THE NINE BEARS

(THE OTHER MAN)

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

Freeditorial

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1. N.H.C.

IT was a bad night in London, not wild or turbulent, but swathed to the eyes like an Eastern woman in a soft grey garment of fog. It engulfed the walled canyons of the city through which the traffic had roared all day, plugged up the maze of dark side streets, and blotted out the open squares. Close to the ground it was thick, viscous, impenetrable, so that one could not see a yard ahead, and walked ghostlike, adventuring into a strange world.

Occasionally it dispersed. In front of the opera house, numbers of arc- lights wrought a wavering mist-hung yellow square, into which a constant line of vehicles like monstrous shiny bugs emerged from the outer nowhere, disgorged their contents, and eclipsed again. And pedestrians in gay processional streamed across the ruddy glistening patch like figures on a slide.

Conspicuous in the shifting throng was a boy, ostensibly selling violets, but with a keen eye upon the arriving vehicles. Suddenly he darted to the curb, where an electric coupe had just drawn up. A man alighted heavily, and turned to assist a young woman.

For an instant the lad's attention was deflected by the radiant vision. The girl, wrapped in a voluminous cloak of ivory colour, was tall and slim, with soft white throat and graceful neck; her eyes under shadowy lashes were a little narrow, but blue as autumn mist, and sparkling now with amusement.

"Watch your steps, auntie," she warned laughingly, as a plump elderly little lady descended stiffly from the coupe. "These London fogs are dangerous."

The boy stood staring at her, his feet as helpless as if they had taken root in the ground. Suddenly he remembered his mission. His native impudence reasserted itself, and he started forward.

"Voylets, lidy? Wear your colours. You ain't allowed to trot without."

The girl gazed at him, her blue eyes bright as stars on a windy night. An enchanting dimple twinkled about her curved lips in gay hide-and-seek, and when she laughed, fled upward to her eyes.

"Father," she said, "will you buy my colours from this bold sporting gentleman?"

As the man fumbled in an inner pocket for change, the lad took a swift inventory. The face, beneath the tall hat, was a powerful oval, paste-coloured, with thin lips, and heavy lines from nostril to jaw. The eyes were close-set and of a turbid grey.

"It's him," the boy assured himself, and opened his mouth to speak.

"So you are a sporting man," the girl rallied him gaily, adjusting the flowers.

The boy nodded, responding instantly to her mood.

"Only," he swept her with shrewd, appraising eyes, that noted every detail of her delicate beauty and sumptuousness, "I don't trot in the two-minute class myself."

The girl laughed a clear silvery peal; and turned impulsively to the young man in evening dress who had just dismissed his hansom and joined the group.

It was the diversion the boy had prayed for. He took a quick step toward the older man.

"N.," he said in a soft but distinct undertone. The man's face blanched suddenly, and a coin which he held in his large, white-gloved palm, slipped jingling to the pavement.

The young messenger stooped and caught it up dextrously.

"N.," he whispered again, insistently.

"H.," the answer came hoarsely. The man's lips trembled.

"C.," finished the boy promptly and with satisfaction. Under cover of returning the coin, he thrust a slip of white paper into the other's hand. Then he wheeled, ducked to the girl with a gay little swagger of impudence, threw a lightning glance of scrutiny at her young escort, and turning, was lost in the throng.

The whole incident occupied less than a minute, and presently the four were seated in their box, and the throbbing strains from the overture of I Pagliacci came floating up to them.

"I wish I were a little street gamin in London," said the girl pensively, fingering the violets at her corsage. "Think of the adventures! Don't you, Cord?"

"Don't I wish you were?" Cord Van Ingen looked across at her with smiling significant eyes, which brought a flush to her cheeks.

"No," he said softly, "I do not!"

The girl laughed at him and shrugged her round white shoulders.

"For a young diplomat, Cord, you are too obvious—too delightfully verdant. You should study indirection, subtlety, finesse—study Poltavo!" At the name the boy's brow darkened.

"Study the devil!" he muttered under his breath.

"That too, for a diplomat, is necessary!" she murmured sweetly.

"He isn't coming here to-night?" Van Ingen asked in aggrieved tones.

The girl nodded, her eyes dancing with laughter.

"What you can see in that man, Doris," he protested, "passes me! I'll bet you anything you like that the fellow's a rogue! A smooth, soft-smiling rascal! Lady Dinsmore," he appealed to the older woman, "do you like him?"

"Oh, don't ask Aunt Patricia!" cried the girl.

"She thinks him quite the most fascinating man in London. Don't deny it, auntie!"

"I shan't," said that lady calmly, "for it's true! Count Poltavo," she paused to inspect through her lorgnettes some newcomers in the opposite box, "Count Poltavo is the only interesting man in London. He is a genius." She shut her lorgnettes with a snap. "It delights me to talk with him. He smiles and murmurs gay witticisms and quotes Talleyrand and Luculhis, and all the while in the back of his head, quite out of reach, his real opinions of you are being tabulated and ranged neatly in a row, like bottles on a shelf."

"I'd like to take down some of those bottles," said Doris thoughtfully. "Maybe some day I shall."

"They're probably labelled poison," remarked Van Ingen, a little viciously. He looked at the girl with a growing sense of injury. Of late she had seemed absolutely changed toward him; and from being his dear friend, his childhood's mate, with established intimacies, she had turned before his very. eyes into an alien, almost an enemy, more beautiful than ever, to be true, but perverse, mocking, impish. She flouted him for his youth, his bluntness, his guileless transparency. But hardest of all to bear was the

delicate derision with which she treated his awkward attempts to express his passion for her, to speak of the fever which had taken possession of him, almost against his will, and which at sight of her throbbed madly at his wrists and temples. And now, he reflected bitterly, with this velvet fop of a count looming up as a possible rival, with his savoir faire, and his absurd penchant for literature and art, what chance had he, a plain American, against such odds?— unless, as he profoundly believed, the chap was a crook. He determined to sound her father.

"Mr. Grayson," he asked aloud, "what do you think—halloo!" He sprang up suddenly and thrust out a supporting arm.

Grayson had risen, and stood swaying slightly upon his feet. He was frightfully pale, and his countenance was contracted as if in pain. He lifted a wavering hand to his brow.

"I—I feel ill," he said faintly. His hand fell limply to his side. He took a staggering step toward the door.

Van Ingen was beside him instantly.

"Lean on me, sir," he urged quietly. He passed a steadying hand through Grayson's, and guided him toward the passage.

"We'll have you out of this in a jiffy," he said cheerfully. "It's the confounded stifling air of these places! It's enough to make a grampus faint! Lady Dinsmore, will you look after Doris?"

"No! No!" the girl exclaimed. Her face was white and strained and fear darkened her eyes. In her distress she had risen, and stood, clasping tightly her father's arm.

"We'll all go together! Please, dear!" Her voice and eyes pleaded. She seemed trying to convey a hidden meaning, a secret urgency.

"Nonsense!" Grayson, still pallid and frowning, leaned heavily upon Van Ingen's shoulder. Tiny beads of perspiration stood out upon his temples but his voice was stronger.

"Don't make a scene, my girl." He nodded toward the stalls, where already curious lorgnettes were beginning to be levelled at their box.

"Sit down!"

Doris obeyed mutely, her mobile lips quivering as she sought to suppress her emotion. She was conscious of a shiver which seemed to spread from

her heart throughout her limbs. The oppression of a nameless fear took possession of her; it weighed her down. She sat very still, gripping her fan.

"I'll be around fit as ever in the morning. 'Night, Lady Dinsmore. Take care of my girl."

Grayson spoke jerkily with a strong effort.

Lady Patricia Dinsmore regarded him coldly. She disliked the man cordially, and made no bones of it. In her heart she had never forgiven him for wedding her foolish younger sister, the family beauty, who had died at Doris' birth far away from her kith and kin in the desolate wilds of New York.

"Good-night, Gerald," she said drily. "Try to get a little sleep." She turned to the younger man. "Put him to bed, Cord, and cut all the wires around the Savoy, so he won't call up those wretched brokers. I think he's trying to gobble the whole English market."

She marked sharply the effect of her shaft. Grayson turned a shade paler. He clutched Van Ingen's arm.

"Get me out of here!" he whispered hoarsely. Lady Patricia viewed their departing backs with a fleeting ironical smile.

"Your father, my dear," she murmured to Doris, "is a very remarkable man."

Out in the fresh air, Grayson revived amazingly. His feebleness disappeared as if by magic, and he stepped out briskly. He nodded to a hansom in the rank and the man drew in to the opening.

"The Savoy," cried Grayson.

He sprang in hastily.

Van Ingen made as if to follow, but Grayson held the apron door securely.

"No need in the world for you to accompany me, dear boy," he exclaimed, smiling. "Go back. I feel quite braced already. It was that devilish stuffiness inside—a momentary seizure. Good-night!"

He waved his hand and sank back. The hansom started forward with a jerk, and the young man retraced his steps to the theatre, frowning thoughtfully.

Ten minutes later Grayson thrust up the trap.

"You may drop me here," he called. He descended and paid his fare. "I'll walk the rest of the way," he remarked casually.

"Bit thickish on foot to-night, sir," offered the driver respectfully. "Better let me set you down at the hotel." But his fare was already lost in the enveloping gloom.

Grayson wrapped his muffler closely about his chin, pulled down his hat to shadow his eyes, and hurried along like a man with a set destination. Presently he halted and signalled to a cab, crawling along close to the curb. Grayson scrutinised it keenly. The horse looked strong.

"Can you take me some distance?" he asked the driver.

"Take ye far's you got the coin!"

Grayson glanced about him furtively. "As far as this?" He stepped forward and gave an address in a carefully lowered voice.

The driver leaned far down from his high box and peered into his fare's face.

"Not there!" he muttered.

Grayson held out a sovereign silently. The driver shook his head.

"It's fair worth a man's life on a night like this."

Two sovereigns gleamed in Grayson's bare outstretched palm.

"I'll double it if you drive fast," he offered.

"All right, sir," answered the man at length, a bit sullenly. "Jump in." He turned his horse round and drove rapidly toward the river.

2. A BUSINESS CONSULTATION

THE fog was still heavy and the blurred street-lamps looked ghastly in the yellow mist when the young messenger, the first half of his mission performed, struck briskly riverward to complete his business. He disposed of his violets at a corner stand, hailed a passing hansom boldly, and after a low consultation with the driver, got in. They drove steadily for an hour. The gas- lamps grew fewer, and the streets more narrow and gloomy. Suddenly the man drew up with a jerk.

"Here ye be," he called huskily.

The boy sprang to the ground and peered about him. "It'll do," he announced, and then briefly, "Wait 'arf an hour."

He plunged down a dark and crabbed way, glancing warily behind him now and then to see if he was being followed.

Here, between invisible walls, the fog hung thick and warm and sticky, crowding up close, with a kind of blowsy intimacy that whispered the atmosphere of the place. Occasionally, close to his ear, snatches of loose song burst out, or a base, coarse face loomed head-high through the reek. But the boy was upon his native heath and scuttled along, whistling softly between closed teeth, as, with a dexterity born of long practice, he skirted slush and garbage sinks, held around the blacker gulfs that denoted unguarded basement holes, and eluded the hideous shadows that lurched by in the gloom.

Hugging the wall, he presently became aware of footsteps behind him. He rounded a corner, and turning swiftly collided with something which grappled him with great hands. Without hesitation, the lad leaned down and set his teeth deep into the hairy arm.

The man let go with a hoarse bellow of rage, and the boy, darting across the alley, could hear him stumbling after him in blind search of the narrow way.

Thin shivers of excitement rippled up and down his spine and his blood crinkled in his veins. Squatting close to the sloppy wall, he thrust out one leg and waited. He could feel the quarry come on, the big blowing body of him, the groping, outstretched arms. His leg stiffened rigid as a bar of iron. With a crash the man fell headlong across it. The boy laughed aloud and sheered aside, barely missing a knife which hurtled past and stuck quivering in the opposite wall.

As he sped along, a door suddenly opened in the blank wall beside him, and a stream of ruddy light gushed out, catching him square within its radiance, mud-spattered, starry-eyed, vivid.

A man stood framed in the doorway.

"Come in," he commanded briefly.

The boy obeyed. Surreptitiously he wiped the wet and mud from his face and tried to reduce his wild breathing.

The room which he entered was meagre and stale-smelling, with bare floor and stained and sagging wall-paper; unfurnished save for a battered deal table and some chairs.

He sank into one of them and stared with frank curiosity past his employer, who had often entrusted him with messages requiring secrecy, past his employer's companion, to the third figure in the room. A prostrate figure which lay quite still under the heavy folds of a long dark ulster with its face turned to the wall.

"Well?" It was a singularly agreeable voice which aroused him, softly modulated but with a faint foreign accent. The speaker was his employer, a slender dark man, with a finely carved face, immobile as the Sphinx. He had laid aside his Inverness and top hat, and showed himself in evening dress with a large buttonhole of Parma violets, which sent forth a faint, delicious fragrance.

Of the personality of the man the messenger knew nothing more than that he was an aristocratic young nob, eccentric in a quiet way, who lived in a grand house near Portland Place, and who rewarded him handsomely for his occasional services.

He related his adventures of the evening, not omitting to mention his late pursuer. "The keb's waitin' now, outside, sir," he concluded. The man listened quietly, brooding, his elbows upon the table, his inscrutable face propped in the crotch of his hand. A ruby, set quaintly in a cobra's head, gleamed from a ring upon his little finger. Presently he roused.

"That's all to-night, my boy," he said gravely.

"You've served me well."

He drew out his purse, extracted two sovereigns, and laid them in the messenger's hand.

"And this," he said softly, holding up a third gold piece, "is for—discretion! You comprehend?"

The boy shot a swift glance, not unmixed with terror, at the still, recumbent figure in the corner, mumbled an assent, and withdrew. Out in the dampness of the fog, he took a long, deep breath. After all, he reflected, such affairs were not in the province of a night-messenger. They belonged to Scotland Yard. And certainly the man paid well.

As the door closed behind him, his employer leaned back in his chair, and smiled into the sombre eyes of his companion.

"At last!" he breathed softly. "The thing moves. The wheels are beginning to revolve!"

His friend nodded gloomily, his glance straying off toward the corner of the room.

"They've got to revolve a mighty lot more before the night's done!" he replied with heavy significance.

He was a tall, lean man and wore a brown overcoat with the collar turned up sharply about his throat, and a derby hat still glistening from the mist. His voice, which was flat and rasping, betrayed his transatlantic origin.

"It's my opinion," he continued bluntly, "that you stick right here at this end of the line and see the game through. You can present your excuses to Lady Dinsmore to-morrow. I needn't tell you that we must move in this venture with extreme caution. A single misstep at the outset, the slightest breath of suspicion, and pff! the entire superstructure falls to the ground."

"That is doubtless true, Mr. Baggin," murmured his companion pleasantly. He leaned down to inhale the fragrant scent of the violets. "But you forget one little thing. This grand superstructure you speak of—so mysteriously—" he hid a slight smile, "I know it not. You have seen fit, in your extreme caution, to withhold all knowledge of it from me."

He paused and regarded his companion with a level, steady gaze. A faint, ironical smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"Is it not so, my friend?" he asked softly. "I am—how you say—left out in the cold?"

His countenance was serene and unruffled, and it was only by his slightly quickened breathing that an acute observer might have said that the conversation held any unusual significance.

The American stirred uneasily in his chair. A dull flush mounted to his temples.

"There are some financial matters—" he muttered sullenly.

"You admit it, then—this high scheme has to do with finance, with the finance of nations—the finance of the world!"

"Hush!" whispered Baggin hoarsely. He glanced about, half-fearfully.

The younger man ignored the outburst. He laid a persuasive hand upon his companion's arm.

"My friend," he said gravely, "let me give you a bit of good advice. Believe me, I speak disinterestedly. Take me into your counsels. As a Russian nobleman and distant kinsman of his Imperial Majesty the Tsar, I have the entree to the most exclusive houses of London. Politics I know a little, and the politicians extremely well. Twice I have been a guest at Sandringham. I am a person of diplomacy, resolution, power. In brief, Mr. Baggin, I am intelligent,'and I know too little or too much for you. Too much for an outsider, too little for a friend and—ah—conspirator. With half my knowledge, I could make you, or break you like glass. Candidly, I have not the heart for the latter. I would be rather a—a friendly power."

He leaned forward suddenly. "Make me," he said softly, "a member of your Committee of Nine."

Baggin shrank back. "You—you know that?" he gasped.

"I know many things," was the quiet reply, "but not all."

The American looked at him doubtfully. The man seemed limpid. Was he, in truth, as Grayson had once said, as deep as the bottomless pit?

Grayson, he knew, had favoured him.

"You have no money," he objected, finally.

"I have something better."

"What?" In Baggin's mouth the question was an insult.

"Genius!" returned the young man simply.

He disregarded Baggin's scornful ejaculation, and continued impersonally, as if reading aloud from a book.

"Genius, my friend! Genius is as high above mere money as the stars wheeling in their celestial courses are above the earth. It is human electricity —the motive power of the world. With my power, the spark I feel within me here"—he touched his white shirt-front—"I could wipe out kingdoms and principalities, change the map of Europe more drastically than Napoleon—and bloodlessly! Think of it a moment, my prosaic, financial friend! I who sit here in this room, with you and a dead man, can do these things! Just one little pawn in the game is missing. Money. A few million pounds for running expenses and for salaries to my—er—myrmidons! That item, Mr. Baggin, I expect to be supplied by you."

He laughed outright at Baggin's frowning, mistrustful face, crossed one leg over the other, and clasped his silk-clad ankle with a shapely hand. Baggin noted the boyish action. It at once irritated him and determined his course.

"Unfortunately," he replied drily, "we have already chosen our president and voted upon the immediate use of the fund. The map of Europe, I fear, must for the present remain unaltered—"

He glanced up and added hurriedly, "I—regret this Perhaps at our next meeting The membership, as you perhaps know, is—er—limited."

The young man sprang to his feet. His face was bronze.

"It is of no consequence, my friend." He laughed softly. "Simply, the scheme appealed to me. It fired my imagination. I am, as you know, a dreamer.

"'If you can dream, and not make dreams your master,'" he murmured.

He walked over to the corner of the room, picked up his Inverness, and stood looking composedly down upon the figure which it had concealed.

"Salve, my friend! You go down the river to- night, wiser than all the kings of earth."

He slipped into his coat and turned toward Baggin, who had also risen.

"You will see that it gets into the morning papers," he said. "I could wish to write it myself," he added pensively, drawing on his gloves.

"It has possibilities. So: ' Grayson a suicide. Great financier shows himself at the opera, bids the gay world good-night, and throws himself in the Thames. A flying rumour breathes money troubles as a cause for the tragedy.' Wait!" he fumbled in his breast pocket, "I'll write a note to pin to his clothes."

He scribbled hastily in his memorandum book, tore out the leaf, and handed it to his companion.

"He confesses his sins and commends his soul to 'le bon Dieu.'" He laid a hand upon the door.

"You will leave me here—alone?" asked Baggin.

"But yes! Nothing can harm you from within, and you bolt the door from without—until the preconcerted signal. It should not be long now." He drew out his watch.

"But—I wish you to remain—I command it—"

Despite his efforts at composure, Baggin's voice quavered.

His companion laughed. "A Roland for your Oliver, my friend!" he cried. "Favour for favour! You grant my small request?"

Baggin shook his head.

"You will be king, eh?—and alone? Good!"

He put on his top hat, adjusted his silk muffler about his throat, and with an amiable nod to his companion, stepped out into the night.

The fog had thinned to a nebulous haze, fine as a lady's veil, and the young man strode along briskly. Ten minutes brought him to the waiting hansom.

"Covent Garden," he directed the driver. He sprang in and leaned back against the cushions.

"So Baggin would be king!" He smiled with a certain grimness.

3. IN WHICH A CERTAIN MOMENTOUS QUESTION IS ASKED

AT precisely ten o'clock, as the curtain came reefing slowly down upon the first act of I Pagliacci, Lady Dinsmore turned with outstretched hand to greet a newcomer who had just entered the box.

"My dear count," she exclaimed, "I am disappointed in you! Here I have been paying you really quite tremendous compliments to these young people—which for an old woman, you know, is very proper—and you show your complete indifference to me by committing the worst crime in the calendar!"

"I am desolated!" The stranger who was bowing over her hand, a trifle lower than an Englishman would have done, was slender and distinguished looking, faultlessly dressed, and wearing a bunch of Parma violets. He had a way of looking at one gravely with an air of concentrated attention, as if he were seeing through the words, into the very soul of the speaker. He was, indeed, a wonderful listener, and this quality, added to a certain boyish candour of temperament, accounted perhaps for Count Poltavo's popularity in society.

"Before I ask you to name the crime, Lady Dinsmore," he said, "or to inform me if the calendar is a lady's, permit me to offer my humblest apologies for my lateness." Lady Dinsmore shook her head at him.

"You are incorrigible!" she declared. "But sit down and make your excuses at your leisure. You know my niece, and I think you have met Mr. Van Ingen. He is one of our future diplomats." The count bowed and sank into a chair beside his hostess.

Van Ingen, after a frigidly polite acknowledgment, resumed his conversation with Doris rather eagerly, and Lady Dinsmore turned to her companion.

"Now for the explanation," she exclaimed briskly. "I shall not let you off! Unpunctuality is a crime, and your punishment shall be to confess its cause."

Count Poltavo bent toward her with bright, smiling eyes.

"A very stupid and foolish business engagement," he replied, "which required my personal attendance. Shall I give you the details? I warn you in advance they will bore you frightfully! They did me."

Lady Dinsmore threw up a protesting hand.

"Pray spare me," she begged. "Business has no charms to soothe my savage breast! Grayson," she lowered her voice confidentially, "can talk of nothing

else. When he was with me, he was forever telegraphing, cabling to America, or decoding messages. There was no peace in the house, by day or by night. Finally I made a stand. 'Gerald,' I said, 'you shall not pervert my servants with your odious tips, and turn my home into a public stock-exchange. Take your bulls and bears over to the Savoy and play with them there, and leave Doris to me.' And he did!" she concluded triumphantly.

Count Poltavo looked about, as if noting for the first time the man's absence. "Where is he now?" he enquired.

Lady Dinsmore shrugged her shoulders.

"He is—ill! Frankly, I think he had a slight indisposition, and magnified it in order to escape. He hates music. Doris has been quite distrait ever since. The child adores her father."

Her companion glanced across to the subject of their remarks. The girl sat in the front of the box, slim and elegant, her hands clasped loosely in her lap. She was watching the brilliant scene with a certain air of detachment, as if thinking of other things. Her usual lightness and gay banter seemed for the moment to have deserted her, leaving a soft brooding wistfulness that was strangely appealing.

The count looked long at her.

"She is very beautiful," he murmured under his breath.

Something in his voice caught Lady Dinsmore's attention. She eyed him keenly. The count met her look frankly.

"Is—is she engaged to her young friend?" he asked quietly. "Believe me, it is not vulgar curiosity which prompts the question. I—I am—interested."

His voice was as composed as ever, but a slight pallor spread across his countenance. Lady Dinsmore averted her gaze hurriedly and thought with lightning rapidity.

"I have not her confidence," she replied at length in a low tone. "She is a wise young woman and keeps her own counsel." She appeared to hesitate. "She dislikes you," she added. "I am sorry to wound you, but it is no secret." Count Poltavo nodded. "I know," he said simply. "Will you be my very good friend and tell me why?"

Lady Dinsmore smiled. "I will do better than that," she said kindly. "I will be your very good friend and give you a chance to ask her why. Cord," she bent forward and tapped the young man upon the shoulder'with her fan, "will you

come over here and tell me what your chief means by permitting all this dreadful war-talk with Japan. Is it true that you Americans are going to fight those pleasant little men?"

The count resigned his seat courteously, and took the vacant place beside the girl. A silence fell between them, which presently the man broke.

"Miss Grayson," he began gravely, "your aunt kindly gave me this opportunity to ask you a question. Have I your permission also?"

The girl arched her brows at him. Her lip curled ever so slightly.

"A question to which you and my Aunt Patricia could find no answer between you! It must be subtle indeed! How can I hope to succeed?"

He ignored her sarcasm. "Because it concerns yourself, mademoiselle."

"Ah!" She drew herself up and regarded him with sparkling eyes. One small foot began to tap the floor ominously. Then she broke into a vexed little laugh.

"I am no match for you with the foils, count. I admit it, freely. I should have learned by this time that you never say what you mean, or mean what you say."

"Forgive me, Miss Grayson, if I say that you mistake me utterly. I mean always what I say—most of all to you. But to say all that I mean.—to put into speech all that one hopes or dreams—or dares—" his voice dropped to a whisper—" to turn oneself inside out like an empty pocket to the gaze of the multitude—that is—imbecile."

He threw out his hands with an expressive gesture.

"But to speak concretely—I have unhappily offended you, Miss Grayson. Something I have done—

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"But to speak concretely—I have unhappily offended you, Miss Grayson. Something I have done or left undone—or my unfortunate personality does not engage your interest? Is it not true?"

There was no mistaking his almost passionate sincerity now, held in check by the man's invincible composure.

But the girl still held aloof, her blue eyes cool and watchful. For the moment her face, in its young hardness, bore a curious resemblance to her father's.

"Is that your question?" she demanded. The count bowed silently. His lips were pale.

"Then I will tell you!" She spoke in a low voice surcharged with emotion. "I will give you candour for candour, and make an end of all this paltry masquerade."

"That," he murmured, "is what I most desire." Doris continued, heedless of the interruption.

"It is true that I dislike you. I am glad to be able to say it to you, openly. And yet, perhaps, I should use another word. I dislike you and fear you in equal parts. I dislike your secrecy—something dark and hidden within you—and I fear your influence over my father." Her voice faltered over the last word, and she paused.

Lady Dinsmore's cheerful tones broke across the silence.

"Doris," she charged, "you are preaching to the count. He is looking quite sulky and bored."

He shook his head at her, smiling.

"My unfortunate face, it belies me. I was, in truth, deeply interested. Miss Grayson was speaking of her father." He turned back to the girl. "You will continue the—how you say—arraignment?" he asked gravely. "I would know the worst. I, influence your father for evil—but how?"

Doris looked at him sombrely.

"I don't know—exactly," she admitted. "But you are somehow connected with the—the scheme —a terrible illegal scheme," her voice was only just audible. "That I know to a certainty. Father spoke to me one day of you—"

Count Poltavo started.

"It was after he had decoded a telegram. He looked up and spoke of your brilliance and discretion. He said you had the mind of a Napoleon."

"It is true that I was able to do your father a service," he replied slowly. "I did him another to-night." He smiled with a certain mysticism.

"In truth, it was what delayed me. But as for your—ah—conspiracy, Miss Grayson, believe me, I know little. That a—a committee exists, with a president—"

"Baggin!" breathed the girl. Her eyes were wide with terror.

"Ah!" His face was immovable, but a gleam in his eyes betrayed him.

She turned upon him sharply. "You did not know?"

He shook his head. "I know nothing—certainly. I wish I did!" he added simply.

"That is true—you swear it?" She leaned toward him a little, her bosom heaving tumultuously.

He bowed his head in assent.

"If I could believe you!" she faltered. "I need a friend! Oh, if you could know how I have been torn by doubts, beset by fears—oppressions!"

Her voice quivered. "It is illegal, you know, and terrible! If you would help me Wait. May I test you with a question?"

"A thousand if you like."

"And you will answer—truthfully?" In her eagerness she was like a child.

He smiled. "If I answer at all, be sure it v/ill be truthful."

"Tell me then, is Mr. Baggin your friend?"

"He is my dearest enemy," he returned promptly.

She drew a deep breath of relief. "And my father?" The question was a whisper. She appeared to hang upon his reply. The count hesitated. "I do not know," he admitted finally. "If he were not influenced by Mr. Baggin, I believe he would be my friend."

"For the first time that evening Doris looked at him with warmth in her manner. "By that," she said, smiling faintly, "I know you have told the truth. My father likes you, but Mr. Baggin sways him completely." The smile deepened in her eyes and she laughed a little unsteadily. "You—you will be kind, and forgive my rudeness and—and my anger?" The coldness had departed from her face completely and she was charming.

The count looked hard at her. Her glance wavered, fell, and met his again for a long moment.

Her colour heightened, and her breath came more quickly. A cloud of passion was about them. It brushed them with invisible wings.

He broke the spell.

"I am happy to have convinced you of my—ah —sincerity," he murmured. "And you do, in truth, believe me?"

She laughed softly. "Yes."

"And will trust me?"

"Yes."

He bent nearer to her. His face was quite pale and his eyes burned like living things. "May I put'my original question, then—my personality is not utterly displeasing to you?"

"My dear count," it was Lady Dinsmore's voice again, "it occurs to me that you are putting several hundred questions besides the one which I permitted you."

"It is I who am the culprit, auntie," exclaimed Doris gaily. "You see it was a game—taking down bottles off the shelf! Each one of us had ten questions

which the other must answer truthfully. I finished mine first, and the count had just begun on his!"

"I see," said Lady Dinsmore drily. "I fear, then, that I interrupted." Count Poltavo leaned toward her persuasively.

"There is just one more important question, dear Lady Dinsmore," he said,'" and that I should like to ask you."

The little lady elevated her brows at him. "Insatiable youth!" she murmured. "What is your question?"

"It is a very small thing," he replied, "but it has been in my mind for several days. I should like you and Miss Grayson—and Mr. Van Ingen, if he can find the time," he bowed politely to the young American, "to visit my studio."

Doris clapped her hands. "Delightful!" she exclaimed. "And will you do a sketch of auntie with her head cocked a bit to one side, like a pert little robin, and that adorable crooked smile?"

Lady Dinsmore patted her hand with a tolerant smile. "It is you that the count wishes to paint, my dear, not a wizened old woman like me."

"If I might try both of you," the count replied.

"Sometimes, with people who are my friends, the result is not so bad. The likeness, if it comes at all, comes quickly."

Lady Dinsmore laughed. "We will come, I promise you! Some afternoon—"

"Morning," he begged. "The light is better."

"Some morning, then," she agreed, "next week."

The curtain rose upon Nedda and Canio, who sang with love and bitterness and rage. Lady Dinsmore yawned behind her fan. At the end of the act she rose.

"Doris, my dear, I am going to follow the example of your father. This air is stifling, and we have a heavy day before us to-morrow. Cord, will you go for our things?"

It was the count who handed the ladies to their places in the unobtrusively elegant electric coupe, while Van Ingen stood doggedly at his elbow, awaiting a last word with Doris. He was bitterly jealous of his rival, who, to the boy's inflamed mind, seemed perversely lingering over his farewells. There was

some colour for his anger. The count had taken the girl's hand, and bending down so low that the two dark heads almost touched, was murmuring in her ear.

She smiled, but shook her head.

"Every moment to-morrow is already gone. And the next day also!"

He looked at her steadfastly for a moment. "I shall see you to-morrow," he reiterated softly.

"Moreover, you yourself will send for me. I prophesy!"

She laughed, and gave her hand to Van Ingen.

"Good-night, Cord," she said with frank affection.

"You won't forget you're lunching with me tomorrow, Doris?" he begged.

"No, indeed!" she returned mischievously. "I want to see my father. And, Cord, do look him up in the morning and 'phone me how he is— will you? I wish you could get him off for a walk."

"I will." He flushed with pleasure at the request. "I'll take him out to the zoo."

He closed the door and turned to rid himself of his companion.

The count stood with bared head, staring after the coupe. The corners of his lips curved in a slight smile, and his eyes were bright, as of one who dreams of pleasant things.

"Good-night," said Van Ingen shortly. The count laid a persuasive hand upon the young man's arm.

"Not yet," he begged. "You will perhaps stroll with me for a little?"

Van Ingen hesitated, frowning.

"I must insist!" Count Poltavo linked an arm through his companion's, who perforce fell into step with him. "It is—how you say—a small matter of business!" He laughed softly.

Van Ingen stalked along in absolute silence. The man's marked, almost insolent preference of Doris, as well as his amazing power over her, filled him with speechless rage. ,Given a pinchbeck title, he reflected viciously, and a glib tongue, and straightway loses her head. "What is your business?"

he asked aloud. Poltavo threw back his head and laughed musically. "Ah, you Americans!" he murmured.

"You cut, like a sharp knife, straight to the heart of a matter. One stroke! 'What is your business?'" He mimicked the young man's curt speech with delicate precision.

"Your countrywoman, Miss Grayson, she also is direct—and adorable." He appeared to muse.

"She is natural, with the naivete of a child. She is beautiful. She has charm. The perfect trinity! Have you observe' her chin—so round, so firm— and her throat—"

Van Ingen disengaged himself roughly. "We will not discuss Miss Grayson," he said a little hoarsely. "We will, if you please, keep strictly to business."

The count regarded him with an air of aggrieved reproach.

"You use words like bricks, my friend," he said gently. "You assault the intelligence. Ver' good. I retort in kind." His accent became slightly more pronounced. "You say: keep strictly to business. I say: mademoiselle is the subject of my business. She have told me that she and you are childhood mates—that you live in—how you say—the same bloc with her in New York—and that she have for you great regard, great affection—like a sister, perhaps. And it was this great regard which leads me to speak to you—to confide my hopes. It is my great wish to make Miss Grayson my wife," he concluded simply.

"You—you are engaged to her?" The universe seemed suddenly wheeling about Van Ingen's head, and his heart was beating thickly. It appeared, oddly enough, to be beating up in his head, smiting the drums of his ears like iron hammers, and pounding madly at his temples. He fought for composure, the hated ease of his companion. The count's words came to him dimly, as from a distance.

"Not yet," he was saying. "In the future— perhaps. But with you, her almost-brother, one may anticipate—"

Van Ingen interrupted him. "I fear I must correct a slight misapprehension upon your part. I am not Miss Grayson's 'almost-brother,' nor," he laughed grimly, "have I any desire for that particular relationship. You have given me your confidence. I will be equally frank with you. I, too, admire Miss Grayson."

"Ah!" He looked at Van Ingen with interest. "So you also are making the running! But, my dear boy, are you not—forgive me!—are you not—ah—young?"

Van Ingen flushed to the roots of his hair with sheer rage. It was the very taunt which Doris had flung in his teeth earlier in the evening. "I am twenty-five," he replied stiffly.

"So old!" exclaimed the count. "Permit me to say that you do not look it! I," he continued thoughtfully, "am thirty-five. And Miss Doris is older than both of us."

"She is exactly twenty-two."

The count shook his head. "Never believe it, my friend. She is as old as Eve. And as eternally young as Spring!" ' He turned to the other with a slight laugh. "You are my rival, then? You will do your best to baffle me, to thwart this great desire?"

"That is understood!" Van Ingen retorted. In spite of himself he was coming to admire the man's coolness and apparent simplicity of nature.

"Excellent! Well, then, it would appear that we are enemies. I have been counted an indifferently good enemy," he remarked. He held out his hand. "Good- night! Let us part friends, though we meet as sworn foes in the morning."

Van Ingen appeared not to perceive the outstretched hand. "Good-night," he said coldly.

He lifted his hat and turned away.

The count looked after him thoughtfully.

"Odd!" he muttered. "But I fancy that youngster. He is like her." With a few swift steps he overtook his late companion.

"Mr. Van Ingen, forgive my insistence. Believe me, it surprises you no more than it does me.

Let me venture to give you a word of advice."

Van Ingen interrupted him fiercely. "Let me give you a word first," he exclaimed. "The plain advice of a very plain American. Briefly, mind your own business and permit me to attend to mine."

The count looked at him fixedly for a moment, and then shrugged his shoulders. "So be it, my friend," he murmured, turning away.

"It was but a momentary weakness." He drew out his note-book, which afterwards became so famous, and wrote: "To spare is to become a coward."

4. WHICH RELATES TO A NEWSPAPER SUICIDE

THE next morning, at the stroke of ten, Van Ingen, faultlessly clad, sprang from his hansom in front of the American Embassy and tossed the astonished jarvey a sovereign.

"Because it's a fine morning," explained Van Ingen gaily, "and also because something nice is going to happen to-day."

He stood for a moment, drawing in the fresh April air, sweet with the breath of approaching spring. He caught the scent of lilacs from an adjoining florist shop. Overhead, the sky was faintly blue. He was feeling fit, very fit indeed— he made passes with his cane at an imaginary foe— and he was to lunch with Doris and her father at the Savoy. That was the "something nice"—with perhaps a stroll later along the Embankment with Doris alone.

He turned and took the stairs three at a time, whistling softly to himself.

"Chief in yet?" he enquired of Jamieson, the secretary, who looked up in astonishment at his entrance, and then at the clock.

"No, he's not down yet. You've broken your record."

Cord grinned. "I've got to get away early." Tossing his hat upon his desk, he sat down and went methodically through his mail. Half-an-hour later, he leaned back languidly and unfolded his Times, which in his haste he had thrust unread into his pocket.

"Beastly bore, this keeping up with the times," he grumbled in an aggrieved tone. "Why does the chief make us wade through all this stuff? Make us diplomats, forsooth!"

He yawned and glanced down at the flaring headlines on the front page. With a little horrified cry he sprang to his feet. He was suddenly pale, and the hand which gripped the paper shook.

"Good God!" he exclaimed.

Jamieson swung about in his swivel chair.

"What's up?" he enquired alertly.

"Grayson!" he muttered huskily. "Gerald Grayson has committed suicide!"

"Yes, so I read," remarked Jamieson cheerfully.

"Supposed to be a fabulously rich old johnny, wasn't he, and turned out to be a bankrupt. Friend of yours?" he asked curiously.

Van Ingen lifted a face from which every vestige of colour had been drained. "I—I was with him at the opera last night," he said. Jamieson whistled softly.

"He was slightly indisposed and left early," continued Van Ingen, "and I thought no more about it."

He rose hurriedly and reached for his hat. "I must go to them. Perhaps something can be done. Doris—" He broke off, unable to continue, and turned away sharply.

Jamieson looked at him sympathetically. "Why don't you go round by the newspaper offices?" he suggested. "There may be new developments—possibly a mistake. You note that the—the body has not been recovered?"

Van Ingen's face brightened. "A fine idea! Thanks, old man." He wrung the other's hand fervently. "I'll be off at once."

Out upon the pavement, he caught a passing taxi-cab. "Drive to the nearest newspaper office," he directed, "and wait for me."

At the information desk inside the huge building where he preferred his request, his worst fears were realised. The note was unmistakably in Grayson's handwriting.

"We verified that, of course," said the reporter who had been sent out to speak to the young man.

"How?" asked Van Ingen sharply.

"Through his daughter, naturally," was the calm response. "We sent a man out this morning to her aunt's house, and she recognised the handwriting at once." Van Ingen groaned. "Couldn't you have left her in peace?" he demanded.

"Mr. Van Ingen, you don't seem quite to realise the importance of this tragedy. Grayson was a financial king—a multimillionaire. Or, at least, he was so considered up to this morning. It now appears that he had speculated heavily during the last few weeks—we gathered this from Lady Dinsmore—who kindly told us what she knew—and lost everything, every penny of his own and his daughter's fortune. Last night, in a fit of despair, he ended his life."

Van Ingen looked at him in a kind of stupefaction. Was it of Grayson the man was talking such drivel? Grayson who only the week before had told him in high gratification that within the last month he had added a cool million to his girl's marriage portion. Grayson who but yesterday had hinted mysteriously of a gigantic financial coup in the near future. He passed a bewildered hand across his eyes. And now all that fortune was lost, and the loser was lying at the bottom of the Thames!

"I think I must be going mad!" he muttered.

"Grayson wasn't the kind to kill himself. Why, I tell you," he cried, "that last night, when I bade him good-night, he was gay, smiling. He looked like a man who goes forth to meet success."

"You saw him, then?" the reporter queried eagerly. "When? Where? Please give us full details, Mr. Van Ingen. This may turn out to be of tremendous importance." He pulled out his note-book.

"I was at the opera with his party last night," replied Van Ingen. He repeated the events of the previous evening.

"Grayson was not meditating suicide when I left him," he concluded positively. "I could swear it! Rather, he seemed to be reflecting with relish upon some particularly fine joke. May I see that note he is supposed to have written?"

"Certainly!" The reporter vanished into an inner room, and presently returned holding a scrap of white paper in his hand. "Torn from his memorandum book, you see," he observed quietly. Van Ingen read it through. "It's his handwriting, right enough," he admitted. "But somehow, it doesn't sound like Grayson himself. Too theatrical, dramatic!" He frowned, as if trying to catch some haunting impression. "It sounds like—"He broke off sharply, his face paling.

"Good God, no!" he whispered, "that couldn't be! And yet "—his eyes sought the paper again —"it's the dead ringer of the kind of rot he talks! But why—"He pressed his hand to his temples. "I give it up!" He returned the slip to the reporter, who had been watching him with cool, level eyes.

"You have a clue?" he asked.

"No, no!" replied Van Ingen hurriedly. "The whole affair is utterly inexplicable to me at present. I cannot believe that Grayson deliberately killed himself. The thing is beyond reason! The paper says that his hat and overcoat were found?"

"Together with his wallet and some personal letters. It seems a clear case." The reporter hesitated a moment. "It is not as yet known to the public, but I think I may tell it to you that Mr. T.B. Smith has been given charge of the matter. He will probably wish to know your address. And in the meantime, if you run across anything—"

"Certainly! I will let you know. Smith is an able man, of course." Van Ingen gave the number of his chambers, and retreated hastily, glad that the man had questioned him no further.

Out in the fresh air he drew a deep breath of relief, which ended in a sigh. But, at any rate, he had not betrayed his suspicions, if indeed they could be termed suspicions—those wild surmises which had flashed like forked lightning across the blackness of his mind. He found his cab and flung himself wearily back against the cushions. And now for Doris!

But Doris was not visible. Lady Dinsmore met him in the morning-room, her usually serene countenance full of trouble. He took her hand in silence.

"It is good of you, my dear Cord, to come so quickly. You have heard all?"

He nodded. "How is Doris?"

She sank into a chair and shook her head. "The child is taking it terribly hard! Quite tearless, but with a face like frozen marble! She refused quite scornfully to believe the news, until she saw his own handwriting. Then she fainted. She fell to the floor at the man's feet as if she had been stabbed to the heart." Lady Dinsmore took out her lace handkerchief and wiped her eyes. "Doris," she continued in a moment, "has sent for Count Poltavo."

Van Ingen started. "Why?" he demanded in a low voice.

"I cannot say, definitely," she replied, with a sigh. "She is a silent girl. But I fancy she feels that the count knows something She believes that Gerald met with foul play."

Cord leaned forward breathlessly. "My own idea!" he articulated.

Lady Dinsmore surveyed him with faint, good-humoured scorn. "You do not know Gerald!" she said finally.

"But—I do not follow you! If it was not murder it must have been suicide. But why should Grayson kill himself?"

"I am sure that he had not the slightest idea of doing anything so unselfish," returned Lady Dinsmore composedly.

"Then what—"

She leaned forward and tapped him on the shoulder with her fan.

"Why are you so absolutely sure that he is dead?" she asked softly.

Cord stared at her in blank amazement. "What do you mean?" he gasped. Was she mad also?

"Simply that he is no more dead than you or I," she retorted coolly. "What evidence have we? A letter, in his own handwriting, telling us gravely that he has decided to die! Does it sound probable? It is a safe presumption that that is the farthest thing from his intentions. For when did Gerald ever tell the truth concerning his movements? No, depend on it, he is not dead. But, for purposes of his own, he is pretending to be. He has decided to exist—surreptitiously."

"Why should he?" muttered Cord. This was the maddest theory of all. His head swam with the riot of conflicting impressions. He seemed to have been hurled headlong into a frightful nightmare, and he longed to emerge again into the light of the prosaic, everyday world.

The door at the farther end of the room opened. He looked up eagerly, half expecting to see Grayson himself smiling upon the threshold.

It was Doris. She stood there for a moment, uncertain, gazing at them rather strangely. In her white morning dress, slightly crumpled, and her dark hair arranged in smooth bandeaux, she was amazingly like a child. The somewhat cold spring sunlight which streamed through the window showed her pallid, as though the event of the night had already set its mark upon her. There were faint violet shadows beneath her eyes.

Cord came forward hastily, everything blotted from his mind but the sight of her white, grief-stricken face. He took both her hands in his own warm clasp. All he found to say, huskily, was, "Doris! Doris!"

The girl gave him a wide, deep look. Suddenly her lips dipped and quivered uncontrollably. With a short, smothered sob, she flung herself into his arms and hid her face on his shoulder.

Cord held her tenderly. "Don't!" he whispered unsteadily. "Don't cry, dear!"

In her sorrow, she was inexpressibly sweet and precious to him.

The moment recalled vividly an incident in their childhood, when her pet collie had died, and the little girl of seven had flown down the path with streaming eyes to meet him and sobbed out her grief in his arms.

He bent down and smoothed with gentle fingers the soft dusky hair. The fragrance of it filled his nostrils. Its softness sent a delicious ecstasy thrilling from his finger-tips up his arm. He trembled throughout his entire frame. All his life, he declared to himself with passionate sincerity, he would love her like this. All his life he would remember this one moment. He gazed down at her tenderly, a wonderful light in his young face.

"Dear!" he whispered again.

She lifted a pallid face tr, him. Her violet eyes were misty, and tiny drops of dew were still tangled in her lashes.

"You—you are good to me," she murmured.

At his answering look, a faint colour swept into her cheeks. She disengaged herself and sat down.

Lady Dinsmore came forward, and seating herself beside the girl upon the divan, drew her close within the shelter of her arms.

"Now, Cord," she said cheerily, indicating a chair opposite, "sit down, and let us take counsel together. And first of all," she pressed the girl's cold hand, "let me speak my strongest conviction. Gerald is not dead. Something tells me that he is safe and well."

Doris turned her eyes to the young man wistfully. "You have heard something—later?" she asked.

He shook his head. "There has been no time for fresh developments yet. I came past the newspaper office, and they are doing what they can.

Scotland Yard is in charge of the affair, and T.B. Smith has been put upon the case."

She shuddered and covered her face with her hands.

"How strange and ghastly it all is!" she whispered. "I—I cannot get it out of my head. The dark river—my father—I can see him there—" She broke off with a low moan.

Lady Dinsmore looked helplessly across to the young man. Tears were in her kind eyes.

The curtain at the lower end of the room parted, and a footman stood framed in the opening.

"A message for Miss Grayson," he announced discreetly.

Lady Dinsmore arched her eyebrows significantly. "Poltavo!" she breathed.

Doris darted forward and snatched the letter from the man's hand. She broke the seal and tore out the contents at a glance. A little strangled cry of joy escaped her. Her face, which had been pale, flushed a rosy hue. She bent to read it again, her lips parted. Her whole aspect breathed renewed hope and radiance. She folded the note, slipped it into her bosom, and, without a word, glided from the room.

Cord stared after her, white to the lips with rage and wounded love.

Lady Dinsmore rose briskly to her feet. "Excuse me, dear Cord," she murmured, "and wait here!" She rustled after her niece.

Van Ingen paced up and down the room distractedly, momentarily expecting her reappearance.

Alternate waves of jealousy and grief inundated his being. Only a short half-hour ago, with Doris' head pillowed upon his breast, he had felt supremely happy; now he was plunged into an abyss of utter wretchedness. What were the contents of that brief note which had affected her so powerfully? Why should she secrete it with such care unless it conveyed a lover's assurance? His foot came into contact with a chair, and he swore under his breath. Then he sighed.

The servant, who had entered unobserved, coughed deprecatingly. "Her ladyship sends her excuses, sir," he said, "and says she will write you later." He ushered the young man to the outer door.

Upon the top step Van Ingen halted stiffly. He found himself face to face with Poltavo.

The count greeted him gravely. "A sad business!" he murmured. "You have seen the ladies? How does Miss Grayson bear it? She is well?"

Van Ingen gazed at him darkly. "Your note recovered her!" he said with harsh bitterness.

"Mine!" Surprise was in the count's voice.

"But I have not written. I am come in person."

Cord's face expressed scornful incredulity. He lifted his hat grimly and descended the steps.

5. COUNT POLTAVO OFFERS HIS SERVICES

THE footman who had shown Van Ingen to the door ushered the count into the morning-room, replenished the fire in the grate which had burned low, and departed noiselessly.

The newcomer sank wearily into a deep chair, and closed his eyes. He looked spent and haggard, as if his night had been a sleepless one. The clear olive of his skin showed slightly sallow, and fine wire-lines were etched about his eyes. Perhaps he did not hear the light footfalls which approached. Doris came nearer, soft-footed, and pausing before the fire, regarded him with deep attention.

She had changed into a dark dress which accentuated her youth and slenderness.

The count opened his eyes and looked at her. A slight smile touched his lips. "I was dreaming of you!" he murmured softly. He sprang to his feet. "Forgive me!" he exclaimed contritely. "I must have dozed. I had a wakeful night." She gave him her hand. "And I disturbed you with my message!"

"I was glad to come," he replied simply. "But you—this terrible news!" He released her hand and fell back a pace, scrutinising her sharply.

"But you do not look sad! And yet your letter— the morning paper which I bought upon the way —it is not true, then?"

"Something is true—but not—not the ghastly thing I feared when I wrote you." She seated herself, and the count resumed his chair by the fire. His face was hidden in the shadows. "You mean that your father—"

"Is alive and well!" Her voice quivered and broke. Two shining tears trembled for a moment upon her lashes., and then sped down her cheeks. Others followed. She smiled through them. "I am so happy—so thankful!" she murmured.

"How did you learn this—wonderful news?"

The count's voice, though low, rang like steel on stone.

She gave him a startled look, and withdrew the note from its warm resting place and handed it silently to him.

"May I take it to the light?" Without waiting for permission, he rose and stepped to the window. He stood with his eyes glued to the oblong strip of paper. A curious greyish pallor had spread across his countenance, and his

hands shook. A gust of strong rage overtook him, as he stared down at the familiar handwriting. "Imbecile!" he muttered. With an effort he collected himself, and turned back to the girl. "Permit me to ask if your aunt has seen this—ah—communication?"

She shook her head. "You see, he—he has forbidden me to speak!" Tears clouded her vision.

The sternness melted out of his face, but he put another question.

"And your estimable young friend whom I met at the door?"

"No."

He took a deep breath and returned to his place at her side.

"I wished to tell him," she continued, "for Cord is so good! He is as dear to me as a brother."

The count restrained a smile. He bent down and possessed himself of her hand. "Dear lady," he said, "you must conceal this, even from your brother. It was a mad thing for your father to do! I think Baggin would kill him if he knew!"

His own face hardened as he spoke. "But what's done can be undone." He leaned forward and dropped the paper upon the glowing coals. It smoked, then turned a deep quivering red, against which the letters were blackly visible. "Look!" he exclaimed softly. One phrase stood out strong and clear upon the darkening ashes.

"'Trust Poltavo!'" Doris whispered. She bent a little toward him. Her eyes were luminous, and her red lips parted. "It is a good omen!" she breathed.

"And you will trust me in this matter?" he asked.

She nodded gravely.

He raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them.

"And in others, also?"

She flushed warmly. "You must not speak of such things now. I must not listen. I can think only of my father. He is not dead—for that I thank Heaven. But he is in danger—great danger, both from Baggin and the law. He—he loved me more than his millions, and wrote to reassure me of his safety. Oh!" she exclaimed passionately, he is not bad, Count Poltavo—as

Baggin is—as I once thought you were—but only weak, and swayed by his imagination. He sees things big. He dreams of a financial empire such as the world never knew."

The count looked at her, and smiled queerly.

"And you wish me to find your father?" he questioned.

"Yes, or take me to him!"

"And after that?" he demanded a little eagerly.

"After that," she replied wearily, "you may say what you will."

"Until that hour, then," he said gently, "I shall set a seal upon my lips."

A silence fell between them. The count brooded, his eyelids down-dropped, his chin propped in the palm of his hand. A ruby, set in a curious antique ring, gleamed dully from his finger.

"I think," he observed finally in a low voice, "that Mr. Grayson is, by this time, safely upon the Continent. Paris—Rome?" He shook his head. "Too dangerous. Madrid? It is possible. Yes." He nodded, and then sat erect. "To-night, mademoiselle," he announced, "I shall start for Madrid to find your father."

She thanked him with her eyes. "And you will stop this terrible scheme—you will save him from Baggin?"

"I will save him from Baggin!" he promised grimly. "More than that, dear lady, I cannot undertake."

She gave him a shining look. "Ah, you are good," she whispered. She laid a hand on his arm. "Good and—and faithful!"

The count seemed deeply moved. He looked down at the hand, but made no motion to touch it.

"Mademoiselle," he said in a strange, choked voice, "it is you who are good! You conquer me with your divine tenderness!" A spasm as of pain crossed his countenance. "I—I am not good, as, the world knows that word. I am hard, ambitious, cruel." He continued, his face white and stern:

"Power is to me the greatest thing in the world, greater than love—even my love for you—greater than life. For what is human life? It is cheaper than the

dirt in the street. Why should we value it? For myself, it signifies nothing. When it obstructs my path, I set it aside—or crush it."

She drew back from him half fearfully. A lock of dark hair had escaped, and fallen across her brow. It made her look singularly young and troubled. "Why do you say those wild things?" she faltered.

He smiled, master of himself again, and took her hand.

"You are afraid of me—Doris?" he whispered softly.

She trembled at the word. Her white eyelids fluttered, and her colour came and went under his persistent gaze.

"A—a little!" she confessed. It seemed to her that she could almost hear her heart beat. His personality was round about her like a spell.

"Only a little!" the count laughed gaily. "I admit I am very much afraid of you!"

The hand was still closely imprisoned. She disengaged it, and lifted her eyes bravely to him.

"I believe that you are the most truthful man in the world," she said simply. "But I—I fear your truth. It terrifies me."

"Yesterday," he replied, with a whimsical smile, "you hated me. I was all evil. To-day I am the most truthful man in the world. What shall I be to-morrow?"

She held her head down and refused to meet his look.

"I—I cannot tell," she whispered.

"Nor shall I urge you," he replied gently.

"Later, perhaps, when your father is safe But until then, may I ask a very great favour?"

She nodded mutely.

He drew off the ring. "Will you wear this? I have a fancy that upon your hand it will bring me good luck and ward off danger." He tried it upon one after another of her fingers. "Too large!" he murmured disappointedly.

Doris smiled faintly. From about her throat, hidden in the lace of her gown, she pulled out a slender gold chain, from which a locket depended.

"I will wear it here," she promised, "together with the picture of my father." She took the jewel from his hand, and undoing the clasp, threaded the ring upon the chain and restored all to their place.

"That is better than I dared hope!" he said. He bent toward her. "And you will think of me sometimes?"

"Every instant of the day," she responded fervently, "until I shall see my father."

He laughed a little ruefully, and rose. "I suppose that must content me! And now I must be off. I will find your father. 'Trust Poltavo.'"

"I do—completely." She gave him her hand.

Her face was composed, almost cheerful. "Do you leave any commands?"

He looked significantly at the fire, where the only trace of the note was a faint black film. "You have already received them," he said gravely.

"Everything is as it was this morning. Your father is dead. For you nothing is left but silence—and courage."

She shuddered a little. "Cord told me that the—the affair was in the hands of Scotland Yard, and that a Mr. Smith had been appointed to the case."

The count started at the name. He opened his lips to speak, but closed them again.

"Will he come and question me?" she continued. "Oh," she declared half wildly, "I could not bear that!"

"I regret that Mr. Smith has been given the case," observed the count thoughtfully. "I know the gentleman, slightly. He is a difficult man to deceive. You may be sure, dear lady, that he will come—and come again, if he suspects anything. You must be on your guard. Aid him openly with all the information at your disposal. Make engagements with him. Write notes. Send him fresh clues—one a day! And now—how you say— good-bye!" He looked down into her eyes, smiling.

Doris appeared to cling to him. "Oh, if you could be here to advise me!" she murmured. "I am afraid. It is all so secret—and terrible!"

"I will return," he assured her. "In three days I will return, or wire instructions. Courage!" he whispered. He touched his lips to her hand, pressed it, gave her a long look, and turned abruptly upon his heel.

Doris sank upon the divan, and stared drearily into the fire.

Half-an-hour later, Lady Dinsmore, drawing the curtains softly, found her in the same position. The older woman's face was flushed, and showed traces of recent tears. She sat down beside the girl and drew her close into her arms.

"Dear," she said in a choked voice, "you must be very brave."

Doris shuddered inside the protecting circle. Lady Dinsmore held her tightly.

"Your poor father has been found. Mr. Smith is below. He wishes us to go with him, to identify the—the body." She bent down tenderly to the girl, who lay quite still in her arms, and then gave a little cry. Doris had fainted.

6. A STRANGER COMES TO BURGOS

HE was a slender, distinguished man, and dressed in black, which is the colour of Spain.

Seeing him, on windy days, when bleak, icy air-streams poured down from the circling Sierras, and made life in Madrid insupportable, one might have marked him down as a Spaniard. His black felt hat and his velvet-linedcappa with its high collar would show him to be such from a distance, while nearer at hand his olive complexion, his delicateiy aquiline nose, and slightly upturned black moustache, would confirm the distant impression. He had come to Burgos from Madrid by an express, and had travelled all night, and yet he was the trimmest and most alert of the crowd which thronged the Calle de Vitoria, a crowd made up of peasants, tourists, and soldiers.

He made a slow progress, for the crowd grew thicker in the vicinity of the Casa del Cordón, where the loyal country-folk waited patiently for a glimpse of their young king.

The stranger stood for a little while looking up at the expressionless windows of the Casa, innocent of curtain, but strangely clean. He speculated on the value of life—of royal life.

"If I were to kill the king," he mused, "Europe would dissolve into one big shudder. If, being dead, I came forward offering to restore him to life for fifty million francs the money would be instantly forthcoming on the proof of my ability. Yet were I to go now to the king's minister saying—'It is easy for me to kill the king, but if you will give me the money you would spend on his obsequies, I will stay my hand,' I should be kicked out, arrested, and possibly confined as a lunatic."

He nodded his head slowly, and as he turned away he took a little note-book from his pocket, and inscribed—" The greatest of miracles is self-restraint." Then he rolled a cigarette and walked slowly back to the Cafe Suizo in the Espolon.

A clean-shaven priest, with a thin, intellectual face, was stirring his coffee at one of the tables, and since this was the least occupied the stranger made for it. He raised his hat to the priest and sat down.

"I apologise for intruding myself, father," he said, "but the other tables—"

The priest smiled and raised a protesting hand.

"The table is at your disposition, my son," he said.

He was about the same age as the stranger, but he spoke with the assurance of years. His voice was modulated, his accent refined, his presence that of a gentleman.

"A Jesuit," thought the stranger, and regarded him with politely veiled curiosity. Jesuits had a fascination for him. They were clever, and they were good; but principally they were a mysterious force that rode triumphant over the prejudice of the world and the hatred in the Church.

"If I were not an adventurer," he said aloud, and with an air of simplicity, "I should be a Jesuit."

The priest smiled again, looking at him with calm interest.

"My son," he said, "if I were not a Jesuit priest, I should be suspicious of your well-simulated frankness."

Here would have come a deadlock to a man of lesser parts than the stranger, but he was a very adaptable man. None the less, he was surprised into a laugh which showed his white teeth.

"In Spain," he said, "no gambit to conversation is known. I might have spoken of the weather, of the crowd, of the king—I chose to voice my faults."

The priest shook his head, still smiling.

"It is of no importance," he said quietly; "—you are a Russian, of course?"

The stranger stared at him blankly. These Jesuits—strange stories had been told about them. A body with a secret organisation, spread over the world—it had been said that they were hand-in-hand with the police.

"I knew you were a Russian; I lived for some time in St. Petersburg. Besides, you are only Spanish to your feet," the Jesuit looked down at the stranger's boots,—" they are not Spanish; they are much too short."

The stranger laughed again. After all, this was a confirmation of his views of Jesuits.

"You, my father," he accused in his turn, "are a teacher; a professor at the College of Madrid: a professor of languages." He stopped and looked up to the awning that spread above him, seeking inspiration. "A professor of Greek," he said slowly.

"Arabic," corrected the other; "—but that deduction isn't clever, because the Jesuits at Madrid are all engaged in scholastic work."

"But I knew you came from Madrid."

"Because we both came by the same train," said the calm priest, "and for the same purpose."

The stranger's eyes narrowed.

"For what purpose, father?" he asked.

"To witness the eclipse," said the priest. A few minutes later the stranger watched the black-robed figure with the broad-rimmed hat disappearing in the crowd with a little feeling of irritation.

He drank the remainder of his café en tasse, paid the waiter, and stepping out into the stream, was swept up the hill to where a number of English people were gathered, with one eye upon their watches and another upon the livid shadow that lay upon the western sky.

He found a place on the slope of the hill tolerably clear of sightseers, and spread a handkerchief carefully on the bare baked earth and sat down. He had invested a penny in a strip of smoked glass, and through this he peered critically at the sun. The hour of contact was at hand, and he could see the thin rim of the obstruction cover the edge of the glaring ball.

"Say, this will do; it's not so crowded."

The stranger buried his chin in the high collar of his cappa, pulled down his felt hat over his eyes, and from beneath its brim gazed eagerly at the newcomers.

One was short and stout and breathed stertorously, having recently climbed the hill. His face was a heavy oval, with deep creases running from nostril to jaw. The other, the speaker, was a tall, lean man, with an eagle cast of countenance. He wore, somewhat carelessly, a brown overcoat and a derby. Both were unmistakably American tourists, who had stopped off at Burgos to see the eclipse.

"Phew!" exclaimed the fat man. "I don't know which was worse, the climb or the crowd. I hate crowds," he grumbled. "You lose things,"

"Have you lost anything?" asked the other. His own hand went unconsciously to his breast pocket. The stranger saw this out of the corner of his eye—inside breast pocket on the left, he noted.

"You shouldn't carry valuables in a place like this," the man continued, "that is to say, not money."

"How about letters, eh, Baggin? Letters— and plans? They are sometimes worth money to the right party."

His companion frowned. "Nothing that I carry is worth money," he returned shortly. "I flatter myself that not a man in the world, no, not even you, Grayson," there was a slight sneer in his voice, "could make head or tail of my memoranda. And yet, there it is, the entire proposition, written down, in black and white. But it's all in code, and I carry the code in my head."

"I'm sincerely glad to hear it," replied the other. He looked about him nervously. "I have a feeling that we oughtn't to have come here."

"You make me tired," said Baggin wearily.

"We oughtn't be seen together," persisted the other. "All sorts of people are here. Men from the city, perhaps. Suppose I should be recognised —my picture was in all the papers."

"Don't be a fool," said Baggin roughly. "And for Heaven's sake, don't peer around in that silly fashion. Let me give you an epigram of Poltavo's. 'It is the observer who is always observed.' Rather neat, eh?"

"I wish he were in with us on this thing."

"I don't," retorted Baggin. "So that's settled. He's done his work, and that's the end of him."

"I doubt it," returned the other thoughtfully.

"And, frankly, if the matter comes up again, I shall vote to admit him."

"Well, wait till it does come up," growled Baggin. "And don't talk shop in a crowd like this.

Do you know what Poltavo says? 'Men babble away their secrets, and whisper away their lives.'" There was a long pause, and the stranger knew that one of the Americans was making dumb-show signals of warning. They were nodding at him, he felt sure, so he bowed and asked politely:

"At what hour is the eclipse?"

"No savvy," said the fat man, "no hablo Espagnol."

The stranger shrugged his shoulders, and turned again to the contemplation of the plain below.

"He doesn't speak English," said the fat man, "none of these beggars do."

His friend made no reply, but after a silence of a few minutes he said quietly and in English:

"Look at that balloon."

But the stranger was not to be trapped by a simple trick like that, and continued his stolid regard of the landscape; besides he had seen the balloons parked on the outskirts of the town, and knew that intrepid scientists would make the ascent to gather data.

He took another look at the sun. The disc was and blue, and the little clouds that flecked the sky were iridescent. Crowds still poured up the hill, and the slope was now covered with people. He had to stand up, and in doing so, he found himself side by side with the fat man. A strange light was coming to the world; there were triple shadows on the ground, and the stout man shifted uneasily.

"Don't like this, Baggin," he said fretfully, "it's hateful—never did like these wonders of the sky, they make me nervous. It's awful. Look out there, out west behind you. It's black, black—it's like the end of the world!"

"Cut it out!" said his unimaginative companion.

Then of a sudden the black shadow in the west leaped across the sky, and the world went grey-black. Where the sun had been was a hoop of fire, a bubbling, boiling circle of golden light, and the circling horizon was a dado of bright yellow. It was as though the sun had set at its zenith, and the sunset glows were shown, east, west, north, and south.

"My God, this is awful!"

The stout man covered his face with one hand and clung tightly with the other to Baggin. He was oblivious to everything, save a gripping fear of the unknown that clawed at his heart. Baggin himself paled, and set his jaw grimly.

For the moment he was blind and deaf to the hustling, murmuring crowd about him; he only knew that he stood in the darkness at high noon, and that something was happening which he could not compress within the limits of his understanding.

Three minutes the eclipse lasted; then, as suddenly as it began, it ended.

A blazing, blinding wave of light flooded the world, and the stars that had studded the sky went out.

"Yes—yes, I know I'm a fool." Grayson's face was bathed in perspiration. "It's—it's my temperament. But never again! It's an experience." He shook his head, as his trembling legs carried him down the hillside.

"You're all right," said Baggin reassuringly.

"I'll admit that it was a bit spooky." He tapped his pocket mechanically, and stopped dead.

"Gone!" he gasped, and dived into his pocket.

"My memorandum book!" Suddenly he grasped his companion and shook him savagely.

"It was you, damn you! I felt you pawing over me in the dark."

Grayson looked at him good-naturedly. "Don't be an ass, Baggin," he said. "What would I do with your code when I had it? God knows I don't want the responsibility of this business!"

Baggin released him sullenly.

"I—I beg pardon, Grayson. But I did feel hands upon me in the darkness, and thought at the time it was you. I daresay it was that accursed Spaniard."

He looked about him eagerly. The crowd was dispersing in all directions. The stranger was not to be seen.

"Thank Heaven, the thing was in cipher. He won't be able to make anything of it, anyway. He probably thought it was a fat wallet full of money, and will be desperately disappointed." He laughed mirthlessly. Plainly he was greatly disturbed. Grayson observed him with a malicious satisfaction.

"You shouldn't carry valuables around in a place like this," he remarked gravely.

The two men descended the hill and made their way to their hotel.

The stranger went into the cathedral, and took from the pocket of his mantle a small memorandum book.

"'Men babble away their secrets, and whisper away their lives,'" he murmured with a smile.

"Never was my friend Baggin more apropos." He set to work upon the cipher. It was very quiet in the cathedral.

That evening, at ten o'clock, the trim serving- maid tapped lightly at the sitting-room door of the two American gentlemen, and tendered Baggin, who answered it, a card.

"Tell him to come up," he said in a surly voice.

He flipped the bit of pasteboard across to his friend. "Poltavo! What the devil is he doing in this part of the world? No good, I'll be bound."

A sudden idea shot across his mind and struck him pale. He stood in the middle of the room, his head down, his brows drawn blackly together. A red light flickered in his eyes. Grayson, lounging easily in a deep leather chair, regarded him with something of the contempt the lazy man always entertains for the active one. The beginning of a secret dislike formed vaguely in his brain. His thoughts flew to Poltavo, a bright contrast. "I wish he would bring me news of Doris," he muttered. A wistful look crept into his face.

There was a discreet double knock at the door, it fell open, and Count Poltavo was revealed framed picturesquely in the archway.

He wore a black felt hat and a velvet-lined cappa which fell about him in long graceful folds. A small dark moustache adorned his upper lip. He removed it, and the hat, gravely, and stood bare- headed before them, a slender, distinguished figure.

"Good-evening, gentlemen."

He spoke in a soft, well-modulated voice, which held a hint of laughter. "Mr. Baggin, permit me to restore something of yours which I—er— found upon the hill." He held out the memorandum book, smiling.

Baggin sprang at him with an oath.

The count, still smiling, flung out his other hand, with a motion of defence, and the candlelight gleamed brightly upon a small dagger of Spanish workmanship. "'Ware!" he cried softly. "That point, I fancy, is sharp."

Baggin fell back a pace, his face twitching with rage.

"You would knife me, an unarmed man!" he cried furiously. "You low foreign cur!"

The count took a quick step toward him. His eyes sparkled. "I must ask you to retract that," he said. There was a dangerous note in his tones like the thin edge of a blade.

Grayson started to his feet. "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" he cried. "Are you gone stark mad, to quarrel over such a trifle? Baggin, stop glaring like a caged beast. Sit down. The count has returned your book, which doubtless you dropped upon the hill. And did you not boast that its contents were undecipherable?,"

Baggin took the book. "I may have been over-hasty," he acknowledged grudgingly, suspicion still in his eye. "But your disguise—"

"Was necessary, my friend, and I accept your apology. Say nothing more of it." The count unfastened the clasp at his throat, stuck the dagger into the panel of the door, and hung his hat and mantle upon it. The moustache he held up between thumb and forefinger with a grimace.

"How do you like me with mustachios, Mr. Grayson? They fell off three times to-day." The man whom most of London supposed to be dead laughed heartily.

"They change the entire cast of your countenance," he remarked candidly. "They make you look like a rascal."

"That is true," admitted the count. "I have observe' the same. They bring out the evil streak in my nature. I used to wear them, five years ago, in London," he continued pensively, "and then I shaved for—ah—aesthetic reasons. Mr. T. B. Smith does not fancy mustachios. He thought they gave me the look of a nihilist—or perhaps a Russian spy. Apropos," he nodded to Grayson, "he has charge of your case. He is a clever man, my friend." He sighed gently.

Grayson looked at him sombrely. "I wish I were out of this job," he muttered, "and back in America with DoYis. You saw her?"he demanded eagerly.

The count nodded, with a significant glance toward Baggin. The latter caught the look, and suspicion flamed again in his eye.

"May I ask you a plain question?" he said harshly.

"Surely!"

"How much of this business do you know?"

The count permitted himself a smile. "Since this afternoon," he answered softly, "I know— all."

Baggin's face grew black with rage. "Thief! I knew it!" He stuttered in the intensity of his passion.

The count surveyed him dispassionately.

"Wrath in, reason out," he murmured. Grayson intervened again. "For my part," he declared, "I am heartily glad of it. Poltavo is one of us now, and can tell us what he thinks of the scheme. I have always wished for his opinion."

Baggin rose abruptly, and strode about the room. Plainly the man was in a great, almost uncontrollable passion. The veins on his temples stood out in knots, and his hands clenched and unclenched spasmodically. Presently he turned, mastering himself with a strong effort, and held out his hand.

"I agree," he said in a constrained voice. "You are one of us, count." The two shook hands and resumed their chairs.

"And now," said Grayson, "tell us what you think of the scheme?"

The count hesitated for a minute. "Good," he said at length, "and bad! Admirable in the general plan, but absurd in some of the details."

"The general plan was mine," said Baggin gruffly.

"And the absurd details were probably mine," admitted Grayson with cheerfulness.

"May I give you some suggestions?" asked the count politely.

"Go ahead!" returned Baggin.

"This afternoon—after I had deciphered your notes—it took me precisely two . hours by the cathedral chimes to work out the key—I ventured to revise them, and also to devise a different plan of retirement for the committee. You would care to know it?" He looked deferentially at Baggin, whose bent brows relaxed.

"Draw up your chair to the table," he said in reply. "We'll overhaul the entire proposition. There will be difficulties If you could invest an equal share of money—"

"I thought of that," answered the count simply.

"And I fancy I can—how you say—raise the required amount. May I speak for a moment to Mr. Grayson—on a very personal matter?"

He drew the older man aside, and conversed with him briefly, in low tones.

Surprise, incredulity, displeasure chased each other across Grayson's countenance in rapid succession. "Very well," he said finally, somewhat brusquely. "You have my consent—until I see Doris."

They returned to the table. "I will be security for Count Poltavo," he declared to Baggin, "for half-a-million pounds."

7. SOME DISAPPEARANCES

IN the last week of April, 1908, a notice was posted on the doors of the London, Manhattan, and Jersey Syndicate, in Moorgate Street. It was brief, but it was to the point:

"Owing to the disappearance of Mr. George T. Baggin, the L. M. and J. Syndicate has suspended operations."

With Mr. Baggin had disappeared the sum of £247,000. An examination of the books of the firm revealed the fact that the London, Manhattan, and Jersey Syndicate was—Mr. Baggin; that its imposing title thinly disguised the operations of a bucket-shop, and the vanished bullion had been most systematically collected in gold and foreign notes.

Mr. Baggin had disappeared as though the earth had swallowed him up. He was traced to Liverpool. A ticket to New York had been purchased by a man answering to his description, and he had embarked on the Lucania. The liner called at Queenstown, and the night she left, Mr. "Coleman" was missing. His clothing and trunks were found intact in his cabin. The ship was searched from stem to stern, but no trace of the unfortunate man could be discovered. The evening newspapers flared forth with, "Tragic End of a Defaulting Banker," but Scotland Yard, ever sceptical, set on foot certain enquiries and learnt that a stranger had been seen in Queenstown after the ship sailed. A stranger who left for Dublin, and who doubled back to Heysham; who came, via Manchester, back to London again. In London he had vanished completely. Whether or not this was the redoubtable George T. Baggin, was a matter for conjecture.

T.B. Smith, of Scotland Yard, into whose hands the case was put, had no doubt at all. He believed that Baggin was alive.

Most artistic of all was the passing of Lucas Damant, the Company Promoter. Damant's defalcations were the heaviest, for his opportunities were greater. He dealt in millions and stole in millions. Taking his holiday in Switzerland, Mr. Damant foolishly essayed the ascent of the Matterhorn without a guide. His alpenstock was picked up at the edge of a deep crevasse, and another Alpine disaster was added to the alarming list of mountaineering tragedies. What time four expert guides were endeavouring to extricate the lost man from a bottomless pit, sixteen chartered accountants were engaged in extracting from the chaos of his documentary remains the true position of Mr. Damant's affairs, but the sixteen accountants, had they been sixteen hundred, and the space of time occupied in their investigations a thousand years, would never have been

able to balance the Company Promoter's estate to the satisfaction of all concerned, for between debit and credit yawned an unfathomable chasm that close on a million pounds could not have spanned.

In the course of time a fickle public forgot the sensational disappearance of these men; in course of time their victims died or sought admission to the workhouse. There were spasmodic discussions that arose in smoke-rooms and tap-rooms, and the question, as to whether they were dead or whether they had merely bolted, was hotly debated, but it may be truthfully said that they were forgotten; but not by Scotland Yard, which neither forgets nor forgives.

The Official Memory sits in a big office that overlooks the Thames Embankment. It is embodied in a man who checks, day by day, hour by hour, and minute by minute, the dark happenings of the world. He is an inconsiderable person, as personalities go, for he enters no witness-box to testify against a pallid prisoner. He grants no interviews to curious newspaper reporters, he appears in no magazines as a picturesque detector of crime, but silently, earnestly, and remorselessly he marks certain little square cards, makes grim entries in strange ledgers, consults maps, and pores over foreign newspaper reports. Sometimes he prepares a dossier as a cheap-jack makes up his prize packet, with a paper from this cabinet, a photograph from that drawer, a newspaper-cutting, a docketed deposition with the sprawling signature of a dying man, a finger-print card— and all these he places in a large envelope, and addresses it in a clerkly hand to Chief Inspector So-and-So, or to the "Director of Public Prosecutions." When the case is over and a dazed man sits in a cell at Wormwood Scrubbs pondering his sentence, or, as it sometimes happens, when convict masons are at work carving initials over a grave in a prison-yard, the envelope comes back to the man in the office, and he sorts the contents jealously. It is nothing to him, the sum of misery they have cast, or the odour of death that permeates them. He receives them unemotionally, distributes the contents to their cabinets, pigeon- holes, guard-books, and drawers and proceeds to make up yet another dossier.

All things come to him; crime in all its aspects is veritably his stock- in-trade.

When George T. Baggin disappeared in 1908, his simple arrangement of indexing showed the connection between the passing of Lucas Damant, six months later, and the obliteration of Gerald Grayson. The Official Memory knew, too, what the public had no knowledge of: namely, that there had been half-a-dozen minor, but no less mysterious, flittings in the space of two years.

Their stories, briefly and pithily told, were inscribed on cards in the silent man's cabinet. Underneath was the significant word, "Incomplete." They were stories to be continued; some other hand than his might take up the tale at a future time, and subscribe "Finis" to their grim chapters. He was satisfied to carry the story forward as far as his information allowed him.

There never was a more fascinating office than this of the Silent Recorder's. It was terribly business-like, with its banked files, its innumerable drawers, its rows of deep cabinets. "A, B, C, D," they ran; then began all over again, "AA, BB, CC," except the big index drawer where "Aabot, Aaroon, Aato, Abard, Abart" commenced the record of infamous men. There were forgers here, murderers, coiners, defaulters great and small. There are stories of great swindles, and of suspected swindles, of events apparently innocent in themselves, behind which lie unsuspected criminalities.

I show you this office, the merest glimpse of it, so that as this story progresses, and information comes mysteriously to the hand of the chief actor, you will understand that no miracle has been performed, no Heaven-sent divination of purpose has come to him, but that at the back of the knowledge he employs with such assurance is this big office at New Scotland Yard. A pleasant office, overlooking the Embankment with its green trees and its sunny river and its very pleasant sights— none of which the Recorder ever sees, being short- sighted from overmuch study of criminal records.

8. THE AMBASSADOR TAKES A HAND

MR. JOHN HAMMOND BIERCE, American Ambassador and Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of Saint James, sat in his spacious private office, and listened with an air of grave attention to the story his young protégé poured into his ears. As Van Ingen concluded, the great man leaned back in his swivel-chair until the spring creaked, and stifled a yawn behind a white, well- groomed hand.

"My dear boy," he said, "this is a very sad tale, and I am genuinely sorry for Miss Grayson. Her father appears to have been a rascal. But," he smiled across at his youthful visitor, "I do not quite see what the American ambassador has to do with the business. I understand you consulted me in my official capacity."

"I—I thought perhaps you might wish to take some action—"

"But the man is dead!" exclaimed the ambassador. "Dead and buried."

"That is just the question!" cried Cord eagerly. "Is he dead? For my part, I suspect he is very much alive and kicking. His suicide was only a ruse, to mask his plans from the public."

"A very successful one!" retorted the older man drily. "His daughter identified the body and was present at its burial. It was in all the papers."

"That is another point!" exclaimed Van Ingen.

"Not once was I permitted to view the body. I was even denied admittance to the house until three days after the funeral. Throughout the affair the utmost secrecy was observed."

"That seems natural, under the circumstances."

Van Ingen coloured warmly. "Pardon me, it is not natural, sir, when you know all the circumstances. I was an intimate of the family—almost, one might say, in the position of a son." He halted, and then continued, with a certain dignity:

"I have not spoken on the subject to you before, sir, chiefly because there has been nothing definite to say. But Miss Grayson is, I hope and pray, sir, my future wife."

"Ah!" The ambassador surveyed him with a keen but kindly glance.

"I feel bound," he observed thoughtfully, "to make a few remarks, both as your guardian and as a man who has seen something of the world. The wife of a rising young diplomat must be, like Caesar's wife, above reproach. In short, my dear boy, to marry Miss Grayson will absolutely ruin your career."

Van Ingen sprang to his feet; his face was livid with anger.

"Then, sir," he cried hotly, "I shall ruin my career, with the greatest pleasure in life. Miss Grayson—Doris—is worth inestimably more to me than any paltry success, or material advantage. Moreover," he continued, composing himself with a strong effort, "I disagree with you, even upon worldly grounds. Marriage with Doris will not mar me—it will make me. Without her, I shall be ineffectual, a nobody to the end of my days. Without her, living has no aim, no purpose. She justifies existence. I can't explain these things, sir, even to you. I—I love her!"

"So it would seem!" murmured the ambassador. The sternness had melted out of his face, leaving a whimsical tenderness.

"Sit down, my dear boy! Other people have been as hot in love as you before now—and as rashly headstrong." A shade passed over his features. "Come, let us get down to business. What is it you wish me to do—administer a love- potion to the young woman? Or restore the father to life?"

"I want you to investigate the case," Cord replied simply. "Or rather, give me the power to do so."

"There's Scotland Yard, you know," suggested his friend mildly.

"They could co-operate with us. In fact, that is what I should like to ask. That you send for Mr. T.B. Smith, who is already in charge of the business, and tell him that a certain strangeness in the circumstances has aroused your suspicions, and that you wish to sift the affair to the bottom. But since you cannot move openly, on account of your conspicuous position, you desire to join forces secretly, and to that end you offer a bonus of £500 to clear up the mystery—to prove, satisfactorily, that Grayson either is, or is not,, dead."

"Five hundred pounds!" mused the ambassador. "You are in love!"

Van Ingen flushed at the thrust. "I am in earnest," he said simply.

The ambassador studied his finger-tips. "I might say," he observed gravely, "that such a course as you outline—minus the £500—had already occurred to me. Certain financial—er—adventures in which Grayson was engaged,

with others, have come before my attention, and it appeared advisable to throw a searchlight upon the somewhat shadowy obscurity of his death. But my attitude in the investigation differs slightly from yours." His eyes, suddenly upraised, were slightly quizzical.

Van Ingen leaned forward breathlessly. He appeared to hang on his companion's words. "Go on! Go on, sir!" he urged.

The older man continued: "I do not ask, then, as you, where is Mr. Grayson? I ask, where is Mr. Grayson's money? The gentleman may be in heaven, or—ah!—elsewhere; presumably the latter. But, in either case, his money is not with him. Where is it, then? These, and several other interesting queries, I am waiting to put to Mr. Smith, who "—he took out his watch—" is due here in precisely ten minutes."

He smiled blandly at the young man, who seized his hand and wrung it fervently.

"And you will let me work under him, for you?"

"That was my intention before this interview. But, since your revelation, I doubt its wisdom. Coolness, impartiality of judgment—"

"Oh, come, sir!" protested Van Ingen, reddening. "I think I've had enough!"

The ambassador laughed. "Perhaps you have," he conceded. "Especially as the young lady has not yet struck her colours—eh?"

"Nor shows the slightest signs of doing so," replied Van Ingen ruefully. "There's another fellow making the running—that foreign beggar, Poltavo."

The ambassador looked up swiftly. "Not Count Poltavo, distantly related to the Czar?"

"Related to the devil!" muttered Van Ingen gloomily. "The way he gets around Doris—"

His guardian looked a little disturbed. "I am sorry for you, my boy. Poltavo is a strong man. I fancy he will give you quite a fight." There was a discreet knock at the door, and, at the ambassador's call, Jamieson entered. He bore a card, which he laid upon the table.

"I told him that you were engaged, Mr. Bierce, but he said he came in answer to your note."

"Quite right!" replied the ambassador briskly.

"Show him in at once." As the secretary vanished, the older man held up the bit of engraved pasteboard before the astonished eyes of his young friend. "Apropos!" he murmured.

Van Ingen reached for his hat. "I must be going," he said hurriedly.

"Not so fast!" The ambassador waved him back to his chair. "Sit still. The investigation has begun!"

The door opened, and Count Poltavo entered the room.

The ambassador received him cordially. "It was good of you to come so promptly," he said.

"I daresay my note puzzled you."

"I shall not deny it," smiled the count. He bowed politely to Van Ingen. "As you see, I have come directly on the heels of it, to hear the question."

"I shall not keep you in suspense, Count Poltavo," replied the ambassador gravely, "but come at once to the point. Briefly, some data which lie before me "—he tapped a typewritten report upon the table—" connect you, somewhat vaguely, with a certain recent event. For reasons, I propose to investigate that event, and a truthful statement on your part—"

The count elevated his eyebrows slightly.

"Pardon me! I withdraw the unnecessary adjective."

The count bowed. "And a statement on my part—"he murmured.

"Would be of great value to me at the present moment. And so I have ventured to write to you, as one gentleman to another, to beg your assistance."

"And the question?" The count's voice was like velvet. He outlined a pattern of the carpet with his cane.

The ambassador regarded him somewhat sternly. "How did you spend the evening of the eighteenth of thisfmonth?"

The count's composure did not fail him. Not a muscle of his face moved under the sharp scrutiny of his questioner, but he hesitated a perceptible moment.

"The eighteenth?" He wrinkled his brows, in an effort at recollection. "Pardon me!" He took out a small, black, leather-bound book. "I sometimes scribble

in it my random thoughts," he explained. "It may contain something which will aid my memory of that particular night. Ah!" His face beamed. "Here it is! The night of the eighteenth, I was at the opera with Lady Dinsmore and her charming niece. Afterwards, I had a most interesting conversation with Mr. Van Ingen, in which he confided to me—ah! —his age." He looked up brightly.

"Is that helpful?"

The ambassador smiled grimly. "And then?"

"Then we parted. I strolled for perhaps ten minutes, and took a taxi-cab home." He appeared to reflect a moment. "I went directly to my study, and wrote for some time—several hours, perhaps. Later, I read." He paused, and then added: "I am not, at any time, an insatiable sleeper. Four, or five hours at best, are all that I can manage. That morning it was dawn when I retired, and a faint, ghostly light was filtering through the shutters. I remember flinging them wide to look out, and wondering what the new day would bring to the world. It brought," he concluded quietly, "great grief to my dear friends."

He rose as he finished. "And now I regret that another engagement—with Lady Dinsmore, in truth—cuts short my time. I am glad if I have been able to aid you. And you will let me know if I can be of further service to you in this lamentable business." He held out his hand. The ambassador sat still in his chair, smiling.

"One moment, my dear count, and, if Lady Dinsmore complains, refer her to me."

The count looked at him amiably. "There is still another question?" he murmured.

"A small part of the same one," the ambassador emended smoothly. "Where were you in the early part of the evening—before the opera?"

Poltavo laughed softly. "That is true," he admitted. "For the moment I had completely forgotten. I dined at an unconscionably early hour with a business associate—I regret that I cannot give you his name—"

The ambassador glanced down at his report.

"Baggin?" he suggested.

The count turned a little white, but he answered composedly. "It is true. I dined with Mr. Baggin."

"And did not Mr. Grayson call you up over the telephone during dinner?"

"Some one called Mr. Baggin," responded the count indifferently. "I remember, because the fish grew cold and had to be sent away."

"And then?"

"Then—we discussed—business. I have a little money lying idle which I desired Mr. Baggin to invest for me. Unfortunately, the sum was too small for his purpose."

"And when did you join Mr. Grayson?"

The count stared. "Not at all!" He glanced down at the typewritten sheets, and an ironical smile touched his lips. "Your report appears to be—ah!—defective.

"It is," agreed the ambassador. "I had hoped to supplement it by your information. May I ask you again—Did you not see Mr. Grayson at some time during the evening of the eighteenth?"

The count shook his head. "I did not," he replied simply. "I affirm it, upon the honour of a Poltavo."

The ambassador sighed. "Then we are still in the dark," he said ruefully. "But I thank you for your courtesy. Would you care to know why I have sought you out, openly, in this extraordinary fashion?"

"Because you are an extraordinary man," returned the count, with a deep bow. The ambassador made a motion of dissent.

"Because I am your well-wisher, Count Poltavo," he said earnestly. "You are, I believe, a poet, a philosopher, a dreamer—not a common, base money-grabber. And, therefore, I should deeply regret to find you connected in any way with this present investigation, and I sincerely trust that in the future your name will not appear in these— ah!—defective reports. Frankly, I like you, Count Poltavo." He held out his hand. "Good-morning. I thank you for your extreme good nature in answering my questions."

The count appeared moved. Throughout his life, this strange man remained deeply susceptible to expressions of regard from his associates, and was always melted, for the moment, by sincere affection. Indeed, his natural tenderness, offspring of his heart, and his haughty ambitions, offspring of his head, were ever in deadly conflict, and his hardness conquered only by the supremest act of his will.

He grasped the outstretched hand cordially.

"You are very kind!" he said. "And I shall repay you by endeavouring that my name does not again appear in that reprehensible report." He laid a hand upon the sheaf of papers. "I should like to see it?" he asked simply.

The ambassador laughed outright. "My dear count," he exclaimed, "your powers are wasted as a private gentleman! You should be the ambassador of your imperial kinsman. There, your abilities would have adequate scope."

The count laughed, and glanced again at the report. "I shall see you next week at the Duke of Manchester's," he said. "The duchess read me yesterday her list of names. I was rejoiced to see it included yours." He bowed again, and withdrew.

The ambassador stared after him somewhat gloomily, took a turn about the room, and stopped in front of the young man. At sight of his doleful countenance, his own face brightened.

"Well?" he demanded.

Van Ingen looked sheepish. "I give up!" he replied. "The rascal's as deep as a well. But he seemed to me to be telling the truth."

"He was!" agreed the ambassador promptly.

"He is a great man—and a dangerous one. He has an unquenchable spirit."

He took out his watch. "Smith has failed us," he remarked. "But it is no matter. He sent in this morning his detailed report. I will turn that over to you, my boy, since you have volunteered your services in this business. Read it with care—it contains some remarkable statements—and return it to Mr. Smith, in person. Why not drop around to his chambers, this evening and see what has detained him? Wait! I'll give you a line to him."

He scribbled a note hastily, and thrust it and the report into the young man's hands. "And now, clear out!" He waved his hands laughingly.

"Don't return until you can explain—everything! Off with you!"

On the way out, Cord paused to examine his mail. One letter was from Doris. He broke the seal with fingers that trembled slightly. It contained but a single sentence.

"Can you come to me at nine o'clock? DORIS."

Despite his joy at receiving such a token of friendship, his face clouded. Nine o'clock! It was an awkward hour. He had planned to spend the entire evening with the detective. He determined to read the report, dine with Smith, if he could catch him, and go on later to Lady Dinsmore's. His spirits rose with a bound at the prospect.

But he was destined to disappointment. Mr. Smith was not to be found at his chambers, nor at Scotland Yard, nor in any of his accustomed haunts. Nor had he left any instructions with his man. At five o'clock, after repeated attempts, Cord gave up the project, somewhat sulkily, and sent two messages. He would stay for a short half-hour with Doris, and then drive around to the apartment of the detective, trusting that he might have returned.

That evening, at nine o'clock, he was ushered into Lady Dinsmore's drawing-room by a deferential footman, who went to announce his presence. Cord moved about restlessly. His forehead throbbed madly with overwrought nerves, for, since the reading of the report, he had felt wildly excited. It was safely folded away in an inner pocket, together with a telegram from T.B. Smith, bearing the single word, "Delighted!"

When at length Doris appeared, Cord was struck with the pallid beauty of the girl. Her animation and glow had departed, and her red lips, usually a Cupid's-bow of laughter, drooped pitifully at the corners. Her high- necked gown of deepest black gave her the look of a sorrowing nun. Nor did her manner reassure him; it was vague and remote, and Cord, who had meant to pour out his heart in sympathy, found himself chilled, and stammering forth absurd inanities. The half-hour passed on leaden foot. Doris explained, in a listless voice, that she was leaving soon, with her aunt, for the Continent, to travel indefinitely. She had meant to go away, quietly, without a word, but she found that she wished to see him once more—she faltered piteously.

Cord stood up abruptly. The interview had suddenly become unendurable to him.

"I shall see you again to-morrow!" he assured her.

She shook her head sadly. "This is the end, dear Cord. Our paths lie apart in the future. Yours is a fair, shining one, with success just ahead. Mine—"She gave a gesture of despair. "Good-bye!"

Cord took both her hands in his. "Good-night! I shall come again in the morning." He felt an almost overmastering desire {o take her into his arms, to whisper into her ear the secret of the report.

She walked with him to the outer door and let him out into the cool darkness of the night.

"Good-bye!" she said again. She seemed vaguely uneasy, and bent forward, peering about her. "Is that your taxi-cab?" she asked sharply. Cord reassured her.

"I—I have a presentiment that something is going to happen." She spoke in a low voice, full of emotion. "You will be careful—for my sake?"

Cord laughed, with a commingling of the joy and tender pride which a man feels toward the anxiety of the one woman in the world.

"I will be most careful," he promised, "and I will report my welfare to you in the morning!"

The door closed between them, and he went down the steps, whistling cheerfully.

The taxi-cab drew alongside. He gave the address to the driver, and sprang in, triumphant, hopeful. In front of the house of the detective, he descended and halted a moment upon the pavement, searching in an inner pocket for change. Something rushed upon him from behind; he swerved, instinctively, and received a stinging blow across the head and neck. As he sank helplessly to his knees, blinded by pain, but still conscious, a hand from behind inserted itself into his pocket. Cord resisted with all his strength. "Smith!" he shouted. Something heavy descended upon his head. There was a sudden blaze of falling stars all about him,—and then blackness, oblivion. When he regained consciousness, he was lying upon a couch, and Smith was bending over him.

"That was a narrow squeak, my friend!" he said cheerfully. "You may thank your lucky stars that you missed the full force of that first blow." Van Ingen blinked feebly. There was still a horrid buzzing in his ears, and Smith's voice sounded as from a great distance. The room swam in great circles around him.

"The report?" he asked faintly.

"They got it!" admitted Smith, who did not seem deeply downcast at its loss. "But they didn't get you, my boy! So that I think we may regard their job as a failure."

9. INTRODUCING T.B.SMITH

IN the month of May the market, that unfailing barometer of public nerves, moved slowly in an upward direction.

If the "House" was jubilant, the "Street" was no less gratified, for since the "Baggin Failure" and financial cataclysm, which dragged down the little investors to ruin, there had been a sad flatness in the world of shares. There are many places of public resort where the "Street" people meet—those speculators who daily, year in and out, promenade the pavement of Throgmorton Street, buying and selling on an "eighth" margin. To them, from time to time, come the bare-headed clerks with news of this or that rise or fall, to receive instructions gravely imparted, and as gravely accepted, and to retire to the mysterious deeps of the "House" to execute their commissions.

The market was rising, steadily as the waters of a river rise; that was the most pleasant knowledge of all. It did not jump or leap or flare; it progressed by sixteenths, by thirty-seconds, by sixty-fourths; but all down the money columns in the financial papers of the press were tiny little plus marks which brought joy to the small investor, who is by nature a "bull."

Many people who are not directly interested In finance regarded the signs with sympathy. The slaves of the street, 'busmen, cabmen, the sellers of clamorous little financial papers, all these partook in the general cheeriness.

Slowly, slowly climbed the market.

"Like old times!" said a hurrying clerk; but the man he spoke to sniffed contemptuously, being by nature one of that sour class from which all beardom is recruited.

"Like old times!" chuckled a man standing at the Bodega bar, a little dazed with his prosperity. Somebody reminded him of the other booms that had come and undergone sudden collapse, but the man standing at the counter twiddled the stem of the glass in his hand and smiled indulgently.

"Industrials are the feature," said an evening paper, and indeed the biggest figures behind the tiny plus marks were those against the famous commercial concerns best known in the city. The breweries, the bakeries, the cotton corporations, the textile manufacturing companies enjoying quotation in the share list—all these participated in the upward rush; nay, led the van.

Into Old Broad Street, on one day at the height of the boom, came a man a little above middle height, clean-shaven, his face the brick-tan of one who spends much of his life in the open air. He wore a suit of blue serge, well-cut but plain, a spotless grey Tirai hat, broad-brimmed, white spats over his patent shoes, and a thin cane in his hand. "A fellow in the Kaffir market—" guessed one of the group about the corner of 'Change Alley, but somebody better informed turned hastily when he saw the quick, striding figure approaching, and dived down a side court.

A showily attired young man, standing on the edge of the pavement chewing a quill toothpick thoughtfully, did not see the nqwcomer until he was close on him, then started and changed colour. The man in the wide-brimmed hat recognised him and nodded. He checked his walk and stopped.

"Here's Moss," he said. He had a snappy, curt delivery and a disconcerting habit of addressing one in the third person. "How is Moss? Straight now? Straight as a die, I'll swear. He's given up rigging, given up Punk Prospectuses for Petty Punters. Oh, Moss! Moss!"

He shook his head with gentle melancholy, though a light twinkled in his humorous grey eyes.

"I don't know why you're so 'ard on me, Mister Smith," said the embarrassed Moss; "we've all got our faults—"

"Not me, Mr. Moss," said T.B. Smith promptly.

"I dessay even you, sir," insisted the other.

"I've 'ad my flutter; and I failed. There's lots of people who've done more than I ever done, worse things, and crookeder things, who are livin* in what I might call the odour of sanctity.

"There's people in the 'Ouse," Moss wagged an admonitory finger towards 'Change, and his tone was bitter but envious, "who've robbed by the million, an' what do we see?"

T.B. Smith shook his head.

"We see," said the indignant young man, "motor-cars, an' yachts, an' race-horses—because they 'aven't been found out!"

"Moral," mused T.B. Smith: "don't allow yourself—"

"I know, I know." Moss loftily waved aside the dubious morality of Mr. Assistant-Commissioner Smith. "But I was found out. Twelve months in the second division. Is that justice?"

"It all depends," cautiously, "what you mean by justice. I thought the sentence was rather light."

"Look here, Mr. Smith," said Mr. Moss firmly; "—let's put the matter another way round. Here's Baggin's case, an' Grayson's case. Now, I ask you, man to man, are these chaps dead?"

T.B. Smith was discreetly silent.

"Are they dead?" again demanded Moss, with emotion. "You know jolly well they ain't. You know as well as I do who's at the bottom of these bear raids to send the market into the mud. I know them raids!" In his excitement Mr. Moss got farther and farther away from the language of his adoption. "They smell o' Baggin, George T. Baggin; he's operatin' somewhere. I recognise the touch. George T. Baggin, I tell you, an', as the good book says, his right hand hath not lost its cunnin'."

"And," said T.B. Smith, blandly ignoring the startling hypothesis; "what is Mr. Moss doing now to earn the bread, butter, and et ceteras of life?"

"Me? Oh, I'm in the East mostly," said the other moodily;—" got a client or two; give a tip an' get a tip now an' again. Small money an' small profits."

He dropped his eyes under the steady and pseudo-benevolent gaze of the other.

"No companies?" said the detective softly.

"No companies, Mr. Moss? No Amalgamated Peruvian Concessions, eh? No Brazilian Rubber and Exploitation Syndicate?"

The young man shifted his feet uneasily.

"Genuine concerns, them," he said doggedly; "an', besides, I'm only a shareholder."

"Not promoter. Mr. Moss is not a promoter?"

In desperation the badgered shareholder turned.

"How in 'Eaven's name you get hold of things I don't know," he said in helpless annoyance.

"An' all I can say—excuse me."

T.B. Smith saw his expression undergo a sudden change.

"Don't look round, sir," said the other breathlessly; "there's one o' my clients comin' along; genuine business, Mr. Smith; don't crab the deal."

In his agitation he grew a little incoherent.

T.B. Smith might have walked on discreetly, leaving Moss to transact his business in quiet and peace. Indeed, the young man's light-blue eyes pleaded for this indulgence; but the gentleman from Scotland Yard was singularly obtuse this morning.

"You don't want to meet him," urged Mr. Moss. "He's not in your line, sir; he's a gentleman."

"I think you're very rude, Mr. Moss," said T.B. Smith, and waited, whilst Moss and client met.

"Permit me," said Moss, with all the grace he could summon at a moment's notice, "to introduce you to a friend of mine—name of Smith—in the Government."

The stranger bowed and offered a gloved hand.

"Er—" said T.B., hesitant. "I did not quite catch your name?"

"Count Poltavo," said Mr. Moss defiantly; "a friend of mine an' a client."

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, count. I have met you somewhere."

The count bowed.

"It is ver' likely. I have been in England before."

T.B. Smith surveyed the imperturbable foreigner with interest. Of Count Poltavo's connection with Baggin and with Grayson he knew from his men's reports, though, as far as recollection served, he had never seen the man. But a haunting resemblance troubled him.

He nodded briefly to Moss, and turned away, and five minutes later had dismissed the incident from his mind.

He continued in the direction of the Mansion House. A famous banker, passing in his motor brougham, waved his hand in salute; a city policeman stolidly ignored him.

Along Cheapside, with the deliberate air of a sightseer, the man in the grey felt hat strolled, turning over in his mind the problem of the boom.

For it was a problem.

If you see, on one hand, ice forming on a pool, and, on the other, a thermometer rising slowly to blood-heat, you may be satisfied in your mind that something is wrong somewhere. Nature cannot make mistakes. Thermometers are equally infallible. Look for the human agency at work on the mercury bulb for the jet of hot air directed to the instrument. In this parable is explained the market position, and T.B. Smith, who dealt with huge, vague problems like markets and wars and national prosperity, was looking for the hot-air current.

The market rises because big people buy big quantities of shares; it falls because these same people sell, and T.B. Smith happened to know that nobody was buying. That is, nobody of account —Eckhardts, Tollingtons, or Bronte's Bank. You can account for the rise of a particular share by some local and favourable circumstance, but when the market as a whole moves up?

"—We can trace no transactions," wrote Mr. Louis Veil, of the firm of Veil, Vallings & Boys, Brokers, "carried out by or on behalf of the leading jobbers. The market improvement in Industrial Stocks is due, as far as we can gather, to Continental buying—an unusual circumstance."

Who was the "philanthropist" who was making a market in stagnant stocks? Whoever it was, he or they repented long before T.B. Smith had reached the Central Criminal Court, which was his objective.

He was a witness in the Gildie Bank fraud case, and his cross-examination at the hands of one of the most relentless of counsel occupied three hours. This concluded to everybody's satisfaction, save counsel's, T.B. Smith, who hated the law courts, walked out into Old Bailey to find newsboys loudly proclaiming, "Slump on the Stock Exchange!"

"Thank Heaven, that bubble's burst!" said T.B. piously, and walked back to Scotland Yard, whistling.

He did not doubt that the artificial rise had failed, and that the market had gone back to normal.

At the corner of the Thames Embankment he bought a paper, and the first item of news he read was:

"CONSOLS HAVE FALLEN TO 84."

Now, Consols that morning had stood at 90, and T.B. Smith stopped whistling.

10. THE ANTICIPATORS

T.B. SMITH strolled into the room of Superintendent Elk.

Elk is a detective officer chiefly remarkable for his memory. A tall, thin, sad man, who affects a low turned-down collar and the merest wisp of a black tie. If he has any other pose than his desire to be taken for a lay preacher, it is his pose of ignorance on most subjects. Elk's attitude to the world at large is comprehended in the phrase, "I am a child in these things," which accounts to a very great extent for the rapidity of his promotion in the Criminal Investigation Department. T.B.'s face wore a frown, and he twirled a paper-knife irritably.

"Elk," he said, without any preliminary, "the market has gone to the devil."

"Again?" said Elk politely, haying knowledge without interest.

"Again," said T.B. emphatically, "for the fourth time this year. I've just seen one of the Stock Exchange Committee, and he's in a terrible state of mind. Stocks and shares are nothing to me," the Commissioner went on, seeing the patient boredom on the other's face, "and I know there is a fairly well-defined law that governs the condition of the Stock Exchange. Prices go see-sawing up and down, and that is part of the day's work, but for the fourth time, and for no apparent reason, the market is broken. Consols are down to 84."

"I once had some shares in an American copper mine," reflected Elk, "and a disinterested stock- jobber advised me to hold on to them; I'm still holding, but it never occurred to me—I lost £500 —that it was a matter for police investigation." The Commissioner stopped in his walk and looked at the detective.

"There's little romance in finance," he mused, "but there is something behind all this; do you remember the break of January 4?"

Elk nodded; he saw there was a police side to this slump, and grew alert and knowledgeable.

"Yankees and gilt-edged American stock came tumbling down as though their financial foundations had been dug away. What was the cause?"

Elk thought.

"Wasn't it the suicide of the President of the Eleventh National Bank?" he asked.

"Happened after the crash," said T.B. promptly. "Do you remember the extraordinary slump in Russian Fours in April—a slump which, like the drop in Yankees, affected every market? What was the cause?"

"The attempt on the Czar."

"Again you're wrong," said the other; "the slump anticipated the attempt; it did not follow it. Then we have the business of the 9th of August." "The Kaffir slump?"

"Yes."

"But, surely, the reason for that may be traced," said Elk; "—it followed the decision of the Cabinet to abolish coloured labour in the mines."

"It anticipated it," corrected his chief, with a twinkle in his eye, "and do you remember no other occurrence that filled the public mind about that time?"

Elk thought with knit brows.

"There was the airship disaster at the palace. Hike Mills was put away just about then for blackmail; there was the Vermont case—and the Sud Express wreck—"

"That's it," said the Commissioner, "wrecked outside Valladolid; three killed, many injured— do you remember who was killed?ü" Yes," said Elk slowly, "a Frenchman, whose name I've forgotten; Mr. Arthur Saintsbury, a King's Messenger—by George!" The connection dawned upon him, and T.B. grinned.

"Killed whilst carrying despatches to the King of Portugal," he said.

"Those despatches related to the proposed withdrawal of native labour—much of which is recruited in Portuguese West Africa." He paused a moment, and added as an afterthought, "His despatch-box was never found."

There was silence.

"You suggest?" said Elk suddenly.

"I suggest there is an intelligent anticipator in existence who is much too intelligent to be at large." The Commissioner walked to the door. He stood for a moment irresolutely.

"I offer you two suggestions," he said: "the first is that the method which our unknown operator is employing is not unlike the method of Mr. George Baggin, who departed this life some time ago. The second is that, if by any chance I am correct in my first surmise, we lay this ghost for good and all."

11. AT BRONTE'S BANK

IT was two days later, when Consols touched 80, that T.B. Smith gathered in Cord Van Ingen and marched him into the City.

The agitated Committee-man of the Stock Exchange met them in his office and led them to his private room.

"I must tell you the whole story," he said, after he had carefully shut and locked the door. "Last Wednesday, the market still rising and a genuine boom in sight, Mogseys—they're the biggest firm of brokers in the city—got a wire from their Paris agents which was to this effect, ' Sell Consols down to 80.' They were standing then at 90, and were on the up-grade. Immediately following the wire, and before it could be confirmed, came another instruction, in which they were told to sell some gilt-edged stocks—this was on a rising market, too—down to prices specified. I have seen the list, and taking the prices as they stood on Wednesday morning and the price they stand at to-day, the difference is enormous—something like three millions."

"Which means?"

"Which means that the unknown bears have pocketed that amount. Well, Mogseys were paralysed at the magnitude of the order, and cabled away to their agent, asking for particulars, and were equally dumfounded to learn that they were acting on behalf of the Credit Bourbonnais, one of the biggest banks in the South of France. There was nothing else to do but to carry out the order, and on Thursday morning they had hammered stocks down ten points—stocks that have never fluctuated five points each way in mortal memory!"

The Committee-man, speaking in tones of reverence of these imperturbable securities, mopped his forehead with a tumultuous bandanna.

"Now," he resumed, "we know all the bears throughout all the world. The biggest of 'em is dead. That was George T. Baggin, one of the most daring and unscrupulous operators we have ever had in London. We know every man or woman or corporation likely to jump onto the market with both feet and set it sagging—but there isn't a single known bear who has a hand in this. We've tried to discover his identity, but we've always come up against a blank wall—the bank. The bank can't give away its client, and, even if it did, I doubt very much whether we should be any the wiser, for he's pretty sure to have hidden himself too deep. We'd probably find the bank was instructed by a broker and the broker by another bank, and we'd be as far off a solution as ever."

"Is there any cause for the present break?"

"I'm coming to that. In all previous slumps there has been a very good excuse for a panic hanging round. In the present instance no such excuse exists. There is a good feeling abroad, money is free and the Bank Rate is low, and the recent spurt in Kaffirs and Yankee rails has put a good heart into the market—why, even the Brontes have dealt!"

He mentioned the name of the great bank, which, in the City of London, ranks second to the Bank of England only.

"I don't know exactly the details of their dealing, but it is pretty generally known in the City that they have increased their commitments, and, when a conservative house like Bronte's takes advantage of a spell of prosperity, you may be sure that peace is in the very air we breathe." T.B. Smith was thoughtfully rolling a glass paper-weight up and down a blotting-pad, and Van Ingen, following such a plain lead, was regarding the ceiling with an air of pained resignation.

Neither of the two spoke when the Committee-man finished his recital. He waited a little longer for them to offer some remark, and, finding that neither had any comment to make, he asked, a little impatiently:

"Well?"

T.B. roused himself from his reverie.

"Would you mind telling me the names of the stocks again?" he asked. "The stocks that are being attacked."

The member recited a list.

"Um!" said the Commissioner thoughtfully.

"Industrials, breweries, manufactories—the very shares that enjoyed the boom are now undergoing the slump. Will you give me a Stock Exchange Year- book?"

"Certainly."

He unlocked the door and went out, reappearing shortly with a fat brown volume.

T.B. turned the pages of the book with quick, nervous fingers, consulting the list at his side from time to time.

"Thank you," he said at length, pushing the book from him and rising.

"Have you any idea—?" the broker began, and T.B. laughed.

"You nearly said 'clue'" he smiled; "—yes, I've lots of ideas—I'm just going to work one of them out."

He bowed slightly, and the two men left the building together. Van Ingen was burning with curiosity, but he wisely kept silence. At the corner of Threadneedle Street, Smith bought an evening paper.

"Issued at 4.10," he said, glancing at the "fudge" space, where the result of a race had been printed, "and nothing has happened."

He hailed a passing cab, and the two men got in.

"Bronte's Bank, Holborn," was the direction he gave.

"Like the immortal Mrs. Harris, there ain't no Bronte, as you know," he said. "The head of the business is Sir George Calliper. He's an austere young man of thirty-five or thereabouts. President of philosophical societies and patron of innumerable philanthropies."

"Has no vices," added Van Ingen.

"And therefore a little inhuman," commented T.B. "Here we are."

They drew up before the severe façade of Bronte's, and dismissed the cab.

The bank was closed, but there was a side door —if, indeed, such an insignificant title could be applied to the magnificent portal of mahogany and brass—and a bell, which was answered by a uniformed porter.

"The bank is closed, gentlemen," he said when T.B. had stated his errand.

"My business is very urgent," said T.B. imperatively, and the man hesitated.

"I am afraid Sir George has left the building," he said, "but, if you will give me your cards, I will see."

T.B. Smith drew a card from his case. He also produced a tiny envelope, in which he inserted the card.

A few minutes later the messenger returned.

"Sir George will see you," he said, and ushered them into an anteroom. "Just a moment, gentlemen; Sir George is engaged."

Ten minutes passed before he came again. Then he reappeared, and they followed him along a marble-tiled corridor to the sanctum of the great man. It was a large room, solidly and comfortably furnished and thickly carpeted. The only ornamentation was the beautifully carved mantel, over which hung the portrait of Septimus Bronte, who, in 1743, had founded the institution which bore his name.

Sir George Calliper rose to meet them. He was a tall young man with sandy hair and a high, bald forehead. From his square-toed boots to his black satin cravat, he was commercial solidity personified. T.B. noted the black ribbon watchguard, the heavy dull gold signet-ring, the immaculately manicured nails, the dangling black-rimmed monocle, and catalogued his observations for future reference.

Van Ingen, who saw with another eye and from a different point of view, mentally recorded a rosebud on the carpet and a handkerchief.

"Now, what can I do for you?" asked Sir George; he picked up the card from the desk and refreshed his memory.

"We're very sorry to trouble you," began T.B. conventionally, but the baronet waved the apology aside.

"I gather you have not come to see me out of office hours without cause," he said, and his tone rather suggested that it would be unpleasant even for an Assistant-Commissioner, if he had.

"No, but I've come to make myself a nuisance —I want to ask you questions," said T.B. coolly.

"So long as they are pertinent to the business in hand, I shall have every pleasure in answering," replied Sir George.

"First and foremost, is there the slightest danger of Bronte's Bank failing?" asked T.B. Smith calmly.

The audacity of the question struck the baronet dumb.

"Failing?" he repeated. "Bronte's fail—Mr. Smith, are you jesting?"

"I was never more in earnest," said T.B.

"Think what you like of my impertinence, but humour me, please." The banker looked hard at the man before him, as though to detect some evidence of ill-timed humour.

"It is no more possible for Bronte's to fail than the Bank of England," he said brusquely.

"I am not very well acquainted with the practice of banking," said T.B., "and I should be grateful if you would explain why it is impossible for a bank to fail."

If Sir George Calliper had been a little less sure of himself, he would have detected the monstrous inaccuracy of T.B.'s confession of ignorance.

"But are you really in earnest?"

"I assure you," said T.B. seriously, "that I regard this matter as being one of life and death."

"Well," said the banker, with a perplexed frown, "I will explain. The solvency of a bank, as of an individual, is merely a matter of assets and liabilities. The liabilities are the elementary debts, deposits, loans, calls, and such like that are due from the bank to its clients and shareholders. Sometimes the liability takes the form of a guarantee for the performance of certain obligations —that is clear enough?"

T.B. nodded.

"Assets may be represented as gold, Government securities and stock convertible into gold, properties, freehold, leasehold, land; but you know, of course, the exact significance of the word assets?"

T.B. nodded again.

"Well, it is a matter of balance," said the banker, "allowing a liberal margin for the fluctuation of securities, we endeavour and succeed in keeping a balance of assets in excess of our liabilities."

"Do you keep gold in any quantity on the premises?—what would be the result, say, of a successful burglary that cleared your vaults?"

"It would be inconvenient," said Sir George, with a dry smile, "but it would not be disastrous."

"What is your greatest outstanding liability?" demanded T.B.

The banker looked at him strangely.

"It is queer that you should ask," he said slowly; "—it was the subject of a discussion at my board meeting this afternoon—it is the Wady Semlik Barrage."

"The Egyptian irrigation scheme?" asked T.B. quickly.

"Yes, the bank's liability was very limited until a short time ago. There was always a danger that the physical disabilities of the Soudan would bring about a fiasco. So we farmed our liability, if you understand the phrase. But with the completion of the dam, and the report of our engineer that it had been submitted to the severest test, we curtailed the expensive insurance."

"When are the works to be handed over to the Egyptian Government?"

Sir George smiled.

"That I cannot tell you," he said; "it is a secret known only to the directors and myself."

"But until it is officially handed over, you are liable?"

"Yes, to an extent. As a matter of fact, we shall only be fully liable for one day. For there is a clause in the agreement which binds the Gov* ernment to accept responsibilities for the work seven days after inspection by the works department, and the bulk of our insurances run on till within twenty- four hours of that date. I will tell you this much: the inspection has taken place—I cannot give you the date—and the fact that it was made earlier than we anticipated is responsible for the cancellation of the insurances."

"One more question, Sir George," said T.B.

"Suppose, through any cause, the Wady Semlik Barrage broke on that day—the day upon which the bank was completely liable,—what would be the effect on Bronte's?"

A shadow passed over the banker's face.

"That is a contingency I do not care to contemplate," he said curtly.

He glanced at his watch.

"I have not asked you to explain your mysterious visit," he said, with a smile, "and I am afraid I must curb my curiosity, for I have an appointment in ten minutes, as far west as Portland Place. In the meantime, it may interest you to read the bank's balance-sheet."

Van Ingen's eye was on him as he opened a drawer in his desk.

He closed it again hurriedly, with a little frown. He opened another drawer and produced a printed sheet. "Here it is," he said. "Would you care to see me again at ten to-morrow?"

T.B. might have told him that for the next twelve hours the banker would hardly be out of sight for an hour, but he replied:

"I shall be very pleased."

He had shaken hands with Sir George, and was on his way to the door, when Van Ingen gave him a sign. T.B. turned again.

"By the way," he said, pointing to the picture over the fireplace, "that is the Bronte, is it not?"

Sir George turned to the picture.

"Yes," said he, and then with a smile: "—I wonder Mr. Bronte did not fall from his frame at some of your questions."

T.B. chuckled softly as he followed the uniformed doorkeeper along the ornate corridor. In a cab being driven rapidly westward, Van Ingen solemnly produced his finds.

"A little rose and a handkerchief," he said. T.B. took the last-named article in his hand. It was a delicate piece of flimsiness, all lace and fragrance. Also it was damp.

"Here's romance," said T.B., folding it carefully and putting it in his pocket. "Somebody has been crying, and I'll bet it wasn't our friend the banker."

12. MURDER

"I'VE got two men on to Sir George," said T.B. to Van Ingen. They were at the Yard. "I've given them instructions not to leave him day or night. Now, the question is, how will the ' bears ' discover the fatal day the barrage is to be handed over to the guileless Fellaheen?"

"Through the Egyptian Government?" suggested Van Ingen.

"That I doubt. It seems a simple proposition, but the issues are so important that you may be sure our mysterious friends will not strike until they are absolutely certain. In the meantime—"

He unlocked the safe and took out a book.

This, too, was fastened by two locks. He opened it, laid it down, and began writing on a sheet of paper, carefully, laboriously checking the result.

That night the gentleman who is responsible for the good order of Egypt received a telegram which ran:

PREMIUM FELLOW COLLECT WADY BARRAGE MERIDIAN TAINTED INOCULATE WEARY SULPHUR.

There was a great deal more written in the same interesting style. When the Egyptian Chief of Police unlocked his book to decode the message, he was humming a little tune that he had heard the band playing outside Shepheard's Hotel. Long before he had finished decoding the message, his humming stopped.

Ten minutes later the wires were humming, and a battalion of infantry was hastily entrained from Khartoum.

Having despatched the wire, T.B. turned to the young man, who was sitting solemnly regarding a small gossamer handkerchief and a crushed rosebud that lay on the table.

"Well?" demanded T.B. Smith, leaning over the table, "what do you make of 'em?"

"They are not Sir George's," replied Van Ingen, with a grin.

"So much I gather," said T.B."

"A client's?"

"A very depressed and agitated client—feel."

T.B.'s fingers touched the little handkerchief; it was still quite damp. He nodded.

"The rosebud?"

"Did you notice our austere banker's button-hole?"

"Not particularly—but I remember no flowers."

"No," agreed Van Ingen, "there were no flowers. I noticed particularly that his buttonhole was sewn, and yet—"

"And yet?"

"Hidden in one of those drawers was a bunch of these roses. I saw them when he was getting your balance-sheet."

"H'm!" T.B. tapped the table impatiently.

"So, you see," Van Ingen went on, "we have an interest in this lady client of his, who comes after office hours, weeps copiously, and leaves a bunch of rosebuds as a souvenir of her visit. It may have been a client, of course."

"And the roses may have been security for an overdraft," said the ironic T.B. "What do you make of the handkerchief?"

It was an exquisite little thing of the most delicate cambric. Along one hem, in letters minutely embroidered in flowing script, there ran a line of writing. T.B. took up a magnifying glass and read it.

"'Que dieu te garde,'" he read, "and a little monogram—a gift of some sort, I gather. As far as I can see, the lettering is ' N.H.C.'—and what that means, Heaven knows! I'm afraid that, beyond intruding to an unjustifiable extent into the private affairs of our banker, we get no further. Well, Jones?"

With a knock at the door, an officer had entered.

"Sir George has returned to his house. We have just received a telephone message from one of our men."

"What has he been doing to-night—Sir George?"

"He dined at home; went to his club and returned; he does not go out again." T.B. nodded.

"Watch the house and report," he said. The man saluted and left.

T.B. turned again to the contemplation of the handkerchief.

"If I were one of those funny detectives, Mr. Van Ingen, who live in books," he said sadly, "I could weave quite an interesting theory from this." He held the handkerchief to his nose and smelt it.

"The scent is 'Simpatico,' therefore the owner must have lived in Spain; the workmanship is Parisian, therefore—" He threw the flimsy thing from him with a laugh. "This takes us no nearer to the Wady Barrage, my friend—no nearer to the mysterious millionaires who 'bear' the shares of worthy brewers. Let us go out into the open, and ask Heaven to drop a clue at our feet." The two men turned their steps towards Whitehall, and were halfway to Trafalgar Square when a panting constable overtook them.

"There is a message from the man watching Sir George Calliper's house, sir," he said; "—he wants you to go there at once."

"What is wrong?" asked T.B. quickly.

"A drunken man, sir, so far as I could understand."

"A what?"

T.B.'s eyebrows rose, and he smiled incredulously.

"A drunken man," repeated the man; "he's made two attempts to see Sir George—"

"Hail that cab," said T.B. "We'll drive round and see this extraordinary person."

A drunken man is not usually a problem so difficult that it is necessary to requisition the services of an Assistant-Commissioner. This much T.B. pointed out to the detective who awaited him at the corner of St. James's Square.

"But this man is different," said the officer; "he's well dressed; he has plenty of money— he gave the cab-driver a sovereign—and he talks."

"Nothing remarkable in that, dear lad," said T.B. reproachfully; "we all talk."

"But he talks business, sir," persisted the officer; "boasts that he's got Bronte's bank in his pocket."

"The devil he does!" T.B.'s eyebrows had a trick of rising. "Did he say anything else?"

"The second time he came," said the detective, "the butler pushed him down the steps, and that seemed to annoy him—he talked pretty freely then, called Sir George all the names he could lay his tongue to, and finished up by saying that he could ruin him."

T.B. nodded.

"And Sir George? He could not, of course, hear this unpleasant conversation? He would be out of earshot."

"Beg pardon, sir," said the plain-clothes man, "but that's where you're mistaken. I distinctly saw Sir George through the half-opened door. He was standing behind his servant."

"It's a pity—" began T.B., when the detective pointed along the street in the direction of the Square.

"There he is, sir," he whispered; "he's coming again."

Along the pavement, a little unsteadily, a young man walked. In the brilliant light of a street lamp T.B. saw that he was well dressed in a glaring way. The Assistant-Commissioner waited until the newcomer reached the next lamp; then walked to meet him.

A young man, expensively garbed, red of face, and flashily jewelled—at a distance T.B. classified him as one of the more offensive type of nouveau riche. The stranger would have passed on his way, but T.B. stepped in front of him.

"Excuse me, Mr. "He stopped with an incredulous gasp. "Mr. Moss!" he said wonderingly. "Mr. Lewis Moss, some time of Tokenhouse Yard, company promoter."

"Here, stash it, Mr. Smith," begged the young man. He stood unsteadily, and in his eye was defiance. "Drop all that—reformed—me. Look 'ere"—he lurched forward and caught T.B. by the lapel of his coat, and his breath was reminiscent of a distillery—" if you knew what I know, ah!"

The "ah!" was triumph in a word.

"If you knew what 1 know," continued Mr. Moss, with relish; "but you don't. You fellers at your game think you know toot, as Count Poltavo says; but you don't." He wagged his head wisely.

T.B. waited.

"I'm goin' to see Calliper," Mr. Moss went on, with gross familiarity, "an' what I've got to say to him is worth millions—millions, I tell you. An' when Calliper says to me, ' Mr. Moss, I thank you! ' and has done the right thing, I'll come to you—see?"

"I see," said T.B., "but you mustn't annoy Sir George any more to- night."

"Look here, Smith," Mr. Moss went off at a tangent, "you want to know how I got acquainted with Count Poltavo—well, I'll tell you. There's a feller named Hyatt that I used to do a bit of business with. Quiet young feller who got marvellous tips—made a lot o' money, he did, all because he bowled out Poltavo—see?"

He stopped short, for it evidently dawned upon him that he was talking too much.

"He sent you, eh?" Mr. Moss jerked the point of a gold-mounted stick in the direction of Sir George's house. "Come down off his high 'orse "—the third "h" was too much for him— "and very wisely, very wisely." He shook his head with drunken gravity. "As a man of the world," he went on, "you bein' one an' me bein' another, it only remains to fix a meeting between self an' client—your client—an' I can give him a few tips."

"That," said T.B., "is precisely my desire." He had ever the happy knack of dealing satisfactorily with drunken men. "Now let us review the position."

"First of all," said Mr. Moss firmly, "who are these people?" He indicated Van Ingen and the detective. "If they're friends of yours, old feller, say the word "—and his gesture was generous— "friends of yours? Right!" Once more he became the man of affairs.

"Let us get at the bottom of the matter," said T.B. "Firstly, you wish to see Sir George Calliper?"

The young man, leaning against some happily placed railings, nodded several times.

"Although," T.B. went on, shaking his head reprovingly, "you are not exactly—"

"A bottle of fizz—a couple, nothing to cloud the mind," said the young man airily. "I've never been drunk in me life."

"It seems to me that I have heard that remark before," said T.B., "—but that's beside the matter; you were talking about a man called Hyatt who bawled Poltavo."

The young man pulled himself erect.

"In a sense I was," he said, with dignity, "in a sense I wasn't; and now I must be toddling." T.B. saw the sudden suspicion that came to him. "What do you know about the barrage?" he asked abruptly.

The man started back, sobered.

"Nothing," he said harshly. "I know nothing. I know you, though, Mr. Bloomin' Smith, and you ain't goin' to pump me. Here, I'm going." He pushed T.B. aside. Van Ingen would have stopped him but for a look from his companion.

"Let him go," he said. "I have a feeling that—"

The young man was crossing St. James's Street, and disappeared for a moment in the gloom between the street lamps. T.B. waited a time for him to reappear, but he did not come into sight.

"That's rum," murmured Van Ingen; "he couldn't have gone into Sir George's; his house is on the other side of the street—hello, there he is!"

A man appeared momentarily in the rays of the lamp they were watching, and walked rapidly away.

"That isn't him," said T.B., puzzled; "he's too tall; it must be somebody from one of the houses. Let us stroll along and see what has become of Mr. Moss."

The little party crossed the street. The thoroughfare was deserted now, save for the disappearing figure of the tall gentleman.

The black patch where Moss had disappeared was the entrance of the mews.

"He must have mistaken this for a thoroughfare," said T.B. "We'll probably find him asleep in a corner somewhere." He took a little electric lamp from his pocket and shot a white beam into the darkness.

"I don't see him anywhere," he said, and walked into the mews.

"There he is!" said Van Ingen suddenly. The man was lying flat on his back, his eyes wide open, one arm moving feebly.

"Drunk?" said T.B., and leant over him. Then he saw the blood and the wound in the man's throat.

"Murder! by the Lord!" he cried. He was not dead, but, even as the sound of Van Ingen's running feet grew fainter, T.B. knew that this was a case beyond the power of the divisional surgeon. The man tried to speak, and the detective bent his head to listen. "Can't tell you all," the poor wreck whispered, "get Hyatt or the man on the Eiffel Tower—they know. His sister's got the book—Hyatt's sister—down in Falmouth—you'll find N.H.C. I don't know who they are, but you'll find them." He muttered a little incoherently, and T.B. strained his ears, but heard nothing. "N.H.C.," he repeated under his breath, and remembered the handkerchief.

The man on the ground spoke again—" The Admiralty—they could fix it for you. Poltavo—"

Then he died.

13. HYATT

"GET Hyatt or the man on the Eiffel Tower!"

It sounded like the raving of a dying man, and T.B. shook his head as, in the company of Van Ingen, he walked back to his chambers in the early hours of the morning.

Since the night of the assault, the young man had remained as Smith's guest, at the latter's express command.

"Not that I believe you stand in immediate danger of having your head broken again by those miscreants," he said laughingly the next morning, "or that I could protect you if you didl But since you are in on this thing, and the enemy have got wind of it, it is as well to join forces. You can run errands, type my notes, and investigate obscure clues—in short, become a useful other self to me. In that way I double my efficiency, and can be in two places at once!"

And so Van Ingen, nothing loath, had sent for a few necessaries, and had taken up quarters with the detective.

At the suggestion of the latter, he had not acquainted Doris with his mishap, the injuries from which were, indeed, slight enough, consisting only of a bruise, the size of a walnut on the right side of his head, and an accompanying dizziness when, the next morning, he attempted to raise his head from the pillow.

He had scrawled a line to Doris therefore, reporting himself, per agreement, and inviting himself to tea, to discuss an important personal matter, the next afternoon at five.

To this he had received, late the same day, posted from Folkestone, the following reply:

"DEAR CORD :

"Owing to a sudden change of plans, we start for the Continent to-night, and, ' to-morrow at five,' I shall be having my tea with Aunty in Paris—and thinking of you!

"We remain there only for a few days, then on to the Riviera, and eventually cross into Spain.

I had something to ask you last night, which escaped me in the pain of bidding you farewell—something you may do for me, which will add to the

great debt of gratitude I already owe you—and crown it all! Abandon this investigation! By our dear friendship of many years, I ask it,—by the love which you profess for me. It will involve you in frightful consequences of which I do not dare to speak. Your bare connection with it fills me with anguish—I cannot sleep!... Thank you for the report of your health. I am nervous and unstrung these days, and filled with imaginary terrors.

In your note, you speak of 'an important personal matter'—may I interpret the phrase, candidly, and give you my answer? I esteem you too dear to entangle you in my own melancholy career. This decision is quite unalterable, and,, moreover, I am not free.

"There is nothing left to add. God bless you.

"DORIS."

This missive Van Ingen did not show to Smith.

With a white bandage about his head, and looking, the detective declared, "pale and interesting," he sat in an easy-chair before the open fire, and gloomily reviewed the situation.

She was not free. That meant Poltavo! Could it be true that in truth she loved him, then? For a while, he gave himself to the full bitterness of the idea. Before his mind there arose, vividly, the picture of the two at the opera—Poltavo, elegant, distinguished, speaking in low eager tones, and Doris bending toward him with parted lips, a divine light in her blue eyes. As he pondered all the recent circumstances, he felt the waters of despair pour over his soul. His head still throbbed from the bruise; he felt feverish and agitated, full of a burning turmoil, and a longing that knows but one solace.

Again he turned to the letter, seeking, unconsciously, for some word of comfort to his troubled spirit, and reread it, slowly.

This time her sweet sympathy shone out at him, like the sun behind storm-clouds. He remarked, also, the note of despairing sadness. She was not free! That hinted not of love, but of compulsion, of an iron necessity laid upon her soul. In a flash of intuition, the young man glimpsed the real situation. She had bound herself to the count, in order to save her father!

What had it not cost her to assume that heavy burden? For the first time he realised something of what the girl, with her high spirit, and her passionate adoration of her father, must have suffered at learning that he had perpetrated such a monstrous fraud on the public; that he was, in truth, a

cheat, an outlaw, and a criminal. Was it any wonder that her cheeks had lost their colour, her eyes their light, and her figure its youthful buoyancy and charm? He recalled, with a sharp pang, the pitiful droop of the slender, black- robed figure when he had last seen her; her pallor, and the shadow which lay deep, in her eyes. Fear had looked out of those eyes, fear had trembled in her voice, as she bade him be careful!... And she had esteemed him too dear to entangle in her dark fate!... A flood of infinite tenderness welled up in his breast, a tenderness and an exquisite yearning which thrilled the young man's soul to the point of pain. He burned with the desire to stand between her and her troubles, ta carry her off bodily from her enemies, to conquer a kingdom, or subdue a dragon—to do any wild, rash thing to prove his love.

Such moments rarely endure. They pass, these mountain-heights of exaltation and emotion, but to have experienced them however briefly, to have loved a woman with such passion and pure fervour, leaves no man as he was before.

Van Ingen returned to the problem. She had: bound herself to the count.

But Poltavo, according to the detective's theory, was the master-mind of the conspiracy. How, then, had he tricked her so completely? How had he gulled them all, he wondered savagely. Even his chief, the American ambassador, and a judge of men, had been completely fascinated by the charm of his personality, and would not hear a word against him.

As for women—he knew the silly ardent creatures went down like nine- pins before the smiling glance of his eyes and the unfailing courtesy of his manners. There was Lady Angela, the Duke of Manchester's daughter, a slender dryad-girl, with soft eyes and a halo of pale golden hair, whom the count had sketched upon a recent visit to their country-house, and whom, it was reported, he might have any day, for the asking.

"Why don't he ask her, then?" he growled aloud.

The detective, who lounged opposite him, warm coils of smoke ascending from his briar pipe, regarded him with humorous eyes.

"I don't follow you," he said. He glanced down at the open letter, which Van Ingen still held tightly in his hand.

"Do you want him to marry her?"

Van Ingen reddened. "I — I beg your pardon!" he stammered. "I was thinking of Lady Angela."

The detective smoked on tranquilly, though it was apparent he did not get the connection. Van Ingen, however, vouchsafed no further explanation, and presently the conversation fell upon other things.

The next morning Cord had awakened greatly refreshed, and with his resolve strengthened to continue the investigation. In company with Smith, he had interviewed Sir George Calliper, and seen the tragic end of Moss. As they walked homeward in the cold air of the early morning, Cord speculated upon the manner of man was this Count Poltavo. Beside him, the detective pondered, grimly, the same problem.

Hyatt—the man on the Eiffel Tower—the Wady Barrage—the mysterious bears—what connection was there one with another?

TO—HYATT, A FRIEND OF THE LATE LEWIS MOSS

Information concerning the whereabouts of the above- mentioned Hyatt is urgently required. Immediate communication should be made to the nearest police-station.

This notice appeared under the heading, "Too Late for Classification," in every London newspaper the morning following the murder of Moss.

"It is possible that the name is an assumed one," said T.B.," but the Falmouth clue narrows the search."

An "all-station" message was flashed throughout the metropolis:

"Arrest and detain Count Ivan Poltavo" (here followed a description), "on suspicion of being concerned in the murder of Lewis Moss."

But Count Poltavo anticipated the arrest, for hardly had the last message been despatched when he himself entered the portico of Scotland Yard and requested an interview with T.B.

"Yes," he said sadly, "I knew this young man. Poor fellow!"

He gave a very frank account of his dealings with Moss, offered a very full explanation of his own movements on the night of the murder, and was finally dismissed by a perplexed Commissioner, who detached an officer to verify all that Poltavo had said.

T.B. was worried, and showed it, after his own fashion. He sent Van Ingen by an early train to pursue his enquiries in Cornwall, and then went into the City.

An interview with the head of the banking- house of Bronte was not satisfactory.

"I am satisfied," said T.B., "that an attempt will be made to destroy the barrage on the day for which you are liable. All the features of the present market position point to this fact."

"In that case," said the banker, "the ' bears ' must be clairvoyant. The day on which the barrage comes into the hands of the Egyptian Government is known to two persons only. I am one, and the other is a gentleman the mere mention of whose name would satisfy you as to his integrity."

"And none other?"

"None other," said the banker. And that was all he would say.

But at six o'clock that night T.B. received a message. It was written in pencil on the torn edges of a newspaper.

"To-night Sir George Calliper is dining with the Spanish dancing girl, La Belle Espagnole."

That, and an initial, was all the note contained, but it came from the most reliable man in the Criminal Investigation Department, and T.B. whistled his astonishment.

14. SIR GEORGE DINES

SIR GEORGE CALLIPER lived in St. James's Street. A bachelor—some regarded him as a misogynist— his establishment was nevertheless a model of order; and if you had missed the indefinable something that betrays a woman's hand in the arrange- ment of furniture, you recognised that the controlling spirit of the household was one possessed of a rigid sense of domesticity, that found expression in solid comfort and sober luxury. The banker sat in his study engaged in writing a letter. He was in evening dress, and the little French clock on the mantel had just chimed seven. He finished the note and folded it in its envelope. Then he pressed a bell. A servant entered.

"I am dining out," said Sir George shortly.

"I shall be home at eleven." It was characteristic that he did not say "may be home," or "at about eleven."

"Shall I order the car, Sir George?"

"No; I'll take a cab."

A shrill whistle brought a taxi-cab to the door. A passing commissionaire stopped to ask the cabman which was the nearest way to Berkeley Square as the banker came down the two steps of the house.

"Meggioli's," he instructed the cabman, and added, "the Vine Street entrance."

The commissionaire stood back respectfully as the whining taxi jerked forward.

"Meggioli's!" murmured the commissionaire, "and by the private doorl That's rum. I wonder whether Van Ingen has started for Cornwall yet?"

He walked into St. James's Square, and a smart one-horse brougham, that had been idly moving round the circle of garden in the centre, pulled up at the curb by his side.

"Meggioli's—front entrance," said the commissionaire.

It was a uniformed man who entered the carriage; it was T.B. Smith in his well- fitting dress clothes who emerged at Meggioli's.

"I want a private room," he informed the proprietor, who came to meet him with a bow.

"I'm ver' sorry, Mr. Smith, but I have not—"

"But you have three," said T.B. indignantly.

"I offer a thousand regrets," said the distressed restaurateur; "they are engaged. If you had only—"

"But, name of dog! name of a sacred pipe!" expostulated T.B. unscrupulously. Was it not possible to pretend that there had been a mistake; that one room had already been engaged?

"Impossible, m'sieur! In No.1 we have no less a person than the Premier of Southwest Australia, who is being dined by his fellow-colonists; in No.2 a family party of Lord Redlands; in No.3—ah! in No. 3—"

"Ah, in No. 3!" repeated T.B. cunningly, and the proprietor dropped his voice to a whisper.

"'La Belle Espagnole'!" he murmured. He named the great Spanish dancer with relish.

"She, and her fiancé's friend, eh?"

"Her fiancé? I didn't know—"

"It is a secret—" He looked round as if he were fearful of eavesdroppers. "But it is said that 'La Belle Espagnole' is to be married to a rich admirer."

"Name?" asked T.B. carelessly.

The proprietor shrugged his shoulders.

"I do not enquire the name of my patrons," he said, "but I understand that it is to be the young Lord Carleby."

The name told T.B. nothing.

"Well," he said easily, "I will take a table in the restaurant. I do not wish to interrupt a tête-à-tête."

"Oh, it is not Carleby to-night," the proprietor hastened to assure him. "I think mamzelle would prefer that it was—no; it is a stranger."

T.B. sauntered into the brilliantly lighted room, having handed his hat and coat to a waiter. He found a deserted table. Luck was with him to an extraordinary extent; that Sir George should have chosen Meggioli's was the greatest good fortune of all.

At that time Count Menshikoff was paying one of his visits to England. The master of the St. Petersburg secret police was a responsibility. For his protection it was necessary that a small army of men should be detailed, and since Meggioli's was the restaurant he favoured, at least one man of the Criminal Investigation Department was permanently employed at that establishment.

T.B. called a waiter, and the man came swiftly. He had a large white face, big unwinking black eyes, and heavy bushy eyebrows, that stamped his face as one out of the common. His name—which is unimportant—was Vellair, and foreign notabilities his specialty.

"Soup—consommé, crème de—"

T.B., studying his menu, asked quietly, "Is it possible to see and hear what is going on in No. 3?"

"The private room?"

"Yes."

The waiter adjusted the table with a soft professional touch. "There is a small anteroom, and a ventilator, a table that might be pushed against the wall and a chair," said the waiter concisely. "If you remain here I will make sure."

He scribbled a mythical order on his little pad and disappeared.

He came back in five minutes with a small tureen of soup. As he emptied its contents into the plate before T.B. he said, "All right; the key is on the inside.—The door is numbered 11." T.B. picked up the wine list.

"Cover me when I leave," he said.

He had finished his soup when the waiter brought him a note. He broke open the envelope and read the contents with an expression of annoyance.

"I shall be back in a few minutes," he said, rising; "—reserve this table."

The waiter bowed.

15. THE DANCING GIRL

T.B. REACHED the second floor. The corridor was deserted; he walked quickly to No. 11. The door yielded to his push. He closed it behind him and noiselessly locked it. He took a tiny electric lamp from his pocket and threw the light cautiously round.

He found the table and chair placed ready for him, and blessed Vellair silently.

The ventilator was a small one; he had located it easily enough when he had entered the room by the gleam of light that came through it. Very carefully he mounted the table, stepped lightly into the chair, and looked down into the next chamber. It was an ordinary kind of private dining-room. The only light came from two shaded electric lamps on the table in the centre.

Sir George, with a frown, was regarding his beautiful vis-à- vis. That she was lovely beyond ordinary loveliness T.B. knew from repute. He had expected the high colourings, the blacks and scarlets of the Andalusian; but this girl had the creamy complexion of the well-bred Spaniard, with eyes that might have been hazel or violet in the uncertain light, but which were decidedly not black. Her lips, now tightly compressed, were neither too full nor too thin; her nose straight; her hair, brushed back from her forehead in an unfamiliar style, was that exact tint between bronze and brown that your connoisseur so greatly values.

A plain filet of dull gold about her head and the broad collar of pearls around her neck were the only jewels she displayed. Her dress was black, unrelieved by any touch of colour. She was talking rapidly in French, a language with which T.B. was very well conversant.

"—but, Sir George," she pleaded, "it would be horrible, wicked, cruel not to see him again!"

"It would be worse if you saw him," said the other drily. "You know, my dear Miss Dominguez, you would both be miserable in a month. The title would be no compensation for you; Carleby would bore you; Carleby House would drive you mad; Carleby's relatives would incite you to murder."

"You are one!" she blazed.

"Exactly; and do I not exasperate you? Think of me magnified by a hundred. Come, come, there are better men than Carleby in the world, and you are young, you are little more than a child."

"But I love him," she sobbed.

"I suppose you do." T.B., from his hiding- place, bestowed an admiring grin upon the patronage in the baronet's tone. "When did you meet him first?"

"Three weeks ago." She spoke with a catch in her voice that affected T.B. strangely.

"That girl is acting," he thought. "But why?"

"Three weeks?" mused the banker. "Um— when did you discover he was a relative of mine?"

"A few days since," she said eagerly. "I was in Cornwall, visiting some friends—"

"Cornwall!" T.B. had hard work to suppress an exclamation.

"—and I learnt from them that you were related. I did not know of any other relation. My friends told me it would be wicked to marry without the knowledge of his people. 'Go to Sir George Calliper and explain,' they said; 'he will help you'; instead of which—"

The banker smiled again.

"Instead of which I pointed out how impossible it was, eh? and persuaded you to give up all idea of marrying Carleby. Yes, I suppose you think I am a heartless brute." She sat with bent head.

"You will give him my message?" she asked suddenly.

He nodded.

"And the flowers?"

"And the flowers," he repeated gravely.

("That clears the banker," thought T.B.)

"I shall leave for Spain to-morrow. It was good of you to let me have this talk."

"It was good of you to come."

"Somehow," she said drearily, "I cannot help feeling that it is for the best." Again T.B. thought he detected a note of insincerity.

"When will you see him?"

"Carleby?" he asked.

"To-morrow?"

"Not to-morrow."

"The next day?"

T.B. was alert now; he saw in a flash the significance of this interview; saw the plot which had lured a foolish relative of Calliper's to a love affair; and now, the manoeuvring to the crucial moment of the interview which she had so cleverly planned.

"Nor the next day," smiled Sir George.

"Well, the next day?"

He shook his head. "That is the day of all days I am not likely to leave London."

"Why?" she asked innocently, her eyes wide open and her lips parted.

"I have some very important business to transact on that day," he said briefly.

"Oh, I forgot," she said, with a hint of awe in her voice. "You're a great banker, aren't you?" she smiled. "Oh, yes, Carleby told me—"

"I thought you didn't know about me until your Cornish friends told you?" he asked.

"Not that you were related to him," she rejoined quickly, "but he spoke of the great house of Bronte—"

("Neat," approved the hidden T.B.)

"So Thursday will be the day,"" she mused.

"What day?" The banker's voice was sharp.

"The day you will see Carleby," she said, with a look of surprise.

"I said not Thursday on any account, but possibly the next day," said Sir George stiffly.

"She has the information she wants," said T.B. to himself, "and so have I," he reflected; "I will now retire."

He stepped carefully down, reached the floor, and was feeling his way to the door when a strange noise attracted his attention. It came, not from the next room, but from that in which he stood. He stood stock-still, holding his breath, and the noise he heard was repeated.

Somebody was in the room with him. Somebody was moving stealthily along the wall at the opposite side of the apartment. T.B. waited for a moment to locate his man, then leapt noiselessly in the direction of the sound. His strong hands grasped a man's shoulder; another instant and his fingers were at the spy's throat. "Utter a word and I'll knock your head off!" he hissed. No terrible threat when uttered facetiously, but T.B.'s words were the reverse of humorous. Retaining a hold of his prisoner, he waited until the noise of a door closing told him that the diners in the next room had departed, then he dragged his man to where he judged the electric-light switch would be. His fingers found the button, turned it, and the room was instantly flooded with light. He released the man with a little push, and stood with his back to the door.

"Now, sir," said T.B. virtuously; "will you kindly explain what you mean by spying on me?"

The man was tall and thin. He was under thirty and decently dressed; but it was his face that held the detective's attention. It was the face of a man in mortal terror—the eyes staring, the lips tremulous, the cheeks lined and seamed like an old man's. He stood blinking in the light for a moment, and when he spoke he was incoherent and hoarse.

"You're T.B. Smith," he croaked. "I know you; I've been wanting to find you."

"Well, you've found me," said the detective grimly.

"I wasn't looking for you—now. I'm Hyatt."

He said this simply enough. It was the detective's turn to stare.

"I'm Hyatt," the man went on; "and I've a communication to make; King's evidence; but you've got to hide me!" He came forward and laid his hand on the other's arm. "I'm not going to be done in like Moss; it's your responsibility, and you'll be blamed if anything happens to me," he almost whispered in his fear. "They've had Moss, and they'll try to have me. They've played me false because they thought I'd get to know the day the barrage

was to be handed over, and spoil their market. They brought me up to London, because I'd have found out if I'd been in Cornwall—"

"Steady, steady!" T.B. checked the man. He was talking at express rate, and between terror and wrath was well-nigh incomprehensible.

"Now, begin at the beginning. Who are 'they'?"

"N. H. C, I told you," snarled the other impatiently. "I knew they were going to get the date from the banker. That was the scheme of Catherine Dominguez. She is one of the agents— they've got 'em everywhere. She was introduced to his nephew so that she might get at the uncle. But I'm giving King's evidence. I shall get off; shan't I?"

His anxiety was pitiable.

T.B. thought quickly. Here were two ends to the mystery; which was the more important? He decided. This man would keep; the urgent business was to prevent Catherine from communicating her news to her friends.

"Take this card," he said, and scribbled a few words hastily upon a visiting-card; "—that will admit you to my rooms at the Savoy. Make yourself comfortable until I return." He gave the man a few directions, piloted him from the restaurant, saw him enter a cab, then turned his steps toward Baker Street.

16. MARY BROWN

PENTONBY MANSIONS are within a stone's throw of Baker Street Station. T.B. jumped out of his cab some distance from the great entrance hall, and paid the driver. Just before he turned into the vestibule a man, strolling towards him, asked him for a match.

"Well?"

"She came straight from the restaurant and has been inside ten minutes," reported the man, ostentatiously lighting his pipe.

"She hasn't sent a telegram?"

"So far as I know, no, sir." In the vestibule a hall porter sat reading the evening paper.

"Can I telephone from here?" asked T.B.

"Yes, sir," said the man, and T.B.'s heart sank, for he had overlooked this possibility.

"I suppose you have 'phones in every room?" he asked carelessly.

But the man shook his head.

"No, sir," he said; "there is some talk of putting 'em in, but so far this 'phone in my office is the only one in the building."

T.B. smiled genially.

"And I suppose," he said, "that you're bothered day and night with calls from tenants?" He waited anxiously for the answer.

"Sometimes I am, and sometimes I go a whole day without calls. No; to- day, for instance, I haven't had a message since five o'clock."

T.B. murmured polite surprise and began his ascent of the stairs. So far, so good. His business was to prevent the girl communicating with Poltavo.

He had already formed a plan in his mind.

Turning at the first landing, he walked briskly along the corridor to the left.

"29. 31. 33." he counted, "35, 37. Here we are." The corridor was empty; he slipped his skeleton-key from his pocket and deftly manipulated it.

The door opened noiselessly. He was in a dark little hallway. At the end was a door, and a gleam of light shone under it. He closed the door behind him, stepped softly along the carpeted floor, and his hand was on the handle of the further door, when a sweet voice called him by name from the room.

"Adelante! Senor Smit'," it said; and, obeying the summons, T.B. entered.

The room was well, if floridly, furnished; but T.B. had no eyes save for the graceful figure lounging in a big wicker-chair, a thin cigarette between her red lips, and her hands carelessly folded on her lap.

"Come in," she repeated, this time in French.

"I have been expecting you."

T.B. bowed slightly.

"I was told that I should probably receive a visit from you."

"First," said T.B. gently, "let me relieve you of that ugly toy."

Before she could realise what was happening, two strong hands seized her wrists and lifted them. Then one hand clasped her two, and a tiny pistol that lay in her lap was in the detective's possession.

"Let us talk," said T.B. He laid her tiny pistol on the table, and with his thumb raised the safety- catch.

"You are not afraid of a toy pistol?" she scoffed.

"I am afraid of anything that carries a nickel bullet," he confessed without shame. "I know by experience that your 'toy' throws a shot that penetrates an inch of pinewood and comes out on the other side. I cannot offer the same resistance as pinewood," he added modestly.

"I have been warned about you," she said, with a faint smile.

"So you were warned?" T.B. was mildly amused and just a trifle annoyed. It piqued him to know that, whilst, as he thought, he had been working in the shadow, he had been under a searchlight.

"You are—what do you call it in England?— smug," she said, "but what are you going to do with me?"

She had let fall her cloak and was again leaning back lazily in the big armchair. The question was put in the most matter-of-fact tones.

"That you shall see," said T.B. cheerfully. "I am mainly concerned now in preventing you from communicating with your friends."

"It will be rather difficult?" she challenged, with a smile. "I am not proscribed; my character does not admit—"

"As to your character," said T.B. magnanimously, "we will not go into the question. So far as you are concerned, I shall take you into custody on a charge of obtaining property by false pretences," said T.B. calmly.

"What?"

"Your name is Mary Brown, and I shall charge you with having obtained the sum of £350 by a trick from a West Indian gentleman at Barbadoes last March."

She sprang to her feet, her eyes blazing.

"You know that is false and ridiculous," she said steadily. "What is the meaning of it?"

T.B. shrugged his shoulders.

"Would you prefer that I should charge ' La Belle Espagnole ' with being an accessory to murder?" he asked, with a lift of his eyebrows.

"You could not prove it!" she challenged.

"Of that I am aware," he said. "I have taken the trouble to trace your movements. When these murders were committed you were fulfilling an engagement at the Philharmonic, but you knew of the murder, I'll swear—you are an agent of N.H.C."

"So it was you who found my handkerchief?"

"No; a discerning friend of mine is entitled to the discovery. Are you ready—Mary Brown?"

"Wait."

She stood plucking at her dress nervously.

"What good can my arrest do to you?—to- morrow it will be known all over the world."

"There," said T.B., "you are mistaken."

"To arrest me is to sign your death-warrant—you must know that—the Nine Men will strike—"

"Ah!"

T.B.'s eyes were dancing with excitement.

"Nine men!" he repeated slowly. "Neuf hommes—N.H. What does the 'C.' stand for?"

"That much you will doubtless discover," she said coldly, "but they will strike surely and effectively."

The detective had regained his composure.

"I'm a bit of a striker myself," he said in English.

17. DEPORTATION

T.B. FOUND the Chief Commissioner of Police at his club, and unfolded his plan. The Chief looked grave.

"It might very easily lead to a horrible catastrophe if you carry that scheme into execution."

"It might very easily lead to a worse if I don't," said T.B. brutally. "I am too young to die. At the worst it can only be a ' police blunder,' such as you read about in every evening newspaper that's published," he urged, "and I look at the other side of the picture. If this woman communicates with her principals, nothing is more certain than that Thursday will see the blowing up of the Wady Semlik Barrage. These ' Nine Bears ' are operating on the sure knowledge that Bronte's Bank is going to break. The stocks they are attacking are companies banking with Bronte, and it's ten chances to one they will kill Sir George Calliper in order to give an artistic finish to the failure."

The Commissioner bit his lip thoughtfully.

"And," urged T.B. Smith, "the N.H.C. will be warned, and bang goes our only chance of bagging the lot!"

The Commissioner smiled.

"Your language, T.B.!" he deplored; then,

"Do as you wish—but what about the real Mary Brown?"

"Oh, she can be sent on next week with apologies. We can get a new warrant if necessary." "Where is she?"

"At Bow Street."

"No; I mean the Spanish lady?"

T.B. grinned.

"She's locked up in your office, sir," he said cheerfully.

The Commissioner said nothing, but T.B. declined to meet his eye.

At four o'clock the next morning, a woman attendant woke "La Belle Espagnole" from a fitful sleep, and a few minutes afterwards T.B., dressed for a journey and accompanied by a hard-faced wardress and a detective, came in.

"Where are you going to take me?" she demanded, but T.B.'s reply was not very informing.

A closed carriage deposited them at Euston in time to catch the early morning train. In the compartment reserved for her and the wardress—it was a corridor carriage, and T.B. and his man occupied the next compartment—she found a dainty breakfast waiting for her, and a supply of literature. She slept the greater part of the journey and woke at the jolting of a shunting engine being attached to the carriage.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"We're there," was the cryptic reply of the woman attendant.

She was soon to discover, for, when the carriage finally came to a standstill and the door was opened, she stepped down onto a wind-swept quay. Ahead of her the great white hull of a steamer rose, and before she could realise the situation she had been hurried up the sloping gangway onto the deck.

Evidently T.B.'s night had been profitably spent, for he was expected. The purser met him.

"We got your telegrams," he said. "Is this the lady?"

T.B. nodded. The purser led the way down the spacious companion.

"I have prepared 'C' suite," he said, and ushered the party into a beautifully appointed cabin. She noticed that a steel grating had been newly fixed to the porthole, but that was the only indication of her captivity.

"I have enlisted the help of the stewardess," said T.B., "and you will find all the clothing you are likely to require for the voyage. I am also instructed to hand you £300. You will find your little library well stocked. I myself have denuded my own poor stock of French novels in order that you might not be dull."

"I understand that I am to be deported?" she said.

"That is an excellent understanding," he replied.

"By what authority?" she demanded. "It is necessary to obtain an order from the Court."

"For the next fourteen days, and until this ship reaches Jamaica, you will be Mary Brown, who was formally extradited last Saturday on a charge of fraud," said T.B. "If you are wise you will give no trouble, and nobody on

board need have an inkling that you are a prisoner. You can enjoy the voyage, and at the end—"

"At the end?" she asked, seeing that he paused.

"At the end we shall discover our mistake," said T.B., "and you may return."

"I will summon the captain and demand to be put ashore!" she cried.

"A very natural request on the part of a prisoner," said T.B. meditatively, "but I doubt very much whether it would have any effect upon an unimaginative seaman."

He left her raging.

For the rest of the day he idled about the ship. The Port Sybil was due to leave at four o'clock, and when the first warning bell had sounded he went below to take his leave. He found her much calmer.

"I would like to ask one question," she said.

"It is not like the police to provide me with money, and to reserve such a cabin as this for my use— who is behind this?"

"I wondered whether you would ask that," said T.B. "Sir George was very generous—"

"Sir George Calliper!" she gasped. "You have not dared—"

"Yes, it needed some daring," admitted T.B., "to wake an eminent banker out of his beauty sleep to relate such a story as I had to tell—but he was very nice about it."

She brooded for some moments.

"You will be sorry for this," she said. "The Nine Men will know much sooner than you imagine."

"Before they know this they will know other things," he said. And with this utterance he left her.

He stood watching the great steamer moving slowly down the Mersey. He had left the wardress on board to make the voyage, and the other detective had remained to report.

As the vessel swung round a bend of the Mersey out of sight, he murmured flippantly:

"Next stop—Jamaica!"

T.B. reached his chambers at noon that day. He stopped to ask a question of the porter.

"Yes, sir," said that worthy, "he arrived all right with your card last night. I made him comfortable for the night, got him some supper, and told my mate who is on duty at night to look after him."

T.B. nodded. Declining the lift-boy's services, he mounted the marble stairs.

He reached the door of his flat and inserted the key.

"Now for Mr. Hyatt," he thought, and opened the door.

There was a little hallway to his chambers, in which the electric light still burned, in spite of the flood of sunlight that came from a long window at the end.

"Extravagant beggar!" muttered T.B.

The dining-room was empty, and the blinds were drawn, and here, too, the electric light was full on. There was a spare bedroom to the left, and to this T.B. made his way.

He threw open the door.

"Hyatt!" he called; but there was no answer, and he entered.

Hyatt lay on the bed, fully dressed. The handle of a knife protruded from his breast, and T.B., who understood these things, knew that the man had been dead for many hours.

Consols were up.

There was no doubt whatever about that fact, and the industrial market was a humming hive of industry.

Breweries, bakeries, and candlestick makeries— their shares bounded joyously as though a spirit, as of early spring, had entered into these inanimate and soulless things.

The mysterious "bears" were buying, buying, buying. Frantically, recklessly buying.

Whatever coup had been contemplated by the Nine Men had failed, and their agents and brokers were working at fever heat to cover their losses. It is

significant that on the morning the boom started, there appeared in all the early editions of the evening newspapers one little paragraph. It appeared in the "late news" space and was condensed:

"Wady Barrage was handed over to Egyptian Government early this morning in presence of Minister of Works. Overnight rumours were prevalent that attempt made to destroy section dam by dynamite and that Italian named Soccori shot dead by sentry of West Kent Regiment in act of placing explosives on works. No official confirmation."

Interesting enough, but hardly to be associated by the crowd which thronged the approaches of the House with the rising market.

All day long the excitement in the city continued, all day long bareheaded clerks ran aimlessly— to all appearance—from 'Change to pavement, pavement to 'Change, like so many agitated ants. Sir George Calliper, sitting alone in the magnificence of his private office, watched the "boom" thoughtfully, and wondered exactly what would have happened if "an Italian named Soccori" had succeeded in placing his explosive.

The echoes of the boom came to T.B. Smith in, his little room overlooking the Thames Embankment, but brought him little satisfaction. The Nine Men had failed this time. Would they fail on the next occasion?

Who they were he could guess. From what centre they operated, he neither knew nor guessed. For T.B. they had taken on a new aspect. Hitherto they had been regarded merely as a band of dangerous and clever swindlers, Napoleonic in their method; now, they were murderers—dangerous, devilish men without pity or remorse.

The man Moss by some accident had been associated with them—a tool perhaps, but a tool who had surprised their secret. He was not the type of man who, of his own intelligence, would have made discoveries. He mentioned Hyatt and "the man on the Eiffel Tower." That might have been the wanderings of a dying man, but Hyatt had come to light.

Hyatt, with his curiously intellectual face; here, thought T.B., was the man, if any, who had unearthed the secret of the Nine. Likely enough he shared confidence with Moss; indeed, there was already evidence in T.B.'s hands that the two men had business dealings. And the third—"the man on the Eiffel Tower"? Here T.B. came against a wall of improbability.

18. IN THE "JOURNAL" OFFICE

THE room was a long one, full of dazzling islands of light where shaded lamps above the isolated sub-editors' desks threw their white circles. This room, too, was smirched with black shadows; there were odd corners where light never came. It never shone upon the big bookcase over the mantelpiece, or in the corner behind the man who conned the foreign exchanges, or on the nest of pigeonholes over against the chief "sub."

When he would refer to these he must needs emerge blinking from the blinding light in which he worked and go groping in the darkness for the needed 'memorandum.

He was sitting at his desk now, intent upon his work.

At his elbow stood a pad, on which he wrote from time to time.

Seemingly his task was an aimless one. He wrote nothing save the neat jottings upon his pad. Bundles of manuscript came to him, blue books, cuttings from other newspapers; these he looked at rather than read, looked at them in a hard, strained fashion, put them in this basket or that, as the fancy seized him, chose another bundle, stared at it, fluttered the leaves rapidly, and so continued. He had the appearance of a man solving some puzzle, piecing together intricate parts to make one comprehensive whole. When he hesitated, as he sometimes did, and seemed momentarily doubtful as to which basket a manuscript should be consigned, you felt the suggestion of mystery with which his movements were enveloped, and held your breath. When he had decided upon the basket you hoped for the best, but wondered vaguely what would have happened if he had chosen the other.

The door that opened into the tape-room was swinging constantly now, for it wanted twenty minutes to eleven. Five tickers chattered incessantly, and there was a constant procession of agency boys and telegraph messengers passing in and out the vestibule of the silent building. And the pneumatic tubes that ran from the front hall to the subs' room hissed and exploded periodically, and little leathern carriers rattled into the wire basket at the chief sub's elbow.

News! news! news!

A timber fire at Rotherhithe; the sudden rise in Consols; the Sultan of Turkey grants an amnesty to political offenders; a man kills his wife at Wolverhampton; a woman cyclist run down by a motor-car; the Bishop of Elford denounces Nonconformists—

News for to-morrow's breakfast table! Intellectual stimulant for the weary people who are even now kicking off their shoes with a sleepy yawn and wondering whether there will be anything in the paper to-morrow.

A boy came flying through the swing door of the tape-room, carrying in his hand a slip of paper. He laid it before the chief sub.

That restless man looked at it, then looked at the clock.

"Take it to Mr. Greene," he said shortly, and reached for the speaking- tube that connected him with the printer.

"There will be a three-column splash on page five," he said in a matter- of-fact voice.

"What's up?" His startled assistant was on his feet.

"A man found murdered in T.B. Smith's chambers," he said.

The inquest was over, the stuffy little court discharged its morbid public, jurymen gathered in little knots on the pavement permitted themselves to theorise, feeling, perhaps, that the official verdict of "murder against some person or persons unknown" needed amplification.

"My own opinion is," said the stout foreman, "that nobody could have done it, except somebody who could have got into his chambers unknown."

"That's my opinion, too," said another jury-man.

"I should have liked to add a rider," the foreman went on, something like this: 'We call the coroner's attention to the number of undiscovered murders nowadays, and severely censure the police,' but he wouldn't have it."

"They 'ang together," said a gloomy little man; "—p'lice and coroners and doctors, they 'ang together, there's corruption somewhere. I've always said it."

"Here's a feller murdered," the foreman went on, "in a detective's room, the same detective that's in charge of the Moss murder. We're told his name's Hyatt, we're told he was sent to that room by the detective whilst he's engaged in some fanciful business in the north—is that sense?"

"Then there's the Journal," interrupted the man of gloom, "it comes out this mornin' with a cock-an'-bull story about these two murders being connected with the slump—why, there ain't any slump! The market went up the very day this chap Hyatt was discovered."

"Sensation," said the foreman, waving deprecating hands, "newspaper sensation. Any lie to sell the newspapers, that's their motto."

The conversation ended abruptly, as T.B. Smith appeared at the entrance of the court. His face was impassive, his attire, as usual, immaculate, but those who knew him best detected signs of worry.

"For Heaven's sake," he said to a young man who approached him, "don't talk to me now—you beggar, your wretched rag has upset all my plans."

"But, Mr. Smith," pleaded the reporter.

"What we said was true, wasn't it?"

"'A lie that is half the truth,'" quoted T.B. solemnly.

"But it is true—there is some connection between the murders and the slump, and, I say, do your people know anything about the mysterious disappearance of that dancing girl from the Philharmonic?"

"Oh, child of sin!" T.B. shook his head reprovingly. "Oh, collector of romance!"

"One last question," said the reporter. "Do you know a man named Escoltier?"

"Not," said T.B. flippantly, "from a crow— why? is he suspected of abducting your dancing lady?"

"No," said the reporter, "he's suspected of pulling our editor's leg."

T.B. was all this time walking away from the court, and the reporter kept step with him.

"And what is the nature of his hoax?" demanded T.B.

He was not anxious for information, but he was very desirous of talking about nothing—it had been a trying day for him.

"Oh, the usual thing; wants to tell us the greatest crime that ever happened—a great London crime that the police have not discovered."

"Dear me!" said T.B. politely, "wants payment in advance?"

"No; that's the curious thing about it," said the reporter. "All he wants is protection." T.B. stopped dead and faced the young man. He dropped the air of boredom right away.

"Protection?" he said quickly, "from whom?"

"That is just what he doesn't say—in fact, he's rather vague on that point—why don't you go up and see Delawn, the editor?"

T.B. thought a moment.

"Yes," he nodded. "That is an idea. I will go at once."

In the holy of holies, the inner room within the inner room, wherein the editor of the London Morning Journalsaw those visitors who were privileged to pass the outer portal, T.B. Smith sat, a sorely puzzled man, a scrap of disfigured paper in his hands.

He read it again and looked up at the editor.

"This might of course be a fake," he said.

"It doesn't read like a fake," said the other.

"Admitting your authority on the subject of fakes, Tom," said T.B.,—they were members of the same club, which fact in itself is a license for rudeness,—" I am still in the dark. Why does this —what is his name?"

"Escoltier."

"Why does this man Escoltier write to a newspaper, instead of coming straight to the police?"

"Because he is a Frenchman, I should imagine," said the editor. "The French have the newspaper instinct more highly developed than the English." T.B. looked at his watch.

"Will he come, do you think?"

"I have wired to him," said the editor. T.B. read the paper again. It was written in execrable English, but its purport was clear. The writer could solve the mystery of Hyatt's death, and for the matter of that of the Moss murder.

T.B. read it and shook his head.

"This sort of thing is fairly common," he said; "there never was a bad murder yet, but what the Yard received solutions by the score."

A little bell tinkled on the editor's desk, and he took up the receiver of the telephone.

"Yes?" he said, and listened. Then, "Send him up."

"Is it—?"

"Monsieur Escoltier," said the editor. A few seconds later the door was opened, and a man was ushered into the room. Short and thick-set, with a two days' growth of beard on his chin, his nationality was apparent long before he spoke in the argot of the lowly born Parisian. His face was haggard, his eyes heavy from lack of sleep, and the hand that strayed to his mouth shook tremulously.

"I have to tell you," he began, "about M'sieur Moss and M'sieur Hyatt." His voice was thick, and as he spoke he glanced from side to side as though fearful of observation. There was something in his actions that vividly reminded the detective of his interview with Hyatt. "You understand," the man went on incoherently, "that I had long suspected N.H.C.—it was always so unintelligible. There was no such station and—"

"You must calm yourself, monsieur," said T.B., speaking in French; "—begin at the beginning, for as yet my friend and myself are entirely in the dark. What is N.H.C., and what does it mean?"

It was some time before the man could be brought to a condition of coherence. The editor pushed him gently to the settee that ran the length of the bay window of his office.

"Wait," said the journalist, and unlocking a drawer, he produced a silver flask.

"Drink some of this," he said.

The man raised the brandy to his lips with a hand that shook violently, and drank eagerly.

"C'est bien," he muttered, and looked from one to the other.

"I tell you this story because I am afraid to go to the police—they are watching the police office—"

"In the first place, who are you?" demanded T.B.

"As to who and what I am," said the stranger, nodding his head to emphasise his words, "it would be better that I should remain silent."

"I do not see the necessity," said the detective calmly. "So far as I can judge from what information I have, you are a French soldier—an engineer. You

are a wireless telegraph operator, and your post of duty is on the Eiffel Tower."

The man stared at the speaker, and his jaw dropped.

"M'sieur!" he gasped.

"Hyatt was also a wireless operator; probably in the employ of the Marconi Company in the west of England. Between you, you surprised the secret of a mysterious agency which employs wireless installations to communicate with its agents. What benefits you yourself may have derived from your discovery I cannot say. It is certain that Hyatt, operating through Moss, made a small fortune; it is equally certain that, detecting a leakage, the 'Nine Men' have sent a clever agent to discover the cause—"

But the man from the Eiffel Tower had fainted.

"I shall rely on you to keep the matter an absolute secret until we are ready," said T.B., and the editor nodded. "The whole scheme came to me in a flash. The Eiffel Tower! Who lives on the Eiffel Tower? Wireless telegraph operators. Our friend is recovering."

He looked down at the pallid man lying limply in an armchair.

"I am anxious to know what brings him to London. Fright, I suppose. It was the death of Moss that brought Hyatt, the killing of Hyatt that produced Monsieur Escoltier."

The telegraphist recovered consciousness with a shiver and a groan. For a quarter of an hour he sat with his face hidden in his hands. Another pull at the editor's flask aroused him to tell his story—a narrative which is valuable as being the first piece of definite evidence laid against the Nine Bears.

He began hesitatingly, but as the story of his complicity was unfolded he warmed to his task. With the true Gaul's love for the dramatic, he declaimed with elaborate gesture and sonorous phrase the part he had played.

"My name is Jules Escoltier, I am a telegraphist in the corps of engineers. On the establishment of the wireless telegraphy station on the Eiffel Tower in connection with the Casa Blanca affair, I was appointed one of the operators. Strange as it may sound, one does not frequently intercept messages, but I was surprised a year ago to find myself taking code despatches from a station which called itself ' N.H.C.' There is no such station known, so far as I am aware, and copies of the despatches which I forwarded to my superiors were always returned to me as 'non-decodable.'

"One day I received a message in English, which I can read. It ran—

"'All those who know N.H.C. call H. A.'

"Although I did not know who N.H.C. was, I had the curiosity to look up H. A. on the telegraph map, and found it was the Cornish Marconi Station. Taking advantage of the absence of my officer, I sent a wireless message, 'I desire information, L.L.' That is not the Paris 'indicator,' but I knew that I should get the reply. I had hardly sent the message when another message came. It was from Monsieur Hyatt. I got the message distinctly—'Can you meet me in London on the gth, Gallini's Restaurant?' To this I replied, 'No, impossible.' After this I had a long talk with the Cornishman, and then it was that he told me that his name was Hyatt. He told me that he was able to decode the N.H.C. messages, that he had a book, and that it was possible to make huge sums of money from the information contained in them. I thought that it was very indiscreet to speak so openly, and told him so.

"He asked me for my name, and I gave it, and thereafter I regularly received letters from him, and a correspondence began.

"Not being au fait in matters affecting the Bourse, I did not know of what value the information we secured from N.H.C. could be, but Hyatt said he had a friend who was interested in such matters, and that if I 'took off' all N.H.C. messages that I got, and repeated them to him, I should share in the proceeds. I was of great value to Hyatt, because I received messages that never reached him in this way. He was able to keep in touch with all the operations on which N.H.C. were engaged.

"By arrangement, we met in Paris—Hyatt, his friend of the London Bourse, Monsieur Moss, and myself, and Hyatt handed to me notes for 20,000 francs (£800) ; that was the first payment I received from him. He returned to England, and things continued in very much the same way as they had done, I receiving and forwarding N.H.C. messages. I never understood any of them, but Hyatt was clever, and he had discovered the code and worked it out.

"About a fortnight ago I received from him 3,000 francs in notes, a letter that spoke of a great coup contemplated by N.H.C. 'If this materialises,' he wrote, 'I hope to send you half a million francs by the end of next week.'

"The next morning I received this message—"

He fumbled in his pocket and produced a strip of paper, on which was hastily scrawled—

"From N.H.C. to L.L. Meet me in London on the sixth, Charing Cross Station."

"It was, as you see, in French, and as it came I scribbled it down. I would have ignored it, but that night I got a message from Hyatt saying that N.H.C. had discovered we shared their secret and had offered to pay us £5,000 each to preserve silence, and that as they would probably alter the code I should be a fool not to accept. So I got leave of absence and bought a suit of clothing, left Paris, and arrived in London the following night. A dark young man met me at the station, and invited me to come home with him.

"He had a motor-car at the entrance of the station, and after some hesitation I accepted. We drove through the streets filled with people, for the theatres were just emptying, and after an interminable ride we reached the open country. I asked him where was Hyatt, and where we were going, but he refused to speak. When I pressed him, he informed me he was taking me to a rendezvous near the sea.

"We had been driving for close on three hours, when we reached a lonely lane. By the lights of the car I could see a steep hill before us, and I could hear the roar of the waves somewhere ahead.

"Suddenly he threw a lever over, the car bounded forward, and he sprang to the ground.

"Before I could realise what had happened, the machine was flying down the steep gradient, rocking from side to side.

"I have sufficient knowledge of motor-car engineering to manipulate a car, and I at once sprang to the wheel and felt for the brake. But both foot and hand brake were useless. In some manner he had contrived to disconnect them.

"It was pitch-dark, and all that I could hope to do was to keep the car to the centre of the road. Instinctively I knew that I was rushing to certain death, and, messieurs, I was! I was flying down a steep gradient to inevitable destruction, for at the bottom of the hill the road turned sharply, and confronting me, although I did not know this, was a stone sea wall.

"I resolved on taking my life in my hands, and putting the car at one of the steep banks which ran on either side, I turned the steering wheel and shut my eyes. I expected instant death. Instead, the car bounded up at an angle that almost threw me from my seat. I heard the crash of wood, and flying splinters struck my neck, and the next thing I remember was a series of bumps as the car jolted over a ploughed field.

"I had achieved the impossible. At the point I had chosen to leave the road was a gate leading to a field, and by an act of Providence I had found the only way of escape.

"I found myself practically at the very edge of the sea, and in my first terror I would have given every sou I had to escape to France. All night long I waited by the broken car, and with the dawn some peasants came and told me I was only five miles distant from Dover. I embraced the man who told me this, and would have hired a conveyance to drive me to Dover, en route for France. I knew that N.H.C. could trace me, and then I was anxious to get in touch with Hyatt and Moss. Then it was that I saw in an English newspaper that Moss was dead."

He stopped and moistened his lips.

"M'sieur!" he went on with a characteristic gesture, "I decided that I would come to London and find Hyatt. I took train, but I was watched. At a little junction called Sandgate, a man sauntered past my carriage. I did not know him, he looked like an Italian. As the train left the station something smashed the window and I heard a thud. There was no report, but I knew that I had been fired at with an air-gun, for the bullet I found embedded in the woodwork of the carriage."

"Did nothing further happen?" asked T.B.

"Nothing till I reached Charing Cross, then when I stopped to ask a policeman to direct me to the Central Police Bureau I saw a man pass me in a motor-car, eyeing me closely. It was the man who had tried to kill me."

"And then?"

"Then I saw my danger. I was afraid of the police. I saw a newspaper sheet. It was a great newspaper—I wrote a letter—and sought lodgings in a little hotel near the river. There was no answer to my letter. I waited in hiding for two days before I realised that I had given no address. I wrote again. All this time I have been seeking Hyatt. I have telegraphed to Cornwall, but the reply comes that he is not there. Then in the newspaper I learn of his death. M'sieur, I am afraid."

He wiped the drops of sweat from his forehead with a shaky hand.

He was indeed in a pitiable condition of fright, and T.B., upon whose nerves the mysterious "bears" were already beginning to work, appreciated his fear without sharing it. There came a knock at the outer door of the office, and

the editor moved to answer it. There was a whispered conversation at the door, the door closed again, and the editor returned with raised brows.

"T.B.," he said, "that wretched market has gone again."

"Gone?"

"Gone to blazes! Spanish Fours are so low that you'd get pain in your back if you stooped to pick them up."

T.B. nodded.

"I'll use your telephone," he said, and stooped over the desk. He called for a number, and after an interval—

"Yes—that you, Maitland? Go to 375 St. John Street, and take into custody Count Ivan Poltavo on a charge of murder. Take with you fifty men and surround the place. Detain every caller, and every person you find in the house."

He hung up the receiver. "It is a bluff, as my gay American friend says," he remarked to the editor, "because, of course, I have no real evidence against him. But I want a chance to ransack that studio of his, anyway.

"Now, my friend," he said in French, "what shall we do with you?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders listlessly.

"What does it matter?" he said. "They will have me—it is only a matter of hours."

"I take a brighter view," said T.B. cheerily; "you shall walk with us to Scotland Yard and there you shall be taken care of."

But the Frenchman shrank back.

"Come, there is no danger," smiled T.B.

Reluctantly the engineer accompanied the detective and the editor from the building. A yellow fog lay like a damp cloth over London, and the Thames Embankment was almost deserted.

"Do you think he followed you here?" asked T.B.

"I am sure." The Frenchman looked from left to right in an agony of apprehension. "He killed Hyatt and he killed Moss—of that I am certain—and now—"

A motor-car loomed suddenly through the fog, coming from the direction of Northumberland Avenue, and overtook them. A man leant out of the window as the car swept abreast. His face was masked and his actions were deliberate.

"Look out!" cried the editor and clutched the Frenchman's arm.

The pistol that was levelled from the window of the car cracked twice and T.B. felt the wind of the bullets as they passed his head.

Then the car disappeared into the mist, leaving behind three men, one half fainting with terror, one immensely pleased with the novel sensation—- our editor, you may be sure—and one using language unbecoming to an Assistant- Commissioner of Police.

19. THE BOOK

THE house in St. John Street had been raided. In a little room on the top floor there was evidence that an instrument of some considerable size had been hastily dismantled. Broken ends of wire were hanging from the wall, and one other room on the same floor was packed with storage batteries. Pursuing their investigations, the detectives ascended to the roof through a trap door. Here was the flagstaff and the arrangement for hoisting the wires. Apparently, night was usually chosen for the reception and despatch of messages. By night, the taut strands of wire would not attract attention. Only in cases of extremest urgency were they employed in daylight.

Count Poltavo was gone—vanished, in spite of the fact that every railway terminus in London had been watched, every ocean-going passenger scrutinised.

Van Ingen had been given two days to get the "book"; this code which the unfortunate Hyatt had deciphered to his undoing. Moss had said Hyatt's sister had it, but the country had been searched from end to end for Hyatt's sister. It had not been difficult to trace her. Van Ingen, after half-an-hour's search in Falmouth, had discovered her abode, but the girl was not there.

"She left for London yesterday," he was informed.

From that moment Miss Hyatt had disappeared. A telegram had reached her on the very day of Hyatt's death. It said "Come."

There was no name, no address. The telegram had been handed in at St. Martin's-le-Grand; unearthed, it was found to be in typewritten characters, and the address at its back a fictitious one. One other item of news Van Ingen secured; there had been a lady on the same errand as himself.

"A foreign lady," said the good folks of Falmouth.

He had some two days to discover Eva Hyatt—this was her name.

He paced the room, his head sunk on his breast. Where was the girl?

The telegram said "Come." It suggested some prearranged plan in which the girl had acquiesced; she was to leave Falmouth and go somewhere. Suppose she had come to London, where would Catherine Dominguez have placed her? Near at hand; a thought struck Van Ingen. Smith had told him the tale of the deportation of the dancing girl. He would search her flat. He took down his overcoat and struggled into it, made a selection of keys from his

pocket, and went out. It was a forlorn hope, but forlorn hopes had often been the fore- runners of victory, and there was nothing to be lost by trying.

He came to the great hall of the mansion in Baker Street and asked the number of the dancer's flat.

The hall porter touched his cap.

"Evening, sir." Then, "I suppose you know the young lady hasn't come back yet?"

Van Ingen did know, but said nothing. The porter was in a talkative mood.

"She sent me a wire from Liverpool, saying that she'd been called away suddenly."

The young man nodded. He knew this, too, for T.B. had sent the wire.

"What the other young lady couldn't understand," continued the porter, and Van Ingen's heart gave a leap, "was, why—"

"Why she hadn't wired her, eh?" he asked.

"Well, you see, she was so busy—"

"Of course!" The porter clucked his lips impatiently.

"She's upstairs in Miss Dominguez' flat at this moment. My word, she's been horribly worried—"

"I'll go up and see her. As a matter of fact, I've come here for the purpose," said Van Ingen quickly. He took the lift to the second floor, and walked along the corridor. He reached No. 43 and his hand was raised to press the little electric bell of the suite when the door opened quickly and a girl stepped out. She gave a startled cry as she saw the stranger, and drew back.

"I beg your pardon," said Van Ingen, with a pleasant smile. "I'm afraid I startled you." She was a big florid girl with a certain awkwardness of movement.

"Well-dressed but gauche," thought Van Ingen.

"Provincial! she'll talk."

"I was a little startled," she said, with a ready smile. "I thought it was the postman."

"But surely postmen do not deliver letters in this palatial dwelling," he laughed. "I thought the hall porter—"

"Oh, but this is a registered letter," she said importantly, "from America." All the time Van Ingen was thinking out some method by which he might introduce the object of his visit. An idea struck him.

"Is your mother—" she looked blank, "er— aunt within?" he asked. He saw the slow suspicion gathering on her face.

"I'm not a burglar," he smiled, "in spite of my alarming question, but I'm in rather a quandary. I've a friend—well, not exactly a friend—but I have business with Miss Dominguez, and—"

"Here's the postman," she interrupted. A quick step sounded in the passage, and the bearer of the king's mails, with a flat parcel in his hand and his eyes searching the door numbers, stopped before them.

"Hyatt?" he asked, glancing at the address.

"Yes," said the girl; "—is that my parcel?"

"Yes, miss; will you sign?"

"Hyatt?" murmured Van Ingen; "what an extraordinary coincidence. You are not by any chance related to the unfortunate young man the story of whose sad death has been filling the newspapers?"

She flushed and her lip trembled.

"He was my brother; did you know him?"

"I knew of him," said Van Ingen quietly, "but I did not know you lived in London!"

"Nor do I," said the girl; "it is only by the great kindness of Miss Dominguez that I am here."

There was no time for delicate finesse.

"Will you let me come in and talk with you?"

Van Ingen said; then, as he saw again the evidence of her suspicion, "What I have to ask you is of the greatest importance to you and to me."

She hesitated, then led the way into a handsomely furnished sitting- room.

"First of all," said Van Ingen quietly, "you must tell me how Miss Dominguez found you."

"She came to Falmouth and sought me out. It was not difficult. I have a little millinery establishment there, and my name is well known. She came one morning, eight days—no—yes, it was seven days ago, and—"

"What did she want?"

"She said she had known Charles; he had some awfully swagger friends; that is what got him into trouble at the post-office; it was a great blow to us, because—"

"What did she want?" asked Van Ingen, cutting short the loquacity.

"She said that Charles had something of hers —a book which she had lent him, years before. Now, the strange thing was that on the very day poor Charles was killed I had a telegram which ran: ' If anything happens, tell Escoltier book is at Antaxia, New York.' It was unsigned, and I did not connect it with Charles. You see, I hadn't heard from him for years.

"She was a great friend of Charles'—the Spanish lady—and she came down especially about the book. She said Charles had got into trouble and she wanted the book to save him. Then I showed her the telegram. I was confused, but I wanted to help Charles." She gulped down a sob. "I asked her who Escoltier was."

"Yes?" asked Van Ingen quickly.

"She said he was a friend of hers who was interested in the book. She went away, but came back soon afterwards and told me that 'Antaxia' was the telegraphic address of a safe deposit in New York. She was very nice and offered to pay for a cable to the deposit. So I wired: 'Please forward by registered post the book deposited by Charles Hyatt'; and I signed it 'Eva Hyatt' and gave my address. By the evening the reply came: 'Forwarded; your previous wire did not comply with our instructions.'—"

"I see," said Van Ingen.

"Well, that is more than I can," said the girl, with a smile, "because only one wire was sent. Miss Dominguez was surprised, too, and a little annoyed, and said: ' How foolish it was of me not to ask you your Christian name.' Well, then she insisted upon my coming to stay with her till the book came. I came expecting I should find Charles, but—but—"

Her eyes were filled with tears.

"I read in a newspaper that he was dead. It was the first thing I saw in London, the bill of a newspaper—"

Van Ingen gave her time to recover her voice.

"And Miss Dominguez?"

"She took this furnished flat near to hers," said the girl; "she lives here—"

"Does she?" asked Van Ingen artlessly. He took up the registered parcel which she had put on the table.

It was fairly light.

"Now, Miss Hyatt," he said, very gently. "I want you to do something for me; and I must tell you that, although I ask it as a favour, I can enforce my wishes as a right."

"I will do anything," said the girl eagerly.

"Very well; you must let me take this book away."

"But it is not mine; it belongs to Miss Dominguez," she protested; "and it is to save my brother's name—"

"Miss Hyatt," said Van Ingen, "I must take this book which has so providentially come into my hands, not to save your brother's name, but to bring to justice the men who took his life." As he spoke there came a knock at the door; and, hastily drying her eyes, the girl opened it.

A porter handed her a telegram, and she came back into the light of the room to open it. She read it, and reread it; then looked at Van Ingen with bewilderment written on her face.

"What does this mean?" she said. He took the telegram from her hand; it had been readdressed from Falmouth and ran:

BY WIRELESS FROM PORT SYBIL. DO NOT PART WITH BOOK TO ANYBODY ON ANY ACCOUNT. CATHERINE DOMINGUEZ.

He handed the telegram back.

"It means," he said, "that our friend is just two minutes too late."

20. AT THE ADMIRALTY

"THIS business is a little too hot to hold," said the editor in a final interview with T.B., who had persuaded him to keep back his story, until he had bagged the "Nine Men." "To-night I must tell the whole of the affair."

T.B. nodded.

"To-night," said T.B., "you can tell what you like. I shall have played my stake for good or ill.

"I have been talking with Escoltier; we have got him lodged in Scotland Yard—though you needn't mention that fact in your account—and I think we know enough now to trap the 'Nine Men.'"

"Who are they and what does the ' C.' stand for in ' N.H.C.'?"

"I can only guess," said T.B. cautiously. "Do you know anything about wireless telegraphy?"

he demanded.

"Not much," admitted the editor.

"Well, you know enough to realise that the further you wish to communicate the more electrical energy you require?"

"That much I understand," said the journalist.

"The principle is the 'rings on the pond.' You throw a stone into still water, and immediately rings grow outward. The bigger the stone, the farther-reaching the rings."

"At Poldhu," continued T.B., "Hyatt was in charge of the long-distance instrument. As a matter of fact, the work he was engaged on was merely experimental, but his endeavour seemed to be centred in securing the necessary energy for communicating 900 miles. Of course, wireless telegraphy is practicable up to and beyond 3,000 miles, but few installations are capable of transmitting that distance."

"So 'C.' is, you think, within 900 miles of Cornwall?"

T.B. nodded.

"I have a feeling that I know 'C.,'" he said.

"I have another feeling that these wireless messages do not come from 'C.' at all, but from a place adjacent. However,"—he took from his pocket a flat exercise book filled with closely written columns of words and figures—" we shall see."

He took a cab from Fleet Street; and, arriving at the block of Government buildings which shelters the Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty, he entered its gloomy doors.

A messenger came forward to enquire his business, but was forestalled by a keen little man with tanned face and twinkling eyes. "Sailor" was written on every line of his mahogany face.

"Hullo, my noble policeman," he greeted T.B.

"Who is the victim—the First Sea Lord or the Controller of the Victualling Department?"

"To be precise, Almack," said T.B., "I have come to arrest Reform, which I gather—"

"No politics," smiled Captain John Almack, R.N. "What is the game?"

"It is what our mutual friend Napoleon would call a negative problem in strategy," the Assistant- Commissioner replied. "I want to ask an ethereal friend, who exists somewhere in space, to come in and be killed."

Captain Almack led the way up a flight of stairs.

"We got a request from your Commissioner; and, of course, the Lords of the Admiralty are only too pleased to put the instrument at your disposal."

"They are very charming," murmured T.B.

"They instructed me to keep a watchful eye on you. We have missed things since your last visit."

"That sounds like a jovial lie," said T.B. frankly.

In the orderly instrument room they found an operator in attendance, and T.B. lost no time.

"Call N.H.C.," he said; and, whilst the instrument clicked and snapped obedient to the man's hand, T.B. opened his little exercise book and composed a message. He had finished his work long before any answer came

to the call. For half-an-hour they waited whilst the instrument clicked monotonously. "Dash-dot, dot-dot-dot, dash-dot-dash-dot."

And over and over again.

"Dash-dot, dot-dot-dot, dash-dot-dash-dot." Then suddenly the operator stopped, and there came a new sound.

They waited in tense silence.

"Answered," said the operator.

"Take this." T.B. handed him a slip of paper.

As the man sent the message out with emphatic tappings, Captain Almack took the translation that T.B. handed to him.

"To N.H.C. There is trouble here. I must see you. Important. Can you meet me in Paris to-morrow?"

After this message had gone through there was a wait of five minutes. Then the answer came, and the man at the instrument wrote down unintelligible words which T.B. translated.

"Impossible. Come to M. Will meet S.E. Have you got the book?"

"Reply 'Podaba'" instructed T.B., spelling the word. "Now send this." He handed another slip of paper across the table, and passed the translation back to the man behind him.

"Is Gibraltar intercepting messages?" it ran. Again the wait, and again the staccato reply.

"Unlikely, but will send round to-morrow to make sure. Good- night."

As the instrument clicked its farewell, T.B. executed a silent war-dance to the scandal of the solemn operator, and the delight of the little captain.

"T.B., you'll get me hung!" he warned.

"You'll upset all kinds of delicate instruments, to say nothing of the telegraphist's sense of decency. Come away."

"Now," demanded Captain Almack, when he had led him to his snug little office; "what is the mystery?"

T.B. related as much of the story as was necessary, and the officer whistled.

"The devils!" he swore.

"The discovery I was trying to make," T.B. went on, "was the exact location of N.H.C. I asked him or them to come to Paris. As a matter of fact, I wanted to know if they were within twenty-four hours' distance of Paris. 'Impossible,' they reply. But they will come to Madrid, and offer to meet the Sud Express. So they must be in Spain and south of Madrid, otherwise there would be no impossibility about meeting me in Paris to-morrow. Where are they? Within reach of Gibraltar apparently, because they talk of sending round to-morrow. Now, that phrase 'sending round' is significant, for it proves beyond the shadow of a doubt exactly in what part of Andalusia they live."

"How?"

"When people who live within reach of the fortress talk of going to Gibraltar, as you know they either say that they are ' going across to Gibraltar' or that they are ' going round.' By the first, they indicate the route viaAlgeciras and across the bay; by the latter, they refer to the journey by way of Cadiz and Tangier—"

"Cadiz!"

The exclamation came from his hearer.

"Cadiz," repeated T.B. He bent his head forward and rested it for a moment in his hands. When he lifted it, his face was grave.

"It's worth trying," he muttered. "And," he continued aloud, "it will be bringing down two birds with one stone."

"Can I use the instrument again?" he asked.

"Certainly," said the officer readily.

T.B. rose.

"I'm going to Scotland Yard, and I shall not be away for more than ten minutes," he said; and in a few seconds he was crossing Whitehall at a run. He passed through the entrance and made straight for the big bureau, where day in and day out the silent recorder sat with his pen, his cabinets, and his everlasting dossier.

T.B. knew he would be there, because there was a heavy calendar at the Old Bailey, and the silent man was working far into the night—arranging, sorting, and rearranging.

The detective was back at the Admiralty within the ten minutes, and together the two made their way to the instrument room.

"N.H.C." responded almost at once, and T.B. sent his message.

"Tell George T. Baggin that another warrant has been issued for his arrest."

The reply came immediately.

"Thanks. Get further particulars, but do not use names."

T.B. read the reply and handed it without a word to the other.

"Please God, I'll hang the man who sent that message," he said with unusual earnestness.

21. POLTAVO STRIKES

IT was half-past nine when T.B. sent and received the last message; and an hour later he had interviewed the Commissioner.

"Get your lady away all right?" his chief greeted him.

"Well away, sir," said T.B. serenely. "Out of reach of Poltavo—his agents were watching the flat—there was a burglary there the very night the book arrived."

"And the lady?"

"She is due in Jamaica in a few days."

"And now—"

T.B. told the story of the developments. The Commissioner nodded from time to time.

"You're an ingenious young man," he said.

"One of these fine days somebody will badly want your blood."

"It has often happened," T.B. granted. He sat over a companionable cigar and a whisky and soda, talking until the hands of the clock were near on midnight; then he rose to take his leave.

"You will leave for Spain to-morrow?" asked the chief.

"Yes; by the first train. I shall take Van Ingen, with me; he speaks Spanish with ease, while I can only blunder through with a phrase or two. I can get the warrants from the Yard before I leave," he continued, "and the Spanish authorities will give me all the help I need."

"And what of Poltavo?" asked the Chief Commissioner.

T.B. shrugged his shoulders.

"We had a murderer there," he said. "I am satisfied that he killed Moss. Whether he actually stabbed Hyatt, I am not sure. The man had such a perfect organisation in London that it is possible that one of his cutthroat friends served him in the case of that unfortunate young man. Count Poltavo can wait. If we get the others, we shall get him. He has powerful friends; we must move with caution.

"Good-night, sir."

He grasped the proffered hand, and his host ushered him into the silent street.

He took two steps forward, when a man rose apparently from the ground, and two shots rang out. T.B. had drawn his revolver and fired from his hip, and his assailant staggered back cursing as a dark shadow came running from the opposite side of the road to his help.

Then T.B. swayed, his knees bent under him, and he fell back into the Commissioner's arms.

"I'm done," he said, and the third man, hesitating a moment in the roadway, heard the words and slipped his revolver back into his pocket and fled.

22. THE CONVICT FROM CEUTRA

THE streets of Cadiz were deserted. Only by the Quay was there any sign of life, for here the crew of the Brazilian warship, the Maria Braganza, were languidly embarking stores on flat-bottomed lighters, and discussing, with a wealth of language and in no complimentary terms, the energy of their commander. It was obvious, so they said in their picturesque language, that a warship was never intended to carry cargo, and if the Brazilian Government was foolish enough to purchase war stores in Spain, it should go a little farther, and charter a Spanish merchant ship to carry them.

So they cursed Captain Lombrosa for a dog and the son of a dog, and predicted for him an eternity of particular discomfort.

Captain Lombrosa, a short, swarthy man, knew nothing of his unpopularity and probably cared less. He was sitting in the Cafe of the Five Nations, near the Plaza Mayor, picking his teeth thoughtfully and reading from time to time the cablegram from his Government which informed him that certain defalcations of his had been discovered by the paymaster-general of the navy, and demanding peremptorily his return to Rio de Janeiro.

To say that Captain Lombrosa was unperturbed would be to exaggerate. No man who builds his house upon sand can calmly regard the shifting foundations of his edifice. But he was not especially depressed, for many reasons. The Government had merely anticipated events by a week or so.

He read the cablegram with its pencilled decodation, smiled sadly, put up his feet on a chair, and called for another bottle of Rioja.

There is an unlovely road through the dreary waste that leads from Cadiz to San Fernando. Beyond the city and beyond the Arsenal the road winds through the bleak salt marshes to Jerez, that Xeres de la Frontera which has given its name to the amber wine of Spain.

A solitary horseman cantered into San Fernando, his clothing white with brackish dust. He drew rein before the Cafe Cruz Blanca and dismounted, an untidy barefooted boy leading his horse away. There were few people in the saloon of the café, for a chill wind was abroad, and the cap-pa is a very poor protection against the icy breezes that blow from the Sierras.

A man greeted the horseman as he entered—a stout man with bulging cheeks and puffy eyes. He breathed wheezily, and his hands moved with a strange restlessness.

They hailed each other in the Andalusian dialect, and the newcomer ordered "Cafe c'leche."

"Well, friend?" asked the stout man, when the waiter had disappeared. "What is the news?"

He spoke in English.

"The best," replied the other in the same language. "T.B. is finished."

"No!"

"It's a fact. Ramundo shot him at close range, but the devil went down fighting. They've got Ramundo."

The fat man snorted.

"Isn't that dangerous?" he asked.

"For us, no; for him, yes," said the man carelessly. "Ramundo knows nothing except that he has been living in the lap of luxury in London on the wages of an unknown employer."

"What will he get?" asked the stout man nervously.

The man looked at him curiously.

"You are getting jumpy, friend Grayson," he said coolly.

"I am getting sick of this life," said Grayson.

"We're making money by the million, but what is the use of it? We are dogs that dare not show our noses abroad; we're exiled and damned, and there is no future."

"You might as well be here as in prison," philosophised his friend. "And in prison you most certainly would be, if not worse—"

"We had no hand in the murders," interrupted Grayson pleadingly. "Now did we, Baggin?"

"I know little about the English law," drawled George T. Baggin, sometime treasurer of the London, Manhattan, and Jersey Securities Syndicate.

"But such knowledge as I have enables me to say with certainty that we should be hanged—sure." The fat man collapsed, mopping his brow.

"Ramundo killed one and Poltavo the other," he mumbled. "What about Poltavo?"

"He was standing by when T.B. was shot; but, as soon as he saw the policeman was down and out, he skipped. He arrives to-night."

Some thought came to him which was not quite agreeable, for he frowned.

"Poltavo, of course, knows," he went on meditatively. "Poltavo is one with us."

"He has been a valuable member," ventured Grayson.

"Had been," said the other, emphasising the first word.

"What do you mean? Was it not he who established our stations and got the right men to work 'em? Why, he has got the whole thing at his fingers' ends."

"Yes," agreed Baggin, with a wry smile. "And he has us at his fingers' ends also—where are our friends?—the other matter I have arranged without calling in Poltavo."

"They are returning to-night." The fat man shifted uncomfortably. "You were saying about this T.B. fellow—he is dead?"

"Not dead, but nearly; Poltavo saw him carried into the house, and a little later an ambulance came flying to the door. He saw him carried out. Later he enquired at the hospital—sent in his card, if you please—and found that Smith was shot through the shoulder."

Grayson lowered his voice.

"Is Poltavo—" He did not complete his sentence.

"He's dangerous. I tell you, Grayson, we are on tender ice; there's a crackling and a creaking in the air."

Grayson licked his dry lips.

"I've been having dreams lately," he rumbled.

"Horrid dreams about prisons—"

"Oh, cut it out!" said Baggin. "There's no time for fool dreaming. I'm going to the committee to-night; you back me up. Hullo!"

A beggar had sidled into the café in the waiter's absence. He moved with the furtive shuffle of the practised mendicant.

His hair was close-cropped, and on his cheeks was a three days' growth of beard. He held out a grimy hand.

"Senor," he murmured. "For Dios—"

"Get out."

The man looked at him appealingly.

"Diez centimes, senor," he whined.

Baggin raised his hand, but checked its descent.

He had seen something behind the ragged jacket closely buttoned at the throat.

"Wait for me on the road to Jerez," he commanded, and tossed the man a silver piece. The beggar caught it with the skill of an expert. Baggin cut short the torrent of thanks, blessings, and protestations.

"Meet me in half-an-hour; you understand?"

"What the devil are you going to do?" demanded Grayson.

"You shall see."

Half-an-hour later they emerged from the café, Baggin to his horse, and the fat man to a capacious victoria that he had summoned from the hotel stables.

A mile along the road they came up with the beggar.

"Get down, Grayson, and send the victoria on; you can signal it when you want it."

He waited until the empty victoria had driven away; then he turned to the waiting ragamuffin.

"What is your name?"

"Carlos Cabindez," said the man hesitatingly.

"Where do you live?"

"At Ronda."

"Where have you come from?"

"Tarifa."

"What is your trade?"

The man grinned and shuffled his feet.

"A fisherman," he said at last.

Baggin's hand suddenly shot out; and, grasping his collar, tore open the frayed jacket. The man wrenched himself free with an imprecation.

"Take your hand from that knife," commanded Baggin. "I will do you no harm. Where did you get that shirt?"

The beggar scowled and drew the threadbare coat across his chest.

"I bought it," he said.

"That's a lie," said Baggin. "It is a prisoner's shirt; you are an escaped convict."

The man made no answer.

"From Ceuta?"

Again no reply.

"What was your sentence? Answer."

"Life," said the other sullenly.

"Your crime?"

"Asesinatos."

"How many?"

"Tres."

Baggin's eyes narrowed.

"Three murders, eh?" he said. Then, "You would like to earn a thousand pesetas?" he asked. The man's eyes lit up.

Baggin turned to the troubled Grayson.

"You can go on, Grayson," he said. "I shall see you to-night. In the meantime, I wish to have a little talk with our friend here.

23. THE HOUSE ON THE HILL

BEYOND the town of Jerez and on the road that runs westward to San Lucar, there is a hill. Once upon a time, a grey old watch-tower stood upon its steepest place, but one day there came an eccentric American who purchased the land on which it stood, demolished the tower, and erected a castellated mansion. Rumour had it that he was mad, but no American would be confined on a Spaniard's appreciation of sanity.

The American consul at Jerez, of his charity and kindliness of heart, journeyed out to call upon him, and received a cold welcome. A message came to him that the proprietor was in bed with gout, and neither then or at any time desired visitors, which so enraged the well-meaning consul that he never called again. The American's visits were of a fleeting character. He was in residence less than a month in the year. Then one day he came and remained. His name was registered as Senor Walter G. Brown, of New York. The English police sought him as George T. Baggin, an absconding promoter, broker, bucket- shop keeper, and all-round thief. After a time he began to receive visitors, who stayed on also.

Then came a period when Mr. Walter G. Brown became aggressively patriotic. He caused to be erected on the topmost tower of his mansion an enormous flagstaff, from which flew on rare occasions a ridiculously small Stars and Stripes.

At night, the place of the flag was taken by a number of thick copper strands, and simple-minded villagers in the country about reported strange noises, for all the world like the rattling of dried peas in a tin canister.

On the evening of a wintry day, many people journeyed up the steep pathway that led to the mansion on the hill. They came singly and in pairs, mostly riding, although one stout man drove up in a little victoria drawn by two panting mules. The last to come was Mr. Baggin, an unpleasant smile on his square face.

By the side of his horse trotted a breathless man. in a tattered coat, his cropped head bare.

"I will show you where to stand," Baggin said.

"There is a curtain that covers a door. The man will pass by that curtain, and I shall be with him. I will hold his arm—so. Then I will say, ' Count Poltavo, I do not trust you,' and then—"

The ragged man swept the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand, for the path was> steep.

"And then," he grunted, "I will strike."

"Surely," warned the other.

The man grinned.

"I shall not fail," he said significantly. They disappeared into the great house—it is worthy of note that Baggin opened the door with a key of his own—and darkness fell upon the hill and upon the valley.

Far away, lights twinkling through the trees showed where Jerez lay.

24. THE NINE BEARS

THE room in which the Nine Men sat was large, even as rooms go in Spain. It had the appearance of a small lecture hall. Heavy curtains of dark blue velvet hid the tall windows, and electric lights, set at intervals in the ceiling, provided light. The little desks at which the men sat were placed so as to form a horseshoe.

Of the nine, it is possible that one knew the other, and that some guessed the identity of all. It was difficult to disguise Grayson, who in his life of inactivity had grown exceedingly stout, and yet with all the trickery of the black cloaks they wore and the crepe masks that hid their faces, it was hard enough to single even him from his fellows. The last man had reached his seat when one who sat at the extreme end of the horseshoe on the president's right, rose and asked: "What of Poltavo, brother?"

"He has not yet arrived," was the muffled reply.

"Perhaps, then, it is well that I should say what I have to say before his return," said the first speaker.

He rose to his feet, and eight pairs of eyes turned towards him.

"Gentlemen," he began, "the time has come when our operations must cease."

A murmur interrupted him, and he stopped.

"What is it?" he asked sharply.

"Let us have more light," said a mask at the end of the horseshoe, and pointed to the ceiling where only half of the lights glowed. Baggin nodded, and the man rose and made his way to the curtained recess where the switches were.

"No, no, no!" said Baggin quickly—for he suddenly realised that there was something hidden by the curtain, a sinister figure of a man in convict shirt, fingering the edge of a brand-new knife. So Baggin pictured him.

The masked man halted in surprise.

"No, no," repeated Baggin, and beckoned him back. "For what I have to say I need no light; you interrupt me, brother."

With a muttered apology the man resumed his seat.

"I have said," continued Baggin, "that the time has come when we must seriously consider the advisability of dispersing."

A murmur of assent met these words.

"This organisation of ours has grown and grown until it has become unwieldy," he went on.

"We are all business men, so there is no need for me to enlarge upon the danger that attends the house that undertakes responsibilities which it cannot personally attend to.

"We have completed a most wonderful organisation. We have employed all the ingenuities of modern science to further our plans. We have agents in every part of Europe, in India, Egypt, and America. So long as these agents have been ignorant of the identity and location of their employers, we were safe. To ensure this, we have worked through Count Poltavo, a gentleman who came to us some time ago—under peculiar conditions.

"We have employed, too, and gratefully employed, Catherine Dominguez, a charming lady, as to whose future you need have no fear. Some time ago, as you all know, we established wireless stations in the great capitals, as being the safest method by which our instructions might be transmitted without revealing to our agents the origin of these commands. A code was drawn up, certain arrangements of letters and words, and this code was deciphered and our secret revealed through the ingenuity of one man. We were prepared to meet him on a business basis. We communicated with him by wireless, and agreed to pay a sum not only to himself, but to two others, if he kept our secret and agreed to make no written record of theif discovery. They promised, but their promise was broken, and it was necessary to employ other methods.

"I am fully prepared to accept responsibility for my share of the result, just as I am prepared to share responsibility for any other act which circumstances may have rendered necessary.

"And now, gentlemen, I come to the important part in my speech. By sharing the result of our operations we may each go our way, in whatever guise we think most suitable, to the enjoyment of our labours.

"In a short time for many of us the statute of limitations will have worked effectively; and for others there are States in South America that would welcome us and offer us every luxury that money can buy or heart desire.

"Yet I would not advise the scattering of our forces. Rather, I have a scheme which will, I think, enable us to extract the maximum of enjoyment from life, at a minimum of risk. With that end in view, I have expended from our common fund a sum equal to half-a-million English pounds. I have completed elaborate arrangements, which I shall ask you to approve of; I have fashioned our future." He threw out his hands with a gesture of pride. "It is for you to decide whether we shall go our several ways, each in fear of the weakness of the other, our days filled with dread, our nights sleepless with doubt, or whether in new circumstances we shall live together in freedom, in happiness, and in unity."

Again the murmured applause.

"But there is an element of danger which must be removed," Baggin went on; "—between freedom and us there lies a shadow."

He stopped and looked from mask to mask.

"That shadow," he said slowly, "is Count Ivan Poltavo, the man who knows our secrets, who has done our work, the one man in the world who holds our lives in the hollow of his—"

Before he had finished he saw their eyes leave his face and seek the door, and he turned to meet the calm scrutiny of the subject of his discourse. He had entered the room whilst Baggin was speaking and stood listening.

For a few moments there was silence.

Over Baggin's face came a startling change. The flush of excitement died out of his cheeks, leaving him ghastly pale and overcome with confusion. His mouth, opened to conclude his sentence, hung gaping, as if it had suddenly been frozen in that position. His eyes glared with rage and terror.

Count Poltavo advanced, hat in hand, and bowed gravely to the masked company.

"Monsieur Baggin does me an honour that I do not deserve," he said.

Baggin, recovering himself, shot a swift side glance at a curtained recess behind which stooped a crop-haired man in a convict shirt, fingering a brand-new knife.

"Monsieur Baggin," Count Poltavo went on, "is wrong when he says I am the only man who stands between the Nine Bears of Cadiz and freedom—there is another, and his name is T.B. Smith."

"T.B. Smith is dead, or dying," said Baggin angrily; "—we have your word for it."

His antagonist favoured him with the slightest bow.

"Even I may fall into an error," he said magnanimously. "T.B. is neither dead nor dying."

"But he fell?"

The count smiled.

"It was clever, and for the moment even I was deceived," he confessed.

He walked forward until he was opposite the curtain where the assassin waited.

"He is in Jerez, messieurs—with an assistant. I saw them upon the street this morning. Mr. Smith," he concluded, smiling, "wore his arm in a sling."

"It's a lie!" shouted Baggin. "Strike, Carlos!"

He wrenched the curtain aside, revealing the sinister figure behind.

Poltavo fell back with an ashen face, but the convict made no move.

Baggin sprang at him in a fury, and struck madly, blindly, but Poltavo's arm caught his, and wrenched him backward.

In the count's other hand was a revolver, and the muzzle covered the convict.

"Gentlemen," he said, and his eyes blazed with triumph, "I have told you that T.B. Smith was here with an assistant—behold the assistant!"

And Cord Van Ingen, in his convict shirt, standing with one hand against the wall of the recess, and the other on his hip, smiled cheerfully.

"That is very true," he said.

Under his hand were the three switches that controlled the light in the room.

"It is also true, my young friend," said Poltavo softly, "that you have meddled outrageously in this matter—that you are virtually dead." Van Ingen nodded.

"Wasn't it a Polish philosopher," he began, with all the hesitation of one who is beginning a long discourse, "who said—"

Then he switched out the light and dropped flat on the floor. The revolvers cracked together, and Poltavo uttered an oath.

There was a wild scramble in the dark. A knot of men swayed over a prostrate form; then a trembling hand found the switch, and the room was flooded with light.

Poltavo lay flat on his back with a bullet through his leg, but the man they sought, the man in the striped shirt and with a three days' growth of beard, was gone.

25. IN THE GARDEN

THAT night at nine o'clock, Cord Van Ingen paced with beating heart the length of the tiny enclosed garden upon which the side-door of the hotel opened, and glanced up eagerly at every sound of footsteps. There may be men who can go to a lover's appointment with an even pulse, but Cord Van Ingen was not one of them. His heart sang a psean of joy and praise. He was going to see Doris! A broad shaft of yellow light streaming from an unshuttered window in the second story, told him that the detective was still busy writing reports and preparing despatches. That he regarded the expedition as a failure the young man knew, but he was indifferent since he had learned the one great fact. Doris was in Jerez!

An old woman, with a face like a withered apple, and her eyes under the fringe of her black headshawl shining like bright beads, had delivered the message. At the conclusion of his adventure with the Nine, he had made his way back to the hotel, and after a few words to the detective, had mounted to his bare little room, bathed, shaved, and descended to supper.

The meal was an unsocial one, for Smith, in an execrable temper over the miscarriage of his plans, glowered blackly through the scant courses, and at their close vanished promptly into his room.

Van Ingen lighted a cigarette, and sauntered out upon the narrow street. He meant to stroll toward the plaza, and have a look at the cathedral. As he stood for a moment in front of the hotel, uncertain of the direction, an old crone, such as haunt the steps of churches with trinkets and sacred relics for sale, hobbled up to him, scanned his face sharply, and dropped a courtesy.

"Senor Van Eenge?" she asked, in a clear soft whisper.

The young man fell back a pace in amazement.

"Yes," he admitted curtly. On the instant he thought of Poltavo, and his hand went into his coat pocket. "But how did you know?"

She shook her head with a mysterious smile, and held out her hand. "From the senorita," she murmured.

"Eh?" Cord stared blankly.

But he took the missive, scenting a romance, and laughingly struck a match. It contained but a single pencilled line, written, evidently, in great agitation, for the characters were scarcely legible. The match burned down

and scorched his fingers. He lit another unsteadily, and stared again, his face in the small circle of light pallid with excitement.

"I will see you in the garden at nine. DORIS."

Doris, whom he had believed to be with Lady Dinsmore on the Riviera, in this desolate, wind- raked little Spanish town? What was the meaning of it? He turned to question the old crone, but she had slid noiselessly into the gloom whence she had come, and he was left standing before the hotel with only the scrap of white paper to show that the entire incident was not the wild imagining of an overwrought brain.

He bent his eyes to it again, and especially to the signature. There could be no mistake. That funny little D of Doris, with its childish curl at the end, he would know the world around. It smote him with a strong emotion and gave him a sense of reality. Doris, then, was actually near at hand, breathing the same warm night air, watching the same moon, high and pale, sailing across the sky. He turned back to the house, and after a casual word with his host, a tall, spare-looking man, with a drooping moustache and a face as sour as the vintages he sold to his guests, he went down the short flight of steps into the garden. The bell of the campanile somewhere in the distance struck the four quarters, and then chimed eight silver strokes. An hour to wait. He flung himself upon a bench at the extreme end of the garden, beneath a pomegranate tree. As he leaned back, a shower of the scarlet flowers fell about him. Not far down the street, perhaps beneath some window, a youth's voice could be heard, sweetened by distance, singing "La Paloma." Cord wondered idly if it were another tryst.

He sprang up, mastered by impatience, and walked about, whistling the same air softly. Minutes passed. Cord wondered how she would come. The only entrance to the enclosed garden which he had remarked lay through the lobby of the hotel. He frowned at the thought of her meeting the cold, leering stare of his host, and decided to meet her upon the street. With a foot upon the lower step, he paused and lifted his head, alert, listening. Behind him, at the end of the garden, coming from the neighbourhood of the bench, he had heard the sound of an unmistakable click. He sprang toward the sound, his blood racing tumultuously through his veins.

Two shadows detached themselves from the deeper gloom of the garden wall, and stood forth uncertainly. One of the shadows held out a hand.

"Cord!" she murmured. She pushed back the enveloping folds of the lace mantilla about her head. It fell away upon her shoulders, and the pale beams of the moon shone full upon her face. It was Doris.

At sight of her, the exclamation of joy died on Van Ingen's lips. He stood rooted to the spot by the startling change in her countenance. Her blue eyes, once so laughing, looked out from black hollows, her cheeks were pale and slightly drawn, and her mouth colourless. Fear, depression, misery, spoke in every drooping line of her figure.

"Well?" she said at last, tremulously. "You— are not glad to see me?"

With a hoarse little cry, he took her into his arms, and held her close.

"My Doris!" he whispered. "What have they done to you?"

She trembled in the close embrace, and clung to him.

"I—I have been afraid," she said simply, "for so many endless days! So many long white nights! I thought at times I should go mad at the horror of it! And when I heard that you were here, near me, in Jerez, I decided to risk all. And so I—I came with Maria, who knows the way," she nodded toward the other figure which had withdrawn into the shadows, "to—to see you."

"To see me?" he repeated in a low voice, as one cons a difficult lesson. "You risked all, to see me?"

She nodded, and raised her eyes to his. "But if you are not glad to see me?" She strove gently to disengage herself.

He held her fast. At the moment, as if the heavens had opened wide, a great light broke in upon him. He stared at the face lying against his shoulder, flushed, eager, incredulous. Her soft eyelids were closed. Love lay upon them like a dream, and upon the faintly smiling lips. Her breath mounted to his nostrils like delicate incense. He bent lower and lower.

"Open your eyes, darling!" he entreated. She obeyed—their lips met. He kissed her again.

A slight sound came from the shadows. Doris broke from him, breathless, but unashamed, a new-found joy in her eyes.

"I had almost forgot!" she exclaimed. "I came to tell you something—something important." Cord laughed.

"You have told it already!" he said. "You have been chanting wonderful, thrilling, cosmic things to me the last ten minutes!"

He sat down and drew her beside him on the bench.

"Tell me—everything," he said gravely. She eased herself within the circle of his arm.

"First, I wish you to take a message to my aunt. Tell her I am well and happy—now!"

"Lady Dinsmore?" he asked in surprise. "Is she not with you?"

She shook her head. "Aunt Patricia is in Biarritz," she replied in a low tone. "I—I am with my father." Fear had crept into her voice again.

"That is what I came to tell you," she continued.

"My aunt does not understand—she would have me desert my father. But I shall stay with him to the end.

"And—Poltavo?" Van Ingen recalled her letter, and jealousy started up within him.

"Count Poltavo is with us—at present," she answered in a constrained voice. "How long he will remain—"

"Tell me everything, darling!" he pleaded.

"I can tell you—nothing!" she said passionately, her breast heaving. "Save only that I shall be glad, glad, when this terrible search is completed. So many lives—" For the first time, she broke down completely, and turning from him, sobbed bitterly, her face hidden in her hands. She rocked back and forth in a paroxysm of grief. He bent over her, in an agony of distress, and put his arms about her.

"Cord!" The voice came to him, strangled with sobs.

"Darling?" his mouth was close to her lips.

"Promise me that you will give it up?"

"No."

"But they will kill you—too!" she moaned.

"Not me!" he said cheerfully. "Not after this!" He raised her tearful face to his. "Tell me, at least, where a letter may find you."

"I shall be with my father," she replied evasively. "Count Poltavo and Mr. Baggin are in open rupture," she hurried on. "Each is fighting for mastery.

Count Poltavo has the brains, but Baggin has the money. Between them, they tear my poor father to pieces."

"And you!" he cried in a choked, angry voice.

"They are killing you, too."

"I am a pawn in the game," she said listlessly.

"Each side plays me off against the other." She rose. "It is late. Maria."

The old woman materialised out of the gloom, and held open the gate. Cord arose also.

"You are not to come with me!" she whispered urgently. "Good-night!"

He held her closely. "You love me?"

"Forever!" she said simply.

She rearranged the lace mantilla about her head, and held out her hand.

"I am coming with you," he said composedly.

Something in his tone checked the protest on her lips.

They walked quietly along the narrow street, the duenna behind, climbed a slight ascent, and stopped in front of a house standing apart, and surrounded by a large garden.

She turned to him, laying one hand upon a small wicket gate.

"One moment," he implored. "Count Poltavo Your promise—"

"I gave my pledge to him if he would save my father," she said sadly. "That he has not done." She opened the gate.

"But if he should—" he insisted.

She lifted her head proudly. "Then I should redeem my pledge."

She vanished into the darkness of the garden, and the young man retraced his steps to the hotel. The next morning he mounted the steep little street with hope in his heart, and hung about, watching anxiously. No sign of life exhibited itself. The windows, with their close-drawn shades, stared at him blankly. Presently an old woman hobbled out of the little wicket gate. Van Ingen approached her eagerly. "The young lady—" he began in a low tone.

"Gone, senor!" She threw out her hands with an expressive gesture, to indicate illimitable distances. "They departed, in mad haste, in the night."

"And she left no message?" he cried, in bitter disappointment.

She shrugged her shoulders. "Nothing more than she told the senor last night."

Van Ingen tossed her a silver piece, and turned slowly back to the hotel.

26. T.B. SMITH REPORTS

IN red, blue, and green; in type varying in size according to the temperament of the newspaper; in words wild or sedate, as the character of the journal demanded, the newspaper contents bills gave London its first intimation of the breaking up of the Nine Bears.

As a sensation scarcely less vivid came the astounding exposé of Count Ivan Poltavo. Society rocked to its foundations by this news of its favourite. From every dinner- table in London arose the excited clamour of discussion. Lady Angela defended him stoutly, declaring that as an artist, and ignorant of money, he had been misled by bad, clever rascals. Men who had been forced to take second place in his presence, now came forward, boldly, and stated that they had always suspected him to be a rogue.

One brilliant young man achieved a week-long fame by looking up his record at Scotland Yard. It appeared that the count was indeed a black-hearted villain. Five years ago he had been deported as an undesirable alien.

"But how did he escape recognition?" asked a guest.

The famous one smirked. "He parted his hair on one side, and wore a moustache!"

Ah! Into the mind of every feminine diner arose the vivid picture of the count—with mustachios! They sighed.

That the Nine Bears were dispersed was hailed as a triumph for the English police. Unfortunately, the popular view is not always the correct view, and T.B. Smith came back to London a very angry man.

It had been no fault of his that the majority of the band had escaped.

"The Civil Guard was twenty minutes late in taking up its position," wrote T.B. in his private report.

"No blame attached to the Guard, which is one of the finest police forces in the world, but to the local police authorities, who at the eleventh hour detected some obscurity in their instructions from Madrid, and must needs telegraph for elucidation. So that the ring about the House on the Hill which I commanded was not completed until long after the whole lot had escaped. We caught François Zillier, who has been handed over to the French police, but the remainder of the gang got clean away. Apparently they have taken Count Poltavo with them; Van Ingen declares he shot him and such indications as we have point to his having been badly hurt. How the

remainder managed to carry him off passes my comprehension. We have secured a few documents. There is one mysterious scrap of paper discovered in Baggin's private room which is incoherent to a point of wildness, and apparently the rough note of some future scheme; it will bear re-examination."

"Thanks to the industry and perseverance of the English police," said the London Morning Journal, commenting on the affair, "the Nine Men of Cadiz are dispersed, their power destroyed, their brilliant villainies a memory. It is only a matter of time before they will fall into the hands of the police, and the full measure of Society's punishment be awarded them. Scattered as they are—"

T.B. Smith put down his paper when he came to this part, and smiled grimly.

"Scattered, are they!" he said. "I doubt it." For all the praise that was lavished upon him and upon his department, he was not satisfied with himself. He knew that he had failed. To break up the gang had always been possible. To arrest them and seize the huge fortune they had amassed would have been an achievement justifying the encomia that were being lavished upon him.

"The only satisfaction I have," he said to the Chief Commissioner, "is that we are so often cursed for inefficiency when we do the right thing, that we can afford to take a little credit when we've made a hash of things."

"I wouldn't say that," demurred the Chief.

"You did all that was humanly possible."

T.B. sniffed.

"Eight men and Poltavo slipped through my fingers," he answered briefly; "—that's a bad best." He rose from the chair and paced the room, his head sunk on his breast.

"If Count Poltavo had delayed his entrance another ten minutes," he said, stopping suddenly, "Baggin would have told Van Ingen all that I wanted to know. This wonderful scheme of his that was to secure them all ease and security for the rest of their lives."

"He may have been boasting," suggested the other, but T.B. shook his head.

"It was no boast," he said with assurance, "and if it were he has made it good, for where are the Nine? One of them is on Devil's Island, because he

had the misfortune to fall into our hands. But where are the others? Vanished! Dissolved into the elements—and their money with them! I tell you, sir, there is not even the suspicion of a trace of these men. How did they get away from Cadiz? Not by rail, for all northward trains were stopped at Boadilla and searched. Not by sea, for the only ship that left that night was the Brazilian man-o'-war, Maria Braganza."

"Airship," suggested his chief flippantly, as he moved towards the door.

"It is unlikely, sir," replied T.B. coldly. The Chief Commissioner stood with his hand on the edge of the open door.

"At any rate, they are finished," he said, "their power for further mischief is destroyed."

"I appreciate your optimism, sir," said T.B. impertinently, "which I regret to say I do not share."

"One thing is evident, and must be remembered," T.B. went on, as his chief still lingered.

"Outside of the Nine Men there must be in Europe hundreds of agents, who, without being aware of their principals, have been acting blindly for years in their interest. What of the men who went to the length of murder at Poltavo's orders? What of the assassins in Europe and America who 'arranged' the suicide of the bank president and the wreck of the Sud Express? Not one of these men have we been able to track down. I tell you, sir, that outside of the inner council of this gang, Poltavo organised as great a band of villains as the world has ever seen. They remain; this is an indisputable fact; somewhere in the world, scattered materially, but bound together by bonds of Poltavo's weaving, are a number of men who formed the working parts of the Nine Men's great machine. For the moment the steam is absent Yes?"

A constable was at the door.

"A message for you, sir."

T.B. took the envelope and tore it open mechanically. It was a note from Van Ingen.

"Saw Poltavo ten minutes ago in a hansom. Positive— no disguise. C.V.I."

Smith sat suddenly erect. "Poltavo in London!" he breathed. "It is incredible!"

He stood up, busily engaged in speculation.

The little telegraph instrument near the Chief Inspector's desk began to click. In every police station throughout the metropolis it snapped forth its message. In Highgate, in Camberwell, in sleepy Greenwich, in Ladywell, as in Stoke Newington.

"Clickerty, clickerty, click," it went, hastily, breathlessly. It ran:

TO ALL STATIONS: ARREST AND DETAIN COUNT IVAN POLTAVO. [here the description followed.] ALL RESERVES OUT IN PLAIN CLOTHES.

All reserves out!

That was a remarkable order.

London did not know of the happening; the homeward-bound suburbanite may have noticed a couple of keen-faced men standing idly near the entrance of the railway station, may have seen a loiterer on the platform—a loiterer who apparently had no train to catch. Curious men, too, came to the hotels, lounging away the whole evening in the entrance hall, mildly interested in people who came or went. Even the tram termini were not neglected, nor the theatre queues, nor the boarding- houses of Bloomsbury. Throughout London, from east to west, north to south, the work that Scotland Yard had set silent emissaries to perform was swiftly and expeditiously carried out.

T.B. sat all that evening in his office waiting. One by one little pink slips were carried in to him and laid upon the desk before him.

As the evening advanced they increased in number and length.

At eight o'clock came a wire:

NOT LEAVING BY HOOK OF HOLLAND ROUTE.

Soon after nine:

CONTINENTAL MAIL CLEAR.

Then in rapid succession the great caravanserais reported themselves. Theatres, bars, restaurants, every place in London where men and women gather together, sent, through the plain-clothes watchers, their messages.

At eleven o'clock T.B. was reading a telegram from Harwich when the telephone at his elbow buzzed.

He took up the receiver.

"Hullo," he said curtly.

For a second there was no reply, and then, very clear and distinct, came a voice.

"T.B. Smith, I presume."

It was the voice of Count Poltavo.

If there had been anybody in the room but T.B., he might have imagined it was a very ordinary call the detective was receiving. Save for the fact that his face twitched, as was a characteristic of his when labouring under any great excitement, he gave no sign of the varied emotions Poltavo's voice had aroused.

"Yes, I am T.B. Smith; you are, of course, Count Poltavo?"

"I am, of course, Count Poltavo," said the voice suavely, "and it is on the tip of your tongue to ask me where I am."

"I am hardly as foolish as that," said T.B. drily, "but wherever you are—and I gather from the clearness of your voice that you are in London —I shall have you."

There was a little laugh at the other end of the wire.

T.B.'s hand stole out and pressed a little bell- push that rested on the table.

"Yes," said Poltavo's voice mockingly, "I am in London. I am desirous of knowing where my friends have hidden."

"Your friends?" T.B. was genuinely astonished.

"My friends," said the voice gravely, "who so ungenerously left me to die on the salt plains near Jerez whilst they were making their escape."

A constable entered the room whilst Poltavo was talking, and T.B. raised his hand warningly.

"Tell me," he said carelessly, "why you have not joined them."

Then, like a flash, he brought his hand down over the transmitter and turned to the waiting constable.

"Run across to Mr. Elk's room," he said rapidly; "call the Treasury Exchange and ask what part of London—what office—this man is speaking to me from."

Poltavo was talking before T.B. had finished giving his instructions.

"Why have I not joined them?" he said, and there was a little bitterness in his voice,—" because they do not wish to have me. Poltavo has served his purpose! Where are they now?—that is what I wish to know. More important still, I greatly desire a piece of information which you alone, monsieur, can afford me."

The sublime audacity of the man brought a grin to T.B.'s face.

"And that is?" he asked.

"There was," said Poltavo, "amongst the documents you found at our headquarters in Jerez a scrap of paper written somewhat unintelligibly, and apparently—I should imagine, for I have not seen it—without much meaning."

"There was," said T.B. cheerfully.

"So much I gathered from Baggin's agitation on our retreat," said Poltavo. "Where, may I ask, is this interesting piece of literature deposited?"

The cool, matter-of-fact demand almost took T.B.'s breath away.

"It is at present at Scotland Yard," he said "With my—er—dossier?" asked the voice, and a little laugh followed.

"Rather with the dossier of your friend Baggin," said T.B.

"In case I should ever want to—how do you say—burgle Scotland Yard," said the drawling voice again, "could you give me explicit instructions where to find it?"

T.B.'s anxiety was to keep Poltavo engaged in conversation until the officer he had despatched to the telephone returned.

"Yes," he said, "at present it is in the cabinet marked ' Unclassified Data,' but I cannot promise you that it will remain there. You see, count, I have too high an opinion of your enterprise and daring."

He waited for a reply, but no reply came, and at that moment the door opened and the constable he had sent on the errand appeared.

T.B. covered the transmitter again.

"The Treasury say that you are not connected with anybody, sir," he said.

"What?"

T.B. stared at him.

He moved his hand from the transmitter and called softly, "Poltavo!"

There was no reply, and he called again.

He looked up with the receiver still at his ear.

"He's rung off."

Then a new voice spoke.

"Finished, sir?"

"No—who are you?" demanded T.B. quickly.

"Exchange, sir—Private Exchange, Scotland Yard."

"Who was talking to me then? Where was he talking from?"

"Why, from the Record Office."

T.B., his face white, leapt to his feet.

"Follow me," he said, and went racing down the long corridor. He went down the broad stairs three at a time.

A constable on duty in the hall turned in astonishment.

"Has anybody left here recently?" asked T.B. breathlessly.

"A gentleman just gone out, sir," said the man; "went away in a motor- car."

"Is Mr. Elk in the building?"

"In the Record Office, sir," said the man. Up the stairs again flew the detective.

The Record Office was at the far end of the building.

The door was ajar and the room in darkness, but T.B. was in the room and had switched on the light.

In the centre of the room was stretched the unfortunate Elk in a pool of blood. A life- preserver lay near him. T.B. leant over him; he was alive, but terribly injured; then he shot a swift glance round the room. He saw the

telephone with the receiver off; he saw an open cabinet marked "Unclassified Data," and it was empty.

27. THE LOST WARSHIP

POLTAVO had escaped. There was pother enough —eight of the Nine Bears had melted into nothingness. No official feather came to T.B.'s cap for that, whatever praise the mistaken public might award. Worst of all, and most shocking outrage of all, the Record Office at Scotland Yard had been burgled and important documents had been stolen. But Elk had not been killed, so the incident did not come before the public.

The contents of the documents were not lost to the police, for Scotland Yard does not put all its eggs into one basket, even when the basket is as secure a one as the Record Office. There were photographs innumerable of the scrap of paper, and one of these was on T.B. Smith's desk the morning after the robbery.

The memorandum, for such it was, was contained in less than a hundred words. Literally, and with all its erasures written out, it ran:

"Idea [crossed out]. Ideas [written again]. Suppose we separated; where to meet; allowing for accidental partings; must be some spot; yet that would be dangerous; otherwise, must be figures easily remembered; especially as none of these people have knowledge [crossed out and rewritten]; especially as difficult for non-technical [word undecipherable] to fix in mind, and one cipher makes all difference. LOLO be good, accessible, unfrequented. Suggest on first Ju every year we rendezvous at Lolo.

"(Mem.—Lolo would indeed be nowhere!)

"So far have only explained to Zillier."

That was all, and T.B. read and reread the memorandum. Zillier was the only man who knew. By the oddest of chances, Baggin had confided his plans to the one man who might have found them useful if Providence had given him one chance of escape. But the French Government had him safe enough on Devil's Island.

For the rest, the "note" needed much more explanation than he could give it.

He took a pen and began to group the sentences he could not understand.

"Must be some spot; yet that would be dangerous; otherwise, must be figures easily remem- bered."

A spot would be dangerous? He was perplexed and showed it. What was meant by "spot"?

"On the 1st of Ju we rendezvous at Lolo— nowhere!"

"This is absolute nonsense!" The detective threw down his pen and jumped up. He called in the Chief Commissioner's office and was received cordially.

"Any news, T.B.; what do you make of your puzzle?"

T.B. made a little grimace.

"Nothing," he said, "and if the original had not been stolen I should not have troubled to study it."

He gained the Strand by a short cut.

A contents bill attracted his attention, and he stopped to buy an evening newspaper.

LOSS OF A WARSHIP

He turned the paper before he discovered the small paragraph that justified so large a bill.

"The Brazilian Government has sent another cruiser to search for the Brazilian man-of-war, Maria Braganza, which is a month overdue. It is feared that the warship foundered in the recent cyclone in the South Atlantic."

"Maria Braganza?" thought T.B., and remembered where he had seen the vessel.

The ship and her fate passed out of his mind soon afterward, for he had a great deal of routine work requiring his attention, but the name cropped up again in the course of the day and in a curious manner.

A drunken sailor, obviously of foreign extraction, was ejected, fighting, from a small public- house in the Edgware Road. He rose from the ground slowly, and stood apparently debating in his mind whether he should go away quietly or whether he should return to the attack. It is not too much to say that had he decided upon the pacific course, the mystery of the whereabouts of the Nine Bears might never have been elucidated. In that two seconds of deliberation hung the fates of Baggin and his confederates, and the reputation of Scotland Yard.

The foreign sailor made up his mind. Back to the swing-doors of the tavern he staggered, pushed them open, and entered.

A few minutes later a police-whistle blew, and a commonplace constable strolled leisurely to the scene of the disturbance and took into custody the pugnacious foreigner on a charge of "drunk and disorderly."

This was the beginning of the final fight with the "Bears," a fight which cost Europe over a million of money and many lives, but which closed forever the account of the Nine Bears of Cadiz.

"Here is a case that will amuse you, T.B.," said the Chief, strolling into his bureau; "—a man, giving the name of Silva, who has been taken to the police- station on the prosaic charge of 'D. and D.,' is found to be a walking cash deposit. Twelve hundred pounds in Bank of England notes and 26,000 francs in French money was found in his possession. He speaks little or no English, has the appearance of being a sailor—will you go down and see what you can make of him?"

In a quarter of an hour the Assistant-Commissioner was at the police-station.

"Yes, sir," said the station sergeant, "he's quiet now. I don't think he's so very drunk, only pugilistically so."

"What do you make of him?"

"He's a sailor; a deserter from some foreign navy, I should say. He has underclothes of a uniform type, and there's a sort of device on his singlet—three stars and a number."

"Brazilian Navy," said T.B. with promptness.

"Talkative?"

The sergeant smiled.

"In his own language, very," he said drily.

"When I searched him, he said a great number of things which were probably very rude."

T.B. nodded.

"I'll see him," he said.

A gaoler led him down a long corridor. On either side were long stone-painted doors, each with a little steel wicket.

Stopping before one door, he inserted his bright key in the lock, snapped back a polished bolt, and the door swung open.

A man who was sitting on a wooden bench with his head in his hands, jumped to his feet as the Assistant-Commissioner entered, and poured forth a volume of language.

"Softly, softly," said T.B. "You speak French, my friend."

"Oui, monsieur," said the man. "Though I am Spanish."

"You are a deserter from a Brazilian warship," said T.B.

The man stared at him defiantly.

"Is not that so, friend?"

The prisoner shrugged his shoulders.

"I should like to smoke," was all that he said. T.B. took his gold case from an inside pocket and opened it.

"Many thanks," said the sailor, and took the lighted match the gaoler had struck. If he had known the ways of the English police, he would have grown suspicious. Elsewhere, a man might be bullied, browbeaten, frightened into a confession. In France, Juge d'Instruction and detective would combine to wring from his reluctant lips a damaging admission. In America, the Third Degree, most despicable of police methods, would have been similarly employed.

But the English police do most things by kindness, and do them very well.

The sailor puffed at his cigarette, from time to time looking up from the bench on which he sat at the detective's smiling face.

T.B. asked no questions; he had none to ask; he did not demand how the man came by his wealth; he would not be guilty of such a crudity. He waited for the sailor to talk. At last he spoke.

"Monsieur," he said, "you wish to know where I got my money?"

T.B. said nothing.

"Honestly," said the sailor loudly, and with emphatic gesture; "honestly, monsieur;" and he went on earnestly, "By my way of reckoning, a man has a price."

"Undoubtedly," agreed T.B.

"A price for body and soul." The sailor blew a ring of smoke and watched it rising to the vaulted roof of the cell.

"Some men," continued the man, "in their calm moments set their value at twenty million dollars— only to sell themselves in the heat of a foolish moment for—" He snapped his fingers.

"I have never," thought T.B., "come into contact with so many philosophical criminals in my life."

"Yet I would beg you to believe," said the sailor, "it is a question of opportunity and need. There are moments when I would not risk my liberty for a million pesetas—there have been days when I would have sold my soul for ten mil-reis." He paused again, for he had all the Latin's appreciation of an audience; all the Latin's desire for dramatic effect.

"Sixty thousand pesetas is a large sum, monsieur; it amounts to more than £2,000 in your money—that was my price!"

"For what?"

"I will set you a riddle: on the Maria Braganza we had one hundred officers and men—"

T.B. saw light.

"You are a deserter from the Maria Braganza," he said—but the man shook his head smilingly.

"On the contrary I have my discharge from the navy, properly attested and signed by my good captain. You will find it at my lodgings, in a tin trunk under a picture of the blessed Saint Teresa of Avila, or, as some say, Sergovia. No, monsieur officer, I am discharged honourably. Listen."

His cigarette was nearly finished, and T.B. opened his case again, and the man, with a grateful inclination of his head, helped himself. Slowly, he began his story, a story which, before all others, helps the mind to grasp the magnitude of a combination which made the events he described possible.

"I was a sub-officer on the Maria Braganza," he began, and went on to narrate the history of the voyage of that remarkable battleship from the day it left Rio until it steamed into the roadstead off Cadiz.

"We stayed at Cadiz much longer than we expected, and the men were grumbling—because our next port was to have been Rio. But for some reason our Captain Lombrosa did not wish to sail. Then one day he came on board—he spent most of his time ashore—looking extremely happy. Previous to this he had lived and walked in gloom, as though some matter were preying on his mind. But this was all changed now. Whatever troubles he had were evaporated. He walked about the deck, smiling and cracking jokes, and we naturally concluded that he had received his orders to sail back to Brazil at once.

"That same day we were ordered to take on board stores which the Government had purchased. Whatever stores these were, they were extremely heavy. They were packed in little square boxes, strongly made and clamped with steel. Of these boxes we took two hundred and fifty, and the business of transporting them occupied the greater part of a whole day."

"What was the weight of them?" asked T.B.

"About fifty kilos," said the man, "and," he added with an assumption of carelessness, "they each contained gold."

T.B. did a little sum in his head.

"In fact a million and a half of English pounds," he said half to himself.

"As to that I do not know," said the other, "but it was enormous; I discovered the gold by accident, for I and another officer had been chosen to store the boxes in one of the ammunition flats, and, owing to the breaking of a box, I saw—what I saw.

"However, to get back to the captain. In the evening he came aboard, having first given orders for steam to be ready and every preparation made for slipping.

"Then it was I told him that I had seen the contents of one of the boxes, and he was distressed.

"'Who else has seen this?' he asked, and I informed him of the sub- officer who had been with me.

"'Do not speak of this matter, as you value your soul,' he said, 'for this is a high Government secret—send sub-officer Alverez to me '—that was the name of my companion. I obeyed and sent Alverez aft. He too received similar injunctions, and was dismissed.

"At ten o'clock that night, the quartermasters went to their stations, and all stood ready for dropping our mooring.

"As the hours wore on, the captain began to show signs of impatience. I was on the bridge with the officer of the watch, and the captain was pacing up and down, now looking at his watch and swearing, now training his binocular on a portion of the land to the north of the town.

"I had forgotten to say that at 8.30 the ship's steam pinnace had been sent away, and that it had not returned.

"It was for the coming of the pinnace, and whoever was coming with it, that our captain displayed so much anxiety.

"It was eleven o'clock before the boat came alongside. We heard it racing across the water— for the night was very still. Then it drew alongside, and a number of gentlemen came on board. They were all talking excitedly, and seemed as though they had walked a long distance, for, by the light of the branch lamp that lit the gangway, I saw that their boots and trousers were white with dust, such as I believe lies on the road outside Cadiz. One was in a state of great fear; he was very stout. Another, and he was the leader, spoke to our captain, and soon after I heard the order given— 'Quartermaster, stand by for going out of harbour,' and the captain gave the navigating officer his course. We went out at full speed, steering a course due west.

"It was a perfectly calm night, with stars, but no moon. When (as near as I can guess) we were twenty miles from the coast, the captain sent for me and Alverez to his cabin.

"'My friends,' he said, 'I have a proposition to make to you, but first let me ask you if you are good patriots.'

"We said that we were.

"'What,' said the captain, addressing himself to me, 'do you value your patriotism at?'

"I was silent.

"Monsieur," said the prisoner earnestly, "I assure you I was not considering the insult offered to me, because we had got to a point outside of abstract morality. In my mind was a dilemma— if I ask too much I might lose an opportunity, if I ask too little I should assuredly lose money. Such was also

the consideration in Alverez's mind. 'Senor Capitan,' I said, 'as an honest man—'

"'We will leave that out of the question,' said the captain. 'Name a price.'

"And so, at random, I suggested a sum equal to £3,000, and Alverez, not a man of any originality, repeated '£3,000.'

"The captain nodded; 'This sum I will pay you,' he said. 'Moreover, I will give you your discharge from the Navy of Brazil, and you may leave the ship to-night.'

"I did not ask him why. I realised he had some high scheme which it was not proper I should know, besides which I had not been ashore for a month—and there was the £3,000.

"'Before you go,' said the captain, 'I will explain to you, that my honour and my reputation may not suffer. In a few days' time, when we are at sea, the comrades you leave behind will be offered a new service, a service under a new and wealthier government, a government that will offer large and generous rewards for faithful service and obedience.'"

The prisoner chuckled softly, as at some thought which amused him.

"We went ashore in the steam pinnace; the captain himself superintending our landing. It was a remarkable journey, senor.

"You may imagine us in the open sea, with nothing but the 'chica clucka, clucka!' of the engine of our little boat! Alverez and myself sat at the bow with our hands on the butts of our revolvers— we knew our captain—and he himself steered us for the lights that soon came up over the horizon. We landed at Cadiz, and were provided with papers to the Brazilian consul, should our return be noticed. But none saw us, or if they did, thought nothing of the spectacle of two Brazilian seamen walking through the streets at that hour of the night; remember that none but the port authorities were aware that the Maria Braganza had sailed. The next morning we procured some civilian clothing, and left by the afternoon train for Seville. By easy stages we came first to Madrid, then to Paris. Here we stayed some time."

He chuckled again.

"Alverez," he resumed, "is a man of spirit, but, as I have said, of no great originality. In Paris a man of spirit may go far, a man of money farther, always providing that behind the spirit and the wealth there is intelligence. My poor Alverez went his own way in Paris. He made friends."

Again he smiled thoughtfully.

"Alverez I left," he explained; "his ways are not my ways. I came to England. I do not like this country," he said frankly. "Your lower classes are gross people, and very quarrelsome."

A few more questions were asked, and answered, and ten minutes later T.B. was flying back to Scotland Yard with the story of the stolen battleship.

28. THE "MARIA BRAGANZA"

ONCE more were the Nine Men in the bill of every newspaper in London. Once more the cables hummed from world's end to world's end, and slowly, item by item, came fragmentary scraps of news which Scotland Yard pieced together.

"Of all extraordinary developments," said the London Journal, "in any great criminal case, nothing has ever equalled, in its improbability, the present phase of this remarkable case.

"And now we have reached the stage which we confidently hope will be a final one. It is clear that these men, having command of enormous riches, gained at the sacrifice of life, and by the ruin of thousands of innocent people, secured to their service the Captain of the Brazilian warship, Maria Braganza. So that somewhere in the wide seas of the world is a stolen battleship, having on board a congregation of the world's worst rascals, Napoleonic in the largeness of their crimes.

"Many and fantastic are the suggestions that have been put forward as to the whereabouts of the Nine Men of Cadiz. One of our contemporaries draws a fanciful picture of life on some gorgeous Southern Pacific isle, out of the track of steamers, and pictures the Nine Men living in a condition of Oriental splendour, an existence of dolce far nlente. Such a supposition is, of course, on the face of it absurd. Such an island exists only in the fancy of the romantic writer. The uninhabited portions of the globe are few, and are, in the main, of the character of the Sahara desert. Wherever life can be sustained, wherever comfort and freedom from disease wait the newcomer, be sure the newcomer has already arrived."

This much is quoted from the Journal because it approaches near enough to truth and actuality to merit quotation.

That Baggin had based all his plans on the supposition that such an island existed, and could be discovered, we now know. He was the possessor of an imagination, but his geographical knowledge was faulty.

The "idea," that scrap of paper which Count Poltavo had risked his neck to obtain, was simple enough now—up to a point.

THE "IDEA" THE SOLUTION

"Suppose we separated, where to meet? Must be some spot; yet that would be dangerous."

"Some spot," meant some place on land,

"Otherwise, must be easily remembered. Especially as it is difficult for non-technical (?) to fix in mind, and one cipher makes all the difference."

The latitude and longitude of sea rendezvous must be easy to remember.

"Suggest we rendezvous at Lolo."

This last was the only part of the little clue that offered any difficulty to T.B. The Gazetteer supplied no explanation,

Nor could the Admiralty help. The naval authorities did their best to unravel the mystery of "Lolo."

A conference of the Ambassadors met in London, and it was jointly agreed that the nations should act in concert to bring the Maria Braganza and her crew to justice as speedily as possible. The Brazilian Government agreed to indemnify the Powers in their action, and, in the event of the destruction of the ship being necessitated by resistance on the part of its rebel captain, to accept an agreed sum as compensation.

There are surprising periods of inaction in the record of all great accomplishments, which those who live, rather than those who read the stories of achievements, realise.

There were weeks of fretting and days of blank despair in one room at Scotland Yard. For the examination of all clues led to the one end. Somewhere in the world were the Nine Men of Cadiz— but where, none could say. Every port in every civilised land was alert. Captains of mail steamers, of grimy little tramps, of war vessels of every nation, watched for

the battleship. Three British cruisers, detached unostentatiously from the Home Fleet, cruised unlikely seas, but with no good result.

Then began the new terror.

T.B. had always had one uncomfortable feeling, a feeling that the dissipation of the Nine had not dispelled, and that was the knowledge that somewhere in Europe the machinery set up with devilish ingenuity by Poltavo still existed. Who were the desperate and broken men who acted as agents to the Nine? Whoever they were, they had been well chosen.

The weeks passed without further news of the ship, and T.B. was beginning to worry, for good reasons. He had an elaborate chart supplied to him by the Admiralty, which showed him, from day to day, the amount of provisions and coal such a ship as the Maria Braganza would require, and he knew that she must be running short. Then, one morning, he received a clue.

A telegram came to Scotland Yard, which began:

"OFFICER COMMANDING GIBRALTAR REPORTS THAT HIS WIRELESS STATION HAD BEEN INTERCEPTING MESSAGES IN CODE WHICH BEAR SOME RESEMBLANCE TO THOSE OF N.H.C. FULL MESSAGES HAVE BEEN FORWARDED HERE FOR DECODING. SOME OF THEM ARE UNINTELLIGIBLE, BUT ONE PORTION OF A MESSAGE WE HAVE BEEN ABLE TO MAKE READ: '...ACCEPT YOUR ASSURANCE AND EXPLANATION; WE HAVE STILL SPLENDID FIELD FOR ENTERPRISE; I WILL JOIN YOU AT LOLO WITH SHIPLOAD OF PROVISIONS AND COLLIER ON JUNE 1ST. IN MEANTIME, IF YOU DO AS I SUGGEST, WE CAN MAKE TERMS WITH GOVERNMENTS AND, MOREOVER, FIND EMPLOYMENT FOR AGENTS WHO ARE AT PRESENT DISCONTENTED...' MESSAGE BEYOND THIS UNDECIPHERABLE WITH EXCEPTION OF WORDS 'DESTRUCTION,' 'EASILY OBTAINABLE,' AND 'INSURE.' THIS MESSAGE OBVIOUSLY BETWEEN POLTAVO AND MARIA BRAGANZA—' COMMANDER FLEET, GIBRALTAR, HAS SENT H.M.S. DUNCAN, ESSEX, KENT, WITH SIX DESTROYERS, INTO ATLANTIC PICK UP MARIA BRAGANZA.'"

T.B. read the message again, folded it carefully, and placed it in his breast pocket. There was one word in Poltavo's message that revealed, in a flash, the nature of the new terror with which the Nine Men of Cadiz threatened the world.

29. A MATTER OF INSURANCE

You pass up a broad stone staircase at one end of the Royal Exchange, and come to a landing where, confronting you, are two big swing-doors that are constantly opening and closing as bare-headed clerks and top-hatted brokers go swiftly in and out.

On the other side of the doors is a small counter where a man in uniform checks, with keen glance, each passer-by. Beyond the counter are two rooms, one leading to the other, shaped like the letter "L," and in the longer of the two sit, in innumerable pews, quiet men with fat note-books. From desk to desk flutter the brokers bargaining their risks, and there is a quiet but eager buzz of voices through which, at intervals, boom the stentorian tones of the porter calling by name the members whose presence is required outside.

A stout man made a slow progress down one of the aisles, calling at the little pews en route, making notes in a silver-mounted book he held in his hand.

He stopped before the pew of one of the biggest underwriters. "Raglan Castle?" he said laconically, and the underwriter looked up over his spectacles, then down at the slip of paper the man put before him.

"One per cent?" he asked, in some surprise, and the other nodded.

"How much?" he asked.

The underwriter tapped the slip of paper before him.

"Ten thousand pounds at 5s. per centum," he said. "I can do that." He initialled the slip, and the man passed on.

He went the round of the room, stopped to exchange a joke with an acquaintance, then descended the stone stairs.

Back to his stuffy little office went the broker, with little thought that he had been engaged in any unusual variety of business. In his private room he found his client; a thick-set man with a straggling beard, who rose politely as the broker entered, and removed the cigar he had been smoking.

"You have finish?" he said, with a slightly foreign accent, and the broker smiled.

"Oh, yes!"—a little pompously, after the manner of all Lloyd's brokers—" no difficulty about the Raglan, you know. Mail ship, new steamer, no risks

practically on the Cape route; rather a bad business for you; you'll lose your premium."

He shook his head with a show of melancholy, and took a pinch of snuff.

"I have a dream," said the foreigner hastily, "ver' bad dream. I have belief in dreams."

"I daresay," said the broker indulgently. "A sister of mine used to have 'em, or said she had; dreamt a tiger bit her, and, sure enough, next day she lost her brooch." He sat at his desk, signed a receipt, counted some notes, and locked them in his drawer.

"You won't get your policies for a day or so," he said; "you're staying—"

"At the Hotel Belgique," said the client, and, pocketing his receipts, he rose.

"Good-day," said the broker, and opened the door.

With a slight bow, his client departed, and reached the street.

There was a taxi-cab drawn up before the door, and two or three gentlemen standing on the pavement before the office.

"Cab, sir?" said the driver, but the foreigner shook his head.

"I think you had better," said a voice in French, and a strong hand grasped his arm. Before he realised what had happened, the Frenchman was hustled into the cab, two men jumped in with him, the door banged, and the car whirled westward.

It was a car which had extraordinary privileges, for at a nod from the man who sat by the side of the driver the City police held up the traffic to allow it to pass. It flew down Queen Victoria Street at a much greater speed than is permissible within the City boundaries, and the gloved hands of the policemen on duty at the end of Blackfriars Bridge made a clear way for it.

It turned into Scotland Yard, remained a few minutes, then returned along the Embankment, up Northumberland Avenue, and through a side thoroughfare to Bow Street.

Thereafter, the Frenchman's experience was bewildering. He was searched, hurried through a passage to a small court, where a benevolent- looking gentleman sat behind a table, on a raised dais.

The prisoner was placed in a steel pen, and a quietly dressed man rose from the solicitors' table, and made a brief statement.

"We shall charge this man with being a suspected person, your Worship," he said, "and ask for a remand."

Then another man went into the witness-box.

"My name is Detective-Sergeant Kiegnell, of 'A' Division," he said; "and, from information received, I went to 976 Throgmorton Street, where I saw the prisoner. I told him I was a police officer, and should take him into custody."

That was all.

The magistrate scribbled something on a paper before him, and said briefly, "Remanded."

Before the prisoner could say a word, or utter anything more than a "Sacré!" he was beckoned from the dock and disappeared from court.

So unimportant was this case that none of the reporters in court troubled to record more than the fact that "a well-dressed man of foreign appearance was charged with loitering with intent."

Certainly nobody associated his arrest with the announcement that the Raglan Castle had left Cape Town, homeward bound.

It was an interesting voyage for the passengers of the Raglan Castle, which, by the way, carried specie to the amount of £600,000. She left Cape Town soon after dusk. The next morning, to the surprise of her captain, she fell in with a little British fleet—the Doris, the Philomel, and the St. George, flying a Commodore's flag.

Greatest surprise of all came to the captain of the Raglan Castle when he received the following signal:

"Slow down to thirteen knots, and do not part company."

To the captain's "I am carrying the mails," came the laconic message, "I know."

For ten days the four ships kept together, then came the sensation of the voyage. At dawn of the tenth day, a big steamer came into view over the horizon. She was in the direct path of the flotilla, and to all appearance she was stationary. Those who were on deck at that early hour heard shrill bugle sounds from the escorting warships, then suddenly the engines of the

Raglan stopped, and a crowd of curious passengers came running up from below. The Raglan Castle had obeyed a peremptory order given by the St. George, and was hove-to.

The St. George and Doris went on; then, from the funnels of the stationary steamer, came clouds of smoke, and, through their telescope, the passengers saw her turn slowly and move.

Slowly, slowly she got under way, then—

"Bang!"

The forward 9.2 gun of the St. George emitted a thin straight streak of flame, and there was a strange whining noise in the air.

"Bang! Bang!"

The Doris came into action at the same time as the St. George fired her second gun. Both shots fell short, and the spray of the ricochets leapt up into the air.

The fugitive steamer was now moving at full speed; there was a great fan-shaped patch of white water at her stern.

"Bang!"

All this time the two British warships were going ahead, firing as they went. Then, from the stern of the strange steamer, floated a whiff of white smoke, and, in a second, the eerie whine of a shell came to the passengers who crowded the deck of the Raglan Castle. The shell missed the firing warships; indeed, it did not seem to be aimed in their direction, but it fell uncomfortably close to the mail boat. Another shell fell wide of the steamer, but in a line with her. The manoeuvre of the flying vessel was now apparent. She carried heavier metal than the second-class cruisers of the British fleet, but her object was to disable the mail boat.

The captain of the Raglan did not wait for orders; he rung his engines full speed ahead, and swung his helm hard aport. He was going to steam back out of range.

But no further shot came from the Maria Braganza.

Smaller and smaller she grew until only a pall of smoke on the horizon showed where she lay.

Obeying a signal from the distant warship, the Raglan came round again, and in half-an-hour had come abreast of the two warships, the faithful

in attendance.

There was a swift exchange of signals between the warships, and their semaphore arms whirled furiously.

Then the Commodore's ship signalled:

"Hope you are not alarmed; you will not be troubled again; go ahead."

On the twelfth day there was another shock for the excited passengers of the Raglan Castle, for, nearing Cape Verde Islands, they came upon not one warship but six—six big black hulls lying at regular intervals along the horizon. But there was no cause for alarm. They were the six Dreadnought cruisers that had been sent down from Gibraltar to take up the burden of the Cape Fleet.

It was all a mystery to the bewildered passengers, whatever it might be to the officers of the Raglan, who had received a long "lamp" message in the middle of the night.

There was a two hours' delay whilst the captain of the St. George went on board the Indefatigable to report.

This was the end of the adventures that awaited the Raglan. She was escorted to the Needles by the six warships, and came into Southampton, her passengers a-flutter with that excitement peculiar to men who have come through a great danger and are exhilarated to find themselves alive.

The arrival of the Raglan was opportune; it gave confirmation to the rumours which had been in circulation, and synchronised with the issue of the manifesto of the Nine Men—a manifesto unique in history.

30. THE "MAD WARSHIP"

THE manifesto had arrived simultaneously at every newspaper office in London, Paris, and Berlin.

It was printed on paper of a texture and quality which is generally in use in small Continental newspaper offices. From certain peculiarities of the printed characters, it was seen that the type from which it was printed must have been cast in Spain. The manifesto was neatly folded and enclosed in an envelope of octavo size, and the actual sheet-size was what is known in the printing trade as double-crown. The postage stamps were Spanish, the place of posting, as revealed by the office post-marks, were in some cases Malaga, and in some, Algeciras. The fact that, whether posted at one place or the other, the date of the posting was identical, supported the view that at least two persons had been concerned in the despatch.

The manifesto itself ran:

TO THE CIVILIZED NATION (sic)

Whereas, we, the company known as the Nine Men of Cadiz, have been placed by universal decree outside the law, and whereas it is against our desires that such decrees of outlawry should exist against us, both from the point of view of our own personal comfort and safety, and from the point of view of the free exchange of commercial (sic) relationships.

Now, therefore, we decree—

That unless an immediate free pardon be granted to each and every man on board the Maria Braganzaand liberty be given to him to go his way peaceably without arrest or fear of molestations (sic), the owners and crew of the Maria Braganza will declare war upon the commerce of the world. It will loot and destroy such shipping as may with advantage be so looted and destroyed, and in the end will fight to the last against its aggressor.

(Signed) By order of the Nine.

POLTAVO.

It is no exaggeration to say that the publication of this manifesto caused a panic, not only in shipping circles, but throughout the civilised world. The sea held a hidden danger, neither life nor property was secure.

That the fears of the community were justified was proved by the story of the Raglan Castle, and within a fortnight came the story of the North Atlantic outrage.

The Caratana, the fastest mail-ship afloat, as well as being nearly the largest, was sixty hours out of New York with 350 passengers on board, when she came up with a strange warship flying a red flag. The warship hoisted an unintelligible signal, which the captain of the Caratana did not understand. It was followed by one of which there could be no mistaking the meaning:

"Stop, or I will sink you."

The captain of the Atlantic liner knew all that was known about the Maria Braganza, and at once realised his danger. If he did not realise it, there came a shell from the warship which passed astern. Fortunately, there was a mist on the water, which grew heavier every minute—a dense bank of fog, not usually met with so far east.

The captain of the Caratana decided upon the course of action he would take. Very quickly he signalled "I surrender," and rang his engines to "stop." The men on the warship seemed satisfied with his action, and no further demonstration was made against the liner. Such was the "way" on the big ship that, although her propellers had ceased to revolve, she continued her course—nearer and nearer she grew to a thick patch of the fog that lay ahead of her. The Maria Braganza may have suspected the manoeuvre, for she signalled—-

"Go astern."

For answer, the captain of the Caratana put port and starboard engines full ahead, and, whilst men were running to their stations on the warship, the Caratana slipped into the fog-belt.

In an instant, the Maria Braganza was blotted from view.

The liner captain put his helm over to starboard, and it was well that he did so, for, with a reverberating crash, the warship opened fire in the direction in which he had disappeared. Shell after shell came flying through the thick mist, and the thud of their impact as they struck the water came to the ears of the affrighted passengers.

The sound of spasmodic firing grew fainter and fainter every minute as the great steamer went threshing through the swirling fog, until it ceased altogether.

Although no harm had befallen the liner, the news of the attack produced a profound sensation. Its effect was to paralyse the business of ocean travel. The "Mad Warship" terrorised the seas.

It was on the day the report of this new outrage reached England that T.B. Smith located Poltavo.

There languished in a prosaic prison cell at Brixton Gaol a Monsieur Torquet, who was admittedly a victim of police persecution. That much T.B. himself was prepared to admit.

Monsieur Torquet was suspected not of a crime against any particular section of society, but indeed of being accessory to a crime against humanity; and T.B. was prepared to run a tilt at the very Habeas Corpus Act rather than release his grip upon the stranger with the straggling beard who had so heavily insured the Raglan Castle before she started out on her adventurous voyage. This Monsieur Torquet, brooding in the loneliness of his cell at Brixton, had very nearly reached the limits of his patience; the silence and the indifference had crushed what little spirit there was in him.

For two months he had lain without trial, in a cell which had a table on which were pen, paper, and ink. He had not in all that time touched the one or the other, but on the day that the Atlantic liner came across the Maria Braganza he sat at the table and wrote a brief note to the governor of the prison. Within an hour T.B. Smith was ushered into the cell, and remained with the man for some time. Then he came out, and sent for a shorthand clerk, and together they returned. For four hours the three men worked, one questioning and translating, one answering at first sullenly and with periodic outbursts of temper, and later eagerly, volubly—and all this time the clerk wrote and wrote, until one note-book was exhausted and he sent out for another.

It was late in the evening when he said:

"And that, monsieur, is all."

"All?" T.B.'s eyebrows rose. "All? But you have not explained the whereabouts of Lolo?"

The prisoner was frankly puzzled.

"Lolo?" he repeated. "M'sieur, I do not understand."

It was T.B.'s turn to be astonished.

"But the rendezvous—there was to be some rendezvous where the ship would come to pick up any member of the Nine who might become detached."

The man shook his head, and at that moment an idea occurred to T.B. He drew from his pocket a copy of Baggin's little "cross with the nobs," as it had been named at Scotland Yard.

"Do you know this?" he asked.

The man looked at it, and smiled.

"Yes—Poltavo drew that for me on the last occasion I met him in Paris."

"What does it mean?"

Again the prisoner shook his head.

"I do not know," he said simply. "Poltavo was telling me something of his plans. He drew the cross and was beginning to explain its meaning, and then for some reason he stopped, crumpled up the paper, and threw it into the fireplace. At the time I attached some importance to it, and, after he had gone, I rescued it, but—"

"You don't understand it?"

"I don't," said the man, and T.B. knew that he spoke the truth.

31. THE FLIGHT

IT must have been whilst Poltavo was in Paris that the ruling spirit of the Maria Braganza discovered that Count Poltavo was indispensable, and that strange reconciliation occurred. Through what agency Baggin and he came into touch is not known. It is generally supposed that the warship ventured close to the French or Spanish coast and sent a message of good will flickering through space, and that some receiving station, undiscovered and undemolished—there must have been a score of such stations—received it, and transmitted it to Poltavo.

News of him came to Smith from Van Ingen, who, following a faint clue of the Spanish dancer, had gone to Tangier. Work at the Embassy had become unendurable to him, since the disappearance of the Nine Men had marked also the disappearance of Doris, and despite the expostulations of the ambassador, who was sorely distressed by certain international complications of the situation—for both Baggin and Grayson were Americans—despite also the detective's blunt advice to let the business alone and return to the Embassy, Van Ingen had set forth on his wild-goose chase.

The afternoon of his arrival, he climbed to the Marshan, the plateau that commands Tangier. Here are villas, in which Moorish, Spanish, and English styles of architecture, struggling for supremacy, have compromised in a conglomerate type. And here, idling along the promenade, scanning every figure as it passed, he had come face to face with Catherine Dominguez.

At his start of surprise, for he had not expected such good fortune, the lady paused, uncertainly. The young man uncovered with a sweeping bow.

"Pardon!" he exclaimed gallantly, in Spanish, "but so often have I seen the lovely face of the 'Belle Espagnole' in the newspapers that I recognised it before I was aware!"

Catherine nodded amiably, and, at a word of invitation, Van Ingen fell into step beside her.

That night he cabled to the detective:

POLTAVO IN TANGIER. C. DOMINGUEZ WILL SELL HIS WHEREABOUTS FOR £5,000. VAN INGEN.

To this he received the laconic reply, "Coming."

The trap which the detective laid, as the Sud Express fled shrieking through the night, was simple. To capture Count Poltavo while the "Mad Terror" remained afloat would be imbecile. But to frighten him by a pseudo-attack out into the open, and then follow him to the Nine— Smith smiled over the common-sense of his little scheme, and fell asleep.

His interview, two mornings later, with Catherine Dominguez was most amiable—both ignored their last meeting—and satisfactory, save in one small particular. Upon reflection, the lady had raised her price. For £10,000 she would divulge her secret. And the detective, after a few protests, acceded to her demands. After all, she ran a certain risk in betraying a man like the count. He thought, grimly, of Hyatt and Moss.

At the conclusion of the conference, he wrote her a check.

She shook her head, smiling.

"I should prefer bank-notes," she said gently. Smith appeared to hesitate. "Very well," he replied finally. "But, in that case, you must wait until to-morrow. If your information is good—the check will be also."

She took it from his hand, and he rose.

"Ver' good, Senor Smit'," she replied, looking up at him with an engaging smile. "I will trust you." She fingered the paper absently. Smith looked down at her. Something, he knew, she had left untold, and he waited.

"One small thing I had almost forgot," she murmured pensively. "Count Poltavo leaves for —Lolo—to-night."

Catherine Dominguez had not lied. Perhaps, she had some secret grudge against the Nine, whose faithful agent she had been, or perhaps she was tired of obscure flittings, and wished to buy indemnity by confession. The detective never knew. Nevertheless, he felt grateful to her.

That night, a slender man, wearing a felt hat and a cappa, descended the steps of one of the villas of the Marshan, and walked through the garden.

There was a man standing in the middle of the white road, his hands in his overcoat pocket, the red glow of his cigar a point of light in the gloom. Farther away, he saw the figures of three horsemen.

"Count Poltavo, I suppose," drawled a voice— the voice of T.B. Smith. "Put up your hands or you're a dead man."

32. POLTAVO LEAVES HURRIEDLY

IN an instant the road was filled with men; they must have been crouching in the shadow of the grassy plateau, but in that same instant Poltavo had leapt back to the cover of the garden. A revolver banged behind him; and, as he ran, he snatched his own revolver from his pocket, and sent two quick shots into the thick of the surrounding circle. There was another gate at the farther end of the garden; there would be men there, but he must risk it. He was slight and had some speed as a runner; he must depend upon these gifts.

He opened the gate swiftly and sprang out. There were three or four men standing in his path. He shot at one point-blank, dodged the others, and ran. He judged that his pursuers would not know the road as well as he. Shot after shot rang out behind him. He was an easy mark on the white road, and he turned aside and took to the grass. He was clear of the houses now, and there was no danger ahead, but the men who followed him were untiring.

Presently he struck the footpath across the sloping plain that led to the shore, and the going was easier.

It was his luck that his pursuers should have missed the path. His every arrangement worked smoothly, for the boat was waiting, the men at their oars, and he sprang breathlessly into the stern.

It was a circumstance which might have struck him as strange, had he been in a condition for calm thought, that the horsemen who were of the party that surrounded him had not joined in pursuit.

But there was another mystery that the night revealed. He had been on board the Doro—as his little ship was called—for an hour before he went to the cabin that had been made ready for him. His first act was to take his revolver from his pocket, preparatory to reloading it from the cartridges stored in one of his trunks.

Two chambers of the pistol were undischarged, and, as he jerked back the extractor, these two shells fell on the bed. He looked at them stupidly.

Both cartridges were blank!

Had he heard T.B. Smith speaking as he went flying down the road, Poltavo might have understood.

"Where's the dead man?" asked T.B.

"Here, sir," said Van Ingen cheerfully.

"Good." Then, in French, he addressed a figure that stood in the doorway.

"Were you hurt, mademoiselle?"

Catherine's little laugh came out to him. "I am quite safe," she said quietly. He was going away, but she called him.

"I cannot understand why you allowed him to escape—" she began. "That you should desire blank cartridges to be placed in his revolver is not so difficult, but I do not see—"

"I suppose not," said T.B. politely, and left her abruptly.

He sprang onto a horse that was waiting, and went clattering down the hill, through the Sole, down the narrow main street that passes the mosque; dismounting by the Custom House, he placed his horse in charge of a waiting soldier, and walked swiftly along the narrow wooden pier. At the same time as the count was boarding the Doro, T.B. and Van Ingen were being rowed in a cockleshell of a pinnace to the long destroyer which lay, without lights, in the bay.

They swung themselves up a tiny ladder onto the steel deck that rang hollow under their feet.

"All right?" said a voice in the darkness.

"All right," said T.B.; a bell tinkled somewhere, the destroyer moved slowly ahead, and swung out to sea.

"Will you have any difficulty in picking her up?" He was standing in the cramped space of the little bridge, wedged between a quick-firing gun and the navigation desk.

"No—I think not," said the officer; "—our difficulty will be to keep out of sight of her. It will be an easy matter to keep her in view, because she stands high out of the water, and she is pretty sure to burn her regulation lights. By day I shall let her get hull down and take her masts for guide."

It was the strangest procession that followed the southern bend of the African coast. First went the Doro, its passengers serenely unconscious of the fact that six miles away, below the rim of the horizon, followed a slim ugly destroyer that did not once lose sight of the Doro's mainmast; behind the destroyer, and three miles distant, came six destroyers steaming abreast. Behind them, four miles away, six swift cruisers.

That same night, there steamed from Funchal in the Island of Madeira, the Victor Hugo, Condé, Gloire, and the Edgard Quinet of the French Fleet; the Roon, Yorck, Prinz Adalbert, and the battleship Pommern of the German Navy, with sixteen destroyers, and followed a parallel ocean path.

After three days' steaming, the Doro turned sharply to starboard, and the unseen fleets that dogged her turned too. In that circle of death, for a whole week, the little Spanish steamer twisted and turned, and, obedient to the message that went from destroyer to cruiser, the fleets followed her every movement. For the Doro was unconsciously leading the nations to the "Mad Battleship." She had been slipped with that object. So far every part of the plan had worked well. To make doubly sure, the news of Zillier's escape from Devil's Island had been circulated in every country. It was essential that, if they missed the Maria Braganza this time, they should catch her on the first of June at "Lolo."

"And where that is," said T.B., in despair, "Heaven only knows."

Wearing a heavy overcoat, he was standing on the narrow deck of the destroyer as she pounded through the seas. They had found the southeast trade winds at a surprisingly northerly latitude, and the sea was choppy and cold.

Young Marchcourt, the youthful skipper of the Martine, grinned.

"'Lolo' is 'nowhere,' isn't it?" he said.

"You'll find it charted on all Admiralty maps; it's the place where the supply transport is always waiting on manoeuvres—I wish to Heaven these squalls would drop," he added irritably, as a sudden gust of wind and rain struck the tiny ship.

"Feel seasick?" suggested T.B. maliciously.

"Not much—but I'm horribly afraid of losing sight of this Looker- ahead."

He lifted the flexible end of a speaking-tube, and pressed a button.

"Give her a few more revolutions, Cole," he said. He hung up the tube. "We look like carrying this weather with us for a few days," he said, "and, as I don't feel competent to depend entirely upon my own eyesight, I shall bring up the Magneto and the Solus to help me watch this beggar."

Obedient to signal, two destroyers were detached from the following flotilla, and came abreast at dusk.

The weather grew rapidly worse, the squalls of greater frequence. The sea rose, so that life upon the destroyer was anything but pleasant. At midnight, T.B. Smith was awakened from a restless sleep by a figure in gleaming oilskins.

"I say," said a gloomy voice, "we've lost sight of that dashed Doro."

"Eh?"

T.B. jumped from his bunk, to be immediately precipitated against the other side of the cabin.

"Lost her light—it has either gone out or been put out. We're going ahead now full speed in the hope of overhauling her—"

Another oilskinned figure came to the door.

"Light ahead, sir."

"Thank Heaven!" said the other fervently, and bolted to the deck.

T.B. struggled into his clothing, and, with some difficulty, made his way to the bridge. Van Ingen was already before him. As he climbed the little steel ladder, he heard the engine-bell ring, and instantly the rattle and jar of the engines ceased.

"She's stationary," explained the officer," so we've stopped. She has probably upset herself in this sea."

"How do you know she is stationary?" asked T.B., for the two faint stars ahead told him nothing.

"Got her riding lights," said the other laconically.

Those two riding lights stopped the destroyer; it stopped six other destroyers, far out of sight, six obedient cruisers came to a halt, and, a hundred miles or so away, the combined French and German fleets became stationary.

All through the night the watchers lay, heaving, rolling, and pitching, like so many logs, on the troubled seas. Dawn broke mistily, but the lights still gleamed. Day came in dull greyness, and the young officer, with his eyes fastened to his binoculars, looked long and earnestly ahead.

"I can see a mast," he said doubtfully, "but there's something very curious about it." Then he put down his glasses suddenly, put out his hand, and rang his engines full ahead.

He turned to the quartermaster at his side.

"Get the Commodore by wireless," he said rapidly; "the Doro has gone." Gone, indeed, was the Doro—gone six hours since.

They found the lights. They were still burning when the destroyer came up with them. A roughly built raft with a pole lashed upright, and from this was suspended two lanterns. Whilst the fleet had watched this raft, theDoro had gone on. Nailed to the pole was a letter. It was sodden with spray, but T.B. had no difficulty in reading it.

"Cher ami," it ran, "much as I value the honour of a naval escort, its presence is embarrassing at the moment. I saw your destroyer this morning through my glasses, and guessed the rest. You are ingenious. Now I understand why you allowed me to escape.

"My respectful salutations to you, oh, most admirable of policemen!"

It was signed, "POLTAVO."

The court-martial held on Lieutenant-Commander George Septimus Marchcourt, on a charge of "neglect of duty, in that he failed to carry out the instructions of his superior officer," resulted in an honourable acquittal for that cheerful young officer. It was an acquittal which had a far-reaching effect, though'at the time it did not promise well.

T.B. was a witness at the trial, which was a purely formal one, in spite of the attention it excited.

He remained at Gibraltar, pending further developments. For the affair of the Nine Men had got beyond Scotland Yard—they were an international problem.

T.B. was walking over from La Linea, across the strip of neutral ground which separated Gibraltar from Spain, with Van Ingen, when he confessed that he despaired of ever bringing the Nine to justice.

"The nations cannot stand the racket much longer," he said; "these Nine Men are costing civilisation a million a week! Think of it! A million pounds a week! We must either capture them soon or effect a compromise. I am afraid they will make peace on their own terms."

"But they must be caught soon," urged the other.

"Why?" demanded T.B. irritably. "How can we hope to capture one of the fastest war vessels afloat when the men who control her have all the seas to run in?"

They had reached the water-port, and T.B. stopped before his hotel.

"Come in," he said suddenly. The two men passed through the paved vestibule and mounted the stair to T.B.'s room. "I'm going to look again at our clue," he said grimly, and extracted from his portfolio the drawing of the little cross with the circular ends.

T.B. himself does not know to this day why he was moved to produce this disappointing little diagram at that moment. It may have been that, as a forlorn hope, he relied upon the application of a fresh young mind to the problem which was so stale in his, for Van Ingen had never seen the diagram.

He looked and frowned.

"Is that all?" he asked, without disguising his disappointment.

"That is all," responded T.B.

They sat looking at the diagram in silence. Van Ingen, as was his peculiarity, scribbled mechanically on the blotting pad before him. He drew flowers, and men's heads, and impossible structures of all kinds; he made inaccurate tracings of maps, of columns, pediments, squares, and triangles. Then, in the same absent way, he made a rough copy of the diagram.

Then his pencil stopped and he sat bolt upright.

"Gee!" he whispered.

The detective looked up in astonishment.

"Whew!" whistled Van Ingen. "Have you got an atlas, Smith?"

The detective took one from his trunk. Van Ingen turned the leaves, looked long and earnestly at something he saw, closed the book, and turned a little white, but his eyes were blazing.

"I have found 'Lolo,'" he said simply.

He took up his pencil and quickly sketched the diagram:

"Look," he said, and added a few letters:

"Longitude, nought; latitude nought—L.0, L.0!" whispered the detective. "You've hit it, Van Ingen! By Jove! Why, that is off the African coast."

He looked again at the map.

"It is where the Greenwich meridian crosses the Equator," he said. "It's 'nowhere'! The only 'nowhere' in the world!"

33. AT "LOLO"

UNDER an awning on the quarter-deck of the Maria Braganza, George T. Baggin was stretched out in the easiest of easy-chairs in an attitude of luxurious comfort.

Admiral Lombrosa, passing on his way to his cabin, smacked him familiarly upon the shoulder— an attitude which epitomised the changed relationships of the pair.

The Maria Braganza was steaming slowly eastward, and, since it was the hour of siesta, the deck was strewn with the recumbent forms of men. Baggin looked up with a scowl.

"Where is Poltavo?" he asked, and the other laughed.

"He sleeps, Senor Presidente," said the "Admiral."—There had been some curious promotions on board theMaria Braganza.—" He is amusing, your count."

Baggin wriggled uncomfortably in his chair, but made no answer, and the other man eyed him keenly.

Baggin must have felt rather than observed the scrutiny, for suddenly he looked up and caught the sailor's eye.

"Eh?" he asked, as though to some unspoken question. Then, "Where is Grayson?"

Again the smile on the swart face of the Brazilian.

"He is here," he said, as a stout figure in white ducks shuffled awkwardly along the canting deck. He came opposite to Baggin; and, drawing a chair towards him with a grunt, he dropped into it with a crash.

"You grow fatter, my friend," said Baggin.

"Fatter!" gasped the other. "Of course I'm fatter! No exercise—this cursed ship! Oh, what a fool, what a fool I've been!"

"Forget it," said Baggin. He took a long gold case from his inside pocket, opened it, and selected with care a black cheroot. "Forget it."

"I wish I could! I'd give half-a-million to be safe in the hands of the Official Receiver! I'd give half-a-million to be serving five years in Sing Sing! Baggin,"

he said, with comic earnestness, "we've got to compromise! It's got to be done. Where do we stand, eh?"

Baggin puffed leisurely at his cigar, but made no attempt to elucidate the position. He was used to all this; but now, with his nerves on edge, this cowardice of Grayson's grated.

"Where are the Nine Men of Cadiz?" demanded Grayson, the sweat rolling down his cheeks. "Where is Bortuski? Where is Morson? Where is Couthwright? Zillier, we know where he is, or was, but where are the others? You and me and Count Poltavo and the rest— phutt!" He made a little noise with his mouth.

"I know!" he said. He raised a trembling finger accusingly.

"My dear man," said Baggin lazily, though his face was white and his lips firm-pressed.

"There was the storm—"

"That's a lie!" screamed Grayson, beating the air with his hands; "—that's a lie! The storm didn't take Kohr from his bunk and leave blood on his pillow! It didn't make Morson's cabin smell of chloroform! I know, I know!"

"There is such a thing as knowing too much," said George T. Baggin, rising unsteadily.

"Grayson," he said, "I've been a good friend of yours because I sort of like you in spite of your foolishness. Our friends perished in the storm; it wasn't a bad thing for us, taking matters all round. If this manifesto of ours doesn't secure us a pardon, we can risk making a run for safety. There are fewer of us to blab. See here—"

He sat down on the side of the other's chair and dropped his voice— "suppose we can't shock this old world into giving us a free pardon, and the sun gets too warm for us, as it will sooner or later—"

"Suppose it!" Grayson burst in. "Do you think there's an hour of the day or night when I don't suppose it? Lord! I—"

"Listen, can't you?" said Baggin savagely.

"When that happens, what are we to do? We've buried gold on the African coast; we've buried it on the South American coast—"

"All the .crew know. We're at the mercy—"

"Wait, wait!" said the other wearily. "Suppose there comes a time when we must make a dash for safety—with the steam pinnace. Slipping away in the night when the men of the watch are doped. You and your daughter, and me, Poltavo, and the Admiral"—he bent his head lower—" leaving a time-fuse in the magazine," he whispered. "There's a way out for us, my friend! We are going to make one last effort," he went on. "Between here and ' Lolo ' we fall in with the outward-bound, intermediate Cape mail. It shall be our last attack upon civilisation."

"Don't do it!" begged Grayson; "—for the love of Heaven, don't do it, Baggin!"

He got upon his feet, .pallid and staring. His hand was clapped over his heart, and his breath came in thick, stertorous gasps. Doris appeared around the corner, walking with Count Poltavo. She came forward swiftly.

"Come, father!" she said, and led him, unresisting, away.

They ate a silent meal in the magnificently upholstered ward-room, which had been converted into a saloon for the officers of the "Mad Battleship."

After dinner, Count Poltavo and Baggin promenaded the quarter-deck together.

"Grayson has gone below," reported the count, in answer to a question of his companion. "He got no sleep last night."

"He is a greater danger than any of the others," said Baggin.

They stood for awhile, watching the phosphorescence on the water, till Lombrosa's voice recalled them.

"Are you there?" he called quickly. They detected the agitation in his tone and turned together.

"It's Grayson," said the captain rapidly. "I found him in the wireless cabin, trying to send a message. He's half-mad."

"Where is he?" demanded the count; but, before his tongue had formed the words, the voice of the fat man came to him. He came along, the centre of a swaying body of sailors, who held him.

"For God's sake, silence him!" said the Brazilian hoarsely. "Don't you hear?"

"Dead! you'll all be dead!" yelled Grayson. He was screaming at the top of his voice in English. "A time-fuse in your magazine! whilst they get away with the money!"

At any moment he might remember that the Brazilians who held him could not understand a word he said.

Poltavo gave an order, and the struggling man was flung to the deck.

"Murder!" he screamed. "Hyatt, and the other man! And poor Morson and Kohr. I see the blood on his pillow! and a time-fuse in the magazine—"

Baggin thrust a handkerchief in his mouth.

"Chloroform," he said in Spanish. "Our friend has been drinking." In a few seconds, the captain was back with a bottle of colourless liquid, and a saturated handkerchief was pressed over the struggling man's mouth.

He was silent at last, and, at a word from their captain, the men who held him released their hold, and went forward to their quarters. The captain discreetly followed them.

The two men stood in silence, gazing down at the huddled figure. Then, "He must go," said Baggin.

Poltavo was silent a moment.

"No," he said finally, "I do not agree." Baggin regarded him blackly.

"I see your point," he said, with biting emphasis. "With the others"—he wet his dry lips—" you cast the black vote fast enough—"

The count elevated his eyebrows. "Why refer to such things?" he objected mildly. "If they be necessary—do them, swiftly and well—but be silent, even as Nature is silent. For Mr. Grayson, he is—how you say—a very sick man. Perhaps—" He shrugged his shoulders and did not finish the sentence.

He bent down to the unconscious man.

"Lend a hand," he said quietly to Baggin. The American obeyed, sullenly, and, between them, they half supported, half carried Grayson to his cabin.

34. THE LAST OF THE NINE

To a calm sea, to a dawn all pearl and rose, the crew of the Maria Braganza woke. In the night, the speed of the warship had been accelerated until she was moving at her top speed, and two columns of black smoke belched from her great funnels. The two men who came on deck at the same moment did not speak one to the other. Baggin was pale; there were dark circles about his eyes; he looked like a man who had not slept. But Count Poltavo was unperturbed.

Clear-eyed, shaven, not unusually pallid, he woke as from a pleasant dream, and appeared on deck immaculate from point of shoe to finger-nail.

All the morning preparations were going on. Ammunition came up from the magazine, dilatory quartermasters swung out guns; on the mast-head was an under- officer armed with a telescope.

He was the principal object of interest to the men on the quarter-deck. Every few minutes their eyes would go sweeping aloft.

Beyond the curtest salutations, neither the captain, Baggin, nor the calm Poltavo spoke. In Baggin's heart grew a new terror, and he avoided the count.

The sun beat down on the stretch of awning that protected the privileged three, but, for some reason, Baggin did not feel the heat. He had a something on his mind; a question to ask; and at last he summoned his resolution to put it. He walked over to where the count sat reading.

"Ivan," he said—he had never so addressed him before—"is the end near?"

The count had raised his clear eyes when the other had come toward him; he smiled.

"Which variety of end?" he asked.

"There is only one variety," said Baggin steadily. "There is only one thing in the world that counts, and that is life."

"Not money?" asked the Russian, with a faint, ironical smile.

"Not money," repeated Baggin. "Least of all, money—but life!"

Poltavo arose. He had seen the flutter of a white skirt at the far end of the promenade-deck.

"Life," he said, with soft deliberateness, "is the least of all gifts, my friend. It is of no more consequence than the crystal of snow which is lost in the foul mud beneath our feet, or the drop of dew which is burned up by the. ardent rays of the sun." He turned upon his heel.

The American plucked at his sleeve. "Then, what counts?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Nothing!" There was a certain mysticism in the count's gentle smile. "We are bewildered guests. Listen to the words of one of your own great countrymen." He quoted in a musical voice, looking out across the water:

I was not asked if I should like to come,

I have not seen my host here since I came,

Or had a word of welcome in his name.

Some say that we shall never see him, and some

That we shall see him elsewhere, and then know

Why we were bid.

"For myself"—he shrugged his shoulders with an expressive gesture—" it does not matter. I have been wellamusé." He strolled forward. Doris, dressed all in white, was leaning against the rail. She drank in the fresh morning air eagerly. The wind had brought a faint tinge of colour to her cheeks, and the blue ribbon which she had bound about her hair to protect it from the ravages of the wind lent her an air almost of gaiety, which the count was not slow to observe.

"It is a glorious day," he said cheerfully.

"And your father is better. I can read the good news in your face."

He ranged himself beside her, his back against the rail, so that his eyes took in every aspect of her face and figure.

"He is asleep," she returned in a low voice, "and so I ventured out for a breath of fresh air. He was—delirious—through the night."

He looked at her reproachfully. "And you watched with him all night?"

She nodded.

"You might, at least, have permitted me to divide the time with you."

The girl was silent.

"Is he alone—now?" he asked abruptly.

A certain quality in his tones made her glance up swiftly.

"I—I think so," she faltered. "There is—danger?"

"It is just as well to have a guard," he said drily. "In case the—ah!—delirium should return."

He beckoned to one of the sailors, and spoke to him in Spanish.

As the man retreated, she turned to him, her blue eyes swimming in a bright mist of tears.

"You are very good!" she murmured.

"It is nothing," he said simply. "Will you come up on the hurricane-deck? I have a desire for wide sweeps—great distances to-day."

She hesitated.

"Your father is safe," he urged. "I have set two men at his door. And I have something to say to you."

"I also have something to say to you," she answered, with a queer little laugh.

They did not speak again until he had placed her in a luxurious steamer-chair, protected from the rays of the sun by a gay striped awning, and seated himself beside her.

Doris folded her hands in her lap, and gazed across the shimmering water. Slowly her eyes came back, and rested upon the figure beside her. She drew from about her neck a slender gold chain, from which depended a locket, and a ring, set quaintly with a ruby.

"Count Poltavo," she said, in a low, clear tone, "do you remember giving me this ring?"

"Yes." His face had paled slightly, and a light came into his eyes.

"And—and the pledge which I made you then?"

"I recall no pledge, dear lady."

She gave him a wide, deep look.

"I bound myself to answer any question you should wish to ask—if you should save my father from Mr. Baggin. Yesterday, that came to pass. During a lucid interval in the night, my father—" —her voice quivered on the word—"spoke of you, but brokenly, and I did not completely understand until you set the guard about his door."

The count made as if to speak, but she raised a protesting hand. "So now you have fulfilled your pledge to me, and I "—she lifted her head proudly—" stand ready to redeem mine."

He looked at her strangely. "You would marry me?"

"Yes."

Her lips articulated the word with difficulty. Her eyes were upon her hands, and her hands plaited nervously a fold of her white gown.

"Doris!" He laid a hand over the slim white fingers. She shrank back, and then suffered her hand to lie in his, passively.

"Look up, child," he urged gently. "Let me see your eyes."

She closed them tightly. A warm tear splashed upon his hand.

Count Poltavo was very white, but he smiled.

"Do you weep," he said softly, "because you have given yourself to me? Or because you do not love me?"

The tears fell faster.

He took both her hands. "Dear lady," he said, "let our hearts speak only true words to-day. You have already chosen a mate—is it not true?"

She sat mute, but a burning flush betrayed her.

The count rose suddenly to his feet, and made his way blindly to the rail. When he returned, a few moments later, his face was tranquil and serene. "I have put my question," he said lightly, "and you have answered it—with a blush! Let us drop the poor unfortunate subject into oblivion."

She took a long deep breath, as if throwing off the weight of a weary burden. "I am free?" she whispered.

He laughed somewhat harshly. "As free as a bird," he retorted, "to fly whither you will."

She did not answer, but unthreaded the ring, with trembling fingers, and handed it to him without a word.

He drew back, shaking his head. "Will you honour me by keeping it as a memento of your— ah!—freedom? To think upon, in happier days?"

"I will keep it," she said softly, "in memory of a man whom I could wish to love!" A silence fell between them, which the girl presently broke.

"You also had something to tell me?" she said.

He roused himself. "It is true—I had almost forgot!" He stopped and looked about them, as if to reassure himself that they were quite alone.

"Your father is very ill," he began, "too ill to receive proper attention aboard this ship. I have decided, therefore,"—he lowered his voice to a whisper,—" to transfer him, as soon as he is able, to the first steamer we meet. It can be arranged, quite simply, with assumed names. You will take him to some quiet place, and, when he is quite restored, return with him to America."

The light of a great hope shone in her eyes.

Impulsively, she bent down, and touched his hand with her lips. "I can never, never repay you!" she murmured.

He rose smiling. From where he stood, the man in the mainmast was visible. He was shouting to somebody on the bridge, and pointing northward.

The count deftly interposed himself between the girl and the sea.

"You can repay me," he said slowly, "by returning at once with me to your father's state-room, and promising to remain there until I come or send some one for you."

She looked up at him, startled, and the blood ebbed from her cheeks, leaving them ashen, but she asked no question, and he escorted her gravely to her father's cabin.

When he came again on deck, Baggin pointed triumphantly toward the north. "We make our final appeal to the world!" he cried.

It came reluctantly into view, a big grey-painted steamer with red-and- black funnels, a great, lumbering ocean beast.

Through their glasses the three men watched her, a puzzled frown upon the captain's face.

"I do not recognise her," he said, "but she looks like a gigantic cargo steamer."

"Her decks are crowded with passengers," said Baggin. "I can see women's hats and men in white; what is that structure forward?" He indicated a long superstructure before the steamer's bridge.

"There goes her flag."

A little ball crept up to the mainmast.

"We will show her ours," said the captain pleasantly, and pushed a button.

Instantly, with a crash that shook the ship, the forward gun of the Maria Braganza sent a shell whizzing through the air.

It fell short and wide of the steamer. The captain turned to Poltavo, as for instructions.

"Sink her," said the count briefly.

But the steamer was never sunk.

The little ball that hung at the main suddenly broke, and out to the breeze there floated not the red ensign of the merchant service, but the Stars and Stripes of America—more, on the little flag-staff at the bow of the ship fluttered a tiny blue flag spangled with stars.

Livid of face, Captain Lombrosa sprang to the wheel.

"It's a Yankee man-o'-war!" he cried, and his voice was cracked. "We've—"

As he spoke the superstructure on the "intermediate," which had excited the count's curiosity, fell apart like a house of canvas—as it was—and the long slim barrel of a nine-inch gun swung round.

"Bang!"

The shell carried away a boat and a part of the wireless cabin.

"Every gun!" yelled Lombrosa, frantically pressing the buttons on the bridge before him.

"We must run for it!"

Instantly, with an ear-splitting succession of crashes, the guns of the Maria Braganza came into action.

To the last, fortune was with the Nine, for the second or third shot sent the American over with a list to starboard.

Round swung the Maria Braganza like a frightened hare; the water foamed under her bows as, running under every ounce of steam, she made her retreat.

"We must drop all idea of picking up Zillier," said Baggin, white to the lips; "this damned warship is probably in wireless communication with a fleet; can you tap her messages?"

Poltavo shook his head.

"The first shell smashed our apparatus," he said. "What is that ahead?"

Lombrosa, with his telescope glued to his eye, was scanning the horizon.

"It looks like a sea fog."

But the captain made no reply.

Over the edge of the ocean hung a thin red haze. He put the glass down, and turned a troubled face to the two men.

"In other latitudes I should say that it was a gathering typhoon," he said. He took another long look, put down the telescope, closed it mechanically, and hung it in the rack.

"Smoke," he said briefly. "We are running into a fleet."

He brought the Maria Braganza's bows northward, but the smoke haze was there, too. East, north, south, west, a great circle of smoke and the Maria Braganza trapped in the very centre.

Out of the smoke haze grey shadowy shapes, dirty grey hulls, white hulls, hulls black as pitch, loomed into view.

The captain rang his engines to "stop."

"We are caught," he said.

He opened a locker on the bridge leisurely, and took out a revolver.

"I have no regrets," he said—it was a challenge to fate.

Then he shot himself and fell dead at the feet of the two. Baggin sprang forward, but too late.

"You coward!" he screamed. He shook his fist in the dead man's face, then he turned like a wild beast on Poltavo. "This is the end of it! This is the end of your scheme! Curse you! Curse you!"

He leapt at the Russian's throat.

For a moment they swayed and struggled, then suddenly Baggin released his hold, dropped his head like a tired man, and slid to the deck.

Count Poltavo flung the knife overboard, and lit a cigarette with a hand that did not tremble.

One last expiring effort the Maria Braganza made; you could almost follow Poltavo, as he sped from one side of the ship to the other, by the spasmodic shots that came from the doomed ship.

Then four men-of-war detached themselves from the encircling fleets and steamed in toward the Brazilian. Shell after shell beat upon the steel hull of the "Mad Battleship," a great hole gaped in her side, her funnels were shot away, her foremast hung limply.

A white flag waved feebly from her bridge, and a British destroyer came with a swift run across the smoky seas.

Up the companion-ladder came a rush of marines; and, after them, a revolver in his hand, T.B. Smith, a prosaic Assistant-Commissioner from Scotland Yard, and Van Ingen.

T.B. came upon the count standing with his back to a bulkhead, grimy—bloodstained, but with the butt of a cigarette still glowing in the corner of his mouth.

"You are Count Ivan Poltavo," said T.B., and snapped a pair of handcuffs on his wrists. "I shall take you into custody on a charge of wilful murder, and I caution you that what you now say may be used in evidence against you at your trial."

The count laughed, though faintly.

"You come, as ever, a bit late, my friend." He flung overboard a tiny phial, which he had held concealed in his hand. He turned to Van Ingen.

"You will find Miss Grayson in the cabin with her father, who is dying. For him, also, Mr. Smith comes a trifle too late."

He staggered backward.

Van Ingen and the detective sprang to his support.

The marines had gathered about in an awe-struck circle.

A slight foam gathered upon the count's lips.

He opened his eyes.

"It grows dark," he whispered. "Good-night, gentlemen!"

He stiffened himself suddenly, and stood boldly erect, gazing past the circle of men.

"Vive Poltavo!" he cried, in a loud, clear voice, and fell backward into their arms.

THE END

Freeditorial