THE MILLION DOLLAR STORY

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

Freeditorial

The Million Dollar Story

I. — THE WOMAN WITH THE RED HANDS

JOHN SANDS had infinite faith in his star, and, being a precise and methodical soul, he had early in life chosen Bellatrix, which is the star gamma in the constellation of Orion, to be his celestial representative and guardian.

Neither Orion nor γ-Orionis was visible as he came slithering down Whitecross Hill, skid round the danger bend into the straight dip which leads to Moulders Coppice, and straightened his car for the final run. The rain was pelting down as it had been pelting for three days. Above him was a scurry of grey clouds, beneath the wheels of his car was naked clay. All the most wonderful non-skid contrivances in the world would not save him from taking a toss down that steep slope leading to the little river if once the car swung an inch too far.

But John Sands not only professed to have faith in his star, but he acted up to his profession. With one hand on the steering-wheel and the other on the hand-brake he swerved and swung down the slope, nor did he even regret his decision to take the short cut—they told him the hill road was impossible, and he had smilingly rejected their advice—for his belief in Bellatrix was unbounded.

A confirmed dreamer of dreams, his peril did not interrupt the smooth weavings of his fancy. Perhaps he would meet her? It was, of course, a fantastic idea, but in John Sands' dreams such things happened. Had he not taken the unfrequented road in sheer obedience to the law—his own law—of romance? He might meet her. He would go to her and take her hand and say: "I know you. You must come with me and I will get you back to London."

He imagined her, against all reason, as a pale, timid thing, who would shrink from him and look at him with big, wide-open eyes in which fear and hope struggled for the mastery. It was just as likely that she would be stout and coarse and impossibly vulgar, but of course such persons never figured in John Sands' dreams, which were altogether beautiful or exquisite.

At the foot of the hill his petrol supply gave out and the engine stopped. John climbed from the big coupé, where he had been well protected from the elements, and stepped down into a little river of rain, his big, handsome face

wearing the grimaces appropriate to discomfort. He dragged out a tin of petrol, filled the tank, cranked up and moved towards the Great North Road.

Rain driven by the full force of a strong south-wester brings a man to the realisation of realities and produces a condition unfavourable to the growth of fancy. Nevertheless, so mercurial a man was he, he took the next rise with a song on his lips, and his eyes thrilled with blurred but comfortable visions. He would find her, perhaps, lying exhausted by the roadside. He would leap from his car and lift her up and bring her to warmth and safety. She would open her eyes and look wildly about her. He stopped the car with a jerk, his heart beating a little faster.

She stood in the shelter of a dripping tree, and any less keen-sighted man than he might have missed her, for she was crouching against the trunk, and her dark costume melted into the gloom of the background.

He was sure it was she before he spoke to her. There was a certain spiritual beauty in her pale face which fulfilled all his dream requirements. She had neither cloak nor umbrella. Her black dress was sodden; the straw hat on her head was limp and sloppy, and her black gloves were discoloured as though she had fallen on to the clayey ground.

She stood up, her head thrown back, her graceful body erect, and waited for him. Her eyes were dark with hate, her lips quivered for a second and were still, for she made no sound. John Sands, hat in hand, his heart exultant, was so flustered by the unexpectedness of the meeting, that he forgot all the fine sentiments, all the suave graciousness which he had so often rehearsed.

“I think I know you,” he said. “I heard about you back there,” jerking his head toward the hill. She looked about helplessly, as though for some avenue of escape.

“Don’t touch me!” she breathed, throwing out her hands; “don’t—don’t! I’ll not go back—I’d die rather!”

He laid a hand on her arm and patted her as if she were a restive colt.

“The man at the inn talked about you,” he went on soothingly. “Just then—you know. I don’t know anything about you—and I don’t want to know,” he added hastily and a little more loudly. “You are not to tell me anything, you understand. I don’t want to know.”

She looked at him in bewilderment.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“You get in that car,” said he. “In about five minutes we’ll strike the North Road and I’ll run you into London. I have a little house in Charles Street,” he added inconsequently.

She hesitated.

“You know?” she began.

“I know,” he said loudly and peremptorily. “I know all I want to know. I don’t want to know anything more. Will you please understand that? I—do—not—want—to—know—any—more.”

She inclined her head.

He observed as she walked past that her boots were sodden and clay-soiled, and that her dress was dripping water.

“Get into the back,” he commanded, and added: “I am glad you’re pretty.”

She smiled, involuntarily it seemed, because she composed her face immediately, but it was a smile that was well up to John Sands’ expectations.

He stopped only long enough to put another tin of petrol in the tank, and came to the North Road without mishap. There was no incentive to dream now, the reality was so close. He slowed the car before a women’s outfitters, glanced back undecidedly, and then, with a half apology, continued on his way. The gloom of evening lay over London when he brought the car to the door of his tiny house in Charles Street.

“Don’t get out yet,” he said.

He descended, passed round the car and opened the door before he came back to assist her to alight. Perhaps there was no necessity for caution, but John Sands took few risks and put no needless strain upon his stellar guardian.

She found herself standing in a lobby enclosed with three ground-glass panels, one of which was a door. When he had shut the street door behind him he opened the other and ushered her into a big room whence a flight of

stairs led to an upper storey. In the half-light she gathered it was comfortably, if not luxuriously furnished, and after he had pulled down the blinds and switched on the electric light, she saw what, to her mind, was an ideal bachelor sitting-room.

He looked at her critically and admiringly.

“I don’t suppose there are three women in London who could appear in your plight and yet preserve their dignity,” he said. “What am I going to do about clothes, eh?”

She shook her head smilingly.

“I nearly stopped at a store in the suburbs,” he said, “but thought better of it. There was no need to ask for trouble. We shall have to get over your clothes difficulty somehow.”

With a nod of his head he beckoned her to follow, and passed up the soft carpeted stairs, she in his wake leaving behind her a trail of rain-water.

“I can give you a suit of pyjamas and an old dressing-gown,” he said. “That will have to satisfy you until tomorrow. The newspapers are full of advertisements of ladies’ clothing, and I will send for anything you want.”

She was looking at him curiously, and now for the first time she spoke.

“Why are you doing all this?” she asked.

Then a panic overtook him. Suppose he had made a mistake? Suppose she was not the woman? He had jumped at conclusions, but it was possible.

“Let me see your hand,” he said.

It was still covered with the discoloured gloves, and slowly she took them off. He took her hands in his and looked at them. They were rough and red, the finger-tips coarse, the hands of a manual worker. He looked from the hands to the delicate face and smiled.

“You gave me a scare,” he said. “All right. What were you asking?”

“I asked you what is the meaning of this—kindness?” she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, my young friend,” he said, “it means that I have been able to render you a mighty important service, and my advice to you is not to look a gift-horse in the mouth. I don’t know very much about you, but I guess you are pretty willing at this moment to do anything for a quiet and comfortable life—I am not going to ask you to do anything that a self-respecting woman should not do,” he added hastily.

She laughed.

“There is little that I wouldn’t do,” she said softly. “Where shall I find you when I want you?”

“I shall be downstairs,” he said. “I live alone in this house, and I am just going to telephone to the garage to ask them to send a man to take my car. Afterwards I can give you a meal and we can talk.”

“You know my name?” she asked.

“I don’t know it,” he said with truth, “and I don’t want to know it. What is your Christian name?”

“Margaret,” she said.

“Then you are Margaret Smith as far as I am concerned,” said John Sands firmly. “Margaret Smith is an easy name to remember.”

II. — JOHN SANDS CHOOSES A BRIDE

HE went downstairs conscious of the fact that he had been flustered out of his normal habit of thought. It was not exactly the kind of introduction that he had pictured, wherein he saw himself very self-possessed, mildly amusingly, absolutely master of the situation. He was the latter, no doubt, but he was annoyed to realise that he had been at best a little commonplace. Even his mystery—and to the girl it was a mystery indeed—was open to the most tawdry interpretation.

He saw the car away and drew a curtain across the room, dividing it into two. The table had been laid at the far end, and there was very little to do except to fix an electric plug which set the kettle boiling for the coffee. She came down—not, as he had expected, a grotesque or ludicrous figure, but preserving all the dignity, and more, that she had shown at the first meeting. His ample dressing-gown she had in some mysterious fashion fitted to her own slim figure and bound it about with a silk scarf which she had found in his room. How she had disposed of the other garments he dared not think.

She sat down before the electric radiator and put out her hands to the warmth.

“Terrible, aren’t they?” she laughed. “But then, you see, I haven’t lived the kind of life that gives one’s hands a chance. Can I help you to make the coffee? It’s years since I made coffee.”

“No, I can manage,” he smiled. “Warm yourself. You guessed, of course, that the room opposite the bath-room will be yours? I left the door open on purpose, and I am glad to see “—with a glance at the scarf—”that you have availed yourself of anything you found.”

She lifted her head to listen. The gale had increased in violence. The rain was beating a fierce tattoo against the back window. She shivered a little and drew her chair nearer to the red radiator.

“Horrid, isn’t it?” she asked. “Not a night I should care to spend on the hill-side in the open country.”

He was humming a little tune. She saw, watching him, that he was curiously like a woman in his movements. He had that everlasting little smile which is the precious possession of a happy woman, and his hands,

as he fiddled with the coffee machine, were white and beautiful. She looked ruefully at her own and made a little grimace.

“I have a weakness for comfort,” he said, “a weakness for old china, for silver, for good music and pretty poetry. Do you play?” he asked.

“A little,” she said.

“Then you shall play me some Grieg after supper,” he said.

She laughed again. She was beginning to feel at home and less suspicious of the man, though God knows she could not afford to be suspicious in any case.

“Good music requires a good musician,” she said, “and I am not the good musician.”

Out of the corner of her eye as she sat warming her hands she was watching his every movement. She saw him take something from his pocket—a little phial—and remove the cork. From this he extracted a small white pellet and dropped it into one of the cups. Unnerved as she was by her experience earlier in the day, she grew tense at the sight and jumped to her feet. She thought she had seen something horribly reminiscent.

“What did you do there?” she asked almost harshly.

He looked round in surprise.

“Do where?” he demanded.

“What have you put into that cup?”

She reached out her hand, lifted the cup and shook the pellet into the palm of her hand.

“What is this?”

Her eyes were fixed on him.

“That? Why, that is saccharine. I do not take sugar.”

“Was the cup intended for you?” she demanded, and then went red. “I am awfully sorry. I am rather unnerved, you know.”

“That’s all right.” He patted her hand. “God bless my life! I intend you no harm. If I had, what would have been easier?”

“I am sorry,” she said in a low voice. “It was very ungracious of me. You must think I am very dreadful.”

“Not at all. I know more about it.”

Nevertheless, for all her apologies, she remarked the cup and did not take her eyes from it until she saw him fill it with steaming coffee, and was careful to examine the contents of her own cup before she allowed him to fill it.

It was a pleasant little dinner. The wine to which he helped her sparingly was rich and good. The coffee which ended it all, to her had a fragrance undreamt of. He gave her brandy as a liqueur, and then drew a chair for her to the radiator and took one on the opposite side.

“Margaret Smith,” he said—”or shall I call you Margaret?—I am going to be very frank with you. That you will respect my frankness I am sure; that you will retain any secrets which I may divulge I am equally certain. I know two facts about you, and two only. I do not want to know anything more. The first of these tacts,” he stated them very carefully and deliberately, ticking them off on his fingertips, “is that until early morning you were a convict at Aylesbury Jail undergoing a life sentence—for what crime I have not taken the trouble to discover. You have served three years of your sentence and have seventeen years of prison before you.”

“Twelve,” she corrected; “or rather, it would have been twelve if I had not attempted to make my escape. I suppose the sentence would be seventeen now.”

“Those are the two facts—that you are an escaped convict and that you have seventeen years to serve in prison. In other words, had I not come along down Whitecross Hill in that providential manner, picked you up and whisked you off to London, you would have been captured, and be at this moment in a punishment cell at Aylesbury Jail awaiting a new sentence.”

She nodded.

“I heard about you when I stopped for lunch at Aylesbury,” he went on. “The man at the hotel who did some trifling repair to my car told me that a

woman convict had escaped that morning. He also said that you were a lifer—that is the term, I believe. Who you were, what was your name, what was your crime, he did not know. That is only natural," said John Sands, speaking to himself. "How would he know? The main fact that a convict had escaped would be the only information which the prison authorities would give him."

"I was sentenced for a crime of which I was innocent," said the girl in a low voice.

"I am sorry to hear you say that," he said. "I was rather hoping that you were guilty."

She looked up in astonishment, and to his surprise a faint smile trembled at the corners of her lips.

"And of course you were guilty," said John Sands. "All people who are convicted are guilty, and the innocent convict is a novelist's creation. The truth is," he went on, "I need the assistance of somebody with a criminal mind. A criminal mind is necessarily a clever mind and a resourceful mind. Understand that I do not wish you for the moment to commit any more criminal act than to give a false name to a certain British official and act up to that name. I cannot, for example, imagine that you would care to marry under your own name."

"Marry!" she said, wide-eyed.

"Marry," repeated John Sands comfortably. "I assure you the prospect is not an appalling one. For you it means comfort, even luxury, continental travel, et cetera, et cetera."

"Do you want me to marry you?" she asked bluntly. John took her steady gaze without flinching.

"I desire you to marry Marcus Leman," he said, and she looked at him wonderingly.

"Marcus Leman?" she repeated. "Marcus Leman? Why, that is the American millionaire, the oil man."

He nodded.

“Marcus Leman is an American millionaire, and he is an oil man,” he said. “That is proposition No. 1, and we will put it aside. Proposition No. 2 is that Marcus Leman is a friend of mine—in fact, I am the only friend he has in Europe or the United States. That is proposition No. 2, and we will put that aside also. You are to marry Marcus Leman at the Griddelsea register office by special licence on Monday week—or will it be Tuesday week? No, I think Monday week will do.”

She threw back her head and laughed.

“You have made this arrangement without consulting me.”

“Naturally,” he replied. “There was very little opportunity for meeting you before to-day.”

“Had you me in your mind?” she asked.

“I confess I had not,” he said. “No; until this morning Marcus’s prospective bride was a dream lady, a creature of fantasy, the kind of woman that I never hope to find. You came to me directed by my star—you know Bellatrix? It is the star gamma in the constellation of Orion. No? You do not study astronomy? I admit I had not you in my mind, but to-day a miracle has happened, and you are that miracle.”

“Suppose I do not fall in with your arrangement?” she said. “Suppose I refuse?”

John Sands laughed.

“I should ask you to get again into your wet clothes, I should put you into a damp motor-car, and I should drive you through this infernal night to the place where I found you and turn you loose. That sounds very malicious, but I’m not a malicious man. I am all for peace and quietness, and I assure you I should not have undertaken this adventure but for my tremendous respect for my friend, Marcus Leman. There is something about Marcus”—he shook his head contemplatively—“there is something about him that I like.”

“Well, we need not discuss what would happen,” she said, “because I am not such a fool as to refuse, though I am not quite so keen on being married again.”

“Then you were married?” asked John Sands sharply. “Are you free to marry?”

She nodded.

“It would have been extremely awkward if you had had a husband,” he said, “extremely awkward.”

“Now, what do you expect me to do?” she asked.

“I expect you to go to bed and sleep,” he said.

“And what else?”

“In the morning a woman comes here to clean up. I shall explain to her that you are my sister who has arrived unexpectedly and has lost her trunk, and shall send her out to buy whatever articles of attire you may require. There is no reason why she shouldn’t come up and see you and get the details from you first hand,” he said after a pause. “You can dry your clothes in your room—I suppose they do not bear the prison marks?”

She shook her head.

“They belong to the lady doctor at the prison,” she said. “I took them in the early hours of the morning. It was through her house that I escaped.”

“Very good,” said John Sands. “Very good indeed.”

She rose.

“There is still something you aren’t telling me,” she said.

“There are several things that I’m not telling you,” he agreed, “but they can wait. I realise that in your present condition of mind you are not ripe for the complicated story that I have to tell.”

She was half-way up the stairs before he spoke again.

“I shall not be sleeping in the house to-night,” he said, “but I shall be here very early in the morning. There is a telephone in the lobby if you want to call me. My number will be Paddington 1764. I gather,” he said humorously, “that you do not intend making your escape during my absence? I am putting you on your honour.”

She laughed.

“Don’t be afraid,” she said dryly. “I am not likely to venture out of this house without somebody to guard me.

“You are both wise and cautious,” he approved, “and in all probability you have a very good star. It is a matter which you should take up seriously.”

“Stars!” she called down to him from the landing above with a note of contempt in her tone.

“Star study,” said John Sands firmly, “is a study which more than any other repays the student.”

She went to his room and sat on the edge of the bed, her mind in a whirl. She heard him moving about below, and once his not unmusical voice rose in song of a decorous character. Then, after a while, she heard the click of the light and the soft thud of the street door. She pulled off the dressing-gown and resigned herself, with a smile of satisfaction, to the luxury of linen sheets and soft pillows. She had forgotten how tired she was and did not know until she woke. She had but to close her eyes and open them again to find that it was morning.

III. — THE MEAN MARK LEMAN

IN the meantime John Sands had plodded steadily through the rain in the direction of Berkeley Square. From that aristocratic and exclusive place ran Davis Street, a thoroughfare partly made up of small but expensive shops. It was above one of these that Marcus Leman had his modest flat. Leman lived with his niece in a style which might properly be described as frugal. He had hired the maisonnette furnished, and had been content to live in this place for the past five years.

He was lying on a sofa which was drawn up close to the window when John Sands, who had admitted himself with a key, entered the room. The room was illuminated only by a solitary candle reading-lamp placed on a small table near the head of the sofa. The tiniest of fires glowed in the grate. At sight of the visitor Mark Leman withdrew his eyes from the uncurtained window and rose slowly. He was a tall man and painfully thin. His black suit hung on him like a sack, and his shrunken neck was encircled by a straight white collar which had the appearance of being at least three sizes too large for him. The face was small and yellow, and at that moment covered by a two days' growth of grey bristles. The only article of jewellery on his person was a large gold chain which ran from the top waistcoat pocket on the one side to the bottom waistcoat pocket on the other. His shirt cuffs were frayed but clean, and his shoes were cracked to the toes but brightly polished, as well they might be, because Marcus Leman, five times a dollar millionaire, had made it a practice of his life to polish his own shoes every morning.

He must have been six feet two in height, for he overshadowed Sands by head and shoulders.

N He nodded toward the sideboard. Two liqueur glasses filled with golden-brown old brandy had been placed on a tray. Sands handed one glass to his host and tossed down the other. It was a queer little ceremony which was invariably carried out.

"You are ten minutes late," said Leman, wiping his lips. "Get the cards."

"And lights too, I think," said Sands, snapping a switch on the wall.

He walked to a small cabinet, took out two packs of cards and a scoring-board, and brought them back to the table.

"What do you see out of the window that interests you?" he asked curiously, for the night was dark and thick.

“I was watching that reporter at work on the other side of the street.”

“Reporter!” said John in surprise.

Leman grunted.

“He’s got an apartment over there. He’s one of Holland Brown’s boys, the New York Mail Advertiser.”

“How do you know?” asked John, more interested than was his wont.

“Because he came over and wanted to interview me to-day,” said the other carelessly. “When was I going back to New York? Was it true I was married?”

He chuckled again.

“I suppose that sort of thing interests the American reader,” said John as he shuffled the cards.

“That sort of thing!” snarled the other. “Why, I’m the big story! Say, Sands, it would pay Holland Brown to keep a man to specialise on me. Don’t you read the papers? Interesting! I should say! I’m the biggest news story in America.”

“And is he—specialising on you?” asked John Sands carelessly.

The old man grinned.

“I know as much about him as he knows about me, I guess,” he said. “He’s going back to New York by the next boat, with a grip full of new Leman stories, some I’ve told him and some Faith gave him, I guess.”

“Faith?” Sands raised his eyebrows.

“Sure, Faith,” said Marcus Leman.

“But you don’t allow your niece to associate with that kind of fellow?”

“Why not?” asked the old man. “She ain’t any better than him. In fact, he’s better. He’s earning his fifty dollars a week. She has nothing—and will get nothing.”

“What will you take, senior or junior?”

They were playing piquet—a game which was Mark Leman's one relaxation and passion. It was a game which accounted to some extent for the strange friendship which existed between these two. John Sands was a master player with an intuition—and piquet is half intuition—that defied the probabilities, and Mark Leman was probably the only man in England who was in the same class.

"I will take the senior," said John Sands. "What shall it be for?"

"A hundred thousand dollars a point and a million on the rubber," said Mark Leman glibly.

"That means a cent point and a dollar on the rubber, as usual," said John without the ghost of a smile, and began dealing the cards.

"Where is Faith?" he asked.

"In her room improving her mind," said the old man.

"It's a hell of a life for a girl," said John.

The elder man grinned.

"Faith will move mountains, eh?" he said. "But Hope, John Sands, Hope! The hope of my dying some day and leaving her a million! They seem to think that I've got a weak heart. That's her."

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in," snapped Mark, and a girl entered.

John rose and offered his hand.

"Hullo, Miss Leman! I haven't seen you for a week," he said.

He admired Faith Leman with her big grey eyes and her pink-and-white complexion. He admired the vigour and youth of her carriage, the pride of her bearing.

The effect of her coming upon the old man would have been extraordinary to anyone but John Sands, who had so often witnessed such scenes. A dark frown gathered on Mark Leman's face, and he rasped:

“Well, what do you want?”

She also was used to greetings of this kind, and she took no offence.

“I just looked in to see if there was anything I could do for you,” she said.

“There is nothing you can do for me,” said the old man, “except go to bed. I don’t want a hot-water bottle, or my pillows smoothed, or my hand held, or any of the attentions which the beautiful heiress pays to her dying uncle.”

She lifted her brows slightly, and with a nod to John Sands left the room.

“If you hate that girl, why do you have her round?” asked Sands.

“Mind your own business!” growled the other.

“If there is anything more astonishing than your treatment of her,” said John Sands, “it is that the girl stands for it.”

“She has to, hasn’t she?” growled Mark Leman. “Don’t I keep her mother, and wouldn’t she be in the poor-house but for me?”

“You will have to leave your money somewhere, anyway,” smiled John.

“It won’t be to her or to her fool mother, do you hear that?” roared Mark. “I have told her so. I’d rather get married. I told her that too. In fact,” he chuckled, “I told her I was going to get married.”

“And it’s not for the first time you’ve passed along that information,” said John.

“Did you bring in a paper?” asked the old man after a few silent hands had been played.

“I have an evening paper, yes,” replied John.

“Let me look at it.”

John went to his overcoat and took the paper from his pocket, and the old man turned the pages eagerly.

“Good! Good!” he said. “Mexican Consolidated are up two points. I bought 100,000 on Monday.”

John laughed.

“What the devil are you laughing at?”

“It is amusing, that is all,” said John. “Here you are straining every nerve to increase a fortune which is quite big enough for you or for any man, and not an ounce of pleasure does the extra money give you.”

“How do you know?” asked Mark Leman. “Don’t you understand that there is as much pleasure in preventing other people getting money as there is in getting money for yourself? It isn’t what I have, it’s what the other fellow doesn’t get. That tickles me. That is half the fun of the game. The real pleasure of battle lies in the defeat of your enemy.”

“And who is your enemy?” asked John curiously.

“The other fellow,” replied Mark vaguely. “Any old fellow that gets up against me on a deal of this kind.”

They played three games, Mark Leman’s nightly allowance, and the old man won. He walked to the sideboard, and poured out a glass of colourless liquid.

Sands laughed good-humouredly.

“I sometimes wonder why I stand for you myself,” he said. “I suppose there’s something you like about me.”

“There is,” said the old man.

Sands looked him straight in the eye.

“Have I ever tried to get money from you, Mark?” he asked.

“No; but that doesn’t mean you are not going to try,” said old Leman briskly. “You are one of the patient sort. It is because I admire your patience, and I am mighty curious to know what your game is, that I stand for you!”

They both laughed together.

“Why don’t you get married?” asked John Sands suddenly.

Leman eyed him with a look of suspicion.

“You haven’t a sister you want to be married off, have you?” he asked. “That isn’t your game, eh, Sands?”

“No, I haven’t a sister I want to marry off,” replied the other carelessly, “but it strikes me you are developing a grouch against the world that marriage might correct. And you have so often talked to me of getting married so as to put one over on your relations, that it has occurred to me to wonder why you haven’t carried your threat into execution.”

“I haven’t any relations, as I have told you before,” said Leman sharply. “There’s only that girl and her mother. The mother is a poor weakling who married my brother Tom, who got through life without worry by telling the waiter to keep the change. What could I do with a wife now?”

“What could she do? That’s the question,” said Sands. “How does the idea strike you? Suppose you found the right kind of accommodating woman, who would marry you and just hike off to the Continent and live around?”

“It strikes me as the most foolish suggestion you ever put forward,” said Mark. “Now get off; I want to go to bed.”

John Sands went to the hotel where he had booked a room by telephone, and spent the greater part of the night sitting up in an arm-chair before the fire, turning certain matters over in his mind.

He had met Mark Leman on a transatlantic voyage, and the pair had struck up a curious kind of friendship, which was primarily based upon the fact that John Sands possessed a very equable temper and played an excellent hand of piquet. He had inherited a small property in his youth, and had invested his money a factory in Connecticut which earned a sufficient dividend to enable him to live comfortably in London. He had known Leman by name—as who did not?—as one of the innumerable oil kings who have been dutifully crowned by the Press in the past twenty years. He knew of his extraordinary passion for publicity, his no less extraordinary meanness and his reputation as a misogynist. It irritated John Sands to see a man so rich and so void of all outward and visible signs of happiness. Mark Leman’s food cost him less than a dollar a day. He smoked cheap cigars and boasted that he had not had a new suit of clothes for fifteen years. When he crossed the Atlantic he, who could have afforded a royal suite three times over, was

content to share an inside cabin with whomsoever happened to be billeted by the purser in the berth above.

John Stands, who had one of the best cabins on the ship, and who had never had less than twelve lounge suits a year, was first irritated and then amused—and then thoughtful.

He lived up to every penny of his income, and every dollar earned for him some pleasant experience. Lately the production of his factory had fallen off and he had had to sacrifice his chauffeur and the two horses he kept in training at Newmarket. Gone, too, was his pleasant dream of some day winning a Futurity, because Futurity winners are not easy to come by, and you may breed from twenty strains and still miss getting a horse guaranteed to show his nose first under the wire at the proper and appropriate moment.

So John Sands sat before the fire in his bedroom in a small hotel in Tavistock Square, dreaming dreams which were hampered at moments by the one unexpected reality which had come into his life.

And as he dreamed his rosy visions, some half a dozen rain-soaked policemen were searching the plantations north and south of Whitecross Hill, stopping now and again to curse Margaret.

“I’ll bet some fellow’s got her away,” said a stout sergeant, stopping under a dripping tree for shelter and unscrewing the top of his flask. “She wasn’t a bad-looking dame by all accounts. Have a nip, son.”

The constable took the flask and tilted it.

“Well, if any man’s got her away, I can only hope she serves him as she served her husband—here’s how!” said he.

IV. — FAITH LEMAN

MARGARET MALIKO rose on her elbow and blinked at the sunlight which was pouring into the bedroom. She looked around bewildered and then remembered where she was.

She slipped out of bed to the floor, and, walking round the apartment, observed with interest and admiration the evidence of Mr. Sands' sybaritic tastes. The silver and tortoiseshell brushes on the table, the Venetian glass vases, the well-chosen photogravures which covered the walls, the tiny Empire desk in the window recess—they were all in harmony, and she, who had known what luxury was, saw and approved. She opened the door carefully and heard the sound of a vacuum cleaner at work below. Tiptoeing to the head of the stairs, she looked down and saw a woman at work.

"Has Mr. Sands returned?" she asked.

The woman looked up.

"Yes, miss," she replied. "He was in here about half an hour ago. Are you ready for me to go out? I have got all the newspapers here."

Margaret hesitated.

"Bring them up and put them on my bed whilst I am having my bath," she said. "Can you bring me some coffee?"

"I've got it all ready, miss," said the woman. "Your brother told me that I was not to disturb you until you called."

When Margaret came back to her bedroom she found an array of daily newspapers, around certain advertisements in which a blue line had been drawn by the painstaking Mr. Sands. With a pencil and paper she prepared a hasty list, and then it struck her that she had no money. She went to the door again. The woman by this time was dressed.

"Did Mr. Sands leave anything for me?" asked the girl.

"Oh, yes, miss, I forgot."

She laboured upstairs with an envelope, which Margaret took round the edge of the door. Ten £10 bank-notes—more than sufficient to cover the cost of the things she had chosen.

“Here’s the list. Take a cab, please,” she said.

She was careful not to reveal herself in her garb, for even the credulity of a lady help might have been taxed by the revelation of Mr. Sands’ pyjamas. She went back to the bedroom and read the newspapers carefully. Every one of them had a small paragraph about her escape, and she read, too, a description of herself—a description which no stranger could possibly recognise—in every one of them. One paragraph, however, caught her eye and wiped the smile from her face.

“It is believed,” it ran, “that the woman escaped to London with the help of a confederate. A motor-car was seen on the North Road close to where the convict must have been in hiding, and the police are making attempts to trace this car.”

That was serious. If the number were known—and possibly somebody may have noticed it—there would be no difficulty whatever in discovering the ownership, and once John Sands was known to have been the driver there was very little chance of her escaping detection. On the other hand, had the number been known, the police would have been in the house long before this. She waited impatiently for the return of the woman with the new apparel. They came at last—a ready-made suit, which fitted her to perfection, a number of other necessary garments, a hat and a raincoat. She felt more confident when she saw herself in the long mirror in John Sands’ wardrobe. She was so unlike an escaped convict, so eminently respectable, that she felt she might walk into the street, might indeed pass the very prison gates, and none would detect her. She had regained something of her confidence when John Sands returned.

“You look fine,” he said, with the light of admiration in his eyes. “Your own warden wouldn’t know you now.”

“Warden?” she said, puzzled. “Oh, you mean warder.”

“Something like that,” he said good-humouredly.

“Look at this.”

She produced the paragraph she had cut from the newspaper, and he read it carefully and shook his head.

“When we came in last night I walked round the back of the machine just to see the name-plate. It was so covered with mud that it would have been impossible for anybody to have deciphered it. Besides, it was nearly dark when I found you.”

“Then there is no danger?” she asked.

“I am sure of it,” he replied promptly, “and as proof of my faith I am going to take you out to lunch at the swellest restaurant in town.”

He drove her to Piccadilly Circus in an open taxi, for the rain had cleared off and the day was an unusually mild one. Half-way down Wimpole Street he lifted his hat to a girl and a young man who were on the sidewalk.

“Take notice of that girl, if you can without turning round,” he said. “She is your future niece.”

He chuckled.

The girl on the pavement looked after the disappearing taxi with interest.

“I seem to know that man’s face,” said her companion.

“He’s a friend of uncle’s,” said Faith Leman, “a Mr. Sands.”

“I’ve got him,” answered the other, “John Sands. He’s the New Yorker who has gone English.”

She smiled.

“I think that’s a description that could almost apply to uncle.”

Her companion shook his head.

“There’s nothing English about Uncle Mark,” he said, “except his bad manners.” And she lifted a reproving finger.

“I told uncle you were going away to-day,” said the girl. “Do you really return to America to-morrow?”

He nodded.

“I wish I were going with you,” she said wistfully. “I am just aching to see mother.”

“Why don’t you ask Mr. Leman to send you? There are two or three women I know going across, and they would chaperon you.”

She shook her head.

“It’s useless to ask uncle for anything,” she said sadly. “The mere fact that I wanted something would be sufficient to make him refuse.”

“Why don’t you shake him?” urged the young man. “I know it’s no business of mine, and it’s a pretty cool proposition to ask you to shake five million dollars.”

“Shaking the dollars would not be easy,” she interrupted, “because for me they do not exist. And the other thing isn’t easy either. Uncle has been very good to mother, and—”

“I understand,” he said quietly. “You have just got to stick it, and I guess the old man is using his kindness to your mother as a lever to hold you.”

She made no reply, for this was an implication which she could not in truth deny.

“But are you satisfied with your visit to London?” she asked. “Have you got—what do you call it?—a good story?”

“Thousands,” he said promptly. “You know that stories about Mark Leman sell like hot cakes. He’s one of the best sellers in the newspaper world. Of course our London man has been sending stories over to New York about him, but they’ve got a bit thin lately, and the boss sent me over to put a little romance into ‘em. Why, I’ve got some of the dandiest stories about Mark that have ever been told. There’s a story about how he nearly bought a new pair of boots in Oxford Street and then hedged and tried to buy one.”

The girl looked shocked.

“Why, bless your heart, Miss Faith, your uncle revels in that kind of story, and when we printed a Sunday story about John Rockbetter being the meanest millionaire alive, old man Leman was all for indicting us for libel! But I have fallen down on the marriage story. You are sure there is nothing in it?”

The girl hesitated.

“I am certain,” she said. “Uncle says he will get married, but I think he only says it to annoy me and to squelch any hope I may have of inheriting his fortune. Heaven knows I don’t want his money,” she said bitterly. “I would ask for nothing better than to be released from the misery of living in the same house. You don’t know what it means, Mr. Cassidy.”

“I guess I do,” he said. “It’s the one unhappy impression I’m carrying back to America.”

He wanted to say something more, but checked himself. It was not the first time he had wanted to say something more, and it was only the fact that he was speaking to a girl who some day might inherit Mark Leman’s enormous fortune which prevented him saying the word which so frequently trembled on his lips. He had met her when he had made his first call upon the millionaire in London, and she had entertained him during her uncle’s absence. They had met—as she thought—by accident many times since.

To the girl this new interest in her fife had come like a streak of sunshine across a grey moor, and she faced the prospects of the end of this strange friendship with a little ache in her heart.

“I just envy you,” she said. “To be in little old New York again! Do you know what I should like to do?”

“I know what I should like to do,” he said fervently.

“What?” she asked in surprise.

“Never mind,” he said. “What would you like to do?”

“I would like to get on a car and go out to Coney Island. I’d like just to loaf around with the crowd and see all the side-shows and eat all the things that were offered—”

“And be very ill next morning,” he said practically. “No, I can devise a more pleasant picnic for you than that, Miss Leman, when you strike New York,” he said.

They came to Berkeley Square and, as if by common agreement, their progress had slowed down to little more than a saunter. There was a tale to be told, but for the life of him he could not find an opening.

“Miss Leman,” he began, “there’s something I want to say to you mighty badly.”

He paused.

“Yes?” she said encouragingly.

“You know I am a newspaper man—” He stopped again.

“I know that,” she said. “You are on the Advertiser?”

He nodded.

“That isn’t what I wanted to say,” he said. “The fact is, I am going away to-morrow, and it may be a year or so before I see you again, unless you come to New York.”

“But you are going to write to me, aren’t you?” she asked. “You said you would.”

He swallowed something.

“Yes, I’m going to write, if you will allow me to. I want you, please, to think of me as your very best friend.”

“You are,” she smiled. “I have no other friend. I shall always think of you with the greatest kindness, Mr. Cassidy.”

“That’s all right,” said Jimmy. “Only,I want to say this: that perhaps one day you’ll be a millionairess, and then I shan’t bother you any more. But perhaps you won’t be, and this old curmud—uncle of yours will leave you without a cent. Well, if that happens—”

What might have been the result of such a happening he was not to disclose, for a voice hailed him and he turned round to meet the lank figure of Mark Leman.

“Hullo! Hullo!” said Mark genially. “Thought you were gone to America!”

“Going to-morrow, Mr. Leman,” said Jimmy.

“Good for you!” said Mark. “Now come here, Jimmy. I’ve got a story for you that’s worth a whole page. You can tell ‘em that I was going to be married, but that I quarrelled with the bride as to who should pay the fees. Do you get me? And, say, you can tell ‘em that I loaned the wedding-ring from a jeweller for fifty cents. Now that’s a story that’s worth real money—”

The girl turned from the two with a little sigh, and for the moment Jimmy’s eyes met hers and he nodded his farewell.

“I will tell you the rest of that story one of these days, Miss Leman,” he said.

“What story’s that?” asked the old man as the girl walked away. “Is it about me, son? If it is, I can tell you one better. The other day a man asked me to loan him a postage stamp—”

For the first time in his journalistic life Jimmy Cassidy heard an exclusive story and paid no heed to it. His eyes were fixed upon the retreating figure of the girl.

V. — JIMMY CASSIDY PALLS DOWN

EIGHTEEN months later a shirt-sleeved Jimmy Cassidy sat in his room at the "Magnificent," in Russell Square, setting forth his views on a subject which interested him even more than did the eccentricities of millionaires.

"The villain of fiction is necessarily a madman because of his abnormality. A man who does evil for evil's sake must be a lunatic, and sooner or later his disease brings him to the insane asylum where he belongs. Most criminals are villains from force of circumstances. Their villainy is incidental to the accomplishment of their purpose. Of all criminals so called, murderers are least criminal. Seventy per cent, of the men who suffer death for this act have never before committed crime and have led respectable and blameless lives. The cold-blooded Borgias of the world are few—"

So far had Jimmy Cassidy written when the door opened and Holland Brown followed his cigar into the room. Holland Brown was stout and hairless and wholly unsentimental. He flopped down into an arm-chair near Jimmy's table. The young man thrust his hands in his pockets and braced himself in his chair, for he knew what was coming.

"Jimmy," said Mr. Brown, "eighteen months ago you came to this city to see old man Leman, and you returned to New York with every story except the story I told you to get. Eighteen months ago," he went on, "you had the chance of a beat which would have made every other kind of beat that has appeared in the New York Press during the last fifteen years look mean and foolish. You came back with a cock-and-bull story about Leman having gone to the register office with a loaned gold ring and having refused to marry his bride because she would not pay half the parson's fees, and I must say that story was a fairly good one, even though it was obviously a fake."

"Sure it was a fake," said Jimmy cheerfully. "I told you all the circumstances."

Holland Brown shifted his cigar from one comer of his mouth to the other and nodded.

"I am very reasonable," he said, "and I will be reasonable enough to admit that what you say is true. Nevertheless, you have allowed the New York Post Special to scoop you with the news of his marriage."

"It is only a circumstantial story," said Jimmy, "and the old man doesn't admit it."

“Have you seen him?”

“I saw him to-day.”

“Does he deny it?”

Jimmy hesitated.

“No, he doesn’t. I guess that all this talk of marriage is merely intended to hurt Miss Leman?”

“The niece?”

“The niece,” nodded Jimmy. “I admit the old man has boasted of having been married for over a year, but he has never produced his wife or proof that the marriage has ever taken place.”

“The Post Special man’s story isn’t very circumstantial,” complained Holland Brown. “He said it took place a week after you left England for New York, and, Jimmy, unless there’s proof to the contrary that the Post Special man’s a liar, I have got to believe it. I have sent you over again to make good and, Jimmy, you have fallen down. That’s why I have come from Paris to see you, Jimmy—and to fire you.”

“So I’m fired, eh?” said Jimmy.

“Sure you’re fired,” said Mr. Brown. “I don’t want to say anything against you, Jimmy, because you’re a pretty good boy, but you can’t make the same mistake twice—at least, not on the Advertiser. Go to the London office and they will give you your fare back to New York and your salary to the end of the month. I’ve got to get a five man on to Leman, and for the moment in my category, Jimmy, you’re classified as ‘recently deceased.’”

“Thank you very much,” said Jimmy. “Suppose after I’m fired I get the story. Am I reinstated?”

Holland Brown shrugged his massive shoulders.

“I don’t see what’s the good of bringing in confirmation of the Post Special story,” he said. “That’s not good enough for me. If you can bring in a brand-new story—something worth about a million dollars, and obviously worth a million dollars—why, I’ll buy it.”

Jimmy got up and put on his coat.

“Very good, Mr. Brown,” he said, “but I can tell you this: that there is a million-dollar story hanging on to old man Leman. I haven’t told you all my suspicions and theories, because suspicions and theories ought to|be kept in a reporter’s mind until he’s worked them into facts. And I’m not asking you to pay me a million dollars for any story, nor even a dollar. When I’ve put the truth about Mark Leman’s marriage on to my typewriter, the whole truth from beginning to end—why, then I’ll come across with it.”

“I don’t want to be hard, Jimmy,” said Brown. “There’s no flies on you, boy, but it weakens the moral of an office if the star man falls down and doesn’t get trodden on. There are lots of papers that will jump at you.”

“Don’t I know it?” said Jimmy.

“Your work’s fallen off, too,” said Brown, shaking his head regretfully. “Say, there’s a lot of stories they tell about you, that you’re not giving sufficient attention to your work and that you’re running after some girl or other. That may account for your work—”

“Bring me the man who tells that story,” said Jimmy, grinning quietly, “and I’ll stop his light flow of conversation for some time to come.”

“Now don’t get hot about it,” said Mr. Brown. “Let’s have no unpleasantness, Jimmy. I’ve a great respect for you and—damn it! I’ll make it two months’ salary.”

Jimmy laughed.

“You’ll give me three months’, anyway,” said Jimmy. “Those are the terms of my contract. And when I bring that million-dollar story along, Mr. Brown, maybe you’ll take me into partnership, because I don’t think there will be enough money on the paper to buy it otherwise.”

It was firing he had expected when he heard that Holland Brown was coming from Paris to see him. He had certainly fallen down in the sense that Leman’s marriage was accepted as a fact by all the newspapers in New York, and that he alone had been sceptical. He knew now he was wrong in so emphatically denying the story, but he had depended upon his knowledge of the old man and upon the malicious desire of Mark Leman to hurt his niece. It was the sort of thing the old man would do.

After Holland Brown had gone, Jimmy gathered together the manuscript of his great work on crime, which would one day astonish the world, and locked it away in a drawer. He looked at his watch. It was too early to see Faith, whom he had arranged to meet in the park that evening.

Eighteen months had passed and the story which Mark Leman had interrupted in Berkeley Square was still untold. The end of it all was a little worse than the beginning, for now the man was out of a job. This fact, however, did not weigh upon him. It served only to stem for the moment the inevitable wave of self-pity which hampers the young in similar circumstances. A thought struck him.

“John Sands!” he exclaimed; “that’s the fellow I ought to see.”

He picked up a telephone directory and turned up the address. Ten minutes later he was pushing the bell at John Sands’ door. That genial man was alone and was playing patience on a little table near a window when Jimmy arrived.

“Come right in,” he said cheerfully. “I don’t think I’ve met you, but I know you. Your name’s Cassidy, isn’t it?”

“That’s me,” said Jimmy. “I wonder if you can give me a few minutes of your valuable time?”

Mr. Sands looked at the cards on the table and laughed.

“There is no call for sarcasm,” he smiled; “what can I do for you?”

“I’ll start fair with you,” said Jimmy. “I am a reporter on the New York Mail Advertiser.”

Sands nodded.

“Mr. Leman spoke to me of you.”

“Well, Mr. Leman has to know that I’ve been fired over the story of his marriage,” said Jimmy.

“The story of his marriage?” repeated Sands.

“Yes. The Post Special man got a beat on it and I’ve been fired in consequence. I ask you, Mr. Sands, can you tell me, speaking as man to man, whether it is true that Mark Leman is married?”

“Speaking as man to man,” said Mr. Sands slowly, “I cannot deny that he is not married.”

“Does that mean that he is married?” asked Jimmy impatiently.

“I can tell you no more than Mr. Leman tells his friends,” replied Sands.

Jimmy rose.

“Oh, well, I’ve made a mistake,” he said. “I thought I might get the facts from you. The Post Special man says he was married the week after I left London eighteen months ago.”

“It is possible,” said Mr. Sands with a shrug of his shoulders. “I am a friend of Mr. Leman, and an intimate friend, but he does not discuss his private affairs with me or anybody, I should imagine; and the only information I can give is the information which he himself has given out to—er—the Press.”

“Which amounts to nothing,” said the exasperated Jimmy.

“Practically,” repeated Sands quietly.

Jimmy had based very few hopes on the possibility of John Sands disclosing his friend’s secrets. He would have questioned Sands more closely, but he had an appointment which he would not have missed for all the stories in the world.

Faith Leman was waiting for him at the entrance of a prosaic London park, and together they paced the gritty paths and for a while their troubles and difficulties were forgotten. Between them in that eighteen months had passed an almost voluminous correspondence. They had met after their absence and found one another unchanged save for the better. The girl’s ripe beauty almost stunned Jimmy when he saw her, and filled him with a sense of dismay at the insurmountable obstacles to the fulfilment of that dream of his which had filled his every waking hour for a year and a half. She found him a steadier, stronger quality, and threw the weight of her burden upon him without hesitation or misgiving. The big thing that Jimmy Cassidy had to say was still unsaid, but happily the larger sentiments of life are most subtly interpreted for us and do not require the aid of speech.

They walked deep into the park before he remembered his own little worry.

“Oh, by the way, Miss Leman, I’ve been fired.”

“Fired?” she said in surprise. “Do you mean you’ve lost your work?”

He nodded.

“Something like that. Old man Brown came over from Paris. I had a hunch that he was coming for that purpose, but I was hoping he’d put it off for a month or two until I could get through with this story.”

She shook her head with a little smile.

“Do you still think that my uncle is married?”

“I hardly know what to think,” said Jimmy.

“I wish he was!“ the girl said vehemently. “Oh, how I wish he was! If I could only find some excuse for leaving him, I would go to-morrow. He’s horrid to me—worse than ever. He’s for ever sneering at me and reproaching me with envying him his money and waiting for him to die—all the vilest charges that you can imagine. I wish he were dead! I do! I do! I wish he could take the evil money with him.”

Jimmy dropped his hand on her shoulder.

“My dear,” he said, and marvelled at himself, “that isn’t the way to talk—not for you, anyway. You are getting over-strung. Why don’t you go to America and let your mother take her chance?”

VI. — "JIMMY SQUEEZED HER ARM"

AS he asked the question he knew what her answer would be. He had taken the opportunity whilst he was in New York of making inquiries about the girl's mother, and found she was an amiable, helpless soul who, like John Sands, had a weakness for comfort. That she was buying her comfort at the expense of her daughter's misery she did not know; or, if she knew, the fact did not greatly distress her. It is possible that she had an inkling of the conditions under which the girl lived, because on the occasion of Jimmy's one interview she had not spoken of Faith except as "My poor dear daughter." She was one of those type of women who held that a word of endearment went a long way to cover any unhappiness that selfishness caused.

The girl threw out her hands with a hopeless gesture.

"How can I go?" she said. "You know as well as I that I can't. Mother wrote and told me that you saw her."

Jimmy nodded.

"Well," said the girl helplessly, "how can I?"

He did not attempt to pursue the subject, but turned to one of some importance to himself.

"I hate cross-questioning you about your uncle's business," he said, "and you must turn me down just when you feel you ought to, because maybe I'm overstepping the balance."

"Jimmy, I'll tell you all I know," she said quickly, and Jimmy Cassidy laughed at the natural way she named him, and for a second or two was speechless.

"You know the morning I went away, eighteen months ago?" he said.

She nodded.

"I'm not likely to forget that," she said with a queer look in her eyes. "It wasn't—pleasant. You see, you mustn't think me unwomanly or forward, but you were the first man friend I ever had. Somehow, when you went away, you left life a little bleak. That doesn't mean "—she looked him squarely in the face—"that I am in love with you, or any silly thing like that."

“Oh, no,” said Jimmy hurriedly. “Of course it doesn’t.”

“Or that I believe you are in love with me. Men and women can be friends and all that sort of thing, can’t they, without love?”

“Sure,” said Jimmy stoutly. “It’s the easiest thing in the world to be friendly with a nice girl.”

“Yes, I remember very well,” she went on. “They were very pleasant weeks, and until I had a letter from you—Jimmy, it was the cheeriest, friendliest letter that ever a man wrote to a girl—I felt just as though I didn’t want to go on. But I interrupted?”

“Do you remember your uncle’s movements during the week or fortnight after I left?”

“I remember them very well,” she said readily.

“Did he spend the whole of his time in Davis Street? I mean, did he sleep there every night?”

She shook her head.

“It is curious you should ask that, because as a rule uncle doesn’t stay away from home at night. I think he objects to hotel charges. But at any rate he spends every night in the house, and Mrs. Redmayne—that is our housekeeper—was telling me the other day that the only night uncle has spent out of the house was eighteen months ago.”

“When was that?” asked Jimmy.

“It was about five days after you left,” said the girl. “He didn’t tell me where he was going. He merely said, in his usual brusque way, in the afternoon, that he would not be back that evening. He was going for a motor-car drive into the country with a friend, and he would not return till the next evening.”

“What time did he come back?”

“I think it was eight o’clock,” said the girl after considering, “or it may have been nine. At any rate, it was late the next evening when he returned.”

“Did he come back alone?”

She shook her head.

“No, with Mr. Sands. They both came upstairs together. I was in my room, but I heard them. You see, uncle has a curious practice: when Mr. Sands comes here, two glasses of Kümmel* are placed on the sideboard. They have their drink and play their game of piquet, drink two more glasses of Kümmel and then Mr. Sands goes away. That has been the practice for quite a long time. It is uncle’s only extravagance. That night I had forgotten to fill the glasses, not knowing whether Mr. Sands was coming. Uncle usually tells me in the afternoon if Mr. Sands is paying us a visit. He called me down and asked very rudely why I had neglected my duty. So there are two reasons why I remember that night,” she smiled.

“Did he say where he had been?”

“Not a word,” said the girl. “He doesn’t volunteer information of that kind to me, you know. The only thing he tells me is the amount of money I cost him, and how disappointed I will be when he dies and I find he’s left all his money to charity.”

Jimmy laughed and drew the girl’s arm through his.

“Faith,” he said, “you don’t know much more about this affair than I do. But the Post Special man got the story, I suppose you know?”

“I know,” she said. “Uncle’s delighted with it. He cut the article out and had it pinned up on the wall, and every time I go into the room he nods his head to the cutting and asks me if I’ve seen it. I really think he gets more pleasure out of that little piece of annoyance than anything else, and it really has kept him in quite a good humour for quite a long time.”

“No one ever visited the house?”

“Nobody,” said Faith decidedly.

“It’s very queer,” said Jimmy. “How does Mr. Sands treat you?”

“Kind, as he always is. He does his best to ease uncle’s bad humour, and I really think he’s the only man who has any influence over uncle. He is always doing little things without uncle’s knowledge to make life a little more pleasant for me. Do you know,” she laughed, “he has an almost feminine

interest in such things as dress and hats. When uncle was out the other day we were talking wardrobe. I'd spoilt the only new dress I'd had for three years through upsetting a cup of coffee in my lap, and he told me he was going to persuade uncle to dress me as the niece of Mark Leman should be dressed."

She laughed again.

"Well, that's one for John Sands, anyway," said Jimmy. "My! I don't think I shall leave you alone again, Faith."

"What will you do?" she asked, looking at him.

"Why, I'll take you away," said he with an assumption of gaiety. "After all, I shan't be out of a job very long, and, anyway, my mother isn't exactly poor. You could live with our people—"

She shook her head.

"But you see, Jimmy, my mother is exactly poor, and even if I were willing for you to look after me, I should certainly not care for you to take charge of mother," she said with a little grimace. "I know I'm a Leman, and I suppose I possess all the worst qualities of the breed, but there are times—"

Jimmy squeezed her arm sympathetically. He was glad of an excuse.

It was eleven o'clock when he arrived back at his hotel, to find an English pressman in the vestibule waiting for him.

"Hullo, Jimmy! We've heard at the office that old Brown and you have cut loose. The chief has sent me down to tell you that there's a desk at the office whenever you like to step down."

Jimmy grinned.

"It's not good enough for me, son," he said. "I'm on a million-dollar story."

"How's that?" asked the pressman, interested. "Do you mean it's a story about a million dollars, or do you get that much for writing it?"

"I deserve that much for writing it," said Jimmy, "but as a matter of fact I imagine I shall get a little less."

Jimmy gave a little account of his difficulties and the gist of the story he was trying to trace. The English pressmam listened with interest.

“But what’s worrying you, Jimmy?” he asked. “You could have found out whether he was married or not by making an application to Somerset House.”

“Who’s he?” asked Jimmy vaguely.

“Somerset House is not the name of a highbrow lawyer or politician, it’s a sure enough house,” laughed the pressman. “It’s the place where we keep the records of marriages, births, deaths, divorces and other misfortunes which beset British humanity. When was the marriage supposed to have taken place?”

Jimmy gave the approximate date.

“Well, it’s dead easy,” said the pressman, and offered a few suggestions as to the course Jimmy should take.

It was curious, thought Jimmy, as he undressed that night, that the idea of applying to some central authority had never occurred to him. He was, after all, merely a visitor to England, and knew little of its official practices. Happily the Post Special evidently knew as little, and there was still a chance of picking up some indisputable facts concerning the marriage which had taken place and which had not been related previously. His friend had promised to call for him the next morning, and at ten o’clock Jimmy found him waiting in the hall.

Their examination of the register at Somerset House produced results with ridiculous ease. Within a quarter of an hour from the time their search began the entry was discovered, and Jimmy read with open mouth the matter-of-fact details that “Marcus Leman, aged 56, bachelor,” had married “Margaret Smith, 31, widow,” on the 29th of October, 19—, at Griddelsea Register Office.

“It’s incredible!” gasped Jimmy. “It was here all the time. I had only to pay a dollar and the information was mine. Say, where can I get a time-table?”

“Where are you going?” asked his companion.

“To Griddelsea,” said Jimmy firmly. “I’m going to get a copy of that marriage certificate, and then I’m going to confront old man Leman with the facts,

and he's going to tell me the story of why he has kept it secret and why he never sees his wife. He will give me her portrait, or I'll give him just the kind of story that even he won't like."

It seemed to him that the journey to Griddelsea occupied the greater part of the day. In truth it covered only two hours, and in those two hours Jimmy sketched in his mind the lay-out of the story.

Griddelsea is a quiet seaport town on the Sussex coast, chiefly important as the centre of a rural district. With very little difficulty he found the register office and was admitted to the sanctum of the official—a stout, bald and middle-aged man, who looked at Jimmy with an appraising eye and reached mechanically for his marriage register.

"No," said Jimmy, annoyed to find himself blushing; "I haven't come to be married, Judge; I've come to inquire into a marriage which took place in this office eighteen months ago."

"Ah!" said the registrar, "that was in the time of my predecessor, poor Mr. Hornblew! Can you tell me the name and the date?"

Jimmy had written these facts upon a slip of paper, and this he handed to the official. There was a searching of books and turning of leaves and counterfoils and adjusting of pince-nez, and at last the registrar looked up from his search.

"Just as I thought. This was the very last marriage which Mr. Hornblew performed. I have often heard about this case. The gentleman particularly desired Mr. Hornblew to perform the ceremony, and my poor old friend, who was then very ill and practically on a bed of sickness, came to the office especially for that purpose, receiving, I believe," said the registrar thoughtfully, "a very handsome fee. The chief clerk here, who was unfortunately killed in the latter end of the war, has often told me about the matter. Let me see, Mr. Mark Leman is a millionaire, is he not?"

"Yes," said Jimmy, "that's the gentleman."

"And I presume you want a copy of the marriage certificate?"

"You've got me first time," said Jimmy, and caught the next train back to London with his certified proof. The next train, however, did not leave Griddelsea till four in the afternoon, and it was half-past six when Jimmy came to London, carrying with him the bone of a great story.

VII. — MARK LEMAN ASLEEP

MR. JOHN SANDS sat in his comfortable sitting-room in a very thoughtful frame of mind. He had a dim suspicion that the star Bellatrix was a little obscured, or maybe was on the wane. He was possessed of an uneasy mind, for three things had happened that week which had curiously disturbed him. One was a letter from his agent in New York and dealt strictly with business. The second was a purely domestic trouble which for the moment does not concern us; and the third a letter which he had received by special messenger that afternoon from Mark Leman. It ran: “Will you come at eight o’clock? I particularly wish to speak to you.”

Therefore John Sands whistled a melancholy little song, and his placid brow was puckered in thought. He wondered what world-shaking trouble had induced Mark Leman to spend sixteen cents on a special messenger. But John Sands was not the sort of man who worried. After he had given, as he thought, an adequate amount of meditation to this unusual happening, which of the three was by far the most disturbing, he jumped up, and walked across to a bookcase and, taking down a volume of Browning, read steadily for two hours. At a quarter to eight he went up to his bedroom and came down again, his hair neatly brushed, his white hands speckless, and paced with slow strides the length of the room, his hands behind him, his chin on his breast. He looked at his watch; he had five minutes—ample time to make the journey. He had just taken his gloves and his stick from the table where they lay when there was a ring at the front door. He opened it to discover one of the last men he expected to see—Jimmy Cassidy, bright of eye and the light of triumph in his face.

“Can I see you one minute, Mr. Sands?” he said.

“Only a minute,” replied John Sands. “I have an important appointment. Well, what is it?” he asked when he had closed the door.

“I’ve a record of the marriage!”

There was a silence.

“You have a record of the marriage?” repeated John Sands slowly and quietly. “To which marriage do you refer?”

“To the marriage of Mark Leman and Margaret Smith,” replied Jimmy. “Now come, Mr. Sands, there’s no sense in pretending that you know nothing about it.”

“What are you going to do?” asked Sands..

“I’m going to see Mr. Leman and get him to tell me the whole story. I’ve enough material now to make a full-page story, but he can give me the big thing.”

“Excuse me one moment,” said Sands. “I will be with you in less than a minute.”

Again he ascended the stairs to his bedroom, and had been absent for about forty seconds when he came with ponderous, heavy tread down the carpeted stairs and rejoined his visitor.

“I think perhaps that is the best thing you could do, but you must remember, Mr. Cassidy, that Mark Leman is not only a man well on in years, but he is a man who may very easily take your story the wrong way. I will certainly take you round to him,” he said, “but I think I ought to explain to him first that his secret is out. As a matter of fact, it was no secret at all to me, only—I had to—”

“Naturally, Mr. Sands,” said Jimmy heartily. “I quite understand. Say, I don’t want to shock the old man, and perhaps you’d better break it to him gently that his secret is out.”

They came together to the house in Davis Street. The entrance was through a private door at the side of a shop, and Sands let himself in with his key.

“By the way,” he said, “perhaps you can tell me: is Miss Leman in to-night?”

“I can supply you with that information,” said Jimmy with the pride which no mere information had ever given him before. “She has gone to a concert.”

He did not add the fact that he had provided the ticket for the occasion; that was his affair.

“Thank you,” said Sands. “I wouldn’t like her to be present when this perhaps distressing news is broken. Will you wait here for a moment whilst I go upstairs to Mr. Leman?”

Jimmy nodded.

He waited a little more than a minute, and then Sands rejoined him, and to his surprise closed the door behind him.

“It’s most extraordinary,” said Sands. “Leman is asleep. He has a trick of lying on the sofa after supper, and I’ve noticed a tendency lately to doze, but it’s the first time he has not got up when I went into the room. We will give lim ten minutes, whilst I explain to you the part I have played in this matter. I don’t want you to think, Mr. Cassidy, that I’ve been underhanded with you or with other members of the Press. I have no interest whatever in Mr. Leman’s private life, except the interest that a friend has. I won’t disguise from you the fact that the marriage was designed to disappoint—er—well—“

“To disappoint Miss Faith. I know all about that,” said Jimmy.

“It does not, of course, concern me whether Miss Leman inherits his money or not,” John Sands went on. “That is a matter also which concerns Mr. Leman. Frankly, I have no interest in Miss Leman, except that she is a very nice girl. I feel, in these cases where the divergent interests of relations are concerned, that it is much wiser for an outsider to keep strictly—outside.”

“There I’m with you,” said Jimmy. “Believe me, Mr. Sands, I have nothing but a sense of gratitude for your kindness to Miss Leman.”

They walked to the end of Davis Street, and John Sands was very thoughtful. He knew that before the end of the evening the whole course of his pleasant life would be changed. He hated change, he hated revelation, and at that moment he hated best of all the woman who sent him notes written in pencil and signed “Margaret Leman,” a signature which was invariably followed by an exclamation mark. A thought struck him, probably inspired by a telephone tablet which hung outside a shop.

“Will you excuse me one moment, Mr. Cassidy, whilst I telephone?” he said to Jimmy.

Left to himself, Jimmy strolled back the way he had come and, turning the street comer, he had the whole of Davis Street under his eye. From where he stood he could see the green door leading to Mark Leman’s flat. About that green door he had woven romantic fancies, since it was hallowed by association with the girl who occupied a great deal more of his thoughts than he was prepared to admit. Whatever romantic stories were developing in his mind—for Jimmy had this weakness in common with Mr. Sands, that

he was an incorrigible day-dreamer—were dissipated when the green door suddenly opened and a woman stepped out. He did not for a moment think it was Faith. This woman was taller and obviously older. She was dressed in black and a heavy black veil concealed her face. She looked to the left and right and then, turning quickly, walked in the opposite direction and disappeared into Berkeley Square, pausing for a moment before the mail-box on the comer of the square.

“That can’t be the housekeeper,” thought Jimmy, and turned to meet Mr. Sands.

“Now we will go along and wake our friend,” said that genial man.

But he was less genial than usual, Jimmy observed. A little frown creased his smooth forehead, and he spoke slowly, accentuated his words as though his mind was occupied by other matters than those which formed the subject of his conversation.

“There is one thing I’d like to ask you, Mr. Sands. Perhaps you can give me the information without being disloyal to Mr. Leman,” said Jimmy, as they reached the flat door. “Where can I find Mrs. Leman?”

“You want to know where you can find Mrs. Leman,” repeated Sands carefully. “Now I am afraid that is a question which I am not in a position to answer, even if I wished to supply the information. She is somewhere about.”

“Thank you,” said Jimmy, not without a hint of sarcasm.

Sands took his key, and was inserting it in the lock when he saw for the first time that the door was not closed.

“Hallo!” he said in that level tone of his. “Didn’t I close the door when I came out?”

“I think you did,” said Jimmy, “but it was probably the woman who left it open.”

“The woman?” repeated the other quickly. “To which woman are you referring?”

“I am speaking of the woman who came out of the flat a few moments ago,” said Jimmy. “I saw her while you were telephoning.”

“Came out of the flat? Impossible!” said Mr. Sands, and pushed open the door. “It’s incredible! The housekeeper is out. She always goes out on Thursday evenings, and Miss Leman also is out,” he added. “What sort of woman was it?”

“Tallish, and not the housekeeper type; she looked rather swell,” said Jimmy. “I didn’t see her face, she was heavily veiled.”

“I will show you the way,” Sands said, and marched ahead up the stairs.

The big sitting-room which faced the street had only one occupant, and that was Mark Leman, who lay upon the sofa, his head turned from the door.

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Leman,” said John Sands, “but Mr. Cassidy has found out about the marriage.”

The figure on the sofa made no response, and John Sands walked to the window under which the sofa was drawn and peered down into his friend’s face.

“My God!” he gasped.

With a stride Jimmy was by his side. There was no need to ask the cause of Sands’ perturbation. Mark Leman was dead. The grey face, the staring eyes, the clutched hands told their story.

“Rim for the doctor, Mr. Cassidy, quick!” said Sands. “This is dreadful—dreadful!”

Jimmy had taken in the details of the apartment with the shrewd, scientific accuracy of observation which is half the reporter’s stock-in-trade. He saw the glass on the floor by the dead man’s side, and drew his conclusions. At Sands’ command he flew down the stairs into the street. Fortunately there were quite a number of doctors who had their consultation-rooms in Davis Street; moreover, he found a policeman who acted as a guide, and the first house he stopped at he found a medical man. The policeman, who had directed him, and the doctor accompanied him back to the flat, and found John Sands waiting for them in the doorway. The doctor’s examination was a short one.

“There is no doubt about it, he’s dead all right,” he said. “Has he been ill?”

John Sands shook his head.

“So far as I know, he has not been ill, although he has been very depressed,” he said.

The doctor bent down and smelt the dead man’s Ups.

“Hallo!” he said, and looked around.

He stooped and picked up from the floor by the side of the sofa a small liqueur glass, and smelt this also.

“Kümmel, and if there is no cyanide of potassium in that liquor I’m a very mistaken man.”

He turned to the policeman.

“This ought to be reported immediately to your superiors.”

“Cyanide of potassium!” repeated John Sands. “Do you suggest it’s?”

“Suicide, undoubtedly,” said the physician. “I may be mistaken, but the smell of cyanide is characteristic.”

“It’s incredible, incredible!” cried John Sands.

It was exactly twenty minutes before Blessington, of Scotland Yard, appeared on the spot, and it was’no less than providential that Blessington was put on the case, since he was the only man in the British police force whom Jimmy Cassidy knew. He raised his eyebrows at sight of the reporter.

“Hallo, Jimmy! You’re on the job first, eh?” he said. “What is this?”

He looked at the dead man and from the dead man to John Sands. In as few words as possible Sands explained what had happened.

“Has there been any kind of trouble?” asked the detective.

John hesitated.

“No, nothing unusual,” he said. “Of course, there has been rather bad feeling between himself and his niece, but for that he was entirely responsible. In fact, he was absolutely responsible,” he added energetically,

“and it is hardly necessary to mention the disagreement, except that in a case like this it is advisable that all that can be told, should be told.”

“I quite agree,” said the detective. “Where is the niece that he has quarrelled with?”

“Look here “—it was Jimmy who broke in—”you are not suggesting that the quarrel was anything but one-sided, are you, Mr. Sands?”

Again Mr. Sands hesitated.

“It was largely one-sided, and, as I said before, it was mainly Mr. Leman’s fault. He had annoyed the girl to an extent beyond understanding, and it was only human that she should turn on him. I think you should understand,” Sands went on, turning to the detective, “that Mr. Leman is a very rich man and that Miss Leman is his heiress. It was my poor friend’s delight to taunt the girl that she desired his death in order that she should inherit his money. As I say, it was to be humanly expected that there were times when she would retaliate, as she did a few days ago, and say that she wished he were dead and had taken his money with him. I am sure she was very sorry,” said he, “for being guilty of even this little outburst of temper.”

“I see,” said the detective thoughtfully. “The lady is not here now?”

“She is at a concert at the Queen’s Hall. If you like, I’ll fetch her,” said Jimmy.

“I think you had better,” said Blessington.

“Of course, it’s altogether preposterous that Miss Leman’s name should be brought into the matter at all,” said Jimmy. “It is perfectly true what Mr. Sands says, that the old man made her life a misery. But as to being his heiress, that is not true, unless he made a will, because Mr. Leman was married.”

“Married!” said the detective. “Where is his wife?”

Jimmy shook his head.

“You had better ask Mr. Sands,” said Jimmy, and took his departure.

VIII. — THE PENCILLED NOTES

HE had no difficulty in finding the girl, and in the interval between the songs he went to her and brought her outside. The news, broken as gently as Jimmy could devise, seemed to come as a terrible shock to her. She wilted, and he thought she was fainting, but by a strong effort of will she pulled herself together.

“I am stunned,” she said. “It’s dreadful! Poor, poor uncle! But, Jimmy, it couldn’t have been suicide. Uncle wasn’t that kind of man.”

“Tell me this, dear,” said Jimmy gently. “Have you had a quarrel with your uncle lately?”

She looked at him in astonishment.

“A quarrel? Yes, there was a little quarrel a few days ago,” she said. She shivered and covered her face with her hands. “And I said such dreadful things to him. Oh, I am ashamed, I am ashamed!”

Jimmy gently disengaged her hands from her face.

“Now tell me what you said, Faith. Did you say you wished he were dead?”

She was on the verge of tears and could only nod.

“Then that man Sands spoke the truth.”

She was quicker to understand the implication than he.

“Did they tell the—police that I quarrelled with him? Did they say that I—I did it?”

“Good Lord! No.”

It was Jimmy’s turn to be shocked.

Then he stopped suddenly. He knew too much about police cases to have any illusions. A policeman would build up a case against an archangel on the strength of a stray feather.

“I never thought—” he began. “Oh, snakes! It’s too stupid for words.”

Yet he was uneasy and troubled of mind as he walked by the girl's side back to the flat. These policemen in their search for a scapegoat might easily distress the girl. He knew the game—the criminal detection game—from A to Z. He knew just how far she would have to go before she was cleared from the vague atmosphere of suspicion which surrounded her. It was a most absurd, a most tragic possibility.

When they reached the flat the body had been removed by order of the detective, and the doctor had gone. Only John Sands and the detective remained. The girl was looking very white when she came in, and Blessington eyed her keenly.

"This is Miss Leman," said Sands.

"I have sent for you, Miss Leman, as you are the only relation of the late Mr. Leman—at least, the only relation in England. His wife—you knew he was married, of course?—is in Paris, according to Mr. Sands, who knows both the parties. I am going to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind."

She nodded, and Jimmy pushed a chair forward for her and she sat down.

"Has your uncle shown any signs of worry lately?" asked the detective.

"None," said the girl promptly.

"Has he been unusually depressed?"

"No, I can't say that he has been depressed. He has never been very bright with me," she said with an attempt to smile.

"So I understand," said the detective. "But had he ever mentioned in your presence the possibility of suicide, even in a joking way?"

"Never," said the girl. "It's the last thing I should imagine my uncle would do."

"He has not had any pecuniary losses, to your knowledge?"

"No," she said. "As far as I know, my uncle is a very rich man, and he would find it difficult to lose the money he has accumulated."

"Do you see this glass?"

He held up the little liqueur glass, which still contained a teaspoonful of colourless fluid at the bottom.

“Yes,” she said.

“Is it the glass into which you usually pour a liqueur for your uncle?”

“Yes,” answered the girl. “I poured two glasses for my uncle every night. There is the other glass,” she pointed to the sideboard, “untouched.”

“That I have seen,” said the detective. “Now, can you tell me this, Miss Leman: was it not the practice of your uncle to have a glass of Kümmel ready for Mr. Sands when he arrived and one for himself? Was that not also his practice in the case of other visitors?”

“Yes,” said the girl, “it was, although our other visitors were very rare.”

“Did your uncle show any method in his drinking? That is to say, did he always drink out of the glass nearest the window, or did he choose either at random?”

“Mr. Sands can tell you more about that,” she said. “I was very seldom present when the liqueur was drunk. I am under the impression that he invariably took the same glass.”

“So that if you had filled one of those glasses,” said the detective, “you would know pretty well which one your uncle would drink and which would be drunk by the guest?”

“Yes, I think I should,” said the girl.

Then suddenly she half rose from her chair and demanded: “What do you suggest?”

“I’m suggesting nothing,” said Mr. Blessington. “I’m merely trying to get at the truth. Now keep quiet, Jimmy.” He held up his hand to silence the reporter’s protest.

“You’re in this case because you’re a friend of Miss Leman. You know I have my job to do, Jimmy, and it’s got to be done.”

“But the inference is wicked,” stormed Jimmy, “wicked! It’s monstrous to suggest—”

“I’m suggesting nothing,” said the detective quietly. “I’m asking Miss Leman certain vital questions. You have had a quarrel with your uncle, have you not, Miss Leman?”

“I had a little quarrel with him a few days ago,” said the girl, looking at John Sands. “I told Mr. Sands about it.” John Sands inclined his head slowly.

“That is perfectly true, as I have explained to Mr. Blessington. I have also taken the liberty of telling him the conditions under which you were living and the terribly trying time you had at the hands of your uncle.”

“When you left this evening, did you leave those two glasses filled?”

“Yes,” said the girl.

“Did you fill them with your own hands?”

“Yes.”

“You knew that Mr. Sands was coming?”

“Yes, my uncle told me so. He said lie had a very important matter to discuss with Mr. Sands, and when I told him that I was going to a concert he seemed very pleased. He was particularly anxious that I should leave early.”

“What time did the concert start?” asked the detective. “Half-past seven.”

“And he had arranged to meet Mr. Sands at eight, so I presume you left somewhere about a quarter-past seven?” The girl shook her head.

“No, that was the curious thing about it. He asked me to be out of the house by half-past six.”

“Did he make any other request to you?”

“Yes, he asked me to leave writing materials on the table. There they are now,” she said, pointing to a pad of paper and a pencil.

Blessington made a few notes in his book and turned to John Sands.

“You say that Mrs. Leman lives in Paris. Has she lived there ever since her marriage?”

“She has,” replied Sands. “So far as I know, that is.”

“Were you in communication with her?”

John Sands hesitated.

“There is no need for me to make a mystery about it,” he said. “I was. Mr. Leman married this lady and they separated immediately. It was my duty to send her a monthly allowance, which was on a very generous scale.”

“Have you seen the lady, Mr. Sands?”

“Once,” said Sands. “She came to England and spent a little time here, but she did not see her husband.”

The detective nodded.

“Well, I shall be glad to see that lady, and as soon as she arrives in London I hope you will notify me. At present,” he said, closing his book and putting it in his pocket, “it looks very much like a very ordinary case of suicide, but I shall have to get a few more facts to put before the coroner—there will have to be an inquest, of course.”

He looked at the girl not unkindly.

“Where shall we find you, Miss Leman, if we should want you?”

She shook her head hopelessly.

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Have you no friends in London?”

She looked at Jimmy.

“I have no girl friends,” she said, “but Mr. Cassidy may be able to help me. I think I will go to an hotel.”

“Sure thing,” said Jimmy promptly. “Come along and stay at my hotel. There are one or two American ladies there who will look after you. You know the ‘Magnificent,’ Blessington? That will be Miss Leman’s address.”

“Good for you,” said the detective cheerfully. “Now, Jimmy, take this lady off, and come back and see me here. I’m going to put through a report to the central office, but you’ll find me here on your return.”

The detective was alone when Jimmy got back. Mr. Sands had gone off to get into communication with Paris and to compose his own disturbed mind.

“Well, Jimmy,” greeted Blessington, “this is a queer case.”

“Queer in many respects,” replied Jimmy. “Say, Blessington, you’re not suspecting that girl?”

Blessington smiled.

“I’ve suspected many more unlikely people in my life,” he said. “It’s pretty tough on you, Jimmy. I’m afraid you are rather—”

“I love every hair of her head,” said Jimmy quietly. “That girl is to me all the sweetness and colour of life.”

“I thought so,” said Blessington. “In many ways it looks a little black, and in many ways, of course, it does not. People have quarrels every day of their lives without designing murder, and, if this is a murder, it is one of the most coldblooded type that has ever been committed. It’s the work of a criminal, and, Jimmy, murderers are not as a rule criminals.”

Jimmy smiled.

“Why do you smile?” asked the other.

“I was just remembering my magnum opus that was interrupted a few days ago. In one of the chapters I was strong for exactly the same kind of stuff that you are giving me now. I agree that murderers are not criminals, and there isn’t any accident in this murder—if it is a murder. A man who shoots another in the heat of temper or jealousy does something which revolts him in his calmer moments. But who said this was a murder, anyway?”

Blessington looked at him curiously.

“Jimmy, honestly, is this suicide? You know the game almost as well as I do. I suppose you’ve covered a dozen murder cases and you are acquainted with half a hundred suicides. I ask you for a fair judgment—is this suicide?” Jimmy was silent.

“There’s something queer about it, certainly,” he said at last. “The queerest thing of all is why the old man wanted to be alone an hour and a half before the arrival of Sands, and why By Heaven! the woman!”

“The what?” asked the detective.

“The woman,” said Jimmy rapidly. “After Sands came in and found the old man asleep, as he thought, we walked to the end of the street. While Sands was telephoning I strolled round the corner just in time to see a woman come out of the flat. She was a lady, I should say, and rather graceful. I didn’t see her face, as she was heavily veiled, which struck me as being curious, because people in this country, even when they are in mourning, do not veil themselves heavily.”

“How long did she stand outside the door?”

“Not a second,” said Jimmy. “She hesitated for a moment, then turned and walked in the direction of Berkeley Square, and that’s the last I saw of her.”

“Did anybody else see her?”

“No: Sands was in the store telephoning, but when he came out I told him, and in corroboration of my story we found that the door was ajar.”

“That’s important,” said the detective. “I wish you’d told me before. You’re sure of it?”

“Absolutely certain.”

Blessington walked up and down the apartment, his hands thrust into his pockets.

“Put on all the lights, Jimmy, and let’s see what we can find in the room.”

They went carefully over the floor, moved the sofa and the sideboard, but there was no evidence that helped to elucidate the mystery of Mark Leman’s sudden death.

“That door leads to the bedroom,” said the detective, pointing to a door behind the head of the sofa. “I have made a cursory examination of the room and found nothing.”

“Was there nothing on the body?”

“Nothing worth speaking about,” replied Blessington.

“I suppose that paper’s of no account?” said Jimmy.

He had seen a tiny triangle of white, evidently the corner of a paper which had been thrust into the crevice between the sofa back and seat. He pulled it out. It was a plain sheet of paper covered with pencil writing.

“Look! This is the pad the girl put for him. It’s probably the same kind of paper that he usually used for notes.”

Blessington opened the paper, smoothed its creases, and carried it to the window.

“Do you know Leman’s writing?”

“Yes,” said Jimmy. “I have seen any amount of it. He used to give me rough notes of the stories I wrote about him.”

Looking over the detective’s shoulder, he read:

“Suevic: Plymouth; April 30th.”

Beneath this was the figure “£100,” which had been scratched out and then “£300” substituted. Beneath this again were the words: “Registered letter care the purser.” Beneath this: “Bank of Australia 24th June, 25th September, etc.” Here followed a number which had been scratched out. The notes went on: “C.P. 1—17941—20—Poison.”

“What do you know about that, Jimmy? Queer, isn’t it?” said the detective.

He picked up the pad on the table and carried it to the light.

“That was written to-day,” he said. “Look here at the indentations on the paper where he pressed hard on the pencil. It was written on that table some time between the girl’s departure and Sands’ arrival. This discovery is pretty significant. What do you make of it, Jimmy?”

“He must have been interviewing somebody, probably the woman,” suggested Jimmy. “Those are the kind of notes the old man made.”

“Would they have to do with his business affairs?” asked the detective.

Jimmy shook his head.

“They look like notes he had jotted down to remind him of something,” he said.

Blessington folded the paper and put it in his pocket-book. “Now let us look at that liqueur glass.”

He carried the glass to the light, holding it carefully by the stem.

“We shall probably find one or two finger-marks,” he said, “but I don’t think that will help us, because they are probably Miss Leman’s, as she filled the glasses. Do you notice anything about it?”

“Yes,” said Jimmy quietly. “Somebody has drunk from that glass.”

“I think so,” said the detective. “Somebody has taken just a little sip. There are the marks outside the glass, the true curve of the lower lip. Let me reconstruct the crime. The old man has received a visitor who is of such importance, or whose business is of such a delicate nature, that he insisted upon his niece being out when she arrives. There is some sort of conversation between them, and for reasons best known to herself the visitor drops the dope in the old man’s glass, hands it to him, and he dies.”

“Your theory is pretty good up to a point,” said Jimmy, “but there are one or two things that you’ve got to clear up. How long would it take for that dose to work?”

“About four seconds, according to the doctor,” said the detective. “If the other theory is correct, the old man was sitting at the table writing—he was hardly likely to be lying down whilst discussing important business with his lady visitor.”

“Therefore,” said Jimmy, “if he drunk the poison he would have dropped dead upon the floor. Now the fact is that he was found, not on the floor, but on the sofa.”

“There’s something in that,” said the detective. “Of course, he might very easily have been lying down when the glass was handed to him—and the glass was found by the side of the sofa.”

“In which case,” said Jimmy, “the visitor must have been somebody very well known to him, and with whom he felt perfectly at ease.”

“While you had gone to the hotel with Miss Leman, and knowing nothing about this mysterious lady visitor, I made a few inquiries which led to the impression that no stranger had been inside this house between the hours of half-past six and ten minutes past eight, until Mr. John Sands came in with you.”

Jimmy nodded.

“You can’t get away from the woman,” he said.

Another detective officer from Scotland Yard arrived a few minutes later, armed with necessary documents.

“I’ll make a search of the flat,” said Blessington, and went rapidly through the five rooms that constituted the ménage. At the threshold of the last room he stopped.

“I must go through the formality of searching here as well as the others,” he apologised, and Jimmy nodded.

It was a sacrilege that a policeman should examine this holy of holies, but he knew that it was useless to protest. Swiftly Blessington made his examination, and came at last to the small bureau in which Faith kept her few precious possessions.

Under a heap of handkerchiefs he found in a small cedar-wood box a tiny phial of colourless liquid.

“What’s this?” he said.

He removed the cork and smelt it, and his face went blank.

“Oh, hell!” he said in dismay, speaking to himself.

“What is it?” asked Jimmy.

“Cyanide of potassium, unless my nose is at fault.”

The detective smelt it again.

“Send it to the office for examination,” he said.

“And if,” he said to Jimmy, “as I think it does, this bottle contains cyanide of potassium, I shall arrest Miss Leman to-night.”

IX. — JOHN SANDS OWNS UP

IT was two o'clock in the morning when John Sands came to the door in answer to the frantic pealing, and found a haggard Jimmy Cassidy.

"Come in. What is wrong?" asked John Sands. "You look as if you'd found trouble."

"They have arrested her," said Jimmy huskily. "Isn't it awful?"

"Arrested whom?" asked John Sands.

"Whom? Why, Miss Leman, of course," said Jimmy. "It's your damned fault! Why did you insist on telling Blessington that they had quarrelled? What object had you in getting this girl into trouble?"

"You're mad," said Sands, "and you're rattled too. Have this glass of wine."

Jimmy waved the glass aside.

"I don't want your wine, and I don't want any smoothing down. I'm not a fool, Sands. In my game we haven't any very great respect for human honesty and precious little faith in the kind of disinterestedness which you have so often shown. I want the truth out of you, and I'm not going away until I get it. Who was the woman?"

"I don't know which woman you're referring to," said. John Sands patiently, "but I have a dim idea that you mean the woman whom you said you saw coming from the flat. Nobody else saw her but you."

"The door was open, anyway; you don't deny that," said Jimmy, and for a moment John Sands was taken aback.

"That is perfectly true," he said. "I had not thought of that. Yes, somebody had left the door open. I cannot imagine that it was I."

"Nor can I," said Jimmy, "because I saw the door close. I examined the lock, which is a Yale, before I came away this evening. Forgive me if I am a bit abrupt, but you're right when you say I'm rattled," he went on. "I know you have no evil intentions, but I'm just half crazy with anxiety."

Mr. Sands laid a sympathetic hand upon the young man's shoulder.

“I know just how you’re feeling.”

“Hullo! you’ve hurt yourself,” said Jimmy.

The hand which had fallen upon his shoulder was neatly bandaged.

“It is nothing,” said Sands, “nothing at all. I just bruised myself this evening. Well, to be truthful, I was a little anxious because I have been bitten.”

“Bitten?”

“By a dog. A strange cur got through the larder window and attacked me.”

“Your face is scratched, Mr. Sands,” said Jimmy.

“It is nothing, it is nothing,” said Sands impatiently. “I cut myself when I was shaving. About Miss Leman: believe me, I will give you every assistance which lies in my power. You can command me, and so far as money is required for her defence. I am not a rich man, but I feel that I should only be doing what Mark Leman would wish me to do. He had a very kind heart really, and his unpleasantness was more or less superficial. I am satisfied in my mind that behind all this snarling of his he had a genuine affection and pride for his niece.”

He spoke earnestly, and there was in his voice a note that was wholly sincere.

“I, myself,” he went on, “do not for one moment believe that she was guilty of such an atrocious act. In fact, I am perfectly sure,” he said emphatically, “that Miss Leman did not commit this crime—if it is a crime.”

“Do you think it is murder?” asked Jimmy, who had grown suddenly quiet and calm.

“I doubt it.”

Mr. Sands shook his head.

“He was a very curious man, and had ways which could not, by any stretch of imagination, be described as normal,” he said. “I think there were moments, indeed, when he was quite mad, and a man who has moments of insanity is liable to commit suicide. I do know that there were times when he was depressed to an extraordinary degree. Little things worried him—little,

that is to say, to a man of his wealth—such as the falling of stocks. I know he used to brood on those occasions when the market was going against him. But you have not told me the circumstances of Miss Leman's arrest."

Jimmy did not reply for a moment. He took out his case and lit a cigarette.

"Miss Leman was arrested by Blessington, because he found in her bureau a small bottle of cyanide of potassium in a liquid form."

"Did she explain how she came by it?"

"She said that she had received it by post, wrapped up in a handbill advertising a stain-remover. The detective made inquiries of the local chemist, which was open, and found that the stain-remover, which is a well-advertised brand, was of a different colour and bore no relation whatever to the liquid found in Miss Leman's bureau. Upon that evidence the police decided upon arresting Miss Leman, who surrendered at Bow Street half an hour ago."

He spoke carefully, but there was a quiver in his voice which told something of Jimmy Cassidy's agony.

Mr. Sands shook his head.

"An extraordinary story," he said. "Tell me this: has any woman the right or the excuse to be jealous of Miss Leman?"

Jimmy looked at him in surprise.

"Woman?" he repeated. "As far as I am aware, she knows no woman—"

Then an interruption came—a sound terrifying and dreadful. Somewhere outside the room rose a sobbing wail like that of a soul in torture. It rose in a shuddering crescendo, a long "Oh!" of exquisite misery, then fell again to silence.

The two men looked at one another.

"What was that?" asked Jimmy, who was, if anything, a shade paler than he had been when he came in.

"That is my pet cat," John Sands smiled quietly. "Sometimes when I am reading here a howl goes up and I jump half out of my seat. You don't know

my pet cat," he said jestingly; "but we are getting off a very serious subject. In case we are interrupted again I'll go and drive this infernal thing from the premises."

Jimmy sat down and raised his shaking hand to take his cigarette from his lips. He heard Sands' voice shooing away some invisible animal, the opening and closing of a door, a faint thud, and then after a brief space of time his host reappeared.

"I am so sorry, but that soon gets on one's nerves, if you're not used to it," he said.

"You seem to have been in the wars to-day; cats by night and dogs by day, Mr. Sands," said Jimmy.

Sands laughed.

"I am leading a cat and dog life," he said good-humouredly. "Now I'll come out with you. I shall think better in the open air, and I'm not at all inclined to sleep."

They paced the deserted streets together, and Mr. Sands set forth his own views with thought and lucidity.

"I regret that I have been brought into this business at all," he said, "much against my will. I'll make a very frank statement to you, Cassidy. You're a newspaper man, and you'll probably be investigating the affairs of everybody in connection with this tragedy. It is only natural that suspicion attaches to people, that the motives of everybody should be investigated; and when I say it is natural, I mean that it is proper. I myself would not shrink from the ordeal. I knew Mark Leman more or less well. I met him on a steamship coming across from America, and we became friends—of a kind. I believe I am the only friend he has in London, and I am not disguising from you the fact that I did cultivate the acquaintance because I thought that sooner or later he might be able to do me a good turn. I have a business in the United States which has not been going too well. I hate business of all kinds, but if I am in business I do demand of it that it should support me. My income has been growing steadily less and less, owing largely to the competition of other corporations which are engaged in manufacturing the same kind of article as myself, and manufacturing them on more up-to-date lines. I recognised some two years ago that it would be necessary to reorganise the whole of my factory and to secure new capital. But new capital is shy, unless the man who requires it is himself known as a great worker or a

genius, or is, at least, taking some active part in his business. That I am not, and have not been for years. I hoped, however, to secure the necessary assistance from my poor friend, Mark Leman. I mentioned the fact to him the other evening, and told him that I had been very useful to him, both in assisting him in securing his wife and in maintaining the extraordinary relationship between them. I told him the amount of money I required, and he promised to write to me. He sent me a note this very night—or rather, last night," he said, looking up at the grey light of dawn which was in the sky, "asking me to come and see him and talk the matter over at eight o'clock. Well, you can understand, Mr. Cassidy, that it was a fairly serious matter for me. If Mark Leman had decided that he could not accede to my request—and I had a very uncomfortable feeling that that was going to be so, since he took the trouble to send a note to me by special messenger—then I had to go back to America, take off my coat, which I just hate the idea of doing, and work, not only to restore the profits of the business which had fallen off so badly, but work in an atmosphere which was wholly uncongenial. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly," said Jimmy.

"Eighteen months ago I suggested to Mr. Leman that, as he was intent on marriage for the purpose of disappointing his relations, he should marry a lady who would accommodate herself to his peculiar eccentricities, namely, that he should marry a woman who would never bother him again and who would leave him to live his bachelor life. At first he rejected the idea, but eventually he consented. It so happened," said Mr. Sands carefully, "that I had made the acquaintance of a very charming lady who was, from certain peculiar circumstances, particularly suitable for this kind of arrangement, and the marriage was duly celebrated in a little seaside town of which you know. You understand I am making, so to speak, a clean breast of my part in this marriage. I had no interest but a purely selfish desire to curry favour with Mr. Leman, and of having some sort of right to his—"

"That also I understand," said Jimmy wearily; "but honestly, Mr. Sands, I am less interested in your personal affairs than I am in the fate and future of my poor Faith. I tell you, I just feel as though I could tear down every stone of the police-station—it is madness, madness! Can't you help some, Mr. Sands? You're a man of influence in this town. Maybe when she comes before the judge tomorrow—"

"Magistrate," corrected Mr. Sands.

“Whoever he is,” said Jimmy impatiently, “can’t you get up and say all you know and obtain her release?”

Mr. Sands shook his head.

“I doubt it,” he said. “The police have taken the matter in hand, and you cannot influence the police. Apparently, the evidence they have against her will give the magistrate a prima facie case which will justify his holding her for trial.”

Jimmy turned on him.

“Perhaps Mrs. Leman could help,” he said quietly.

There was a silence.

“Mrs. Leman is hardly likely to give evidence,” said John Sands after a moment, “since she is in France and can know nothing whatever about the circumstances.”

“Mrs. Leman was in Davis Street last night,” said Jimmy. “She was the woman who came to see old man Leman at half-past six. It was because he was meeting her that he sent his niece out at that hour, and she was with him until nearly eight o’clock, at which time I saw her.”

There was a silence, longer than the previous one.

“You are altogether wrong,” said Sands. “If you say you saw a lady, I, of course, believe you,” he said slowly, “but that it was Mrs. Leman is absolutely impossible. I will go farther and say that I am satisfied in my mind that there was somebody in the house, somebody of whom we know nothing. It is very possible that that person may be able to give us a great deal of information as to how and why the tragedy occurred. But again I repeat that it was not, and could not have been, Mrs. Leman.”

He thought a moment, shook his head, and repeated:

“It could not have been.”

His attitude conveyed a curious sense of dejection, and it was accentuated when he pulled himself up and spoke briskly, his old self for the first time since that dreadful night.

“I’ll give you every assistance I can, and I’ll be at the court to-morrow at ten o’clock,” he said. “You can instruct my lawyers to defend Miss Leman—Johnson and Hackett, of Temple Yard.”

“I’ve already arranged,” said Jimmy, “but thank you all the same. I shall see you in court. There is nothing you can think of? Is it possible to get bail?”

Sands shook his head.

“I’m afraid that is altogether out of the question,” he said. “When a charge of this character is made, bail is never given under any circumstances.”

He shook hands with the young man, who, turning, strode away. Jimmy watched him till he was nearly out of sight, and then followed him stealthily.

X. — AT 79, CHARLES STREET

HE gave Sands plenty of time. He wanted leisure himself, to think out his plan of action, so he came to Charles Street, not by the usual direct way, but by a circuitous route which brought him to the long mews which ran at the back of Charles Street, and from which there was access to some of the houses.

One of these was that in which Sands lived. He had to wait some time before he put his plan into operation, because a belated motor-car had hummed into the mews to its garage, and it was nearly half an hour before the chauffeur had locked up and taken his departure.

The back entrance of 79, Charles Street was a small wicket door, which was locked. The wall was eight feet high, and apparently surmounted by a chevaux de frise. A little farther along, however, the top of the wall was free from this obstacle, and it was here that Jimmy made his leap, and, catching the rough edge on the top of the wall, drew himself up and sat astride. On the other side there was a small, lean-to bicycle shed, situated in the tiny yard of the house next to 79. To walk along the top of the parting wall was the work of a few seconds, and he dropped lightly into Mr. John Sands' backyard. He found himself in a flagged space confronting a small side door and a large barred window; at his feet was a grating which apparently ventilated the cellar beneath the house. He tried the door gingerly, and to his amazement it yielded to his touch. Either a careless servant or Mr. Sands himself, in a moment of unusual laxity, had forgotten to lock it. He was in a passage which led him to a cross passage, to the kitchen in one direction, to the living-room in the other. He stooped, unlaced and removed his shoes, wondering as he did so what explanation he would give to the mild-mannered Mr. Sands if he were detected in this act of burglary.

What he expected to find he did not know. He had only the vaguest suspicions, as yet formless, without beginning or end in his mind, but he was certain that 79, Charles Street held, if not the master key to many mysteries, at least a key which would unlock Faith Leman from her prison cell. Jimmy was a crime man who had served his apprenticeship in the unravelment of big and unbelievable stories. He knew the bad men of New York City in the days when they were really bad, and he had come by the news "beats" which had made him famous in many unconventional ways. He was taking now no greater risk than he took that night he ransacked the apartment of Big Jim Macgee, and had come out of the room to find himself confronted by that notorious gunman.

The house was silent. If Sands had returned, he must have retired immediately to bed. There was no glimmer of light either in the hall or at either end. He felt his way along carefully, and turned a sharp corner into the large corridor, where he stood upright, white and shaking, every hair standing on end with the terror of the unknown.

It was that "Oh!" that wailing shriek of agony, that sustained sob which rose with most awful shrillness, which arrested him in his path. He heard the sound of footsteps and hastened to get back to the shelter of the side passage. In doing so he knocked over a tray which had evidently been placed against the wall. The clatter would have raised the dead, but it brought no visible enemy. He crouched against the wall, one eye round the angle, his boots under one arm and himself ready to fly, but the shuffling footsteps had ceased. He waited a few seconds, and was slipping cautiously into the larger passage when a big hand fell on his shoulder and jerked him back.

Twing!

Something flew past his face. He felt the air of it. Another hand was clapped against his mouth and a voice in his ear hissed:

"Come! don't make a trouble."

Something within him made him obey, and he was led through the corridor out into the backyard, whilst his companion closed the door behind.

"Over the wall quickly," he whispered fiercely.

Jimmy obeyed. He scrambled over the wall, and shortly his companion was standing by his side.

"Never mind about your boots," said the voice. "Get out into open country."

Open country was represented by the southern end of Charles Street. Here Jimmy slipped on his boots and laced them hastily.

"See here," he said, "I don't know who you are."

There was a chuckle of laughter from the man, and Jimmy Cassidy looked into his face.

"Jumping great Moses!" he said. "Blessington!"

The detective nodded.

“Jimmy, you had the escape of your life to-night,” he said, graver than was his wont.

“You were there?”

“I was in the larder watching you—but there was nothing for you to find, Jimmy. I did a whole lot of investigation whilst you were walking Mr. Sands round the houses. You see, I came in just as you were going out.”

“Did you hear it?” shivered Jimmy.

“I heard it—the shriek, you mean?”

“For God’s sake, what was it?”

“That is exactly what I was trying to discover while you were out,” said Blessington. “I heard it as I got over the wall to come in, and it nearly scared me to death. It sounded like a cat.”

“That’s what Sands said it was,” said Jimmy, and then suddenly: “Why did you come? Do you suspect him?”

“I suspect everybody,” said Blessington; “that is my business. I suspect you of being a fool, Jimmy. You ran all sorts of risks to-night. Did you realise that where you were standing in the corridor there was a white cupboard behind you?”

Jimmy had noticed the fact in a general way, without, however, attaching any importance to the circumstance.

“You were visible against that, and I thought our friend would get you.”

“He didn’t shoot,” said Jimmy.

“He didn’t use a gun, certainly,” said the detective. “It sounded to me rather like an arrow. Have you noticed the walls of his sanctum are covered with—oh, no! you have not seen his sanctum,” and he chuckled again. “When you do, you will discover that there are all sorts of bows and arrows on hand, and Sands probably knows how to use them. I should say he had spent some time in the East or in the Islands. The wooden masks over his desk are distinctly Papuan.”

“But the thing that shrieked—did you find that?”

“I did not,” said the detective. “I had bad luck. I was hoping to hear it again. The first scream came as I was getting over the wall and nearly scared me to death, but when it came the second time it was too late to investigate.”

“It seemed to come from the cellar,” said Jimmy.

“I thought so myself, but I have inspected the cellar and there’s nothing suspicious about that. I looked everywhere, and I guess it must have been the cat all right.”

“There was no cat,” said Jimmy, “I’ll swear to that. But what were you doing there, Blessington, in John Sands’ house?”

“I want to know a little more about Mr. Sands, and it struck me as being an excellent opportunity to. There are things about this case, Jimmy, which strike me as being distinctly weird. By the way, you will be pleased to know that we have released Miss Leman.”

“You have released her?” said Jimmy, gripping the other’s hand. “You don’t mean that. Where is she?”

“She’s in her hotel and in bed, I hope,” said the detective. “Now, don’t be a fool, Jimmy. I should pinch her again to-morrow if I had the slightest suspicion that there’s anything to back up the evidence which has been produced against her. Aw! Jimmy, you great goop!”

Jimmy, oblivious to the other’s good-natured contempt, was shaking from head to foot like an hysterical schoolgirl.

“I’m nutty, I think,” he said. “It isn’t the release, but because I know you fellows well enough to know that you wouldn’t loose her unless you were sure she was innocent.”

“Quite right,” said the detective. “We had corroboration of the story about the cyanide having come by post. Fortunately, Miss Leman showed it to the housekeeper and asked her how it should be used. They both decided that it shouldn’t be used at all until they knew its properties. That was point No. 1. Point No. 2 was the woman who left the Davis Street flat, and whom you saw, was also seen by one of our plain-clothes men. He had a good view of her, though he did not see her face. She stopped at the corner of Berkeley

Square to post a letter in a long envelope, which she had in her hand when she left the flat. There's nothing unusual about a woman leaving a Davis Street flat to post a letter in Berkeley Square, and our man thought no more of it until after the tragedy was reported. Fact No 3," said the detective, "is that somebody had drunk that glass of Kümmel which had been placed in readiness for Mr. Sands, and had refilled the glass from the bottle. You remember that the bottle of Kümmel was standing on the sideboard?" Jimmy nodded.

"Well, again, fortunately, Miss Leman had filled the glasses in the presence of the housekeeper, and the housekeeper had put the bottle away in the cupboard. In fact, my dear Jimmy, it would have been a sin and a shame to have left that young lady in a police cell for one minute longer. She was never under arrest, you must remember. She was what we call on this side 'detained,' and I took it upon myself to release her, no formal charge having been made."

"Well, thank Heaven for that!" said Jimmy. "I shall sleep to-night. It would be cruelty to disturb her—I'd like to see her—"

"It would be worse than cruelty," said the practical detective, "it would be silly. Now, Jimmy, you're a pretty smart fellow, or I wouldn't have allowed you to make my acquaintance. You're out for big stories and I'm out for big crimes. You know more about crooks than many of our men will learn in a month of Sundays—will you help me in this case?"

"It's a question whether you will help me," said Jimmy grimly. "It's true I'm out for the story—a million-dollar story. Say, Blessington, there's a man living in the lap of luxury at the Carlton, a fat, smooth man who owns an American newspaper, who's just aching to give me a million dollars for something worth printing."

"You shall have that—I mean something worth printing,"' said Blessington, "and I think you'll get it the day you lay your hands upon the woman in black and discover what was the nature of the document she posted in Berkeley Square."

XI. — THE FINGER-PRINT

JOHN SANDS had a horror of discomfort and disturbance. For this reason he held in abhorrence representatives of society who departed from their normal services to him and his like. He judged them not by the standard of righteousness; whether they were good or bad, evil or virtuous. Their moral qualities had no interest for him. Therefore, he did not complain because burglars burgled, but because burglary was a disturbance to his serenity. So long as the burglar kept to proper service, he did not distress Mr. Sands. The butcher who delivered his meat, or the cabman who drove him, might with impunity harbour evil or lawless thoughts, just so long as they did not run into electric standards or bring him tough meat. A burglar was no more a criminal in his eyes than was the laundry man who sent him home a frayed and discoloured shirt in place of the perfect linen he had dispatched.

He came to the district police station at eleven o'clock the following morning with a complaint which on the face of it was justifiable.

"I hate bothering the police," he said. (By the greatest of good luck Blessington had called only a few minutes before.) "But the fact is I've had a burglary in my house, and I understand that it is necessary to notify this fact if I am to recover what the burglar has stolen—not," he added, "that I have, as yet, missed anything."

"Quite right," said Blessington, taking control of the proceedings. "When did this outrage occur?"

"In the early hours of the morning," replied John Sands with a little nod of recognition. "Good morning, Mr. Blessington. I see there is truth in the saying that if you're in the hands of the police once, you're in their hands three times."

"This makes twice," said Blessington.

He was a lean, brown-faced man, who very seldom smiled, but there was a twinkle in his eye.

"It happened about two o'clock," Mr. Sands went on. "I had returned home after talking with Mr. Cassidy, and I was sitting in my smoke-room, a little room in which I write, which is just off my bedroom, when I heard, as I thought, a noise downstairs."

Blessington nodded.

“Where is this place?” he asked blandly.

“At 79, Charles Street,” said Mr. Sands. “It is a very modest house, but I thought you knew it.”

“79, Charles Street,” repeated the detective, making elaborate notes. “I’m sorry. Go on, Mr. Sands.”

“I had no weapon at all in the house,” said Mr. Sands, “and so I took down with me a bow and a couple of arrows. I have a collection of these weapons which I brought from Borneo, and I am rather an efficient shot. I saw one of the miscreants and fired at him, but apparently missed. They scrambled out into the little courtyard at the back, got over the wall, and escaped.”

“Did you follow them?”

“No,” said Mr. Sands with a little smile. “I didn’t feel inclined to follow them.”

“A more important question,” said Blessington: “did you miss anything?”

“No,” said Mr. Sands, “nothing whatever. Apparently I disturbed them.”

“I think I will see your place, Mr. Sands,” said Blessington promptly.

“I assure you nothing is missing,” said Sands very quickly.

“Nevertheless, when a burglary is reported, it is customary to make this inspection. There might be finger-marks and that sort of thing on the window-panes.”

“Very good,” said Mr. Sands. “I am naturally reluctant to have the police in my house,” he chuckled a little, “but if it will be of any assistance to you, by all means come.”

To Blessington this was a heaven-sent opportunity. He never thought for one moment that Sands would complain to the police about the midnight visitation. He strode again by Sands’ side, discussing the coming cricket season, the possibilities of the king’s colt winning the Derby—two subjects which interest all good Britishers—and Mr. Sands found him a pleasant companion. The inspection of the house was a brief one. Blessington passed through the dining-room, the common room, went upstairs, examined the

bedroom, the bathroom, and the sanctuary, and came down to complete his inspection below.

The ground floor consisted only of the large room which ran from the front of the house to the back (and was, in fact, two rooms knocked into one), the kitchen and larder and a servery. In the bigger passage Blessington stopped.

“What have you had here?” he said, pointing to dust-marks.

He had a very excellent reason for knowing what Mr. Sands had had there.

“Oh, that was a cupboard which was rather in the way—just an ordinary portable wardrobe that became rather a nuisance.”

“What colour?” asked Blessington curiously.

“Enamelled white,” said Mr. Sands.

“Did the thieves remove it?” said Blessington.

Mr. Sands thought the question a humorous one.

“No; as a matter of fact I sent it away this morning. I ordered a motor lorry and sent it along to my place in the country.”

“Now,” said Blessington, “would you be kind enough to bring me the bow and arrow you used to shoot at your burglar?”

The other looked at him in surprise.

“Surely you don’t want that?” he said. “That would hardly incriminate the burglar so much as it would me.”

“I should like to see it. I intended asking when I was upstairs.”

“And I was trying to show you,” said Sands, “but you were so quick in leaving my study—but I’ll get it for you.” The walls of the passage were of yellow distemper. One was flooded by a small square patch of sunlight from the window in the opposite wall, and in the very centre of that sunny patch was a distinct finger-print—a faint impression and one liable to escape the untrained eye.

“Blood,” said Blessington to himself, and waited till he heard Sands’ foot upon the stairs. Then he took from his waistcoat pocket a tiny camera, focused it on to the print and snapped it. Three times he turned the film and three times he photographed the tell-tale mark. The camera was back in his pocket and he was examining the cross passage when Mr. Sands appeared with the ornate bow and a handful of deadly little arrows.

“Pretty,” said Blessington. “I’m not sure that this is not a better method than using a gun. Do you think you got your man?”

“I hope I didn’t,” said John Sands. “I was very angry at the time, but I shouldn’t like to feel that I had injured a fellow-creature. These arrow-heads are difficult to get out once they penetrate the flesh.”

Blessington examined the barbed blade of an arrow and handed it back to its owner.

“By the way,” he said, as they strolled back to the sitting-room, “have you heard from Mrs. Leman? The inquest is fixed for the day after to-morrow.”

“Strangely enough,” said Mr. Sands, “I had a letter from her this morning—rather an embarrassing letter, as it eventually proved.”

He opened a small place in the wall and took out an envelope which bore the Paris postmark. The date, however, was very indistinct and useless for the purposes of identification.

“You would like to see the letter probably?” said Sands, handing the document over.

It was headed “Café de Lyons”; and the date was two days before.

Dear Mr. Sands (it ran), I am growing so tired of Paris that I have decided to go away, and I am writing this in a restaurant a quarter of an hour before the train leaves. I shall go first to Marseilles, after which my movements will be undecided. I may go on to Narbonne, to Barcelona and Spain, or I may go to San Remo, to Rome, or even farther afield. It is no use writing to my eccentric husband, because he does not answer my letters. Will you tell him from me what are my plans? Thank you so much for the £1,000 you sent me, which arrived quite safely. You may possibly find it difficult to act for me, and so I am sending you the general power-of-attorney which was drafted after my marriage. By this you will see that you are authorised to act for me in all and any circumstances.

Faithfully yours,

Margaret Leman.

“And here is the power of attorney.”

John Sands handed the document to the detective, who opened it and examined its contents.

“This is drafted in English,” he said.

“That is so,” said Sands. “It was drafted for Mrs. Leman before she left this country at her request, and at the suggestion of Mr. Leman. It is the first time she has ever issued such an instrument in my favour, and under the circumstances I shall myself be involved in a great deal of complicated and unpleasant work.”

The detective held the legal document to the light. The watermarks were two years before. The deed was signed and witnessed by Mark Leman himself!

“It was executed soon after her marriage,” said Sands. “As I say, she has never had any occasion to use it, and I wish she hadn’t sent it on now.”

Blessington handed the document back without a word.

“May I come and see you in two hours’ time?” he said.

“With all the pleasure in the world,” said Mr. Sands.

“I see your hand is hurt,” said Blessington, pointing to the bandage.

“Yes, I was telling Cassidy that I was snapped at by a dog.”

An hour later the detective returned.

“I want to see your kitchen,” he said, and Mr. Sands led the way.

Blessington did not want to see the kitchen, but he wanted to see the wall and the finger-print. He saw the wall, but the finger-print had disappeared, and there was ample evidence that it had been painted over.

“I don’t know whether you noticed,” said Sands, when his inspection of the kitchen was finished, “but I made a discovery after you left which leads me to believe that I must have injured one of the men who broke in last night.”

He pointed to the wall.

“I found a blood-stain there, so I painted it over. It afterwards occurred to me that you might want to see it, for it had the distinct appearance of a finger-print.”

“It is quite unimportant,” said the detective, “unless, of course, it was a finger-print.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” said Mr. Sands, “but then, of course, I know very little about such matters. To me it seemed to be just a smudge.”

Blessington had left Jimmy in a taxi at the door, and when he joined him it was with a puzzled frown on his face.

“Scotland Yard,” he directed the driver, and jumped in, banging the door of the cab behind him.

“Jimmy,” he said, “that fellow is the most difficult man I have had to deal with. I am alternately suspicious and satisfied. I no sooner get what I think is a point against him, than he produces an alibi all brand-new and indisputable.”

“What about the white wardrobe?” asked Jimmy, who had been made acquainted with all that had happened in the morning.

“It undoubtedly went away this morning on a lorry; it was seen by the man on point duty. Unfortunately, he did not get the name of the contractor, but there is a chance of our tracing him.”

“Why do you make such a point of the white cupboard?” asked Jimmy.

“Oh, just because I do,” said Blessington.

They came to Scotland Yard, dismissed the cabman, and the two men went up to the photography department.

“Are those proofs ready?” asked Blessington of the officer on duty.

“Yes, sir, we’ve got prints of them. They are very good positives.”

He handed three proofs to the officer, who carried them to the light.

“Yes, they are fairly good. Jimmy, here are the finger-marks. The print is very distinct. Now, if my theory is right, we shall discover when we meet Mrs. Leman, who is supposed to be careering round the south of France, that she was in the house of John Sands as late as last night.”

“That’s all right,” said Jimmy. “Are you going to let me have a print? Thank you.”

He took it and put it into his pocket-book.

“It’s all material for the million-dollar story,” he said. “Is that where the matter ends at present?”

“Yes. We cannot use the print until we have found Mrs. Leman. I don’t know exactly what we can do when we have found Mrs. Leman. It isn’t a criminal offence to be in London when you’re supposed to be in Paris,” said Blessington.

“Let me see that again,” said Jimmy, taking one of the two remaining prints.

He examined it thoughtfully and then looked up with inspiration shining in his face.

“Who is Mrs. Leman, anyway?” he asked. “For all you know, she may be a crook, Blessington! Haven’t you a record department where you put them on the register?”

Blessington’s eyes narrowed.

“That’s an idea, Jimmy,” he said. “By Jove! that is an idea!”

They went straight into the record department and planked the photograph down on the counter before the staid official in charge. He made a few notes on a card, after examining the print through a magnifying-glass, and passed the record to a sergeant. There was five minutes’ delay, but presently the sergeant came back with a large printed card bearing a number of finger-prints and photographs, and this the officer compared with the little positive.

“That’s it all right,” he said. “It’s the index finger, and the markings are identical.”

“Who is she?” asked Blessington eagerly.

“Margaret Maliko,” said the officer, “a convict who escaped from Aylesbury Convict Prison last October twelvemonth.”

XII. — A NEW THEORY

"MARGARET MALIKO is Margaret Leman," said Jimmy. "There's no doubt about that."

They were sitting in the lounge of the "Magnificent."

"Margaret Leman is worth about 8,000,000 dollars, whether she is Margaret Leman or Margaret Maliko—there is less doubt about that," said Blessington. "The old man has left no will. Apparently he had no regular lawyer, and though he employed several to do his commercial business, he had none with whom he entrusted his private affairs. She was the woman who was in the flat with the old man from half-past six till eight. She was the woman who posted a letter, and that letter has been traced—up to a point," he added carefully.

"Wait a minute," said Jimmy excitedly. "That letter, posted in Berkeley Square, was an unstamped letter addressed to Mrs. Leman herself."

"Right you are, Jimmy, as you always are. It was acting on your suggestion that it was an unstamped letter that I managed to get track of it. Letters put in the post without the sender going through the formality of affixing a postal stamp are specially examined and marked at the Central Post Office. There is a record of a letter going to Mrs. Leman at Kennington House, Hove.

"Kennington House, Jimmy, is not, as you might imagine from its grandiose title, a magnificent mansion standing in its own well-timbered park, but a small suburban villa in a long suburban road outside Brighton. I sent a man down to make inquiries, but unhappily he has not been able to get hold of the letter. It appears that the Hove postal authorities had a general direction from London instructing them to re-address all letters which arrived at Kennington House to—where do you think?"

"To Mr. John Sands?" suggested Jimmy.

"Wrong the first time," said Blessington. "No, Jimmy, it's much more artistic than that. The Poste Restante, Marseilles. The letter has been re-directed. Tell me now, before we go any farther, what are your theories? Why did you believe that the letter bore no stamp?"

"My theory is that it was a document which the woman dared not carry with her," said the reporter. "She stuck it into an envelope—you remember there were a lot of envelopes on the table when old Mark Leman's body was

found—and, being short of a stamp, but desperately anxious to get rid of whatever it was, she addressed the envelope to herself and dropped it into the first pillar-box. It was a very simple matter to get the letter. You had only to give instructions to your agent in Marseilles to collect it."

"It's not quite so simple, Jimmy. That letter was posted last night and caught the mail to-day. It is possible, by paying a fee, to have the letter again re-directed. Anyway, we are going to try. I have telegraphed to Marseilles to my very good friend, M. Pollot, and if any man can get that letter it is he. Your little friend is late."

The detective looked at his watch.

"By the way, what are you going to do about her?"

"She's going back to America by the first boat," said Jimmy. "Just as soon as Mrs. Leman comes into the open and establishes her claim to a legacy, I am going to ask her to marry me."

"Why not before?" demanded the detective.

"Well, because something may happen and Faith may get the money after all."

"What the devil does that matter?" asked the detective;

"You're not such a pup that you're going to allow the girl's financial position to stand in the way of her happiness?"

"But—but—" stammered Jimmy, "if she's rich and I'm poor—"

"Sheer vanity," said the other calmly, "sheer wicked swank! If you were rich and she were poor, if you could do Prince Charming to her Cinderella, it would be all right, I suppose? I never understood why all the favours of matrimony should be one side. For myself, poor as I am, I still live in hopes of attracting the attention of a beautiful girl with mournful eyes and about three million net."

"You don't understand how I feel," said Jimmy thoughtfully.

"Of course I do," said the scornful Blessington. "Do you think that because you feel like every other man, nobody understands you? Ask her to marry you—"

“For the Lord’s sake shut up,” said Jimmy in an agitated whisper. “Here she is.”

Faith came down to the lobby from her room looking, to Jimmy’s prejudiced eyes, divine. The trials of the last twenty-four hours had left shadows under her eyes, a sleepless night had paled the colour in her cheeks. Even that hardened cynic Blessington admitted that she was amongst the beautiful women it had been his fortune to meet.

She stopped dead at the sight of the detective, and the colour came into her face.

“I want you to meet a very good friend, Faith,” said Jimmy. “Having locked you up, Mr. Blessington spent most of the night trying to find evidence to secure your release.”

“I’m very grateful to you, Mr. Blessington,” she said, offering her hand, “but it was such a horrid experience that any association—”

“I know,” said Blessington; “it is almost as bad as the thing it calls to mind. Please don’t imagine that I enjoy arresting beautiful ladies and baling them to the deep, deep dungeon cell, because I don’t.”

“I wanted to ask you something,” he said as they passed into the hotel dining-room to their table.

She looked at the detective dubiously.

“I hope you’ve not come to ask me a lot more questions,” she said.

“I am, indeed,” said that gentleman. “Jimmy’s job in life, and it is my job too, is the asking of questions. That’s the only way you can find things out, you know,” he explained. “It isn’t much I’m going to ask you,” he went on. “You only need answer three questions. First, did your uncle keep postage stamps in the house?”

“Never,” she said. “Poor uncle was a fanatic about stamps. He would never spend a penny on them. If he wanted to post a letter, one had to go to the post office with the exact amount of money.”

“Good,” said Blessington. “Now the second question is: when you put the paper for your uncle, you also put envelopes? I saw them, but you might not have put them there.”

“I put them there,” she nodded.

“Did you also put pen and ink there?”

“No,” said the girl after a moment’s thought, “only pencil. Uncle very seldom used pens.”

“Good again,” said Blessington; “and yet there was a small bottle of ink near the paper when I came into the room. There is one more question: in the room there was found a piece of paper in your uncle’s handwriting, in which the name of Suevic, a ship of the White Star line, is jotted down, together with ‘Plymouth,’ which is one of the ports of call of that line. The Suevic is on the Australia run. Now, do you know anybody connected with Australia, or who had asked your uncle to lend him £100 or £200 in order to take him to Australia? There was also a number: 1—17941—“

“By Heaven!”

The exclamation came from Jimmy.

“That’s it!” he cried, half rising from his chair. “Don’t you remember? Margaret Maliko! You saw the card: that was her convict number, and the word ‘poison’—”

He paused and looked at Blessington.

“What of the word ‘poison’?” he asked.

“The word ‘poison,’” said Blessington, “stands for the crime for which Margaret Maliko was sentenced to twenty years’ penal servitude—for poisoning her husband.”

Jimmy fell back in his chair with a gasp.

“Then it was she?” said the girl, her eyes round with horror.

It might be so—but the theory did not fit with Blessington’s other theories. Nor did they fit with Jimmy’s.

“Blessington, I’m not standing for that story about the woman having committed this crime. It’s a coincidence, maybe, but all the evidence proves that she parted from Mark Leman on pretty good terms. Why, don’t you

see?" he went on, "the old man was sending her away. She was going to Australia! She had come to him with information for which she asked a large sum of money. Look at that paper and see how she bargained with him, how the old man started with £100 and how he gradually increased it to £300. There's the address: 'Poste Restante, Melbourne.' Look, she gave him all particulars about herself—her convict number, twenty—that stands for the twenty years—it's as clear as daylight. Why should she kill him, if he was willing to help her?"

Blessington bit his lip.

"You've got me guessing again, Jimmy," he said. "There's a whole lot of truth in what you say, and yet there are certain gaps in the story. She wouldn't have come to Leman to sell her statement unless there was a good reason why she should clear out at once. She wanted the money badly, and it's very unlikely that she got it, because Leman never kept money in the house. Isn't that so, Miss Leman?"

The girl nodded.

"Uncle never kept money at home," she said. "If he wanted cash he went to the Oxford Street branch of his bank."

"It was after banking hours too," Blessington went on, "and she couldn't expect to get the stuff until the next day. Why then should she poison him? Why should she come prepared to poison him? No, that yam doesn't hang together."

"It's all very dreadful," said the girl with a shiver.

"It's all jolly interesting," said Jimmy and Blessington simultaneously, and solemnly locked fingers across the table.

XIII. — JIMMY PURRS

THE rest of the day was spent by Jimmy in pursuing independent inquiries as to what had happened to the white cupboard. The police had fallen down on this, and there was no trace and no report of its passage out of London. An urgent inquiry sent to the contractors who supplied motor lorries had been unsatisfactory. Since the war there were so many private individuals who had acquired army transport that it was almost impossible to keep track of them.

The inquest was adjourned, and Blessington, availing himself of the opportunity which that function afforded, made a few inquiries of Mr. Sands.

"My country house? Well, it's rather a pretentious name for a modest cottage and a few acres of ground," laughed Sands. "It's on the Brighton road and you will have no difficulty in finding it."

He looked at Blessington oddly.

"Will you tell me frankly why you are so curious as to my private property?"

"I'll be very frank with you indeed, Mr. Sands," smiled the detective. "I want to see that cupboard of yours, because I have a theory that your burglar left his name and address on its smooth surface."

"In other words, his finger-prints," said Mr. Sands. "I have regretted very much painting over that mark on the wall, but if you think you can get information from the wardrobe, by all means go down and see it. In fact, if you like I will drive you down," said Mr. Sands.

"Thanks," said the detective, "but I have loaned a car and I'll go down myself."

Jimmy went with him and found the house a little more pretentious than Mr. Sands had represented. It lay back from the road, hidden behind beeches; and was an old sixteenth-century house—not large, it is true, but extremely comfortable. There was only a caretaker in charge, and the furniture was sheeted with holland. He, with his wife, who apparently came in to keep the place tidy, constituted the whole of the domestic staff. The caretaker remembered the white cupboard arriving.

“Yes, sir, it came rather late at night, after I was in bed,” he said, ”and Mr. Sands arrived with it. He came down by train. It doesn’t look valuable to me, but Mr. Sands was so anxious to get it here that it must be valuable. Otherwise, he could have sent it by train. That was what I said to my wife, and she thought the same thing.”

“It was late at night when it arrived, eh?” said Jimmy thoughtfully. “It left London early in the morning. It took a pretty long time to get here. Well, let’s have a look at this wonderful piece of furniture.”

The caretaker led them to the sheeted drawing-room, and there in the corner stood the white cupboard. It stood in the corner of the room, a very commonplace article of furniture, and the two men examined it carefully.

“Were you in the room when it was brought in?” asked Blessington.

“Yes, sir,” said the caretaker.

“Did you see it opened?”

“Yes, sir,” said the man, to the other’s surprise.

“You saw it opened?” said Jimmy incredulously.

This was a facer, and upset all the theories which the men had separately formed.

“What was inside it?” asked Blessington.

“Nothing, sir. It was just as you see it.”

He turned the handle of the cupboard and swung it open. The interior was without mark or scratch. If Mrs. Leman had voluntarily or involuntarily been concealed in the cupboard, there was absolutely no sign of her tenancy.

“Well, that beats all,” said Jimmy disappointedly.

“You thought?” said Blessington.

“Somewhere about what you were thinking, I guess,” said Jimmy. “Shut the door and let me look at it again,” he said.

His examination this time was more careful, and when it was finished he took the detective's arm and drew him outside.

"Phew! I was nearly fooled!" he said.

"Well, I am quite, apparently," said the puzzled detective. "What is it?"

"This isn't the cupboard that stood in the wall."

"How do you know?"

"I have very good reason for knowing," said Jimmy. "Our stout friend let fly an arrow at my young head. It passed me and hit the wardrobe. There is no sign on the surface of the cupboard that it has been punctured."

"You're perfectly sure the arrow hit it?" asked the detective.

"Where else could it hit?" asked Jimmy. "Of course it hit. I heard the thud of it."

"So did I," said the detective. "Yes, here was no other place. We're just about as far off as ever. If Sands is what we think he is, he guessed we would try to trace the cupboard and has simply gone out and bought another. The fact that the thing arrived late at night proves this—I tell you that man oozes alibis! We have wasted the day."

"Don't say that," said Jimmy, scribbling busily on the back of an envelope. "It may have been wasted for you, but you haven't got a million-dollar story to write."

It was late in the evening when they got back to town, but that the day had not been wasted was advertised by the arrival of a telegram which reached Blessington just as he was leaving Scotland Yard for dinner. Jimmy was at work in his room, his typewriter rattling busily, the floor covered with sheets of manuscript, when Blessington came in.

"Cut this sordid money-making, and listen to real news," said Blessington. "We've got the envelope. I've just had a telegram from the Chief of Police at Marseilles saying that the letter has been intercepted and is being sent to me by registered post. It will be here the day after to-morrow. I've wired certain instructions, but I don't know yet whether they have reached our man."

Jimmy leaned back in his chair and nodded.

“There’s the big end of a story in that letter,” he said. “What about Sands?”

“I’ve put a man to trail him,” said Blessington. “We shan’t leave him day or night until we get the truth of this business. Of course, we may be doing him a great injustice. How do matters stand? Did Miss Leman see her lawyers to-day?”

Jimmy nodded and pulled a wry face.

“She saw both English and American lawyers,” he said. “They are agreed that, as Leman is married and has died intestate, whatever money he has goes to his wife, however bad a character she is. There is no contesting the legality of the marriage, except that the woman gave a false name, and it’s possible that a statement was made by these two people that they were resident in Griddelsea the necessary time to make their marriage possible. That, however, doesn’t dissolve the marriage: it merely makes one or both of them liable to certain penalties for making a false statement. One of them is dead, and in the case of the other a few days more or less imprisonment will not matter. That’s how matters stand,” said Jimmy cheerfully.

“You’re bearing up very well, Jimmy,” said the sardonic Blessington.

“Why shouldn’t I?” said Jimmy. “I hate to see her lose the money, but her loss is my gain, and I just don’t know what I wish.”

“Love,” said Blessington severely, “is the most demoralising factor in life.”

“Shut the door as you go out,” said Jimmy politely. “You’re interrupting my literary labours.”

He worked for another half-hour after Blessington had gone and, gathering up the sheets, locked them away in a drawer, and putting on his coat, strolled along the hotel corridor to the sitting-room occupied by Faith. She came to the door at his knock.

“I’m tired of work, Faith,” he said. “Let us stroll round the block.”

It was a warm evening and an evening of romance, when stars twinkled in a cloudless sky, and even the little scraps of land which flourish in the centre of London squares breathed the odour and spirit of youth.

They walked in silence for a long time, and they had made one complete circuit of the garden in the centre of the square before Jimmy spoke.

“Faith,” he said, “do you believe what your lawyers say?”

“Why, yes, Jimmy,” she answered in surprise, “they were both so definite. The law of America is almost the same as the law of England, and I can claim nothing, and want to claim nothing,” she added. “It’s only mother that worries me. If uncle had left her a little annuity, why, I should have been just happy to be rid of this nightmare—”

“You’re really and truly sure that you’re poor?” said Jimmy.

“Yes, Jimmy, I keep telling you. Why do you ask?” Jimmy tried to speak, but choked. Presently he cleared his throat, though his voice was still husky.

“Faith,” he said, “I think I’m on the way to earning a lot of money. I don’t think that Holland Brown is going to pay me a million dollars for my story—maybe no more than a million cents—but I’ve a little money of my own, and I’m good for a couple of hundred dollars a week when I get back into the swim.”

“Yes, Jimmy?” she said in a tone of gentle inquiry, as though he were discussing some matter in which she thought it was necessary to take a polite interest, but which otherwise had no significance for her.

“Well, Faith, you told me once that you weren’t in love with me, and honestly I don’t think you are, very much.”

“Why very much?” she asked. “Why at all?”

“When I said ‘very much,’” replied Jimmy desperately, “I meant ‘at all.’”

“But what makes you think I don’t love you at all?” she asked inconsistently.

”Why, you said—because—well, it doesn’t seem natural, anyway.”

“That I should be in love?” she asked innocently. “That doesn’t sound nice, Jimmy.”

“What I mean,” said the flustered young man, “is this: that it doesn’t seem natural that you could like a fellow like me.”

“Why not?” she asked. “I think you’re very nice and good. If a girl doesn’t like a good man, well, she can’t be very nice herself, can she?”

Jimmy was very hot and very choky. He was at an unfair advantage, and cursed himself that he had blundered into a situation which he could not control.

“Faith,” he said, and his voice sounded to him like somebody else’s, “I wasn’t talking about ‘liking,’ I was talking about ‘loving.’ I was talking about loving a man well enough to—marry him.”

“Really, Jimmy,” she said faintly.

“Yes, that’s what I mean,” said Jimmy, gaining courage as he felt her slip from her superior position. “I mean the kind of liking that leads to marriage.”

There was a long interval, and then she asked:

“Well, suppose she does—like him—does she have to propose to him?”

Jimmy was caught again.

“Of course not,” he said. “If you love me, you just say: ‘Jimmy, I’ll take a chance.’”

“When would I say that?” she asked.

“Faith,” he said, “you say that when the man asks her—”

“Who is ‘her’?” she demanded.

“I mean, if I ask you to marry me because I love you better than anything in the world, you ought to say—”

She laid her two hands on his shoulders and said softly: “Why don’t you ask her? You haven’t, you know.”

An hour later a young man climbed down out of heaven and narrowly escaped annihilation by a fast-moving taxi.

“It seems all very unreal,” said the girl; “I don’t know whether I’m on my head or heels. Do you think I shan’t be a handicap to you?”

“Handicap!” said Jimmy. “Faith, you darling, you’ve just made me a million per cent, better man than ever I was, and I’m glad—yes, it’s selfish, but I’m glad that money can’t come to you. I should never have had the courage to propose to you.”

She held his arm tightly.

“I was always afraid you wouldn’t,” she said, “and I should have hated to have proposed to you, but I think I should have had to do it.”

Jimmy said nothing. He just felt one big purr.

XIV. — THE PLOT OF THE STORY

”HI, Jimmy!”

Jimmy, sprawling on a seat in Hyde Park, lifted his head to discover who had hailed him in this unceremonious manner. He saw a waving hand above the hood of a motorcar, the brim of a grey Stetson hat and the end of a long cigar, and diagnosed the disturbance accurately as coming from old man Brown. Holland Brown leaned over the side of his open touring car and offered a large hand to his erstwhile subordinate.

“Things are moving,” he said “I’m mighty obliged to you for sending the first news of old man Leman’s suicide. What’s behind it?”

Jimmy’s eyes twinkled.

“About nine chapters to this million-dollar story have already happened, Mr. Brown,” he said. “I’m not quite sure whether I shall give away the dénouement in the first or last—when it is written.”

Now Holland Brown, for all his seeming lethargy, was a live newspaper man. He had started at the bottom of the ladder, and he knew the game from facts to foundry, so to speak. He took the cigar from his mouth and looked at Jimmy with a keen scrutiny.

“Jimmy,” he said, “I’ve somehow got an idea that you’re really on to a million-dollar story. It’s not a suicide, is it?”

“See Chapter VI,” said Jimmy.

“If I’m in Paris when the story’s ready, don’t bother to send it over; just cable me and I’ll come back to London by aeroplane. I’m not going to give you a million dollars for it, because I don’t want any scandal about my sanity, but I’ll pay you Holland Brown rates, Jimmy, if that’s good enough.”

“It’s good enough for me, Mr. Brown,” said Jimmy.

“Now is there anything I can do to help you?”

Jimmy thought a moment.

“Is Mrs. Brown in Paris?” he asked.

Holland Brown nodded.

“Not exactly in Paris, Jimmy; she’s in London with her two daughters. Why?”

“Well,” said Jimmy, “there’s a lady in the case.”

“Old Leman’s niece?” asked Holland Brown; then: “What are you getting heated up about?” he asked curiously. “Jimmy, you’re not marrying the story?”

“Of course I’m not marrying the story,” said Jimmy, red to the roots of his hair, “but I’d like Mrs. Brown, if she would, to take charge of Miss Leman. You see, she’s quite alone here in London and knows very few women.”

“I’ll send the car along for her. Where is she staying?” asked Holland Brown. “My wife will be delighted to do what she can for her.”

He looked at Jimmy and then asked quickly:

“Is there any danger to the girl?”

Jimmy nodded.

“I don’t know what it is,” he confessed, “I have no reason at all. But I’ve just a hunch that there’s a big trouble brewing for that girl. Here is where she is staying.”

He scribbled the address in his notebook and tore out the leaf, and Brown read it.

“I’ll send for her at two o’clock, if that’s convenient. My wife or one of the girls will call with the car.”

Jimmy shook hands warmly with his late employer and went back to his seat with a peace of mind. The morning had been well spent, and one of the difficulties that were troubling him was in a fair way to being wiped out. He must tell Faith of what he had done and secure her approval. There was a great deal of work for him, and he had an appointment with Blessington for lunch. He would feel ever so much happier in his mind if he knew that Faith Leman was in a place of safety. There was no reason why he should believe that any harm was coming to her, save that vague sense of uneasiness and unrest which filled his mind whenever she came into his thoughts.

He drove to the hotel and sent a page-boy up to the girl's room, but the youth returned with the news that the lady was out and had been gone half an hour. He waited till the lunch hour, in the meantime 'phoning Blessington to join him, but the girl had not appeared by the time the detective arrived.

"Maybe she's lunching out," said Blessington.

Jimmy shook his head.

"She promised to see me before lunch, and I know she would keep her promise—in the circumstances," he added.

Blessington did not ask what the circumstances were, but might have guessed by a glance at the young man's face.

"Is there any news?" asked Jimmy.

"I am gathering material to make good news for you, Jimmy," said the detective. "The registered package will be here to-morrow."

"He didn't get it then?"

Blessington shook his head.

"Apparently somebody had cabled to his agent in Marseilles to collect the letter, and the man who called was detained by the police, not, however, before he had an opportunity of telegraphing to his principal that the letter had been intercepted. It takes about ten thousand years for the French police to get busy, and by the time they had pinched the man, the mischief was done. He refuses to disclose the name of his principal, but for the moment that doesn't worry me, because I know."

"Sands?"

Blessington nodded.

"No doubt at all about it," he said. "Sands is the gentleman concerned."

"Any news of Margaret Leman?"

“None. The police at Marseilles say she has not been there, and none of the hotels along the Riviera returns her name. I think we can take it without doubt that she has never left England—probably has never left London.”

He had still something to tell. Jimmy knew that by his manner.

“There’s one warning I want to give you, Jimmy, and I don’t tell you this to alarm you, but to help you protect your young lady from a great deal of unpleasantness.”

“What is it?” asked Jimmy.

“When she returns from her present shopping excursion, she must not under any circumstances go abroad—that is to say, to parties, theatres, or any of the places where modern women usually go unattended, without an escort.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jimmy. “You’re keeping something from me, Blessington.”

“I’ll tell you,” said the detective, lowering his voice. “I took the liberty of instructing our agent in Marseilles to open the envelope and telegraph to me the contents.”

Jimmy did not ask what the contents were. His heart beat a little faster, and there came to him a premonition of trouble.

“The document,” said Blessington, speaking slowly, “is a will executed by Mark Leman on the night of his murder, leaving his entire fortune, without any reservation, to his niece.”

Jimmy staggered back as if he had been shot.

“You’re fooling me,” he said hoarsely.

“That is the will,” said the detective, “and what is more, it is witnessed by Margaret Leman.”

“But—but—” stammered Jimmy, “what does it mean?”

The detective shook his head.

“I can’t tell you that and I can’t even guess at the moment. Now, Jimmy, you’re the man of all men in London who can reconstruct that extraordinary interview which occurred on the night of Leman’s death.”

Jimmy Cassidy passed his hand over his forehead.

“A will!” said Jimmy. “So Faith will, be a rich woman.”

Presently he rose and turned his strained face to the detective.

“Blessington,” he said quietly, “I am only guessing, but I reconstruct the story somehow like this. For a reason which we shall discover, Margaret Maliko went to see Leman, who is obviously not her husband, or she would have witnessed the document in his name or not witnessed it at all, and made a clean breast of something. In return she asked to be sent to a place of safety—possibly to Australia. Don’t you remember how Mark Leman wrote down the ship, the date of sailing and the amount of money she would require? She must have revealed some plot against the life of Leman, and he, as an eleventh-hour precaution, made this will to frustrate the man or woman who was intriguing to secure his money.”

“It hangs together,” agreed Blessington. “Do you think that the woman was in the house when the crime was committed? For crime it undoubtedly was.”

Jimmy nodded.

“Let me write,” he said. “I can only think clearly with a pen in my hand.”

He went to one of the writing-tables and covered sheet after sheet of notepaper with his illegible writing. There was a background to his story, a consciousness of impending disaster and the subconscious realisation that Faith Leman was now a being apart. Nevertheless, such was the fascination of craftsmanship that his pen flew over the paper, and bit by bit the million-dollar story was reconstructed. The detective had taken a chair by the table and was dividing his attention between the reporter and the big turnstile door which swung every second, but never to admit Faith Leman.

“Here it is,” said Jimmy at last. “The marriage was a fake. It was a plan organised and carried out by John Sands. He chose this convict who had providentially come into his way, because she was the kind of woman he could keep under his thumb and who dare not go to the police to betray him. Whether he intended killing Leman, or whether he hoped that Leman would die a natural death, does not signify. The point is that he had this so-

called wife—by Heaven! yes, I know," cried Jimmy suddenly, "it was Sands who married her—not Leman! He must have lured Leman out of town for the day on some pretext or other, chose of all the registrars in England the one man who by his patient inquiry he had discovered was a dying man—that is it. Margaret Leman is really Margaret Sands!"

The detective nodded. His eyes were bright with excitement.

"Go on, go on!" he said. "Then what happened?"

"All the pieces fit in," said Jimmy, half to himself. "Leman dies the same day that I was bringing proof that he was married. Sands knew that I was going to the old man, and knew that the jig was up. He had planned the murder—planned the proof of his innocence and another's guilt. It was Sands who sent Faith the phial of cyanide—I remember that she told me that she had discussed the stain on her dress with him! Don't you see, Blessington? Sands goes with me to Davis Street, but he goes in alone—"

Blessington jumped up.

"Of course!" he cried. "What a fool I've been! It was Mark Leman's practice to have two glasses of liqueur ready, one for himself and one for his friend. He certainly would never have put refreshments for a man who he knew had plotted against him; but Faith, who was ignorant of the object of his visit, and knowing only that Sands was calling, put both glasses ready. Sands leaves you and goes upstairs to see Leman, who would disguise his feelings lest the man should be on his guard. Sands crosses to the sideboard and drops the cyanide into his glass and offers it to his host."

He thought a moment, turning over the possibilities in his mind, and Jimmy took up the tale.

"Leman might have hesitated and shown the real state of his mind. He drinks the liqueur and in ten seconds drops to the floor—a dead or a dying man. Sands takes him in his arms and carries him to the sofa, places him on it. But he has drunk the liquor and that betrays his presence. He knows where the drink is kept, refills the glass, but, by a lapse which is peculiar in such cases, leaves the bottle upon the sideboard."

"Do you suggest that he did not know the woman was present, and she was in the next room?" asked the detective.

“The room which was approached by the door behind the sofa,” said Jimmy rapidly. “She was probably a witness, and certainly overheard all that happened.”

“Where is she now?” asked the detective.

He felt almost as though he were consulting a clairvoyant, and experienced a curious sense of disappointment when Jimmy shook his head and rose, a little impatiently, looking at his watch. “Blessington, I feel I’ve been wasting time,” he said. “Faith should be here by now; it’s half-past one.”

“She may have met somebody,” suggested Blessington, though in his heart he knew it was extremely unlikely. “There is no sense in making a fuss. We don’t want Faith to look ridiculous.”

“She’d better look ridiculous than look dead,” snapped Jimmy, and strode to the door.

XV. — THE HOUSE ON THE LAGOON

THEY left instructions that if the girl returned she was to wait for them and that news of her arrival should be telephoned to Scotland Yard. Jumping into a taxi, they drove first to police head-quarters and then to the house in Charles

Street. Blessington knocked, but there was no answer. He knocked again more loudly, but without result. Then he took from his pocket four master keys and tried them all on the little patent lock. At the fourth attempt the lock turned and the two men went into the house. There was no sign of disorder—the place was merely empty. A search of Sands' bedroom disclosed nothing. His neatly folded pyjamas lay upon his pillow, his bath-gown and slippers were properly disposed at the foot of the bed, whilst on a desk in the sanctum leading from the bedroom was a little pile of receipted bills, a cheque-book and an amber cigarette-holder.

"Open that wardrobe," said Jimmy.

He made an inspection of the contents.

"Grey flannel trousers, more grey flannel trousers, white flannel trousers," catalogued Blessington. "Sands is an American and therefore not a cricketer. Let's look at the boots."

On a long rack were a dozen pairs of boots and shoes, all carefully treed.

"Two pairs of white buckskin shoes, American made," said Blessington, "soles unworn. No, Mr. Sands is not a cricketer, he is a boating man. Boating means a river. Now let's have a look at the hats, particularly the straw hats."

"Why the straw hats?" asked Jimmy curiously.

"Because straw hats are very often purchased on the spot where the man happens to be, and hats are very often useful. Do you remember your 'Pickwick?' Here they are."

On the top of the cupboard were three straw hats.

"That first is a London make," said Blessington. "The second bears the mark of a Maidenhead hatter, and Maidenhead is a pretty big place, the third is Marlow, and Marlow is a pretty small place. Now let us examine the bills."

He went to the desk and turned the neat package of receipted accounts one by one. They told him nothing. He pulled open the drawer of the desk and found, as he had expected, that the methodical Mr. Sands had filed away receipted accounts for the past two years.

“Here we are,” he said, taking out one little wad; “these are petrol bills from a dealer in Maidenhead and the rest in London. Gasoline bought at Maidenhead implies a motor launch.”

“What made you think of the river?” asked Jimmy.

“An extensive knowledge of what I would describe as the sedentary classes and their habits,” he said. “Obviously, he had some other recreation than motoring. If he was the motorist who passed through Aylesbury on the day the woman escaped, the possibility is that he was coming from some river resort. He did no business in England and had few friends that I can discover, and inquiries I have made go to show that he spent some weeks out of town before that escape. If you remember, October two years ago was a particularly beautiful month until the weather broke. We will run down to Marlow and take in Maidenhead, which is on the way.”

The gasoline merchant at Maidenhead was informative. He knew Mr. Sands slightly, and had supplied petrol for his launch.

“I haven’t seen him for some time,” said the man, “but I know he’s got a place somewhere up by Marlow: he always r used to come from that direction.”

“What was the name of the launch?” asked Blessington, who knew that all these little motor-boats had a fancy title.

“The Money-Spinner” said the man. “She was one of the fastest launches on the river in her day, though I don’t know what has happened to her, for, as I say, I haven’t seen her for nearly two years.”

“Good,” said Blessington.

At Marlow they made the interesting discovery that, whilst nobody knew the name of Mr. Sands, the Money-Spinner was known to almost every waterman on the river.

“It belongs to a gentleman who has a bungalow up one of the backwaters,” said Blessington’s informant. “I haven’t seen her now for over a twelvemonth.”

The bungalow was easily found, but was empty. Evidently it had changed ownership, and none of the neighbours knew the address of its late tenant.

“He’s been gone a long time,” said the caretaker of a neighbouring property. “He gave up the bungalow and went to London. He gave up the boat-house too.”

“The boat-house?” asked Jimmy, interested. “Which is the boat-house?”

“It’s farther up the backwater, between two islands. You can just see it from the road,” said the woman. “It used to belong to Lord Welbourne. He had a big steam launch there, but the stream silted up and he couldn’t use the house any more. Then the gentleman who rented the bungalow took it and made a sort of summer-house of it. He built a floor up above and used to keep his launch underneath.”

The two men exchanged glances.

“We will have a look at this boat-house,” said Blessington. They borrowed a punt and made their way through the tangled grasses with some difficulty, for the water was shallow. The water they were traversing was not in reality slack at all, but running water which passed behind the island and rejoined the main stream a quarter of a mile to the west. From this opened a broad lagoon which they found by accident, the entrance being well screened by reeds and bushes. It was a large and handsome building, though somewhat the worse for weather and wear, and stood partly on land and was partly supported by piles driven into the pool, which one end overhung. Admission to its watery basement was secured from the pool through a large door, the bottom of which was under water. The top story had three blank, uncurtained and very dirty windows, and the entrance was apparently reached along a path which skirted the pond. They drew the punt on land and made a slow way round the edge of the lagoon. Both men recognised that this was possibly the particular hiding-place of Mr. John Sands, and neither was anxious to give him a glimpse of them. They found the path leading to the very solid door of the boathouse, and, coming into the opening, approached the building.

Mr. Sands watched their approach with interest from the thick underbrush to the north of the building.

He lay in the shadow of a drooping lilac bush cuddling the stock of a sporting rifle against his feet, the sight covering Jimmy Cassidy, who was the foremost of the two, and in the afternoon sunlight Jimmy was an easy target. Blessington strode past him and examined the door and tried it. He peered through one of the lower windows and saw nothing but signs of desolation.

“What do you think?” he asked. “Shall we try to get in?”

Jimmy looked from the building to the strip of garden, neglected and weed-grown. He looked back along the path they had come; he looked toward the bushes where John Sands lay; and then he looked in the blue heavens above as though seeking inspiration.

“It’s not worth while,” he said calmly. “We’re on the wrong track. I think we shall probably find when we get back to town that she has escaped.”

Blessington gasped.

“I’ve been rather a boob,” Jimmy went on. “I’ve let my fancies run away with me.”

“But,” said the detective, “you said—”

Jimmy laughed.

“I’m nutty, that is all the matter with me,” he said, and, taking the other’s arm, they walked back to the punt.

“But—”

“Keep straight ahead,” said Jimmy, “and if you hear a shot, drop. Say, do I look hot? I always go like that when O see a man covering me with a gun.”

XVI. — FAITH MEETS MRS. LEMAN

THAT morning Faith Leman had risen from her bed with one idea, and one idea only, namely, that sleep was a blessed thing that annihilated the time which separates lovers. She woke to a world from whence all sorrow, all apprehension had vanished, a world beautiful to the eye and filled with melodious sound. She had arranged to be ready for Jimmy when he called,

and at eleven o'clock she was dressed, waiting with whatever patience she could summon. It was then that her telephone bell had rung and the voice of John Sands had greeted her.

"Is that you, Miss Leman?"

She recognised the voice.

"Mr. Sands, isn't it?"

"I want to see you for a few moments, if you can spare the time. There is something your uncle told me which hasn't so far been made public."

"Hadn't you better tell Mr. Cassidy?" She hesitated. "He will be here at twelve."

"I would rather you told Mr. Cassidy," said Sands' pleasant voice. "In fact, I'd rather he did not know that I had given you this good news, because, for some reason or other, Mr. Cassidy is rather suspicious of my attitude towards you, though you know, Miss Leman, there's nobody has a higher regard for you or a greater desire to save you from trouble."

"I'm sure of that," said the girl warmly, "and Jimmy's—I mean Mr. Cassidy's—anxiety was understandable, wasn't it?"

"Quite," said the hearty voice of Sands. "I am not blaming him."

"Where shall I meet you?" she asked.

"Just walk round to the corner of Blane and Oxford Streets, don't take a taxi," he replied. "If you meet Mr. Cassidy—or shall I call him Jimmy?"—she heard his low chuckle and blushed—"please do not tell him that you're going to see me."

At the comer of Blane and Oxford Streets John Sands was waiting, spick-and-span and debonair.

"I have a taxi," he said. "It is so much easier to talk. Besides, it screens one from observation. I would have asked you to see me at Charles Street, but I have no woman in the house and I did not like asking you to come."

She respected his delicacy and was full of warm feeling towards him. There revived in her something of the old trust.

“I’m sure you have always been most kind, Mr. Sands,” she said warmly, “and I shall never forget all you did for me.” He seemed pleased, murmured his delight at her appreciation, and then:

“I am going to put a big strain on your friendship,” he said. “I want you to miss your engagement with Jimmy and come with me—I have found Mrs. Leman,”

She looked at him curiously.

“You have found her?” she said. “Isn’t she on the Continent?”

He shook his head.

“She is in England—she has always been in England,” he said, “but it is rather a long story and I will not go into it now. Miss Leman, do you know that you are a very rich girl?”

“I?” she said in amazement, “but Mrs. Leman—”

“Before your uncle died,” said John Sands, “and nobody regrets that poor fellow’s death more than myself (how I miss the poor old fellow!), he executed a will in your favour. That/will he handed to his wife, Mrs. Leman. I myself knew nothing whatever about it,” he added quickly, “until two days ago, when Mrs. Leman told me the whole story.”

“But it’s impossible!” said the girl. “How could he have made the will?”

“He made the will,” said John Sands, “in the presence of Mrs. Leman, and he left it with her, asking that it should be handed to you. The unfortunate woman did not reveal this fact to me—from what motive one can only guess. But I do not think we should judge her too harshly, Miss Leman. I do not believe,” he added, “in judging my erring fellows too harshly.”

“I certainly do not judge her at all,” said the bewildered girl. “But why do you want me to go to the country?”

“She desires to hand the will to you with her own hands and receive your forgiveness. There are many reasons why we should not bring anybody else at the present moment,” John Sands went on, anticipating her objections. “She will explain to you the circumstances under which she was married,

and then you will realise why it was necessary that Mr. Cassidy and his—er—policeman friend should not share the secret for the time being."

"I can't believe it!" said the girl. "I can't believe it! Why, if I am uncle's heiress I am rich!"

John Sands' gesture inferred wealth beyond calculation.

"Rich enough," he said good-humouredly, "to afford me a little of your time."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"We are going first of all to Paddington Station and on to Slough, where we shall leave the train and my car is waiting. I will drive you the rest of the journey—I have a place near Marlow, you know."

He chattered on about his river experience. His judgment on the merits of rival racing crews was shrewd and informative, and she found herself at Slough and, indeed, within a few hundred yards of her destination before she began to feel any misgivings.

"Don't you think I ought to send a wire to Jimmy? He will be very anxious about me."

"I will see that it is sent," said Sands. "One of the servants will take it the moment you arrive."

She sighed her relief. That word "servants" implied safety—though there was nothing to fear from her kindly companion.

Yet it seemed to her that they were approaching Marlow by a circuitous route, as was the case. They left the Quarrywood Road and turned into a lane which was little more than a cart track, and which, she judged by its condition, was very infrequently used. He pulled the car up at the dead end, and led the way along a little path, chatting all the while.

"Is this the place?"

She could not conceal the surprise in her tone.

"That is the place," said John Sands gaily.

"It looks like a boat-house," said the girl.

“It was a boat-house till I took it in hand, and I assure you it is much more comfortable inside than you would think.”

He opened a door and, seeing that the interior was dark and there was no sign of servants or indeed of any life, she halted on the threshold. Only for a second, however, then his big hand caught her in the middle of the back and pushed her in.

“Mr. Sands!” she gasped.

He slammed the door and locked it before he replied.

“Go ahead. You’ll find some stairs in front of you. There are twenty-one,” he said curtly. “Count them, unless you want a fall.”

“I don’t think I will go any farther,” she said. “I’m going home.”

He laughed.

“Go up those stairs,” he said.

There was something in his tone which made her shiver. Trembling from head to foot, she obeyed him, striving all the time to retain a steady quality in her voice.

“I don’t like your tone, Mr. Sands,” she said.

“You will like it less before I’m through with you,” said John Sands pleasantly. “Stand still on the landing.”

He unlocked a door and drew her into a large room, well furnished, and lighted by kerosene lamps which swung from the rafter. It took her some time to get accustomed to the light. Then she saw, and shrunk back toward the door. It was not the furnishing of the place, its Oriental colouring, the unwholesome luxury of it. It was not the heavy velvet hangings which excluded the light from the windows and gave them from the outside the appearance of blackness. It was the woman who sat at the far end of the room who attracted her eye and caused her to step back, her heart racing in panic. It was a woman dressed in a black gown which threw into relief the white, drawn face and the deep, burning eyes. She sat in a narrow wooden chair of great strength. Her hands were clamped by two steel bracelets to the arms, her ankles chained to the legs. She held her head steadily and

awkwardly, and Faith saw that it was held in place by a thick leather band which passed under her chin.

John Sands walked across the room, took a cupful of water from a table, held it to the woman's lips, and she drank eagerly.

"Thirsty, eh?" said Sands pleasantly. "Well, you're entitled to be."

He bent down, unlocked the manacles with a key he had taken from his pocket, and drew the woman to her feet. She drooped and swayed from sheer exhaustion, and Sands laughed softly.

"Open that door," he commanded the girl. "Be quick!" The girl obeyed, and, lifting the wreck in his arms, John Sands carried her into a little room, laying her down upon a truckle bed.

"She'll be all right," he said, drawing the girl from the room. "You kept me fooling about in London a little longer than I had anticipated."

"Who—who—?" whispered the girl, her eyes wide with horror.

"I told you you were to meet Mrs. Leman, and that is Mrs. Leman," said the man. "Sit down."

XVII. — THE PHILOSOPHY OF JOHN SANDS

TO hear was to obey. Sands' manner was a manner she had never met before in any man. Gone was the old suavity and gentleness. John Sands was just brute—the cave man with a scientific brain.

"If you're hungry you'll find some biscuits in that cupboard," he said. "When she recovers you can take a few in to her."

He jerked his head in the direction of the next room.

"What is the meaning of all this, Mr. Sands? If it is a joke, it is a very sorry kind of joke."

"I never indulge in practical jokes," said Sands. "So far from this being a joke, it is very earnest and serious business, I assure you. I am going to leave you for a little while, and it will save you a lot of valuable time if you believe me that there is no way out of this building except the way you came in. The windows are all shuttered, the walls and floor are covered with sound-proof felt, and underneath the floor," pointing downward, "is the only deep water there is in this backwater."

With that, he unlocked the door and passed out, locking it again after him. She judged that he had gone to look after his car, and in this surmise she was right, for later she heard the noise of the motor as it was driven off to some hiding-place. Despite his advice, she spent her time searching the room for some other egress. The door was of thick oak, and she gave up the attempt to find a way out after a futile effort to smash the lock with a chair. A low moan startled the girl, and she remembered the woman. She lay on the bed with her eyes wide open, her bruised hands clasped together.

"Can I do anything for you?" said the girl.

Margaret Maliko shook her head.

"Nothing for me or for yourself," she said. "Who are you? You're the girl Leman, I suppose?"

"That is my name," said Faith gently. "Are you very ill?"

The woman smiled.

"Do you know where I should like to be now?" she asked.

Faith shook her head.

“I should like to be in a cell in Aylesbury Jail, with seventeen years of my sentence to serve.”

“But I don’t understand—”

“Do you believe that God punishes sinners according to their deserts?” the woman went on. “I used to think all that stuff was a joke, but I know it’s true. I was in prison for three years, and I should be in prison still, only I escaped.” Faith, sitting on the edge of the bed, thought the woman’s mind was wandering, and she must have guessed her thoughts.

“I’m not mad,” she said. “I am Margaret Maliko or Margaret Sands.”

“You’re Mrs. Leman?”

Margaret brought her wandering eyes to the girl’s face. “I married John Sands for better or for worse,” she said with a faint smile. “He was my second husband. My first was a brute, and I used to think he was the worst man that ever lived. He ill-treated me and drove me to the verge of madness—and on that verge I poisoned him.”

The girl looked at her with horror-stricken eyes.

“And yet Paul Maliko was an angel of light compared with John Sands,” mused the woman.

She was speaking reflectively, as though putting her thoughts into words oblivious of her audience.

“Yes, I poisoned him. My father was a chemist and I studied pharmacy. One day, when Paul had driven me to distraction, I gave him an orange impregnated with—it doesn’t matter what it was. And here I am, for my sins, the wife of a poisoner. Oh, my God!”

She sat up in bed and buried her face in her hands. Suddenly she looked up at the girl.

“You wouldn’t think that a man would flog a woman?” she whimpered. “You wouldn’t think he’d practise every refinement of cruelty—not mental, but sheer simple brutality—on a woman, would you? It sounds like a lie. It isn’t

believable. I wanted to run away, but there was the prison—And then I had the mad idea of telling the truth to old Mark Leman. He was going to help me. In another two or three days I should have been on my way to Australia, and John Sands would have taken my place in prison. But he found it out. He knew it was I who had been to Mark Leman—a reporter told him. I had to meet John that night in Charles Street before I returned to Hove. Oh, that night!" she shivered.

She covered her eyes as though to blot out the memory, and her frame shook with the shuddering horror of it.

"I thought I was dying," she went on. "He put me into a cupboard, tied me hand and foot, gagged me—and oh, the pain of it, the pain of it!"

She rubbed her hands together, and then with an effort recovered her self-possession.

"I don't know what he intends doing with you," she said. "He is coming back. I know it! I know it! I can feel his presence. It is just a cold feeling here!"

She gripped at her heart.

"Promise me one thing, Miss Leman: if you value your life, do not eat or drink anything in this house. Swear that to me!"

The girl promised, and the woman, lowering her voice, spoke intensely:

"You may have one chance of escape. So may I. The only escape for me is prison, and yet I would welcome it. 0 God! how I would welcome it!"

There was a click of the door and John Sands came in.

"Hallo!" he said in his old friendly manner. "Getting acquainted, are you? You know Miss Leman," he said to the woman.

He laughed long, but softly. Then, stooping down, he lifted his wife from the bed and brought her back to the Oriental room.

"I want you to sit here and hear all I'm going to say," he said. "You're accumulating a great deal of information and you might as well have it all. You're aware that this lady is not Mrs. Leman? She is, in fact, my own wife," said John Sands. "She's not a very perfect wife—in fact, she's one of the

worst wives that any man has had. But what can you expect from a lady who escaped the gallows by the skin of her teeth, eh?"

He looked over the object of his talk with a possessive eye.

"Margaret, when you get out of the habit of disloyalty you'll have a better time," he said. "It won't be necessary to tie you down every time I leave you, or subject you to other discomforts," and his eye wandered significantly to the wall where hung a short stocky whip.

"I suppose you're very horrified at all this, Miss Leman? Naturally you would be. Brought up, as the old story-books would say, amidst gentle and refined surroundings, tended by loving friends and all that sort of thing, eh? And yet you need not be shocked at all."

He leaned back on the big divan where he had taken his seat, pulled a cushion toward him, and, thrusting it against his back, he lit a cigarette.

"You need not be shocked at all," he repeated, "especially when you realise that the first object and duty of man is to live. Life, after all, is but a span, and the more pleasure and happiness you can crowd into that span, the more successful your life has been. My object has been from my very early age to avoid pain to myself. I have schooled myself to eradicate that foolish sympathy with my fellows and their sufferings which brings to mankind half its misery."

He was evidently on a favourite theme, and both his tone and his language were as serious and as emphatic as though he held a professorship of immorality and were taking his favourite class.

"Selfishness," he went on, "is not a disease, but a virtue. It is the true art of right living. Every man is subject to many illnesses and handicaps. Why should he shoulder other burdens by cultivating the qualities which enable him to appreciate the miseries of his friends? That seems to me to be very silly and contrary to the real rules of life."

He said this regretfully, as if stating a human weakness which was generally recognised as reprehensible.

"I dare say in the few minutes' conversation which you have had with my lady"—he waved his hand to the white-faced woman, who sat in her chair, but unshackled—"you have received the impression that I am cruel for cruelty's sake. Nothing is farther from the truth. I boast, and with justice,

that I have never hurt any human being in the world, nor have I hurt any animal, unless by hurting them I secured an advantage for myself. You do not go to a horse in the field and flog him with a whip, unless you are a brute; but if you are behind him and have a few minutes to catch a train, you whip him to go the faster—is that cruelty? Not at all. That is necessity."

"I do not think your philosophy is a very beautiful one," said the girl quietly.

"What is beauty but truth?" asked Mr. Sands. "Do you not know your Keats?

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,
That is all we know, and all we need to know.

"I have certainly hurt my lady, as I say, but only because by doing so I save myself from a great deal of discomfort and have thereby advanced my own cause."

He smiled at the woman, who met his eyes with a steady gaze.

"For example, I had to hurt her because she would not tell me the nature of a certain document which she had posted in Berkeley Square. It took nearly twenty-four hours of persistent bad treatment to elicit that information; but when it came to me, her news was of the greatest service."

He paused as though expecting some comment, but the girl said nothing.

"Take your own case, for example, Miss Leman. You are, through the folly and disloyalty of my wife, the heiress of Mr. Mark Leman. Yes, it is perfectly true, you are the heiress. The will was made and signed at my wife's instigation."

"It was the old man's own idea," said the woman in a low tone.

"If you had not been there to put ideas into his head, he would not have had them," retorted her husband. "But that is beside the point—the will was made. What does that mean?"

He ticked the matter off on his finger-tips, a favourite trick of his.

"It meant, first of all, that the careful work and cultivation which I had been carrying on for years was rendered valueless in a few minutes. It meant that I had endangered my precious life by killing Mark Leman, and that I was in a fair way to losing the reward for which I had risked so much. This meant

also the waste of all the good money I had spent upon this lady, and finally, it meant black ruin to me, because, unless I can secure a very large sum of money by Midsummer Day, I am a bankrupt."

"What do you expect me to do?" asked the girl. "Am I to pay you for my freedom—or do you imagine that if you ill-treat me I shall sign away my inheritance?"

John Sands shook his head.

"It would not matter, if you did," he said, "because such a gift under duress would have no legal value. My point is this: in the event of your dying, the inheritance reverts to my wife. Of course, she is not supposed to be my wife," he explained, "but nobody but you and she are aware of the fact. As to you, well, so far as you are concerned I need not trouble."

There was something sinister in his words, and the girl shivered.

"When you are—disposed of," said the man, "my lady will make such claims upon the property as I wish her to make, and I have no doubt that we shall secure the greater portion of Mark Leman's fortune—that is, when you are dead."

"When I am dead," repeated the girl dully.

"When you are dead," said John Sands.

He got up from the divan and walked to a wall cupboard. This he unlocked and opened. The girl saw two rows of shining bottles and her heart almost ceased beating.

"As a poisoner," said John Sands, turning his head to her, "I am the veriest amateur. But I am an enthusiastic amateur. I had never thought of ending any life by means of what the lawyers call 'an obnoxious drug.' It was a chance meeting with our dear Margaret which first led to the discovery that she was not only a convicted poisoner, but had a very passable knowledge of medicine, which turned me in the direction I have taken—a direction which I do not regret," he added. "Margaret and I have had many talks, all of which have been very instructive, though of course she was not aware of the fact that I was storing up knowledge for future use. If I am wrong, Margaret, you may correct me," he added with heavy politeness.

He took the little bottles down one by one and fondled them in his hand, as though each had a separate charm from which he was loath to depart. Reluctantly he replaced them, and after one more admiring glance he locked the cupboard.

“I show you these because it is not my intention to—”

He stopped dead. In the corner of the room was the faint tinkle of an electric bell. In two strides he crossed the room, locked the door and passed out.

XVIII. — THE END

"WHAT is it?" asked the girl.

"He fixes a wire across all the paths leading to the house," replied the woman in a low voice. "Somebody is approaching. But don't build any hopes on it," she said bitterly. "It has happened before. People come this way by accident."

Outside the room and on the landing John Sands had slid back a little observation shutter and was searching the shores of the pond through a pair of glasses which were kept handy for the purpose. Presently he saw two heads and recognised them. He closed the shutter gently, reached up for and found a rifle hanging on a peg above the keyhole, and made his way out of the boat-house. It would be five minutes before they came and he had time to take up a favourable position. He had foreseen the possibility of some such thing as this happening and had rehearsed all possible ends to his adventure. This was one. He lay, not moving a muscle, whilst Jimmy Cassidy and the detective discussed the possibility of the girl being in the building, and heard with relief Jimmy's expressed intention of returning to town. He waited for five minutes till the sound of their footsteps died away, until he heard their feet beating on the hard road a hundred yards from the house, and then he walked back to the door, hung his rifle on its peg and came into the presence of Faith Leman.

The strain had told upon him—even she saw that. His face seemed to have grown a little older, to have lost some of its roundness, and when he spoke again his voice was in a higher key.

It was some time before he recovered his normal calmness of manner. He busied himself making coffee with an oil-stove—he was a great coffee-drinker—and placed a cup for the girl and one for his wife. To Faith's surprise the woman drank her portion, and nodded her approval to the girl. Evidently the danger was not here.

Toward the evening he grew restless, paced the room, but all the time kept up a continuous flow of conversation. Again and again he looked at his watch, and after one such inspection he said as he closed the case with a snap:

"It is necessary that I should be seen in my accustomed spot to-night, Miss Leman."

His tone was polite, almost respectful. She was off her guard, and then, before she knew what was happening, she was in his arms—arms like bars of steel, that gripped and held her despite her struggles.

“If you scream, I’ll flog you,” he said. “I’m not going to hurt you. Put your arms behind you like that—so.” With one hand he gripped her two wrists, with the other he bound them quickly and scientifically, then lowered her gently to the ground.

All the time the elder woman was watching him in silence. She had known what was coming when she had seen Sands take two silk cords from the divan, but it was useless to warn the girl.

“I am not binding your ankles together,” he said, “because it is unnecessary.”

She looked up, and with a thrill of horror she saw that attached to one of the beams was a small pulley block. With the aid of a step-ladder he inserted a thin strong rope through this, and the girl watched him, paralysed with terror. He looked down at her, smiling benignly.

“Gruesome, isn’t it?” he said. “But please don’t imagine I’m going to hang you or do anything commonplace like that. Have you ever heard of Smith and Wright? I see that you haven’t. You should read your criminal chronicles. They are almost as interesting as the study of astronomy. By the way, Orion is at its zenith to-night—a good omen for me.”

He put a cushion under her head, walked to his poison cupboard and took out a flat case. This he brought to the divan, murmuring a little tune, and, opening it, took out a small hypodermic syringe, which he examined critically.

“Rusty?” he said. “Now how did that get rusty?”

He drew the needle between his fingers and examined the brown stain it left. Then he looked up at the ceiling as though considering when he had last used the instrument.

“This place must be damp,” he said.

Evidently the rust caused him unusual uneasiness. He took a duster and rubbed the needle till every vestige of the corroded matter had disappeared.

Then he unscrewed the nozzle and filled the little cylinder from one of the bottles he had brought from his cupboard.

“It is pure morphia,” he explained, “and it will not hurt you.”

She shrieked as he approached her, but he made a movement as though to strike her with the back of his hand, and she was silent. She winced as the needle entered the flesh of her arm, but lay silent, quivering under his touch. He withdrew the needle and stood up, watching his victim. Then he turned to his wife.

“I call you to witness, Margaret Sands, that I am humane. I do not hurt unnecessarily. She is responding splendidly, and I can loosen the rope about her wrists.”

“What are you going to do?” asked the woman.

“Under this rug is a trap door,” explained John Sands, sitting on the edge of the divan and taking another cigarette from His case. “It is locked, so you need not have any hope ‘of escaping by that way, and even if it were not locked, you could not get out through the boat-house. I mentioned Smith and Wright. They were two artists who lived in England in 1812. They destroyed their victim by giving him or her a sufficient dose of opium to send them to sleep, and then hanging them head downwards in a near-by well. The advantage of that method is that the cleverest doctor in the world could not trace any signs of violence, or any symptoms which medical science could detect. To-morrow morning the body of this unfortunate girl will be picked up in Regent’s Canal.”

“You’re mad, mad!” wailed the woman. “Only a madman could be such a devil.”

John Sands laughed as he pulled back the mat and exposed the square of the trap.

“I’m the sanest person you ever met,” he said, “or will ever meet.”

He looked at her dubiously for a moment, then walked across to her and commanded her to put her hands behind her. Quickly he manacled her and fastened the strap about her neck.

“I am taking no risks to-night, Margaret,” he said.

He came back to the girl. She was now half conscious. He unlocked and threw back the trap. Then he looked at his watch again.

“I will give her another three minutes.” he said, and, crossing to a small table, picked up a tangerine and peeled it.

She might have marvelled at the astounding cold-bloodedness of this man, but her mind was occupied by other more serious considerations. He wiped his lips with a silk handkerchief, put the peel carefully on a plate.

“Now, I think,” he said, and stooped to pass the rope about the girl’s ankles.

“Now, I think,” said a voice behind him, and he turned in a flash.

But Blessington’s revolver was covering him. The door had opened silently. Blessington had tried seven master keys before he found the one that fitted. Jimmy stood framed in the doorway. Only for a second did horror and amazement hold him, then with a bound he was by the girl’s side, loosening the rope and chafing her cold hands.

“The game’s up, Sands,” said Blessington.

“So I realise,” said the other, staring stupidly at the detective. “Yes, I think that—I think that is so.”

“You’re Margaret. Margaret, I want you also.”

The woman nodded.

Then, to the amazement of Sands and the detective, she drew her wrists clear of the manacles, and, bending down, unlocked the irons about her ankles.

“You—you—you could get out?”

It was Sands, his astonishment overcoming his fear, who spoke.

She nodded.

“I could always get out,” she said, speaking slowly. “I could always reach the poison cupboard. I forgot to wipe the syringe when I used it on the oranges, John Sands.”

She lowered her voice as she spoke, so that the detective could not hear her.

Blessington saw the man suddenly stand erect and crouching for a spring. In a second the detective was on him and had flung him backwards.

“No, you don’t,” he said sternly. “Put up your hands, Sands.”

The man, ashen of face, a ludicrous figure, with his big open mouth and his saucer eye, was speechless, incapable of obeying or of hearing. As Blessington’s hand fell upon hi? shoulder he collapsed forward into the detective’s arms, and was dead long before the nearest doctor had arrived.

Two people sat on the deck of a Western-bound liner and under the cover of a rug they held hands, very tightly, as lovers have held hands in similar circumstances ever since travelling rugs were invented.

“The point I wish to make is this,” said Jimmy for about the fiftieth time. “I’m not going to allow you to give me a penny, and if you ask me to give up my work I’ll never forgive you.”

“But, Jimmy, you’re a rich man yourself,” she complained. “Why, Mr. Holland Brown told me that you had written a million-dollar story.”

Jimmy smiled.

“Sure, I’ve written a million-dollar story, and I’ll write lots of other million-dollar stories. That’s just how I’m going to earn my living.”

“I wish I hadn’t inherited the money,” said the girl with a little pout. “Everything is going to be horrid. Jimmy, what am I worth to you?” she asked suddenly.

“That is all right, then,” she said. “You own me, so you’re a double millionaire, and I’ll let you work. And if anybody asks me why you work, I’ll just tell them that you’re eccentric.”

THE END