrath had hung up.

“That beats the band,” said John in despair.

For the mystery of the girl’s distress was a greater mystery than ever.

CHAPTER XI. — THE DUKE

THE tickets for the Arts Ball were at a premium. He had some difficulty in obtaining the necessary voucher, and then had to pay twice its original value. Year after year the Arts Ball had drawn fashionable and artistic London to the Albert Hall; and so popular was the function that there was a waiting-list of names before the tickets were first issued.

John was not the type who found much fun in the amenities and recreations of the younger set. For five years he had devoted every minute of his day to the development of what Selwyn facetiously called “the timber trade”. His business had not been built up from nothing, nor yet by accident. He had sunk the greater portion of the money which his mother had left him in the leases he had procured from the Government, and in the erection of mills and seasoning plant, and only in the last two years had his reward come to him. That he had derived very little personal advantage from his success seldom occurred to him. Heverswood, first and last, was his preoccupation.

He had had a frugal dinner and was dressing for the ball when he received a rare visitor in the shape of a tall, aristocratic man whose white moustache and bristling eyebrows were the joy of the caricaturist. Straight of back, slim as a youth, the ninth Duke of Taunton stalked into his room.

“Hullo, you scallywag!” he greeted his favourite nephew with a roar. “What’s this news I’ve had of you?”“Good Lord! I thought it had reached you years ago, uncle.”

John suspended the fastening of his white tie to shake hands with the man whom, of all men in the world, he loved.

“I was in Paris. Of course, it’s all tommyrot. You’re not that kind of night bird. What is the inside of it? I called at the club on my way back and raised Cain when I heard they’d asked you to resign. Of all the dunderheaded jackasses “

“I think that matter will be rectified,” said John quietly, resuming his dressing operations. “A very lovely lady has taken the unusual course of writing to the committee.”

“You were there after Selwyn, of course?” said the duke as he sat down on the bed and scowled at his nephew.

“I was there after Selwyn,” agreed John. “You and Mary Predelle are intent upon robbing me of the martyr’s halo, so I may as well confess that my

appearance in that notorious establishment was determined by the foreknowledge I had of the police raid."

"Mary Predelle?" The duke frowned. "That's the pretty girl that's marrying your brute of a brother?"

His uncle was a privileged person. John did not protest against the description.

"Poor little devil!" Taunton went on, shaking his head mournfully. "She's an American: that makes it worse. One likes to keep these tragedies inside the family. Why didn't you marry her yourself?"

"I?" John laughed softly. "She wouldn't have had me!"

"Stuff!" snapped the duke. "Where are you going?"

"To the Arts Ball," said John. "That confirms your worst suspicions."

To his surprise, his ducal relative confessed that he himself was joining a party later in the evening.

"I presume that you will look forward with some relief to the passing of the family burden?"

The duke was eyeing him keenly, and John started. That aspect of the marriage had not occurred to him.

"They don't expect you to go on keeping the family for the rest of your natural life, do they?"

"I hadn't thought about it," confessed his nephew.

"That old she-wolf would bleed you white." In these uncomplimentary terms did he refer to the Dowager Countess of Heverswood.

He strode up and down the room, poking at various objects with his ebony stick, another distressing practice of his.

"I saw a disreputable pal of Selwyn's at the station when I arrived," said the duke.

"Not Bertie Threnigen?"

Taunton nodded.

“He was on his way to the Continent by the late afternoon train, with many boxes and bags, and he was more prosperous than I’ve seen him for a long time.”

“Do you know anything about him, duke?” asked John seriously.

“Know anything about him!” scoffed the other. “I know he’s the most unmitigated scoundrel that has ever walked the streets of London, that he’s the worst blackguard who has ever been warned off the turf, that his name on a promissory note is worth just the value of the note as wastepaper and no more....” He enumerated a few of Mr. Threnigen’s past exploits, and Johnny was in agreement.

The duke looked at his watch.

“Are you going to the wedding?”

John nodded.

“Who invited you?”—bluntly.

“Miss Predelle.”

“Humph!” said the Duke of Taunton, and looked at his nephew queerly. “You’re a damned fool.”

It was one of the Duke of Taunton’s characteristic farewell speeches.

CHAPTER XII. — AT THE ARTS BALL

THE great hall was brilliantly lighted. At one end a large orchestra was playing, and although John had come comparatively early the floor was already covered with dancers. There were crusaders, hot and uncomfortable in their unaccustomed armour; there were troubadours and minstrels, milkmaids and Elizabethan ladies, rajahs in shimmering silk and Eastern ladies in sequin trousers; a Red Indian or two; a policeman; cowboys and pierrots galore.

John had come alone, but he did not feel the need of a partner. From the level of the floor he watched the kaleidoscopic shift of colour. A shower of toy balloons came down from the roof, a pink ribbon streamer hurtled in a curve across the dancers. From one of the boxes came the “toot” of a toy trumpet.

He felt somebody touch his arm, and turned to meet a smiling girl attendant, who held a mask in her hand, and over her arm a long crimson domino.

“No evening dress is allowed,” she said.

“Must I wear this?” said John, in dismay.

She observed his inches admiringly.

“If you can wear it,” she said.

He slipped into the domino and found it at least three inches short. She disappeared into some hidden wardrobe and returned with a larger domino; and although John was inclined to run away in her absence, the fear of getting the girl into some scrape kept him, and he reluctantly struggled into a wrap which certainly fitted him. He looked at the mask dubiously, put it on, and paid the girl the fee.

So far from causing him any discomfort, the mask and domino gave him a sense of seclusion which was eminently desirable.

He hung about the entrance, and presently he saw Mary arrive with her father and Lady Heverswood, and was thankful for his disguise. Again he saw that peaked look in her face that he had noticed the previous day— but she was lovely! She was dressed as Beatrice, and in the severe straight garment of the Venetian maid her beauty was ethereal. Mr. Predelle was superior to the frivolities of fancy dress, and halted to don his domino; but, to the unholy joy of the watcher, the duchess was wearing the costume of a

grande dame. He thought he had never seen anything quite so funny in his life.

Under the snowy pompadour wig, the face, in spite of its heavy rouging and its elaborate make-up, looked hard and old; and not even the glittering glory of jewelled mittens disguised the age of her hands.

After they had passed out of view on the way to their box, there arrived a visitor at the sight of whom John Calthorpe almost collapsed. It was Quio!

By what means he secured entrance to that hall nobody ever knew. John did not trouble to ask himself why the man came—Quio in these days was his shadow.

The appearance of the Indian in his shabby clothes was instantly noticed by a group of guests who were waiting. John heard somebody say, “What a wonderful make-up!” and he realized that it was possible that the Indian might have been a masquerader; for his features were regular: he was almost European in that respect.

When he had recovered from his surprise John crossed the floor to him.

“Quio,” he said sharply, “why are you here?”

The man looked up in his dog-like way.

“I go everywhere you go, master.”

“So I realize,” said John dryly; “but this time you must go home.”

To his surprise, the man did not argue, but, turning, went through the throng of newcomers, and John walked up the stairs to the box tier in the hope of again seeing the girl.

He had examined the plan which was displayed in the vestibule, and knew where Selwyn’s box might be. It was four from that occupied by his mother and fiancee. John strolled into the box, and a uniformed attendant came hurrying towards him.

“It’s all right,” smiled the younger son. “This is Lord Heverswood’s box, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m his brother.”

From this vantage-place he could look down upon the gay scene and watch with interest the dancers and their many and varied styles. From the front of the loge he could look along the other boxes. There was a masked Chinaman in the next; beyond that, a monk. He could just glimpse the profile of Mary Predelle, who came into view round the edge of the sheltering partition.

With a heavy sigh he turned in time to see a boisterous party coming along the promenade. Selwyn he recognized in spite of his pierrot costume and his mask. The other two were men known to him.

The third of the party was a woman in a Polly Peachum dress, and John gasped at his brother's audacity. Her name does not matter: that she was notorious, and that nine doors out of ten in Mayfair were closed against her, was bad enough. But that Selwyn should, on his bridal eve, and in the presence of his mother and the woman who was to be his wife, bring this girl into his party was outrageous. He had not intended making himself known, but now he intercepted his brother.

"I want a word with you, Selwyn."

Selwyn did not recognize him.

"Who the devil are you? Not John? Good Lord! Here's John Calthorpe!" He roared with laughter, but the man to whom he spoke was beyond the discomfort of ridicule.

He took his brother by the arm and led the reluctant man away from the party.

"Selwyn, you must send that girl home. You know Mary is here?"

"See here, John," interrupted the other angrily, "how long have you been censor of public morals? Anna's here and she's going to stay here. If Mary doesn't like it, she can go to blazes!"

He was more than half drunk. Johnny knew that it was useless attempting to argue with him.

"You are riding for a fall," he warned. "Don't forget, Selwyn, that you are not married—yet!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Selwyn, partially sobered by the seriousness of his half-brother's voice.

“You’ve been borrowing money on the strength of your engagement, and I tell you that Mary Predelle is a girl who would not hesitate to break off her engagement at the last minute of the eleventh hour. You’re running a risk, Selwyn.” And then, as the folly and the wickedness of the thing came to him, he added passionately: “I wish to God she would see you, and understand the kind of cattle you herd with!”

“Go and tell her!” snarled Selwyn. “And as for ‘cattle’….”

But John, with a shrug of his shoulders, turned away. It was madness, utter folly to talk to him now. He could only leave him to his fate.

He saw the duke later, and that autocrat refused to don any accommodation domino. John was rather surprised to find that quite a number of other men had taken the same stand. For himself, he was quite content with his mask and cloak: it gave him a chance to be nearer the girl.

He must have wandered the entire circuit of the first tier half a dozen times before, utterly weary, he decided to return home. He had seen the girl three times: once she danced with Selwyn, and the dance ended abruptly. He saw her stop in the middle of a movement, turn, and walk back to the stairway, a flush on her face, Selwyn, grotesquely apologetic, following her like a whipped cur. It was the possibility that this might have some sequel that kept John until one o’clock, and he was strengthened in his determination to leave the place by discovering that his uncle had the same intention.

John had slipped his domino and handed his mask to an attendant. They were standing together on the outer rim of the dancers, when suddenly, from one of the boxes, came a shrill scream. John turned his head quickly. The sound came from somewhere near the box that was occupied by Selwyn. His heart suddenly thumped painfully, and there came to him a dreadful feeling of foreboding.

Racing upstairs, he flew along the circular corridor, now deserted, and, pushing through the press of people who stood in the doorway, he looked down upon a sight that filled him with horror.

Selwyn, Earl of Heverswood, lay on his back, his arms outstretched. From the centre of his breast protruded a golden-handled poignard, and John Calthorpe’s senses reeled. It was the knife he had taken from the native Quio and had left in the drawer of his desk!

CHAPTER XIII. — THE ACCUSATION

STANDING at his elbow, looking down in terror, was the woman whose presence Johnny had so resented. Before he could talk to her, or ask a question, there was a shriek that was almost animal from behind the little crowd that pressed about the door of the box, and Lady Heverswood, her wig grotesquely awry, fought her way through and dropped on her knees by the side of the dead man. Presently she looked up at Johnny, and her eyes were like fire.

“You did this!” she said.

Suddenly a deadly calm had fallen on her. She was mistress of her voice and her emotions. The withered face was working convulsively, but her voice had that steady, metallic quality that he knew so well.

“You did this, John Calthorpe, as you threatened I”

He was so dumbfounded that he could not answer.

“You threatened, and now you have kept your word, that there would be another Earl of Heverswood.”

The crowd behind had melted under the instructions of a police officer. Two detectives, set to watch the jewels, were in the box, examining the still figure. One of them heard her words as he entered, and shot a suspicious glance at John.

“I am Lady Heverswood”—the words came slowly, evenly—”this is my son. And this—gentleman”—she pointed a trembling finger to John—”is his half-brother, who inherits the title.”

So sick at heart was he with grief and horror that John Calthorpe could only shake his head. But the practical detective saw an avenue for investigation.

“Have you spoken to your brother to-night, Mr. Calthorpe?” he asked.

John nodded.

“Yes,” he said quietly. Then: “Don’t you think you’d better get Lady Heverswood away?”

The detective hesitated, looked over his shoulder, and at that moment a uniformed inspector of police appeared and, to John’s relief, the old woman allowed herself to be led away.

“Now, Mr. Calthorpe.” The door was closed; they were at the back of the box, out of view of the dancing crowd, the majority of whom knew little or nothing of what had happened. “You spoke to your brother to- night?”

“Yes, I saw him for a few moments.”

“Have you seen this knife before?”

John only hesitated a second.

“Yes; the last time I saw it, it was in the drawer of my desk,” he said. And, accustomed as he was to shocks, the police officer gasped.

“You realize what you’re saying, Mr. Calthorpe?”

“Yes, of course,” said John impatiently.

“Where were you when the murder was committed?”

“I don’t know—I was talking with my uncle, the Duke of Taunton, and I’d just said good night to him when I heard a woman shriek.”

By this time there had arrived an eye-witness of the crime: a young man who had occupied a box immediately opposite Selwyn’s, and who had been examining the other box-holders through his glasses.

“He was standing at the curtain at the back of the box, and I saw the curtain move and a hand come through, and then he fell. I thought it was a joke at first.”

“You saw nobody?”

“Nobody at all.” The eye-witness shook his head. “Only the hand and the sleeve of a red domino.”

The detective looked at John.

“You’re sure of that?”

“Absolutely,” said the witness.

“What costume did you wear to-night, Mr. Calthorpe?”

The other hesitated.

“A red domino,” he said.

The corridor outside had been cleared, and attendants were lifting the still figure to a stretcher which lay waiting. John averted his eyes from the ghastly sight. His head was in a whirl; he had lost the power of reasoning. If he thought consecutively, it was of Mary Predelle. What would she think and suffer? Who had struck the blow? Quio! It must be he. Only he could have retrieved the knife; only he would dare use it upon the man who he thought was an "enemy". There was no reason to disguise the native's presence in the hall, and he told the detective what had happened. To his surprise, the officer knew all about Quio.

"It couldn't have been he, Mr. Calthorpe. We saw him coming out of the hall. One of our officers challenged him for his ticket, and found he could not speak English. He has been locked in one of the rooms, under charge of a police officer, and has been there ever since the early part of the evening."

John shook his head.

"I can't help you," he said wearily. "I know the knife was in my drawer this afternoon. To suggest that I struck my brother is monstrous! As for his title, I no more envy that than I envy this policeman his brass buttons. It is horrible, horrible!"

The officer was looking at him keenly.

"Lady Heverswood was very emphatic," he said significantly.

"Lady Heverswood!" John threw out his hands in a gesture of despair. "We are not good friends, she and I. I don't think there's any more I can tell you. Do you suspect me?" he asked bluntly.

"I suspect everybody," was the cool reply. "At any rate, I must ask you to stay here until my sergeant or inspector come. I have no doubt they will have some questions to ask you which I have overlooked."

He was virtually a prisoner: he recognized that, and knew that from his present position to the occupancy of a police-court cell was the easiest of transitions.

The situation was so ghastly, so unbelievable, that it was beyond his understanding. He had a wild desire to go to the girl and comfort her; but she must have been taken away immediately by her father, for there was no sign of her in the box, and he only hoped that this theory of his was correct.

The police chief arrived soon after, and to John's relief he discovered it was a man with whom he had some slight acquaintance. Inspector Welling

listened, examined the knife, and when he had heard the story of Quio had him sent for.

They had left the box, proceeding to one of the offices in the building, where they were free from interruption. Quio was lodged so near that he seemed to return almost immediately with his custodian. Fortunately, Welling spoke Spanish fluently, and although the Spanish of South America is subtly different from the European language, he made himself understood.

“You know this knife?”

The Indian nodded.

“Yes, master, that is mine.”

At the sight of the blood on the blade the Indian’s eyes opened wide.

He looked up at John with approval in his eyes. To this wild man, murder was a perfectly normal and natural sequence of the dislike which he knew existed between the two men.

“Did the caballero kill his enemy?” he asked eagerly.

John shook his head, and a shade of disappointment passed over Quio’s expressive face. His long arm reached out for the knife.

“Steady, my friend,” said Welling. “We’re not going to give you this weapon!”

“Master”—Quio’s voice was very earnest—”J have tracked killers of men in my own land. For this is the truth, that when a caballero slays with a knife his hands grow hot and wet because of the spirit which is within him. Caballero, let me put my nose to the handle.”

The detective held the haft gingerly towards the Indian. Bending his head, he ran his delicate nostrils up and down the haft. Then slowly he straightened, and John saw on his face a look of bewilderment.

“Master,” he said, “that is a scent I know and yet I do not know.”

“Is it your master’s?”

Quio shook his head.

“No,” he said. “But it is one I know.” His hideous frown advertised his perplexity.

“I’m afraid I shall have to ask you to come to the station, Lord Heverswood,” said Welling, and Johnny started and stared at the man.

“Lord?” he began.

And then he understood. Never had peer learned of his accession with such a bitterness of heart, with so wild a feeling of desolation and sorrow, as John Calthorpe, twelfth Earl of Heverswood.

It was nearly three o’clock before he returned to his house. The duke, who had gone home, and knew nothing of the tragedy, had been sent for, and it was his evidence and influence that saved his nephew from a night of close detention.

Sergeant Lane was waiting up for him and told him that Scotland Yard had made a search of the house. To the surprise of the weary Johnny, the sergeant was in a state of spluttering indignation.

“They must have gone daft to think you’d do anything like that!”

John fell heavily into a chair with a tired smile.

“I think they’re pretty well convinced. They examined my hands and my shirt-cuff very thoroughly— there was a great deal of blood—some of it had splattered on the wall of the box....” He shivered. “My God! It was awful, awful!” he said, covering his face with his hands.

And yet his thoughts were not of his dead brother, but of the girl to whom this tragedy and its sequel would be a crowning sorrow.

The sergeant was not a thought-reader, but the information he gave was naturally prompted.

“A lady rang you up, sir. She’s rung up three times: once when the police were here.”

John looked up.

“A lady—who?” he asked quickly.

“She didn’t give her name, sir, but she asked me to tell you to call her the moment you came in.”

As he spoke, the telephone-bell rang and he took up the instrument.

“Yes, madam,” he said, and, nodding, handed the ‘phone to John.

It was Mary, and at the sound of his voice he heard her sigh.

“Thank God you’re back! They told me you were arrested, Johnny. Isn’t it too terrible! Poor soul! … Johnny, how dare they think that it was you?”

“Lady Heverswood suggested it,” he said.

“They’ve taken her to a hospital, Johnny. She’s mad—quite mad.… What is going to happen to you?”

There was little mirth in his laugh.

“Oh, I suppose I shall be an object of suspicion for many years to come,” he said. “Poor old Selwyn!”

“There is no explanation?” Her voice was full of anxiety.

“Nobody is suspected,” he said.

“He had a woman with him.…” A little pause. “Daddy heard she wasn’t very nice.…”

“The woman quite .cleared herself. She was in the company of Selwyn’s friends,” said John. “No, I’m afraid there is no clue at all.”

“But you—what is going to happen to you?” she asked fearfully.

John was not in a position to answer. Though he felt that he had been cleared to some extent by the very careful inspection, both by two police surgeons and the detectives, he realized just how much suspicion would attach to him.

“I’m afraid there will be a first-class newspaper sensation,” he said. “And, Mary, you’re to keep out of it. You’re to see no reporters. If the police come to

“They’ve already been,” she said quietly. “They wanted to know whether I knew of any quarrel between you and Selwyn, and I told them no. They told me the knife was yours. Was it, Johnny?”

He explained, as briefly as possible, how the poignard came into his possession.

“Will you come and see me in the morning?” she asked. “You promise?”

But he was silent.

“You promise?” she asked again.

“I don’t think I’d better see you for a day or two, Mary,” he said gently, “not until this matter is cleared up. I want to keep your name out of the case. I want no suggestion that …” He could not bring himself to say the words, but she guessed.

“That there was a rivalry too,” she said. “Oh, Johnny!”

A long silence, and then:

“Good night,” she said; and he hung up the receiver with a sense of relief and gratitude.

CHAPTER XIV. — ALMA'S HOME

LANE was making him coffee when Inspector Welling knocked at the front door and was admitted.

"I have an idea that you're thoroughly and completely exonerated, Lord Heverswood," he said.

"I'd rather you called me 'Calthorpe', in the circumstances. The other name is a little painful."

Welling nodded.

"That I can understand," he said. "Yes, we found a trail of blood leading to one of the stairways and to an emergency exit, which had been pushed open. There was blood on the paving-stones outside."

"But the knife was left behind."

Again Welling nodded.

"Yes. Either the murderer cut himself, or, what is more likely, his sleeve and hand were covered after the first blow."

Lane brought the coffee in at that moment, and in the presence of a brother officer the inspector felt no disinclination to talk.

"The thing that impressed me was that nigger of yours "

"Indian," corrected Johnny.

"Well, they're all niggers to me," said Welling.

"What impressed you about him?"

"Smelling the knife. I know that some native fellows have an abnormal sense of smell, and I've heard about these South American trackers. Do you think his story was a fake?"Johnny shook his head.

"No," he said quietly; "I have had remarkable proofs of this quality, especially in the tribe from which Quio comes."

"You don't think he was saying it because he thought he was exonerating you?"

Johnny expressed his dissent.

“I’m afraid I rather fell in his estimation when he found that I was not the murderer,” he said with a faint smile. “Poor old Selwyn! I can’t believe it is true! Soon I shall wake up and find that it is all nightmare.”

The inspector looked at him strangely.

“I don’t want to hurt your feelings, Mr. Calthorpe,” he said, with a hint of dryness, “but your brother was not exactly a saint? He must have had many enemies “

So far he got when the door was burst violently open and Quio came running in, his eyes bright with excitement. In his hand he held an object which Johnny recognized instantly.

“Master,” he said eagerly, “here it is—the thing I smelt!” It was the wisp of lace and cambric which the Indian had picked up on the stairs. “It is the same, the same!” He was dancing in his wild excitement.

The police officer put out his hand and snatched the handkerchief, examining it carefully.

“A. K.,” he said. “Who is that?”

Johnny jumped to his feet.

“Alma Keenan!” he gasped, and in a few words told all he knew of the girl.

Alma Keenan! It was incredible!

He pulled the ‘phone to him and in a few minutes had got Lady Heverswood’s house. The butler answered him immediately, for the whole household was awake.

“Is that you, Milton? This is Mr. John speaking. What is Alma Keenan’s address?”

“I don’t know, my lord.” John groaned. “I will tell you in a moment.”

He was gone more than a moment. Five minutes passed before he returned,

“I’ve taken the liberty of looking through her ladyship’s letters, and there is one from Miss Keenan, saying that her future address would be 309 Belgrave House. I think she’s got a job there, sir.”

“Belgrave House?” said the detective. “That’s a pretty swagger block of residential flats near Eaton Square. Will you come with me, Mr. Calthorpe?”

John swallowed his coffee and hurried down behind the detective into the grey street. Day was dawning; he had been nearly twenty-four hours out of bed, but no longer did he feel tired. On his way westward he told Welling of the girl's visit, and the note she had left for him.

"Where do you keep your notepaper?" asked the detective suddenly.

John thought for a while.

"In one of the drawers of my desk."

"In the same drawer as you put the knife?"

"No, the one below."

"She probably opened that first in a search for paper, found the knife and took it," said Welling. "The reason is to seek, but I am satisfied that she killed your brother."

There was a night bell at Belgrave House, and after a little wait the night porter admitted them.

"No, sir, I don't know any Miss Keenan who is employed here. There is a Miss Keenan who's got a suite on the second floor: she's had it for a long time."

"What is she like?" asked Welling, and when the porter had described her there was no doubt left in their minds that the lady who paid £600 a year for one of the best apartments in the most exclusive of buildings was Alma Keenan!

They went upstairs and wakened her maid. No sooner were they in the sumptuous drawing-room than all their doubts were at rest. Alma's own portrait was on the mantelpiece, taken by a fashionable photographer, and on the piano was an even larger picture of Selwyn.

"Humph!" said the detective. "This explains a lot."

He questioned the girl, but her mistress had not been there that night. She thought she might have gone down to Heverswood to see her father.

"Her father?" said John incredulously. "Her father doesn't live at Heverswood."

“Oh, yes, he does, sir,” said the shivering maid, frightened to death by the apparition of the police. “I happen to know because I saw a letter of his one day when I was dusting her table. It was signed ‘your loving father’.”

They looked at one another.

“Are you sure it was Heverswood?”

“Perfectly sure.”

“But not Heverswood Castle? The village is a very small one. What is his name?”

“I don’t know his name,” said the girl, shaking her head, “but I know he lives in Heverswood Castle.”

John’s jaw dropped.

“At any rate”—the girl was insistent upon this— “it was Heverswood Castle on the notepaper.”

And then the truth suddenly dawned upon Johnny. He remembered questions asked and resentfully evaded.

“I think I can take you to Alma Keenan,” he said reluctantly, for now he knew the extent of Selwyn’s infamy.

The sun was flooding the broad acres of Heverswood Castle when the police car stopped at the main gates and, in answer to the repeated signals, Elijah Sawder, haggard and white of face, staggered out of his house; his trembling hands unlocked the gate and threw it open. The car passed inside and stopped. Johnny and the detective got down.

“Elijah,” said Johnny gently, “where is your daughter?”

“Dead!”

The harsh voice was full of grief, the face still bore the grime of his tears. “Her’s dead I By her own hand she died, lad. Thee can’t touch her. Dead and in heaven, like the pure angel she is—thy brother is in hell, Johnny Calthorpe, and well he deserved it!”

A man appeared in the doorway of the keeper’s lodge: the thin-faced little man whom Johnny instantly recognized. He came quickly to the old man’s side and put his arm round his shoulder.

“Go inside, dad,” he said soothingly. “I’ll talk to Mr. Calthorpe.”

Very tenderly he led the old man back to the house, and handed him over to the care of the village woman who had attended him for so many years. And then the little man closed the door softly and came back.

“Gentlemen, I think you ought to know the truth,” he said, and told them the story of Alma Keenan Sawder.

CHAPTER XV. — THE TRUTH

"YOU must remember us, Mr. John, when you were a little boy. Her ladyship always took an interest in us, and when Alma grew old enough she paid the expenses of her education and sent her away to a school. Her ladyship was not so much interested in me, but she got me a job in a training stable, and although I wasn't on exactly the same level as Alma in the matter of education, I did pretty well and made money.

"When Alma came back from school, her ladyship sent her to Paris to learn French, because she wanted a private secretary. Although she was very good to us, Lady Heverswood never treated us as anything but what we were—her servants. She's a queer woman, and I don't suppose she has ever done a turn for anybody without looking forward to the time when she was going to get back a little more than she gave.

"Before she went to Paris, Alma met Mr. Selwyn, and they grew fond of each other—used to walk in the home park; and one thing led to another, and the end of it was, Alma was getting ideas a little above her situation, and refused to have anything more to do with Selwyn unless he married her. There's no doubt that my sister was the one woman in the world that Selwyn loved, but he dared not marry her, especially as he knew that his mother was planning a good marriage for him, and one that would bring the family a lot of money. I only heard about this affair by accident. I didn't take much notice of it, because such things have happened before, and though I didn't want my sister to disgrace the family, yet I didn't much favour his lordship, and I took no part, one way or the other, in helping Alma to get what she wanted. She was a very ambitious girl, and when she told me she was to be Lady Heverswood I nearly dropped dead! But she was quite serious about it, and told me that his lordship had promised to marry her, but that the marriage must be kept secret. One day when I was at Newmarket I had a telegram from him, telling me to come up to London to a certain house, and when I arrived Alma was there, in a great state of excitement, and said that she and Selwyn were to be married by special licence from the Archbishop of Canterbury, and that I was to be a witness."

"Where was this house?"

"It was Lady Heverswood's town house, but it was empty because the family were in the country, and the caretaker was out. I rather think that his lordship arranged for him to be away that afternoon. Whilst we were talking, Selwyn (as I got to call him) came, and brought with him a very aristocratic-looking parson, and there and then, without any waste of time, they were

married, and I was the witness. The parson told me that in the exceptional circumstances a second witness was not necessary.

“Selwyn was allowed to keep the marriage certificate, because he thought that Alma had no place for it and the paper might be discovered. Of course, I had to swear that I’d not say a word, and as he gave me a hundred pounds for my trouble I was quite pleased with my trip to London.

“Nothing further happened until about a week ago, when I went down to see my father. He was terribly upset. He had gone up unexpectedly to see Alma— he had not been to London in forty years—and found her in a beautiful apartment. This so distressed him that she told him about her marriage to Lord Heverswood. He couldn’t believe it, especially as his lordship was going to be married to somebody else. But Alma explained the plan which his lordship had suggested. He was to marry this girl, and after the marriage he was to leave her, and she would divorce him. And then he would openly marry Alma, saying nothing about the secret marriage beforehand. They were practically to part at the church door, or as soon as the money from the marriage settlement was transferred to him. He said that all this American girl wanted was to be Countess of Heverswood; and though I don’t believe Alma was very keen on the idea, she accepted. My poor father was terribly upset, for he is an honest man and has lived straightly and decently all his life. He had done everything her ladyship asked of him, even pretending that Alma was no relation, because he thought it might reflect on her having a lodge-keeper for a father. And her ladyship ordered this too.

“Things would have gone on all right, but yesterday— or was it the day before?—as Alma and I were walking along Piccadilly, we saw his lordship on the other side of the road with a man whom we both recognized as the parson who had married Alma at his mother’s house! Alma saw the trick at once, and would have flown across and demanded an explanation, but I held her arm. Then we saw you stop and talk to them, and Alma said we must follow you. She wanted to know who the other man was, and when you told her he was an actor she knew that she had been sold, that the marriage was only a pretence and Selwyn’s story a lie.

“I lost sight of her after that. She had not gone to her flat, and I never saw her again until late last night. She telephoned me about nine o’clock to have her car— his lordship made her a very big allowance—waiting near Albert Mansions at half past ten. I had a feeling that things were going very wrong, and I was terribly worried, but I waited from half past ten till nearly one, when suddenly I saw her coming along the sidewalk, almost running. She wore a red cloak and her face was still masked, but she did not speak a

word as I opened the door of the car for her, but, jumping in, collapsed by my side. 'What is the matter, Alma,' I said. 'Take me home,' was all that she could say. 'Take me to Heverswood.'

"'Heverswood at this hour of the night?' I said to her, but: 'I want to see father,' was all she would say.

"I leaned out of the window and told the driver, but not a word would she say until we reached Heverswood village, and then she asked me to stop. You know the place in the road, Mr. John, where you can see the Castle and the lawns and rosery—that's where she stopped, and got out of the car. She stood for about five minutes, looking at the castle without a word. I didn't see what she was doing, until suddenly she started to sway, and I managed to catch her before she fell ... she was dead by the time we reached the lodge."

"Poisoned?" asked Welling.

The man nodded. His eyes were swimming with tears, and presently he broke down and sobbed convulsively into his hands.

"That is all, gentlemen," he said at last, without looking up. "Lord Heverswood was a scoundrel who deserved to die, but it is damnable that he should have dragged my sister down with him!"

Johnny came back from a trip to South America on a Royal Mail steamer packet. It entered the Solent side by side with a great Atlantic liner, and, standing at the rail of the boat-deck, he looked across the waters to a slim figure in white who stood in splendid isolation on the top deck of the Berengaria. That she was there, he knew. That he was the man in grey flannel, she was well aware. For three days, messages of greeting and enquiry had been flashed from ship to ship, and ever since they had been within four hundred miles distance they had heard the sound of each other's voices. The stipulated year had passed. Ahead of them was the port of Southampton. Beyond that, Heverswood church. A veritable holy place to John Calthorpe, Earl of Heverswood. For her one page of life had ended when they put Selwyn with his father, and here the newest and the most glorious page of all was to open.

THE LAST ADVENTURE

No record of prior magazine publication under this title found

MOST people who draw for a straight throw in their hands when it comes to their turn to bet. Edna drew for a straight and got a straight flush, which meant that she had the beating of the average fifty thousand hands.

Pecksell played poker, but he was a bad loser, though it was not his own money that he risked. He was a poor player, nervous, easily bluffed. She discovered that he was terribly sensitive to ridicule, being one of those men who run an inferiority complex. She made other findings which amazed, enraged or heartened her.

Pecksell was vain and immensely self-admiring. Put him in a room with a mirror, and it was inevitable that he would site himself so that he could glance sideways or frontways at his own reflection.

When he was talking his eyes would be for himself; not swift, seemingly unconscious straying of eyes towards his mirrored self, but glances that were long, lingering and satisfied—almost tender.

He was tall; his figure was the ideal of the men's fashion artist; broad-shouldered, slim-waisted; a perfect figure for a tail-coat, for he was long in the leg. His hands were white and shapely, his feet reasonably small. He had a great pad of fair hair brushed back from his high, sloping forehead. This completes the catalogue of his attractive qualities. His nose was big and broad, and his eyes had a peculiarly Oriental slant. Thick lips, a rounded, womanly chin, and an almost flawless complexion … the first time Edna saw him she thought he was a man in the early thirties. It was a long time before she saw him in the light of day that revealed certain lines about the eyes and mouth that no masseur could wholly obliterate.

She suspected him of good taste for a time. He had furnished the Dower House exquisitely, but afterwards she learned that he had left the décor in the hands of an Oxford Street store which employed the sweetest of young men to advise the roughneck patrons in the choice of colour and form.

Naturally she would discover this in time, because in the end the bills came to her for settlement. The Dower House cost four thousand pounds in the raw. By the time flowers were growing where weeds had been, and the new central-heating pipes were laid under new oak flooring, and wallpaper and whitewash had given way to painted walls and ceilings, Edna had spent three times that amount—the cleverly concealed safe in his library had cost six hundred pounds to buy and install.

She need not have paid a penny. Any good lawyer would have fixed Ralph in a spacious dock, there to sit for a dreary day between two bored warders till at the end the white-wigged judge told him the way to go.

But since she had so many pennies—she had enjoyed the income from seven hundred thousand pounds from her father's estate before Uncle "Dicker" Jordan made her his sole heiress—she preferred to pay.

The affair with Benito belonged to that hectic postwar period when shingled youth wrote ecstatic letters to mighty airmen who had earned their double ace. Benito was a wonderful lover. There were three or four meetings in Paris, and after each meeting the correspondence became a little more quiveringly incoherent, and a little less suitable for publication in a church magazine.

Benito was killed in a crash; he was drunk at the time, and everybody agreed that it was a mercy that the pretty little French actress who was with him was lucky enough to escape with nothing worse than a broken ankle.

Edna was not stricken by the tragedy. She was awfully sorry and very shocked, for by then Benito's charm had waned, and she used to spend unpleasant hours wondering if he really had burnt her letters.

It was Ralph who told her that he had not; that the letters were, in fact, in the possession of a very revengeful woman. It was Ralph who suggested that he should act as go-between and for a consideration "buy the woman's silence". The expression was his.

He came out of the blue one rainy September evening, shabby and quite self-assured. It was the day Edna Mason had come back from Davos, her heart singing little lines of joy, for the squat and toad-like Swiss doctor, who never spoke anything but the truth, had made his pronouncement. Jack Mason was curable. Eminent English physicians had given him three months to live. A really bad case of T.B. Ye-es, he might go to a Swiss clinic, but … He might as well die in Switzerland as in England. They did not say this in so many words, but a half-shrug can be very eloquent.

This husband of hers, sometime athlete, always like a child in his faith and adoration, was God and the world to her. He knew nothing of Benito or the cottage at Fontainebleau; he believed that purity was an inseparable element of spinsterhood, though he knew that servant-girls did odd things. He wasn't a fool either, had commanded the King's Company of the Grenadiers, was a big-game shot and a master of foxhounds. But he was a dreamer, had walked, dreaming, through much that was dirty. He was a member of that branch of society which hardly knows one night club from

another, an old- fashioned lot of people, rather stupid and self-centred and wholesome folk, who are wise about dogs and horses and ground rents. They lived in the same houses as their great-great-grandfathers, and they were wholly incapable of visualizing a household that did not employ a footman called Charles.

No, Jack did not dream of Benito or the cottage, or the kind of letters, half in French and half in English, that crazy adolescence can write.

And here was Mr. Ralph Pecksell, very much more composed outwardly than he was in his mind, displaying, like a conjurer, handwritten copies of certain correspondence, spreading sheet after sheet on the polished walnut table.

“I personally regret to be the agent in such a matter,” he said in his deep and musical voice, “but unfortunately my business as a private detective …”

“Yes,” she said.

He was watching her closely but approvingly. He had had very little to do with women of her class, though he had admired them. She was tall and straight-backed, had the vague qualities of aristocracy. Lovely, too, and very fragrant. Not so pretty or as much to his taste as the girl who interrupted their talk, apologized frantically and withdrew. That was the first time he saw Jack Mason’s sister—thereafter the vision of her was never absent from his mind.

Enid was not the kind to panic at the hint of danger. She was a cool, balanced woman; the blood of four generals ran in her—one had been Marlborough’s chief-of-staff.

The man was puzzled by her, and he was disappointed. He had read the letters, and had been quite perturbed as to the effect which would be produced when she knew that he had violated the sacred privacy of her written thought. She must be confused, burn with shame, cry a little, possibly faint. She did none of these things. She did not so much as flush as her eyes skimmed the copper-plate writing—Ralph had served an apprenticeship in the offices of a Melbourne lawyer.

So calm and impersonal was her scrutiny that she might have been considering the indiscretions of a stranger in the presence of an intimate friend.

“What is the name of the woman who has these letters?” she asked.

“Mademoiselle Levine,” he answered glibly. “I am afraid that I cannot give you her address—except that she is living at the moment in Lille.”

A long silence. The rain dripped unceasingly upon the stone sill of an open window; there was the faintest aroma of gardenias in the room. He wondered why all those coats of arms were let into the windows. She wore no jewels, only a very thin pearl necklace—cost three hundred at the most. That was queer for a woman who was reputedly a millionairess.

Her serenity frightened him. Where was the bell? Two silken straps hung on either side of the stone fireplace. And there were telephones in the house. He was a fool to come by train—a couple of rural flatties could pick him up at the railway station as easy as pie. They gave you fourteen years for blackmail—and the prosecutor’s name was not mentioned in Court, and there was no fear of the letters being read. He began to perspire at the temples.

“How many letters are there?” she asked.

“Thirty-seven,” he said. His voice sounded hoarse.

She was silent for a time, and then she nodded.

“There were thirty-six and a short note,” she said. “I didn’t dream that he would keep them. Mademoiselle Levine? I will buy the originals back from her for twenty thousand pounds.”

Mr. Ralph Pecksell was staggered, for a few seconds was speechless. With luck he had hoped for a thousand. New and magnificent vistas opened to him.

He left, as she believed, for Paris with a deposit of five thousand pounds. In a month he came back with photographic reproductions of all the letters. They looked like the real letters because they had been printed from process plates. It was he who, when he had drawn the balance of the twenty thousand, “discovered” the fraud. Until then she had regarded him as a genuine agent and had rewarded him for his services. When he came to her with one of the original letters (and the most innocuous) she realized the character of his mission, and cold-bloodedly faced the prospect of an expensive pensioner.

All this happened between lovely visits to Davos where a husband who should have been dead was playing golf.

“Who is this man who has bought the Dower House?” asked Jane Mason. “Mr. Pecksell, I mean.”

“He’s an old friend of my brother’s.”

Enid could lie convincingly.

Jane made a little face.

“He’s an extraordinary person—he told me I was the loveliest girl he had ever seen.”

Enid stared at her.

“When was this?”

“To-day. I was walking up from the village and he overtook me in his car—the road was so beastly that when he offered to drive me to the house I jumped in.”

Enid looked at her for a long time.

“Oh!” she said at last, and her lips were set very tight.

She had not fought the suggestion that Ralph should live at the Dower House. In her queerly sane way she saw the advantage to the man of living near the source of his revenue. That night Jane went out to dine with the Harrigays, and she sent for the man.

“Don’t speak to Miss Mason again, please,” she said. “If you do, I may decide to see my lawyers.”

He was cowed—for a week.

But on the main road, not very far from the Dower House, was a post-box, and he had seen Enid go there, even on rainy days, to post a letter. He made a “net” that fitted into the opening of the letter-box, and snared a letter. It was to her husband, and from his knowledge of human beings, which was considerable, he understood why she paid blackmail rather than that his dream of her should be awakened to stark reality.

Edna came to accept the burden of his persecution as she accepted the ugliness of the pollards that lined Biddy brook; these trees, by some freak of nature, had grown into strangely obscene shapes. Nor was it persecution, for she never lost an hour’s sleep about the man.

She met him sometimes. Once he asked himself to dinner, and came, a resplendent tribute to the art of Savile Row. She wished to see him about several things; she had returned from Davos a few days before and had called upon a certain notary of Paris. Jane was in town; they dined tête-à-tête, and Ralph was most correct in speech and manner.

Remembering all that he had gleaned from the correspondence which had come into his possession, the correctness of his attitude might seem remarkable, for he could definitely trace the path to wild and flaming horizons of mad error. But she had a guard not easily forced, rather, an ice barrier that offered no foothold to adventurous feet.

“Before you were a blackmailer you were a burglar, weren’t you?”

She asked this disconcerting question almost as the door closed on the butler, who had left them to their coffee. He hated that abrupt attack of hers; it frightened him.

“My dear lady,” he drawled, “I do not follow you.”

Ralph had acquired a tone that was bored and languid, a tone and an inflection which went rather well with a refurbished Dower House and a Stutz car.

He glanced at her through his slant eyelids; his thick lips puffed in a smile, consciously nonchalant, in reality a little apprehensive.

“I had a letter last week from a Paris notary,” she said, flicking the ash from her cigarette. “A Monsieur Roux. He was Benito’s attorney, and had my letters, which he would have returned to me, only Benito did not put my address on the sealed envelope—if the notary had broken the seal and read the letters he would have known where to find me. He only discovered where I lived when he found an old address book of Benito’s— last week.”

Ralph inclined his head; he was frowning in the manner of a man who was greatly puzzled and could make neither head nor tail of what he was hearing. At least, that is how he hoped he looked.

“Nine months ago,” Edna went on, “burglars opened the safe of Monsieur Roux and took away about two thousand pounds’ worth of bonds and a number of documents. The sealed envelope containing my letters was part of the theft.”

“Indeed?” said Mr. Pecksell.

“That is how you came to possess them,” she said. “I have wondered how it was.”

Ralph puffed at his cigar and looked up at the ceiling.

“My career has been a strange one “ he began.

“I’m not interested in the story of your life,” she interrupted, “but that is the truth, isn’t it? After all, you can’t be much worse than a blackmailer, can you? Burglary must seem an innocent amusement by comparison.”

He had been a burglar; he had been almost everything that qualifies a man for Dartmoor. He began to tell her, diffidently at first, and then, as the splendour of his embroidered narrative took hold of him, he became expansive. He had all the gaolbird’s faith in the uniqueness of his own experiences, surrounded the most commonplace of incidents with a nimbus of glory, took credit to himself for the many discreditable exploits that were purely imaginary. But this he made plain—burglary did not pay.

“Take ‘Gilly’ Brown—one of the most brilliant bank- smashers of the day—a jewel thief. Broke—I saw him the other day in town—he didn’t see me—down at heel, miserable-looking. Yet that man once got away with a quarter of a million in sparklers!”

He spoke of other great characters in this umbrageous world he knew, but always he came back to Gilly Brown, sometimes testily, sometimes despisingly, once with a hint of fearfulness, but never displaying the admiration proper in a journeyman for a master of craft.

She listened attentively, conscious through him of the terrible importance of Gilly Brown. This shadowy crook was an obsession, a dominating life; circumstances revolved about and had their beginning in him; he marked crucial steps and stages of existence.

This he discovered to the quiet woman with the grey, steadfast eyes, and gave the impression that his revelation was automatic. It was as though by her statement and question she had broken down his inhibitions, and Gilly Brown became visible because he was all in life there was to conceal.

When Pecksell came to the end of his boastings, she said:

“My husband is coming home in the spring. I have decided that you must not stay here. Why don’t you live in London?”

He had excuses. A desire to break from old associates, to go straight.

When she laughed at this he flushed, was obviously hurt. He was going straight in the sense that he added nothing to his considerable income from any other illicit form of employment, and his grievance made him a little angry. He gave shape to plans which up to that moment had been formless even in his own mind.

Edna listened, and for the first time in their association she was shocked, so that she became a little off her balance.

"... I may not be a gentleman," he said, "but there are plenty of so-called gentlemen who wouldn't make your sister as happy as I should. After all, we live in a democratic age...."

He developed his staggering thesis. Fortunately she was not called upon to make any comment until he had finished. It was strange that at that moment she remembered, as a little girl, planting a particularly beautiful flower— or so it had appeared to her. She remembered the despair and rage of the gardeners, who knew that this weed would never be eradicated, but would spread and spread and appear in the most unexpected places, whither its seed had blown. Here was a parasite growth to be dealt with instantly and drastically. She knew that threats of lawyers and police were futile. Mr. Ralph Pecksell had explored those avenues of danger and had found them well fortified against attack.

"It is not a matter that I can discuss," she said at last.

Next day she went to town.

She knew of an underworld, but it had neither location nor definite boundary. The only wrongdoer who had ever come into her life was a butler who had pawned her father's silver, and he, she imagined, was no desperado, but a criminal from force of circumstances.

Whilst Jack was at Davos she lived in a small flat off Park Lane. There was only one hope in her heart, and that faint enough. Because of her association with certain charities she had been brought into touch with sundry bright representatives of the Press—languid young men who wrote gossip paragraphs, knew social obscurities by sight, and could spell their names without error. One of these she summoned to her, and her luck was in.

Usually these gentlemen—who, though in Fleet Street, are not of it—could hardly tell you the name of a reporter, but her visitor was more gifted. At eleven o'clock that night she interviewed Jerry Hold, who knew more about criminals than most crime reporters.

“Gilly Brown? It’s funny you should mention Gilly. I’m going to do a story about him this week— profitless crime. Here’s a man dying of T.B.”—she winced at this—”in a miserable little Lambeth lodging, without a shilling to his name, and he must have handled hundreds of thousands of pounds. He never really got over the flogging he had at Dartmoor.”

Edna did not even know that convicts were flogged; but apparently they are, for bad assaults on warders, and this particular warder had been especially hateful to Gilly and his six hundred companions in misery. Nobody saw the blow struck—no official body; it almost killed the warder, and the culprit would have escaped punishment but for the fact that there was one of the six hundred sunburnt convicts who saw an opportunity of gaining a remission of sentence.

“The curious thing,” said Jerry, “was that Langer— that was the fellow’s name—was a friend of Gilly’s, had worked on many jobs with him. But, Mrs. Mason, you’re not adding prison philanthropy to your other activities, are you?”

She had not thought of this explanation for her curiosity, and grasped the suggestion instantly.

Gilly was not confined to his bed. He walked the streets by day, seeking sunshine, a dilapidated and haggard man who was sixty and looked eighty.

“If you can do anything for him,” said Jerry at parting, “I’d be glad, because he’s a decent old bird, in spite of his disreputable past.”

“Do you know this man Langer?” she asked.

Jerry nodded.

“Curiously enough, I do. I haven’t seen him for years. A tall fellow, rather swell in his way. A pretty good burglar, though he’s never been charged with that crime. He’s got a woman complex....”

Jerry, being a crime reporter, was very frank.

He left to collect Gilly. This was on the Tuesday. On the Thursday he telephoned that Gilly Brown was on his way.

Her heart ached for the breathless old man. The similarity of his symptoms to others she had seen cut her like a knife. She had sent out all the servants and they were alone in the flat together.

“Yes, miss, I’m as near dead as makes no difference, but I sort of hang on. It was the bashing that did it …”

She had to steel herself while he described the flogging in horrid detail. He had come in the expectancy of largesse, and accordingly kept his conversation on the plaintive note, piling misery on misery, sketching all the probabilities of a lonely workhouse death. She might be good for a fiver, he decided. Later he took a more extravagant view of the possibilities.

Yet there was nothing soft about her. His most gruesome and heartrending descriptions brought no suspicion of tears or sorrow. Presently he thought it was her turn to talk.

“You’ve been a burglar, haven’t you—a safe-opener?”

He grinned a little proudly, and was stimulated to a new line of appeal, but she cut him short.

“I’m going to tell you frankly, Mr. Brown, just why I want you. I realize I am placing myself in your hands, but that doesn’t bother me very much. I am being blackmailed by a man who has thirty-seven letters of mine, which he keeps, I am sure, in a safe. They are probably in the original envelope. I want you to open the safe and get me the letters. I will pay you five thousand pounds, and arrange for your admission into a clinic in Switzerland.”

He sat bolt upright in his chair, staring at her, suspicion in his pale eyes. Irresolutely he shook his head.

“I don’t think I could do it, miss. Apart from me health and strength, there’s the question of tools; they’d cost money to get “

“I will pay for those,” she said, opened her bag and took out a thick bunch of five-pound notes. “There’s two hundred pounds here,” she said. “I will drive you to the place myself, and drive you from there to Dover. Do you know the Continent?”

He nodded, and smacked his thin lips.

“Do I know the Continent? Why, the year before the war I did a job in Monte Carlo “

Again she cut short his narrative, and he became businesslike. What type of safe was it? She could tell him this, for she had paid the bill.

“A Craster? That’s easy.”

She showed him where the Dower House was on a map, drew a plan of its rooms.

“What’s he like—the fellow who’s put the black on you?”

She described Mr. Ralph Pecksell rather vaguely.

“Anyway, he won’t worry me,” said the old man grimly. “And you needn’t be frightened of me going to prison, because I never shall. I’ve had my last bit of stir. There’s only one thing that I’ve never parted with. No prison for me, miss—or workhouse.” A statement which was in violent conflict with the lurid picture he had drawn of death in a pauper’s bed.

The possibility of this last adventure set his sluggish blood racing. His eyes were brighter, his step firmer, when he left that night.

She picked him up the next night in the New Cut. He had been waiting for an hour, he told her.

“Never dreamt you would come, miss.”

She noticed that he carried no bag.

“You haven’t the tools you were going to buy?” she said, and he chuckled.

“I got ‘em all planted on me, miss. If a flattie saw me carrying a bag he’d pull me in under the Act.”

He had never asked her her name. Probably the crime reporter had told him. But she had the impression that names meant nothing to him—except such names as were borne by eminent judges and regimental prison governors.

Through that long journey into Hampshire he coughed at regular intervals; hard little coughs that shook his spare frame, and every time a paroxysm was over he said the same thing.

“It was the bashing that done it. Maybe Mr. Hold told you? … I told you, did I? My memory’s not what it was. Twenty-five lashes, eh? And I wouldn’t have got it but for That Fellow.”

He never referred to Langer in any other way. He had no name—he was just That Fellow.

“The things I’ve done for that man! I got him out of trouble time after time. I’ve never done him a harm in my life.”

It began to rain almost as they came to the top of the hill from which in daylight could be seen the Dower House, standing at the end of an avenue of oaks. She turned the car into a narrow lane which formed one of the boundaries of Mr. Pecksell's property.

Ralph went to bed early, and the windows were dark as they stole in the shadow of the oaks to the front of the house. To Gilly's surprise she gave him a key. It was like Edna that she had long ago secured the key of the Dower House front door against emergencies.

"He keeps two servants," she said. "They sleep in the back of the house. He himself is a heavy sleeper."

She was starting to tell him the position of the library again, but he stopped her.

"You stay here, miss, and get back to the car."

She went back to the end of the avenue, near the disused lodges, and waited. Rain fell heavily and more heavily. There was a sound of far-off thunder. Half an hour passed, then she saw the spare shape coming swiftly and noiselessly across the lawn.

"Is this the letter, miss?"

There was a flicker of light; she saw the big envelope, tore open the flap with trembling fingers, and took out one of the letters.

"Yes." She was more breathless than he.

"That's all right." His voice was very cheerful.

They walked down the avenue and along the road to the lane in silence. She stepped into the car, but he did not follow. He seemed to have suddenly disappeared from the face of the earth. Edna called the man by name, but there was no answer. And then she got out again, walked a few steps, stumbled over something lying by the side of the roadway, and, stooping, felt the shape of him.

Jerry came to Park Lane as she was finishing breakfast the next morning.

"Have you heard about your Gilly Brown? Found dead near your house. You didn't tell him you had jewellery there, did you? Anyway, he busted the wrong crib. Do you know the man who lives in the Dower House? You'll never guess who he was—an ex-convict named Langer. The police found him

shot stone dead, the safe open, and poor old Gilly dead in a lane about a hundred yards away. His last adventure must have settled him."

He took out his notebook.

"Now can you tell me anything about this fellow Langer? He called himself Pecksell. How he came to be living in your neighbourhood?"

Edna Mason had nothing interesting to say.

THE TALKATIVE BURGLAR

First published in The Novel Magazine, Dec 1912

THE Duke smelt danger the moment the white fan of his electric lamp flashed across the room.

For this was no unoccupied house. There was a newspaper on the floor and a cosy chair drawn up to a little table—there was also an empty glass. He lifted it and sniffed wisely.

"A whisky-and-soda," he said mentally. "I have made what my disreputable associates call 'an error'."

The window through which he had come was still open—he looked and hesitated.

He was an accomplished burglar, practised in his art. He preferred an unoccupied house, but failing that— anyway, he had gone to a great deal of trouble and he would not leave without a souvenir.

He put the rays of his lamp over the room, noted a secretaire in the corner, and felt for his delicate jemmy.

Then the door was flung open violently.

In the hall without all the lights were on and the Duke saw the figure of a man silhouetted. More interesting to the Duke, he saw the sharp outline of a long-barrelled revolver, and it was held by a man who did not seem afraid of holding it.

"Who's there?" said a voice sharply. The Duke heard the fingers of the newcomer rustling along the wall searching for the switch.

"It's all right!" said the Duke calmly.

"All right be damned!"

Click!The room was flooded with light.

The man in the doorway was a soldierly gentleman in a dressing-gown, and he was reasonably annoyed.

“Don’t move,” he said; “stand over there where I can see you.”

The Duke laid his jemmy on the table and obeyed.

“All right,” he said easily, “send for the police.”

“That is exactly what I am going to do,” replied the other grimly.

From somewhere in the house came a woman’s voice.

“What is it?”

The man with the revolver backed to the door and spoke over his shoulder.

“It’s all right, dear. Put on your gown and come down if you’d like to see a real live burglar.” He looked at his captive interestedly. “And a famous one at that. You’re the rascal they call the Duke, aren’t you?”

The other smiled and, uninvited, sank into a chair.

“I am called the Duke,” he said punctiliously, “but I object to being called ‘rascal’.”

“You’re particular, my man,” said the owner of the revolver.

“I am particular,” corrected the Duke, “but I am not your man.”

The Duke was about thirty-five, clean-shaven and dressed quietly. He had a presence and a bearing which led policemen to touch their hats to him. His eyes were solemn and grey, and there were tiny lines at each corner which spoke eloquently of hidden laughter. And, indeed, the Duke’s ruin was a sense of humour and a propensity to laugh at his more serious self. There is no devil so potent as that one which dwells snugly in smiles.

“Stay where you are,” said Sir Brandon Burton, Bart.

He crossed to the telephone which stood on the study table and disentangled the receiver.

“Hello, Central,” he called in the irritated tone peculiar to the patrician in a hurry. “Get me Lime Street Police Station.”

“They’re not connected; try Wardour Place,” said the Duke softly. “Besides, it’s nearer.”

“Hello—hello—not connected? Well, get me—where did you say?” He turned to his prisoner.

“Wardour Place,” said the other. “Ask for Inspector King. He’s on duty to-night.”

“Eh? How do you know?”

“Oh, I know,” said the Duke vaguely.

“Hello. Is that Wardour Place. Yes. Is Inspector King there? Oh, is it you, Inspector? I want you to send a man to my house—I am Sir Brandon Burton, 162 Curberry Gardens—no, there’s no pressing hurry; I think I can manage till he comes. I am obliged to you.”

The last was addressed to the Duke, and he inclined his head.

He had chosen the most comfortable seat and sat in the most comfortable attitude—his legs stretched stiffly outward, his fingers drumming a little tune on the padded arms.

He was whistling softly to himself an air from Pagliacci.

At the sound of Sir Brandon’s voice he started as from a pleasant reverie.

“Not at all,” he said courteously. “Naturally, I know a great deal more about police stations than you do. Besides, I like Wardour Place; the cells are new and fairly clean.”

Sir Brandon laid down his revolver within reach and a smile struggled to his lean face.

“You’re a cool devil I What will you get?”

The Duke contemplated the ceiling.

“Five years and the remainder of my sentence. It’s rather a pity. I was hoping to see the Royal Hunt Cup run.”

He was in earnest—there was no braggadocio here.

“Jove! You’re a refreshing person,” said the admiring Sir Brandon.

“Why not?” The Duke crossed his legs. “What is the good of worrying? I made a mistake.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I thought you were abroad; you left London on Friday.”

“I came back again.”

“So I gather.”

There was an embarrassing period of silence.

Then: “Help yourself to a drink,” said Sir Brandon.

“Thanks!” The burglar walked to the table and measured himself a modest portion.

Sir Brandon was puzzled.

“How does it come about, a man of your class and obvious education—a burglar—good God!”

Said the Duke, and there was a hint of boredom in his tone:

“Why is it that people of my class never forgive crime that means hard work? You condone the forger, the swindler, the bucket-shop keeper, the fraudulent director, and hold up your hands in horror because we younger sons discover a profession which is not overcrowded. It is class snobbery—nothing less.”

There was another period of silence. The Duke watched a clock which ticked noisily on the mantelshelf, and wondered why an expensive clock should tick so loudly.

Then a thought struck Sir Brandon.

“So you want to see the Royal Hunt Cup run? Why?”

“I happen to know the horse that will win,” said the Duke, and there was immense confidence in his tone.

Sir Brandon smiled.

“So do I, my friend.”

The other looked at him with a pitying shake of his head.

“You mean your filly? You amuse me,” he said carelessly.

Sir Brandon Burton got up from his chair.

“What the devil do you mean?” he asked. “I tell you she will win, and win easily.”

The burglar raised his patient eyes to the ceiling.

“Good Lord!” he murmured. “How blind these owners are! However, it isn’t worth discussion. I hoped,” he added meditatively, “to make enough to carry me very far from this land. To tell the truth, I’ve already backed the horse, and got £5,000 to £150, and I’ve put up the money. It took many burglaries to make up that hundred and fifty.”

He spoke a little ruefully, and Sir Brandon smiled again.

“Anyway, you would have lost,” he said.

“Oh, of course!” There was no mistaking the offensive acquiescence.

“You don’t agree?” demanded the baronet irritably.

“I most certainly do not,” said the calm burglar, and looked at the clock. “That policeman takes a long time, but perhaps he didn’t think the errand was very urgent.”

“What is your horse?” persisted the other.

The Duke favoured him with a lofty smile.

“I do not feel justified in telling you,” he said, and explained. “I gained my information in delicate circumstances. I was burgling the owner’s house, and I heard the strength from the gentleman—er—as he was telling a lady.”

The baronet started to speak, but a step on the stairs arrested him.

“Excuse me,” he said, without realizing the absurdity of excusing himself to a burglar.

He went to the door, and the Duke rose to his feet as the girl came in. Tall and slim, with a rare and delicate colouring, her beauty was enhanced by the vividly hued kimono she wore. She looked from one to the other.

“This isn’t?”

Sir Brandon chuckled like a big boy exhibiting his rare find.

“This is our burglar—the gentleman burglar.”

The Duke frowned a little—he had a tender gorge.

“The term is somewhat offensive,” he said, “and contradictory. There cannot be a gentleman burglar.”

She looked from him to her husband.

“What have you done?” she asked.

“Sent for the police.”

Her eyes made a quick survey of the room.

“Nothing has been disturbed,” said the Duke, interpreting the look. “I can assure your ladyship on that point. I was, as the newspapers say, ‘disturbed at my nefarious work’.”

“Just as you disturbed him in a most interesting confession,” said Sir Brandon.

“I am sorry. Won’t you sit down?”

The Duke pushed the chair he had been using towards her, and with a little inclination of her head she settled herself.

“You must hear this, dear,” said the baronet eagerly. “It touches us both. Our friend knows a horse that will beat White Lady; overheard in the course of one of his midnight forays the owner telling “

The girl fixed her eyes on the burglar with a new interest.

“Overheard?” she repeated. “What horse is this?”

Ordinarily the Duke would have said no more, but he was a thirsty man, thirsty for his own people, the sound of their voices, the intimacy of their companionship. Ahead of him was a desert of days—of months—of years, wherein he would be a number, less than a pawn, since he would have no part in the game. He began wondering how far he would get before the caution which was second nature to him laid a finger on his tongue.

“You must not ask which is the horse,” he said, “because it involves I broke into a little house in Mayfair less than a week ago. A little house but an enormously rich one. The owner was by every account out of town; there were no servants in the place, and I took my time. It is of no interest to you to know how I got in—it is sufficient to say that I got in. I made my way through the house, spying out the land: I came to the dining-room last.

Imagine my surprise to discover that, though the owner was supposed to be away, the table was laid for two. A dainty little supper, wines, fruits, liquors— too rich a feast for a servant. Whilst I was looking at the table by the light of my electric lamp I heard the front door open'and voices in the hall. I had just time to secrete myself in a little room which led off the dining room, when they entered."

"And—?" It was the woman's voice and it was in the wrong key. The Duke noticed this, but Sir Brandon had no sensitive ear.

"Well, they ate and they drank and they talked—she was especially vivacious."

Lady Burton shifted her chair deliberately. Her back was half turned to her husband. She faced the unbidden guest.

"Did you—did you see her face?" she asked.

"I caught a glimpse."

The Duke's voice was casual, too casual for the woman with her lips a-tremble.

"Ah!" she said.

"The gentleman's wife, I suppose?" asked Sir Brandon.

The Duke hesitated.

"Er—no—not permanently so, I think—so I understood."

The latter was to the woman and had a note of apology.

"Oh!" said Sir Brandon.

"It was embarrassing for me," the Duke went on; "I come of a good puritan stock, but what could I do?"

"You—you could have made your presence known," said Lady Burton almost fiercely.

"And have been arrested," protested the Duke.

"They would not have dared arrest you," she said vehemently.

"I cannot blackmail justice," said the Duke loftily.

“So you stood like a cad, listening.”

Icily bitter, her words did not sting the Duke, conscious as he was alike of his rectitude and the overwhelming justification of expediency.

“I stood listening, not because I am a cad, but because I am a burglar.”

Sir Brandon Burton’s mouth made a large “O”. He was an honest man, possessing no subtlety.

“My dear,” he said a little shocked, “be reasonable. What on earth was he to do?”

“What, indeed!” agreed the other man with a bland and benevolent smile. “So I stayed and the talk turned upon race-horses. I heard the man say, ‘So-and-so thinks he will win, but I shall beat him.’ “

The sportsman in Sir Brandon was wide awake, and he leaned forward.

“Do you remember the name?”

“It was a curious name,” reflected the burglar, “in fact, it must have been a nickname.”

“And it was?”

The Duke tapped his head impatiently.

“It was on the tip of my tongue—tut! Ah! I remember; it was ‘Ronny’.”

Sir Brandon was on his feet.

“Ronny! Why, that is my nickname,” he gasped. “Who on earth could “

Lady Burton twisted her chair still further.

“And the lady—did—did she agree?” she asked quickly.

“She laughed, I remember, then he told her of the trial. And he was telling her the truth.”

“He may have boasted,” suggested Sir Brandon.

“I think not,” replied the Duke oracularly; “men seldom lie on side issues. It rang true to me. As for me, I saw a way out. I am not a betting man: betting isn’t as safe as burglary. But here was a chance.”

Lady Burton was resting her chin on her hand, searching his face.

“Do men only speak the truth—in side issues?” she asked. “There was a big issue there, was there not? Forgive me, I am a woman, and these things interest me. He probably loved her. Was he lying if he told her so? I ask you because you have no illusions; you see men and women in a different light from that in which we see them.”

Her husband was shuffling his feet nervously as she spoke. He was proud of his wife—a clever woman with depths his simple nature could not plumb.

“My dear,” he urged, “we cannot expect a burglar to talk philosophy at two o’clock in the morning.”

“You do not answer me,” she said, ignoring the interruption.

The Duke was enjoying his hour. He was prepared to plunge into the psychology of the situation she conjured.

“You ask a question which it is difficult to answer,” he said. “Love is very difficult to detect in normal circumstances, but when a house is on fire it is a somewhat difficult task to decide whether the kitchen grate is also burning. The man was all on fire—as I judged. Whether the fire would eventually restrict itself to the domestic hearth was beyond my understanding.”

He felt he had acquitted himself well. Sir Brandon was impatient for practical issues.

“You people are getting away from the main point,” he said. “I confess myself as being immensely curious to know the name of this wonderful horse.”

The burglar threw out his hands—a man desolated.

“And I cannot tell you,” he confessed miserably.

“Why not?”

The Duke was annoyed. He had forgotten the horse.

“Obviously,” he said with an exhibition of asperity, “if I tell you the horse you know the owner; if you know the owner you may infer the lady—that would be a betrayal of which no self-respecting burglar would be guilty.”

“Stuff!” snapped Sir Brandon. “But isn’t the whole thing ridiculous! Here we find ourselves at two o’clock in the morning taking lessons in morality from a burglar. Look here, you’re a sporting sort of devil and I’ll make you a sporting offer “

She turned to him, her face rigid and tense.

“I forbid you making any bargains with this man,” she said coldly; “it is unworthy of you.”

Sir Brandon’s face was a study.

“Dearest, you are mistaken,” he said, eager to correct her; “if you think I have any other desire than to gratify my curiosity you are wrong. It makes no difference to me. I do not bet—but I am piqued. I’ll make this offer “

The Duke came to the Lady’s rescue.

“My dear fellow, no offer you make will alter my determination.”

His tone was that of a patron reluctantly compelled to refuse a favour to a very old friend.

“Now look here,” persisted Sir Brandon, “there is only one horse in the race I am afraid of—you know what that is, Millicent?”

She nodded slowly. All the time her husband was talking she was watching the Duke with an expressionless face.

“It is a horse in the ownership of my best pal, Arthur Graversley, Lord Arthur Graversley. Why, it was only to-night you were telling me, dear, that Arthur thinks Saracen will win. Is that the horse?”

The Duke shook his head.

“Suppose I said yes?” he asked.

“Well?”

“If Lord Arthur Graversley were the man,” said the burglar slowly, “it would not be nice hearing for you or for any friend.”

Sir Brandon was uncomfortable.

“Oh, the lady? I had forgotten her—but”—he shrugged his shoulders—”young men are young men.... Was it Arthur Graversley?”

They heard the faint tinkle of a bell, and the Duke and his host rose together.

“No, it was not Lord Arthur,” said the Duke.

“H’m!”

Sir Brandon stood in the doorway, deep in thought, and they heard the bell ring again.

“Give me your word that you will not try to escape,” said he.

“Escape—not I.”

Sir Brandon looked at his wife, half inviting her to come with him, but she avoided the invitation and he left the room.

For a moment they stood facing each other, the burglar and the lady. Then she spoke.

“You are discreet,” she said, “and not a little merciful.”

The Duke wrinkled his forehead.

“I cannot quite follow your ladyship,” he said slowly.

“Oh, don’t pretend, please!” She spoke rapidly, feverishly, harshly almost.

“You know it was Lord Graversley—you know that you saw the woman.”

“Yes, I did see the woman.” He nodded.

“It was last Wednesday?”

He was genuinely surprised, and looked it.

“You are wrong, it was last Friday,” he answered quietly.

“Wednesday, I think,” said Lady Burton. She was very pale. The rose of delicate shade had left her cheeks.

“Pardon me—Friday,” he insisted. “I know my own burglaries,” he added testily.

She walked up and down the room with quick little strides, her arms moving undecidedly. Then she swung round on him stormily.

“Let us finish this farce. I know, I know! My God, how I know!” Her voice sank to a whisper; she was speaking to herself, seeing herself abased and horrible. “Ah, don’t pretend. Don’t, for God’s sake, play with me. Buy your freedom, tell my husband—I was the woman you saw in Graversley’s house on Wednesday night.”

“You!”

The man stared at her; had she been less disturbed she would have noted his amazement.

“You saw—you know,” she said shortly.

“Lady Burton, you are mad!” He found his voice. “Mad to make such a confession to a man like me, though it is safe enough.” He went nearer to her. “It was Friday night that I broke into Graversley’s house. Do you hear, Friday—and the woman was not you!”

She passed her hand across her eyes—this new shock was the greater of the two.

“Not me—you’re deceiving yourself. I left for Paris on Friday.”

Her voice was monotonous.

“What was the night of the Art’s Ball?” The Duke was businesslike. He was in a state of terror: for her. One can hold off hysteria if one is precise enough. “Graversley had been there—he was in costume.”

She whispered something; he could not catch what she said.

“It was the costume of an Austrian officer,” he added. She nodded her head many times.

“Another woman Friday, and he swore to me two days before—I shall go mad. Who was she, tell me?”

“It was not you,” said the Duke, but was deceived if he thought that satisfied her. The colour had come back to her cheeks, settling in two little lakes of crimson under her eyes. He felt her small hand on his arm and marvelled at the strength of her grip.

“You fool! Do you think I care for myself? Do you think that matters now? Tell me you’re lying, tell me you invented this. You were a man of my class once—if you have any lingering spark of honour—”

The Duke put her away from him kindly.

“I have many lingering sparks of honour,” he said gently; “one is glowing very brightly just now. I cannot tell you who the woman was.”

There was a step on the stair. She recovered herself with an efficiency which was marvellous to the man. He himself shook from head to foot, and there was a trickle of perspiration coming from his forehead.

“Ha! Not escaped?” said Burton with the heavy jocoseness of a man who has good news to reveal.

“No, but I rather wish I had,” said the burglar with earnestness.

“Well, you’re going to,” said Sir Brandon briskly. “I’ve sent the police away with a cock-and-bull story”; he hesitated, then, “I owe you an apology,” he said, “I owe it as much to myself. I allowed my keenness to run away with me. I ought not to have asked you about that man.”

“It was Graversley.”

Lady Burton spoke, and the Duke turned on her in a sweat of apprehension.

“I forbid you, madam; you are betraying a confidence,” he said angrily.

“It was Graversley, Brandon,” she said, ignoring him, “Graversley with a woman!” And her laugh was not pleasant to hear.

Sir Brandon’s face was troubled. He hastened to her side, ready to blame himself.

“Oh, some men are brutes!” she almost wailed. “Graversley, with his art and his ideals!Graversley, with his cults and his music I A beast I A beast!” Her sorrow was painful to watch. The Duke knew himself for a fool: his folly impressed him more than his villainy. He had blundered.

The other man was comforting her awkwardly. They were both oblivious of the presence of the burglar. He thought once of leaving by the window. Their voices dropped so that he could only catch a word here and there, then hers rose to a conversational pitch.

Sir Brandon came across the room.

“My wife wishes to speak to you, and so do I. Have you any money?”

The Duke nodded.

“A little. Enough.”

“Look here, you clear out of England. Give me the name of your bookmaker and if the horse wins I will send the money on.”

The Duke hesitated.

“That is kind of you, but “

“No buts; I’ll get you some money.”

He left the room, and they were alone.

She had not wept, he saw, but the little lakes of fire were gone and she was deadly pale.

“What do you know of Graversley?”

She took it for granted that he knew the man. Therein she was not mistaken. Lord Arthur enjoyed a reputation, and the Duke, who confined his labours to the best of houses, had heard things from servants—and servants are seldom scandalmongers without reason.

He answered her, weighing his words.

“What all the world knows—he’s a blackguard.

“This woman you saw,” she asked, “she is not—not the only one?”

The Duke shook his head.

“There are others—many others?” she persisted.

“Lady Burton,” he said gravely, “I will not lie to you, though I know the truth will hurt you—there are many.”

There was a long silence. From the floor below they heard the patter-patter of Sir Brandon’s slippered feet as he moved from room to room like a man seeking something.

“I—I wrote to him,” she said simply.

The Duke said nothing, but he was thinking quickly.

“Yes, I put my soul into words for him,” she went on listlessly. “All my life will be blackened by that. Every day will hold a fear, every night a terror—oh, what a fool, what a fool I have been!”

She clasped and unclasped her slim white hands, and the Duke watched her with a far-away eye.

“Can you tell me, is Arthur Graversley in town tonight?” he asked suddenly.

He had to repeat the question before she answered.

“Oh, I don’t know—why do you ask?”

“Did you write many letters?”

She nodded.

Sir Brandon had put down his revolver on a little table, and the Duke picked it up.

From the hall below the baronet was calling:

“I say, are you coming down?”

“Yes, at once,” said the Duke.

She was staring at him, doubt and hope in her eyes.

“What are you going to do?” she whispered.

“I am going to get your letters,” said the Duke in a matter- of-fact voice.

“Oh, no!”

The Duke had a sense of the dramatic: he was inspired with the nobility of his errand; an intoxicating sense of rectitude uplifted him.“Madam,” he said, “I hope in a few days to have retired permanently from my profession. I owe it to the man I once was to end my adventurous career in a blaze of glory. To-morrow those letters will be in your hands.”

“You—you will do this,” she whispered. “But if Graversley is there?”

The Duke twisted the loaded cylinders of the revolver. “So much the worse for Graversley,” he said grimly, and went out.

THE WILL AND THE WAY

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PEOPLE only make such wills in books and those fantastic stories which are the stand-by of the half-witted novelist. Bobbie Beale said as much, but not quite in those words: he used language which was strong, and in many ways unjustifiable.

Bertie Featherston, who sat at breakfast with him in his little fiat which overlooked Hyde Park, made noises of encouragement and approval.

“It would have been much better,” said Bobbie gloomily, “if I had never rescued the old bli—the old gentleman. If I had left him, so to speak, to stick in the mud “

“And let the beastly fishes eat him,” put in Bertie helpfully.

“It isn’t his money: money means nothing to me.” His eyes roamed unconsciously to the letter which had come that morning from his bank manager informing him of his £84 overdraft and requesting him “without delay” to put the matter right. “It means less than nothing to me, old boy. I am, so to speak, superior to filthy lucre.”

“That’s how I feel,” said Bertie, who really was superior to filthy lucre, since he enjoyed an income from his grandmother’s estate which brought him in three thousand pounds a year after he had paid income tax.

“The point is,” Bobbie went on, and there were evidently many points, for he prepared to tick them off on his fingers, “that this sort of thing isn’t done. When a fellow leaves some other fellow money in his will, he doesn’t impose all sorts of ridiculous conditions. And another thing is that this old buf—dear old fellow has evidently got the idea out of a lot of trashy novels.” “Which shows that he’s mad,” said Bertie enthusiastically. “I’ll tell you what we’ll do, dear old thing. We’ll go along and dispute the will, prove that the old bird was potty “

“Don’t be an ass, Bertie,” said Mr. Beale with sudden energy. “That means we should get nothing, and all the money would go to some cat-and-dog asylum! What I was saying, when you interrupted, was this: nobody has ever heard, outside of books, of a man leaving a hundred thousand pounds on condition that he marries some wretched girl he’s never seen. With the proviso—now listen to this, you muddle-headed chump—that if one refuses the other one, the other one gets the lot. You understand?”

“Quite, old boy,” beamed Bertie. “If you refuse to marry this awful creature, you simply pack up the whole parcel.”

Mr. Beale paused here in his argument to describe his friend in terms which were neither flattering nor kind nor yet just.

“You’ve got it all wrong. If I refuse to marry her, then she gets the money. If she refuses to marry me, I get it. Now the thing to do is to discover her weak points.”

“What about a detective?” said Bertie brilliantly.

It was the first intelligent suggestion that he had made in the course of the morning.

Mr. Beale took hold of his chin (his own chin) with his left hand, a sure sign that he was thinking hard.

“Isn’t it possible,” he said slowly, “for you to go down to Sparrowhurst—that is where the creature lives —and spy out the land, so to speak?”

“Me?” exclaimed Bertie, ungrammatical but aghast. “Why me, old thing? Good Lord! I couldn’t spy out anything. Why, I don’t even know a word of three letters meanin’ ‘emu’! She’d spot me in a minute—

I’m the biggest mug in the world at disguisin’ myself “

“Don’t disguise yourself—go as you are,” said Bobbie firmly. “Nobody will guess that you’re anybody. She’s got a friend who fives with her. Pal up with her. You’re not bad-looking: in fact, you’re the sort of fellow that the average girl would open her young heart to— you know what mugs some girls are. You could find out just what this May What’s-her-name thinks of it all ... you could drop a hint that I’m the last person in the world any decent girl ought to marry.”

Bertie was impressed.

“I get you,” he said. “Tell her you’re a thorough-paced old rotter... drunk every night an’ all that sort of thing.”

“Well”—Bobbie hesitated:—he was not without pride—”yes—you needn’t lay it on too thick—I mean, about drinking. She might want to marry me in the hope that I’ll have an attack of delirium tremens and pop off. Be discreet.”

“I get you,” said Bertie again, his enthusiasm rising. “I’ll tell her that you’re a gadder—always runnin’ about with this girl an’ that “

“Nothing of the sort,” said Bobbie testily. “If you do she’ll marry me in the hope of getting a divorce. Haven’t you any sense?”

“No,” said Bertie truthfully.

They discussed the matter till late in the afternoon and reached a satisfactory conclusion.

Now, it was not so much a coincidence as an inevitable consequence to the queer conditions which had been shaped by Mr. Catt’s extraordinary will, that Quorn Cottage, which is in or near the village of Sparrowhurst, in the

county of Berkshire, seethed with excitement and emotion, and that its atmosphere was so electric that such sensitive things as cats crept out of sight, hiding themselves in the deepest and darkest corners.

May Willoughby had a friend. Pretty girls as a rule do not choose other pretty girls for their confidantes and companions. But friend Janet Stormer, despite her horn-rimmed spectacles, was almost good-looking.

Janet was not a lawyer, but she had taken a degree in law at Oxford University. There was no reason why she should earn her living even as a lawyer, for she was as rich as her friend was poor. But law was her hobby. She could have told Blackstone things that would have made him turn dizzy. Blackstone, being a really great lawyer, was dead, so was beyond dizziness. It is hoped.

Janet strode up and down the pretty little drawing room that looked out on to the lawn with its crocuses and daffodils and its almond trees in blossom, and other forewarnings of the vernal equinox. Her arms were folded and her brow was wrinkled.

“I am not so sure, May,” she said soberly, “whether this will can stand. There is a well-known case, Higgs v. Wiggins with Moulder intervening—”

“For heaven’s sake don’t talk to me about law,” groaned May, prostrate on the settee. “I’ve seen Mr. Scraggit’s clerk and he says there’s no question that the will must stand. The whole thing is a plot,” she said, leaping to her feet. “This wretched Beale man must have got poor Uncle Catt into a state of intoxication, pushed him in the river, and then fished him out again. Uncle Catt did drink: I’ve often seen him taking port at dinner. Isn’t it too disgusting! All that money to be taken from me by a wretched, adventurous interloper, a man who perhaps is the lowest of the low—I mean so far as his morals are concerned——”

“You could of course marry him,” said Janet profoundly, pinching her red lips. “And reform him,” she added.

“Marry him! Are you mad? It’s pretty clear to me what has happened. This wretched Beale is a novel-writer and has put this idea into that silly old—into poor dear uncle’s head. Such things never happen in real life —you know that, Janet.”

Janet shook her shingled head slowly.

“I don’t know that you’re right, darling. In fact, there was a very famous case, Merton against Merton and Another—“

“For heaven’s sake don’t give me any cases! My case is—is pathetic! What can we do?”

Janet scratched her head vulgarly.

“We could appeal to the Master for the documents in the case,” she suggested. “We might even enter an inter-pleader.”

May groaned.

“Don’t you understand, my poor child,” she said, with offensive patience, “that this isn’t a question of documents and inter- pleaders? That it isn’t a matter of law, but a question of common sense? If I refuse him I lose the money; if he refuses me he loses the money.” “Why not discover his weak points?” suggested Janet.

“I have an idea,” said May suddenly. “Suppose you go up and see this person?”

“As your legal representative?” asked Janet hopefully, and by the expression of pain and weariness on her “client’s” face she gathered that this was not her plan.

“This horrible Beale has a friend—somebody told me about him yesterday ... wait ... I’ll think of his name in a minute ... I’ve got it! Bertie Something! Janet, you’re a clever woman. You could turn a man inside out “

“I am a lawyer, not a doctor,” corrected Janet coldly. “I mean you could... cross-examine him.” Jane brightened visibly. “You could find out all there was to be found; you could discover his weaknesses. You could so twist this Bertie Something round your little finger that “

“I think I understand,” said Janet, her hand at her brow. “You may leave this to me. I shall be away a day or two, but when I return....”

The day Janet went to town, Mr. Bertie Featherston’s car arrived at Sparrowhurst. He took a room at the Red Lion Inn, changed his clothes and, having made the necessary enquiries, wended his slow way to the vicinity of Quorn Cottage. It was, he admitted, a nice cottage. It had a thatched roof and timbered walls. Most cottages that Bertie knew were three- storeyed mansions of red brick with Italian terraces and Dutch gardens. All Bertie’s friends had “cottages” in the country—they were sometimes referred to by their owners as “my little place”—and their average garages were about four times the size of Quorn Cottage.

t Bertie Featherston was in no dilemma as to how he should begin operations. His plan was made up. He would go boldly to the cottage, ask for Miss Janet Stormer, and, when Miss Janet Stormer presented herself, he would say: “May I speak to you in private on a matter of the greatest importance?” She would look surprised, blush a little and say: “Yes ... but I am afraid I don’t know you?” He would then say: “I think we know the Robinsons. “ It would hardly be possible for a respectable girl not to know somebody named Robinson. He would continue: “They asked me to call,” and then slip easily into a line of conversation that would, with adroit manoeuvring, bring him to the subject of May Willoughy.

He knocked at the door. It was opened by a beauty. Her hair was fair, her eyes were blue, her skin was milk and pink roses.

“Good morning,” she said expectantly.

Bertie’s mouth was dry.

“Miss—um—Stormer?” he said huskily.

“Miss Stormer is in town—are you a friend of hers?”

Bertie nodded dumbly. She opened the door wider, a little white hand bade him enter. He stumbled over the mat and found himself in a paradise mainly covered with chintz.

“Miss—um——?”

“I’m Miss Willoughby,” she smiled.

Again Bertie nodded. She was sorry for him. Most women are sorry for those who are obviously overcome by their beauty. She made conversation until Bertie found his voice. He stayed to tea. He came to dinner. He would have come to breakfast next morning, only she didn’t ask him. Instead, he took her in his car to Eastbourne to lunch. He dined with her that night....

Four days later he went back to town a little unhappy, a little indignant, more than a little uneasy. Bobbie was at his flat when he called. Bobbie also seemed a little uneasy.

“Well, son,” he asked, “how did you get on?”

Bertie coughed.

“I saw her—Miss Willoughby.”

Bobbie's eyes opened.

"You saw the vamp—did she know who you were, you great juggins?"

"No," said Bertie, with a catch in his voice, "she didn't. I felt like a criminal deceiving her. And she's no vamp, Bobbie." His voice trembled. "Never speak disparagingly of Miss Willoughby!"

Bobbie sneered horribly.

"Oh ho!" said he. "She's caught you, eh?—you poor herring!You blind bat! How are you going to explain that to Gladys?"

Bertie was staggered.

"To who—whom?" he gasped.

"No matter." Bobbie was prepared to shrug the matter of Gladys from discussion. "You don't deserve her, anyway."

"I don't know anybody called Gladys," protested Bertie.

"Gladys Malloy," said Bertie sternly. "The lady who called at your flat to see you the day you left. Fortunately I happened to call in for my golf clubs—you never return anything I lend you—and I saw her. By heavens, Bertie, if you are deceiving that girl you'll have to settle with me!"

His tone was ferocious; his air and mien threatening. Bertie went rapidly through the list of girls he might possibly be deceiving and failed to find Gladys.

"The matter isn't worth talking about," Bobbie went on. "I've got to see the lawyers to-morrow, and that female will be there. If she refuses to release me now, I'll—I'll..."

Bertie was very pale.

"Old top," he said, his voice quivering, "if you raise so much as a finger to that innocent child, I'll-— I'll ... really, I shall be awfully vexed."

They parted bad friends.

In the morning Bobbie drove down to Scraggits the lawyers—a very important firm, so exclusive that it seldom had its windows cleaned. He stalked through the outer lobby, scarcely noticing Bertie, who sat patiently waiting.

Mr. Scraggit was a very old man with a strong sense of law. He had, he told Bobbie, a communication to make after “you young people” had made up their minds.

“Mine is already made up,” said Bobbie.

“Splendid,” said Mr. Scraggit, and shuffled into his very private room, for he had heard the door open and knew that the other beneficiary under the will had arrived.

Miss Willoughby had scarcely done shaking hands and approving of the weather when she began to state her views on eccentric wills. Mr. Scraggit listened with an affectation of patience.

“I am sorry, madam, but that is how the will reads. It was not my suggestion, but the late Mr. Catt’s.”

“I think it’s an abominable will,” said Mary hotly.

Mr. Scraggit raised his thin shoulders to his ears.

“I have my own views about it,” he said, “but what can I do? You see, your uncle had an attachment for Mr. Bobbie Beale. Have you ever met him, by the way?”

“No!” Miss Willoughby snapped the word. “And I hope to goodness I never shall!”

Again the lawyer’s shoulders rose.

“That, I am afraid, cannot be avoided. He is here to-day and you must make your decision in accordance with the terms of the will.”

“It’s a nice outlook for me, to marry a man I’ve never seen just because uncle was silly enough to fall into the water and be fished out by Mr. Beale! Hasn’t this wretched man any sense of decency? Wouldn’t he give up his share?”

“That,” said Mr. Scraggit gravely, “is stretching decency rather far. Of course, if you could persuade him “

“Persuade a man to give up money!” May’s lip curled.

“Or if he could persuade you “ suggested Mr. Scraggit.

“Persuade me to give up what is rightfully my own? I’d like to see him do it!”

Mr. Scraggit walked to the door and opened it.

“Here is your Mr. Beale,” he said.

“Not my Mr. Beale,” breathed May Willoughby, and followed him into the less private office.

For a moment youth glared at youth, murder in their eyes. Bobbie hated her; May Willoughby thought he was loathsome. Bobbie dragged the lawyer aside.

“Have I got to marry this person?” said Bobbie hollowly and rudely.

“It was Mr. Catt’s wish.” The legal sphinx could say no more.

“I think it’s a perfectly beastly idea,” -said Bobbie wrathfully. “How can one marry anyone one doesn’t know? I ask you. My dear old chap, it isn’t done. It’s positively revolting. What is this creature’s name?” “May.”

“Yes, that’s the sort of thing that would happen to me,” said Bobbie bitterly. “May!”

“There is no necessity for you to marry at all.”

Bobbie grew testy.

“Don’t piffle, old thing. I saved Mr. Catt’s life, or one of his fives—that’s rather good, isn’t it? Cats have nine fives, you know, like tailors. Ha, ha! Well, I saved his fife and I’m entitled to the reward.”

The lawyer sidled to the door and closed it. They were alone. The situation was an awkward one. Bobbie tried to save it by referring to the weather. Then:

“I say, you’re the young party that wants to marry me,aren’t you?”

“Me want to marry you!” May’s chin went up. “If you were the last man in the world, Mr. Beale, I should not want to marry you!”

“But I’m not the last man in the world,” said the practical Bobbie, “and, of course, I don’t want to marry you.”

“Then we are mutually agreed.”

There was an awkward silence.

“You can imagine how bitter I feel about it, Mr. Beale,” said May at last. “I suppose a girl indulges in foolish dreams, and I’d pictured an ideal husband, a tall, handsome man, who carried himself with a distinguished air.

Bobbie thought the description not unlike him.

“I had my ideas of a wife, too,” he said sternly. “She was to be pretty, with dark, flashing eyes—your eyes haven’t got a flash in ‘em! Still, if you are not willing to marry me—”

“Oh, I’m willing to marry you!” she said hastily. “But, of course, you wouldn’t be cad enough to marry a girl who doesn’t want you. It is you who are not willing to marry me!”

Bobbie sighed wearily.

“My dear old thing, I’m falling over myself to marry you, only you hate the sight of me. Mind you, I don’t say that you’re not right. I’m not the kind of man that any girl would want to marry, if you understand me. I’m awfully bad-tempered “

“So am I,” said May promptly.

“I snore,” said Bobbie.

“Well, that wouldn’t worry me,” she retorted quickly, “because I shouldn’t hear you. You see, I’m rather deaf and naturally bad- tempered. If you married me, why, poor Mr. Beale, you would have a perfect hell of a life I”

Bobbie swallowed something.

“But, oh, I get into fearful rages sometimes, and generally all the time. I throw the first thing that I can put my hand on at the first person I reach. I’m the worst husband that any respectable woman could ever have!”

May was fast losing her patience.

“Of course, that doesn’t affect me, because I’m not respectable. I don’t want to tell you all my past, but if these walls could speak …! No, Mr. Beale, I think you are very wise in refusing to marry me, although I’m keen on marrying you, and I think you are doing a very generous and unselfish thing, because lots of men would marry a woman who hated them just for the sake of the money. Now, you’re not that kind of person!”

“But I am rather,” said Bobbie desperately. “Yes, I’d do any dirty trick like that. I mean I’m fearfully reckless where women are concerned. But I quite understand why a girl brought up in a convent—I know you’re a convent girl by your fearful language—I can quite understand why you don’t want to marry a wicked old rake like me.”

“Oh, but I do!” protested May furiously. “Now don’t say I don’t! I declare to you that I want to marry you, even though....”

It was at this moment that Mr. Scraggit came into the room. Had he been listening? Who knows to what depths a lawyer will sink, especially a family lawyer? It is an established fact that most of the crimes committed on the Victorian stage had their origin in innocent-looking old family lawyers with white beards. And Mr. Scraggit did not even look innocent, and was beardless. He glanced from one to the other a little timidly.

“I feel I ought to say,” he said apologetically, “that in trying to bring you young people together I am merely carrying out the wish of my dear old friend Catt. May he rest in peace!” he added, raising his eyes to the ceiling.

Bobbie looked up too, wondering whether the deceased Mr. Catt had been filed away with other human documents in some dark recess of the office.

“That was my first desire,” the lawyer went on, “but, alas, it does not seem possible that my old friend’s wishes—my eccentric old friend,” he added a little emphatically, “who went through life under the impression that he was a rich man, though in point of fact, so far from leaving a hundred thousand pounds, the total amount of his property is a little less than four hundred——”

Bobbie staggered.

“Four hundred!” said May, her mouth open wide.

“Three hundred and ninety-two pounds seven shillings and fourpence halfpenny to be exact,” said Mr. Scraggit, rubbing his thin hands together. “But it pleased my dear old friend to believe that he was a rich man.”

“Don’t let us detain you,” said Bobbie haughtily, and with a stiff bow to the girl walked out into the waiting-room.

Two people were there, and it was difficult to say who was the paler, Bertie Featherston or Janet Stormer. At the sight of Janet, Bobbie gasped.

“You here?” he said, in amazement.

“You’re not going to marry that designing woman, are you?” said Janet, glaring at her erstwhile friend. “It is disgraceful, marrying for money I”

Bertie’s eyes sought May Willoughby’s. She smiled and shook her head.

“No, dear,” she said, although she had not been asked, “I am not marrying this …”

She looked Bobbie Beale up and down and left the sentence in the air.

They parted at the lawyer’s office with scarcely more than the most formal acknowledgment of each other’s existence.

“I am so glad you rose superior to money, Bobbie,” said Janet, holding him tight by the arm as they walked along. “I knew, the moment I saw you, the moment I heard your dear voice, that there was nothing mercenary in your nature. Darling, with all my money we ought to be able to live awfully comfortably, but I’m never going to see that woman again.…”

“If,” said Bertie Featherston, in that queer tremolo which was indicative of his emotions—”if Bobbie had forced you into a marriage for the sake of that wretched money, I’d—I’d have done something desperate. Thank heaven I came down and saved you from that money hound…

A JUDGE OF HORSES

No record of prior magazine publication under this title found

THERE was a young man whose name was Ferdinand Boyle Marsh who travelled on an American passport, but had, he often stated, a European mind. There were quite a lot of people who did not believe he had any kind of mind. What he meant was that he drew his money from New York and his inspiration from Paris.

He was fond of horses, especially horses that won races when he had backed them, and he believed in art more or less for art’s sake. That is to say, he painted pictures which nobody understood except the man who made the frame, and he knew that they were twenty-four inches by thirty- six inches.

It was unfortunate for quite a number of people that he was in Melbourne when the Costyermore case was under discussion. He was a keen bettor, and he came on a grand tour with letters of introduction, amongst others, to the stewards^of the Victoria Racing Club. What is more, he misguidedly backed Costyermore on the occasion when the owner and trainer had not backed him, and his virtuous indignation, loudly expressed to influential people, may have had something to do with the subsequent action of the

racing authorities. It is pretty certain, however, that they were acting on their own initiative, for the stewards of the Victoria Racing Club were neither simple nor long-suffering.

They summoned Mr. Tookes to their presence, and he came, round-eyed and innocent, to explain why Costyermore (by Tariff—Cornflake) had finished down the course at a certain meeting (starting at 20 to 1), and a fortnight later strolled home by three lengths, a white-hot favourite at 9 to 4.

Mr. Tookes was, he said, dumbfounded. His trainer, Mr. Augustus Bache, when called upon to express his own reactions, informed the stewards that they could have knocked him down with a feather when he saw Costyermore jump off in front and make all the running from gate to post.

"I have no intention of knocking you down with a feather," said the senior steward unpleasantly, "though I dare say that there are quite a number of backers who would be glad to make that experiment with an axe. What is your explanation?"

Mr. Bache had several. The horse had been coughing before his ignominious display; the "going" had been hard; the horse hadn't eaten up; he had probably been poisoned; he had two ways of running, probably three.

"You are both warned off for life," said the senior steward eventually, "and Costyermore is disqualified from running for two years."

"That's a bit thick," said the indignant Mr. Tookes. "Not quite so thick as you," retorted the steward colloquially.

Mr. Tookes and his trainer dined that night in a restaurant off Collins Street. They were men of the world, who had read books on philosophy from the prison library—for both had had the misfortune in their earlier days of meeting another kind of steward who sat on a bench and said, "Nine months hard labour," almost mechanically.

"There's no sense in crying over spilt milk," said Mr. Tookes as he dissected a chicken. "We've had a good run and cleaned up. Thank Gawd those bat-eyed so-and-so's" (he referred to the stewards) "didn't hold their inquiry until after the settling!"

"What are we going to do with Costyermore?" asked Mr. Bache. "That's what hurts me. They might have left the so-an-so horse alone. He's worth three thousand quid of anybody's money—now he's a dead loss."

They discussed the matter thoroughly.

Two days later the Melbourne newspapers announced that Costyermore had been sold to a "well-known Queensland breeder", and was leaving for Brisbane by the first available boat. But Costyermore did not go to Queensland. He was certainly landed at Colombo and subsequently was despatched to Natal. From South Africa he was shipped to the Argentine via England.

On Salisbury Plain was a small training establishment recently vacated by a gentleman trainer, who was so much a gentleman that he never came to his stables except for the week-ends. In consequence his horses were left in the charge of a head lad, who spent most of his time in Bournemouth. The patrons of the gentleman trainer endured their misfortunes for two years, and then sent their horses to stables presided over by coarse men who slept with their charges all the year round and won races with monotonous regularity.

Mr. Tookes, sitting at breakfast in a London hotel, read the advertisement in a sporting newspaper:

"Small training establishment to be let. Nice house and garden. Twenty good boxes and best gallops in England."

"That's our place," he said.

It took a fortnight's negotiations and consultations and exchanges of references before Tickey Lodge passed into the possession of Mr. Bache, who had changed his name to Bates, and the greater part of six months elapsed before he received the necessary licence to train horses under the Jockey Club rules.

Happily for him he had trained horses in the Argentine before he migrated to Australia, and the recommendations which came from South America may have had something to do with the facility with which he received his "ticket".

He was a good trainer in the sense that he was a man who could make running horses run. He was not a kind trainer, and when he walked into his stable yard the lads did not greet him with wild cheers, nor did the horses follow him about wherever he went; but he was a good trainer.

He would have had to be superlatively good to have solved the problem of Costyermore. He had a consultation with Mr. Tookes.

"It's no use pretending," he said, "that we are persona grata with the Jockey Club."

“What does persona grata mean?” asked Mr. Tookes. “Boy friends,” translated Mr. Bache. “They are not quite certain of us, and if we try to ring in Costyermore, they will be down on us like a thousand bricks. The only thing to do is to find a can to own this horse.” “You can easily find one of those,” said Mr. Tookes. “There are so many about that they jingle.”

Mr. Bache shook his head.

“This fellow has got to be a regular swell, not somebody who has never seen a night club. He has got to have his name in the Book of Words.”

The Book of Words, to Mr. Bache, was any standard work of reference: in this particular case, the peerage.

Chance brought Mr. Tookes to Whisbury and to the acquaintance of Colonel Bridges, who had a daughter, a dog, and a nose for bargains. About the daughter and the dog Mr. Tookes, between one Italian vermouth and another, learned nothing; but he learned that the colonel was the sort of man who would walk into any junk shop and discover a Velasquez or a Gainsborough or a Corot that had been overlooked by generations; that he was the sort of man who found treasures|in the most unexpected places.

It is true that connoisseurs denied the authenticity of the Velasquez and Gainsboroughs and Corots, and that the sixteenth-century armour that he bought for a mere song was the work of a Birmingham yeoman armourer who had a taste for pictures of greyhound racing; but you could never convince Colonel Bridges that he was not the victim of a conspiracy organized by what he vaguely described as “the ring”.

“This man,” said Mr. Tookes to the interested Mr. Bates, “is Our Bird. Go and buy a milk-cart, and be at such and such a place at such and such an hour tomorrow.”

The next day he walked through a quiet street in Whisbury, and lo, there by the kerb was a milk-cart drawn by a rather large, self- conscious horse.

“That’s an awkward-looking beast, Colonel,” said Mr. Tookes.

The colonel cast an eye over the animal.

“If that isn’t a great horse I’ve never seen one,” he said. “Look at his legs, look at his neck, look at his quarters!”

“I rather like his ears too,” said Mr. Tookes.

They interviewed the milkman. No, the horse was not for sale. It was a legacy from a dead aunt. Yes, it had been in a racing stable.

“What did I tell you?” said the colonel.

“It’s very hard work for the poor old fellow,” said the milkman plaintively, “pulling carts up and down these so-and-so hills. If I could get him in a racing stable I believe he would win something.”

But the horse was not for sale. He could be leased. The colonel, who knew nothing about leases except that you didn’t have to put any money down, grew feverishly enthusiastic at the suggestion. He had discovered another Velasquez.

As to Colonel Bridges’ dog and his daughter, and Mr. Mortimor, who loved his daughter ...

A few months after the excellent milk horse had gone into training, Mr. Frank Mortimor came into the chemist’s shop with a firm step. There was determination in his eye, a certain rapidity of purpose in the lift of his chin. Purpose and determination relaxed for the moment; two young ladies were at the counter, and were making purchases in a whisper, and Frank was, he hoped, too much of a gentleman to intrude upon the privacy of innocent maidenhood engaged in its first choice of lipstick.

“Yes, sir?”

The swing doors were still vibrating from the hurried exit of beauty when Frank approached the white-coated and elderly assistant.

“I want to buy a very deadly poison,” he said firmly. “What can you recommend?”

The chemist looked at him tiredly. He was a man with a whitish beard and he was entirely without illusions.

“Houpla Lemonade Crystals have never been known to fail,” he said with an appropriate acidity of manner. “We also stock a ginger-beer powder that is devastating.” Mr. Mortimor made a noise which indicated his annoyance and resentment.

“There is no need for you to be amusing,” he|said testily. “I am asking you as a chemist for information. I seem to remember that you have a sign on your window —’Curtis for Courtesy’—give me a sample.”

The bearded assistant sighed.

“Do you require the poison for a dog or a rich relative?” he asked. “What is suitable for one may be quite inadequate for another.”

“For a dog,” said Frank. “A big white dog—at least, it looked big to me.”

The man behind the counter shook his head.

“We have nothing that would suit a white dog. A brown dog—yes. Is it your own dog? “

“That is immaterial,” said Frank stiffly. “But as you are so infernally curious, I may tell you that it is not my dog. It belongs to Colonel Bridges. At least, it lives in his house.”

Mr. Curtis nodded.

“Toby,” he said, and leaned back against a shelf full of large bottles, setting them jangling. “I could run this store and could make a good profit on the sale of poisons for Toby. He bit you, of course? Who was the young man we sent over to Paris for a Pasteur treatment? It is amazing how rare hydrophobia is nowadays.” Frank breathed heavily through his nose.

“Am I to understand that other—er—gentlemen have been chased by this dog?”

Mr. Curtis nodded.

“And caught,” he said simply. “There is a strain of bloodhound in him—the colonel has been experimenting for years. The Bridges Terrier is becoming recognized; there was a Bridges Terrier class at the Hindeny Dog Show last year. Did you kiss her?”

Mr. Mortimor went red. He was naturally pink anyway, and he hadn’t far to go.

“If you are referring to Miss Bridges “ he began.

Mr. Curtis nodded gravely.

“I thought so. The colonel has trained the dog to bite anybody who kisses his daughter. Hence the casualties. A fantastic idea, but then the colonel is a scientist. When he says that kissing is unhygienic he has the support of the British Bacteriological Association.…”

Frank walked from the store and banged the door behind him. He did not realize that it was a swing door until he received the bump that flung him

into the middle of the sidewalk, almost at the feet of the one girl in the world.

Honore Bridges looked deliciously cool and sweet and inadequately dressed—fair-skinned, grey-eyed, slim and adorable. Frank used to whisper to himself that she had the most wonderful figure; her girl friends used to sigh with envy at the perfect shape of her visible legs.

“Poor dear—are you hurt?”

He picked himself up and looked at Toby. Of course, Toby was there—a nondescript hound with a silly grin and a wagging tail. It was impossible to believe that this imbecile dog could be terrifying and dangerous. He sidled up to Frank and rubbed a little grime on to his immaculate flannel trousers.

“I shall kill that animal.”

Frank spoke in an undertone: there were some things he did not wish the dog to know.

“How silly you are, darling! Come along and give me some tea, and then you can take me to the pier. I want to see all the unbalanced people who think Whisbury is a holiday resort.”

Whisbury is on the South Coast. For eight months in the year it is a beautiful little town with a delightful old Norman church, and, on the sea-front, an unbroken stretch of amber sands. Retired officers of the Indian Army have their residences here, and their houses have such names as “Simla”, “Pondicherry”, “Allahabad”, “Gunga Din”, or something similar. They have a club where they sign “chits” for “pegs” and tell one another about the jolly times they had when they were staying with the Maharajah of Hooti-Tooti, and the pigs they have killed, and the tigers they have shot, and what a pukka sahib everybody was who happened to be dead.

In the summer “Simla”, “Pondicherry”, etc., were let to careful tenants who were willing to pay for the privilege of living in houses that were mainly furnished with Benares brassware, bead curtains and Indian screens.

Colonel Bridges had never been in the Indian Army. He had got his colonelcy in the Great War, when he was in control of a clothing department. It was his boast that he had “done his bit”. He never forgave young men who had been at school in those perilous days (he himself had lived through hell owing to the mysterious disappearance of 5,000 trousers—soldiers—khaki, from a store), and had only one word to describe any man who had failed his Country in “Her Hour of Need”.

“Slacker, sir! Slacking at home, sir! A young man like you, sir!”

In vain did the delinquent plead that in 1914 he had been in the care of a nursery governess.

“I was fifty when I joined up, sir! Dammit! It makes my blood boil to see you Cuthberts hiding yourselves behind your nursery governess’s petticoats.”

Anyway, he was a colonel and had a big house and three hundred acres, kennels, ideas about hygiene and Saparino.

Of Saparino he was even more proud than of his daughter, his big house, his three hundred acres, his kennels, and his ideas about hygiene.

The colonel often told the story of how he had found Saparino pulling a milk-cart, had instantly recognized the “blood” in him, had “got” the animal for a mere song and had put him into training. His false-hearted kennel-man as frequently told the story of how found Saparino pulling a milk-cart, had told the colonel, who went down to the promenade and, picking on the wrong milk-cart, had bought a pony that was absolutely valueless for any other purpose than pulling a milk-cart; but the fact remained that Saparino, by Mottled Soap, dam’s pedigree unknown, came eventually into the possession of the colonel. It was a matter of history that in three weeks he won the Novices Hurdle race at Ludlow, a Maiden Hurdle at Chelmsford, and was second to High and Dry in a Novices Steeplechase at Sandown Park.

He was trained by Bates of Chalkham, and the colonel wore out the country between Chalkham and Whisbury in his superintending of Saparino’s preparation. The horse thrived under his supervision, but the trainer would have become a nervous wreck if he had taken the slightest notice of his employer.

The colonel might have tolerated Mr. Mortimor but for the crowning error of that gentleman; he was the owner of High and Dry. He owned one or two other horses, but to Colonel Bridges his principal offence lay in the fact that he allowed such a horse as High and Dry to live, and whenever he was not engaged in telling Frank that he was a slacker who had deserted his country in the hour of her need, he was saying things about High and Dry which would have boiled the blood of that ingenious thoroughbred but for the fact that he was naturally of a cool and phlegmatic disposition.

“You shouldn’t have won. Of course you shouldn’t have won!Your infernal hair-trunk fouled Saparino two fences from home.... Don’t tell me it isn’t

true —I saw it! Am I blind, sir? Not so blind that I was accepted to serve my country in the hour of her need. No, sir, you fouled me!"

"My jockey " pleaded Frank.

"You fouled me," said the colonel firmly. "You tried to ride me over the wing. You knocked me sideways as I was coming out to take my place; you jumped across me at the last fence. If the stewards had been English gentlemen you would have been disqualified. If they had not been blind, sir—they are blind, sir—you would have been warned off. I am willing to match Saparino against your hair trunk for a thousand sovereigns."

He never referred to High and Dry except as a hair trunk. Happily, High and Dry was impervious to insult, and anyway would not have recognized himself under that name.

A few days before the misadventure which ruined a perfectly good pair of tweed plus-fours—and it isn't so funny being chased by underbred dogs as some of these comic artists pretend it is—the colonel had issued his challenge for the nth time. It was in the club, and it was thrown over a chota peg, or, alternatively, a whisky-and-soda, before every other colonel in the club, and Frank had replied deferentially:

"I quite agree, Colonel. I think I was very lucky to win. Certainly I don't want to beat your horse again."

"I should jolly well say you wouldn't," said the colonel, and added, almost unneccessarily: "I should jolly well say you wouldn't!"

Mr. Mortimor knew that he was being a hypocrite and a liar; be believed that High and Dry could give Saparino a stone and lose him. He believed his horse could make rings round Saparino, and, if necessary, oblongs and parallelograms. He believed that if he matched his horse at level weights against Saparino bookmakers would refuse to pay. After all, there is a limit to every bookmaker's sense of benevolence. He had never been so challenged or had heard a more disparaging remark about High and Dry, but he did not offer a sycophantic agreement.

It was unfortunate that both horses were more or less in the same class; more unfortunate that they were generally entered for the same race, because it meant that, for peace and quietness' sake, High and Dry never ran, though he had one or two races at his mercy, and the colonel used to greet Frank in the High Street, or on the golf links, or at the club, with a sneer.

“I see you are not running that hair trunk of yours. By gad, you are wise!”

And Mr. Frank Mortimor used to smile sadly; and even the fact that Saparino invariably finished down the course, after his initial display of brilliance, did not cheer him.

They walked slowly up the long hill leading to Cliff Head, the girl and the young man, with their four-footed chaperon ambling behind them, occasionally stopping to exchange a few angry words with dogs of smaller stature, and never once getting into the way of taxicabs and motor-cars, which were fairly plentiful.

He was a desperate young man and in a dangerous mood. His trainer had telephoned him that morning, with tears in his voice, begging him not to scratch High and Dry for a small steeplechase at Gatwick, and Frank had recklessly determined that the horse should run.

Mr. Bates and Mr. Tookes met to discuss a plan of campaign.

“Costyermore is in a race——” began Mr. Bates.

“Call him Saparino,” said Mr. Tookes, and added dramatically and untruthfully: “Walls have ears.” “Well, he’s in this Gatwick race. I put him in the seller. I can get all the money in the world on him on Friday, and we ought to make a killing.”

“What about this horse of Mortimor’s?” asked Tookes.

Mr. Bates smiled.

“Don’t make me laugh,” he said. “Every time we’ve run against him our horse has had his head pulled off. Natty Andrews rides.”

Now, a lot of money can be taken out of the bookmaker’s offices if a coup is cleverly organized, and Mr. Tookes was a great organizer. He had opened accounts all over the country, and an hour before the race he superintended the despatch of some six hundred telegrams, all of which supported Saparino for a small amount.

He did not go near the racecourse; Mr. Bates attended to that side of the business. He was ably assisted by the colonel, who did everything except ride the horse.

Frank Mortimor had no doubt as to the result. He went down with Mr. Ferdinand Marsh, a friend of his, who was on a brief visit from Paris.

Now, Mr. Marsh was, by all standards, a fool, but he had one great gift: he knew horses apart. The difference between one horse and another was as distinct to him as the difference between a tall, dark man and a blue-eyed milkmaid, and, watching the preliminary canter, he gasped.

“What horse is that?” he asked.

“That is Saparino,” said Frank, with a wry smile. “He belongs to a—um—the parent of a friend of mine.”

Ferdinand Marsh fixed his glasses on the animal.

“Saparino be blowed!” he said. “That is a horse called Costyermore. He belonged to one of the biggest rogues in Australia.”

“He won’t beat mine,” said Frank with confidence.

“Yours won’t see the way he goes,” said Mr. Marsh, and plunged into the ring.

Saparino won by twenty lengths. The judge said it was ten, but he hadn’t a board with twenty on it.

Ferdie came back jubilant.

“It’s no business of mine,” he said dishonestly. “I should, of course, go to the stewards and tell them all about it. But charity, old boy, begins at home.”

Frank was perturbed.

“Do you seriously mean that this horse is what they call a ringer?”

Ferdie nodded. Then he caught sight of Mr. Bates hurrying towards the unsaddling ring and buttonholed him, and Mr. Bates, who knew him slightly, wilted.

“You infernal scoundrel “ he began.

Mr. Bates stared at him for a moment, wrenched himself free and ran. In moments of crisis he invariably did the wrong thing.

“I suppose I must go and tell these bat-eyed stewards the truth,” said Ferdie; but an agitated young man detained him.

“If you do,” he said, “there’s going to be trouble for the Colonel. The dear old gentleman will be warned off, and we can’t allow that.”

They walked to a quiet corner of the paddock, and Frank told his companion the cause of his embarrassment. They were going slowly back to the enclosure when the infuriated colonel came striding towards them.

“Where’s that infernal villain? “ he said. “This horse has been sold I Going into Lambury’s stable—three hundred and twenty guineas!”

He knew nothing about selling races; he had not realized that a horse that wins an event of this character is immediately sold by public auction, and whilst he was receiving the congratulations of his friends the tragedy had happened; the horse had gone out of his possession.

To buy it back from Mr. Lambury was an impossibility. Frank offered fabulous sums to that phlegmatic young trainer, but each increased sum was received with a smile and a shake of the head. Lambury’s patrons were rich; the winter favourite for the Derby was in his stable. Money, as he said a little sententiously, was no object.

That night Ferdie and Mr. Mortimor conspired together in Frank’s little flat in Half Moon Street.

“I’ve seen the Colonel and he’s in a terrible state. He says that if he’s warned off he’ll lose his O.B.E. and everything. He’s willing to do anything.”

“Did you ask him for the girl?” said Ferdinand romantically.

“No, but he’s going to poison the dog. This horse must be got out of England before they discover the truth about him—and I’m going to get him out.”

Lambury’s stables were on Salisbury Plain. Frank knew them well: a straggling collection of wooden sheds, very easily accessible. He went down the next day and pursued cautious enquiries. He saw the horse, sheeted and hooded, brought back, and through a pair of field-glasses saw it stabled in the most isolated of the buildings. There had been coughing in the stable, he learned from a tout, and those horses that had escaped the malady were housed in positions remote from the main run of boxes.

“Hard luck on Lambury,” said the tout. “With Tinkersprite in the stable—he’ll win the Derby by ten minutes, mark my words!”

Frank was not interested in Tinkersprite. That night he and his confederate stole up to the box, forced the fastening and led out a horse who seemed quite surprised to find himself under the stars. They led him across the plain, avoiding villages, to where a horse-box was waiting, driven by Frank’s

own chauffeur. It was not till they had left Shrewton behind and were nearing Newbury that either man spoke.

“That’s that,” said Frank. “I’ll take him down to my own stable in the country and keep him there for a month or two, and then we’ll ship him somewhere.”

Ferdie drew a long breath.

“I’m beginning to realize it was rather unfortunate that I went to Gatwick,” he said. “I’m leaving by air mail for France this morning.”

He did not even wait to see the horse unboxed, but streaked up the Bath Road in the darkness before the conveyance had entered the stable yard of Frank Mortimor’s establishment at Maidenhead.

The colonel was there, an agitated and incoherent man.

“I wish I’d never seen the beastly horse,” he wailed. “If this gets out everybody’s going to cut me.”

“Don’t worry,” said Frank brutally. “The gaoler won’t cut you when he brings you your morning skilly.” They put the horse in the stable, sent the box back to the contractor from whom it had been hired, and the colonel and Frank drove to London together. Honore was waiting for them at the hotel, and they had a solemn thanksgiving in the little sitting-room where breakfast had been laid.

“At the same time,” said the colonel, “you must agree that I wasn’t far wrong. The moment I saw that horse in the shafts of that milk-cart I said to myself t ‘Here’s a bit of blood!’ “

“Thank goodness it’s all over,” said Honore. “I’ve had a terrible night.”

The colonel smiled.

“You know, my dear, it takes an old soldier to stand that sort of racket. Don’t think I’ve done with horses— I haven’t. I shall have a Derby horse one of these days “

A waiter came in at that moment with the prosaic bacon and eggs. He laid on the table the last edition of a morning paper.

“That’s a bit remarkable, isn’t it, sir?” He was an English waiter and therefore had no manners.

“What is remarkable?” asked the colonel fiercely.

“About that horse being stolen,”

They looked at each other guiltily.

“Is it in the paper?” faltered Honore.

“Naturally,” said the waiter. “They can’t pinch a Derby favourite without everybody knowing it.”

Frank did not swoon. He took the paper with a hand that shook so slightly that it was hardly noticeable to anybody who was not looking at him. There was the headline: “Mysterious Affair on Salisbury Plain. Tinker- sprite, Winter Favourite for the Derby, Stolen in the Night.”

The waiter went out. Frank handed the paper with extravagant politeness to his future father-in-law.

“I think you said you would have a Derby favourite one of these days?” he said. “Well, you’ve got it!”

Six months had passed since the Derby favourite had mysteriously vanished from Salisbury, and had as mysteriously appeared on Chobham Common. The Derby was won and lost. Messrs. Bache and Tookes were living riotously on their ill-gotten gains in a select hotel near Vienna, when the colonel came briskly into the breakfast-room at Whisbury, where a newly married couple were talking, as lovers do, about the rotten weather, and, throwing down his gloves and his hunting-crop (he always carried a hunting- crop, even when he was inspecting trousers), said:

“I saw a nice piece of horseflesh in a baker’s cart to- day—by gad, he looks a snorter I”

Frank fingered a cut-glass ash-tray thoughtfully. Honore leaned forward and laid her hand gently on his arm.

“Don’t kill daddie to-day,” she said. “It’s Friday.”

THE PEDLAR IN THE MASK

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ARTHUR CONFORT was a young man with a red face and an instant, confident smile. When to the smile and the confidence of manner he added a certain amused, compelling stare, he was very dangerous to women, who were not quite certain whether they liked or loathed him. He had a high forehead and reddish hair and he was slightly bald where men go bald most easily.

Meredith hated him; he had the same effect upon that student as a knife edge scratched along a plate. There was something obscene in his self-complacency; something appalling in his ruthless tenacity of purpose. His insensitiveness to snub or insult left Meredith feeling like a baffled child with whom someone stronger had taken an unfair advantage.

And Meredith Porter had tried hard to stifle his sentiments and cultivate the man. He had glued down his hackles, so to speak, and had even sought his advice on finance—for Arthur had inherited three woollen mills, was immensely rich and reputedly a shrewd man of business.

“Tell you how you can make a lot of money?” guffawed Mr. Confort a trifle scornfully. “Good Lord, that’s easy I Buy cheap and sell dear. I’m surprised at you, Porter—an authority on economics asking that! What you are doing”—he tapped the other’s chest with his long forefinger—”is buying dear and selling cheap! Your education cost you thousands—you won’t get back the purchase money in twenty years. That’s bad business. I’m a man for bargains, Porter—I can’t resist ‘em. Give me something that is worth more than I pay and I fall for it every time. What do you do? Spend money on new books that when you sell you’ll get ten per cent, for; spend money on University courses to retail to kids at a beggarly wage. That’s what is wrong with you—you’ve bought highbrow education which nobody wants to buy “

And all the time he spoke Arthur Confort was smiling as if at a wonderful jest. For he was the kind of man who rattled the money in his pocket and found joy in the envy of the unfortunate.

Meredith Porter remembered this conversation a long time afterwards, and particularly he recalled it one evening in late October.

The situation and the hour encouraged the flow of long- inhibited reminiscence. As the day faded on the lake a spangle of stars carpeted the earth where Montreux was, and at the foot of Grammont the windows of Bouveret showed in yellow specks of fire.

Up in Caux, terraced and aloof, there was no sign of light or life, for the vast hotels were closed and the folk of the village go early to bed in the off-season, which is from October to December. Already the snow- sprinkled scarp of Rochers de Naye was wreathed in cloud, which would presently sink lower and lower, until Caux lay hidden in fog, and then Glion, and Anally to the margin of the lake the mist would glide, covering the floor of the Rhone valley and leaving Caux exposed like an island in a white and shifting sea of cloud.

Meredith, who sat on the hillside watching the lights below, was sufficiently acquainted with all the physical peculiarities of the country to be able to judge within a few minutes how long his view would remain uninterrupted. He was in a condition of mind which made him inferior to the incidence of natural phenomena. A year ago he would have said “superior”, but now all that was in the world had so got on top of him that he would salute gravely the first pine tree and grudge its independence. The clumsily built cowman puffing at his long pipe as he shuffled down the hill-road was a magnate and a happy pasha, for did he not possess the right to enter and bolt a door of his own and give his lordly orders to a woman who was his body and soul?

As for Meredith Porter, save the clothes he wore (for which he had never paid his tailor), and the small grip that rested by his side (the property of the stout hostess of the Villa Marina, if everybody had their due, for she could have seized it in lieu of payment, but for her kind heart), he was without worldly property. Nor had he a spiritual lien on so much as a hope of improved circumstances. A Master of Arts of the University of Cambridge, the author of two small text-books on economics; the son of a bishop who had died with a deserved reputation for philanthropy which had been earned at the expense of his heir, Meredith had gravitated to Switzerland and to the University of Lausanne. Partly because he liked Switzerland, and partly because Margaret Campbell had looked first one way and then another, plucking the flowers at her waist until there was nothing but a wreckage of bedraggled stems and in the end had said she was sorry he felt like that because she could never be anything more than a good friend.

In a country where gambling is confined to a ridiculous table game where the stakes are limited to five francs and the happy winner is paid six-to-one on an eight-to-one chance, it seems fairly impossible for a man to ruin himself at the tables. But men have been ruined at penny pitch-and- toss, and Meredith Porter lived so close to the border-line of insolvency that he was destroyed by the loss of a thousand francs. For the thousand francs was due to his lodging-house keeper and other little leeches of life, and when he did not pay, the usual reclamation went to the principal of the

faculty. Meredith lost his job. Loth to leave the country, he took an assistant mastership at a “school for young English and American gentlemen”. The proprietor offered good wages but never paid them. He was an authority on Intermediate Hydrostatics, Functions, Complex Variables, Harmonic Oscillations. He drank neat whisky whilst he was awake, but he never paid anybody anything unless they came to him armed with the draft of a Procès Verbale.

Meredith took a consumptive student to coach in the mountains. The student died and his tutor paid the funeral expenses. When he notified the boy’s father he learned by wireless that the parent had feared the worst but was on his way to America. He would settle everything when he returned. In the meantime, the shabby tutor with the grave brown face was himself settled and had started to walk to Montreux, where he knew a man who was almost as badly off as himself, though from a different cause.

“Buy something cheap and sell it at a profit,” he murmured, twisting in his absent way the queer signet ring on his little finger. He looked down at the gold with a whimsical interest. It stood for fortune, a bed, possibly a third-class fare to somewhere or other, and yet he hated to sell it or its fellow. He took the latter from his waistcoat pocket. The two rings had been made at his father’s order and they were identical in shape, weight and design. The flat surface of the seal was an intaglio representing a tree with a sword at its base. Its exact meaning he did not know, and his father had never told him. Probably the design had some esoteric significance known only to the bishop and his wife.

Meredith sighed as he put away his dead mother’s ring. That he would never sell. As to the bishop— well, it was rather surprising that he had not presented it to some whining lout with a long tale of woe calculated to stir the lord bishop’s easily moved sympathies.

“Why do bishops wear knee-breeches?” somebody asked him once, and Meredith had answered:

“Because, if they are like my father, they have given away their trousers.”

He looked up quickly as a wreath of white smoke drifted past him and jumped to his feet. The clouds were down to his level. He found his way into Glion laboriously and paid one of his few francs for a ticket to Montreux-— the road was too tricky on so thick a night.

The fog had blotted out Montreux station and there was danger in crossing the line, but he had asked his friend to meet him on the northern-bound platform. The fog was now so dense that he had literally to feel his way —a

white, clinging fog it was, more impenetrable than the brand they get in London.

He heard voices; the bark of porter to porter, the sound of a boy whistling in the street below, the clatter of coffee-cups from the Caf6 Suisse, then more voices, trembling in their restrained anger.

He stopped and listened and slowly the colour went out of his face and his heart began to beat thunderously.

It was in the middle of December that Margaret Campbell, sitting in her Hampstead drawing-room, heard the door open and, looking up, came to her feet, such a colour in her cheeks that Meredith Porter's soul vacillated between fear that he had angered her, and joy that his return had pleased her.

"Why, Meredith!" she gasped, her eyes shining. "You wonderful man—whatever has happened?"

She had never seen him dressed so well or carry himself with such an air.

"It wasn't you who came in that beautiful car that passed the window?" she asked incredulously, and when he nodded: "Meredith!"

"It is queer, isn't it?" he laughed. "I hope you aren't annoyed by the majestic splendour of it?"

"But what has happened, Meredith?"

Her undisguised enthusiasm for his success touched him not a little.

"I'm in business," he said good-humouredly. "Disproving the theories of plutocratic Mr. Confort "

Then he saw a shadow on her face and arrested his speech.

"You aren't engaged to him, are you?" he asked bluntly. His voice sounded hollow even to himself.

She nodded.

"Yes—yes, I'm engaged."

"To that—to Arthur Contort?"

The colour was deepening in her cheeks, but it was not the impertinence of his tone that distressed her.

“Are you—fond of him, Margaret?”

She did not answer at once.

“I think I am,” she replied. “Sometimes I think I’m not. I suppose all girls have their doubts about marriage.”

A pause, then:

“I suppose they have,” he said steadily, and she looked up at him with an obvious effort.

“You’ve been hearing … stories about Arthur?” she challenged him. He shook his head, but she went on quickly: “People hate other people who are well off. ‘Malice loves a shining mark’—isn’t that the proverb?”

“Yes, that is the proverb,” agreed Meredith. “And I suppose Confort is a shining mark—nothing is quite so resplendent as burnished gold “

He stopped here and laughed ruefully.

“I’m being cattish,” he admitted, “but I really wasn’t referring to his”—he nearly made a reference to Arthur Confort’s copper-red hair, and amended his speech to —”material attributes. So long as you love the lad, why, here’s good luck to you both.”

It lacked heartiness, this pious wish, but more serious than his insincerity was her knowledge that she did not wish him to think that she loved the man to whom she was engaged, and that his acceptance of her forthcoming marriage as inevitable aroused an aching sense of dismay. It required a greater effort to turn the conversation into bypaths.

“Now that you are home and prosperous, Meredith,” she smiled, “l am going to be a horribly suburban society-lady and invite you to the church bazaar. And I’ll promise you a thrill.”

He made a little grimace.

“Church bazaars do not, as a rule, thrill me,” he said.

“I suppose it is the usual thing in aid of the insolvent organ? All church organs are insolvent.”

What puzzled the girl was the new strength in him. It was revealed even in his mild cynicism. The Meredith she had known was an irresolute being behind whose most definite statements had lurked a furtive diaphoresis.

That quality of incertitude had been present even in his proposal to her. She was the kind that needed a tempest of love to sweep her from her foundations; Meredith had wooed in zephyrs and had assailed her with summer breezes.

“Now, tell me what miracle has happened,” she demanded. “Was it a long-lost uncle who died in Australia, or a lottery ticket, or did you save the life of a millionaire?”

He smiled.

“Neither,” said he. “I tell you that I have upset all your fiance’s philosophies and my fortune is based on my practice of buying dearly and selling cheaply.”

“Then you are in business?”

He nodded.

“Where? Oh, please don’t mystify me!” she said with an impatience which was only half assumed. “You’re like the masked pedlar!”

He sat back in his chair and stared at her.

“Now I am the mystified person,” he said. “Lead me to the story of the masked pedlar.”

This individual had been the feature of a big bazaar which had been held in Hampstead during the previous week. On the eve of the bazaar’s opening the organizing committee had received a letter from one who signed himself “Philanthropist”. He wished to peddle gold rings at the bazaar. They were worth exactly ten times the price he charged, and the proceeds of his sales would be handed to the committee for charitable purposes.

“And the queer thing about it was,” said the girl impressively, “that when he came, he actually sold these wonderful gold rings for five shillings each!”

“Real gold?”

She nodded.

“We afterwards discovered that he had been doing this sort of thing at seven or eight bazaars in various parts of the country. They are worth twenty times the amount he charges. At first the people at St. Mildreds—that was the church—wouldn’t buy at all. They thought there was some swindle in it—of course, nobody believed the rings were of gold. They were men’s rings,

and he refuses to sell to women—in fact, they are all too big for the average girl's finger. And he's coming to our bazaar."

Meredith Porter looked at her thoughtfully.

"Why do you call him the masked pedlar?" he asked needlessly.

"Because he wears a mask," she replied. "He always comes by taxi and is dressed from head to foot in black. Some people think he is "

She named a famous millionaire.

"I am indeed thrilled," said Meredith, "and almost you persuade me to attend your organized robbery."

"Almost?"

He laughed.

"I am due in Paris," he began.

"You don't even know when the bazaar takes place," she said scornfully, but to her surprise he named the date without hesitation.

"You see, Margaret," he explained, "there is a big poster stuck on a board—and very badly stuck—planted in your garden, so that passers- by may look and read. No, I shan't be here on Tuesday, but I will give you a little contribution to keep the poor old organ on its feet."

He took out a cheque-book and a fountain-pen and wrote quickly, and she watched him in wonderment.

"A hundred pounds!" she gasped as she read the cheque. "But, Meredith, can you afford to give away all this?"

This time his smile was hard.

"I can afford to give away everything in the world except you."

He was gone before she could think of an appropriate reply.

Her father came in just as the car was disappearing down the drive. Julius Campbell was a large man with a long golden beard which was at once his pride and anxiety, for of late the gold had lost something of its brightness and he had detected hairs that graded from red to grey.

“Who was that, my dear?” he asked, and peered myopically through the window.

“Meredith Porter.”

Her father had an irritating trick of dropping his chin to his broad chest and looking from under his bushy eyebrows whenever he was surprised or pained. He was both surprised and pained to learn of Meredith Porter’s return.

“The bad penny has turned up,” he said. “Really, Margy, my love, I do not think that that acquaintance is —what shall we say?—very desirable.”

She did not express an opinion on this, and he continued:

“Arthur would, I am sure, echo my sentiments’to the letter. Did he want to borrow something?”

She was angry in an instant.

“When did Meredith ever borrow money from anybody?” she asked hotly. “He is not the kind of man who borrows…” Here she was on delicate ground, and he was already wincing ostentatiously. It was a favourite delusion of Mr. Campbell’s that he was sensitive.

“Meredith is in business and has a lot of money,” she went on, “and speaking of Arthur, father, what is the truth of this story about an affair in Russia?”

Mr. Campbell waved the affair in Russia out of existence with a sweep of his large, white hands.

“Boys will be boys,” he said complacently.

He was the only man Margaret had ever met who employed the worm-eaten tags of conventional usage with the conscious air of originality.

“He was a boy when he toured Russia, quite a boy.

I’m not so sure that there is anything in the story more than idle gossip, but if there is—well, you can’t set old heads on young shoulders, my dear. A man has to sow his wild oats “

“ ‘And whatsoever a man sows that shall he reap’,” she quoted ironically, and finding nothing in his stock which could suitably cap this, Mr. Campbell assumed his attitude of pained surprise.

He was a London woollen merchant who had traded for ten years with an eye to the comments which might be made by the officials of the Bankruptcy Department when his books came to be examined. Happily, Arthur Confort had come along in the capacity of manufacturer and wholesaler; more happy was the inspiration of Mr, Campbell to invite him to dinner at Hampstead.

Confort, who was already bored with his new acquaintance and had decided that the selling agency which he intended establishing in London could not be in worse hands than Mr. Julius Campbell's, declined the invitation and would have persisted in his refusal to take "pot luck" (which meant a dinner elaborately arranged by telephone) but for the most happy circumstance of all, namely a glimpse of Margaret Campbell's photograph which, heavily framed in gold, stood upon the big man's desk.

"My little girl," said Mr. Campbell. "I hoped to have the pleasure of introducing her to you."

"What time do you dine?" asked Mr. Confort promptly, and there and then had begun a profitable friendship for Mr. Campbell.

"Has Meredith been saying anything about Arthur?" asked that gentleman.

She shook her head.

"Meredith said nothing," she said shortly. "He gave me a cheque for a hundred pounds for the bazaar fund "

"A cheque for a hundred pounds!" repeated the other, genuinely shocked. "Wherever did he get his money from?"

He added a few observations about money easily coming and easily going; remarked that all that glittered was not gold, and made a laboured exit.

She wondered why he had missed delivering his favourite conviction that kind hearts were infinitely superior to coronets and that simple faith had Norman blood beaten to a jelly. In her perturbed state of mind she was glad that she had the affairs of the bazaar to distract her attention from Meredith Porter.

There was little opportunity for seeing the masked pedlar at close quarters. From the moment he came into the crowded parish hall, with its bewildering array of stalls laden with cosies and cushions and tea-cloths and the thousand and one articles which earnest women manufacture in their spare time, he was surrounded by a clamorous crowd.

It was not until he was piloted by the burly vicar to a platform at one end of the building that she saw the man clearly. He wore a long black coat, tightly buttoned and looking rather like a priest's cassock, a black felt hat and black trousers. A sombre touch were the black kid gloves he wore.

"I wonder who he is—the infernal mountebank!"

She had forgotten the presence of her lover and turned to meet his cold eyes. Somehow at that moment he seemed singularly unattractive to her. Why, she could not understand. He was not more blatant than usual; that masterful smile of his was only ordinarily offensive, but there must have been something in the atmosphere which aroused a dormant sense of rebellion against his being. She felt a desire to hurt him, which was not like her.

"I am surprised that you aren't buying, Arthur," she said. "Isn't a bargain more dear to you than life?"

It was the bargain of her engagement, a thought firmly repressed until that moment, which had angered her—she realized now what was the association of ideas. The masked pedlar and the bearded man who stood at the edge of the platform smiling fatuously were brother-tradesmen, only her father was profiteering on the deal which gave Arthur Confort the woman he wanted, in >exchange for the advantage which would accrue to his business.

But her man was not susceptible to sarcasm.

"I suppose they are gold," he said, and edged nearer to the platform.

The face of the mysterious pedlar was hidden by a mask looped about his ears. His voice was gruff and obviously disguised.

"Who will purchase another of these superfine rings, every one of which I guarantee cost me three pounds ten to manufacture—no, madam, they are men's rings—the price is five shillings. I ask only that the purchaser shall wear the ring himself—no, sir, I can only sell you one ring —you have already purchased one at the last bazaar I attended. Who will buy this last ring?"

A dozen hands went up and the masked man pointed to Arthur Confort, whose gesture was as emphatic as any.

"To you, sir," said the stranger gravely, "and that is all I have with me—I have disposed of seventy rings."

Arthur carried his purchase back to the girl, examining it curiously.

“It is weird, isn’t it?” he said, putting the shining gold circlet into her hand. “What is the design—it looks like a tree and a sword?”

She looked at the ring and nodded.

“A tree and a sword,” she agreed. “Do they all bear the same mark?”

He made enquiries and came back to her with the information that the rings were all alike.

“You’d better keep it as a curio,” he said, but she gave it back to him.

“That wouldn’t be fair; you promised him you would wear it—at least, those were the conditions under which he sold.”

“Rubbish!” he said, and slipped the ring on his little finger.

He saw her home and found her less responsive to his amiabilities than she had ever been before. The wedding was to be a quiet one—he had stipulated for that, and it was one of his wishes that she was pleased to concede.

They came into the drawing-room together, and Mr. Confort was giving his views on a honeymoon tom: when that almost savage sense of antagonism flamed up again.

“Arthur, I want you to tell me the truth about this story that people are telling of you—the story of the Russian girl.”

Mr. Confort had many reasons for blessing the Russian Revolution. It was perfectly true that he had had an affair in Russia. He was in Moscow at the outbreak of war and extremely happy, but it was not the kind of happiness that was likely to last. The war cut short the sleepy days and hilarious nights, the gay supper-parties and— his very heavy responsibility.

Sometimes in the quietude of his room he speculated upon the possibility that Helda had perished with thousands of other members of the bourgeoisie in that terrific upheaval that shook society from its foundations. It was bitterly unfortunate for him that the Morleys were staying at the Bazar- Slav during the most hectic period of his introduction to Russian life. Mrs. Morley’s brother was an official at the British Consulate and she had come out to spend a red-hot summer with him.

“I suppose you’ve heard these yarns from the Morleys,” he said with appropriate penitence. “I’ll own up, Margaret—there was a sort of an affair with a girl … but that is all done with.”

“And the girl—was she Russian?”

He. nodded.

“There’s no sense in beating about the bush,” he said handsomely. “I was very fond of her. She was the daughter of a police agent and rather a clever girl, too— spoke English as well as you or I. I was young and inexperienced …”

“Thank you,” said Margaret coldly. “Good night, Arthur.”

“But, Margot, you aren’t going to punish me for a boyish escapade?”

She shook her head wearily.

“If by ‘punishing’ you, you mean breaking off the engagement, I am not,” she said. “I’ve given my word, and I’ll be equally frank with you. I’ve known about this—this ‘boyish escapade’ for a long time.”

“Then why the devil are you bringing it up against me now?” he asked indignantly.

She did not satisfy him.

It was queer, he thought, as he drove back to his suite in Cork Street, infernally queer, that the Helda business should be raised that night. For some extraordinary reason the piquant little face of the girl with her big black eyes and red lips had been in his mind for days. For no earthly reason that he could discover, unless it was that the thought of his approaching marriage——

He opened the door of his flat and stood stock still, staring.

The lights were burning in the tiny hallway; the door of his sitting-room was ajar, and that room also was illuminated. He had no servant and trusted nobody with the key of his flat.

Before he stalked into his room something told him what to expect. With his hand on the knob of the door he knew that it was Helda who was awaiting him. Nevertheless he met her dark, accusing eyes with a blank stare.

She was prettier than ever and more expensively dressed than he remembered.

A long sable coat covered her dainty figure and there was a flash of jewels from the white throat.

“Good God! Helda!” he gasped.

She flashed a smile at him.

“Aren’t you glad to see me, Arthur?”

“Helda!”

She nodded.

“You aren’t a bit pleased to see your little wife,” she pouted.

“My—my wife,” he stammered.

“Your wife—and am I not?” she demanded, leaning back in the armchair in which she sat and loosened her coat. “If marriage makes a girl the wife of a man, then I am your wife.”

He could only gape at her—and gaping was ludicrous.

“How did you get in?” he asked lamely, and she laughed.

“Now please sit down, Arthur—I want you to help me.

“I can give you any money “ he began.

“I don’t want money.” Her voice was almost sharp. “I want rest and peace after that—that hell I’ve been through. The commission has sent me to make enquiries, and after I have done my work I am my own mistress. And, Arthur, my heart has been one big ache for you all these years.”

“But—but I’m going to be married,” he blurted out, and her face went white.

“Married! You can’t ... you are married.” In her agitation she went on fiercely in Russian, but stopped herself.

“It wasn’t legal—in Russia,” he said, gaining courage. “Of course, I know I’ve been an awful villain——”

She had come to her feet and her dark eyes were regarding him sombrely.

“It was legal,” she said simply, “but I understand, and——”

He saw her eyes suddenly fixed on his hand that rested on the table. First, there was a look of incredulity, then a frown of wonder. Before he realized what had happened she had seized his hand and was staring at the ring.

“Your ring!” she said in a whisper.

“I—I bought it from a fellow.” He was glad of the diversion.

She dropped his hand and moved slowly to the door.

“I am glad you are a villain,” she said simply. “It makes things so easy.”

Before he could stop her, she was gone.

The nerves of Mr. Confort were not of the best. He spent the rest of the evening at his club, and returned to Cork Street at two o’clock in the morning.

He was not killed because he was somewhat the worse for drink. He stumbled as the two shots were fired, and the police, who came early on the scene, rushed him in an ambulance to the nearest hospital and his assailant to the nearest police station.

And the obliging constabulary took charge of his disordered flat, for there had been a most systematic search of his belongings during his absence at the club.

Alexis Yusalov, charged at Bow Street with attempted murder and burglary, elected to make a statement.

“My name is Alexis Yusalov, and I am a Commissary of the Revolution. In October last year I was sent to Switzerland in pursuit of a man named Jacobs who had absconded from Moscow, taking with him 750,000 American dollars, the property of the Government, which had been set aside for propaganda work in the United States. I discovered Jacobs in Montreux and took possession of the money.

“Jacobs accompanied me to the station and begged me to use my influence with the Soviet Government to secure his pardon. The station was enveloped in a thick fog, and I had placed the bag containing the money at my side. Whilst I was upbraiding Jacobs for his treachery I heard a movement, and switching on an electric hand lamp I saw a hand grip the handle of the bag. I could not see the owner, but I had a distinct view of the ring which the thief wore. It was a ring with a design of a tree and a sword.

“Before I could grasp the man, my nearest hand being occupied by the lamp, he had taken the bag and disappeared into the fog, and every effort of mine to discover him was in vain. A week ago it was reported to me by an agent, who was married to Confort in Moscow on the 21st of June, 1914, that her husband wore that ring. I have since discovered that hundreds of rings bearing a similar seal are in existence. I declare that what I did as on my

own initiative and that the Soviet Government is not in any way compromised. I am satisfied that a certain masked pedlar who has been selling these rings is the real thief and that he had employed this method of diverting suspicion from himself."

"What an extraordinary story!" said Margaret Campbell.

"Isn't it?" Meredith's voice was careless, but he was watching her.

"Do you know—and it is an awful thing to say," said the girl, knitting her forehead—"I'm glad the thief was never caught."

"So am I," agreed Meredith, and kissed her. He was very sure of himself in these days, and Margaret rather liked him that way.

MR. JIGGS MAKES GOOD

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MR. DENNY, of Lansfield, Hampshire, was impressed by riches. Men who talked in millions could hold him spellbound, though he himself had thought in millions all his life. If he had dared …

There had been so many opportunities. The rubber boom, the steel boom, the American boom, even the faraway South African boom, and he had missed them all.

He was a tall, gaunt, forbidding man, and you might not suspect there was romance in his bosom, or that he was a dreamer who spent hours at his desk building up colossal fortunes, buying shipping lines and mining concessions, creating new systems of finance, piling billion on billion, and never quite knowing what to do with the monies when he had got them into the bank.

At the same time he never overstepped the boundaries which separate permissible extravagance of thought from that uncontrolled exercise of imagination which leads men to imagine they are Julius Caesar to the great amusement of the mental patients. He administered the little estate which brought him in twelve hundred pounds a year, and by careful saving and striving he was enabled to make a yearly trip to America.

It was here, in the vestibule of the Grand Foible Hotel, he had met Edward Castlemaine, and renewed and amplified the acquaintance later between New York and Cherbourg. Edward Castlemaine was young, virile, quick-witted, with an eye for beauty and opportunity.

He paid one visit to the little estate on the Hampshire coast, met Margaret Denny, took, as he admitted, the k.o. from her loveliness, courted her boldly and, to her, in a strange language, and half fascinated her. The other half might have made her surrender if it had not been for what Mr. Denny, a man given to cliches, referred to as an “earlier attachment”. The half dwindled to a quarter and less. By the time she wore Mr. Castlemaine’s solitaire on her finger the earlier attachment met her when she came back from London after the engagement, and there was rather a tense little scene on the lawn that sloped down to the sandy beach. She was in tears before the interview had gone five minutes.

“I know it’s beastly of me, Jimmy, but daddy is so keen on it. He’s very rich, and he really is nice. And, Jimmy, you’re not going to be too dreadful, are you?”

He shook his head. He was a very wholesome young man, who farmed a hundred and fifty acres near by, not because he was a farmer, but because a well-meaning relative had presented him with the farm.

“He may be very charming, but he doesn’t look so to me—I’ve lived in America some time, and I know, as your father doesn’t know, the difference between an educated and an uneducated American. They’ve all got an accent which sounds odd to English ears, and Boston and the East Side sound very much alike.”

There was a long and rather painful silence.

“He has got money,” she said at last.

He nodded.

“Yes, he’s fairly well off, has a suite at the Ritz- Carlton—no—I haven’t been spying on him, I just happen to know. I saw you at supper there the other night and I wanted to kill him!”

Suddenly he held out his hand.

“We shan’t see each other again,” he said, and was gone before she could remember all the things she intended saying. She said them the next day, when they met on the beach road.

They did not see each other again for quite a long time. It was three days before Christmas when Margaret made her decision, and, interrupting a gigantic steel merger that he was planning, walked into the study of her

.father, closed the door behind her, and spoke a little breathlessly, more than a little fearfully. Mr. Denny was a terrifying parent.

“Nonsense! Rubbish!” he snapped. “He’s coming back for Christmas; you’ll be married on the twenty-eighth. Your trousseau’s ordered, practically everything is settled, and Lawson’s coming down to-morrow^with the ante-nuptial contract. Don’t argue, Margaret; I won’t discuss it.”

She had a different view, but he silenced her. “This man,” he said impressively, “is giving up his business in America, living in Europe, and you’ll have a wonderful time.”

“But I don’t love him,” she said.

“Love!” said Mr. Denny, and he told her what love was. She gathered that it was made up of equal parts of stuff and nonsense.

“You have his engagement ring,” he added with a lofty wave of his hand, for he was given to gestures which erred on the side of theatricality.

He was very much impressed by Mr. Castlemaine, and had had a letter that very morning announcing that his future son-in-law would be with him in a few days. More to the point, there was a very handsome draft on the Bankers’ Trust Company, to be expended on the trousseau. Mr. Castlemaine did not use exactly that expression; what he said was:

“Tell the little girl to burn it up.”

That evening she took counsel with an attachment which was no longer earlier, but very present. And she was full of frantic and panic schemes, which began with the perfectly novel idea of running away with the man she loved, and ended, after many arguments and discussions of ways and means, in variations of the same interesting scheme.

“It is going to be perfectly ghastly,” she said, with a little catch in her voice. Daddy’s inviting everybody to the house for Christmas Day. He has remembered that he hasn’t announced the engagement!”

Mr. Castlemaine was all for Christmas and the spirit of Christmas. He was a man with a certain genius for organization, and he had sat himself down in his handsome apartment on Riverside Drive and had elaborated a programme of festivities. The thought of Christmas in old-world surroundings brought a lump to his throat, for at the moment peace and security were as balm to his soul.

He had genuinely “fallen” for Margaret Denny; carried her photograph in his pocket-book; showed it to friends who if they failed to reach the right kind of ecstasy were liable to a slug in the jaw without preliminaries, and worse. Knowing this, they were ecstatic.

He was shaking the dust of the United States from his feet for ever, and saw himself, a veritable squire, wearing clothes appropriate to the position, living a calm, sweet life into which no rackets entered.

Margaret was to be one of the properties of serenity. He wrote to her by every mail, very brief, businesslike letters, and quite inoffensive, for he realized you couldn’t get raw with that kind of dame.

It was a curious fact that nobody in the United States called him Mr. Castlemaine; that is to say, nobody except the staff of the big hotel where Mr. Denny had met him. When he travelled, he was referred to as Mr. Castlemaine, but that happened to be one of his given names, for he had been christened and registered “Edward Castlemaine Haran”.

Louis Capisti came down from Detroit and met a few choice friends in his apartment.

“Ed Haran is taking a powder on this outfit,” he said. “There’s a woman in London he’s going to marry.”

“He’s coming back in January “ began one.

“Forget it!”

Capisti and Haran were armed partners, bound together in the mutual bonds of distrust. Their business was a complicated one, and booze-running was only part of it. There were certain partnerships in other and less pleasant enterprises, and when Ed sold out to Capisti he did so with the promise that he and his gang would help to make it a success.

“What I ain’t done for that guy I” said Capisti. “Joe Sandis would have bumped him off years ago if it hadn’t been for me—hey?”

Joe Sandis was no friend of the Capistis and Harans. The three gangs had waged perpetual war before the frontiers of their territories had been delimitated.

“Joe would give a million dollars to know what we know,” said Capisti, and they looked at each other.

Joe Sandis, the big Pole, would not have given a million dollars, or half a million dollars, for any kind of information, but he received with every evidence of satisfaction the scrawled note that came to him by mail, for Ed owed him four good men, killed in the execution of their duty, and one personal lieutenant who had been taken for a ride and whose body had been found huddled in a taxicab outside the city limits—and Ed Haran had the credit for the accomplishment.

This particular lieutenant had a brother; a stout, good- natured man, who looked like a commercial traveller. He was a professional killer, received a hundred dollars a week for bodyguard and general gang work, and gave no offence to anybody except the people he slew. He guarded liquor in transport, had his part cold-bloodedly in gang fights, had taken a couple of cracks at policemen, and had been twice tried, and twice acquitted, on murder charges.

A broad, red-faced man, with sandy hair, a twinkle in his eye, a man of no particular imagination, abstemious, a lover of fun, completely reliable—this was Jiggs Hennessey.

He came in obedience to the summons, sat on the edge of a chair, twirling his derby nervously, and listened to the big chief. Joe wasted no time in preliminaries.

“You remember the stiff who bumped your brother, Jiggs?”

Jiggs nodded and grinned.

“Sure—Ed?”

“Ed Haran,” confirmed Joe. “He’s leaving by the Melantic. You been to Europe——?”

“Sure,” said Jiggs, a man of few words.

“I’ve got all your transportation booked. You travel second- class. He travels first. Don’t let him see you or he’ll know you. If he gets on”—he emphasized the ‘if’—”you get him—hey?”

“Sure,” said Jiggs.

“Maybe he won’t make the boat. Then you go off to Europe for a little trip, hey? Maybe we’ll get him.

You just lay quiet, get busy at night, keep out of sight all day. He bumped your brother, Jiggs—didn’t give him a break.”

“Sure,” said Jiggs.

“If you get into a jam, jump ashore at Cherbourg. Here’s the address of a feller in that dump who’ll treat you right.”

“O.K.,” said Jiggs.

They handed him his transportation tickets and two thousand dollars, and Jiggs went home, packed two automatics and a blackjack, and in due course presented himself to the second-class steward and was shown his cabin.

Jiggs knew Ed pretty well; he knew Joe better, and was a little surprised, the first night out, when he saw Ed with two of his familiars, and dressed like a million dollars, pacing the first-class promenade deck. In a sense he felt a mild grievance against his employer. What looked like a pleasant trip was going to be a business after all.

He spent his days in bed, his nights in judicious reconnaissance. The first error he discovered, and rectified, was being a second-class passenger. There are certain restrictions which prevent a traveller in this class from exploring the holies of the superior accommodation. He saw the purser very early one morning, before Ed was up, and got himself transferred to the saloon.

He was a unique traveller in that he still had his meals in the second-class saloon, but the chief steward diagnosed this as an inferiority complex and saw nothing remarkable in the circumstance.

Otherwise, luck was against him. The boat ran into bad weather, and most of the passengers kept to their cabins, and the promenade deck at night was deserted. He had hoped Ed would come up for air, and, wrapped in a heavy ulster, he sat in a deck-chair on the darkest part of the deck waiting for miracles to happen. He had located Ed’s suite—he had a stateroom and a private sitting-room. The difficulty was the guard. The two men who were shepherding Ed to Europe never left him.

The boat reached Cherbourg late one night with nothing done. Jiggs was uneasy. A killing on the high seas could be expeditiously arranged. If he could get into Ed’s cabin and use his blackjack the thing would be easy. There were big let-down windows in the sitting-room through which a man could be pushed. But a killing in English waters, and within the operations of a law which hangs for murder ... that was different.

Whether he stood on the trap or made a getaway, this much was certain: he had been sent to get Ed, and he would get him if he hanged for it.

The boat left Cherbourg late at night, and went slowly across the Channel and passed more slowly up the Solent towards Southampton. About three o'clock in the morning he saw the two guards go up to the smoke- room. Ed was alone—it was his opportunity.

He slipped down to E deck. The alleyway was empty, and, pushing open the door of Ed's cabin, he walked boldly in. The room was in darkness. He was reaching for the switch when something hit him. There was no pain; only he suddenly lost grip and went down to his feet.

"Bolt that door!"

The light was switched on. He looked up into the smiling face of Ed Haran, and with him, miraculously enough, were the two guards. They must have gone into the smoke-room, crossed to the other side of the boat and got back to the cabin before he had reached the deck.

"We've been waiting for you, Jiggs. Knew you were on the boat—one of your crowd tipped us off."

He stooped, picked up the gun which Jiggs had let fall, and threw it on the bed.

"You're going to make a whole lot of trouble for me, son, and I hate trouble."

He nodded to one of the men with him, who grinned, put a brass handle into an opening'below the window and turned till the glass was level with the sash. A cold wind blew in, but Jiggs did not feel it. Something wet was running down the side of his face; he was momentarily out.

The three men stooped and pulled him to his feet. He could not resist. His face scraped against the sash of the window, then his shoulder. He saw, dimly, the flicker of shore lights, then he felt himself dropping, dropping... Bitter coldness enveloped him, and he struck out mechanically.

Mr. Denny had one extravagance: a small speedboat. He would not have enjoyed even that, but that he mentioned to Mr. Castlemaine, on his last visit to England, that he wished he possessed such a luxury, and forthwith the speed-boat had appeared; and it had cost Mr. Denny the greater part of a hundred pounds to build a shed on the lawn's edge for its accommodation, and to lay down rollers that would carry it to the beach and, at high tide, the water.

Being of an economical turn of mind, he had put this new structure to two uses: the shoreward half was a greenhouse, through which one passed to the boathouse proper. It was Margaret's habit to go down early in the morning and collect'" such few blooms as were available for table decorations.

She came down a little earlier than usual, unlocked the greenhouse door, stepped in and stopped, paralysed with fear and astonishment; for, sitting on the concrete floor, his back to the closed door leading into the boathouse, was a man.

"It's O.K., missie."

His broad smile reassured her. He seemed well dressed, so far as a man can be well dressed in a sodden silk shirt and trousers which, though wet through, still showed a gentlemanly crease.

"What do you want?" she asked breathlessly.

"Fell overboard—swam ashore."

She looked at him, her mouth and eyes wide open.

"Fell overboard? From a ship?"

He nodded and got up to his feet.

"How wide's this sound?"

|He was peering through the glass at the distant shore of the Isle of Wight.

"I don't know—ten miles perhaps."

"I thought it was a hundred; I've been swimming all night."

There was an ugly-looking bump on the side of his head. He tapped this gingerly.

"Must have hit the ship," he said cheerfully.

"Are you a sailor?"

He considered this.

"No, I'm a passenger. That's the whole trouble, miss. My passport and transportation tickets are in my baggage."

He told a story, a plausible, rather beautiful story, of how his wife had run away from him and had come to England, and how he was following her to persuade her to return to their little home in Baltimore for the sake of the child. He described the child, and tears came into his eyes as he enlarged upon her beauty.

“She ain’t strong, miss, and that’s a fact. It’s her I’m thinking of more than me….”

Not without profit had Jiggs been for two years associated with a con. gang.

Margaret listened, sympathizing, and, departing to the house, obtained a change of clothing, which, with the aid of a pair of scissors, and leaving certain buttons unfastened, he eventually made to fit.

She became his ally. The great point was that nobody must know he had arrived. There was to be no fuss, no bother. If he were found without a passport he would be turned back, probably charged before a judge, and the whole object of his visit to England would be ruined.

She got on the ‘phone to her earlier attachment and enlisted his help. Jiggs was driven to the farmhouse and politely received by a young man who had no reason to love America or its citizens. Here he was more suitably attired, for the young farmer employed men of greater girth than himself.

But the farmer was less gullible, and, recognizing a good scout, Jiggs told quite a lot of the truth. That he might not hurt the girl who had befriended him, he maintained the legend of the runaway wife and the golden-haired daughter who called incessantly for “mammie.“

“Threw you overboard?” said the girl incredulously.

He nodded.

“Sure. Ed’s that kind. Say, that baby shot up a whole family once.”

“But why did you go into his cabin?” asked the girl suspiciously.

“I wanted him and me to part friends,” said Jiggs. “Says I to meself: ‘I’ll go and see that guy….’”

She considered the matter from the new angle.

“Perhaps Mr. Castlemaine could help you. He’ll be here to-morrow.”

“Mr…?”

Not a muscle of the American's face moved.

"Mr. Castlemaine. He's an American gentleman a friend of my father's."

"Is that so?" asked Jiggs thoughtfully. "Coming here!"

She sighed heavily, and Jiggs, who understood human nature and lived on it, began to speculate rapidly.

"Excuse me, miss; you ain't going to marry him or anything, are you?"

The colour in her face told him something; she told him the rest.

"No—I was engaged to Mr. Castlemaine. Do you know him?"

"I've heard of him. He's a big guy on the stock market, ain't he?"

She wasn't sure about this.

"A tall fellow about forty, I guess?" suggested Jiggs.

She told him exactly how old he was and how he appeared. Jiggs, who could have supplied certain photographic details, shook his head.

"I don't know him. If I was you I wouldn't say anything, miss. Maybe he's one of that four hundred bunch, and they wouldn't like you knowing a feller like me.

He looked from the man to the girl, and did some quick but accurate guessing.

"When is the wedding, miss?"

"There isn't going to be a wedding," she said quickly, and then realized that she was being a little undignified in discussing this matter with a shipwrecked sailor.

She talked to the young man about the Christmas festivities, sketched out the programme, and Jim listened without appearing to listen. Father Christmas was coming from town: a gentleman from the stores who could look magnificent as St. Nicholas and could perform conjuring tricks and give impersonations of famous people at an inclusive fee.

She had a little private talk with the young man and outlined her own programme, which was both romantic and exciting.

He had a residential qualification in Marylebone, maintained a small flat which he let furnished when he was in the country, and on the strength of this qualification had secured the necessary special marriage licence. They would leave on the evening following Christmas Day, and the earlier attachment would become permanent.

Jiggs knew nothing of this. He spent the day inspecting the farm. That night he borrowed the flivver and drove to the vicinity of Mr. Denny's house, and in the darkness of the night examined the speed-boat.

The next morning came the radiant Mr. Castlemaine, very boisterous, a little less cautious in his speech and his conduct, slapping Mr. Denny on the back and talking in millions. He was exhilarated, as he was entitled to be, for he was a very rich man, he was young, and he was going to be a squire. His agent had already paid a deposit on the Newland property.

He had brought presents, marvellous presents for the guests, little diamond brooches, trinkets of considerable value. Mr. Castlemaine believed in advance publicity.

Christmas morning was spent by Margaret in writing names on the tops of the little cardboard boxes in which the trinkets were disposed. She felt very guilty, almost as though she were a thief. The recipients of these presents would accept them under false pretences. But even this was less trying than Mr. Castlemaine's increasing tenderness. She prayed for the day to pass.

"This St. Nicholas baby is O.K., I suppose? There's five thousand dollars' worth of presents in that basket."

Mr. Denny explained that Father Christmas would arrive, made up, in a closed car, and would be met by himself and taken through the french windows into the study. The study opened into the big dining-room, and would be used as a dressing-room, where the Spirit of Christmas would change his clothes and become the Spirit of Mystery, or, alternately, the Spirit of Impersonation. Father Christmas himself would be staying at the "Red Lion" at Chelsford, had already arrived and had enquired, querulously and a little thickly, about the conveyance that was to carry him to the place of entertainment.

He was a man who drank a little, but knew just when he had had enough. He told everybody this. He spent

Christmas day drinking enough with a gentlemanly American he met by chance.

The jazz band came by char-a-banc from Southampton. It was, Mr. Castlemaine apologized to the guests, a bum band, but the best he could get. He said this in front of the orchestra, and they were amused, thinking he was facetious.

Nearly two hundred guests assembled that night. They came in limousines and in cars which could by no stretch of imagination be described as limousines; they turned bedrooms into cloakrooms, filled the house with deafening chatter, such interstices of silence as were left being filled with saxophonic disharmony distributed by the Blue Hungarian Jazz Band.

“It’s dreadful, isn’t it?” Margaret found time to speak to the earlier attachment.

“He’s dreadful,” said the young man savagely. “If he paws you again I’m going “

“You’re going to do nothing of the kind; you’re going to be very patient and long-suffering. Where’s my shipwrecked sailor?”

“He’s gone up to town. He sent a most elaborate message to you which I didn’t quite understand. Apparently he’s been on the ‘phone to his wife; and went into Chelsford this afternoon and ‘phoned to her, and they’re reconciled. I lent him my Ford to take him to Chelsford.”

Mr. Denny elbowed his way to her side. The earlier attachment he ignored.

“Into the dining-room, my dear, into the dining-room,” he said testily. “The presents are to be given.”

“Has he arrived?”

He did not answer, but took her by the arm and half dragged her through the press.

Father Christmas had indeed arrived. He had descended from the car Mr. Denny had sent for him, had been received by Mr. Denny himself, and led into the study. He was a jovial man with a white beard plentifully sprinkled with Epsom salts. His robe was red, the eyes that sparkled behind the frost-glittering glasses were humorous and kind.

Briefly Denny explained the routine. A great basket, decorated with holly and fluffy cotton-wool, was to be carried through the folding-doors into the dining-room at a signal—three loud taps on the panel. As he was explaining, Mr. Castlemaine came in and added his own instructions in his own picturesque and forceful language. Father Christmas listened and beamed.

“I’ll stay with this bird,” said Mr. Castlemaine as he led his host out of the range of the saint’s large ears. “I don’t trust nobody, see?”

He was flushed, excited; he had drunk wine. His back- slapping had gained in force and frequency. He slapped Mr. Denny out of the room, then came back to the scarlet-clad figure.

He had to talk loudly because the band was justifying its cost.

“Now, listen “

A hand shot out and gripped him between the collar of his shirt and his throat. A black-muzzled automatic covered his middle.

“Come outside, honey!” said Father Christmas.

“Like hell I will!”

The crash of a trap-drummer covered the three shots. Father Christmas caught his man as he sagged towards him, stooped, lifted him over his shoulder and walked out into the night. Jiggs was a strong man, and could even run across the lawn with his heavy burden.

He dropped the dead man with a crash into the bottom of the speed-boat, and with a push drove it down into the water. The band was still playing; nobody heard the staccato explosions of the engine as it started.

He wondered if the real Father Christmas, whom he had left unconscious in his room at the “Red Lion”, would have to pay for the glad clothes he was wearing and which would soon be bundled into the sea.

Stooping, he relieved the late Mr. Castlemaine of all his portable property and stuffed it into his own pockets.

It was crazy of a man to carry all that money, anyway.

Not till he was well out to sea and had left the Needles astern did Jiggs lift his victim and heave him over the side. Then he looked up at the stars and remembered what day it was.

“Well, well, well!” said Jiggs. “Ain’t this a merry Christmas!”

And he headed his boat full speed for the coast of France.

THE TRIMMING OF SAM

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SOMEBODY saw Long Sam in the smoking-room of the Mauretania the day before she reached Southampton. It was Jake Feld, who worked the liners nine months in the year and ran a little game at Palm Beach for the other three months. And in all the circumstances, and being the possessor of a few rags of conscience, he felt it incumbent upon him to offer a few words of advice.

“Not been over to Europe lately, have you, Sam?”

The tall, lean-faced man took his cigar from his mouth and eyed his questioner thoughtfully.

“Why, no, Jake, I haven’t been over in years,” he said. “But it seems to be Europe’s turn. Anyway, this is a pleasure trip,” he added as an afterthought.

Jake, that wise manipulator of the pasteboards, was not impressed.

“There are certainly pickings, but the game is much more dangerous now than it ever was before. Lee Brown came over with us last trip, and had to borrow money to get his fare back. The London crowd skinned him.”

Long Sam resumed his cigar and puffed away in silence.

“They won’t skin me,” he said complacently. “The diamond ain’t mined that can scratch me. What’s the trouble in Europe, anyway?”

“Everybody’s broke. There’s no money in England, and that’s the only country where money’s real,” said Jake. “The poverty of the sucker class is little short of a national scandal. Even on these boats, the only people you can get money from are the Los Angeles crowd, and they’re gradually going broke too.”

Long Sam had a habit of indulging in extended reveries, and it was a considerable time before he spoke.

“There is an old and a trite saying,” he said slowly, “that one is born every minute. Though I admit they take a long time to grow up. From your point of view, Jake, the outlook is certainly bad, because you only sell one class of goods, which is a line of talk designed to inculcate in the human heart a touching confidence in the honesty of mankind. I run two lines——” Here Jake interrupted him.

“Listen, Sam,” he said quietly, “there’s a girl passenger on her way back to England, who lost over seven hundred pounds in notes the other night, when the concert was on in the saloon. Her cabin is about two from yours.”

Still Jake smoked comfortably.

“Passengers should place their valuables in the care of the purser,” he recited. “There are notices up all over the ship. If you break the rules you pay.”

“Now come across, Sam! You don’t want to rob a kid? It was the money her father left her before he died, and it’s all she’s got in the world.”

“Lend me a handkerchief,” said Sam. “I want to cry! Stories like that always have a bad effect on me. This ship’s full of officers and button-men, whose job it is to look after the passengers, and I guess that when we reach Southampton they’ll be having a few stray bulls or two who’ll be ready to go through the passengers’ kits. Don’t you butt in, Jake, unless you’ve gone over to the police. Judging from the game I saw you sitting in the other night, the great reform movement hasn’t struck you. Maybe I’ll be seeing you at the Boddington; I usually drift in there; and we’ll continue this little talk.”

There was in London a junior reporter whose name was Thomas Henry Minter, who was called by his intimates “Spike”. He had two good qualities—a sense of news value and a sense of humour. His principal drawback, both from his own and from every other standpoint, was his chronic impecuniosity. Spike was paid monthly in advance, and nobody ever knew what he did with his money. Thrifty young sub-editors, with young families, could not understand why Spike was always broke in the middle of the month. Hoary-headed news editors, knowing the salary that Spike received, offered many libellous explanations as to the destination of his salary. Only other young reporters of Fleet Street could offer an accurate explanation. Spike’s money was always bespoke. There was the invariable landlady, the inevitable tailor, the club bills, the little accounts that run up at hosiers, and his season ticket inevitably expired the week when he had least money and least prospect of finding any.

Towards the middle of every month, the finances of Spike became shaky, and in these circumstances he invariably borrowed from the one man in the world who hated lending, even though Spike returned the loan punctiliously on the first of the month.

Gussie Thorpe had been to the same school as Spike, but they lived in different streets. Gussie had a flat in Park Lane and a house in the country. He owned a motorcar for every day of the week and a yacht for Sunday. His

father had been a merchant prince, or a captain of industry, or a bloated capitalist, according to the political standpoint from which you viewed it. He had made soap, and he had died rich and respected. And there were stained-glass windows to his memory in a real cathedral.

There was never a moment when Gussie wanted to see Spike.

“I’ve a position to keep up,” he was in the habit of saying to his intimates. “Spike, being a reporter, has no position at all. I know he’s a reporter, though I’ve never seen him report. And I’m always meeting him! That’s the curse of it. Last year at Ascot there was Spike waiting for me outside the Royal Enclosure with a Press ticket on his coat, ordering me to go and find out if the Duke of Menthel’s horse was going to win!”

Gussie was dressing for dinner when the footman arrived, not even with a card, but with the bald announcement that Spike was below.

“Tell him I’m not in, you fool!” hissed Gussie.

“I’ll tell him,” said Spike, entering nonchalantly.

“I wish to heaven you wouldn’t do it, Spike,” said Gussie irritably. “It upsets the servants, dear old thing.” “What are you dolling yourself up for?”

“I’m going to meet some people,” said Gussie shortly. “And, I say, old boy, don’t come round the day after tomorrow: I shall be away. My cousin’s coming back from America, and she’s a deuced nice girl; and naturally, if she sees me—I mean, if she sees you—I mean, if you’re hanging about——”

“Shurrup!” said Spike vulgarly. “Lend me a fiver till the end of the month, Gussie, and I swear I won’t barge in upon your young romance. What’s she like?” “She’s beautiful,” said Gussie enthusiastically. “Beautiful blue eyes and hair like old gold. She’s what I would describe as flower-like.”

“Then you’re silly,” said Spike, who was an oracle in such matters, “for there was never a flower that took kindly to a cabbage. Do I understand that this is a serious engagement?”

Gussie smiled complacently.

“Well, the truth is, old man, that at present she’s not frantically keen on me.”

“It’s your face,” said Spike solemnly. “Change your face, then she’ll marry you all right. Naturally the girl wants someone to look at through life.”

“What’s the matter with my face?” demanded Gussie wrathfully.

“I’ve often wondered,” said Spike, and held out his hand. “Lend me a fiver till Saturday night.”

“I’m sorry, old thing. I’ve only got a pound in my pocket.”

“I’ll take it,” said Spike, who never let an opportunity get past without braining it.

He wanted that pound very badly. There were certain little loans that had to be discharged, and he came to the office the next day almost as impecunious as he had been when he left it on the previous evening. He had hardly got into the reporters’ room before the news editor sent for him.

“Spike,” said that worthy, “I’ve got a really good story for you, but you’ll need to use all your tact and judgment and good sense.”

“What is more important than a good story or good judgment,” said Spike firmly, “is good money, and that’s what I want.”

He leaned over the editor’s desk, his hard felt hat on the back of his head, and on his bronzed, lean face an expression of utter weariness.

“You’ve heard of Long Sam, the American crook? If you haven’t, you’ll find something about him in the library. Dig out the cuttings.”

“I’ve heard a lot about good money since I joined this staff,” said Spike patiently, “but I can’t say that I’ve seen much of it. Maybe this money shortage that is splashed this morning is responsible, and——”

“We’ve got the tip from our New York man that he’s here,” said the dense editor at the desk; “and, so far as I can tell, none of our own police knows about it. Go down and meet the Mauretania; you’ll have ample time before the boat leaves to get acquainted with somebody who’ll put you on to him. And if you want to make a little extra money, get a two-column story out of him for our Sunday edition.”

“I’m not so much concerned about the extra money,” said Spike, “as any little sum—hark at me talking about little sums when I really mean a lot!—any big sum that you can recommend Scrooge to hand out. That cashier of ours is a gold hoarder. He winces at every penny you take from him. Give me an order that’ll make him howl, Mr. Branksome. Anyway, I shall have to have some money,” he said in a more serious tone. “I can’t go fooling about on a first-class ocean liner, making enquiries, bribing stewards, dropping diamond necklaces here and there, so to speak, unless I’ve got “

The news editor scribbled a note on a sheet of paper and handed it to him, and Spike read with pain the amount that the cashier was authorized to advance on account of expenses.

“How far can a man go in society on a pound?” he asked bitterly. “It isn’t as though I was going to Ascot or to do a Royal wedding. This is an expensive trip, and a pound goes about as far in Southampton as an ice-cream in the tropics. Make it a fiver,”he wheedled; but the news editor, who had listened, stony-faced, to generations of reporters pleading for expenses, waved him forth.

Spike had the good fortune to catch the special train that was on its way to meet the boat, and he had hardly stepped on to the quay when the huge bow of the Mauretania came slowly round the end of the dock, and, pushed and pulled by a fleet of tugs, drifted majestically to her berth.

As soon as the gangways were connected he made his way to the purser’s cabin, and that gentleman, who had met Spike before, beckoned him urgently into the privacy of his inner office.

“There’s been a robbery on the ship,” he said, “and I don’t want you to make too much of a song about it. A young lady had seven hundred pounds stolen from her the night before last.”

“Who are you carrying?” asked Spike, interested.

“The usual crowd. Jake Feld is the card man, and it wouldn’t be him, because he’s not the sort of bird who’d rob a cabin. There’s another fellow. Do you know a man named Steedman?”

Spike shook his head.

“I’ve got an idea that he’s known on this side; and from a hint I’ve had dropped, I should say that he had something to do with this robbery. I’ve had his cabin searched while he’s been on deck, and I’ll get the Customs to run over him when he lands, but he’s too clever a fellow to have the stuff on him.”

“You haven’t by chance a man called Long Sam—the other names are various?” Spike reeled off a dozen of them.

The purser shook his head.

‘This fellow Steedman’s tall, and I’ve got an idea I heard Jake or somebody say, ‘Good morning, Sam,’ to him. I wonder if that’s the fellow?”

“Let me have a look at him,”‘ said Spike.

“You’ll see him in a minute. He’s coming to collect a bag that he put in here the day we left New York. You keep out of sight, and I’ll give you a signal when he arrives.”

The purser had hardly finished speaking when a harsh, strident voice at the counter of the purser’s office called him by name.

“That’s the fellow,” whispered the purser, and went out.

Spike, looking through the curtain, saw a tall, leathery-faced man, the stump of a cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth, and recognized him instantly. It was his business to follow Long Sam and procure his story. What the story would be he knew in advance. Sam would give reminiscences of past and present crimes, would affirm his own penitence and reformation, would state that he had come to England to see a specialist—Spike could have written it without seeing the man.

Instead, he waited, and when the purser came back:

“That’s the fellow,” he said. “I’d like to bet you that he’ll get away with the money in spite of your Customs. Where’s the young lady?”

“She’s in her stateroom—Number 195, D Deck.”

Spike hurried off in search of the girl. He was afraid that she had already gone ashore, for the passengers had begun to leave. They could not get past the Customs barrier, however, and with the aid of the purser he would be able to pick her up. That officer’s assistance was unnecessary, however, for the girl was coming out of her cabin as Spike came to the alleyway, a slim figure in black, with a face that took Spike’s breath away.

“Miss “ he began, raising his hat. (He cursed himself for a fool that he had not asked the purser her name.)

“Miss Thorpe.” She smiled at his embarrassment.

“I’m a reporter of the Post-Herald,” he said, “and I’ve heard from the purser that you’ve lost a lot of money on the voyage.”

She hesitated in the doorway.

“I don’t think I want to talk about it,” she said, and then: “Will you please come in?”

Spike followed her into the little cabin and sat down on the sofa at her gesture.

“I lost seven hundred and fifty pounds,” she said. “Very stupidly I kept the money in my dressing-bag, never dreaming that anybody would rob a girl.”

“The motto of the ship thief is the women and children first,” said Spike, and she smiled.

She was very pretty. She was beautiful, thought Spike. And then he suddenly remembered Gussie Thorpe’s reference to a cousin who was coming from America.

“Your name’s Thorpe; are you any relation to Augustus Thorpe of Park Lane?”

She nodded.

“I’m delighted to hear it,” said Spike untruthfully. “Gussie is one of my best friends, or I’m one of his— I‘m not quite sure which.”

His claim did not seem to arouse much enthusiasm in the girl.

“I’m going to stay with his people in the country,” she said rather shortly. “I had a cablegram to-day inviting me. This robbery alters all my plans. It is terrible, it’s tragic!”

She clenched her hands, and he saw from the expression on her face just how tragic the situation was. And with his quick intuition he jumped at the principal cause of her dismay.

“What were you going to do with the money, Miss Thorpe?” he asked; and she did not even resent the impertinence of the question.

“I have a small farm in the country; it belonged to my father, and we let it when we went to America. With the money I was going to start poultry-farming—and be independent.”

The emphasis on those two words told Spike all he wanted to know.

“Are you going to marry Gussie?” he asked, and she coloured red.

“No,” she said quickly, and then: “I don’t know. I … “

“You hope not. I should imagine you did,” said Spike, fanning himself with his hat. “To marry Gussie is a fate worse than death. His brain’s as empty

as the sound-box of a gramophone, and his conversation would drive you to drink."

"I thought you were a friend of his."

"I never harboured that illusion," said Spike shamelessly. "Miss Thorpe, I'm going to get your money back. " "How?"

"I'm going to get. it back," said Spike. "Are you going straight away to Gussie's ghastly relations?"

This time she laughed.

"It's only just beginning to dawn upon me that you're rather rapid," she finished. "I don't know why I should take you so much into my confidence, though I suppose one does that with the Press instinctively; and I'm sure I ought not to have discussed Augustus with you." "He will never know," said Spike calmly. "Even I shall not tell him."

He hurried on to the deck and down the gangway to the space inside the Customs barrier. There was no difficulty in picking up Long Sam. He was talking to a short, thick-set man, and, going to a steward, Spike asked him who the other was.

"That's Mr. Jake Feld," said the steward.

So that was the card man. Spike edged forward until he came close to where the two men were standing. He only heard one word, and that was the word "Boddington", and then Jake shook his head, and he heard Long Sam say:

"To-night or to-morrow night, just as you like. I shall be there...."

Spike knew the "Boddington"; it was a fashionable bar in the West End of London, and the only bar that had any resemblance to a French cafe. It was a well-known meeting-place of all the dubious characters of the underworld, and the fact that the police made no attempt to close this notorious haunt was inexplicable to those who did not understand police methods. Spike, who understood the workings of the official mind very well indeed, realized that the "Boddington" was allowed to keep open so that the police should have a house where they could, at almost any hour of the day, find those particular undesirables from whom they wished to secure information about other undesirables who did not put in an appearance.

He saw the girl to a carriage, being careful to place her in a part of the train a long way from where Long Sam had seated himself, and travelled up to

London with her; and he found in her the most wonderful woman in the world. In that dazed condition of ecstasy he reached the office.

“Get Sam?” asked the news editor.

“I found him, but the moment is not expedient. There’s been a robbery on board the ship, and they want to keep it dark until they get a little more information about Sam’s worldly possessions.”

Here he was speaking only half the truth, but it was the convincing half, and Mr. Branksome growled and dismissed him.

Gussie was having breakfast when Spike lounged in to him, and Gussie was alarmed. He was a small-headed young man with a tiny moustache, and when he was alarmed he seemed all mouth and eyes.

“Hullo, old thing,” he said suspiciously.

“I want you to help me,” said Spike.

“I haven’t a pound in the house “ began Gussie; but his companion went on:

“What are you doing to-night?”

“I’m going into the country,” said Gussie, with every evidence of satisfaction, “and I shall be away for a month. My dear little girl has arrived, old boy—and she’s lost all her money, old boy—every bean, old boy——”

“Don’t call me ‘old boy’ again or I’ll brain you. You’re a satyr, Gussie, a hideous male vamp, Gussie.”

Spike scratched his chin. All the way from the office of the Post-Herald he had been considering the problem of Long Sam, whom even the police did not know to be in London. And there was lurking at the back of his busy brain the skeleton of a scheme.

“I’m broke,” he continued. “And take that look off your face. Have I ever borrowed money from you more than twice in a month, you mouldy piece of cheese?”

“Really, old thing, you know I would be quite willing,” murmured Gussie.

For five years he had been trying to shake the companion of his schoolboy days. For five years he had pretended not to see his school- fellow at horse-shows, race-meetings, public funerals and other social entertainments

where the Press and the Great meet on equal terms. But no man had ever been able to shake Spike unless he was willing to be shook.

“I thought you would be going out of town,” said Spike thoughtfully. “Are you shutting up your flat? I would like to stay here a couple of nights.”

“Certainly, old thing.”

Gussie was eager in his offer, and was glad that Spike’s request entailed no more onerous service. Spike had made many queer requests of him in his time, mostly for services which Gussie shuddered to recollect.

That night Long Sam, a peculiarly good-looking man of fifty, sat smoking a quiet and thoughtful cigar on the red plush lounge of the “Boddington”, where the underworld have their rendezvous.

He had been away from England for ten years, and no man knew him, not even the occasional detective who strolled in and took a brief but businesslike survey of the company. Therefore did Sam welcome the civility of the smart young man in evening dress who appeared as much of a stranger in this haunt as he was. He was an elegant and blas6 young man, and in his eye was a glass which to Long Sam was the trademark of suckerdom.

“One a minute,” murmured Sam.

“A queer place,” said the young gentleman, taking a seat by his side and beckoning a waiter.

“Why, yes, it’s surely a queer-looking place, but pleasant. It is very amusing to watch the people,” said Long Sam politely. “You have been here before, I guess. Personally, I’m a stranger to this wonderful country, but I guess you know this dive pretty well?”

“No,” said Spike untruthfully, “I am a perfect stranger, and it is certainly not a place where I should care to be seen. The fact is, I was expecting to meet a man here—but perhaps I shouldn’t tell you. You are not a member of the police, are you?” he asked suspiciously.

Long Sam kept a straight face and admitted that he was not.

“The fact is,” said Spike confidentially, “I’ve been staying in Park Lane—I rented a flat there. Two or three nights ago somebody burgled the flat,” he said with a careless wave of his hand. “Happily they missed my sister’s pearls, which I keep in a safe in the drawing room, but they got away with a gold statuette which doesn’t belong to me … in fact, it belongs to the man I

hired the flat from. Naturally I am anxious to recover this. I offered a reward, and have had a communication from the thief, who has undertaken to meet me here. Which is breaking the law," he added soberly, "but you can quite understand one doesn't want to lose another fellow's family heirlooms?" He lit a violet-tipped cigarette and exhaled a fragrant cloud.

"Why, sure," said Long Sam, taking a deep breath. "I can quite understand how you feel about it, mister. The same sort of thing happened to me on Long Island."

His acquaintance with London was an extensive one, however much a stranger he might be to the "Boddington".

In point of fact, he also had come to meet a member of his own craft, to discuss future operations.

"So you have been burgled, eh?" he said slowly. "I heard of a burglary the other day. Where was this?" "Nine-hundred-and-seven Park Lane," said Spike. "But I don't think you read it, because it wasn't in the papers. I am not giving him another chance." He shook his head. "To-morrow I have arranged to carry all the family jewels to the bank. I may be very indiscreet in telling you all this," he added frankly, "but I see that you are an American, a country for which I have the greatest affection."

"Will you have a drink?" asked the genial Sambas the waiter approached at last.

Spike murmured his agreement, and rattled the change from a pound, causing as much noise as four loose shillings can make when vigorously handled.

Long Sam's friend came, but was too much of a professional to approach. Spike saw him out of the corner of his eye, sitting at a table in solitude and waiting.

"Say, that story of the burglar interests me," said Long Sam, after the first drink. "How did he get into your house—nine-hundred-and- seven Park Lane, you said?"

Spike nodded gravely.

"Through the pantry window. My servants have a trick of leaving it unlocked," he said; "and even if they didn't it is an easy place to force. I am having bars put there to-morrow," he added. "Whether the owner will be pleased or not, I don't know…

Early in the morning—at three o'clock, to be precise— Long Sam with the assistance of a fellow professional wrenched open the pantry window of 907 Park Lane and slipped through. The house was in darkness, but his electric lamp showed him the way up the kitchen stairs to the main hall. He knew the exact location of the drawing-room, because Spike, in his artlessness, had practically drawn a plan of the house.

He came into the drawing-room quietly, and then stopped, closing the door behind him and feeling along the wall for the light-switch. He found it at last, turned on the light, and wished he hadn't, for Spike was sitting at a writing-table, and in his hand was a heavy-calibre naval revolver which looked particularly dangerous to Long Sam.

"I—I just came in to see you, Mr. Brown," gulped the visitor.

"Fine," said Spike. "Step over here, and turn out your pockets."

"Eh?" said Sam, startled.

"Neither hay nor corn," said Spike. "Get busy, Sam, or there's going to be trouble for you."

Sam obeyed reluctantly. He produced a small roll of treasury bills, ten five-pound notes, and a handful of silver, a small and serviceable little revolver, which Spike confiscated, a notebook, a watch and chain and a few odds and ends.

"Take off your clothes article by article, and turn 'em over, Sam. The police are looking for you—there's an old charge against you, by the way."

Sam passed his waistcoat—in the breast pocket were seven one-hundred-pound notes and a fifty.

"Stolen from Miss Thorpe's cabin—I've got the numbers," said Spike.

He pocketed the money and handed back the remainder of the goods, except the revolver.

"Say, what about the other money?" growled the man.

Spike smiled.

"Sam," he said, "have you ever heard of manna?"

"You'll hear of something," growled the other.

“You’re not allowed to cross-examine counsel,” said Spike. “You’ve heard of manna from heaven—Sam you’re It! You’re going to keep a reporter in luxury for two months—think of it! Now sit down at this table and tell me the story of your life, because I’ve promised the Post-Herald two columns, and I am a man of my word.”

As soon as the post offices were opened in the morning, Spike sent off a wire. It was addressed to Elsie Thorpe, Grove Hall, Wayboro’, and it ran:

GOT YOUR MONEY. DON’T MARRY GUSSIE TILL I MAKE BETTER OFFER. AM VERY KEEN ON POULTRY-FARMING.

THE WINNING TICKET

No record of prior magazine publication under this title found

I

From her point of observation, Anna saw the old doctor struggling through the crowd that surrounded one of the most popular of the bookmakers, and waved to him.

He did not see her then, but after he had made his bet and was shouldering his way out of the press he raised his head and, catching her eye, smiled grimly. She came half-way down the steps of the stand to meet the shabby old man.

“Hullo, Miss Greer I” he growled. “Can you find nothing else to do with a bright spring afternoon than to throw yourself into this pool of iniquity?”

She laughed.

“We are fellow sinners,” she said. “Where is your nephew?”

He made a wry face.

“Amongst the swells in the Members’ Enclosure— betting in hundreds like the wealthy gentleman he is,” he rumbled. “And here is his needy relative battling to invest ten shillings on an animal that will probably finish nearer last than first.”

Anna missed him a few moments after, when the bell rang that the field was off.

The field came thundering down the hill and there was half a minute of thrill as four horses flashed past the post.

Dick Thurley, who was also of the congregation of the “swells”, came through the wicket gate to take her to the paddock.

“Did you have any luck?” she asked.

“Marvellous luck!” he said dryly. “I didn’t have a bet. The race was won by an outsider—twenty-five to one, I should think. Arthur Liffton had a bad race— which doesn’t depress me. How that fellow does it I don’t know.”

And then she remembered the doctor.

“I saw his uncle—Dr. Liffton. He’s in Tattersall’s Ring?”

Dick nodded.

“A nice old boy. I wonder what broke him? Quite a lot of people think it was Arthur. There’s a poisonous beast if you like!”

She was in agreement, but smiled.

Arthur Liffton was sleek and languid, a beautifully manicured young man with a peach skin and perfect features. He was as objectionable as a consciously irresistible youth could be, but he had been tempestuous in his wooing and persistent in his fervour. And a woman need be an angel if she counted these things against any man. There were little stories about him which were not quite nice. In truth, they were rather ugly.

“Old Dr. Liffton used to be terribly rich once,” Dick went on. “Did you know that? The elegant Arthur suggests that the old gentleman ‘did in his stuff’ at horse-racing, but none of the regular followers of the game agree. They say he has never been anything but a ten-shilling punter. It is a bit odd.”

They had reached the paddock gate and were crossing to the ring when the girl heard her name called, and turned.

“Hullo, Anna—hullo, Richard! Have you come to see the noblest friend of man?”

He lifted his hat to the girl and nodded to her companion.

“I want to talk to you.” Arthur Liffton slipped his arm into the girl’s. “Excuse me.”

Coolly he led her away from the fuming Dick.

“An old friend’s privilege,” he said airily. “I see Dick every day—it is my misfortune that our modest estates adjoin. You, on the other hand, live three miles beyond the fence that surrounds my three acres.”

She resented his proprietorial manner, but it was not the moment to give expression to her rising anger.

“You see a lot of an ancient relative,” he said, and his voice had lost the note of flippancy. “Saved your life when you were a kid or something, didn’t he? He’s not a bad old boy, but he is a bore.”

“He is one of the nicest and kindest men I know “ she began.

“Yes, yes,” he arrested her impatiently, “but he is a bore. He told me the other day that he was leaving all his property to his godchild.”

She stood still and looked at him blankly:

“To me?”

“It’s you, is it? He was very mysterious about it, but I guessed. I didn’t look up the records—by the way, are godparents recorded in any document?—but I thought it might be you. It doesn’t worry me being disinherited—I’m almost his only relative. I’m not at all sentimental, but, what is more important, he has nothing to leave. That old house of his is mortgaged, and, so far as I know, his only property is an annuity, which dies with him. But it was a nice thought of his. He may have a few trinkets, and he certainly has some nice furniture—it should make the nucleus of a happy home when that bovine young man of yours leads you to the altar.”

She turned and walked away, and he followed, protesting.

“Sorry—sorry! I can’t keep my tongue in order. Your very nice and admirable boy friend, let me say “

“I’ll let you say nothing!” she blazed at him. “I don’t know why you’re telling me all this, but I imagine there is something horrid behind it.”

“Nothing at all.” He showed his even white teeth in a flashing smile. “The only thing I wanted you to do, in return for my very handsome attitude in this matter….”

They were coming near to where the glowering Dick was waiting, and she stopped.

“Well?”

“The doctor may talk to you about me—probably has already talked!” And, when she shook her head: “He is a reticent old fellow, but he may open his heart. I want you to put in a few good words for the prodigal nephew.”

She looked him straight in the eyes.

“I don’t see the advantage,” she said. “Obviously, you are quite indifferent as to what he thinks of you. And, as there is no money——”

“There is a little money—a settlement which affects my sister and myself. My sister is married and lives in Australia, so that to all intents and purposes she is both dead and damned.”

The impatient Dick was striding towards them.

“I can make no promise,” she said hurriedly. “I see the doctor very seldom, although we are neighbours—and I don’t feel that I have any right to offer advice.”

She was carried off by an incoherent young man. “One of these days I’ll give that beast….”

“Let us look at the other beasts,” she laughed.

She was not feeling very comfortable, and dreaded the embarrassment of meeting the old doctor. Arthur Liffton might, of course, have lied, and this story of a barren legacy might have been merely introduced to secure from Anna her good offices. She did not tell Dick what was worrying her, but that night, when she got home to Michleham, she told her mother.

“Stuff!” said the woman. “Though he’s quite right about the poor old doctor not having a farthing, and I’m quite sure he was telling the truth when he said the house was mortgaged. What little the old man had he has lost in all sorts of wild-cat schemes, some of them, I suspect, brought to him by Arthur. Poor soul!” Mrs. Greer sighed. “If he’s any worse off than we are, he’s in a pretty bad way!”

It was no secret in the neighbourhood that the Greers had “come down” in the War; and in this their position was not unique, for so many families in that area had “come down”, some with a crash, some so imperceptibly that the extent of their fall was never appreciated; and in this class the widow of Bland Greer had found herself.

She could still afford to maintain some kind of comfort, though Anna never took her hack from the stable without qualms of conscience. She used to

ride over to Epsom on such mornings as Dick Thurley did spectacular things to the three horses he trained.

They were racehorses with conventional histories. Starting life as Derby entrants, they had graduated to the selling-plate class by easy but expensive stages.

Dick and she used to ride across the Downs together, weaving bright dreams. “Are you sure, Dick, this horse isn’t in the Derby?” she pleaded one morning. “Haven’t you forgotten all about it, and if you looked up your book wouldn’t you find that, by some error, you have omitted to strike him out of the race?”

Dick Thurley wiped his brow.

“Phew! It makes me go cold to think of it! The idea of waking up in the morning and finding that this hair-trunk had a fifty-pound forfeit attached to his name is too dreadful to contemplate! No, there’s no Kissing Cup in my stable, darling.”

She sighed.

“Leave me my dreams!”

And then she remembered.

“I’m an heiress,” she said.

He swung round to look at her.

“The devil you are! I didn’t know you had any rich relations.”

“I haven’t,” she confessed, and told him of the talk she had had with Arthur Liffton.

Dick Thurley was very serious.

“I don’t think the doctor’s got a bob now,” he said. “What a queer thing for him to do! And yet I can well understand that he must have a lot of things that he’d hate that brute to have. He’s a bad egg, that fellow. He didn’t settle last Monday.”

He explained the mysteries of betting to her. A man who had lost during the week invariably settled with his bookmakers on Monday, and failure to do so led to unpleasant complications.

“He’ll battle like death to stop that,” he said. “He’s got what I call a thief’s sense of honour. In fact, somebody was telling me this morning that he had managed to raise part of the money to satisfy his most pressing creditors, and when Derby Day comes round he’ll have a heavier settlement, because he’s backed three horses very heavily, and, so far as I can gather, two of them certainly will not be in the final acceptance.”

“What do you mean by ‘heavily’?” she asked, interested.

“He’ll probably lose a couple of thousand pounds, and that’s a lot of money for a man who hasn’t got a couple of thousand pence and has half a dozen writs out against him.”

“Has he no profession?” she asked, and Dick grinned.

“I’d give him two, and neither of them is principal,” he said. “He was for about three years in a hospital. He was half a doctor. The old man paid for that, I suppose. There was trouble with one of the nurses and he was kicked out. Since then he’s been living on his wits. I’ll never forgive the blighter.”

“For wanting me to marry him?” she asked, smiling.

He shook his head.

“For suddenly not wanting to marry you when he discovered that your mother wasn’t a rich woman, as everybody thought she was. It’s a terribly unflattering thing to say to the loveliest girl in Surrey “

“The loveliest girl knew all about that,” she said quietly, “and she was not at all distressed.”

They rode on for some time, and then:

“The long and short of it is that our young friend is up a gum-tree,” he said, and he spoke no more than the truth.

Arthur Liffton was, indeed, hanging by his finger-tips from the topmost branch, and he found looking down a little unnerving.

He had a flat in St. James’s Street, and it was symptomatic of his financial condition that the janitor collected his rent weekly in advance. He varied his time between London and the pretty little house which adjoined Dick Thurley’s place at Burgh Heath; and though they saw little of each other, Dick was able to form a shrewd guess as to the progress this young man was making. New cars appeared and disappeared, for Arthur had a habit of taking a car on approval from the agents and returning it after a week’s

wear with some complaint as to its running. There had been a case which had only been settled on the threshold of the local County Court.

He was facing financial destruction. He had satisfied some of his creditors, but there were others still clamouring for settlement, and threatening to take him before Tattersall's Committee.

He strode up and down his beautifully furnished flat, stopping to stare into St. James's Street and hoping that his familiar devil would bring him some inspiration.

An envelope lay on the table, its flap unfastened. He stopped, picked it up, and examined its contents with a little sneer. From his uncle. Even a fiver would be acceptable at this moment of crisis.

He rang for a cup of tea, and sat turning over two letters that had arrived by the same post. They were written in illiterate hands, and each had the same plaint and made the same request. Money, money, money! He tore the letters into fragments and threw them into the wastepaper basket, thought better of it, rescued them, and kindled a little fire in the empty grate.

It had been a pity about Anna. A nice girl—pretty, too, in a countrified way. She might help him with the old man. The old brute was as tight as a drum on this question of Margaret's settlement. What difference would twelve hundred pounds make to her, with her squatter husband and her fat children? He wished now he were on speaking terms with Margaret, so that he might bring her to his side; but they had not written to each other for four years, and there was no possible chance of approaching a solution of his problem from that angle.

He looked at the watch on his wrist and rose, drawing a long breath. He would have to face the old man and get it over. He put the envelope in his inside pocket, went out, and, taking a taxicab to the station, journeyed down into Surrey.

He reached his destination, and sauntered at his leisure from the station in time to see the last station-fly disappear. He set forth on his mile-and-a-half walk, cursing Dr. Liffton for his penury and his obstinacy.

It was after dark when he arrived and knocked at the door. The doctor kept one daily servant, who had gone by the time Arthur arrived. He opened the door himself, recognized his visitor with a grunt, and led the way to his study.

“Find a chair and sit down,” he said gruffly. “Smoke? Of course you can smoke. I don’t want any of these pretty-boy airs of yours, and I’m going to tell you before you begin that there’s nothing doing about Margaret’s allowance. You’re in a mess, I presume?”

“A damnable one,” said Arthur cheerfully.

The old doctor showed his teeth.

“I’m glad,” he said, almost savagely. “You’ve got to take your medicine, my young friend—you put off the draught as long as you could, but now it’s coming to you. You didn’t settle on Monday.”

“Who told you that?” said Arthur.

“One of the many little birds that infest this neighbourhood.”

“Perhaps you can give me a little advice?”

Arthur Liffton controlled his cold fury as best he could.

The doctor leaned back in his chair and looked at him from under his heavy brows.

“The advice I should give you,” he said, and every word was like acid, “would get me drummed out of my church, and possibly out of decent society.”

He pointed a long, gnarled finger to a door that led into his surgery.

“On the third shelf, not even protected by a grille or a cupboard, is a bottle of a new American preparation called tanoline. Its constituent parts you can discover from a study of the latest supplement to the British Pharmacopoeia. It is the most pleasant and painless method of ending your life I know. Ten minims will produce coma and death and a flood of those laudatory notices which are usually accorded to people who are no longer alive to deny their authenticity.”

Arthur’s lips twitched.

“Rather a long-winded way of telling me to commit suicide, isn’t it?” he said.

“Long-winded or short-winded, it is the only solution that I can offer to a blackguard who has spent his life breaking the hearts and the pockets of the people who loved him.”

Arthur Liffton pulled at his long cigarette.

“I didn’t expect all this,” he said, almost pleasantly, “and I’m afraid I am leading the conversation away from a very vital topic—the question of my settlement.”

“Your settlement was liquidated a very long time ago,” snapped the doctor. “That portion of your sister’s settlement has also been liquidated—I sent a draft to Australia this morning.

The young man’s eyes narrowed.

“The devil you did!” His voice was quivering with anger. “You might at least have asked my views “

“I know your views,” growled Dr. Liffton. “They are that the money should go to you. As a loan, as a gift, as a deferred settlement, as anything you like, so long as the money went to you. Well, it won’t.”

He rose from his chair and towered over the sleek young man.

“Arthur,” he said quietly, “I have ruined myself for you. I thought you were the soundest kid that ever lived. I educated you; I paid to get you out of the scrapes which I thought were the scrapes of youth, and your reward was to swindle me. Thirty-three thousand four hundred and fifty pounds——”

“And a few odd shillings.”

“I remember the odd shillings, too,” the doctor went on in the same even tone. “It was a fraud for which I could have had you arrested and sent to penal servitude. A trick—the most vulgar kind of confidence trick—and I forgave you that. I reduced myself to penury; I have mortgaged my house; I have given you everything that I would give my own son. And just a little too late I realize just what kind of a beast I had to deal with.”

Arthur Liffton threw his cigarette into the grate and lit another.

“Well, I don’t know that this interview need be prolonged,” he said. “If it’s true that you’ve sent the money to Margaret, that’s that! I’ve got to raise nine hundred pounds by Monday, and I was hoping you would give me just one chance “

“Not a dog’s chance,” said the other. Again he waved his hand to the dispensary door, and Arthur Liffton laughed.

“I sent you a cheque the other day for five pounds,” said the doctor.

The young man put his hand in his pocket and flung the envelope on the table.

“Here are your confounded sweepstake tickets,” he said. “Why you couldn’t get them yourself I don’t know.”

“If you hadn’t voluntarily offered to buy them I would have bought them myself,” said the doctor.

He took the ten green slips out of the envelope, examined and replaced them.

“Has it occurred to you that if you draw a horse the ticket will be in my name?”

The old doctor’s face twitched.

“I shan’t draw a horse. If I did, the fact that it was in your name wouldn’t balance against the fact that the ticket was in my pocket.”

Arthur shook his head in wonder.

“I don’t know why you want money.”

The old doctor’s eyes twinkled.

“I would like to have a little to leave to my heiress,” he chuckled.

Anna, standing at the window of her bedroom, looking into the darkened road, saw a figure come along the flagged garden walk, pass through the gate, and close it with a crash behind him. She had a momentary glimpse of him as he passed under the few lamps the little road boasted, and wondered what business had brought Mr. Arthur Liffton to that neighbourhood.

II

Somebody associated with the Hospitals Sweep invited Dick Thurley to Dublin to witness the Derby draw. It was an excellent opportunity for a little holiday, and he went by the boat-train that left on the night previous to the ceremony, carrying with him six little green tickets that he and Anna had jointly purchased.

Anna dined with him in town.

“I’m not quite sure what I shall do with the first prize, ‘ ‘ she meditated. “After all, it’s a mere few hundred thousand pounds. I rather think I shall go to Dublin in state, arrange for a band of music to lead me to the Mansion

House, and it is quite possible I may address the excited crowd from the steps. Dick, do such things really happen? I mean, do people really make these enormous sums?"

"I'm afraid they do," he said ruefully. "Usually they are people who've never seen a racehorse in their lives, and they tell the reporters that they're not interested in horses or courses, and that they're going to settle down to a life of quiet enjoyment. Anyway, we've got six tickets, which represent three pounds' worth of hope and pleasant dreams, and who knows ...?"

Dick went to his hotel, shaved and had a bath, and an hour later found himself in the great crowded hall, at the end of which was a raised platform. On this was a huge cylinder, which was slowly revolving. When it stopped a porthole was opened; a nurse put in her hand and took out a slip of paper. Simultaneously a second nurse drew from a glass cylinder another slip containing the name of a horse. The names of horses and drawers were read out by the official and duly inscribed.

It was late in the afternoon when the end came. There were six papers still remaining in the glass cylinder. One of these was drawn and opened. In the hall the atmosphere was tense, for, of the hundreds of names which had come out of the glass cylinder, not one had yet been the favourite. And now it had come! The buzz became a roar. The announcer waited with a little slip in his hand to call the name of the man or woman who had been fortunate enough to draw half a ticket, the half of which could be sold for forty thousand pounds. Dick listened, interested, then:

'The name," said the announcer, "is Mr. Arthur Liffton, 298 St. James's Street, London."

Dick Thurley half rose from his chair. Arthur Liffton! The luck of it I In the last month he had almost disappeared from the turf; there was a case pending in the Courts against him. Never had any man been so near to being down and out.

Dick came back from Ireland by the early-morning boat, and had time to digest the London newspapers, which had arrived half an hour before he left. All referred to the amazing good fortune of "this young man about town", who had apparently been interviewed on receipt of the news the night before. Said one reporter:

I had the privilege of breaking the news to Mr. Liffton on his good fortune. He received it very quietly. "It is an extraordinary piece of luck." he said, "and I am very grateful. No, I don't intend selling half the ticket—in fact, I

cannot at the moment say what my plans will be. I am a racing man, and naturally I prefer to take a racing chance."

It wasn't very like Arthur Liffton, thought Dick. When he got home he drove over to see Anna. She met him at the door, a picture of indignation.

"Isn't it too dreadful—that wretched man drawing the favourite I Why, somebody told me that he can sell it for fifty thousand pounds."

"If he can sell half of it for fifty thousand I dare say he will," said Dick. "It's worth all that. The horse will start at six to four—in fact, it's one of the most cast-iron Derbys we've had for years. I wonder what the old doctor thinks about it?"

"Mother saw him to-day," she said. "He was terribly elated. I didn't realize that he had any affection for Arthur. He started to tell mother something and then changed his mind."

III

Anna was an early riser, and usually she did an hour's work in the garden before breakfast. She was crossing the front lawn when she saw the doctor's front door thrown open and the woman who attended him come flying down the path.

"Miss Anna!" she screamed, and Anna ran to meet her. "The old doctor!" gasped the woman. "Oh, my God, I think he's dead—dead, I think!"

The girl turned cold, hesitated for a moment, then followed the woman. They passed down the passage into the study. The charwoman had pulled aside the curtains, and by the light that streamed in she saw the old man lying face downward on the ground. She took one glance at him, then went out into the passage and telephoned to the nearest doctor.

She was to have gone riding with Dick that morning. He arrived half an hour later, and from him she learned the news.

"The doctor thinks it's heart failure. He was a pretty old man. There was an empty glass and a whisky decanter on the table, and the doctor's theory is that he was reaching out to get himself a drink when he had his seizure."

An hour later Scotland Yard men were on the spot, and made a brief examination and inquiry without discovering anything of an unusual character. The dead man had taken off his coat and tie and loosened his shirt; he had evidently been sitting in the deep armchair, from which he had slipped to the ground.

The officer in charge of the case confided to Dick Thurley, whom he knew:

“I don’t think there was any reason but nature for this collapse,” he said. “The only thing that is curious is that a key of the front door, which usually hung on a nail in the doctor’s study, has disappeared. We can fix the death: it occurred at eleven o’clock. He fell on his watch, smashed the face, and stopped it. Poor old doctor! I’d promised to see him on the Downs on Wednesday. He was going to the Derby!”

Later came Arthur Liffton in a condition of proper sorrow. Dick found him most pleasantly human.

“Isn’t it terrible?” he said. “And just as I was going to try to make up to him for all the money I’ve borrowed —I’ve treated him very badly, and that’s the truth, Dick.”

They were in the study together, into which Dick had been invited, to his surprise. Arthur Liffton was going through a pile of unfinished manuscripts that the doctor had left behind. He was a voluminous writer.

“He was seventy-two,” he said, and pointed to the fine, almost microscopic writing. “You wouldn’t think that was the hand of a man of seventy-two.”

“Did he always write in red ink?” asked Dick.

Arthur nodded.

“That was one of his peculiarities—he had others,” he added, in a tone that suggested that his antagonism to the doctor had not entirely evaporated.

Dick did not see him again till the Wednesday. It was a bright summer day; the Downs were more crowded than he had ever seen them before.

Arthur came through the gate and climbed up to the stand where Anna was sitting.

“I feel perfectly rotten being here to-day,” he said, “with the old man buried only yesterday. But everything is so completely unreal that one extra unreality doesn’t seem to matter.”

“Have you sold your ticket?”

He shook his head.

“No, I have not sold a cent’s worth of interest. I suppose I’m a fool, but I’m taking a chance. There’s about eighty thousand pounds even for the third horse, and I can’t see how the favourite can be beaten right out of a place.”

She looked at him curiously, almost with awe.

“How much do you win?”

“About three hundred and twenty thousand pounds if the horse wins,” he smiled.

He was nervous—not unnaturally, she thought.

“I think I shall go abroad for a year—if I win.”

He was going on when he remembered something and turned back.

“By the way, he did leave all his possessions to you. I’m told they’ll come to quite a considerable sum—a thousand pounds or more. I bear him no ill-will, though he might have left me “

What he might have left him he did not say, but hurried away as somebody beckoned to him from the Members’ Enclosure.

She watched the horses at parade, saw the field slowly cross towards the starting-gate, and endured that breathless suspense which can only come when the Derby field is standing at the gate waiting to be dispatched on its mile-and-a-half journey. Then there was a terrific roar as the gate flew up, and the field went away in line.

There could be no excuse for the favourite if it failed: it was away with the leading division, and at the end of the first two furlongs lay close up fourth. Dick Thurley, standing by her side, voiced the general opinion.

“I don’t think anything can beat the favourite,” he said, as the field came on to the top stretch and bore down towards Tattenham Corner.

The favourite was second now, lying a length behind the leader, who went wide at the turn. Instantly its jockey pushed his mount to the rails and was half a length clear by the time the jockey on the temporary leader had got his mount straightened.

Now the rest of the field was coming up to challenge. One by one they ranged up against the far-striding bay; one by one they fell away, beaten. And then, as they reached the dip, the favourite moved forward with an

effortless swing, and his blue-and-red jacket flashed past the post an easy winner.

“My God!”

Anna turned. Arthur Liffton was at her side. He was white to the lips. The hand that came up to his face shook.

“I’ve won—I’ve won!”

All that night Arthur Liffton did not sleep. He paced his room restlessly. A dozen times he took from the drawer of his desk the envelope containing the tickets. He had not even dared to separate them.

The bank had just opened the next morning when he came in and requested an interview with the manager. That gentleman, knowing why he had come, beamed upon the visitor.

“I suppose you’re overwhelmed with congratulations, but, what is more important, you want me to collect your money?”

Arthur took from his pocket the envelope, and his trembling hands tried to extract its contents. He passed the envelope across to the manager.

“I’ve gone to pieces,” he said. “There are ten tickets in a series; the third one is the winning ticket.”

“Do you mean to say that you have brought the lot with you?” the manager asked in surprise.

“Yes—it seemed to me it was safer—less likely to be lost.” Arthur’s voice was shaking.

In the corner of the manager’s room was a small filter and a glass. Going to this, he drew a tumbler full of water, drank it greedily, and refilled it. Then he turned to meet the manager’s stern eyes.

“I don’t understand this.”

“Isn’t the ticket there?” Arthur Liffton almost screamed the words.

“It is here—yes.”

He held a green slip in his hand, and with horror the young man saw that it was crossed with line upon line of tiny red writing.

“I will read this,” said the manager. He adjusted his glasses more firmly.

“This ticket is the property of me, Dr. Lewis Liffton. It was purchased on my behalf by my nephew, Arthur Liffton. On the night of the 21st of May the said Arthur Liffton came to my house, apparently to congratulate me upon my lucky purchase. I had occasion to leave my room to answer a telephone call, which I have reason to believe was made by a confederate. During my absence he put into my whisky a fatal dose of tanoline. I did not realize this until he had gone, and saw that he had taken with him the key of the front door. He will return at his leisure to search the house for this ticket.

“Lewis Liffton.

“There is a postcript,” said the manager.

“It is useless to telephone for a doctor.”

The manager leaned back in his chair.

“This requires a little explanation, doesn’t it, Mr. Liffton?”

Arthur said nothing. He went swiftly from his bank to his flat. He had a revolver in his flat.

HIS GAME

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I

THE Ninth Guards were at dinner.

Lord Callington had edged the soap-box on which he sat farther and farther from the fire which roared in the centre of the circle of men, but Tubbetts, very red of face, sat on a camp-stool staring at the flames.

He was a heavy-looking young man, broad of face and broad of shoulder. He had a fair moustache, grotesquely small.

One by one, as the heat from the fire increased, the other officers had drawn back, till only Tubbetts remained, deep in troubled thought, his big hands nervously fidgeting.

Suddenly, above the babble of talk and light laughter, Callington's voice rose harshly.

"Tubs, draw back from that fire! What the devil are you doing?"

Tubbetts jumped up as if he had been shot, then shuffled awkwardly back, muttering an apology.

Carsley watched him with a quiet smile on his handsome face. George Brackett, seventh baronet of that name, turned to the officer at his side, and said under his breath:

"Cally is very cross."

"Don't wonder. Tubs made an awful mess of it again to-day. Seems to lose his head the moment a burgher's rifle goes 'pop'. Rum bird, Tubs!"

Tubbetts was standing now, quietly savage, and glowering direspectfully in the direction of his colonel. Big and awkward and gauche as he was in most things, he was sensitive to disapproval, and Lord Callington's disapproval was the most evident thing in the world.

He stood for a moment, then, taking the steaming tin cup that a servant handed him, he slouched over to where George Brackett sat.

"I've a jolly good mind..." he muttered, then stopped.

"Steady your leaders, Tubs!" George frowned warningly.

The Ninth Guards were a very happy family, to which Major Sir George Brackett stood, by general acceptation, in loco parentis.

“You sit down and take your soup, and please don’t be an ass! The old man will put you under arrest on the slightest provocation.”

“This isn’t my game,” said Lieutenant Tubbetts sulkily.

The Major chuckled softly, and the ghost of a smile hovered about the corners of Carsley’s mouth.

“You’re an unfortunate soul, Tubs,” said Sir George dryly. “You’re the victim of circumstances. If your father weren’t a banker, and if you hadn’t so much money in your family that you positively reek of honest wealth, you would not have been in the Guards, you would not have come to South Africa, nor found yourself on a bit of wet veldt, being ragged by Callington.”

Tubbetts sipped at his bouillon and said nothing, and the buzz of conversation, arrested for the moment by the little incident of Tubbetts at the fire, resumed.

“The fact is, Tubs”—Carsley leaned over and laid his hand on the other’s knee—”you didn’t start fair with the Ninth. There was that business of the drag “

“I don’t believe in wasting money,” said the other doggedly. “Because a fellow has thirty thousand a year, it doesn’t follow that he must chuck his money about.”

“You hardly go as far as that,” said the other.

“You think I’m mean when I won’t subscribe to things,” Tubs went on; “but I’ve been taught that there are two hundred and forty pennies in every pound “

Carsley turned away with frank rudeness.

Thereafter Tubbetts sat in the circle, but not of it. He brooded through his dinner, listening resentfully to the light chatter of the men about the fire. He envied their ease, these clean-limbed patricians who could joke of danger and speak lightly of death.

He envied Brackett, for whom no man had a wry word; he envied Claud Carsley, with his splendid face and flippant drawl. There was Mainward, most daring of amateur riders, holding the company breathless with the story of an Aintree steeplechase.

"…'Kink' Mason went ahead, but Verry's horse refused… Over Valentine's Brook Kink's horse jumped sideways and fell, and I came over nearly on the top of him…."

A spot of rain fell, and another, and another.

The men about the fire seemed to be oblivious of the shower, but Tubs shifted uneasily, for he had the civilized being's horror of catching cold.

As the downpour increased he waited irresolutely, then stalked away from the fire and stumbled over the uneven ground in the direction of his little shelter tent.

"Thank heavens!"

The ejaculation was the colonel's, and his relief was shared by the others.

"Poor old Tubs!" smiled Brackett.

"Poor!" Callington snapped the word, and his white moustache bristled. ' ' Poor! If he were poor, we shouldn't have seen the beggar. George, he's impossible! He's bad enough in London—he's absolutely useless here!"

"Was it bad, sir?"

"Bad! Weren't you there? No, you were on the other side of the kopje. He had a half-company on the right flank. When the first shot was fired, he would have bolted, only Providence put his foot in a meerkat hole, and there he sprawled, yelling to his men to take cover."

"I wouldn't mind that so much," said the second in command. "Any man is liable to lose his head, but old Tubs is such a—a careful beggar. He checks the mess steward's accounts twice over, and gets perfectly frantic if he discovers that two and two have been exaggerated into five!"

Tubbetts, lying in his shelter tent, listening to the pattering of rain on the taut canvas, saw the end.

Unless he was jolly careful, he told himself, there would be courts martial and scandals, and a line in the Gazette:

Retirement:——Ninth——Guards.—Lieutenant Algernon James Tubbetts, the King having no further use for his services.

That would mean being thrown out of one's club and getting one's name in the paper, and injuring Tubbett's Bank, which was essentially an Army bank.

"I wish to heaven," reflected the young man, as he turned over preparatory to sleeping, "that De Wet was at the bottom of the sea, and the whole business of war wiped out! If there is any fighting to-morrow, I'm pretty sure to make a mess of it. Soldiering is not my game."

He fell asleep.

II

Lord Callington swung into a creaking saddle, and his horse spun round. He pulled it straight till his face was turned to the blue line of kopje that quivered through the heat-haze.

A little knot of officers stood close at hand, their glasses fixed on the highest of the squat hills.

George Brackett put down his glasses and turned to his chief.

"There's a laager there, and it looks as if they'll stand."

The little column had halted.

To the right the Victorian Mounted Rifles stood by their horses; in the centre three guns of the R.H.A. waited in readiness; in the rear, the Ninth Guards were drawn up in quarter-column—a solid slab of men in discoloured khaki.

"Send the Victorians on," said Callington.

An officer went galloping to the right.

There was an order, the quaver of a trumpet, and men rose jerkily to their saddles; a hushed rattle of hoofs, and in two long lines the Victorians moved over the veldt.

Way back with the infantry, Tubs paced nervously up and down before his half-company.

It was hot, but there was no justification for the streams of perspiration that streaked his red face.

Carsley, watching him furtively, saw the tell-tale signs, and made a little impatient noise with his lips. But he was sympathetic, for there was much of the woman in the composition of this handsome man.

He strolled casually towards his junior.

“Hot, Tubs?” he asked carelessly.

Tubbetts nodded. He did not remove his eyes from the distant blue line of hills.

“Hot, Tubs?”

Carsley’s voice was sharper, and the younger man turned.

“Yes, sir,” he said stiffly.

Carsley’s eyes searched his face with frank curiosity.

“Look here, young Tubs,” he said, and, taking the other’s arm affectionately, led him out of hearing of the men, “this is going to be a tiny little fight not worth troubling about, and you must not get jumpy.”

“I——”

“We all get jumpy,” Carsley interrupted. “I was as scared as you yesterday, but I had the luck to escape notice.”

Tubbetts looked suspiciously at the other.

“You’re tryin’ to buck me up, Carsley; you know jolly well this is going to be one of those rotten frontal affairs.” He licked his dry lips, and looked again toward the hills.

“I—I don’t believe Callington knows his job.” He was fretful and agitated, and the trickling streams of perspiration became veritable rivers, until his red face shone wetly. “I don’t believe he knows anything about it! He’s colonel and all that, but what can he know of war? He never saw a shot fired in anger till this war. He “

“S-s-sh, Tubs—Tubs!” warned his captain with a troubled frown. “You really mustn’t, Tubs. Look at the men; they’ve confidence enough in us—in you.” “But they haven’t,” said Tubbetts fretfully, “and they’d be fools if they had! They know this is not my game.”

“Right half-battalion will advance by the left!”

George Brackett came cantering over the veldt. An officer ran out to meet him, and they exchanged a word. The Major beckoned Carsley.

“We are going to work round the right of that hill; there’s a sort of nek in the middle of the range which isn’t held. Your men ready?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hullo, Tubs!”

Sir George reined in his fidgeting horse and bent over. “You’ll have a chance to-day—a chance of showing the colonel he was wrong. Don’t get flurried, there’s a good boy.”

His gloved hand rested on Tubs’s shoulder, his kindly grey eyes searched the young man’s face.

“I’m not going to talk a lot of melodrama about the honour of the regiment,” he went on quickly, “but you owe us something, Tubs. Remember all the good chaps who died, and how proud we are of them—Nevill at Albuhera, the brothers Manton at Nive, the fellows at the Alma. For heaven’s sake, Tubs, play the game!”

“I won’t run, if that’s what you mean,” muttered the officer, his head sunk on his breast. “I’m not afraid to die, but I’m horribly afraid of making myself ridiculous.” The men were on the move now. Extending as they marched, they made a long skeleton front that stretched across the plain.

“Join your company,” said Sir George, and his hand tightened on Lieutenant Tubbetts’s shoulder for a fraction of a second, and then relaxed.

Tubs ran ahead. He passed between two men, and heard one of them laugh. He could have turned back and struck him, although the man’s laugh had no connection with the running officer.

He passed Mainward trudging a few paces ahead of his company, and the gentleman rider shouted a cheery greeting.

“Hot, Tubs? We’d be riding at nine stone for the Grand Military if we had a week of this!”

He nodded with a forced smile, and heard Mainward’s chuckle at his own harmless joke.

Tubs joined his company, and fell in by the side of Carsley.

“Hello I Thought you weren’t coming!”

There was no sarcasm in Carsley's quick smile, but Tubbetts felt uncomfortable.

They marched for half an hour, and nothing happened. Tubs' spirits rose.

"Perhaps the beggars have cleared," he said; but the company officer shook his head.

"We've got a long way to go yet," he said, and Tubs felt annoyed.

"Where are the guns?" he demanded resentfully. "One doesn't do this sort of thing unless one is supported. The whole affair seems to be mismanaged. I don't think "

"Turn your head, and you'll see 'em," said the officer. "We're supported all right; you needn't worry about that. The question is "

The hills were not so far away as they thought. Distantly they saw a wisp of white smoke drift lazily from the hillside, then:

O-omm!

A sound that was like the soughing of a wind came to them; it rose in shrill intensity.

Instinctively Tubs ducked his head. "They're shelling us!" he spluttered wrathfully.

The other officer said nothing.

A second burst of slow-moving smoke from the hillside, and again the hideous shriek of flying shell.

A whistle sounded, and the advancing line of men came to a halt. They were in the shelter of a ridge that extended across the veldt like a huge green wave.

Carsley turned and looked back, and from the right of the line rode George Brackett at a gallop.

"Claud," he shouted, "can you read that?" "That" was a splash of dazzling light that twinked and trembled on the edge of the veldt behind them.

Carsley shaded his eyes and read.

he spelt, as the light of the heliograph danced and died. " 'Victorians report kloof strongly held—make your own arrangements'," he read. "'Suggest——' Look out!"

Bang!

Unheralded by the boom of the gun, or the whine that told of its passage, a shell burst over them, and there was a patter as of rain.

"Shrapnel," said the major. "Go on, Claud."

" 'Suggest' was the last word," said the other coolly. "Signaller!"

A man had unstrapped a thin steel tripod he had been carrying on his shoulder, produced a mirror from a leather case at his belt, and deftly adjusted it.

"Ask them to repeat everything after 'suggest'."

Click, clicketty click!

The man tapped the controlling key rapidly, and the splash on the horizon answered.

"'Suggest'," read the man, "'you work farther to the right and occupy kopje'"—he pronounced it "koppy-gee"—"that commands kloof."

"Here, I say!"

Tubs, an impatient audience, obviously ill at ease, broke in.

"All that ought to be in cipher. These chaps"—he waved a despairing hand towards the kopje—"these chaps can read English as well as you I It's not right sending messages like that!" he fumed. "It shows the whole mismanagement——"

"Silence, sir!"

Brackett's face, gone fierce and pinched of a sudden, glowered down at him.

"Fall in with your company," he ordered shortly, and Tubs's hand rose to his helmet in salute.

Whew-w! Whew-w! Whew-e-e-w!

They were on the crest of the rise now, and from the ground rose little fountains of earth. They jumped up at your feet unaccountably, and the air was full of hissings and wailings.

“Cover—cover!” yelled Tubs; but the men could not obey, for the ground was innocent of cover. The line moved on, steadily doggedly.

“Here, hold up!”

A man marching on Tubbetts’s right sighed and leaned heavily against him, Then he slipped to the ground, and the officer stared at him.

“Tubbetts!”

Claud was shouting to him angrily, and he realized he was standing still whilst the rest of the line was advancing.

He ran again, and found himself curiously short of breath.

With a quick jerk of his head, Claud called him to his side.

“We’re in an ambush,” he said briefly. “The Boers are on this randje ahead; there are some on that rising ground to the left. Keep your men together.”

“Ambush?” stammered Tubs. “Where?”

He could picture an ambush in a narrow lane between high banks, but this was open country. To the right he saw Sir George Brackett. He was a little ahead of the men, and he had a revolver in his hand.

The whistling sound was terrible now—terrible, terrible, terrible! So Tubs told himself as he went forward mechanically, fumbling at his belt for the Mauser pistol he’carried.

“Ambush? Where?”

He must have asked the question a dozen times— asked it at great personal inconvenience, for his lips were dry and his throat sore.

He looked round. The companies were closing in on the centre. There was a horrible whining in the air, and every few seconds something exploded with a harsh crash. Away to the rear there was a haze of blue smoke. Evidently “our guns” were in action too. Suppose they made a mistake and shelled us! Such things had occurred. Tubs’s lips twitched. Curse war I Curse all men who made wars!

And these little jets of earth that kept springing up all around! One half of his mind told him that if he could only dodge them he would be safe. The other half said with pitiless logic that no evasion was possible, because the fountains of dust were made by bullets striking the ground.

Something impelled his eyes to Brackett. The Major had stopped, and the line of men behind him had stopped too. He saw Sir George wave them on again, and go down on to his knees.

“Go to the Major, Tubs!”

Carsley’s voice was strained and unfamiliar.

Sir George was flat on his back, staring up at the blue sky. There was blood on his tunic and a trickle of blood on his lips.

“Tell Mainward—take command,” he mumbled like an old man, and made a little grimace.

“He’s dead—he’s dead! Mainward must take command!”

Tubs charged back, bellowing the news, and Carsley nodded coolly.

“Tell Mainward,” was all he said. But even as Tubs turned reluctant feet to the left rear, he saw Mainward fall, shot through the heart.

Men were going down too; little yellow patches lay on the green amongst the bushes.

Firing! Somebody was firing close at hand! The Ninth Guards, of course! His own men were firing at something ahead—firing at the blue sky and the yellow line of the randje.

Bang—b-rang—b-r-r-rang!

Tubbetts, hands on hip, stood up, a mark for every rifleman, glaring at the invisible enemy, piecing together the montrous situation. Those people ahead were firing at the Ninth Guards, and the Ninth Guards were firing at them. That seemed fair. Poor Brackett was killed, lying somewhere in the rear, staring at the blue sky with unseeing eyes. Mainward was dead, and young Ferguson-Pollett … and that decent colour-sergeant of No. 4 Company…. Yes, and other men.

“Ah!”

Carsley spun round like a dancer, his arms wide- stretched, pitiable surprise on his face. Tubs knew he was dead before he pitched sideways to the ground.

Whew—smack!

A ricochetting bullet struck his helmet and knocked it backward. The shock jerked his chin-strap and made him bite his tongue.

He looked round for inspiration, swearing helplessly. He saw no officer, only men huddled in little groups, and seeking what cover the flat earth offered. He was alone—in an ambush—men were lying dead all round him. He saw the face of Toms, his servant, pinched and grey, mouth and eyes open, astonishment frozen on the dead face.

Halliker's Column came up at a trot, and four guns opened on the Boers' position.

"I'm glad you've come," said Lord Callington.

"I heard your guns going. What is happening?"

Lord Callington shook his head.

"I don't know," he said simply. "It looks as if one-half of the Ninth Guards are wiped out."

Nearly one-half, for of the men who went into action on the right, ninety rank and file and one officer came out, and that officer was Tubbetts, unharmed.

They met—the grey old man and the young officer— and for a moment neither spoke.

"Brackett dead—Carsley dead—Mainward dead"—Lord Callington spoke slowly, thought-fully—"and you —alive!"

He looked long and earnestly at the young man, and Tubbetts hung his head.

"Why?" The old man's sudden fury was appalling, and Tubbetts shrank back. "Why? Tell me that! Why should the best be taken—the dear, good fellows" —his voice broke, and his eyes were full of hot tears— "and you to come unscathed? Where is the wisdom of heaven in this?"

Tubbetts offered no solution.

III

Tubbetts' Bank was by common acceptation one of the soundest institutions in the City "despite the fact", as cynical City folk were in the habit of saying, "that its directors are Army men."

When Tubs took his father's place in the bank at the end of the war—the old man had died suddenly whilst Tubs was homeward bound—he set himself the task of discovering exactly why the bank was great, and how it could be made greater.

In the books of the bank he found names that gave him little twinges of sorrow—Carsley, Brackett. He gave up that side of his investigation. The Army was "not his game".

This he explained to such of his intimates as came close enough to his life to extract confidence from him. Yet in Tubbetts' Bank one could not get away from the Army or clear oneself from unhappy associations.There was a managing clerk, one Vicars, a slim, tall man with a quiet voice and a trick of avoiding your eye. Tubs had tried for exactly five minutes to like his subordinate, at the end of which time he was frankly antagonistic. Vicars had a mysterious little smile which meant anything you chose to read into it. Tubs read an uncomplimentary and unflattering opinion of himself into that smile, and his attitude towards Mr. Vicars was one of continuous resentment.

Vicars was respectful and polite.

"A jolly sight too suave I" was Tubs's verdict, and in secret had the managing clerk's books examined, but without making any other discovery than that he was an orderly and a methodical person.

Three years after the war the military associations of Tubbetts' Bank were strengthened in an embarrassing manner. Lord Callington joined the board of directors.

You may picture the scene.

A big oak-panelled room with a long table, on which blotting-pads were placed at regular intervals—at one end of the table, seated under the large oil-painting of his father, Tubbetts, very businesslike, and immaculately dressed in a dark-grey frock-coat.

"You know Lord Callington?" One of the directors was introducing the newly appointed member of the board.

Tubs, flushing a little, rose awkwardly and held out his hand, and the older man smiled under his moustache.

The awkwardness had worn off a little in three months, though Tubs always deferred to the other's opinion, always addressed him as "sir", and never offered opposition to any suggested scheme that Callington put forward.

When Tubs, in his capacity of managing director summarily dismissed the managing clerk of the bank, it was Callington who secured that gentleman's reinstatement.

Tubs shifted uneasily in his seat when the matter was brought up at a board meeting.

"…After fifteen years of service—loyal and honourable service—to the bank!" said Callington reproachfully.

"That's all right, sir," said Tubs a little peevishly, "but Vicars has been taking a jolly sight too much on himself. He practically pledged the bank to the support of that wild-cat scheme of Vessey's—the Sudanese irrigation scheme—which I wouldn't touch with a pole!" "Lord Vessey is a personal friend of mine," said Callington coldly; "and, so far from his great project being a 'wild-cat scheme', it has all the elements of a great Imperial undertaking."

"Hear, hear!" murmured the board.

"Sorry, of course—friend of yours," muttered Tubs uncomfortably, "but, you know, sir, we can't have a managing clerk giving undertakings—promises."

"That I can appreciate," admitted Callington graciously; "but zeal in the bank's interest "

Vicars was reinstated, and the board turned to the discussion of a dividend declaration. At the end of the business:

"I would like to return to the matter of Vessey's scheme," said Callington.

Tubs, twisting the ends of his little moustache, frowned. He knew that he was out of sympathy with the board on this matter. He knew, too, that he was at some disadvantage facing these men; he had been trained to obey them. Callington had no authority over him— for Tubs was no longer a soldier—but he could not shake off the sense of service. General Brabington, too—he was in awe of that shaggy-browed veteran. Yet he hated Vessey's Sudanese scheme like the devil. He had an irritating sense of his impotence, and the irritation was not allayed by the knowledge that he was, if he

wished, master of the situation, for he held by far the largest number of shares in the bank.

“You know, gentlemen,” continued Callington, addressing the board rather than Tubs, “that it has been the custom of the bank, in your late father’s time”— he turned to the scowling young chairman—”to distribute from time to time, to its shareholders, the result of any extraordinary profits which came to the bank.

Those extraordinary profits came from extraordinary enterprises, and were very welcome to those of us who had invested our moneys in the bank. In the last four years” —he looked at Tubs absently—”in the last four years—indeed, ever since the death of the bank’s founder—the bank would seem to have been singularly lacking in initiative”—Hear, hear!—”and at a period when, from the point of view of our shareholders, some form of initiative in increasing the earning power of the bank was most necessary.”

“Steady dividends,” interrupted Tubs loudly. He was nervous, and showed it in the aggressive quality of his voice. “We’ve paid steady dividends, and taken no risks—that is the job of a bank.”

“Whether it is the ‘job of a bank’ or not,” said Calling- ton, emphasizing the words, “it is an indisputable fact that Tubbetts’ bonus, which was at one time believed to be as inevitable as a consolidated dividend, has almost ceased to be. I would remind the chairman that the war left many relatives of dear and, I hope, mutual friends badly provided for.”

Tubs wriggled again. Callington was going to mention names—names of men he had seen lying in little pools of blood, men who spun round like tops and made strange noises when they fell.

“Poor Brackett has a daughter who is an invalid. Her only income is from the bank. A bonus would be a godsend to her. Carsley left a young widow—you would remember Carsley, Mr. Tubbetts?—to whom a hundred pounds or so would make all the difference. I could mention others.”

All the time Callington was speaking, the chairman was showing signs of increasing agitation. He was scribbling aimlessly with his pen on the blotting-pad, now sitting forward hunched up over the table, now leaning back in his chair, with his eyes fixed on the ceiling.

As Callington paused, Tubs threw his pen down violently.

“I don’t care what you say, sir I” he cried. When he was flustered, his voice rose almost to a squeak. “I know it’s disrespectful and all that sort of thing—

I know that I'm an ass—but I won't have this Vessey scheme! I won't—I won't!"

He thumped the table with his clenched fist.

"I want to help people as much as anybody—I want to do a turn for the wives of—of people—but Vessey's syndicate is rotten—rotten! Suppose we finance it "

"Financing has not been suggested," interrupted Callington; "it is a question of guarantees."

"It's the same thing." Tubs heard the dissatisfied murmur of his directors, and went on rapidly, incoherently. "They want us to take an uncommercial risk; they want to trade on our credit. I know Vessey. He had something to do with a Peruvian railway. I saw it in The Times the other day. He's a wrong 'un!"

Lord Callington rose.

"I cannot listen to this hysterical abuse of a man I have known for years—a gallant officer and an honourable gentleman," he said stiffly.

The board adjourned, and Tubbetts left the room, leaving behind him very much the same atmosphere as signalized his exit, one historic night, in South Africa.

"He's a fool—a useless, boorish fool," said Callington bitterly, as he walked home through the City that evening, "but he shall have his responsibilities brought home to him!"

That afternoon a curious thing happened. Tubs had an appointment with the directors of the British Industrial Bank of Yorkshire, and, in a very bad temper, went to keep it. He had received an offer to purchase the business of the bank, and for an hour he haggled and argued with two Scotchmen and a Lancashire spinner who controlled the shares of the bank.

He was leaving the directors' room, having definitely decided not to purchase, when he saw something which interested him. The directors' room opened on to a balcony which ran on three sides of the "shop". Standing at one of the paying-in counters was Vicars. He watched the managing clerk as he gathered up his paying-in book and disappeared through the swing doors. Then Tubs walked back into the room he had left, and renewed his negotiations.

In the meantime there came whispers to the City that Vessey's irrigation scheme was going through, and that Tubbetts' Bank was behind it.

Mrs. Carsley called upon the managing director the next morning—a pathetic figure of a girl widow—and Tubs saw her. It may have been a coincidence that she called so soon after the board meeting, but Tubs thought otherwise. He was by nature suspicious.

He listened gravely to all she had to say.

"I'm sorry," he said, when she had finished, "but I see no immediate prospect of a dividend. If you need the money badly, I will let you have an overdraft on my own responsibility."

"I do not want to borrow money," she said with quiet dignity, "but I understood There used to be bonuses, you know, Mr. Tubbetts, and people were saying at dinner last night that the bank was going to do something very wonderful that would make all our fortunes."

Tubs grinned, responsive to the girl's weary smile.

"There is no likelihood of anything wonderful happening whilst I am chairman," he said, and when she smiled again, Tubs went red.

She was very beautiful, thought Tubs, when he summoned courage to look at her. Women were not "his game", either, and there was a little aching pain in his heart when she began telling him why the "bonus" was needed. Such pitiably little requirements she had—a new carpet for her drawing-room was one of the things.

Carsley went down to death, spinning like a top, and trying to say something ... and died with a little smile ... and his widow wanted a few pounds to buy a carpet! Tubs could have cried.

"And, of course," she concluded, "if there were a bonus.it would mean so much."

"I know—I know!" He leaned over the desk, his big hands clasped on the pad. "And I'm simply aching to do something for you. I want to, and I—I can't see a way."

She was disappointed; he saw that when she rose to go. He cursed himself that he was no genius who could devise, at a second's notice, some plan for her relief.

“You—you knew my husband?” she said, as she stood with one hand on his desk.

Tubs nodded.

“Yes,” he said huskily, “I knew him. Good chap —brave chap!” He gulped something down.

Could he not see Carsley—a prince of men, who took his arm, and spoke so gently to him? And here was the one being in the world whom, above all others, Carsley loved. He would give her an open cheque for ten— twenty— fifty thousand pounds if she asked him. But she would not take that. She wanted a hundred pounds to buy a carpet for the drawing-room, and clothes, perhaps, and he could not give it to her in the way she wanted.

He opened the door for her, and then an idea struck him.

“I say, Mrs. Carsley”—he was breathless with the splendour of his scheme, vague, too, as to its working out, untidy of speech—”I’ve got a scheme—interested in something—cabbage factory—no, not that, furniture business—huge profits, enormous! Let me invest some of your money in that. Big profits, cent, per cent., and that sort of thing. Look here, you could have your profits in advance.”

He committed an error there, for she saw through the threadbare cloak that hid his philanthropy, and smiled kindly.

“No, no, no, Mr. Tubbetts! I understand, and thank you, but no.” She was gone before he could lie his way to plausibility.

Letters came to him, pleading, bullying letters. When would the bank pay a bonus? He suspected Lord Callington and his directors, and he did them an injustice. There were other agencies at work.

Callington wrote asking for an extraordinary board meeting, and Tubs consented.

“We have gone into this question of Sudanese irrigation,” said Callington, “and unless we step in now, another bank will guarantee the money.”

“Which bank?” demanded Tubs sceptically.

“The Rand Bank.”

‘ They’ve got no money.” Tubs was contemptuous.

“We feel we are acting in the best interest of our shareholders,” said a director.

“I don’t,” said Tubs.

He was sitting square in his chair, and his under-jaw was thrust out; he was fighting for his faith in his own judgment.

Three directors began talking at once; they were growing angry.

“It has come to this, Tubs.” It was like old times to hear Callington snap that word at him. “We know you too well to accept your final word on this matter; we are not going to stand idly by and see you throw away this opportunity. I have seen you throw away things more precious, but you are not going to bungle this. Here”—he smacked the table with his hand—”now”— he thumped it again—”we have got to come to a decision and guarantee this irrigation scheme. It means a hundred thousand pounds for distribution amongst our shareholders. Are you going to agree, or are you not?”

Tubs licked his lips.

“I’m not,” he said doggedly. “It’s a rotten scheme; it’s run by a wrong ‘un. If it petered out, as it will do, the bank would be ruined.”

“You’re a fool!” Callington was white with anger. “I will send you my resignation from the board to-morrow.”

Tubs said nothing—not even when, one after another, by growling asides and direct statement, the remaining directors of Tubbetts’ Bank followed Callington’s lead.

IV

Hard days for Tubbs, these. The resignation of the directors was the sensation of the day. There was almost a run on the bank, and every post brought hundreds of letters from anxious depositors.

The day the last of the directors resigned, he sent for Vicars, his managing clerk.

“Vicars,” he said, “how much commission were you promised by Vessey for inducing the directors to entertain his wretched scheme?”

“Sir!” said the outraged clerk.

“How much?”

“This is scandalous, sir I I served your late father “

“How much commission for standing in with the Vessey gang?”

The managing clerk turned on his heel.

“I shall leave the bank at once! You shall hear from my solicitors!”

But Tubs was at the door in a bound.

“Before you leave this room, I want to know,” he said; and as Vicars attempted to pass he seized him by the throat and thrust him back into the centre of the room. “Stand there, you dog! You didn’t think I knew where the directors got all their information from—all the fine promises from—did you? They didn’t get it from Vessey; he’s too wily. I know Vessey; he’d promise nothing.”

The man was sick with fear.

“I could run you in for conspiracy,” said Tubs, “or I could break every bone in your body, and one or the other I’ll do, if you don’t tell me the truth.”

“There was no commission,” said the man sullenly, “but Vessey gave me a thousand for expenses. How did you know?”

“I’ll not satisfy your beastly curiosity. Sit down and write.”

Nine ex-directors of Tubbetts’ Bank received nine certified copies of a managing clerk’s confession. Nine directors accepted Tubs’s invitation to a meeting, and they came, looking rather sheepish.

“Vicars was at the bottom of this from the first,” said Tubs. “He was getting big cheques and running another account at the Yorkshire Industrial.”

“I hardly know what to say to you, Tubs,” said Callington, “except that I am sorry. I thought Vessey was straight. We might have ruined thousands of people! My blood goes cold when I think of it!”

“That brings me to another point, “said Tubs hurriedly, for the distress of his colonel made him uncomfortable. “There will be a bonus. I’ve made a deal—bought the Yorkshire Industrial Bank for a quarter of a million, and transferred it to the Bank of the Empire at a profit of fifty thousand.”

He did not say what had decided him to buy the bank, and they did not guess. They did not know that it was to examine the private account of Mr. Vicars, sometime managing clerk of Tubbetts’, that he had spent a quarter

of a million, and that, having satisfied his curiosity, he hastened to sell his purchase—at a profit.

“It’s very wonderful to me,” said Callington half to himself. “Think of what has happened! If Tubs had been killed, and another man spared! I used to think “

He shook his head, and Tubs grew very red.

“Bankin’ is my game,” he said apologetically.

THE DEVIL DOCTOR

No record of prior magazine publication under this title found

I

GEORGE REWEN had a weakness for London parks, even on grey days when there was a smell of snow in the air and the rags of last night's fog streaked across the leafless poplars.

He liked them because they seemed to him to be the. only places in London where he could breathe and be free from the everlasting rumble and roar of wheeled traffic.

He came out of his hotel with a wistful glance at a gloomy cloud, behind which somewhere was a sun that unfolded the waxy petals of gladioli and drew from the pale heliotrope a heady fragrance. Somewhere it laved the world with a golden glory, and bare-footed children were treading yellow sands....

For the moment it was desperately uncosy; the advance guard of a northern gale was bending the tree-tops, and every few seconds something flat and wet and cold, like a piece of icy confetti, melted on his cheek. He strode at a rare pace along the gravelled path, and was alone except for the lady in the fur coat who walked ahead of him swinging a cane. She came to a cross-path and was undecided as to whether she should turn or continue ahead. He dodged to pass her, collided.

"I'm terribly sorry."

She was very pretty—even as pretty as he thought. The cold morning had given her cheeks a petal pinkness and had been merciful to her straight little nose.

"It was my fault," she smiled, and went on a few paces.

"Excuse me."

He stooped and picked up the flat morocco purse she had dropped. She told him she had dropped that purse in identically the same spot a year before. George Rewen had only lost one purse in his life—just outside Gwelo as he was riding in. Gwelo? Where was Gwelo? Wasn't it in Rhodesia?

She was not at all uncomfortable to find herself in conversation with a perfect stranger, good-looking and thirty-something. The very desolation of

the park destroyed much of the convention which holds human beings apart.

They paced together slowly; an overcoated policeman, slapping his hands together and stamping his cold feet, saw them pass and smiled cynically. He thought they were engaged.

He did not ask her name, and she would have been disappointed in him if he had. She might be well off, or she might be poor; working-girls were dressing rather well in England, he had observed during the brief period of his sojourn. The coat she wore might be the last word in expensive furs. It might also be supplied by one of those stores which cater for the careful.

“Lonely? Yes, I suppose so. There are degrees of loneliness. You would probably feel a little overcrowded in my surroundings—your idea of solitude might frighten me to death!”

She laughed.

George Rewen said good-bye to her with regret, and wished he had had the courage to ask her if she often walked in the park. He could come and find out, but the park was a big place.

Any doubt he had as to her financial position was removed as she passed through the gate. From the middle of the road, a big and shining car drew up to the pavement, a footman got down and touched his cap as she entered the machine. He stood watching, and she bowed to him as the Rolls passed on the other side of the railings.

He did not speak of his mild adventure when he met Dr. Lansen. In truth, Dr. Lansen gave him little opportunity, for the doctor was a great talker, and, unlike most great talkers, was interesting.

He talked through lunch, and when George Rewen was ushered into the smoke-room of Brown’s Club that evening (he had promised to call for the doctor at that rendezvous) he was talking even more brilliantly. For he loved an audience.

On the question of criminal psychology he was accepted as an authority, even amongst eminent psychologists. In the course of his interesting career he had acted for seven years as a prison doctor, and was one of the few men in England who had collected systematically the data which is the basis of all scientific observation.

II

It was on the evening of the 23rd of December, the last busy day Brown's Club would know until its members straggled back from their holidays, that the doctor stood with his back to the fire and discussed criminals with ten interested men and one unemotional stranger; and George Rewen's boredness was all the more reprehensible because he was Dr. Lansen's personal guest.

Lansen was tall and broad-shouldered; he had a mop of iron- grey hair, and his square, good-humoured face was illuminated—it seemed to reflect any light there was in a room—by round, gold-rimmed spectacles, through which a pair of blue eyes danced with amusement.

'The true criminal is the more difficult to detect because he has no criminal record. The police know him not; his name may be written large in the Court circular but it never appears in the Court registers; he is a highly respected member of society, a pillar of local institutions, a member of the best clubs, and a popular fellow in the most discriminating circles."

"A pretty fair description of your good self," chuckled old Blathwyte.

"And of you and all of us," Lansen beamed. "In Carey Street is a court which is occupied, year in and year out, with the affairs of foolish men whose liabilities are in excess of their assets. If you sat in those stuffy rooms long enough, you would imagine that an inability to balance income and expenditure was the inevitable preliminary to ruin. Yet is not the City filled with prosperous men who thrive on their liabilities? What is the Old Bailey but a bankruptcy court, where the dismal failures of the criminal world are audited and found incorrect? Clever financiers do not reach bankruptcy. Clever thieves and murderers seldom walk up the stone steps and bow to the judge. Crime and commerce demand training and study; carelessness in either pursuit, lack of experience, lack of foresight, ignorance of detail, faulty organization—in fact, weakness of executive quality leads to disaster, whether you sell butter or cut throats I"

Some of his audience "supposed so"; two dull men who had missed the thread of the argument were prepared to dispute the conclusions. George Rewen was mildly amused, mildly interested. His mind was some six thousand miles away, in a pleasant land that knew not the fog glooming the windows of the smoke-room, nor the thin sleet that had driven into his face as he walked up Pall Mall.…

"… Of all the factors which make for catastrophe in criminal activity"—the doctor twitched his coat-tails, his fine head drooped sideways as it

invariably did when he grew dogmatic—"there is none so potent as the factor of emotion. Passion in all its forms—anger, love, hate, sentimentality—disastrous! Twelve months ago this week I prosecuted a butler of mine. He had been stealing systematically—sleeve-links, a case of wine, a little silver—a good fellow, and he had been with me eight years. He had a wife and child. They died when he was in prison, which was unfortunate—terribly unfortunate, poor man. A week ago I had a letter from him telling me that sooner or later he would hang for me. The letter was almost incoherent; he wrote in a fury. I have not even troubled to put the letter in the hands of the police. His anger is my safeguard. Had he not written I should have been worried, for I knew that he had been released from prison; an angry enemy is half disarmed. In a month's time I shall receive another letter apologizing for the first and asking for my good offices to secure a situation for him; in six months he will have married again and will write thanking me for all I have done for him. Tanner is typical——"

Dr. Lansen's limousine was waiting as he conducted his guest down the broad marble stairs to the murky street. Underfoot was half an inch of greasy snow; the fog swirled in clouds along Pall Mall, and though the journey to Park Lane, where he had his apartment, was a short one, Rewen was shivering by the time they arrived.

"A beastly climate," chuckled the doctor, unlocking the door of his flat, "and I can understand that you are pining for the beaches of Durban—or is it Muizenberg? Personally, I love the mystery and furtiveness of fog." The big library-study was furnished with a luxury which seemed to err on the side of effeminacy; but then, George Rewen carried the advertisement of his out-of-door life in his tanned face and lean, loose frame.

He loathed financiers as a rule, but was compelled to admit that Dr. Lansen was a notable exception to the general run of the species. A financier who had other interests than money was something of a novelty.

"When does your steamer leave?" Lansen asked, as he pressed the bell on his desk.

"January 3rd," said Rewen. "At least, I hope I can finish my business in time to catch the mail-boat."

A liveried manservant came in; Dr. Lansen ordered cocktails.

"I hope so," he said, when the man had gone. "Lady Mary is rather difficult. She is young, and young people can be difficult. A year ago I could have sold the property and saved you the journey perhaps. But she is of age, and before the claims can be transferred her signature is necessary."

“Are there any other trustees?”

The doctor shook his head.

“No—I have the sole responsibility. I am seeing her to- night. I do not anticipate any very great opposition.”

III

Over the cocktails George Rewen learnt something of the doctor and the genesis of his fortune. He had been a general practitioner in a county town till the death of a grateful patient had placed him in possession of a modest fortune. This had been augmented by another legacy soon after he had set up in Harley Street as a specialist on nervous disorders.

The late Earl of Landring had been his friend and patient, and had left him a considerable sum, in addition to the trusteeship of his estate, which included two hundred apparently worthless gold claims in the Leydenburg district of the Transvaal. On these he had paid taxation for ten years before a boring on a neighbouring gold farm had revealed a rich low-level reef. The purchase of these claims was the business which had brought George Rewen to England.

“She had some absurd idea that there should be no further sale of property until the term of my trusteeship expires, which is another eleven months,” said Lansen, sipping thoughtfully at his cocktail.

Rewen smiled.

“I hope she will change her mind,” he said. “We wish to get the company floated this year whilst the market is healthy. I think that in offering a hundred thousand we are offering top price.”

He went back to his hotel after dinner, a little puzzled. For a shrewd financier, the doctor had peculiar views on the value of mining propositions. He had cross-examined his guest upon the future of half a dozen African properties which Rewen knew to be hopelessly insolvent, and in which, apparently, Lansen had invested. To describe them as wild-cat schemes would be to suggest that wild cats were gentle and domesticated creatures.

He had been an investor in the Marandalas Platinum Company—the most palpable swindle that had ever been put upon the market. Rewen had a banker friend in London, and, late as the hour was, he rang up the banker at his Sunningdale residence.

“Lansen? Oh, yes, a gambler, but immensely rich. Everything he touches turns to gold—eventually. A very lucky man and a most convincing talker.”

At the moment this testimonial was being offered to his power of persuasion, Dr. Lansen was in some doubts as to his gifts in this respect. He was standing in his favourite position, his back to a fireplace in a Grosvenor Square house, and his argument awakened no enthusiasm in his unresponsive audience.

Lady Mary Elfort sat in a corner of the big settee, turning and turning the diamond bracelet on her arm, and appeared to be so absorbed in her occupation that she did not raise her eyes to the doctor once. She had come in from a theatre, and her ermine cloak lay over one arm of the settee.

“I know—I am awfully sorry I am so obstinate, but I don’t see the need for hurry. We’ve sold such an awful lot this year—the Bennett estate and the Clear- haven property. I feel I ought to—see somebody— couldn’t I consult Mr. Strangeway?”

Dr. Lansen smiled. Another man would have grown frantic at the suggestion. Strangeway was a lawyer, and, until the days of his trusteeship, the family lawyer, and Strangeway did not like him.

“My dear Mary”—his voice was very gentle—”that is rather offensive, isn’t it? I am doing my best for you—it is no profit to me. This man Rewen understands the mining market and was very emphatic; he said the value of the claims may be sensibly reduced next year——”

“How can they be?”

“It is a question of the money market.” Lansen was very patient; it was as though he were pointing out to a naughty child the error of her ways. “Money just now is free; next year it may be tight.”

“Could I see Mr. Rewen?” she asked, and the doctor hesitated.

“Certainly. I was going to suggest that.”

He thought so quickly that she might not guess how in the brief space of the pause between speech and speech he had planned and revised his plan.

“He is coming down to lunch with me at ‘Sea Castle’. Let me drive you down to-morrow.”

She had visited Dr. Lansen’s old house before—a pleasant, if lonely, place on the Thanet coast—in summer.

Mary Elfort had few relations, and most of them had been antagonized by her erratic father, who had a penchant for quarrelling with his relatives.

“Yes—but it won’t be a pleasant drive, will it?” she asked. “It is snowing now?”

Dr. Lansen smiled.

“You are too young to think of such old-fashioned things as the weather,” he said.

When he reached Park Lane he experienced an unpleasant shock. Save for the swift passage of occasioned motor-buses, the thoroughfare was deserted. The man who came towards him from the shadows might be an innocent wayfarer: on the other hand … Dr. Lansen’s slipped his hand into his overcoat pocket, and wished he had told his chauffeur to wait until he had opened the outer door of the building in which he had his flat.

“Good evening, Doctor.”

It was Tanner. Tanner, the gaolbird, and the utterer of dire threats. But his voice was civil and his tone without offence.

“What do you want, Tanner?”

The doctor’s hand closed over the stock of his Browning; he thumbed down the safety-catch. It seemed to him at that moment that Tanner knew he carried a gun.

“Could you do anything for me, Doctor? I’m down and out.”

Lansen smiled; he could have wished that his audience at Brown’s Club were there to witness this rapid endorsement of his prophecy. And then he thought….

“Come up, Tanner.”

He let the man walk first.

In the setting of a beautiful room Tanner looked unwholesome. He had not shaved. His clothes were shabby and weather-stained. There was no resemblance here to a pompous and dishonest butler.

“Would you like to go down to Sea Castle and open up the house? I shall only be there for a day or two.”

The man stared at him. Had the psychologist in Dr. Lansen been at its brightest he might have read in that stare the fulfilment of crazy dreams.

“Yes, sir—you don’t usually go down to Sea Castle in the winter “

The doctor nodded.

“Exactly. I have a reason for wishing that my visit should not be advertised now. It is rather a private —er—business.”

He sent Tanner away with certain keys and money. Curious, mused Dr. Lansen, that a man who had suffered imprisonment, justly, and who could ascribe the loss of a wife and child to him, could be so meek. Tanner’s appearance was in every way providential.

IV

Dr. Lansen did not go to bed that night; he sat up packing necessary clothing and destroying papers. It would be hard to take a final farewell of this pleasant flat. The last of the papers to go into the fire and add to the ashes which overflowed on to the hearth were six Writs of Summons issued that very day by certain rapacious stockbrokers who had acted in concert, or had been moved by a common instinct of self-preservation.

The salvage of two estates for which he had acted as trustee was in a wall-safe: three thick wads of Swiss banknotes, each for a thousand francs.

An unintelligent criminal, thought Dr. Lansen, would have waited until people began to whisper, and court messengers deposited orders of garnishee upon the tables of bank messengers. He was not unintelligent. Also at the Kantonal Bank at Montreux was a large balance … foresight—organization—the executive brain….

Early the next morning, George Rewen received an express letter:

Lady Mary has ceased to be difficult [it ran]. She is staying with me at my place near Whitstable. Will you come down and join my house-party for Christmas? On one point her ladyship is childishly insistent—the money must be paid in dollar currency! She has, apparently, some notion that sterling will slump as a result of the strike. She may be right, but it is a little wearying to deal with youthful mentalities. I am afraid we must humour her.

There were elaborate directions as to how “Sea Castle” should be reached by road. George Rewen had hired a big Spanz coupe for his use whilst he was in London; the doctor had been his guarantor to the hiring company.

George scratched his chin thoughtfully; he consulted the bank where his money was deposited. The bank manager was quietly amused, but offered only the conventional objections and expressed a willingness to insure the currency in transit. He knew the doctor was slightly acquainted with Lady Mary and was aware that she^was “difficult”—he had had this impression from Dr. Lansen.

With the greater part of five hundred thousand dollars in his pocket George Rewen drove out of London with a light heart, for the letter had put a period to his stay in a very unpleasant climate.

He found himself thinking about the park girl as he drove through Lewisham, had a little pang of regret that a promising acquaintance could not be renewed. A skid on the greasy tramlines put her out of his mind. It had been snowing for three days intermittently in the country, he learned at Dartford. Snow is a breath-taking decoration on the branches of cedars and the roofs of old cottages; it brings a ghostly silence to the countryside and a new value of loveliness to the ugly corners of the world. But to a man who has a large car suffering from a fractured water-joint its aesthetic qualities are not so obvious.

Night was coming down with the fine, powdery snow when George Rewen switched on his lamps and took one long and gloomy look at the newly formed pool of ice beneath his radiator, and began his tramp in search of the inevitable garage. He rather wished he was not carrying nearly half a million dollars in currency. It had been an inspiration to follow the secondary road to Whitstable; such inspirations are of the devil. Normally the depth of snow on the road was about twelve inches, but it was a track exposed to all the winds that blew, and he was knee-deep in drifts every few yards. To his left a flat marsh extending, as he guessed, to the grey sea; to his right a featureless plain, though he had seen straggling lines of trees before the water-joint went.

Gale and snow. He grinned mirthlessly, and felt in his pocket to be sure that his electric lamp was there.

He resented many things, but none so much as the romance of being snowbound on Christmas Eve. Such things only happened in sugary stories; he was not romantic. He was a very wholesome bachelor who had made money by developing mines and buying and selling stock. He thought lovingly of Tanganyika Concessions and East Rands. It was warm and sunny in Johannesburg, and the plumbago would be burning bluely in a hundred gardens, and the children playing in Joubert Park; in Tanganyika, too … there was a whole lot of fun to be got round Tanganyika, shooting.…

He stopped, gasping. The wind was blowing all ways; in an instant his face had been masked with snow.

Then, to add to the grotesqueness of everything, there was a sudden quiver of blinding light and the crash and roll of thunder.

“Snow-storms and lightning! Heavens, what a country!” he growled.

V

It was growing dark with extraordinary rapidity. He looked back, wondering if he could see the lights of his car, but the falling flakes dropped a thick and impenetrable curtain. Whether he were on or off the road, he could only guess. Snow-billows, which might hide the scrubby hedges, stretched away into the dusk. He plodded on— and on. Sometimes the wind was behind him, sometimes at his flank. Once he nearly slipped down the steep bank of a water-channel. It was then that he knew he was not on the road. A rift occurred in the invisible clouds, and it became a little lighter; ahead or behind, he heard the distant rumble of thunder.

He stopped and looked down. To call them footprints would have been inaccurate. But there were certain deep little pats in the snow, similar to those which he had been creating as he walked; they occurred at regular intervals and followed a snow-furrow that ran at right angles to his own track. And they were new. The fine snow had not filled them as it would in a few minutes, for the wind had momentarily dropped and the white, powdery stuff was falling straightly. The visible impress of heel and toe would have told him the direction, but no sign of a boot-sole showed. Stooping, he peered down first into one and then into another of the depressions. Here was a place where the unknown foot had slipped, ploughing a white channel.

He turned left, stamping knee-deep, his eyes on the snow—white no longer, but purple in the failing light.

He was moving in the right direction—if his guide was right. A half-buried sapling appeared from the fog, another—a dwarf of a tree like a shrivelled old man crouching painfully—a pine on his left, and then the indescribable scent of a wood. There was more and more shelter; the snow under his feet became a crust so thin that he could feel the solid earth beneath. And the little pits had become footmarks—a woman’s; a fashionably shod woman—the soles were narrow and pointed, the heels high. He had scarcely made the discovery before he saw a dark, shapeless bundle, almost at his feet. It was oddly like a bear cub, the fur speckled thickly with snow, but he knew it was

human before he knelt by its side, and a woman before his nostrils were flattered by the faint fragrance of a perfume beyond his power to classify.

He was less interested in the identity of his find, its sex or age, than in the dismal realization of his own helplessness. There was some sort of shelter here, for the trees were massing; there were some so protected from the storm that only a powder of snow showed on their trunks. He tried to lift her and was surprised at her weight. He had always thought of women rather as ethereal beings to be supported on one strong arm and defended with another.

Standing astride of her, like a pair of human shear-legs, he lifted her till his shoulder was at her waist level; then, heaving her up, he staggered on, he hoped, to complete shelter.

Unexpectedly it showed out of the darkness, a square wood- shed of a place with a rough door held in position by a hasp and wooden peg. Setting down his burden, he opened the door and flashed his lamp around. The tiny shed was empty, except for a lawn-mower and a tin lantern that hung on a nail to the scantling rafter. A grimy lantern, but it held a candle, and this he lit before he returned to the doubled heap he had left at the door.

Unconsciously he had applied the perfect remedy to a fainting woman, for he had left her with her head drooping in her lap.

“Who is that?”

Her voice was husky with fear as she stared up at the shape that had detached itself from the gloomy doorway.

“I found you in the snow. Fainted, I guess.”

“Oh!”

She tried to get to her feet unaided; she was too weak, and accepted the cold hand that was extended to her.

“It is snowing worse than ever. This place seems warm—it may even be dry. Watch your step.”

A circle of light from his hand-lamp guided her and she reached the interior. The candle was burning gallantly, somewhat handicapped by the dust that obscured its glass case; he took out a sodden handkerchief and left the glass streaky, but translucent.

“I don’t know where we are. I’ve got a car somewhere on the Whitstable road. If I knew where the Whitstable road was, I’d go back and bring the rug——”

He stopped open-mouthed. She was leaning against the wall, her white face turned to his. The heavy mink coat was open; underneath she wore a dark cloth dress— the pearls about her whiter throat were worth a rich man’s annual income; on her dress quivered a diamond pendant that flashed back all the colours of the spectrum. He was conscious only of eyes—great dark eyes, wide and staring.

“Will you come back to the house with me—I think I ought to go back—it was silly—running away. I think I ought to go back.”

Her speech was strangely deliberate; he remembered a hypnotic stance conducted by a fakir in—where was it? Anyway, the lured subject talked just like that, and nodded wisely as she was nodding.

“Where is your house?” he asked, and she turned her head and looked out through the open door.

‘ ‘Somewhere—near. ‘ ‘

She lifted her hand and peered down at it; it was an odd, mad little gesture. She had done it before.

“Are you hurt?”

He took her hand in his; it was blue with cold, icy to the touch. There was no injury except two tiny punctures at the wrist—blue-red specks in a discoloured circle.

“I think I’ve met you before,” he said gently. “I saw you in the Green Park—wasn’t it yesterday morning? “

“I don’t know—perhaps. Rather a nice man who talked about—Africa.”

It was she—the park girl. As she stumbled towards the door, he put his arm about her waist, supporting her, and she did not resist.

“You can’t go “ he began, when he saw a light coming through the trees. It was a very powerful light —a spirit-gas lamp that swung as its owner walked.

“Hello!” shouted George Rewen. Dr. Lansen’s jovial voice answered him.

“Where the deuce have you been? I’ve been expecting you for hours, my dear fellow. Lady Mary is here, and everything is signed and sealed “

He stopped; only then did he see the girl shrinking to Rewen’s side.

“Oh—I see you’ve met. My poor little girl has had rather a bad nervous breakdown.”

The doctor was a very quick thinker.

“Come along, Mary, my dear,” he said briskly.

“Is this Lady Mary? I can look after her. Will you lead the way?”

Rewen’s voice had the quality of ice, and Lansen said nothing to him, but turned and went slowly back the way he had come, the two following him.

“Don’t let him—touch me!”

The words were no more than breathed, yet as Rewen nodded the doctor looked round.

“Of course, she’s talking utter nonsense,” he said. “These modern young women are liable to such attacks. I wonder it hasn’t come sooner.”

George Rewen did not answer.

The house was very near, a squat, rambling cottage built on the crumbling walls of that famous Sea Castle which had braved the gales for four hundred years.

The doctor passed under the portico into the big hall. There was evidence here that the house had been untenanted for some time—a musty smell, thick dust on the hall table. The drawing-room was an ocean of gloom in which the sheeted furniture stood up like lonely little islands.

“Your house-party doesn’t seem to have arrived?”

Dr. Lansen smiled.

“No—they are coming to-morrow. Will you excuse me?”

He was gone before excuse could be accepted.

VI

In the stone kitchen at the back of the house the unshaven Tanner sat at the table munching a piece of bread. There was an opened bottle of wine before him.

“You can go back, Tanner; here is fifty pounds. Call at my place in about a week’s time and I may be able to do something for you.”

The man nodded but did not touch the money.

“Does the young lady know I am here?” he asked.

“Even I do not know you’re here.” Dr. Lansen was in a flippant mood. “Take the path over the fields— you can find your way, and the main road is good walking.”

“Somebody has taken off that cover of the well, sir,” said Tanner.

“That I know,” said Dr. Lansen testily. “I have been taking a sample of the water.”

Tanner nodded again and rose. This time he took up the money.

‘I’ll be going in five minutes,” he said, and felt in his pocket for a piece of cord that he had been tying slipknot fashion.

Dr. Lansen returned to the drawing-room without misgivings. He stopped at the door and took from his pocket a long envelope, from this a paper.

“Is she feeling better?” he asked as he came into the room.

Mary was lying on a sheeted sofa, and turned her pale face towards him. Behind the sofa was George Rewen, leaning on the back. He was so obviously on his defence that the psychologist realized that he was to be saved a great deal of unnecessary explanation.

Nevertheless:

“I have the transfer properly signed and the receipt,” he said. “You have, I understand, the money——”

Rewen shook his head.

“There will be no deal,” he said quietly. “Lady Mary has been drugged and is still under its influence, as she was when she signed the transfer.”

“The money,” said Dr. Lansen firmly.

The barrel of a Browning he held rested on the back of a chair, and its muzzle covered the man.

“Give it to me nicely and take your receipt. I shall shoot if you don’t, and take it from you.”

“Let him have it, please.”

The girl spoke quietly; there was no tremor in her voice.

“I once called you unintelligent—I’m sorry,” murmured Lansen as he reached for the package. “Thank you. I rather wondered if you would carry a pistol; it was foolish not to take that precaution.”

He backed out into the passage, listening. The sound of shuffling footsteps on the stone floor of the kitchen reached him, the squeak of rusty bolts, and, after an interval, the slam of a door. How characteristic of Tanner to leave by the servants’ entrance I

“It will be from five to ten days before the evidence of this unfortunate happening is discovered,” he said pleasantly, “and it may interest you to know that I have precipitated this crisis because of certain private information which came to me yesterday. One of the danger spots to me is the Home Office. There is a temporary messenger at the Home Office who has been my guardian angel. It was from him I learnt that permission had been granted to exhume the body of a former patient— a patient who left me quite a lot of money!”

He smiled waggishly.

“You may not see the connection? I am going to tell you something, Mr. Rewen—it is probably the last piece of knowledge you will gain in this world. The true criminal—as I believe myself to be—prepares himself to meet all contingencies.” He looked at the Browning in his hand. “Very near to this house is a large deep well—very, very deep.”

Why was he talking at such lengths? Rewen puzzled —and guessed.

Somebody had left—Lansen was waiting until that somebody was out of earshot. He looked down at the girl and smiled, and she smiled back at him. And then their hands met in a grip that brought courage to both.

The doctor had stopped talking.

Looking up, Rewen saw that the doorway was empty. He heard no sound. There was a high-backed chair near to his hand and this he lifted. Once he had defended himself against Mashona assegais with a lighter chair than this. It would be poor protection against the shattering thresh of bullets, but it was something.

He reached the wall flush with the door and listened— no sound. He flung the chair into the hall to divert the lurking assassin and followed instantly. The hall was empty; on the floor lay a thick package, the money he had brought and which Lansen had held in his hand. Near by was a folded carpet, and on top of this was a pistol. It was as if pistol and money had been dropped together.

With the gun in his hand, Rewen went swiftly along the passage, but his progress was arrested by a locked door. He thought he heard a sound and listened. There was no need to risk the girl's life by any further exploration. He went back to her and told her of his surprising discoveries.

"We'll get out. Lansen's lantern is still in the hall, and we'll have to take the risk of being potted—it may be a trap, but it doesn't look like it."

The Browning was loaded, he found on examination, and, with the girl carrying the lantern, they went out into the night.

Tanner, the butler, who knew nothing of the psychology of criminals, but only knew that he once had a wife and child, waited until the light had vanished before he loosened the cord about a dead man's neck and pushed the body of the eminent psychologist into a well which was reputedly bottomless.

George Rewen sent a cable to his partner in Johannesburg:

AM POSTPONING DEPARTURE TWO MONTHS, PERHAPS THREE. LADY MARY THINKS ACCOMPANYING ME TO CAPE IN MAY TO SEE PROPERTY.

"Who's Lady Mary?" snarled his overworked partner. "And why doesn't he tell us what he's done about those damn' claims? Boy—get me a cable-blank!"

THE ORIGINAL MRS. BLANEY

No record of prior magazine publication under this title found

I

MR. MICHALOFF POGINSKI, having finished playing the piano, announced to his subdued but clever family that Chopin's Prelude in C was not what it used to be.

"Everything's changed," said Mrs. Poginski moodily. "Where's your circuses? Where's your bareback riders? Where's your contortionists? They ain't producing them nowadays. Mark my words, the fashion will change and there'll be a call for people who can wind themselves in and out of the rails of a chair, and there'll be nobody to do it. Then where will they be?"

Mr. Poginski agreed with every word she said.

He was a little, pinched man with weak eyes and a weaker beard. His name was Arthur Ruskin Pogg, and it was his misfortune that he had gained a scholarship at the famous School of Music and had, at great expense and the sacrifice of one-twentieth of his lifetime, acquired the right and title to give pianoforte lessons at half a crown an hour to the young gentry of Croydon. For he lacked that syncopated touch which alone is the true sign of greatness. From this bleak prospect he was rescued by Earl Hiker, whom it would be wrong to describe as "his Lordship", his first name being William, and "Earl" at best a pseudonym.

Bill Hiker, who wrote and read with difficulty, had heard about a man called Paderewski who had attracted audiences of fabulous values. At the moment this item of news was discovered to him, Bill sat in his caravan cogitating upon the rival drawing powers of a trained chimpanzee and a troupe of performing dogs for his forthcoming season.

He was an immense man, who hadn't seen his feet for years.

"What's 'e play?" he asked.

“The pianner, Bill,” said his reader and amanuensis.

“By ‘and?” asked Bill incredulously, and, when he was so assured, Bill bit his toothpick in half.

“Go out and get a feller that plays the pianner—by ‘and,” he said autocratically. “Go on—get ‘im!And tell O’Leary that the performin’ chimp ain’t booked. Chimps always bring fleas into the company.”

Mr. Pogg was the person upon whom choice fell, and, in a moment of temporary insanity Mr. Pogg accepted £2 a week, food, and a sleeping share in the caravan occupied by one lion-tamer, a tent hand and a sword swallower.

Later, he met Lettie Le Lounville, the Boneless Wonder, and they fell in love, albeit Mr. Pogg (now Michael Poginski) was himself not overburdened with backbone.

There came a time, however, when the fascinations of a pianist palled. People stirred uneasily in their seats, and the voice of the peanut seller (a great opportunist) rose continuously during Poginski’s turn; and one morning Bill Hiker sent for his slave.

“Playing the pianner by ‘and don’t draw nothing,” he said. “Pogg, you’ve gotta getta new specialty. Can you play a pianner with your feet?”

The artistic soul of Mr. Pogg flickered to a feeble flame and was instantly extinguished.

“I haven’t tried, Mr. Hiker,” he faltered.

“Go and see Lettie,” said Mr. Hiker kindly. “I’ll put up your salary a pound and bill you—big!”

It was six months before M. Poginski made his début in the new role—six months of torture physical and mental. Then, before an enraptured audience, and with the small of his back balanced upon an inadequate piano-stool and his knees acrobatically contorted, he beat forth the "Spring Song" with his agile toes and became Poginski the Marvellous Trick Pianist.

But there were no (or few) circuses, and Lettie de Lounville no longer wound herself affectionately round the body of her partner; and the toes of the trick pianist were out of practice.

Cinemas gave him work occasionally, but the cinemas that depended entirely upon one pianist were few, and these preferred people who played jazz by ear.

And behind him was the record of tragedy. This began and ended with a touring concert party consisting of the Poggs, two vocalists, and one who was both advance agent, bill-poster, check-taker, chief "barker" (by which is meant vocal advertiser and leader of the applause) named Hubert Vernon Swift. Swift by name and nature, he had vanished one night, leaving Mr. Pogg to raise the money to get home. And with Mr. Swift had vanished some four hundred pounds. In moments of extreme depression Mr. Pogg was prone to meditate upon one whose encouraging "houp la!" yelled from the back of the pit had so often led the applause which greeted Lettie de Lounville's culminating contortion.

"There are times," said Mr. Pogg wearily, "when I doubt if life is worth living. Yet, so to speak, I live in hope of meeting Swifty and strangling him with my bare hands—I'll give him 'houp la'!"

Mrs. Pogg sniffed.

"You couldn't strangle him even if you wore gloves," she said acidly; and Mr. Pogg sighed again.

"Well, I could give him in charge," he said mildly; "that'd learn him."

II

At this moment there was a diffident knock, and Mr. Pogg opened the door to find a well-dressed young man standing on the threshold.

"Mr. Poginski?" asked the stranger in a tone of doubt, for the untidy room and the uninviting appearance of that gentleman did not accord with the ecstatic description which a variety agent had given.

"That is my name, sir."

Mr. Poginski was not quite sure of his visitor. There were one or two outstanding tradesmen's accounts which were in the cocoon stage that might produce butterflies of inaction or county-court wasps.

"I've been sent here by Mr. Colforter, the agent," said the young man. "My name is Fairview, and—er—I understand that you—er—do extraordinary things."

Mr. Poginski bowed gravely.

“And Mrs. Poginski?” hesitated Fairview.

“She also does extraordinary things, sir,” said her proud husband more gravely than ever. “Won’t you come in?”

Johnny Fairview stepped into the home of genius not a little apprehensively. He had all the normal young man’s fear of the abnormal. People who could play pianoforte solos with their feet were scarcely human.

“The fact is,” he began, “I’ve a commission to find somebody—well, not exactly a commission … in fact, they don’t know that I’m getting you, do you understand?”

Mr. Poginski stroked his little beard sagely and nodded.

He did not understand, but he gathered that an engagement was imminent.

“Your agent told me that you’d accept—er—a—j—private engagement. I don’t exactly know how you will be presented. If it was a lawn, of course, it would be perfectly simple, but it isn’t a lawn.”

“There are so few good lawns nowadays,” said the pianist gently. “I think it is due to the worms.”

“Anyway, this is a drawing-room show,” said Johnny, “but at the same time I’m not sure whether …”

Half an hour later he left the artistes with a five- pound note and a confused impression that they were engaged to perform in a drawing- room, though it was quite possible they would not be asked to perform at all.

III

“I did my best,” Johnny was explaining gloomily, some time later.

“Johnny, you were silly! Of course, mother wouldn’t allow them to perform. When I told you to bring somebody original, I meant—well, I meant friends. For heaven’s sake don’t tell mother what you’ve done.”

“I have!” groaned the young man. “I told her I’d got two people.”

“Oh, dear I”

Lydia Blaney sighed and threw a stone at an unoffending goldfish that was rising cautiously to a fly that had lit on the water.

Mrs. Carbew-Blaney had goldfishes in the marble basins that ornamented her over-ornamental grounds because they were so rich-looking. If there were emerald fish or diamond fish she would have ordered a thousand.

She was a good woman, and had once been a modest woman, in spite of her immense wealth. She had inherited more or less than a million from her simple-living husband, and would have been satisfied to live, alternating her presence on the moderate estate at Ascot and the very nice flat in the Marylebone Road, as her husband had done before her.

And she would never have dreamed of bizarre entertainments but for the accident which brought to one of her garden-parties the Rajah of Bholkapur, an Eastern gentleman who had a passion for playing the flute. His performance on this instrument was execrable, but, being a born musician who played by ear, he never realized the fact. In his own province he was so powerful that only one of his subjects ever dared to complain. He was never seen again.

He came to Mrs. Carbew-Blaney's garden-party in a hired motor-car. Had he continued on his way for another five hundred yards, he would have reached the imposing gates of the Earl of Forley's country seat. It was in every way unfortunate that there were two garden- parties at Ascot that day, and that the hireling chauffeur, to whom Ascot was a racecourse and nothing else, very naturally chose the festal lawn that came into view over the top of the trimmed privet, and deposited his Highness before a stout, amiable and awe- stricken hostess.

Eventually, the sound of his fluting led his distracted A.D.C. to Mrs. Blaney's lawn, and H.H. was rescued and introduced to a more superior garden-party, where nobody asked him to play. On the whole, the Rajah preferred Mrs. Blaney's occasion.

That may or may not have been the beginning of her search for the unusual and the astonishing deeds of emulation she performed. Somebody had said she was "original". Thereafter she sought originality, which is the quality of doing something that nobody remembers having been done before.

Johnny Fairview was not original. He was, in fact, as unoriginal as a front door. Thousands of Johnny Fairviews are turned out annually by the big schools and universities and Army colleges of England. He brushed his hair and dressed to type. He played golf badly and read the sporting news thoroughly before he skimmed the Near Eastern crisis, just as thousands of other Johnnys did. He hated eccentricity in male or female, was scared of cleverness, and could never remember how many days there were in a

month without repeating the ancient doggerel, just as did all the Johnnys he ever met. In one respect he was original, though this Mrs. Blaney did not know.

“I don’t want you to think that your being disgustingly rich and my being fearfully average makes any difference to me, Lydia,” he said, watching the goldfish frisk to cover. “That sort of stuff in books always reads like a lie to me. That isn’t the barrier, old dear. Your mother used to like me once,” he added inconsequently.

“She likes you now, Johnny,” said the girl, frowning horribly at the dim goldfish skulking at the bottom of the basin—the news of her unprovoked assault had apparently spread. “She thinks you’re ordinary, that’s all. You’re not striking.”

“Has she ever seen me in pyjamas?” asked the young man hopefully.

“Don’t be silly—you know you are ordinary. You’re a darling and to me you’re wonderful. But mother doesn’t love you—at least, I hope she doesn’t—and she can’t see you as I see you. And Frank Elfer is clever.” Johnny’s shapely nose wrinkled sneeringly.

“If juggling three billiard balls is evidence of genius, then he’s Solon!” he said.

Followed the gloomy silence of unhappy meditation. The cause of all the trouble was the Tea Reception which Mrs. Blaney was giving at her Portland Place residence to no less a personage than Prince Michael Sergoff. It was to transcend in originality all Mrs. Blaney’s previous efforts, for the very presence in London of the Prince constituted a challenge. It was he who had given the Macaroni Luncheon at the Astoria, he who had invented the Gondola Dinner at the Ritz-Carlton. He was the master creator of bizarre parties, and his ready acceptance of her invitation had thrown Mrs. Blaney into paroxysms of gratification.

“Mother wants this to be her chef d’oeuvre,” said Lydia miserably. “Johnny, can’t you do something original? I’ve had an awful job persuading mother to invite you. She says you know nobody. Of course, the poor dear is mad.”

“She’s mad with me, anyway,” said Johnny.

And here Mrs. Carbew-Blaney came into view. The sycophantic woman friend who had described her as original had also determined most of her everyday occupations by devising a set of labels to describe Mrs. Blaney’s attitude and behaviour. Thus, she had once said that Mrs. Blaney “sailed”,

and that good lady sailed down the terrace steps at this moment with foretopgallant and spinnaker set.

She favoured Johnny with a glare. He could think of no more original retort than to glare back. She was a stout woman, with a somewhat vacuous expression and a profusion of pale-gold hair, and in the days of her obscurity she had been one of those motherly souls who are surprised at everything. No longer did she say, “Good gracious!” or, “How extraordinary I” when Johnny passed on the news he had gleaned from the evening newspapers. She was now shock-proof, and could accept cataclysms without a droop of lid or a quiver of lip. To such lengths do flute-playing rajahs carry the simple- minded.

“You are coming to my little party, aren’t you, Mr. Fairview?” she asked hopefully.

Johnny knew that the hope expressed in her inquiry was that he would answer negatively.

“I’m so glad!”

Her sigh may have been one of relief. On the other hand….

“I’ve been talking the matter over with Lady Cristofer,” she said, looking through him. “She thinks I ought to engage somebody to perform. So unoriginal I I suppose one could get concert people by paying for them, but that isn’t what I want.”

Johnny turned his guilty eyes away.

“You wrote and told me you were bringing somebody?”

“Yes,” he stammered. “I—I am bringing some people—friends of mine,” he went on glibly. “Awfully interesting and all that sort of thing.”

Mrs. Blaney looked at him dubiously.

“I hope so,” she said with emphasis. “Not only Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race persons, because that doesn’t interest me at all, Mr. Fairview.”

Johnny had once produced, as his contribution to an immortal gathering, an Oxford Blue, and had been inordinately proud of the introduction until the Blue had betrayed his utter ignorance of all the qualities which make for social entertainment.

“You’ve done it,” accused Lydia after her energetic mother had departed.

It may be said that, despite her success, Mrs. Blaney had not won from Society that recognition which was her due. Not even Mrs. Blaney's emeralds, paragraphed by a Press agent specially hired for the purpose—it may be repeated that she was once a modest woman—roused sufficient curiosity in the bosoms of Mayfair to induce invitations from the hostesses of that exclusive neighbourhood.

"Mother has now reached a point where I tremble every time she thinks!" said Lydia desperately. "Johnny, why couldn't you have found Prince Michael instead of Frank?"

"Did Frank find him?" asked the young man in surprise.

Lydia nodded.

"Frank heard that he was in London, and trailed him to his hotel. He didn't see him, because the Prince was out, but mother wrote to him at Frank's suggestion, and of course Frank has the credit."

"Heaven bless him!" said Johnny bitterly.

He went to his club in a chastened mood. And in the sombre desolation of the smoke-room there came to him the great idea.

He was half-way through a letter explaining to the Poginskis that their services would not be required, when the inspiration came. He tore up the letter and scribbled a note to Mr. Poginski, asking him to come at once, and sent this by district messenger in a taxi-cab.

Half an hour later the shabby pianist was shown into the smoke-room, and very briefly Johnny explained the position.

"My original idea was to ask you and Madame Poginski to give a little entertainment," he said, "but I find that my friend Mrs. Blaney does not approve, and I'm in rather a hole."

Mr. Poginski, who was also in rather a hole, murmured something about the inviolability of a contract.

"Oh, you'll get paid all right, old son," said Johnny testily. "That isn't in question. The point is, would you and your wife agree to turn up at Portland Place as my guests? In fact, would you mind coming in the role of two distinguished Russian visitors?"

Mr. Poginski pursed his weak Ups thoughtfully.

“You say that the party is for Prince Michael Sergoff?” he said. “If we pretend to be Russians too, he’ll bowl us out, for the only Russian word I know is nichevo.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Johnny, unconsciously translating. “He’s only Russian in name. He’s an American—married a rich girl in Cincinatti, and has got into the papers through giving Monkey Parties. Will you come?”

Mr. Poginski coughed.

“I’ve got my ‘prop’ kit, evening dress and that sort of thing, but I’m afraid neither my day clothes nor my

dear wife’s wardrobe “ he began.

But that was a matter which Johnny could settle without difficulty.

“The point is this: you’ve got to do your little stunts when the opportunities occur. Mrs. Blaney will probably ask you to do something. She’ll expect a Russian poem, or maybe a Russian dance, and then you’ll just step in and be original. You’d better go in your own name; that will save me the trouble of remembering. Is it a bet?”

Mr. Poginski thought it was a bet, and Johnny ushered him from the club with a sense of relief and comfort.

IV

Dining that night, he saw the hated Frank Elfer—a tall, cadaverous young man, who added to great possessions the reputation of having once balanced a billiard-cue on the tip of his nose for three hours and thirty-five minutes.

“When you see my Mrs. Poginski biting her own heels you’ll feel small, my friend,” thought Johnny.

He had several interviews during the week with the male Poginski, who had produced himself in his new raiment and had been passed as satisfactory.

Mrs. Blaney displayed unusual anxiety for the success of her party. She even went to the length of inviting Johnny to tea before the event; and he went, to discover her in company with her sycophantic lady friend.

“I intend making the party purely Oriental,” she explained. “The waitresses will be in the conventional garb of the Turkish harem, and I’ve engaged two wonderful negroes to guard the staircase with drawn swords. Coffee will be

served in the Turkish fashion, and I've found a most delicious Oriental jazz band, which will play in the room off the salon. Now, about these friends of yours, Monsieur and Madame Poginski. I do hope, Mr. Fairview, that they are not humdrum?"

"They're original," said Johnny with emphasis. "They are, in fact, the most original people I've ever met. I had great difficulty in inducing them to come at all."

He did not meet Lydia's eye, staring fixedly at his hostess.

"I'm glad," said Mrs. Blaney, "very glad."

And her chorus murmured appreciatively.

"The Prince is so unusual, and I should simply die if he had to meet ordinary people."

Undoubtedly Prince Michael Sergoff was unusual. He had taken the unusual course, on his arrival in London, of putting up at a temperance hotel in Bloomsbury. He had, moreover, most eccentrically written to Mrs. Blaney to ask what number bus passed her door

"It is just what I should have expected of him," purred the stout hostess. "One could not imagine him doing things in an ordinary way."

Johnny had a number of friends in Fleet Street, and that he might get closer to his subject he interviewed the copper-headed correspondent of a New York journal.

"Do I know Mike Sergoff? Sure!" said his informant. "The craziest kid ever! Is he? I'll tell the world he is! Married old Lessheimer's daughter; ran through her money, divorced her, and married the widow of a Pittsburg steel emperor. It's queer that he's that way, because he's related to one of the cleverest brains that Russia produced, a friend of Tolstoi's and that crowd. I've got one of his books here somewhere."

He searched the office and produced a respectable volume, the uncut leaves of which testified to the reverence in which the reporter held its contents.

"Here it is—Human Vanity. I've dipped into it. It's a little brighter than the Book of Revelations, but hasn't got the pep of Ecclesiastes."

Johnny examined the book curiously. The "Michael Sergoff" on its back looked very imposing.

“Same name, same family. But in the matter of temperament—oh, boy! What a difference! So Mike’s in London, is he? I guess I’ll look him up. There’s always a story to Mike, and his new wives are generally interesting.”

A horrible thought occurred to Johnny. Suppose Mrs. Blaney had made a mistake and had invited the wrong Mike? He put a question to the reporter, who shook his head.

“No, I don’t think the Professor is in England. The last I heard of him, he was delivering lectures on theosophy in Vienna—a queer old cuss.”

V

At half past four on a sunny afternoon, a somewhat shabby man, in an ancient frock-coat and a silk hat that was a size too large for him, and was only prevented from extinguishing his powerful head through the merciful disposition of his ears, alighted from a bus at the corner of Oxford Circus and walked up Langham Place, examining a card and peering at the numbers of the shop fronts. A policeman assisted him to his destination, and Mrs. Blaney, who had been receiving her guests in the hall, was sent for, the butler on duty at the door steadfastly refusing to admit the human scarecrow.

“I am Professor Michael Sergoff,” said the man in his rasping voice, and glaring at the flabbergasted lady through his powerful glasses.

“Prince Michael Sergoff?” faltered the hostess.

“That is my name, though I dislike intensely the pomp of the title,” he growled. “For what are titles but flimsy absurdities? Does a dog come to me more readily because I am a prince? Do I sleep better? Do I enjoy better health?”

He frowned suddenly and pointed a longer finger at her neck.

“Those baubles are offensive to me, madam!” he said; and Mrs. Carbew-Blaney put up her hand to the great emerald chain about her neck.

“I’m—I’m extremely sorry,” she stammered. “Please won’t you come in here for a moment?”

Fortunately there was a little reception-room on the ground- floor, and into this she ushered her guest. Johnny, coming a few minutes later, was met by Lydia in a condition bordering upon hysteria.

“Come here!” she hissed, and drew him into a mysterious region at the back of the house. “The wrong Sergoff has come,” she said rapidly.

“Oh, Lord I” said Johnny, his face falling. “Not the Professor?”

“Did you know?” she asked suspiciously. “Oh, Johnny, mother’s in a terrible state of mind. She’ll kill Frank, that’s one satisfaction. Such a terrible old man! He insisted on mother taking off her jewellery! Mother’s distracted. She’s had to make those unfortunate waitresses change into the garb of civilization, and she has sworn Frank Elfer not to move or speak. Johnny, can you be intellectual? We want a great intellect so badly.”

Suddenly Johnny’s jaw dropped.

“I suppose my friends haven’t arrived?”

She nodded.

“Yes, they’re upstairs. They won’t do things, will they?” she asked fearfully.

Johnny swallowed something.

“If I can get a word with them, I’ll undertake that they won’t,” he said.

When he reached the big salon on the first floor, the Professor was being introduced to the awe-stricken assembly. The gold and lacquered Turkish lanterns, the cunning and clever drapings of the walls to lend similitude to a Turkish environment, seemed a little out of place in all the circumstances, and the Prince looked suspiciously from one gaily decorated table to another.

“Vanity, madam!” he snapped. “I would prefer being received in a whitewashed shed, with plain chairs for those who cannot bear the fatigue of standing. Simplicity is the very soul of life, madam. I have a degenerate nephew who married an American lady, who might be pleased with these fal- lals.”

“Do—do you think he would? “ said the uncomfortable lady; and it was the heroic Johnny who came to her rescue.

“I’m sure the Professor is heartily delighted at his reception, Mrs. Blaney,” he said, adopting for the moment the role of chairman and master of ceremonies. “I am sure that he is glad and gratified that—er—this amazing gathering should—er—gather in appreciation of his—er —amazing intellect. I suppose you would like the Professor to say a few words?”

Mrs. Blaney nodded dumbly, and the sinister man gulped down a cup of scalding hot tea, wiped his beard with the back of his hand, and began.

It was a little talk about normal people and abnormal people. For twenty minutes the old man thundered his denunciations of Society, and Society blinked and listened. So intent were the two Poginskis that not once could Johnny catch their eye. The peaky-faced woman, the bearded little man, sat open-mouthed, staring at the transfigured speaker, as he castigated the idle rich, annihilated the snobbish bourgeoisie, and pulverized to the finest powder what he termed the freakish and unwholesome-minded decadence of modem youth.

When he sat down there was a gasp, the loudest of which came from Mr. Poginski. And then, freed of the spell of the Professor's hypnotic eyes, he turned his head. Johnny winked and made a grimace which to a thought-reader would have been plain and simple, but to Mr. Poginski was merely an urging towards a fulfilment of his contract.

He slipped off his shoes, threaded his way through the tea- tables, and in another instant was balanced on a ridiculously small music- stool, his thin legs (the trousers decorously fastened with tape) upraised in the air, his pink toes working convulsively.

In the dead silence that followed, the thunder of the opening notes of the "March of the Vikings" almost shocked Johnny Fairview into insensibility. The Professor stared through his glasses and over his glasses, and finally removed his glasses, that he might stare more voluminously. Open-mouthed, the company gazed spellbound upon the apparition. Mrs. Blaney had subsided into her chair and was gazing into vacancy.

The selection was nearing the end of its first phase when there was the flash of a silk-clad body, and Lettie de Lounville, the Boneless Wonder, leaped to the flat top of the piano and smiled mechanically left and right. And then, throwing herself lightly on her hands, she accompanied her husband's masterly performance with one which had never before been seen in a London drawing-room, and probably never will again. Flat on the piano she lay, her shapely feet beating time to the music on her auburn head. Then, springing to her feet, she extended one toe to the ceiling, and with a quick and graceful movement wrapped her leg lovingly about her neck.

"Houp la!" murmured the Professor, and made a dive for the door.

For a second the Poginskis stared after him, and then, with the passionate cry of a wounded rabbit, Mr. Poginski leapt in pursuit, and Lettie the Boneless Wonder followed.

It was she who, leaping the banisters, dropped upon the hurrying Professor. In an instant she had wound herself about him, a human boa- constrictor that impeded all movement.

“Let up, you fool!” roared the elderly gentleman.

“Four hundred!” breathed Mr. Poginski, gripping his captive’s throat gingerly, as an amateur strangler might. “Four hundred, Swift—you twisting hound!”

“You can have it—come to my hotel.”

Johnny pulled them apart, and threw open the door. A messenger boy was waiting on the step.

“For me?”

Johnny tore open the envelope. The note was from the American reporter.

Professor Sergoff is in Vienna. Mike is in New York. Your man is an hotel thief named Swift. Keep him away from loose jewellery.

Johnny glanced round and saw the agitated Mrs. Blaney standing at the foot of the stairs.

“Where are your emeralds, Mrs. Blaney?” he asked

“Why worry?” demanded the bedraggled Swift, and took them from his pocket.

VI

“But for my friends the Poginskis, I am afraid you would have lost a lot of money,” said Johnny.

They were dining en famille that night, and Mrs. Blaney had recovered sufficiently to dispose of four plovers’ eggs and half a cold chicken.

“I am grateful—very grateful,” quavered the original Mrs. Blaney.

She had taken off her emeralds in the little hall-room and had put them in a drawer, intending to retrieve them after her ill-fated party had dispersed. And she had left the Professor alone in the room for two minutes.

“I shall never forgive Mr. Elfer. He should have made inquiries,” she said.

“I gather from the police that he did. He went bawling through Bloomsbury for Prince Michael, and naturally Mr. Swift responded.”

Mrs. Blaney blinked tearfully.

“Who were those extraordinary people, the Poginskis?” she asked curiously; and then, with sudden inspiration: “They were detectives—oh, Mr. Fairview! And you engaged them! How very original of you!”

Johnny smiled mysteriously.

THE END