

THE ORATOR

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

THE ORATOR

THEY called Chief Inspector Oliver Rater "The Orator" for obvious reasons. Less obvious to those who have no sense of English humour is the fact that such a name stuck to him, less because of the fortuitous circumstance of his initials and surname than because of his extraordinary silence. Mr. Rater said very little, but was believed, with excellent reason, to think a great deal.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a large, expressionless face. And when you spoke to him you had the impression all the time that you were being disbelieved. You left him with the idea that here was a man who had a vocabulary of about ten words. Many a criminal had been marched into the Orator's presence with an alibi so complete that it seemed ridiculous to detain him, but under the deadening influence of his taciturnity had grown desperate and truthful.

"He has one vice," the Assistant Commissioner used to say: "he is a very heavy thinker."

The Orator was indulging in this pet weakness of his one afternoon in February, as he stood in the corner of a large room, which seemed to be entirely filled with wedding presents, and watched a very fashionable gathering, most of whom were looking for the silver clock they gave to the bride and comparing it unfavourably with the silver clocks that other people had given.

You do not as a rule invite a chief inspector to watch wedding presents, but the Orator had volunteered for the job, and was himself a guest, for the bride's dead father had been a great personal friend of his, as Angela Marken remembered when she was making out a list of invitees.

"My dear," said her mother sharply, "you can't ask a policeman. Don't be ridiculous."

Angela sighed and leaned back in her chair, biting at the end of her pen thoughtfully.

"I don't know why we shouldn't," she said, a little wearily. "He will be one of the few respectable people present." She hesitated a little, and then: "Can't I invite Donald Grey?" she asked.

Mrs. Marken's aristocratic nose wrinkled.

“Certainly not! Be decent, Angela! Donald’s a very nice boy and I like him tremendously—but—you can’t afford to grow sentimental over a young man with three hundred pounds a year.”

“I suppose not,” said the girl quietly, and addressed an envelope to Chief Inspector Rater. “Perhaps he will look after the jewellery for us;

that would be rather nice—and save us a couple of guineas,” said Angela, a little bitterly.

Why she should be bitter at all, very few of her guests would understand. Lord Eustace Lightley was rich, the prospective heir to a dukedom, good looking, something of a poet—in every way a most satisfactory match for the daughter of an impecunious field-marshal with a passion for the theory of strategy.

Angela was slim and pretty in a pale way, immensely self-possessed. The Orator saw her come in her bridal costume and slightly approved of her. He approved of so very few people that this attitude of his might be accounted as enthusiasm. Later he saw the bridegroom, and did not approve of him at all. A lanky, thin-faced, rather narrow-headed man, with the complexion of a girl in spite of his thirty-five years, Lord Eustace Lightley was not the type that appealed to the Orator. He mused, in his fantastic way, that if he had been commissioned by the Almighty to fashion man, Lord Eustace Lightley would not have occurred to him.

His lordship was irritable to a point of rudeness, and their first and last encounter did not leave the Orator any too happy.

“Are you the detective fellow?” he asked.

The Orator nodded, which was quite a long speech for him.

“Then what the devil are you standing over there in the corner for? You can see nothing, my dear good chap. Why not go up into the gallery?” He pointed to a little minstrel gallery overlooking the room.

The Orator scratched his nose.

“You’re absolutely useless here,” his lordship went on, with growing wrath. “You might as well be in Grosvenor Square.”

“That’s where I’m going,” said the Orator, and left his enraged host without another word.

That was the first and last time he saw Lord Eustace Lightley, but he learnt quite a lot about him in the ten minutes he stood on the sidewalk before the house, for there came to him a young and respectable man, carrying in his hand a small, neatly wrapped brown paper parcel, who consulted with the Orator the best method of reaching his lordship. Evidently he knew Mr. Rater by sight, which was not remarkable, for the Orator's picture had a frequent appearance in the popular press.

"Isn't it queer, Mr. Rater, what romances there are in real life?—things you wouldn't believe were possible. We've been chemists to his lordship's family for the past hundred years—he gets everything from us, toothpaste, soap, everything. Even when he was in Syria, years and years ago—he had a lung or something, but he's cured now—we used to send him every week...."

Mr. Rater listened and was really interested in all that the chemist's young man had to tell him.

A year and a few months later Mr. Rater was spending his annual holiday at Ostend. He was a bachelor, and therefore could afford expensive holidays, and he chose Ostend because it was pretty certain that he would meet there quite a number of staggered men who imagined him to be a hundred or so miles away. He did not read the newspapers, and it was a little conversation heard by chance at the Hippodrome between races that brought him back to search the files of the newspaper.

"We regret to announce the death of Lord Eustace Lightley. His lordship has been ill for some months, and died suddenly at his residence in Hart Street, Mayfair, last night."

"Dear me!" said Mr. Rater.

Had he followed his own inclination, he would have sent a wire of congratulation to the widow. Instead he was reminded of the conversation he had had with the chemist's young man, and wrote it down in his diary for future reference; and there the matter went out of his mind, for he was occupied during the next three days with interminable conferences with the Ostend police. There had been a number of robberies at the big hotels; jewels to a great value had been abstracted whilst their owners were at dinner or in the Casino; and the Orator woke up to take an active interest in such of his fellow-countrymen as were sojourning in Ostend.

There were five, so far as he could trace; but the man for whom he was looking was not there. The robberies were typical Osawold jobs, and he was a little disappointed to learn, as he did by telephone, that William was in

London, and had been in London, practically under police observation, for the past month.

“In fact,” said the voice at the telephone, “he was nearly pinched on the day you say the robberies were committed... a uniformed man saw him coming out of a house in the West End and recognised him. But it seems he was called in from the street by a lady whose husband was taken ill. The telephone had gone wrong and she was sending him for a doctor.”

“Bad luck!” was the Orator’s comment.

The very next day the real thief was caught, an American citizen named Lavinsky, and there was the end of that mystery.

The Orator came back to town, a giant refreshed, so full of good spirits that he agreed with a fellow passenger who remarked that it was a fine day.

London offered him very full occupation for his talents. For three months he followed remorselessly on the trail of Honoré de Youre, the Bath murderer, and he had returned one early morning from a grisly little ceremony at Wandsworth Prison (the Orator always saw the hangings for which he was responsible) and was walking through Hyde Park when a harsh voice hailed him a little derisively.

“Hullo, inspector, come and have a spiel!”

He turned his head slowly and gazed upon an astonishing sight. In a large and beautiful limousine, supplied, he guessed, by a hiring company, was a resplendently dressed man. The white derby hat was an offence; the diamond ring that glittered on his finger an outrage.

“Step inside, inspector,” said Bill Osawold brightly.

Evidently he did not expect the invitation to be accepted, for there was a momentary look of alarm in his small eyes when the Orator opened the door of the carriage gravely and, stepping in, sat opposite to one whom he had on three separate occasions sent to penal servitude.

“Business looking up, Bill?” he asked.

The man coughed and moved uneasily in his cushioned seat, under the scrutiny of the detective.

“Never seen anybody looking so lovely, Bill,” murmured the Orator.

And indeed Mr. Osawold's raiment was particularly fine. The shepherd's plaid suit, the glossy silk shirt with violet stripes (collar to match), the diamond stick-pin, the patent shoes and livid silk socks, were very impressive.

"I'm going straight now, inspector," said Bill huskily. "An aunt died and left me a lot of money. You must come round and see me in my apartment."

The Orator's eyes were passing over him with the thoroughness of a vacuum cleaner.

"Aunt, eh? I'll bet she's looking down from heaven, pleased with herself! Australian aunt, Bill?"

"American," said Bill, and his shapeless features twisted into what was intended to be an ingratiating smile. "Any time you want a drink, inspector, just pop in to 107 Bloomsbury Mansions."

"I do all my popping at soda fountains, Bill," said the Orator gently.

The admiration in his face was unaffected.

"And to think that the last time we met was when I pinched you red-handed on the roof of Albemarle Mansions and got you five for carrying a gun!"

The other wriggled in his embarrassment.

"That's all done with now, inspector," he said. "Since my uncle died——"

"You told me about her," murmured the Orator.

"Aunt, I mean—I've been going straight. I've kept away from low company."

Mr. Rater scrutinised his companion as an accountant might scrutinise a faked balance sheet. He found him wanting in several particulars. Not all Mr William Osawold's offences had been associated with burglary. There was a raw streak in him that was so near to primitive savagery that in certain moments it was not distinguishable. The Orator remembered one particularly atrocious crime that had been responsible for Bill's absence from his usual haunts for four years and three months. This episode he called to the mind of the plutocratic Mr. Osawold.

"I must have been mad to do a thing like that," said the other, shaking his head. "Anyway, the girl told a lot of lies about me, and you didn't do me any good, inspector."

“I seldom do,” agreed Mr. Rater.

By this time the car had reached the Marble Arch entrance to the park, and Osawold tapped on the window.

“I’ll be dropping you here, inspector. I’ve got an engagement with a friend of mine,” he said, and was relieved when his enemy was out of his sight.

He certainly had an engagement; a very pretty shopgirl who had misguidedly accepted his invitation to a tête-à-tête lunch at his flat was waiting for him when he arrived home.

Mr. Rater was neither perturbed nor puzzled by the sudden accession to wealth of a well-known and highly disrespected criminal. The phenomenon was by no means uncommon. Did not Harry Gay, the confidence man, take a whole floor of the Splendide Hotel on the proceeds of a wonder-coup, and didn’t Clew Remmi celebrate a scientific burglary by driving down Oxford Street drinking beer on the roof of the most expensive limousine in London?

At five o’clock that afternoon a divisional call came through to headquarters and was plugged into Mr. Rater’s room. It was all about Bill Osawold—or as much about him as a hysterical, half-crazy shopgirl could tell between spasms of hysteria.

“Oh, yes,” said the Orator softly.

It was, and yet it was not, a coincidence that, coming out of Scotland Yard into Whitehall, almost the first person Mr. Rater should see was Bill Osawold. It was not a coincidence because the direct route between Bloomsbury and Waterloo Station passes along Whitehall and across Westminster Bridge, and Bill was on his way to the railway terminus and was making a permanent flit, if the trunk and the two bags on the top of his taxi meant anything. He flashed past the inspector—into a traffic block opposite the Houses of Parliament.

Before the phlegmatic constable signalled the traffic to move, the Orator was standing by the open door of the cab.

“Step out,” he said, “and step lively.”

Bill obeyed; his face was white and puckered with rage. With a gesture the Orator had summoned a uniformed policeman.

“Fan him,” he said briefly. “He’s got a gat.”

The burly policeman “fanned” the prisoner scientifically. Five minutes later Bill was standing before the sergeant’s desk at Cannon Row station, describing himself flatteringly.

“It’s a trumped up charge,” he vociferated. “What this girl says about me is lies. She came of her own free will; she’s been chasing me for weeks——”

“No girl has been mentioned—yet,” said the Orator.

Bill’s ugly face contorted in a sneer.

“You think you’ve got me, don’t you? But I’ll tell you something, Rater—there’s money behind me. I could have your coat off your back if I wanted to.”

“Put him in a nice hard cell,” said the Orator gently. “If he gives you any trouble, give him a punch on the nose.”

Bill’s belongings lay on the sergeant’s desk : they included some £1,750 in banknotes, a small automatic pistol fully loaded, several diamond rings, and the brilliant stick-pin before mentioned. Mr. Rater regarded these thoughtfully, had the numbers of the banknotes taken and sent three men making enquiries.

In the intervening days between the appearance of Bill Osawold before a magistrate and his arrival at the Central Criminal Court, the Orator learnt many things, but he could not connect William with any act of robbery or larceny which could justify a further charge. What he did learn—and this was before the man’s appearance at the Old Bailey—was that the prisoner was to be well and truly defended. Not only was he represented at the police court by one of the greatest solicitors in London, but when the case was called, there rose from the counsel’s table an eminent leader at the Bar, and with him were two of the best known common law juniors. And in consequence this trial, which should have lasted a few hours, dragged itself out to three days. There were all manner of witnesses called to tear to pieces the character of the chief witness, and it was not a particularly difficult job.

But, fortunately for justice, the prosecuting counsel was a man of great genius, and slowly but surely the net was woven about the man in the dock. It was on the second day that the Orator saw in the front seat of the public gallery a lady whose face seemed familiar. And then with a start he recognised Lady Angela Lightley. She was following the case with extraordinary intensity, and yet it was not morbid curiosity that had brought her. He saw her wince, not once but many times, at the recital of some unpleasant detail. The end of the trial came : the jury, without leaving

the box, returned a verdict of guilty. The thin-faced old judge fixed his pince-nez, glanced for a moment at the prisoner and then at the jury.

“Is anything known against this man?” he asked, in his hard, dry voice.

The Orator stepped up into the box, raised his hand as the oath was administered, and spoke briefly.

“... a thief and an associate of thieves. He was convicted of a similar offence in 1921. He has a very bad reputation and is one of the most dangerous criminals known to Scotland Yard.”

Bill Osawold leapt to his feet, livid with fury.

“I’ll get you, Rater... you...!”

The judge dipped his pen in the ink and wrote leisurely upon the paper before him.

“You will be kept in penal servitude for twelve years,” he said.

It took four warders to remove the demented man from the dock.

Rater waited outside in the marble waiting hall near the entrance of the public galleries, and presently he saw the girl and stepped directly in her path. This time she could not avoid him. He saw her face go white and pink, and white again.

“Oh, Mr. Rater, whatever will you think of me?... I’m writing a book on crime. It was a horrible case, wasn’t it?”

Her embarrassment was almost pitiable. She was trembling in every limb from the shock of this meeting.

“You saw me before? I didn’t think you would recognise me.”

“Writing a book, are you, my lady?” said the Orator quietly, and then remembered to offer his condolences.

“Oh, yes,” she said hurriedly; “it wasn’t a very happy marriage, you know. He was rather—difficult. I am being married again in three months’ time to Mr. Donald Grey. He’s at the Foreign Office.”

She looked round as though she were seeking some way of escape. He fell in by her side and walked down the stairs with her.

“I suppose you’ve never seen that fellow before?” he asked, and she stopped, her face bloodless.

“That man Osawold? No, of course not.”

“Pretty bad man,” mused the Orator, speaking half to himself. “Got quite a lot of money, too, when we arrested him. I have been wondering how he came by it.”

“I’m afraid I can’t help you.”

She was breathless, spoke with difficulty. He might have been hopelessly wrong, but he could have sworn that she was on the verge of collapse.

“Somebody’s been paying for his defence. There’s been no demand for his money, so I suppose he’s got influential friends,” he said. “May I come along and see you, Lady Angela?”

She hesitated.

“Yes,” she said at last, and gave him her address. It was an exclusive West End hotel.

She was calmer when they reached the street, and succeeded in getting back to something near normal.

“I suppose you are so used to such cases as these that they do not distress you?” she said. “It has reduced me to a rag! One didn’t realise there was such nastiness in the world. Will he appeal?”

It seemed to Mr. Rater that it required an extraordinary effort for her to ask this question.

“Appeal? This fellow Osawold? I suppose so. He seems to have all the money in the world.”

“Do you think he will succeed... that there was any question of misdirection? Somebody was saying that the judge had made comments which were prejudicial to the prisoner.”

Rater, watching her closely, shook his head.

“He hasn’t got a ghost of a chance.”

“Oh!”

That was all she said, but there was something so desperate, so despairing in that word that even he was shocked, and it took quite a great deal to shock the Orator.

“I wish you would tell me something, Lady Angela.”

“What?” she asked quickly.

“What’s on your mind? I might be able to help you. Your father was a great friend of mine, you remember, and I’d go a long way to be of service to his daughter.”

She forced a smile.

“I’m afraid you can’t help me, unless you can write my book!”

He saw her beckon her waiting car, and stood on the edge of the sidewalk long after she had disappeared.

Duty took him to Pentonville Prison to interview the man on a matter connected with one of the diamond rings which had proved to be stolen property. That Osawold was the thief he never for one moment imagined, and Osawold’s story of how he came to acquire this trinket was convincing.

“I got it from Louis Rapover. I bought it for forty-three pounds. If it was pinched, I know nothing about it. You can’t get that on me, Rater.”

“Appealing, aren’t you, Bill?”

The man nodded.

“And I’m going to get out, don’t worry,” he said. “I’ve got friends who have got to get me out, or they’ll know all about it. Twelve years... that old swine! Say a good word for me when I come up, Rater, and I’ll drop you a monkey.”

“I never keep monkeys, Bill,” said Mr. Rater, who was in no sense offended by this offered bribe. “Only cocker spaniels, and you can’t drop me one of those because I breed ’em.”

The appeal was heard at the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand. Bill Osawold was brought to the Court two hours before it sat. He came in a taxicab, accompanied by the usual guard of warders, and was put into a small, cell-like room beneath the Courts. At ten o’clock his breakfast was brought up on a tray from the refreshment-room below.

A policeman accompanied the girl, but his idea of accompanying was to go down the narrow stairs ahead, and he had passed out of sight before the waitress had reached the landing.

“Excuse me.”

The waitress turned her head. A lady was standing behind her. She was dressed in black, the rather elaborate mourning of a Frenchwoman, and a heavy black veil drooped over the brim of the hat.

“Are you taking Mr. Osawolds breakfast?” she asked in broken English.

“Yes, ma’am,” said the girl.

“Is that man with you?” The stranger pointed down the stairs, and the girl turned her head. There was nobody in sight.

“Which man, ma’am?”

“I thought I saw a policeman,” said the woman in black.

That was all the conversation. The Frenchwoman turned and almost collided with Rater, an interested spectator. She brushed past him with a muttered apology, keeping her head down, and moved so quickly that it almost seemed as though she expected to be followed.

Mr. Rater looked after her and then went quickly in pursuit of the waitress. He stopped her outside the guarded door of the detention room. He took the cup of steaming coffee from her hand, gazed at it meditatively, and then, to her amazement and wrath, let the cup drop. It smashed to fragments on the stone floor.

“Sorry—I’m a bit awkward this morning,” said the Orator. “I’ll see about clearing this up, young lady. You dash back and get another cup. Tell them Chief Inspector Rater will pay for the breakage.”

He waited with the custodian of the door till the girl returned. She was not allowed to enter the room; one of the warders took the remainder of the prisoner’s breakfast in to him, and Mr. Rater walked slowly up the stairs into the central hall. He was present in court when three judges dismissed the appeal, and sent William Osawold to Dartmoor for what was tantamount to a life sentence.

It was four o’clock in the afternoon when the telephone bell in Lady Angela’s sitting room tinkled. Grave-faced, she had been sitting waiting for that message; at her feet were a dozen editions of the evening newspapers.

“Tell him to come up,” she said, in a voice so low that her message had to be repeated.

For once in his life the Orator was really talkative. He talked about the weather, the noise of traffic in the street, the high cost of hotel living, and then:

“Your friend’s appeal failed, Lady Angela.”

“Why do you call him my friend?” she asked, not meeting his eyes.

“We could hardly call him that, could we?” said the Orator, smiling comfortably. “He’s not my friend, at any rate. In fact, I suspected him of a number of jewel thefts in Ostend.... Funny thing, I called up London, and they told me he had been seen coming out of your house the very morning your husband died.”

She made no reply.

“The trouble with me,” the Orator went on, “is that I’m a theorist. I’m always making up stories of what happens behind closed doors. And I’ve been trying to get a story that would fit your interest in Bill Osawold, and I think I’ve found it. Some things “—Mr. Rater shook his head sadly—” one can never get definitely. For instance, what was the stuff that mad Frenchwoman put in Osawold’s coffee this morning? I saw her empty her little bottle when the waitress’s head was turned. She might not have been French at all; she was certainly crazy-mad. That’s not the way to stop a man talking. If you knew as much about criminals as I do, Lady Angela, you’d know that their bark doesn’t amount to a row of pins. Bill Osawold’s not going to get anything out of betraying the lady who helped him, and he’s not going to live any too long, if what the prison doctor told me is true. If he ever writes to you, I’d like you to send the letters on to me; but somehow I don’t think he’ll write.”

He took up his hat, stared out of the window for a few minutes, and then:

“I’ll be getting along now, Lady Angela. Perhaps one of these days you’ll write me a letter, and tell me just how that arsenic-eating husband of yours got you into such serious trouble.”

She was on her feet now, white and shaking.

“Arsenic eating... did you know that?”

He nodded.

“That was his trouble He’d lived some years in Syria, and it’s one of the queer habits that some Europeans acquire. The day you were married I met a young man from the chemist’s who had a packet for him. Arsenic eaters start with a small dose and work up till they can take enough to poison a regiment of soldiers, and I should think he’d got to that stage.”

The letter she promised did not come till three months later.

... I was horrified when I discovered he had this terrible habit I couldn’t believe it was possible.... Our life was a very unhappy one. He was irritable, meanly cruel. Twice he struck me in one of his childish frenzies. I wanted to tell the doctor,—threatened if I did that he would deny that he had ever taken arsenic and would tell the doctor that I was poisoning him. Then he fell ill with bronchial trouble, and I had to procure the arsenic. His own chemist refused to supply him with any more. One night I withheld it from him, and there was a terrible scene in his room. At last I gave him a dose, and he wanted more. He screamed out at me from the bed: “I’ll tell them you’re poisoning me. You want my money—you murderess!” It was at that minute I heard something, and, looking round, saw a rough-looking man, a stranger, standing in the doorway, between my room and my husband’s, and at that moment Eustace made a horrible sound and fell back on his pillow. You can guess who the stranger was. It was Osawold. He had broken into the house and had overheard. Can’t you guess what happened? He really believed I had killed Eustace. If I could have thought rationally I should have called in a doctor and told him the truth. It would have been easy to prove that he had been an arsenic eater for years, but I was crazy with fear; I gave the man some money, and later sent him more. You will never know what I endured all the days of that trial. He managed to get word out to me that unless I got him off the charge he would betray me, and my madness culminated that horrible day at the Law Courts.

The Orator read the letter twice before he put it into the fire.

THE MIND-READERS

“THERE is no police force in the world that can counter the intelligent law-breaker,” wrote that remarkable man Len Witlon, in an article he once contributed to the American Press, “providing he lays his plans carefully and skilfully and carries them through without deviation.”

Len Witlon knew five languages perfectly, and had friends and sometimes confederates in at least a dozen European prisons. He himself had certainly been under detention, but had never been dishonoured by a conviction.

You met him at the American bar of Claridge’s in Paris, or dining at Armonvillier; occasionally he took a cure at Vichy or Baden- Baden—there were certain mud baths in Czechoslovakia that he visited regularly. He was a vain and brilliant man, very jealous of his reputation for gallantry.

“To be successful in robbery one must be something of a psychologist. It is not sufficient to know where material danger is to be found: one must be able to read the mind of one’s opponent. That is the art of generalship: success comes when the operator combines with his powers of organisation a loyal and unswerving loyalty to his comrades.”

Inspector O. Rater read this interesting article so often that he could almost quote it word for word. He had cut out the article soon after its publication, had pasted it in an exercise book against the day when Len would commence operations in England.

“Tell that friend of yours,” said the Orator, to a familiar of the great man, “that if he ever puts his nose inside of London he won’t be giving interviews for fourteen years.”

One day Len took up the challenge....

A policeman came through Burford Square at a leisurely pace, moving towards the corner of Canford Street. He had arranged with the constable patrolling the next beat to meet him there at eleven and finish the interrupted story of a brother-in-law’s shortcomings, and the problem of the wife and three children who had been left unsupported by the aforesaid brother- in-law’s hasty departure for Canada.

He came to the rendezvous at almost the same moment as his mate appeared. And the serial was continued :

“...‘Well,’ I says to my sister, ‘you’ve only got yourself to blame...’”

He stopped dead.

The scream came from one of the dark houses of the square, and not very far away.

“Murder... murder!”

The two police officers were already running.... On the doorstep of No. 95 a girl was standing. They saw the white of her nightgown in the dim light of a street lamp.

“Help... please! Oh, thank God you’ve come!”

She retreated before them through the open door into the dark hall.

“I heard him scream... and the struggle... and I tried to get into his room...”

She had been feeling for the switch, and she found it. A big glass lantern suspended from the high ceiling glowed with a golden light.

“What is it, miss? Which room?”

Her trembling fingers pointed to the stairway.

She was very pretty, though as white as chalk, the officer observed.

“Put a coat on the lady, Harry”—he indicated a little alcove where hats and coats were hanging. “Now, miss, you’ll have to show us the room.”

She shook her head; her eyes were wide with horror.

“No, no, no! I can’t.... It is the first landing—the room overlooking the square——”

The two uniformed men raced up the stairs; as they reached the square landing, a light came on, probably controlled from the hall below, for there was a push-button switch on the wall of the landing and nobody could have touched that. Facing them was a polished mahogany door with an ornamental gilt and enamelled door knob.

P.C. Simpson (he of the wronged sister) turned the handle. The door was locked from the inside. He shook the handle vigorously and called out:

“Open this door!”

A futile invitation, and laughable in any other state of affairs. More futile, since when he turned the knob the door opened.

It was a large room, running the whole width of the house. Light came from a crystal chandelier. P.C. Simpson saw a big gilt and mahogany writing-table; behind that was a carved marble fireplace, and on the white hearth an electric fire glowed redly. Until they passed round the table, they did not see the quiet figure that lay, face upwards. It was in evening dress; one hand gripped the edge of the marble curb that surrounded the fireplace; the other was half raised, as though to ward off a blow.

“He’s dead—shot... look!”

Simpson’s companion pointed to the patch of blood above the heart.

P.C. Simpson stared down at his first murder, all too aware of the tremendous importance to him and to his career; he had a confused memory of instructions he had received as to what a policeman should do in such circumstances.

“Don’t let nobody come in,” he said huskily, and gaped round the room. A long window was open—he stepped out on to a balcony, flashing his electric lamp along the rails.

A rope was knotted to the balcony rail and trailing down—as he saw by the rays of his lamp—to the front steps. It had not been there when they had come in or they must have knocked against it.

“He’s got away since we came in, Harry. Come down with me!”

They flew down the stairs into the silent square; they did not see the girl; she must have gone to her room.

The front door was closed. P.C. Simpson jerked at it with confidence, but this door did not open. He twisted the handle and pulled again, but it was a very heavy door, steel-lined, and did not budge.

“It’s been double-locked on the inside,” he said, truthfully. “That girl must have done it, Harry. Go and see her and get the key.”

Harry tried the nearest door; that was locked, and the second door was locked, but the door leading into the back of the house was open. It took him down to a kitchen, and his electric lamp showed him yet another door wide open. He guessed it was the garage; the big gates leading to the mews were swinging idly in the breeze.

He went back to his companion.

“You wait here,” said P.C. Simpson, flew down the stairs, and in a few seconds was in the mews.

With shaking hand he dragged his police whistle from his pocket, and sent out a shrill warning, circumnavigated the house in time to see three policemen running, and ahead of them a stolid, tall figure.

Inspector Rater had business of his own in the neighbourhood that night, but had surrendered all other interest at the alarm. Breathlessly the police-constable told his story as he half ran, half walked back to the mews.

“All right, all right,” said the Orator, impatiently. “One of you fellows stand in front of the door and don’t move.”

He followed Simpson into the house, up to the ground floor. Harry the policeman stood rigidly to attention at the foot of the stairs.

“Where’s the lady? Have you seen her?”

Harry had not seen her or heard her. He ventured the suggestion that she must be “in a faint,” for he was a family man, and knew the effects of such events upon the weak frame of womanhood.

The Orator was half-way up the stairs, and missed the plausible explanation.

“That’s the room, sir.”

Inspector Rater turned the handle and pushed.

“Locked,” he said and, stooping, squinted through the keyhole.

He could see that the door to the balcony was open, and asked a question.

“I left it like that, sir. There was a rope tied to the rails of the balcony. The man who done it must have got out that way, sir——”

“Lend your shoulders to the door,” said the Orator.

Two strong men pushed together—and again. The lock broke with a snap, the door flew open...

“Where’s your body?”

P.C. Simpson stared: where the dead man had lain there was no dead man. The room was entirely empty.

The Orator looked at the policemen, at the floor and then at the window; and then his mind instantly moved to the house of the Marquis Perello, which was on the opposite side of the square. He thought of the Marquis Perello naturally for two reasons: the first was that Len Witlon was in town, and the second that in the Marquis's house, in a safe, and not a very safe safe, were four packets of cut emeralds that had arrived in London a few days before. They were in transit to an illustrious person in Italy who had a passion for emeralds, and had been purchased in the Argentine at great cost. The Marquis had notified the police, and Mr. O. Rater had thought it desirable to station a uniformed constable before and behind the house. He knew the names of those constables, and, leaning over the balcony, he addressed the small gathering of police officers on the pavement below.

"Is Walton here?"

"Yes, sir," said a voice.

"And Martin?"

"Yes, sir," said another voice.

"Then," asked the Orator gently, "why the hell are you here?"

He was very hurt, because he knew just how quickly Len Witlon worked. He did not wait for the door to be opened, but slid down the rope on to the steps, and five minutes later was knocking at the door of the Marquis Perello's house. He knocked for a very long time. The marquis and his wife were at the theatre. The three maidservants were locked in a room upstairs. The armed valet who kept guard over the safe was found bludgeoned in the drawing-room, and the safe was open.

"He worked four-handed," said the Orator philosophically.

Len Witlon invariably worked four-handed, so the Orator had made no great discovery. And after a job was done the four would separate and leave England by various routes. There is, for example, a steamer that goes from Dundee to Holland, and yet another that sails from Plymouth to one of the French ports—Len never made the mistake of following the beaten track. His methods were unique: nobody but Len would have taken a furnished house in Burford Square and staged an elaborate murder mystery in order to bring all the police in the neighbourhood running to that one particular spot and leave unguarded the place he wished to burgle.

A search of the house revealed nothing of value except—in the fireplace of the dining-room were a number of burnt papers, and a little slip printed in

red which was only half-burnt. It had apparently to do with passengers and guides and the difficulties of Customs. He put the little slip in his pocket very carefully and sent forth widespread enquiries. The only clue he had—and that came to him the next morning—was from a constable of the City police who, standing at the juncture of Queen Victoria Street and Cannon Street, had seen a car in which was a woman. He was not even certain it was a woman, but she had that appearance, for her head and the upper part of her body were enclosed in a frock. She was, in point of fact, at the moment he saw her, engaged in slipping on a dress.

Cannon Street Station drew blank : no woman had arrived in a car at that hour. She had obviously gone east of Cannon Street.

The Orator was something of a psychologist himself. He knew Witlon's methods, and knew that that gallant gentleman would first assure himself that his beautiful lady confederate was safe. He interviewed P.C. Simpson, a crestfallen and resentful man, from whom his first murder had been ruthlessly snatched.

"Yes, sir, she talked with a sort of foreign accent."

"I want you to remember every word she said, Simpson," said the Orator gently.

P.C. Simpson thought very hard, trying to coax, by a vigorous massage of his head, the half-forgotten facts of the conversation.

"I can't remember anything she said, sir. The only thing that struck me as curious was that while she was a-moaning and a-groaning she had her eye on her wrist-watch. I saw her look twice."

"The time was about eleven, I think?"

The constable thought it was a little later.

"To me," said the Orator, "it is as clear as daylight."

When P.C. Simpson had gone, the Orator took from an envelope the little half-burned slip of printed paper that had been found in the grate of the dining-room, and reconstructed it...

Early one morning, somewhere in the Bay of Biscay, a British destroyer came up over the horizon behind the slow-moving steamship Emil and signalled the captain to stop. The Emil was a small ship that carried a large number of pleasure-seeking passengers to the Moroccan ports and Madeira. She had left London at midnight on the night of the robbery, and the pretty

Anglo-Spanish girl who had already become the belle of the ship had joined the Emil just before she cast off from one of the London docks. Miss Avilez protested vigorously against her arrest, but rather blotted her copybook by attempting to throw a small package overboard—a piece of extravagance on her part, since the package contained seventeen perfectly cut emeralds, none of which was under ten carats.

The matron who looked after her on the destroyer brought her to London and to Mr. Rater. She replied to all his questions with the hauteur proper to a daughter of hidalgos.

The next morning there appeared in the London Press a communication very carefully composed by the Orator himself. He wrote at greater length than he spoke.

“Part of the proceeds of the Burford Square robbery have been recovered by the arrest of a woman calling herself Inez Avilez. It appears that the leader of the gang responsible for this cleverly planned robbery, whilst he was careful of his own skin, had not only sent the woman on a route where she could be easily traced, but had left evidence—possibly with the idea of using her as a decoy to draw attention from himself to her destination.”

On the day following the pretty Anglo-Spaniard’s conviction (she was a British subject from Gibraltar) a second inspired paragraph appeared:

“This woman was deliberately sacrificed by the man who planned the robbery, and goes to prison to bear the punishment for his crime.”

It was a clumsily written paragraph, and there were several sub-editors who would have liked to alter it a little, but the Orator knew his man, though he might not have recognised Mr. Len Witlon if he had seen him pacing the floor of his expensive suite in Aix, crazily incoherent, planning vengeance for the insult that had been put upon him.

“I’ve got Witlon,” reported the Orator laconically.

And yet his superiors knew there was nothing in the world to associate Witlon with the robbery. He had his perfectly turned alibis, and witnesses to prove his presence in France at the hour the emeralds were stolen.

“I’m a mind-reader, too,” said the Orator, when they asked him for an explanation; “and just at this moment I’m reading Witlon’s. What he’s saying about me at this minute is enough to make me turn in my grave. Only I’m not dead.”

Mr. Len Witlon had a brilliant associate, one John B. Stimmings, who came at the request of his master to Aix, not knowing the condition of Mr. Len Witlon's mind.

"Too bad about Inez," said Mr. Stimmings as he came into the ornate sitting-room and closed the door. "Clever kid that. I'll bet this man Rater framed up something on her——"

"This man Rater couldn't frame a picture," spluttered Len, his ordinarily good-looking face swollen and purple with anger. "Rater! They call him the Orator, don't they! I'll make him talk! Look at this!"

He slammed down two press cuttings before his visitor. "He couldn't get anything on me. The Sûreté came after me the next morning, and there was I snuggled in bed in my villa at Auteuil."

"Up in Paris," said John B., "they talk about asking you to leave France——"

"Leave nothing! They know I wouldn't touch a thing in France. I'm going to England to see this Rater fellow."

Mr. Stimmings looked at him curiously.

"Count me out," he said. "Take one ticket—single. You're going dippy."

The absurdity of the very suggestion that it was not a brilliant idea brought a fleeting smile to the angry man.

"Listen! You know me! I know just what that fellow's thinking. I've got right behind the thing he calls his mind. John, do you remember when I went after the Infanta's pearls and then went back to Madrid four days after? Did anybody know me or recognise me? I'm going to show you my biggest bit of work."

He might have added his ugliest, for in a tempestuous and sleepless night he had designed a crime that had no equal in his brilliant record.

A week later there arrived in London an elderly English gentleman who gave his name at the best London hotel as Colonel Pershin. He had a British passport; he was apparently a fussy, rather quick-tempered man, who had no special business in life. He stayed at the Wheetham Hotel, which was at once the most obscure and the most fashionable in London, and he read the newspapers with great industry.

A few days after his arrival Mr. Rater received a scented letter. It was written by a lady who signed herself "One who Knows," and it ran:

If you wish to know where the rest of the Perello emeralds are to be found, I can tell you. I want you to promise me that I shall not be arrested, but knowing that a police officer cannot make any such promises, I cannot ask you to put that into writing. I will come to Scotland Yard at 2 o'clock on Saturday evening. Will you be in your room?

The Orator read and re-read the communication. Where women were concerned he believed in miracles. And yet he was satisfied in his mind that behind the letter was the inspiration of Mr. Witlon. For a long, long time he stood by his window looking on to the Embankment, staring at the river, and thinking himself into the mind of his enemy.

There was at the Yard at this time a most unpopular Assistant Commissioner, who did not like the Orator, Major Dawlton had had his police training in India. He was an incurable theorist, and had a weakness for interfering with his executive. He summoned the Orator into his office.

“Come, come, Mr. Rater,” he said, a little pompously. “This won't do at all. Here are emeralds of an enormous value stolen under the eyes of the police, after you had been specifically instructed to protect their owner! Have you seen this morning's newspapers?”

“I can't read”—said the Orator wearily, and waited long enough for the Assistant Commissioner to get apoplectic before he concluded—“newspapers when I have got work on hand.”

“It is a scandal, Mr. Rater. Really, I am ashamed to meet my friends at the club. They are constantly asking me why we don't get detectives in from outside. And I think it would be an excellent scheme.”

“You don't want detectives, you want mind-readers to deal with Witlon,” said the Orator again.

“Stuff and nonsense!” said Major Dawlton.

It was a very peaceful Saturday afternoon at Scotland Yard. The day was warm and the double windows that shut out the noises of the Thames Embankment were wide open. Sunshine bathed the deserted wharves and warehouses that form so fine a skyline on the southern bank, and laid on the river a sheet of fretted gold.

The tramway-cars were more or less empty, the promenade given over to leisurely sightseeing folk who had brought their children for a stroll.

Inspector Rater took off his pince-nez with a sigh, folded the minute he had been reading and returned it to its envelope. He gazed pensively through the open window. A tug drawing a string of barges was moving slowly upstream. Timber barges stacked high with planks of yellow pine. On the Embankment a few loungers leaned over the parapet.

He turned his head as the door opened and Major Dawlton came in. Without a word he handed the letter to his superior. The Major fixed his eyeglass, read and sneered.

“That, I suppose, is the art of criminal detection,” he said, with heavy irony—the Orator was very unpopular at that moment. “Half the good work at Scotland Yard is done by informers. I should like to see this woman when she comes.”

“If she comes,” said the Orator softly.

“You think it is a hoax? I don’t agree. It is probably some jealous confederate who has been badly treated. These scraps of information have come to the Yard every day since I have been here.”

“They have come every day I’ve been here,” said the Orator, “and that’s seventeen years.”

The Major snorted under this implication of his inexperience.

“She won’t come, but he will.”

“Witlon? Rubbish! He’s in France. That sort of scoundrel is not going to put his nose into this country, and if he did we’ve sufficient evidence to convict him of simple larceny. I’ll be here at eight o’clock this evening.”

“Make it a quarter to,” suggested the Orator, venom in his eye.

Major Dawlton, sitting in the office chair, yawned.

“She’s sold you,” he said.

“I told you not to come,” said Mr. Rater.

He stood with his back to the wall, glooming down at the Assistant Commissioner thoughtfully. The Major looked at his watch.

“I’ll give her another quarter of an hour——”

“Whee-e-smack!”

Something whizzed past him; he felt the disturbance of air and, turning his startled head, saw the glass of a framed photograph splinter disastrously.

There was no sound of a shot—no report.

He was on his feet in an instant and ran to the window.

Something struck the sill on which his hand rested, ripped a jagged wound in the stone and brought down the plaster from the ceiling.

“I’d keep away from that window,” said the Orator gently. “They tell me he’s a wonderful rifle shot, but I thought he’d operate from the Council building. The barge was certainly a brilliant idea.”

Major Dawlton’s face was white as death.

“Shooting!” he gasped. “At me!”

“At me,” said the Orator pensively. “I hope those fellows have located him. I should think they would.”

As he spoke he saw two motor-launches filled with men shoot out from the cover of the parapet; they were making for the barge.

“That’s all right,” said the Orator. “Now we’ve got something to charge him with.”

“They were shooting at me!” squeaked the Major.

“I told you not to come,” said Mr. Rater, but the joy in his eyes belied his tone of sympathy.

“The general idea was a good one,” said the Orator to the Chief Commissioner. “Witlon knew my weakness for fresh air, and he must have made a reconnaissance and seen how easy it was to look into my room with the window open. Oh, yes, I knew he was in England—one of my men picked him up when he landed at Southampton from Havre.”

The Chief Commissioner’s stern gaze was fixed on the Orator.

“But you didn’t dream he’d be shooting into your room, or you wouldn’t have allowed the Major to come?” he said.

The Orator did not answer immediately. Then he sighed.

“I suppose I wouldn’t,” he said.

THE OLD LADY WHO CHANGED HER MIND

MR. RATER never took a job out of the hands of a subordinate unless there was a very urgent reason. The subordinate in this case was a humble police constable, and his job was to remove Mrs. Schtalmeister from the unconscious body of a rent collector. That the oblivion of this unfortunate man was entirely due to the stone jug this vigorous old lady had wielded was a tragic fact, for in an unguarded moment the disgruntled collector had threatened eviction unless the rent was paid. Possibly he was not too well acquainted with the tenants of 79 Keller Row and their peculiar methods—he most certainly did not know Mrs. Schtalmeister and her reputation, or he would not have turned away even as she was reaching for the pitcher

She was nearer sixty than fifty, a tall and powerful woman with the grip of a navy, and she had behind and about her the moral support of Keller Row and a people to whom rent collectors, school inspectors and policemen were anathema.

It was when a sympathiser of the old lady took a hand and a pick handle to deal with the interfering officer that Inspector Rater, a chance and interested spectator, decided that the moment had arrived when he might interfere.

It was he who hauled Mrs. Schtalmeister from the prostrate collector, his hard fist that persuaded the sympathiser to retire from view, and finally he who lifted the virago bodily on to the police ambulance and helped strap her; and when, half an hour later, Mrs. Schtalmeister was explaining in broken Dutch that she had been the victim of an unjustifiable attack, it was he who spoke tersely of her past record.

She was a grim, raw woman, the terror of her neighbourhood; for fifteen years she had dominated the Swedes, the Dutchmen and the Scotsmen who for some extraordinary reason had congregated in Keller Row, Greenwich. They were seafaring people mostly; their men signed on at irregular intervals in the ships that go down Thames river from Victoria Docks. In the old days they lived in Poplar and Wapping, but once the County Council had driven a tunnel between Blackwall and East Greenwich it was inevitable that there should be a seepage of waste southward.

Seven lascar brothers lived in one house; No. 43 held a shifting population of Chinese; a veritable German who had been interned during the war was established at No. 15; there were Norwegians, an Irish family, and at least one Finn in that cul de sac which ends blankly at the wall of a shipbreaking yard.

To Keller Row one must surely return, since it was the scene of one of the most remarkable cases that was ever handled by the Orator. For the moment, here is Mrs. Schtalmeister fulminating against the law and its representatives, but growing more coherent every minute.

“For fifteen year’ I lif in dis street—no quarrels haf I mit anyones. I lif like a lady —six pound a week I haf by my son.... Nor bad tempers I haf: once, yes, in ’85 it is true. My brudder an’ I quarrels, but never since...”

And then, in perfect innocence, quite unconscious of the amazing breach of the law which she revealed, rather proud than otherwise of her deed, she told a story which Mr. Rater heard apparently unmoved.

The offence was an old one, and in reality a technical one. It was not a matter in which he cared to move, though, being extremely curious, he did confirm the woman’s statement a week or two afterwards.

At the Greenwich Police Court on the following morning the episode of Mrs. Schtalmeister ended with a fine and a horrific warning from the magisterial bench. She paid the fine and her rent—she had money enough but was by nature miserly—and went back to Keller Row, where she died in the winter of ’23.

The Orator did not know of her passing: he was not interested in people who were law-abiding. He was at the moment engaged in a jewel robbery in Chislehurst and it was rather a complicated case, for, although the thieves were caught, their arrest had been delayed just long enough to allow the fourteen big diamonds in Lady Teighmount’s old-fashioned tiara to disappear. The setting was found, but since the setting had only its Early Victorian value, the Orator was not elated.

“I’m tellin’ you the gospel, Mr. Rater,” said Harry Selt, the principal brigand. “I duffed the sparklers with a Jew whose name I don’t know: he works for a Big Feller on the Continent. All I got was two hundred, and that splits four ways. It’s no good me tellin’ you a lie, Mr. Rater; you know how many stand in on a conjure like this.”

No more information than this could be had from Harry, which was unfortunate, for Lady Teighmount, in addition to being a very rich woman, was a family connection of a Cabinet Minister. This exalted man sent for the Orator, and he proved to be very human.

“I am asking a special favour, Mr. Rater,” he said. “My aunt is terribly keen on getting those diamonds back. They were given by her husband in the ’seventies or in some prehistoric year, and she attaches a sentimental value

to them. Happily she's never known that diamond giving was the old boy's hobby. Now isn't it possible for you to get hold of some underworld gentleman who could lead you to them? She's willing to pay two thousand pounds and no questions asked——”

“Which is an illegal inducement,” said Mr. O. Rater soberly.

“I know—I know. The point is, will you, as an act of kindness to me, go out of your official way to recover those stones?”

The Orator nodded. He felt that he had already said too much.

No receiver is to be approached directly, especially by a police officer. The Orator began his tortuous investigations by interviewing one Alf Barkin, a dealer in dogs. It was a long interview and Mr. Barkin said very little. Every few seconds he shook his head and said: “I don't know nothing about it, Mr. Rater,” or: “If I knew I'd tell you, Mr. Rater,” but in the end Alfred arranged to accompany the detective that night to a small drinking shop in Deptford, where they met Joseph Greid, a dealer in furniture, who knew a man “slightly” (he hastened to qualify the extent of his acquaintanceship) who knew another man who might possibly know a friend of somebody else who in his turn could perhaps get into touch with a friend of the receivers.

For twelve days the Orator pursued his patient way. As was his practice, he said little, listened much and alertly. For he must trap certain vital statements carelessly dropped into the streams of verbiage, must sort essentials from non-essentials, unravel cunningly involved sentences.

In the end he made a journey to Brussels, and there he met by appointment M. Heinrich Dissel.

M. Dissel came to his sitting-room at the hotel, a stiff, youngish man with large horn-rimmed spectacles, rather untidy yellow hair and a stiff little furry moustache. He clicked his heels and bowed from the waist, before he offered a cotton-gloved hand.

“Your letter I have had, m'sieu. Be pleased to be seated before I myself, sir.”

He put down the big black portfolio he was carrying, hitched the knees of his well-creased trousers, and sat down on the edge of a chair, exposing as he did so a length of white sock above his brilliantly yellow boot.

“I am merchant and agent, yes? But diamonds seldom. Now in Antwerpen I know several mans who buy, sell diamonds, sometimes goodly bought, sometimes badly bought. Yes, I know them. My brudder in London sent

you? He is a good brudder but not amity—how shall you say?—friendly. We quarrels, make a big row. He gives me plenty money and I love it—piquet, cheval de course, you understand? So we make the big row and no more do we be friendts. When I go to London I telephone, but he say ‘Not to home,’ so we are not friendts.”

He beamed as though his estrangement with his ill-used brother was the greatest joke in the world. The Orator moved uneasily in his chair: such undulations of discomfort were a preliminary to speech.

“That’s all right, M’sieur Dissel; I’m not very much interested in your family troubles. You were good enough to answer my letter about—um—a certain matter. Do I understand that you can buy back these diamonds?”

M. Dissel’s smile was one of triumph. He dived his hand into the inside of his tightly fitting jacket and brought out a fat leather case. This he banged on the table and unfolded with a flourish. From a wad of letters and cards he fished out a packet wrapped in white tissue paper, which, with a deft flick of his finger, he unrolled. The diamonds came into view three by three as he came to the cotton-wool lining.

“Here is!” he said. “For these I pay two hond’erd thirty thousand francs. Of profit I make thirty thousan’ francs—I will not pretend I make no profit.”

The Orator walked to the door of his bedroom and called in the expert he had brought from London. One by one the stones were examined. Henry Dissel was an amused spectator. In the end Mr. O. Rater counted out twenty one-hundred-pound notes and the Belgian folded them carefully and put them in his pocket.

“I suppose, M’sieur Dissel, you are not prepared to give me the name of the man from whom you made this purchase?”

M. Dissel shrugged and shook his head.

“He may be good mans or bad mans,” he said. “If I speak him by name, there should be plenty troubles and questions and reclamations, and then he say: ‘You, M’sieur Dissel, you give me plenty nonsense. Again I will not deal with you,’ isn’t it?”

“Where does your brother carry on business in London?” asked the Orator at parting.

“Theodor has the bureau in Victoria Street. Number nine hundred sixty,” replied M. Dissel. “But we are not good friends. That is sad and against Christian teaching.”

The Orator frowned.

“Theodor? What is his other name?”

“Theodor Louis Hazeborn—mine is Heinrich Frederick Dinehem.”

The Orator looked at him blankly.

“Oh!” he said.

Another man would have said much more, but Chief Inspector Rater was sparing of speech: therefore was he nicknamed by his sardonic peers.

M. Dissel was a Belgian subject and had been engaged in business for ten years, occupying a small office on the Boulevard Militaire. It was a very untidy office, the Orator discovered when he made a visit. Above the desk was a most ornate diploma in a golden frame. It testified to an athletic accomplishment of M. Heinrich Dissel.

He was, as he said, an agent, representing a number of unimportant textile houses, English and German and American. For these he travelled a great deal. He was a member of a club where play was very high, but, although he was a gambler, nothing else was known against him. Occasionally he dealt in precious stones, antiques and even house property. There had been no complaint against him, and he was evidently the sort of man whom international thieves might use as an innocent cover for them in their negotiations.

“Theodor Louis Hazeborn!” The name occurred and recurred to Mr. Rater all the way back to London.

The day he arrived he had the dubious satisfaction of restoring the missing diamonds to their owner—and Lady Teighmount was in an irascible mood. She grudged (she said) every penny of the reward: she thought that if the police could bring about their return for money they could have secured the stones without money; she hinted darkly that she did not exclude the possibility of the police in general and Chief Inspector Rater having shared the reward.

The Orator listened and yet did not listen. He was thinking of M. Theodor Louis Hazeborn Dissel and of M. Heinrich Frederick Dinehem Dissel.

Going back to his suburban home that night, the Orator suddenly said:

“It is crazy!”

“Who is crazy?” asked his startled fellow passenger—for Mr. Rater had made his cryptic pronouncement in a railway carriage.

“Everybody,” said the Orator with great calmness.

His companion drew back to a corner seat and located the alarm cord.

But it was crazy—this theory which was beginning to shape in the Orator’s mind. The craziest notion that any man could conceive.

Patiently he began a fresh enquiry, exploring new avenues that radiated from old crimes. For three weeks he sought interviews with jewel thieves who were behind bars. A dozen prisons were visited, and at the end of his investigations he uncovered a skilfully hidden path that led from London to Belgium. Along this path furtive intermediaries had passed, carrying the proceeds of a score of robberies big and little. Not always did it lead to Brussels; sometimes it branched off to Liege, sometimes it stopped short at Ostend, but always at the end of it was a mysterious somebody to be found in a cafe or a beer-hall or place less reputable, and always the rendezvous was designated in London.

“This was how it was done, Mr. Rater” (the speaker was a fence serving out his sentence in Maidstone Gaol). “When the boys got a good haul it was as certain as anything one of the big fences would be called up on the ‘phone and told where the stuff could be sold. I don’t know where this bird got his information, but he got it. And then one of our runners would take it over the water. The money was always good. I’ve taken stuff over myself.”

“You never saw the foreign fence?”

“Never. You’d get to the cafe and then somebody would come in and say ‘The boss is outside.’ He’d be waiting round the corner in a cab. He’d go through the swag like lightning with an electric lamp, name the price and pay it on the spot.”

The Orator did not ask how the London agent of the fence came to know who held the stolen property. He knew the underworld well enough to know that in certain sets such matters are common knowledge. He knew too that most receivers and the bigger of the thieves had houses of call to which they might be telephoned. The crazy idea was no longer crazy.

Two days after this he had a whole day to himself and he took a busman's holiday—he called on the brother of the volatile Heinrich.

Heinrich's office in Brussels had been one miserable room, untidily furnished. The office of the industrious Theodor was a place of polished mahogany and shining brass. On the ground-glass panel of the door was a neatly painted announcement:

THEODOR DISSEL

engineer

He was a tall, carefully dressed man, clean-shaven, rather exquisite, thought the Orator. His hair was brushed carefully back from his high forehead, he wore a monocle, his linen (in contrast to his brother's) was immaculate. His English was flawless.

A girl secretary showed Mr. Rater into the private office where Theodor sat at a desk so amazingly neat and orderly that it seemed impossible that it could have been used. Theodor bowed from his hips, a little ceremoniously—it was the only suggestion of his foreign origin.

“I have an uncomfortable feeling that you have come to see me about my brother,” he said with a rueful smile. “It isn't exactly a premonition, because I happen to know that you interviewed him a few days ago—in fact he wrote and told me, and although he did not tell me the object of your call, I am just a little uneasy.”

“Why?” asked the Orator bluntly.

M. Theodor Dissel paced up and down the room, his hands in the pockets of his well-creased trousers.

“Well...” he hesitated, “you will not expect me to say anything disparaging of Heinrich—that would be unnatural. He is a wild sort of fellow, absolutely unstable, but I do not think bad at heart. When a man is as careless with money as he is, there is always a likelihood that he might get himself into serious trouble. Is it some trading transaction—some debt he has contracted which he has not paid? I am certain he would do nothing fraudulent——”

His manner betrayed a natural anxiety. It was exactly the attitude the Orator would have expected in a worried brother.

“If it is money...” Theodor shrugged his shoulders helplessly. “I can do little. I have already helped him to the extent of fifteen thousand pounds. That money I shall never receive in his lifetime.”

“There is no question of fraud”—the Orator spoke slowly—not the “kind of fraud you mean. Your brother is a Belgian national, isn't he?” and, when Theodor nodded: “And you are British—naturalised?”

“Yes,” said Theodor quietly. “I am married in England since the war. If my brother is married I do not know.” He shrugged again. “He is the kind of

man who is likely to contract alliances of a less permanent character. I will be frank with you—he is a great trouble to me.”

The Orator said nothing. He stroked his face, and in his large, pathetic, dog-like eyes seemed to be reflected something of the other’s care.

“Whatever you told me of Heinrich I should, alas! believe. He has certain friends who are not——” His gesture expressed the limits of disparagement.

“Ever heard of his being engaged in the jewellery business?”

Theodor frowned. “Jewellery business?” He spoke slowly. “I did not know that he was in that trade. And yet, when he was in London last, he hinted that he had some dealings with a man in London—a Mr. Devereux. I met Devereux once, a rather unpleasant looking man—not the kind one would imagine was a jeweller. In fact I disliked his appearance so much that when he called on me after my brother’s return to Belgium I sent a message to him that I was busy and could not see him.”

The Orator thought for a long time.

“Quite right,” he said at last. “Devereux is a pretty bad man. I know him.”

He went home to his lodgings and puzzled things out.

“Crazy idea!” was the sum of his conclusions.

It was a problem that could be marked, “Shelved for development.” The Orator accordingly laid his mystery in a handy place.

It was a fortnight later that Heinrich Dissel stepped gingerly out of the Brussels train at Ostend station. It was a warm and heavy September day and a white mist lay upon a glassy sea. He engaged a cabin aft, a “cabin of luxury,” where he deposited his one piece of luggage, a small valise, and ordered lunch to be served. He was, apparently, a little lame, for he walked painfully with the aid of a stick when he made an appearance upon the deck.

The mist held to Dover, growing thicker as the English coast was approached. The boat, guided by the guns and siren of Dover Harbour, came slowly towards the harbour’s mouth, an hour late.

It was when she was turning—for mail boats go into harbour stern first—that a second-class passenger heard a cry for help. Heinrich Dissel had been seen hobbling towards the stern of the ship; had also been seen (and warned by a quartermaster) sitting perilously on the rail over the stern.

The cry was followed by a splash, and, rushing to the side, a steward saw Heinrich's walking stick floating out of sight, but saw nothing of the man. A boat was instantly lowered, but though the sailors recovered his hat, Heinrich had disappeared from sight.

That night Mr. Rater read in the stop press of an evening newspaper:

passenger falls overboard from cross-channel steamer

A passenger, believed to be M. Heinrich Dissel of Brussels, fell overboard from the mail boat Princess Josephine as the steamer was entering Dover Harbour. The body has not yet been recovered.

"Well, well!" said the Orator, unmoved by the tragedy.

The body of Heinrich Dissel had not been found when the Orator paid his visit of condolence on the stricken brother.

He discovered M. Theodor examining the contents of the small valise that the Dover police had handed to the dead man's relatives.

"I am bewildered," said Theodor, shaking his head. "I have just been on the telephone to Brussels, but apparently there is not the slightest reason for suicide. His affairs were prospering, everything in his office was in order — so far as the poor fellow's affairs could be in order—and he had over a thousand pounds in his bank. The other day he lamed himself playing tennis, and I can only suppose that a sudden lurch of the ship brought the weight of his body on to his injured ankle..."

"Insured?" asked Mr. Rater.

Theodor nodded slowly.

"Yes—I had forgotten that. When I paid his debts I insisted that he should insure with an English company. It was perhaps a little heartless, but it was necessary that I should have security."

"For fifteen thousand?"

"I think that was the sum. But the money is nothing—I am overwhelmed with grief at this terrible tragedy. Poor Heinrich——"

"Insured in the name of Dissel?" interrupted the Orator.

M. Theodor hesitated.

"No. Our family name is——"

“Schtalmeister,” said the Orator, nodding. “I know.”

Only for a second was Theodor disconcerted.

“We changed our names by deed——” he began.

“I know,” said the Orator. “You had two uncles, didn’t you? One was called Theodor Louis Hazeborn and one called Heinrich Frederick Dinehem. Your mother named you Heinrich Frederick Dinehem a week after you were born. A month later she moved into another district in London and had a violent quarrel with your uncle Heinrich. So she went and registered your birth all over again as Theodor Louis Hazeborn, the second uncle.”

Mr. Theodor was white but silent.

“You started life with two names and you’ve been carrying on the good work. With a clever little moustache you were Heinrich in Brussels and Theodor in London—a receiver of stolen property in both places. When your mother changed her mind, she gave us a lot of trouble.”

“You are mad,” gasped Theodor agitatedly. “My brudder——”

“You are your brother—and that falling overboard was pretty easy for you, wasn’t it? I saw a diploma in your Brussels office—long distance swimming, eh? You got ashore and had a car waiting, I’ll bet. You’re the bird I’ve been waiting for—the bird that was in two places at once. Get your hat.”

THE SUNNINGDALE MURDER

THERE was a certain Assistant Commissioner of Police at Scotland Yard who used to get very annoyed with Inspector Rater. Usually, commissioners are angry when their subordinates talk too much; this particular official was sore with the Orator because he talked too little.

Colonel Levington, the Assistant Commissioner in question, had a house in Sunningdale which gave him, so to speak, an especial interest in the Aliford Gray case, and although Commissioners of Police may make all sorts of statutory declarations and take all manner of solemn oaths and live theoretically in fear of the Official Secrets Act, they are human, like everybody else, and Colonel Levington had a wife and family who regarded him as an oracle, and gave him credit for the fate that overtook every picturesque villain who figured in the popular newspapers. And he had neighbours who respected him and would drop in to coffee and for the enlargement of their experience. In truth, Colonel Levington knew nothing whatever about criminal investigation: he was an administrator who dealt largely with estimates and statistics. If he had been called upon to arrest a man he would not have known exactly where to start first. This, however, is by the way, and it is not denied that the Orator, as he was cynically nicknamed, was a very trying man.

Mrs. Aliford Gray was a pretty widow of thirty-four, slim and dark, rather pale, with fine grey eyes, in which ever lurked the shadow of tragedy (according to her few intimate friends). Fernley Cottage, where she lived, was off the main road, a small bungalow which was the property of Mr. Leicester Vanne. Though it was small, it was very beautifully appointed, and stood in about two acres of ground. She kept two servants, a middle-aged woman and her daughter who lived at Sunninghill, ten minutes' walk from the cottage. They did not sleep on the premises, and Mrs. Gray had not the slightest objection to spending the night alone.

Her closest friend was this same Mr. Leicester Vanne, a wealthy young man who had a flat in Park Lane, and against whom there was not the slightest breath of scandal. He had one weakness, and it was through this that Inspector Rater had first made his acquaintance....

The Orator called at the flat one evening, and found a very pensive man walking up and down his study, his hands thrust into his pockets; and the lady who was the indirect cause of his distress was standing by the window, her lips twitching with an amusement she could not conceal.

“I’m terribly sorry about this business, inspector,” said Leicester Vanne, ruefully. “But this fellow used the most terrible language in the presence of Mrs. Gray, and I’m afraid I made a fool of myself.”

“You nearly made a corpse of him,” said the Orator, soberly.

Vanne and Mrs. Gray had been walking late that afternoon from Kensington through the park. There were few people about, and they had been followed by a man who had at first whined humbly for alms, and, when these were refused, had grown abusive, deceived probably by Leicester Vanne’s slight frame. He was, however, a trained athlete, and when the man’s language had grown just a little too lurid, he turned on him, picked him up bodily, and threw him over the bridge into the Serpentine. With great difficulty, owing to the bad light, the tramp had been rescued; with greater difficulty he had been brought to life by artificial resuscitation, and had been rushed to the hospital. Hence the Orator’s visit.

“Really, Dicky, you’re too terrible.”

She was laughing softly, and something of that very softness and the look in her eyes told the Orator a great deal that was interesting, if not useful to him a week later.

“What is going to happen, inspector?” Vanne was anxious, irritably nervous. “Of course, I oughtn’t to have thrown the blighter into the water. The comic thing was that he knew me—in fact he called me by name. It was when he said that I was going to get murdered one of these days that I lost my—well, I got rattled. Shall I be charged or something?”

The Orator was non-committal; he wanted Dick Vanne’s version of the affair, and he pretty well knew, before the story was half through, that no police action would follow. The beggar was well known both to the London and to the country police. He had an unsavoury reputation, and a string of convictions that stretched from Truro to Aberdeen.

“The best thing you can do, Mr. Vanne, is to send somebody down to see this bird at the hospital and fix it with him. I’m not telling you this as a police officer or as a legal adviser—but a few pounds might make a lot of difference.”

Which was almost an oration for the Orator.

“A bad egg, is he?” said Vanne, interested.

“Came out of Dartmoor last week.” The Orator happened to look round a second later. Mrs. Gray, who had been standing by the window, was now sitting, her face averted, looking through the window as though she saw something which interested her. He had a feeling that the pose was unnatural and strained, and wondered whether she was laughing at her friend and did not wish him to see her merriment.

He went back to Scotland Yard and had almost forgotten there were such people as Mrs. Aliford Gray and Mr. Dicky Leicester Vanne by the time he reached that interesting institution. A few days later, the loquacious superintendent gave him a few particulars about this friendship. The “Super” was a constant visitor to the Assistant Commissioner’s house in Sunningdale.

“She’s a great friend of Vanne’s. Rather a pretty woman, don’t you think?... No, there’s nothing of that kind in it—just friendship.”

“I said nothing,” said the Orator, curtly.

“I knew what you were thinking,” said the superintendent. “But they say that man’s temper is terrible; and I should say he’s a bit jealous, too. The people down in Sunningdale can’t understand why he doesn’t marry her.”

“Queer thing about the people in Sunningdale,” said the Orator, who had no love for the Assistant Commissioner, “is the number of things they don’t understand.”

It was half-past four on the following Sunday morning, and the Orator, who had many curious habits, had just got up after nine hours of solid sleep, and had made himself a cup of tea, when his telephone bell rang. He glanced at the instrument coldly, for he had a number of reports to write, and worked best in the cold hours of the dawn. The bell shrilled again; he took up the instrument, and immediately recognised the voice of the Assistant Commissioner. The Colonel’s voice was tremulous with excitement.

“I’ve been trying to get...” The word was unintelligible, but the Orator guessed he meant the Chief Constable. “Will you come down right away? I’ve asked the Yard to pick you up; the photographers and fingerprint people are coming down.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Rater, quickly.

There was a little pause.

“... Mrs. Gray... awfully pretty woman who lives here ... murdered!”

The Orator opened his mouth wide but did not speak.

“Murdered?” he said at last. “Have you any idea——”

“No, she’s been murdered.... My God! It’s awful! One of the prettiest women I’ve ever seen. Extraordinarily nice woman... perfectly ghastly! Murdered, you understand, Rater?”

“Yes, I understand,” said Rater, calmly. “It’s very interesting.”

He hung up the receiver, drank his tea, and was waiting on the sidewalk when the police car swung round the corner and slowed.

“Don’t stop,” snapped the Orator, as he stepped on to the running-board and into the seat by the driver’s side. “Are there any details?”

None of the officers in the car had heard particulars; indeed, none knew of the identity of the murdered woman.

The Orator pulled his coat collar about his ears and let himself go to sleep. The morning air always had that effect upon him.

He woke as the car stopped before the little cottage. A light was burning in the hall; the door was wide open. On the crazy pavement that led from the road to the doorway he saw a policeman, and in the hall itself, Colonel Levington talking to a man whom he recognised as an inspector of county police.

“All right, Rater. The Berkshire police have called us in.”

“Called me in or you in, sir?” asked Rater, unpleasantly; for this Assistant Commissioner had nothing whatever to do with the Criminal Investigation Department.

“You, of course, my good chap,” said the other, irritably. “I’m here merely as a—um—witness. Not that I witnessed anything,” he said hastily, “but naturally, they came and dragged me out of bed.”

“Where is the body?” asked Mr. Rater.

To his surprise, the Colonel shook his head.

“There is no body; it’s been taken away. I hope you stepped carefully as you came up the pavement; there were blood marks there. This is where the crime was committed.”

He pushed open the door of the pretty little drawing-room. The lights were full on, and Rater stepped in and took a glance round. There were signs of confusion here: a small table had been overturned, a bowl was smashed on the floor, there were two overturned chairs. These he saw immediately, and then his eyes fell to the cream-coloured carpet and the big bloodstain.

“Perhaps I’d better tell you what happened,” said the Chief Commissioner.

“Now, sir.”

The Orator was suddenly bland, and when he was bland he was most offensive.

“I’m afraid you’ve got to be just a common or garden citizen. If I’m in charge I’m in charge; if I’m not I’m not.”

The Colonel was slightly ruffled, but he was a good soldier.

“Of course, my dear chap. I’ll wait in the garden.”

“Wait anywhere you like, sir,” said the Orator, and turned to the Berkshire inspector.

The story was a very simple one. A police-constable going the rounds at half-past three in the morning had noticed that the hall lamp was alight. He went up the garden path, pushed the door, and found it was open. It was then that he saw a pool of blood on the doorstep. He called out, but there was no answer, and knowing that Mrs. Gray lived alone, he waited no longer, but walked into the hall, saw the smears of blood on the distempered walls of the passage, and passed through the doorway of the drawing-room.

The lights were burning, and he saw just what the Orator had seen—that and no more: the signs of struggle.

Rater called in the two men who had accompanied him from Scotland Yard and pointed to the polished surface of a brass fender.

“There’s a finger-print—get that. When daylight comes I’ll have a more thorough search.”

There were the ashes of a fire in the grate, and on the hearth a charred piece of paper. He picked it up carefully. In a woman’s writing he read:

“Tried to kill me... defended myself...” The erratic character of the writing might stand for pain or fear, certainly for some abnormal condition of mind.

He put the scrap aside, and, going out, made a tour of the house. It was getting light now, and he made as careful an inspection as he had made of the inside. He saw the blood on the flagstones, and proof positive that a bleeding body had been dragged into the roadway. Here the trail was lost.

“Had she a car?”

She had a little two-seater. They found the doors of the garage closed, and the machine intact.

“Well?” Colonel Levington could be a silent spectator no longer. “It is pretty clear, isn’t it? She had a quarrel with somebody, they killed her and took her away——”

“Are these the women?” interrupted the Orator.

He saw two figures crossing the road. He had sent for the two servants, not expecting that they would throw any light upon the matter. Leading the elder woman—the cook—into the dining-room, he put the conventional questions to her. Colonel Levington came uninvited. Evidently the woman had been told what had happened, for she was white and shaking.

“Has anyone been here during the night?”

“Only Mr. Vanne, sir.”

The Orator scowled at her. It was a trick of his when he was surprised.

“Mr. Leicester Vanne?”

She nodded.

“What time was he here?”

“He was here when I left, sir. A friend of mine saw his car going up the London road about twelve. It’s not for me to say anything I oughtn’t to say, sir,” she went on, speaking with hysterical rapidity. “I don’t want to swear anybody’s life away, but they had a terrible quarrel.”

“Who?”

“Madam and Mr. Vanne, sir. He was shouting at the top of his voice. I heard him say ‘I insist upon an explanation,’ and I heard madam begging him not to speak so loud.”

“And you listened at the door—yes?” said the Orator.

The woman changed colour.

“Well, sir, I did. I won’t lie about it. I heard the missus say, ‘I can’t marry you and I won’t marry you. I refuse to tell you why, Dicky. If you loved me’—or something of the sort—you wouldn’t be so unreasonable.”

“And then?” said the Orator, jotting down in his notebook the gist of the conversation the cook had overheard.

“Then I heard him say, ‘I’d rather kill you than lose you.’ I’m perfectly sure he said that. I could go into the witness-box and take my Bible oath on it, though he’s a nice gentleman when he’s quiet, and I don’t want to get him into trouble.”

“Was there any noise when you left?”

The woman shook her head.

They were talking in quite a conversational tone when she said good night through the closed door. Her daughter had left an hour before the row started.

“Well, what do you make of that?” asked Colonel Levington, eagerly. “It seems to me the most obvious thing in the world. This fellow must have stayed on, there was another quarrel...”

“She had been to bed,” said the Orator, coldly; “and the man who committed the murder didn’t come in at the front door, he came in at the back. If you go round, you’ll find the jemmy marks on the door and the lock smashed.”

The Colonel was silent.

“Of course I know Mr. Leicester Vanne; in fact I’ve met him,” he said at last. “A man of violent temper. It seems to me that that is the direction where your investigations should—er—be directed.”

“That thought even occurred to me,” said the Orator, coldly.

It was half-past seven when he reached the mansion block in Park Lane where Mr. Leicester Vanne had his flat. From judicious enquiries he learned that Mr. Vanne parked his car in a lock-up garage near by. At 8 o’clock he returned, to find the cleaners were busy in the vestibule, and after a while he saw the porter, who would give him little information, having only come on duty at seven.

The flat was on the first floor, and it was Vanne who opened the door to him. He recognised the Orator instantly, and stiffened.

“Good morning, inspector.” His voice was cold and steady, but the detective saw that that calmness of his required an especial effort. “Come in.”

He opened the door wider with a suggestion of reluctance. Rater noticed that under his silk dressing-gown he was dressed. His face looked tired; he was unshaven; he had the appearance of a man who had spent a sleepless night.

Vanne led the way to the small study, and closed the door behind the detective.

“Well, what is it, Mr. Rater?”

The Orator did not answer; his eyes were fixed on the other’s.

“In the matter of Mrs. Gray, deceased,” he said.

He saw the man start.

“Deceased? Dead?” A look of incredulity was on his face. “What do you mean?”

With characteristic briefness, the Orator told the story of the night, and as he proceeded he saw the look of anxiety fade from the man’s face. At the end Vanne was laughing hysterically.

“How absurd! I thought——” He checked himself. “Do you think Mrs. Gray is dead?”

The Orator did not answer.

“Good God! You don’t imagine that I—that is too absurd.”

“I don’t imagine anything,” said the Orator. “I work on facts. There are bloodstains in that parlour at Sunningdale; there are bloodstains on the pavement outside the door, and signs of a body being dragged to the road.” He paused. “And there are bloodstains in your car, Mr. Vanne.”

Leicester Vanne was master of himself now. His face was a little paler as he realised the gravity of his position.

“Of course, you’ve seen the car. How stupid of me!” he said, and drew a long breath.

“Well?” asked the Orator.

Vanne shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ve nothing to say. I don’t know where Mrs. Gray is; I can give you no information whatever.”

Mr. Rater pursed his lips thoughtfully and stared past the man out of the window.

“Blood in your car,” he mused. “Were you dressed last night—evening dress?”

Vanne nodded slowly.

“I’d like to see that suit of yours, and particularly the shirt.”

Leicester Vanne’s eyes did not falter under the keen scrutiny of the other.

“I spilt some coffee on the front of my shirt, and I’ve burnt it,” he said. “The coat and trousers were old: I also put them into the furnace this morning before anybody was up. I tell you this because the night porter will probably tell you the same thing—he saw me going down to the basement with the parcel.”

“Bloodstains, of course,” said the Orator, absently. “You were with Mrs. Gray last night, there was a quarrel of some kind, and——”

Vanne made a gesture of despair.

“I’m always quarrelling with somebody,” he said, dejectedly. “My temper is foul! But after this...”

“Where is Mrs. Gray?” asked the Orator.

The man turned on him.

“I tell you I don’t know. I haven’t seen Mrs. Gray since last night. If you think I murdered her, arrest me.”

He was shaking with fury.

“Talking about not losing your temper——” began the Orator, and Vanne laughed hysterically.

“I know I’m a fool. I’m very sorry, inspector. I can tell you nothing more about Mrs. Gray. What a fool I’ve been! What an utterly hopeless idiot!”

“Yes,” said the inspector, as he turned to the door. “I’ll be seeing you later, Mr. Vanne.”

That morning he made a few quick enquiries, and at each point was satisfied.

At noon that day there was a conference at headquarters, from which Colonel Levington was tactfully excluded. At one o’clock came a wire from a doctor in Devonshire which put the Orator on to a new trail, and simultaneously the report from a certain cottage hospital near Horsham that supplied the last clue. That afternoon he called again on Vanne. The young man was dressed, and was evidently expecting him.

“I’m not going to give you any trouble. I’ll just get my hat——”

“No, I’m not arresting you, if that’s what you mean. I’m only asking for information,” said the Orator. “Exactly where did you leave the body?”

He was facing Vanne squarely. There was no fencing with the question.

“Exactly where did you leave the body?” asked the Orator again.

Vanne’s face was as white as death. “Five miles on the other side of Horsham—I didn’t leave it——”

“It left you,” said Rater grimly. “It’s in Langwell Cottage Hospital, with a superficial wound in the right arm... curious how those wounds bleed.” Vanne stared at him open-mouthed.

“Alive?” he whispered.

The Orator nodded.

“Suffers from fits—I found that in the records of Scotland Yard, and confirmed it with the prison doctor. I thought it might be something like that. These people don’t die so easily. But they look deader than any live people ought to look.”

He took a telegram from his pocket and opened it.

“Henry Walter Wassingheim is the gentleman’s name: he was convicted in the name of ‘Smith,’ which is unoriginal. I’m going down to Horsham to see that body,” he said. “I expect it’s all sober and lively by now. If Mrs. Gray had told me all about Henry Walter I could have given her all the evidence she wanted for her divorce. I don’t know what’s going to happen to you, Mr. Vanne, but I’d like you to do me a favour. Do you mind seeing Colonel

Levington and telling him all about it? He's naturally long-winded. I'm naturally ungifted for telling stories."

"I first met Mrs. Gray," said Vanne, not to Colonel Levington but to the Commissioner mostly concerned, "about five years ago. We met at the house of a mutual friend, and I don't disguise the fact that I fell immediately in love with her. In spite of my bad temper, she was an angel to me in all respects but one. She would never marry me. I thought she was a widow, and could see no reason why we should not be married. I did not know—nobody knew—that her husband was serving a sentence of ten years for a crime so hideous that she would not risk the publicity which a divorce would bring to her. They had been married secretly; nobody knew of the horrible life she had led with him. She was on the point of telling me, because she had heard he was about to be released, when unexpectedly on Saturday night he turned up at the house. He was drunk, more like a beast than a man. Somehow he had got to hear of her friendship with me, and put a wrong construction upon it, partly because he is incapable of understanding any friendship that is clean and wholesome. He tried to strangle her, and in defence she struck at him with a stiletto paper-knife that I had given to her, and he dropped, bleeding profusely. I know now that he was in a fit. She thought she had killed him, and hastily wrote a letter to me, intending to commit suicide. Writing, she grew a little calmer, and, burning the letter, called me up on the 'phone and told me what had happened. I drove to Sunningdale, and, first bringing her back to the flat, I returned to the cottage. My intention was to take the body to the seaside and leave it on the shore. Of course I made all sorts of blunders; leaving the hall lights burning and the door open was a terrible mistake if I intended covering up my tracks. I got into the car, and drove through Horsham, but on the other side, at the top of the hill, I developed engine trouble and stopped my car for a quarter of an hour. It must have been then that he recovered consciousness and crawled out of the tonneau. I did not miss him for ten minutes, and then, coming back, looked everywhere for him without success. Mrs. Gray was, of course, at my flat. She is now in Bournemouth. I was in terror when the inspector called, for fear he should make a search. It was for that reason, to give her time, that I told him I had burnt my clothes, which wasn't true. How did you know, inspector?"

Mr. Rater made a gesture of self-disparagement.

"The thumb-print on the fender was easy to identify at Scotland Yard. After that, the case worked itself out. Besides, this husband fellow had a statement in his pocket that he intended killing his unfaithful wife—I had a copy of that...."

He stopped, and shook his head.

“I’m talking too much,” he said.

A BANK AND A SECRETARY

THE ORATOR knew the London & Southern Bank, because what little money he possessed was in its safe keeping. He knew Mr. Baide, the general manager of the Piccadilly Branch, by sight, because Inspector Rater once occupied a very cheap apartment in St. James's Street, the owner of the flat making a special concession in the matter of rent, being under the impression that the presence of a detective officer of such high standing upon the premises would act as a scarecrow to possible burglars.

And, sitting at his window smoking his morning pipe, the Orator often saw Mr. Baide walking slowly up St. James's Street towards Piccadilly, his tall hat on the back of his head, his overcoat open summer and winter, his hands clasping behind him a furled umbrella, and on his placid face that peculiar expression of blankness which so often distinguishes the profound thinker.

As for Sir Isaac Mannheim, the President of the London & Southern, who did not know him? His great-grandfather had been born in Germany and had emigrated to England as a youth. But the Mannheims had remained German in name, whatever British characteristics they might have acquired, and most curiously did Sir Isaac refuse either to change his name on the outbreak or at the conclusion of war.

"It was good enough for my father and it is good enough for me," he said.

He served through the war with distinction, gained the D.S.O. and lost his left arm, and came back to a world so bitterly anti-German that he might have been excused if he had yielded to the entreaties of his fellow directors. He listened in silence, grinned unpleasantly, and then:

"Give me back my left arm and I'll think about changing my name," he said.

He was an autocrat of autocrats; the directors of the bank were the merest ciphers—were in reality his nominees. Yet such was his genius that he raised the London & Southern to the highest position in the City of London, and, rejecting all offers of absorption, came out in the end the only formidable rival to the Big Six.

He was a good sportsman, a very gallant fellow, a rider to hounds and the adored head of his family. Here appears and disappears Sir Isaac Mannheim from the story of the big cheque fraud.

The Orator had met him once and had been impressed. Later he was to be extremely annoyed with this Jewish gentleman, for reasons which will be apparent.

It was a curious coincidence that at the time Inspector Rater was called in by the London & Southern Bank he was engaged in investigating the affairs of Mr. Joseph Purdew, some time of Dartmoor Prison, ex-convict, ex-confidence man, ex-fraudulent promoter. Mr Rater was interested to discover how many of those “ex’s” were honorary titles, and seemingly they all came into this category, for Joe Purdew was indubitably well established, with an office in a fashionable West End thoroughfare, as a bookmaker and commission agent, and the one glance Inspector Rater threw round the office convinced him that, whatever the graft might be, it was lucrative.

When he was ushered into the holy of holies, where Joe Purdew sat at an empire desk chewing a gold toothpick, it occurred to the visitor for one fleeting moment that Joe was not too happy to see him. The synthetic heartiness of the greeting would not have deceived a child.

“Why, fancy meeting you, Mr. Rater! Come in, come in. Have a glass of wine with me.”

Joe was stout and purple, and fussed round the room like an old hen, carefully closing the polished mahogany door which separated him from secular companionship.

“It’s a funny thing, I meant to write to you the other day.”

“What’s the swindle?” asked Rater, shaking his head at the invitation to wine.

Joe beamed.

“No swindle, Mr. Rater—I’m running a straight business. I’ve got four hundred of the best people in London on my books—profits nearly a thousand a week. Mugs, I agree, but mug-catching isn’t a crime, thank Gawd!”

He traded in the name of “Bull & England,” which had a patriotic flavour to it.

“Everything’s straight and above-board, Mr. Rater. I’ve finished with the old game,” said Joe virtuously. “What I like is to be able to sit down in my house in Bayswater without the fear of a busy coming in and tapping me on the

shoulder and asking me to step round and see the sergeant. Remember that time you pinched me at Southampton? But, Lord, I bear no malice....”

Mr. Rater had no special reason for calling. He had heard of Joe’s newest occupation, and had dropped in to satisfy his curiosity.

As he pulled the door of the outer office open he nearly collided with a lady who was standing on the mat. She was tall and imposing; her hair was a deep auburn, and whatever defects there might have been to her complexion had been artificially rectified. She had good features, rather fine, lightish-grey eyes, and as she was expensively dressed he supposed that she was one of those four hundred best people in London of whom Joe had boasted.

The second impression, which arrived immediately on top of the other, was that he had met her before. Memory plays tricks; in some obscure fashion she was associated in his mind with a broken pane of glass.

He stepped aside to allow her to enter the office, and she passed him majestically.

He had returned to Scotland Yard when the first report of the London & Southern Bank fraud was brought to him. The minute covered two pages of foolscap and contained surprisingly little information. The plain fact was that a cheque drawn for £35,000 had been presented and honoured, and that the signature was afterwards discovered to be a forgery.

Mr. Baide came into the outer office to meet the visitor. He was tall and stout and worried-looking, his grey hair untidy, his weary eyes eloquent of a sleepless night.

The Piccadilly branch of the London & Southern Bank had been recently rebuilt. The bank premises were the last word in luxurious dignity, and Inspector Rater, whose architectural tastes ran in the direction of domed roofs and serpentine marble, had a sense of contentment.

Mr. Baide led him to his private office, carefully closed the door and pulled up a chair to the desk.

“It is a most terrible business,” he said. “I have never before had such a thing happen —never! For thirty-five years I have been a servant of the bank, and never once has a forgery come my way.”

“You’re lucky,” said the Orator.

He was not interested in the manager’s biography. He wanted to hear only of a certain cheque for £35,000 which had been presented by somebody who

had never been seen, honoured by an unknown cashier, the transaction entered up by a mysterious clerk....

“The first intimation I had that anything was wrong was when Mr. Gillan’s secretary came to me with the pass-book and told me that there was no record of a sum of £35,000 being withdrawn. The record we have—and it is entered in a strange hand—is this.”

He opened a large loose-leaf ledger and pointed to a line:

Bearer cheque £35,000.

“The cheque we found—it had by mistake been filed under another name, ‘Gilby.’ It is unmistakably a forgery. Here it is.”

He handed a slip of paper to the detective, who looked at it, smelt it, held it up to the light, and finally laid it on the table before him.

“Is this from one of Mr. Gillan’s cheque-books?” he asked. “You keep a record of the cheque-books which you issue?” The manager nodded.

“Yes; it was the last cheque but one in a book which was issued to Mr. Gillan a month ago. We are in the habit of sending him ten books, each containing a hundred blank cheques, every six months. Mr. Gillan is a very rich stockbroker, who lives in Grosvenor Square, and this is not only his private, but to some extent his business, account.”

The Orator examined the cheque again. It had been privately printed, and the words “Thomas L. Gillan Account” were inserted in small letters above the name of the bank. It was, he observed, counter-signed in the bottom left-hand corner with the initials “C.E.”

“Who is ‘C.E.’?” he asked.

Mr. Baide smiled wanly.

“Nobody,” he said. “That is a code which means thirty-five thousand. When Mr Gillan signs a cheque for a thousand pounds or upwards he indicates the fact by these initials. The ‘C’ stands for ‘3,’ the ‘E’ for ‘5.’ If it were for one thousand pounds it would be ‘A.’”

“Who knows about this code?” asked the Orator. “You, of course. But who else?”

The manager half shook his head.

“It was a matter entirely between Mr. Gillan and myself. All big cheques have to come to me for verification, and—that is the curious thing—this cheque was not brought to me. My secretary was only remarking this morning that I must have detected the fraud——”

“Who is your secretary?”

“You had better see her.”

Mr. Baide pressed a bell; a few seconds later the glass door opened and into the Orator’s life came Miss Helen Lyne.

She was little above medium height, but her slimness gave the impression that she was taller than she was. She was rather pretty in an enigmatic way; her hair was dark and brushed back from her forehead; the horn-rimmed glasses she wore were probably an improvement to her appearance. He guessed her to be somewhere in the region of twenty-four. She looked and he learnt afterwards that she was very capable; she was at any rate immensely self-possessed. She met the detective’s eyes without flinching.

“This is Miss Lyne,” said the manager.

Rater nodded.

“Do you know about the code?” he asked abruptly.

For a second her straight eyebrows met in a frown of bewilderment. Then her face cleared.

“Oh, you mean the code on Mr. Gillan’s cheques—yes.”

Mr. Baide’s mouth opened in astonishment.

“But I never told you!” he blurted.

Her red lips curved in a smile.

“No, but it was very obvious. I’ve seen so many of Mr. Gillan’s cheques and I’ve noticed that the counter-signature varies, so I guessed it was a code.”

“The cheque was not brought into this office while Mr. Baide was out?”

She shook her head.

“No, I’ve never seen it before.”

He asked her one or two questions, and all the time her eyes were fixed on his. There was the ghost of amusement in them once, he thought, and was piqued. Eventually he dismissed her, waited till the door was closed, then walked slowly towards it and opened it quickly. She was nowhere in sight.

“Where did you find this girl?” he asked.

Mr. Baide fetched a long sigh.

“She is very capable, but I can’t get on with her,” he said. “She was sent to me from head office about six months ago. I’ve no complaints against her: she is most industrious and often she’ll work here for an hour after I’ve left, checking up correspondence.”

“Where do you keep your keys?”

Baide led him to a wall safe.

“Here,” he said, and showed, hanging on steel pegs, about twenty keys great and small.

“What are those?” asked the Orator, and the manager explained.

The majority were pass-keys. That one was the main office safe, and that the strong-room, another was a pass-key to all the upstairs offices.

“Miss Lyne ever go to this safe?”

The other hesitated.

“Yes, I think she’s been once or twice, but I trust her, naturally; she was sent to me from head office by Sir Isaac himself. Sir Isaac never makes a mistake.”

“Sir Isaac Mannheim? Where is he now?”

Again the manager sighed.

“He’s on his yacht, cruising in the Mediterranean. We’ve been trying to get in touch with him, but we haven’t succeeded so far.”

Later the Orator interviewed the assistant manager, the chief accountant and the head cashier. Until late in the afternoon he was in possession of Mr. Baide’s office, questioning and cross-questioning clerks and tellers, and in the end was as wise as he had been when he had read the first minuted report.

Before he left he sent for Baide, who had taken up his quarters in the assistant manager's office.

"Obviously this job has been done from inside the office, by somebody who has access to the books and therefore to your safe," he said.

Mr. Baide waited expectantly; if he imagined that the Orator would give him an account of his conclusions he was disappointed. Mr. Rater went back to headquarters and, interviewing his chief, discussed very briefly what he had learnt.

"Gillan, was it?" The Chief Constable scratched his nose thoughtfully. "That's funny! Gillan was supposed to have been killed the day after that cheque was presented—there was an aeroplane smash in Kent, and you remember his name was among the casualties. Apparently it was another man with very nearly the same name."

The Orator stared at him thoughtfully but said nothing.

The next morning he arrived at the bank, to learn that Mr. Baide had not put in an appearance: he was suffering from a nervous breakdown and was apparently in a bad way.

"You'll tell me what I wish to know," said the Orator to the assistant manager. "I want a list of all your customers that have died in the last twelve months and——"

He heard an exclamation behind him and turned quickly. Miss Lyne had come noiselessly into the room and she was staring at him in wonder. And then she said a thing for which the Orator never completely forgave her.

"How very clever of you!" she said.

He was still gasping at this piece of impertinence on the girl's part when a clerk came into the room.

"Will you see Mrs. Luben-Kellner?" he asked of the assistant manager.

The name was familiar to the Orator, and then he remembered: Mrs. Luben-Kellner was a racehorse owner and something of a figure in the sporting world, not by reason of her horses' victories, which were few and far between, but by reason of their mediocrity. She had the reputation of having the worst stable of horses in England, and they had apparently been acquired at some expense. Perhaps their bad qualities were due to the fact that she herself trained them. She was the only woman trainer in England, and was rather jealous of that reputation.

The assistant manager looked a little dubiously at the Orator.

“I’d better see this lady.”

“Do you want the room?”

The assistant manager hesitated.

“No. It won’t be very private, if you don’t mind her being shown in here?”

Mr. Rater shook his head. He never objected to meeting people.

When the door opened, there came into the room, bringing with her the fragrance of an exotic perfume, the lady he had seen on the door-mat of Joe Purdew’s office. The recognition was mutual; she shot one quick glance at the detective, and when she spoke her voice was a little husky.

“I’m sorry to trouble you, mister, but—where’s Mr. Baide?”

“He’s not very well to-day, madam,” said the assistant manager, “but I can fix anything you want.”

Again she looked at the detective, and was obviously at a loss as to how she should proceed.

“I’d rather discuss this matter without strangers being present,” she said. Her voice was shrill, common; whatever veneer of refinement there was was scratched away in her agitation.

There was nothing for the Orator to do but to leave the room. He was puzzled. Again he had that flashing recollection of a pane of broken glass.

The assistant manager came out after a while, went into Baide’s office and returned again to his visitor. Inspector Rater waited till the woman was gone, then the assistant manager came out of his room and beckoned him.

“Who is she?” asked Mr. Rater.

The official shrugged. He didn’t know very much, except that she was a lady with a large income. More than this he would not tell. Banks are not frank about their customers—especially to detective officers.

“As a matter of fact, she didn’t come on business. She said she left a notebook in Mr. Baide’s office—she came to see him yesterday.”

While he had been waiting for the lady to go, the Orator had located the office of the secretary. He had a few inquiries to make of her, but the result

of his questioning had not, so far, been at all satisfactory. On his way out he stopped at the door of her office, turned the handle and stepped in. She was sitting at a typewriter desk, and so quietly had he entered that she did not realise he was there until he spoke, and then she closed a little note-book she was reading, so hurriedly that he guessed he had interrupted an important study.

“Why clever?” he said.

She swung round in her swivel chair so that she faced and looked up to him, and again he saw that mocking smile and the twitching at the corners of the red lips.

“I thought it was awfully clever of you! You’re Mr. Rater, aren’t you?”

He nodded.

“Somebody told me that you never spoke, but you’ve made quite a lot of speeches since you’ve been here, haven’t you?”

For some reason Mr. Rater found himself going red. He was more furious with himself than with the girl,

“Young lady,” he said, gently, “two people ever tried to pull my leg, and only one of them escaped the gallows!”

Her amusement was undisguised now. “Then I’m afraid I’m in for a nasty sticky time!” she said. “I’m sorry, Mr. Rater. I was only joking. But I do think it was clever of you to remember that when a person dies there is less likely to be a fuss about his forged cheque than if he’s alive to repudiate it. And almost everybody thought Mr. Gillan was dead, didn’t they? And here he is, alive and well and raising hell, if you’ll forgive the unladylike expression.”

The Orator regarded her soberly. “How clever of you!” he said. “You know so much that I’m in three minds to take you along to Cannon Row or maybe to Scotland Yard, and have a real tea-table talk with you.” She shook her head.

“You’d be wasting your time, O Orator! But I can quite understand your point of view. I’ll show you something.”

She opened the bottom drawer of her little desk and took out a small new diary. It was the sort of thing that could be purchased for a shilling. She turned the leaves rapidly, and held up an open page to him. It was covered with neat figures, and the Orator noticed that the last was £35,000.

“That is what Mrs. Kellner came for, and I said I hadn’t seen it!”

The Orator took the book from her and slipped it into his pocket.

“Interesting,” said Mr. Rater. “Now I’d like to hand you a few startling facts, young lady. Do you know Joe Purdew?”

To his surprise she nodded.

“Snide bookmaker, isn’t he?”

“Very snide,” she answered, soberly.

“Mean fellow, too? There’s a girl goes there and sees him every evening. Her hair isn’t straight like yours, and she doesn’t wear horn-rimmed spectacles.”

“She may do when she is inside,” said the girl, quietly. “She really is short-sighted.”

“But she doesn’t wear her hair like you.”

Miss Lyne shook her head.

“And she doesn’t call herself Miss Lyne. Miss Lerner, as far as I can remember.”

The smile came back to her face slowly.

“You are clever!” she said, with obvious admiration.

“Nothing clever about spotting you. Now, young lady, perhaps you’ll tell me all about the why and wherefore of your evening calls on my crooked friend.”

The smile left her face. She thought for a moment, and then:

“Accountancy. I’m the young lady who does the books. He gets me cheaply, and he’s given up his desire to make love to me—that was a nuisance at first.”

“Who put you in this office?” interrupted the Orator.

“This bank office?—Sir Isaac,” she replied. The Orator scratched his chin. The answer seemed sufficient.

“Mrs. Kellner is a customer of Joe’s?” She nodded.

“The best customer he has,” she said drily. “Can’t understand her, and can’t understand myself,” he mused. “Whenever I see that woman I think of a bit of broken glass——”

“A picture-frame?” she suggested, and the Orator jumped. He reached out his hand and gripped hers warmly.

“Where does she live?”

“At Pentley, in Berkshire, if you want to find her.”

“Married?”

The girl nodded.

“She’s almost straight,” she said, seriously. “Only she’s got this peculiar vanity about horses—she thinks she understands them. I have an idea she must be the victim of her first husband. Have you ever seen her second husband come to town? He arrives in a swagger motor-car and invariably gets out near the Guards Memorial in Green Park and makes the rest of the journey on foot——”

The Orator waved her to silence. It was not a moment when he wanted anybody to crow over him, and this girl was unmistakably crowing.

An hour and a quarter from town is a tiny village that nestles at the foot of the Berkshire hills. On the crest, and within sight of the beautiful downs, is a large red house that stands in ten acres of ground. The Orator did not drive up to the front door; he left his car at some distance from the house, and, like the second husband of Mrs. Kellner, went afoot. Nor, after his long walk through the grounds, did he approach the house directly until he saw that the big front doors were wide open. Nor did he ring: he stepped into the spacious hall and listened.

The sound of voices that he heard came from a room beyond the stairway, and, with no thought or worry as to what would happen if he were discovered by a servant, he stepped softly forward and listened....

Mrs. Luben-Kellner could be very coarse. She was being very coarse now.

“... Skulking here, when you ought to be up and doing and showing your face... what do you think that ‘busy’ will think?... You know what a busy is,” she said, impatiently, in answer to a mumbled enquiry. “You’re going to bring me to ruin, that’s what you’re going to do. Fancy leavin’ that damn’ book at the office for everybody to read! And Mr. Purdew says that he’ll be brought into it too.”

A groan of a voice, indistinct and indecipherable. Then the woman's shrill voice rose again.

"You'll be all right if you do as Joe—Mr. Purdew tells you. Go back to the office to-morrow... nobody knows, nobody'll ever dream it's you——"

It was at this point that the Orator opened the door. Mr. Baide sat hunched up in a big deep chair, his elbows on his knees, his big hands covering his face.

"Why did I do it... why did I ever do it?" he asked, wildly. "You've been a bad wife to me... I've been entirely dominated by you. I hate horses, I hate horse-racing.... Oh, God! I wish I'd never seen you! I wish I could get rid of you!"

"I can help you there," said the Orator.

Baide leapt to his feet, his face the colour of chalk.

"I'm terribly sorry you thought I was rude to you," said Miss Lyne, penitently. "But then, you must remember, Mr. Rater, that I regard you as an interloper. Dobell's Detective Agency has been on this case for two years. Harry Dobell is my brother. He sent me six months ago to get all the facts. You see, Sir Isaac has been suspicious for a long time. Whenever a customer of the bank died suddenly, the executors invariably had a dispute about some cheque that had been drawn a day before the death. I think that was Joe's idea—he's an old friend of yours, isn't he? The moment he heard that a customer with a big account had died, a cheque was prepared and passed through the account by poor old Baide. Sometimes no questions were asked; the executors did not attempt to trace the money, and the thing might never have been discovered so completely but for the report of Gillan's death. The unbelievable thing is that Mrs. Joe did all her betting with her husband—and really expected to be paid if she won!"

The Orator ran his fingers through his hair and smiled irritably.

"What a fool I was not to remember that I'd seen her portrait in Joe's baggage the last time I pinched him!"

"Nobody will ever know how poor Mr. Baide fell into their clutches." She shook her head sadly.

"Such a nice old gentleman! What are you charging Mrs. Kellner with?"

"Bigamy," said the Orator, "and conspiracy." The girl shook her head. "It's a pity; she's been punished enough. You don't realise that, because Joe never made love to you."

THE MAN NEXT DOOR

WHEN Mr. Giles walked into the Chief Inspector's room, he did so with a cheerful assurance. His attitude proclaimed the fact that he had nothing whatever to fear from Scotland Yard or its genii; there was a smile on his red face and a frank geniality in his blue eyes which would have been proper to a man whose past was beyond reproach.

"Good morning, Mr. Rater: it's very good of you to see me, I'm sure. When I wrote, I said to myself: 'I wonder if the gov'nor will spare me a minute?' The fact is, I've been trying to make up my mind to write to you for some time."

"Sit down, Farmer," said the Orator, gently. He whose rubicund countenance and expansive manner, no less than the accident of his surname, had earned him the nickname, smiled wider than ever and drew a chair to the inspector's table.

"You know what things are, Mr. Rater! When a man's had a little bit of trouble with the police and is starting all over again to build up his reputation, he sort of shrinks from getting in touch with the police or authorities, if I may use that expression."

"Straight now, Farmer?" The Orator's steady eyes were coldly sceptical.

"Ab-so-lutely! The other game doesn't pay, Mr. Rater. You know that. Yes, I've had a bit of luck. An uncle of mine set me up in business. Naturally, he doesn't know the jokes I've been up to——"

"What kind of business?"

'Farmer' Giles dived into a pocket and extracted a pocket-case. The Orator took the large card which was handed across to him:

J. Giles & Co.

(Late Olney, Brown & Stermer)

agents

479 Cannon Street, E.C.

"Agent' tells me everything!" said Mr. Rater. "What are you—a bookmaker?"

But it appeared that the Farmer was the proprietor of a prosperous general agency.

“The business is increasing every month,” he said, enthusiastically. “I’ve worked it up in eighteen months to double what it used to be. My uncle—well, I’ll tell you the truth, Mr. Rater—I bought it with my own money. Twelve hundred of the best. I’ve always been a very careful man, as you know, and I’ve put money aside. What’s the use of my telling you lies? It was my own money, got on the cross, most of it... you’re too wide to believe it wasn’t. I’ve been making up my mind to come and have a chat with you——”

“I recognised you in the city, and you know I recognised you,” interrupted the Orator. “Yes, the business is O.K. I’ve had you taped up.”

The Farmer beamed.

“Trust you! I said to my wife—quite a lady, Mr. Rater—she was in business herself when I picked her up—I said: ‘Molly, if there’s anybody wider than Mr. Rater, I don’t want to meet him!’ My very words!”

“Married, eh?”

Mr. Giles nodded.

“Eighteen months. I’d like you to come down to tea one Sunday. She’s as pretty as a picture. It’s not much of a neighbourhood —908 Acacia Street—and we’ve got a few queer birds living in our road. One of these days I’ll get a flat up West, but I always say ‘Creep before you crawl!’”

He was a man given to the employment of trite maxims.

“908 Acacia Street!”

The Orator had two causes for astonishment. Acacia Street he knew. It was a long avenue of very small houses, the last thoroughfare in which you might expect to find the residence of J. Giles & Co. (late Olnor, Brown & Stermer), Merchants of the City of London.

“This is my point, gov’nor.” The Farmer was anxious to explain the modesty of his habitation. “I’m trying to make an honest living. I’m earning good money, but what happens if I come up West and take a flash flat? First of all, the police start making enquiries; secondly, I meet my old friends, and that starts me wrong.”

“Very creditable,” murmured Inspector Rater; “also you’re not known in Brockley.”

“Exactly!” said the other.

He took up his hat from the floor where he had placed it and smoothed the crown.

“Do you know a man called Smith—George Smith?” he asked.

The Orator looked at the ceiling.

“It’s an uncommon name,” he said; and the Farmer grinned.

“You will have your joke, gov’nor! He lives next door to me, and I wouldn’t be surprised if he wasn’t a lag. He’s a sanctimonious sort of fellow, and goes to church; but all I know is that the night the boys did that job at Blackheath and got away with eight thousand quids worth of sparklers, he was out all night; I happened to know because I saw him come home at five.” “You having worked at your office all night?” murmured the Inspector, and for a moment the caller was disconcerted.

“No. To tell you the truth, I’m an early riser.”

“You always were, Farmer,” said Mr. Rater, and offered a limp hand.

908 Acacia Street! And at 910 lived a certain man who was a wood carver by trade and who dabbled in electrical contrivances.

A coincidence: a portent, probably—Mr. Rater found material for speculation.

Giles went back to his office in Cannon Street. He had some rooms on the second floor of a business block, and attended to the more intimate side of his affairs. He had in truth purchased the wreckage of a once prosperous concern, but with little intention of putting it to a legitimate use. Even when that remarkable order had been cabled to him from a client of the old firm, and he had been notified by the bankers that £6,000 had been placed to his credit for the purpose of making the purchase, his first inclination had been to draw the money and vanish gracefully. He had, however, taken over two clerks with the business, and one of these explained that the money could only be drawn on presentation of the invoices for the goods; thereupon Mr. Giles most virtuously, and with the assistance of the clerk who knew something about the execution of orders, carried out his duties, received his small commission and was more or less content.

It so happened that the order he filled was an advantageous one, and at the end of six months trading he found his clientele had increased threefold.

He was only mildly interested in the phenomenon, for his interests lay elsewhere than in the pure paths of commerce. J. Giles & Co. was really the

head clerk, who conducted all negotiations and did no more than bring cheques to be endorsed or signed (the former operation was carried out by Mr. Giles willingly, the latter suspiciously), and he left to his employer other negotiations more delicate than the head clerk imagined.

The shipping of second-hand motor-cars to India and the Far East is a lucrative business, if you do not pay too much for the cars. And Mr. Giles paid next to nothing. He had a stabling yard adjacent to the London Docks, where cars would be crated, and it was on the shipment of these machines that his fortune was founded. He had got the strength of this graft from a man he met in Dartmoor, and he might have accumulated a fortune on the disposal of the stolen machines—he was on his way to being the biggest car fence in London—and from the legitimate profits of his business, if that unfortunate spirit of adventure which was his downfall had remained dormant.

On the night before he had interviewed Mr. Rater, he had visited Sunningdale in a stolen car, and, accompanied by two willing helpers, had lifted from a locked house some £1,500 worth of silver, and that was not his first job.

The modus operandi of the little gang can be simply described. A motor-car left unattended was 'knocked-off' by one of the confederates; the other two were picked up in a quiet suburban street, and the car was driven to the house which had been marked down for attack. He had found some little difficulty in securing assistance. Higgy James, whom he eventually secured, voiced the objection of his kind.

"You're a good workman, Farmer, but what about that gun of yours? If you're carrying one, miss me out. You've done a seven for shooting at a copper, and the next time it'll be life, and anybody who's with you may get the same. I'm not playing unless you cut out the shooter."

The English criminal's horror of being found in possession of firearms is natural. The pistol embellished burglar receives an automatic addition of five years for his armament should he find himself interviewing one of His Majesty's judges.

The silver from the overnight raid had already been melted, and in bar form would be disposed of by J. Giles & Co. (late Olney, Brown & Stermer), Merchants & Shippers. He finished work early and went to Acacia Street, having a certain matter to settle. As he passed No. 910, where his offending neighbour lived, he scowled at the unlighted window. No. 910 was built against his own house, which was of a semidetached order. Giles opened his

own door with a key, and strode into the dining-room. The girl who was sitting by the side of the fire, sewing, got up quickly, and a stranger observing the scene, with no knowledge of their relationship, might have supposed that she stood in terror of him, for all the smile she forced. If she was not as pretty as a picture, that was entirely Farmer Giles' fault, but the bruise had almost disappeared, he was pleased to note— pleased because that old so-and-so Rater might very easily take it into his head to accept the invitation he had given.

“Get my tea,” he said, curtly.

“Yes, dear.”

As she moved to the door he called her back.

“Has that fellow next door been smarming round?”

“No, dear; he hasn't spoken to me; I haven't seen him”

“Don't tell me no lies!” His voice rose menacingly. “You let me come back and catch you gossiping over the garden wall and see what happens to you, my girl!”

She did not answer; fear struck the colour from her face as she stood tense, waiting.

“I picked you up out of the gutter, so to speak,” said J. Giles. “A bit of a shop gal, up to your eyes in debt. Why I married you I don't know: I must have been crazy with the heat. I've given you a home and all the luxury that the heart can desire.”

“Yes, dear; I'm very grateful.” She hastened to speak, but he silenced her with a wave of his hand.

“My tea,” he said.

He often woke up in the morning with a dismal sense of his lunacy in marrying this girl. Men should stick to their own game, and his game was burglary and not bigamy. Here was a handle for the 'busies' if they ever got to know about his first marriage; and just as he was making good, and had three thousand 'ready' stowed away in the Northern and Southern Bank. The more he thought about his danger from this source, the more he hated her. It was inconsistent in him that he objected to the attentions of the man next door. If the old fool hadn't knocked on the wall in the middle of the night, and later come with an overcoat over his pyjamas to ask what was the meaning of the screams, he might have used Mr. Smith for his own

purposes. He wasn't a bad-looking fellow, either, though rather grey and sombre. When the Farmer had caught him by the throat and had attempted to throw him into the street, the intruder had pinned him as though he were a child, had shaken off the grip and flung the Farmer the length of the passage.

Joe Giles brooded before the fire till the girl brought in his tea and placed the tray on the table. For a long time he ignored her presence, and then, without looking at her:

"If a fellow named Rater calls, he's from Scotland Yard—a friend of mine. I know everybody at Scotland Yard—I have to, in my business; but you needn't tell him anything about me, do you hear?"

"Yes, dear."

A long silence; and then: "What's that fellow next door do for a living?"

"I don't know, Joe."

"I don't know, Joe!" he mimicked her. "Do you know anything?"

She shrank back from the threat of his uplifted hand, and he laughed.

"You behave yourself and I'll behave myself," he said. "I've got a gentleman calling on me to-night: when he comes, you go up to the bedroom. If I want you I'll send for you."

He looked at his watch and yawned, and, going up to the bathroom, washed himself and announced his intention of going out for an hour. Once, in the early days of their marriage, she had made the mistake of asking him where he was going, but that folly had not been repeated.

She waited until the door slammed on him, passed quickly into the drawing-room with its bow window, and through the curtains watched him till he disappeared; then she went through the kitchen, leaving all the doors open so that she could hear, knowing that her neighbour would have heard the door slam.

He was waiting in the garden, a dark figure in the gloom.

"I had to lie to him, Mr. Smith," she said. "I said I hadn't spoken to you. What am I to do?"

Her voice was vibrant with despair; and yet she found a certain dismal happiness in talking to him. Every night the girl went out at the same hour,

and every night she made her way to the garden to discuss a problem which had been hopeless at its outset and was hopeless yet.

“Well, you hadn’t seen me to-day.” His voice was rough but kindly. “Has he beaten you again?”

She shook her head: he could just see that gesture.

“No, he hasn’t struck me since you came the other night. I don’t know what to do, Mr. Smith, I’m so terrified of him. He gives me no money, so I can’t run away from him. If I went back to my old job at Harridge’s he would follow me. He terrifies me. Sometimes I think I shall put my head in the gas oven and end it all.”

“You’re talking like a fool.” The man’s voice was sharp, but almost instantly he became his gentle self. “I’ll find a way out for——”

“Who is Mr. Rater of Scotland Yard?” she asked, suddenly.

“Why?” He had obviously been startled by the question.

“Joe was talking about him; said he would be likely to call. Do you know him?”

A pause.

“Yes, I know him. I met him once. When is he coming?”

His tone was anxious, and she wondered what Rater stood for in his mind.

“I don’t know if he’s coming at all. Joe only said that he might be calling. He wants to know what you do for a living.”

She heard a chuckle from the other side of the wall.

“He does, does he? Well, you can tell him the truth: I’m a working woodcarver—he’s seen me at the bench often enough; and I’ve another job, which is my own private affair and I never talk about it.”

“I’ll bet you don’t, you dirty trickster.”

The girl screamed and turned in horror, to find her husband standing almost by her side. He had crept back without a sound, and had overheard the last part of the conversation. She would have fled past him, but he caught her by the arm in a grip that made her scream again.

“You wait here. So this is what you do when I go out in the evening, eh? I’ll settle with you later, Smith.”

He dragged the girl inside and bolted the door. Mr. Smith, who was by no means a squeamish man, made a little grimace as her cries came out to him...

She lay huddled on the bed, too weak, too stunned even to cry. Mr. J. Giles buttoned his wristband and put on his coat.

“Now you can go to bed, my girl, and be thankful you’re alive,” he said.

He locked the bedroom door on her and went downstairs into the kitchen and chose an empty soda-water bottle. Then he went out of the house and knocked at Mr. Smith’s door. He was glad to notice that the hallway was in darkness. He heard the footsteps of the man, and then the door was pulled wide open.

“Well?”

Evidently Joe had been recognised.

“I thought I’d come to see you, Mr. Smith”— Giles’ manner was polite, even deferential “—and ask you as a great favour to me not to talk to my wife. She’s a very foolish girl, and I don’t want to get her into trouble of any kind, and——”

His tone was so conciliatory, his manner so completely subdued, that Smith was off his guard. He saw, only for the fraction of a second, the weapon in the man’s hand, and ducked his head as the soda-water bottle struck him. He went down on his knees and collapsed in a heap on the floor, and Mr. J. Giles closed the door carefully and went back into his house to spend an uncomfortable half-hour. Suppose this bird went to the police... that was the second mad thing he had done.

From time to time he pressed his ear against the thin party wall, and had the satisfaction of hearing the stumbling feet of his victim. Taking up a position in the parlour where he could watch the front door, he waited for the man to emerge; but half an hour and an hour passed, and nothing happened. The Farmer smiled. There was probably a very good reason why the man should not go to the police.

Towards ten o’clock the man he expected called. It was ‘Higgy,’ the best of runners and the loyalest of assistants. There was a job ready for the

working—a big house on the outskirts of Horsham. The family were away; there were seven maidservants and two elderly men.

“The old lady who owns the house is down at Bournemouth, and keeps all her jewels in the safe. You can’t see it because it’s let into the wall behind the head of the bed. ‘Stokey’ Barmond went through the house yesterday—he got pally with a gel servant—and he says it’s easy. A French safe that you could open with your finger-nails, and lashings of jewellery—old-fashioned, but the stones are extra.”

“What’s the best way for the car?” asked Mr. Giles.

‘Higgy’ explained. There was a side road where it could be parked, and from there over a low boundary wall into the grounds was ‘a step.’ He produced a fairly accurate plan, for ‘Higgy’ in his youth had been apprenticed to a cartographer. This the Farmer scanned carefully.

“It looks good. Get ‘Stokey’ to knock off a car to-morrow night, and pick me up at the top of Denmark Hill.”

“No shooters,” said ‘Higgy.’ It was his conventional warning.

“Is it likely?” demanded the Farmer.

It was his conventional reply.

Nevertheless, when he went up to his room he took his Browning from a locked drawer, and slipped in a full magazine. He knew better than any that his next stretch would be a lifer, and he would as soon hang.

That morning he had seen Smith with a bandage round his head. He was standing at a little iron gate that shut off the forecourt of his house from the road. For a moment, at the sight of him, the heart of J. Giles had quailed and he had gripped the loaded cane he carried.

“Good morning,” said Smith. “I’ve got a bone to pick with you.”

“Pick it when you like,” said the Farmer, keeping his distance.

The man shook his head.

“I think you’ll choose the time yourself,” he said, and with the mysterious hint they parted.

All day long Mr. Smith considered his position, and in the evening, after the Farmer had gone to his nefarious work, the man next door went out to find

a telephone booth and Rater. For the party walls were very thin, and Mr. Smith, who made a hobby of wire and other electrical contraptions, had made for himself a small microphone...

"You've left it rather late Smith," said the Orator; but anticipated Smith's explanation.

"It's a queer thing for me to do, sir. I can't very well go into the box, and that's been worrying me all day."

The Orator only waited long enough at Scotland Yard to get into touch with the Sussex police before he boarded a swift tender and took the Worthing road.

The Farmer's gift of organisation was of a high order. Almost to the minute he was picked up at the top of Denmark Hill by a light car, the proprietorship in which had undergone a change in the previous hour. 'Higgy' was at the wheel, their companion in the seat behind.

"You picked a good 'un," said the Farmer graciously, which was high praise for him.

They passed through Horsham in a blinding shower of rain which would have made police observation a difficult business even if 'Higgy' had not already changed the number-plate of the stolen car and covered its radiator with a muff.

As they approached the scene of their exploit, 'Higgy' asked, not without anxiety:

"You haven't brought your shooter, have you, Farmer?" and Mr. Giles turned on him savagely.

"What's the matter with you? Would you get a stretch for my gun? It's me that's got to go through it if we're caught—not you!"

Nevertheless, 'Higgy' persisted stubbornly.

"Have you got a gun or haven't you?"

"I haven't," snapped the Farmer.

'Higgy' said nothing, but he was not convinced. It was his task to stand by the car, and at the first sound of a shot—well, 'Higgy' knew his own graft best. He'd be half-way to Horsham before the Farmer reached the road. He had already got his excuses ready for his desertion.

The car turned into the side lane, moving silently on the downward slope with its engine shut off till 'Higgy' braked the machine to a jolting standstill. There was a whispered consultation. Crossing the wall, Farmer and his assistant disappeared into the night. 'Higgy' loosed the brakes, and, by pushing and pulling, managed to turn the nose of the machine about without switching on his engine. He waited for ten minutes to pass, trod on the starter and set the engine going. A quarter of an hour, and he was half-dozing at the wheel, when he heard the squelch of a footstep, and a light was suddenly flashed in his face.

"Step down and don't shout," said a terse voice. 'Higgy' was conscious that the lane was full of uniformed policemen, two of whom were already crossing the wall.

The Farmer had reached his objective, and with the assistance of a convenient porch had forced a window which brought him to the bedroom. The safe proved to be almost as easy money as he had anticipated. In a quarter of an hour he had wrenched the little door from its hinges and had stowed away in his several pockets the valuable contents. When he came out on to the porch his watcher had disappeared. Swinging over the balustrade, he slid down a pillar....

A hand gripped his arm tightly, but he wrenched it free. He saw, dimly, the shape of a helmet against the copper red sky, dodged under an outstretched arm and ran. He was within a dozen paces of the wall when his pursuer leapt forward and, tackling him low, brought the thief sprawling to the ground. In an instant he was on his feet, grinning with rage, and as the constable scrambled up with him...

"Here's yours!" said the Farmer, and shot twice from the hip.

He didn't wait to see the man go slithering into the mud, but darted for the wall and threw himself over, into the arms of the Scotland Yard men who were waiting for him.

"It's a cop," said the Farmer, and hastened to establish his innocence. "We were struggling for the gun and it went off by accident."

"The jury will be interested," said the Orator, icily.

The murder was a commonplace, vulgar one. Only the profession of the victim gave it a public interest. The Farmer appeared first at the local police court, before a bench of magistrates, then before an Assize Court. £3,000 in the bank gave him the right to the best legal advice, and his case was argued with great eloquence by a brilliant leader of the Bar. The value of

such assistance was that it prolonged the trial from one to two days, but the result was inevitable. The reporters sharpened their pencils, the bored ushers leaning against the wall, the morbid sightseers—even the stolid jury knew it was inevitable before the curtain rose on the last act of the drama. Only the judge and the counsel for the defence offered a similitude of conscientious doubt. And when sentence was promulgated, and he was taken to Wandsworth Prison, handcuffs on his wrists and three warders in attendance, there was, felt the Farmer, still hope.

He had not seen his wife since his arrest. She had come up once at his earnest request, but since he was not allowed to interview her except in the presence of a prison official, he could not give her instructions as to certain rather incriminating articles which must be done away with (such as two full boxes of ammunition in the right side hand of the chest of drawers); she wasn't of much use to him, and the sight of her white, drawn face exasperated him to such an extent that when she came again he declined to see her.

The Court of Appeal dismissed his case summarily. And then it was he bethought him of sending for the Orator. Mr. Rater saw him in his cell, a growth of red beard on his redder face, and the Farmer grinned his greeting.

“You've got me to rights, Rater—why did you let ‘Higgy’ off with a three?”

‘Higgy’ had certainly escaped with three years’ penal servitude.

“And that fellow Smith—he thinks I’ll be leaving that woman of mine a bit of money and that he’ll marry her. Now I’m telling you, Rater, she’s not my wife. I was married before. She’s not entitled to a farthing—she won’t get it either.”

He gave particulars of his early marriage. It was not in a spirit of contrition, but rather, as he explained, with satisfaction, “to put her in her place.”

“My point is that I don’t want that woman to go claiming anything from me. She’s been a curse to me,” he added, but did not explain how. Nor, thought Rater, could a logical explanation be forthcoming.

It was out of sheer malice that he had sent for the Orator, who suggested as much, and the condemned man nodded and grinned.

“She’s not going to marry Smith—not on my money.”

“You needn’t worry about Smith——” began the Orator, but stopped. He was on delicate ground.

“That man’s a crook,” said the Farmer. “I’ve had him ‘taped’ for a long time. He’s always going out at nights, and staying away a couple of days. He lives alone, and I’ll bet if you ‘fanned’ his house you’d find lashings of stuff.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” said the Orator, who was glad to leave his victim.

The man next door was a sore point with the Farmer. He discussed him with his custodians, the warders who watched him night and day. He did almost all the talking, and they the listening; but they were good listeners.

“I wish I’d knocked his brains out,” he said, amiably. “They can only hang you once, even for fifty thousand murders. I’ll bet he carries that mark I gave him to his grave! I caught him here...” He illustrated the blow, and the warders were only faintly interested.

And then came the morning of mornings, and Mr. J. Giles submitted patiently to being prayed over. He was still red of face, hardly moved by the horror which awaited him in the little cell that opens immediately opposite the one in which he was confined. When the parson had finished, he rose from his knees with a grunt of satisfaction.

“Now let’s see your——”

And then the man next door walked swiftly into the cell, and he had a black strap in his hand. Giles stared at him open-mouthed. There was a livid scar on his forehead. No doubt at all, it was Smith... the man next door!

“Good Gawd!” he gasped. “That’s what you meant, was it? We’d meet again and you’d be the fellow that brought it off!”

Smith, the hangman, did not answer. He never spoke in business hours.

THE SIRIUS MAN

THE ORATOR was not in his most amiable mood when the telephone bell rang. He looked round helplessly for his clerk, for he hated telephone calls : they made greater demands on speech than he was prepared to meet.

“Is that Mr. Rater?”

Girl’s voices are not easily recognisable through a telephone receiver, but Mr. Rater had no difficulty in identifying the speaker.

“Yes, Miss Linstead.”

It would have been unpardonable if he had forgotten her, for less than a year before she had been his secretary, a dark-haired girl, incorrigibly shy and nervous, who had given up work at the earnest request of her uncle, who for some reason had suddenly become aware of her existence and was now, he remembered vaguely, living in a handsome flat in Mayfair.

“I wonder if it’s possible to see you, Mr. Rater? It’s a very important matter to me... nothing to do with the police, of course... and yet it is in a way—I mean my trouble—but you were so kind to me...”

She ended on a note of incoherence.

The Orator rubbed his nose thoughtfully.

He was a man who had very few likes and many dislikes. He liked Betty Linstead for reasons which had no association with her prettiness. She was efficient, accurate and silent. Talkative secretaries drove him mad; secretaries who demanded that he should discuss the weather he loathed. He began liking her when he found that she did not think it was necessary to say “Good morning.”

“I’m not busy; I’ll come along,” he said, and scribbled down her address on the blotting-pad.

He had an idea that Brook Manor was a most expensive block of flats, but he discovered it to be more exclusive than he had imagined—a place of glass and metal doors, of dignified hall porters who had the appearance of family retainers, of heavily carpeted corridors. When he was admitted to No. 9 he found himself in an apartment so luxuriously appointed and furnished that his attitude towards the girl who came to meet him was a little reserved. This was not the plainly dressed secretary he knew. About her wrist were three bracelets, the value of which represented Mr. Rater’s salary for at least four years.

“I’m so glad you came, Mr. Rater,” she said, breathlessly. “I want you to meet Arthur— Mr. Arthur Menden.”

She was the same fluttering, nervous creature he had known in other days. She led him into the drawing-room and introduced him to a good- looking young man, and if Mr. Rater was embarrassed by the splendour of the flat, he was more embarrassed by the presence of this third party.

“It’s all dreadfully complicated,” said Betty, in her quick, frightened way. “It’s about uncle... and Arthur. Uncle doesn’t wish me to marry Arthur...”

Inwardly the Orator groaned. He had expected many problems, but that of the young lady in love with a man objectionable to her relatives was the last he anticipated. She must have guessed his growing annoyance, for she almost pushed him into an armchair.

“I must tell you everything from the beginning. Uncle Julian you know, of course—everybody knows Uncle Julian. He’s a bachelor. But he’s always been very kind to me, and made me a small allowance when I was working for you. Just enough to live on—I think he would have given me more, but he believes in girls working for their living. I only saw him once in six months, unless I met him by accident. I used to dine with him on Christmas Day if he was in London, and once he asked me down to his box at Ascot, but I made him so uncomfortable, and was so uncomfortable myself, that I rather dreaded those meetings.”

“I think, in fairness to your uncle, you ought to tell Mr. Rater that there was nothing unpleasant about Julian Linstead. He simply didn’t wish to be bothered with girls,” interrupted Arthur Menden. And then, with a laugh: “He’s a queer old devil, and I’ve no reason to excuse him. But I haven’t been exactly straightforward in the matter——”

“It was my fault entirely,” interrupted Betty.

“When did you come into this property?” The Orator was heavily sarcastic as he comprehended the beauties of the room with a wave of his hand.

“That’s what I’m trying to tell you,” she said. “It was whilst I was working at Scotland Yard that I had a very urgent letter from uncle asking me to come and dine with him. I knew Arthur then, of course. We’d been—friends for a long time. I dined with Uncle Julian at the Carlton. He offered me the long lease of a big flat; he said he would furnish it regardless of cost, and that he would pay me five thousand a year so long as I did not marry. I was bewildered at first, but eventually, after another meeting, I agreed. I don’t suppose any girl would think three times about such an offer. He was my

father's brother, and I was his only relative, and it was always understood that I was his heiress.

"I didn't really think very seriously about the clause prohibiting my marriage—I thought that was just a provision he made for my own protection, but I soon discovered that he was very much in earnest. He found out about Arthur, I really think, by employing detectives to watch us. He came round here one day in a state of terrible excitement, and begged me not to think of marrying Arthur or anybody else. He made me promise that I would tell him before anybody when I had found the man I wanted to marry. I really wasn't very keen."

"Does he know Mr. Menden?" asked the Orator.

She shook her head.

"No. That's a queer thing: he had no objections to Mr. Menden as an individual until he learnt, as he did subsequently, that I was very fond of him."

"And then?"

"Oh, then he was beastly—he did everything he possibly could to ruin Arthur."

Arthur interrupted: he was a young man with a sense of justice.

"I don't know whether you'd call it ruin to be offered a job in the Argentine, but he certainly was very keen on getting me out of the way. Naturally, I wouldn't like Betty to lose her allowance, but thank the Lord I'm earning enough to keep two." "Then you're getting married?"

She nodded slowly.

"We've been married four months," she said, and stared at him in fright.

"The devil you have!" said the Orator.

She nodded quickly.

"It was underhanded, but... I don't know... I must have been a little crazy, but I hadn't the courage to tell Uncle Julian, and I wouldn't let Arthur tell him either. What I have done is to write to him to-day, telling him I'm going to be married to-morrow. You see, we were married in a registrar's office, and somehow I do want to be married in a church."

“So you’re being married all over again, and you’re making a false declaration, and you want me to get you out of all your trouble before you get into it?” said the Orator.

“No—you’re wrong,” Betty Linstead said, quickly. “It is quite legal; Arthur has made enquiries. Lots of people get married in churches of different denominations, one for the husband and one for the wife, and lots of others go through two ceremonies, the one civil and the other religious. I want the religious one for... for a special reason.”

The Orator sighed heavily.

“All this is interesting,” he said; “but what exactly do you wish me to do?”

The young people looked at one another, and it was the man who spoke.

“The truth is, Mr. Rater, Betty thinks her uncle is mad. It isn’t the loss of the money that worries her, it is the fear of what may happen to—well, to me, when Julian Linstead hears about the marriage. He is insane on the subject of Betty remaining a spinster. And he’s one of the nicest of men on any other subject—that’s the weirdness of it. There isn’t anybody who could say a word against him. I doubt if he has an enemy in the world. Honestly I’m rather scared about what will happen—not to myself but to Betty.”

A light began to dawn on Mr. Rater.

“You want police protection?”

They nodded together, so like children in their concern that the Orator almost broke a lifetime’s habit and laughed.

“I think you’re crazy but I will see what I can do about it,” he said.

He was more amused than annoyed at the trivial cause of his summons. It was a simple matter to have the house watched, but he had no intention of wasting three perfectly good detectives on such a job—and here he was wrong.

Julian George Linstead was an antique dealer who had speculated on the Stock Exchange to such purpose that he was no longer interested in antiques, which means that he was not an antiquarian at heart but had engaged his energies and such genius as he possessed in the buying and selling of furniture, pictures and the like, having acquired in his youth the technique necessary for the successful prosecution of his business.

He was a bachelor of forty-five, good-looking in a dark and rather sinister way. He was a man of very charming manners, had a sense of humour, was a generous giver to charities, but rather shy of having his name associated with his many gifts.

He had a flat in Curzon Street which was run by a Mrs. Aldred, an elderly and unprepossessing housekeeper. There were also living in the flat a maid, Rosie Liffing, and Mr. Aldred, who acted as butler-valet. These three people were commonplace and respectable folk: the girl rather plain and stout and a member of the congregation of Plymouth Brethren.

Mr. Linstead did not entertain at the flat; on those occasions when he gave a party it was invariably at the Carlton Hotel. Even these were of a modest kind. So far as could be ascertained, he had no entanglements of an embarrassing nature. He was a member of the Junior Carlton; in politics he was vaguely Conservative, a party towards which he had a leaning because they never did anything very drastic or uncomfortable and were believed to be friendly disposed towards vested interests.

So he lived blamelessly, accepting his annual tax assessment as an act of God, and fulfilling the social obligations which convention dictated in a quiet and unostentatious fashion. He had a shoot in Norfolk, rented a fishing in Scotland, hunted twice a week in the early weeks of the season, had a box at Ascot (which more often than not he occupied alone) and a tiny yacht in Southampton Waters. He was at Deauville and the Lido at the right moment, and spent at least three weeks at St. Moritz in the winter. People knew him as well off; he was, indeed, an exceedingly rich man. His saturnity denied him a few acquaintances that might have made life interesting, and a larger number who would certainly have made living expensive.

He had one amiable weakness, an interest in the occult, and was a friend of that remarkable man, Professor Henry Hoylash, the geometrical astrologer, who was a frequent visitor to the flat in Curzon Street. Professor Hoylash was a mild little man who could and did predict world events with amazing accuracy. He was known as "The Sirius Man" because all his prophecies were in some mysterious fashion founded on the position in the heavens of this star at the date when the Pyramids were built. It was a science that had many votaries, and Mr. Linstead, who had not even known that there was such a star, and who had the impression, gained from travel posters, that the Pyramids were erected to advertise Thomas Cook & Sons, was terribly impressed when the subject was explained to him.

Professor Hoylash came occasionally to dinner, and on one occasion did persuade Linstead to forego his winter sports holiday and make a trip to Cairo.

Mr. Rater made his enquiries and learned all that there was to be learnt about Mr. Linstead. Whatever change of attitude his niece may have detected, such change had been visible to his servants. Mr. Aldred, the butler, who spoke freely to one of Mr. Rater's men (it was in the saloon bar of the Cow and Gate) said that a better employer never existed.

"He's taken up with these ghosts and spirits that the old professor's so keen on and talks about Egyptian gods and things, but bless my heart and soul, isn't a gentleman entitled to his hobbies?"

The detective pressed him on the question of Mr. Linstead's occultisms.

"There's nothing in it," protested the butler. "He amuses himself casting horoscopes, and is always asking what hour and day in the year I was born and my wife was born; otherwise you'd never know that he's taken up with this Egyptian stuff."

Apparently Mr. Linstead had taken up his studies with some seriousness. He had acquired a library of sorts on occult subjects, had a marvellous model of the Pyramids, that took to pieces, would spend hours in making mysterious calculations.

The Orator's interest in Mr. Linstead's obsessions was hardly alive to start with—it waned into oblivion as soon as his enquiries were completed. After all, there was nothing remarkable in a rich uncle holding views about the destination of his money, for Betty was certainly his heiress. He returned to Scotland Yard, signed a few letters, heard the reports of his immediate subordinates and went home.

He went to bed early that evening, and he was so sound a sleeper that he did not hear the telephone ring at first, but after some time, cursing silently, he slid from his bed and took up the instrument.

"It's Arthur Menden, sir," said an anxious voice at the other end of the wire. "You remember you saw me at Betty's flat yesterday."

"Why, yes——"

The Orator realised from the young man's hoarse voice that something was wrong.

"She has been spirited away to-night—I'm speaking from her flat."

“Spirited away? What the devil do you mean? Don’t talk. I’ll come round.”

He dressed furiously. Why should he, a responsible police official, be called out of bed in the middle of the night on such a fool’s errand?

He found Mr. Menden in a state of agitation which he did not imagine could be possible in so phlegmatic a young man. Apparently he had been unaware of the disappearance until midnight.

Although he and Betty were married they lived apart. Ordinarily he would have spent the evening with her, and it was at her request that he had gone to his own flat after dining with her at *Ciro’s Grille* and seeing her home. At half-past ten he was called up on the telephone by a stranger, who said that he was speaking for the head of the engineering company for whom Menden worked. The caller asked him to go at once to the senior partner’s house on *Kingston Hill* to discuss a cable that had arrived from *Bermuda*, where, in point of fact, *Arthur Menden’s* firm had a big contract.

Never suspecting that there was anything wrong, he dressed, found a taxi-cab, and was driven to *Kingston*. Here he found a birthday party in progress. *Mr. Fallaby*, the engineer in question, had no knowledge whatever of the call, and, in point of fact, had no cable to discuss. Puzzled and annoyed by the hoax, Menden went back to his apartment. He arrived home at a quarter to one and heard the telephone bell ringing when he went in. It was Betty’s maid. She had tried for an hour to get into touch with the husband of her mistress, but without success.

The story she told was that at eleven o’clock Betty had been called up by somebody who said he was the janitor of her husband’s flat. Would she go to the flat at once? He must have said something more, but this was all the maid knew. Looking out of the window she saw a car standing by the sidewalk and saw Betty talking to a man for a little while before she entered the car with him and drove off.

“Why didn’t you get her a cab?” asked the Orator.

The maid explained that she was undressed and that before she could get her clothes on Betty was gone. She had only stayed long enough to tell the girl where she was going.

“Did you recognise the man or the car?”

The maid shook her head. It was a very dark night; she thought the car was a *Rolls Royce*—it was a very long one.

The girl dressed and waited for Betty's return. When twelve o'clock came she became alarmed and rang up Menden's flat—to receive no answer.

That was all the information she could give, and was, indeed, the only information available.

"It's Julian Linstead! It can't be anybody else," said Arthur Menden, in a state of nervous frenzy. "I waited for you to come, Mr. Rater, otherwise I'd have been at his flat by now."

The Orator could find no other explanation of the girl's flight. She had no friends in London, and in any case would not have gone off alone in a car with a stranger.

The only other clue, if it was a clue, was the fact that she had taken her sleeping things with her—her brush and comb were gone from the dressing-table and her nightdress-case and slippers were missing.

Ten minutes later they were knocking at the door of Mr. Linstead's flat and after a while the door was opened by the butler, who was in his dressing-gown.

He was too picturesquely dishevelled for conviction. The Orator saw that his shoes were laced and tied, and this did not accord exactly with the disorder of his hair.

"No, sir. Mr. Linstead went out of town yesterday morning. I think he went to Paris——"

His protest was a little too loud. The Orator looked him in the eyes.

"I am a police officer," he said simply, and he saw the man look and blink.

"Will you let me write a letter to Mr. Linstead?"

The man nodded mutely and led the way into Mr. Linstead's handsome study, and switched on the lights. The Orator sat down at the desk, looked left and right and, stooping, lifted the waste-paper basket and took out two crumpled envelopes. These he smoothed out on the table before him, and recognised that the first was in the handwriting of Betty Linstead. It had been posted that morning at noon.

He beckoned Mr. Aldred. "Here's a letter addressed to Mr. Linstead posted this morning, delivered this afternoon. Who opened it?"

The man swallowed but said nothing.

“Mr. Linstead opened it,” the Orator went on; “therefore he couldn’t have gone to Paris this morning. It arrived this evening, didn’t it?”

Confronted with this evidence of the omnipotence of Scotland Yard, the butler was dumb.

“Where’s Mr. Linstead gone?”

The man could only shake his head and make curious sounds. Obviously on this matter he was ignorant. He knew Mr. Linstead had one or two little places in the country to where he went. Brighton was one favourite haunt, Sunningdale another; he had an unpretentious bungalow on the Thames, but the butler was not quite sure where, and the Thames, as the Orator remarked sardonically, was a rather long river, mainly fringed with bungalows in which wealthy and semi-wealthy bachelors spend their week-ends.

He questioned the other members of the household. They were genuinely without information. If there was anybody who was privy to Mr. Linstead’s movements it was the butler and no other, and he had relapsed into a dogged silence, relieved with denials. The man was dismissed, and Mr. Rater had a consultation with the bereaved husband.

“I think the matter is not as serious as you imagine,” he said, “but I shall know better when I have had a talk with this bird. Walk round the block for an hour and come back. You understand, of course, that I am acting without any authority or warrant, and that I am on a kick in the pants to nothing.”

No sooner was the young man gone than the Orator sent for the butler, and for the greater part of half an hour questioned and cross-questioned, illicitly examined the contents of such drawers as were open, and at least a dozen volumes of Mr. Linstead’s occult library. In that space of time he became acquainted with more devils and gods than he had dreamed existed: Het and Seth and Osiris and bull-headed monstrosities that Tutankhamen knew; but his principal discovery was in one of the drawers of Mr. Linstead’s desk.

By the time Arthur Menden had returned, the Orator had concluded his investigations and had formulated an exact theory.

“I don’t think there’s any trouble coming to your young lady. I advise you to go home and get a night’s sleep. I’m going to wait here until brother Julian returns.”

“Do you know where he’s staying?”

The Orator shook his head.

“Haven’t the slightest idea, and it doesn’t matter,” he said curtly.

It was with considerable reluctance that Menden at last took his departure, though not to bed: looking out of the window, the Orator saw him pacing restlessly up and down the opposite sidewalk.

It was half-past six o’clock when the detective heard a key in the hall lock, and, anticipating the butler, whom he pushed back into his room, he opened the door.

Julian Linstead’s eyes were so heavy with sleep and weariness that he did not observe that it was a stranger standing in the dark hallway, and, rushing past him with no word of thanks, he walked quickly into his study. He stood for a moment just inside the room, sniffing the unexpected fragrance of the cigar which the Orator had been smoking, and then turned to face the detective.

“Why, what—what’s wrong?” he stammered.

“You,” said the Orator, and then Linstead recognised him.

“You’re Mr. Rater from Scotland Yard?” he said, in a shrill, almost hysterical voice.

The Orator nodded. He was a little taken aback by the recognition, for he never dreamed he was amongst the famous figures of contemporary history.

“Where is Miss Linstead?” he asked.

“Miss Linstead? My niece?” Julian made a heroic attempt to appear unconcerned. “Good heavens, what has happened to her, and why on earth should I know?”

“Where is she?”

“I swear to you——”

“What’s the use, Mr. Linstead?” The Orator’s voice was one of infinite weariness. “I haven’t been sitting up all night to have this kind of child’s talk handed to me. I know pretty well that she’s at your bungalow on the Thames, but I don’t happen to know where your bungalow is situated, though I can find it in half an hour after I return to Scotland Yard.”

The man’s unshaven face was white and haggard.

“All right,” he said, and suddenly seemed to grow old. “Have it your own way: she is there, and she’s quite safe and well. I took her there last night and got her a woman attendant from a mental home to look after her. She won’t be hurt, and I hope to be able to bring her to reason—I don’t mean she’s mad,” he went on quickly. “God forbid that she should be! Only ...”

“Only you take a great deal too much notice of that bogey friend of yours, Professor Hoylash,” said the Orator quietly.

Julian looked up quickly.

“What do you mean?”

“That’s why you’re trying to prevent your niece from marrying. Well, you’ll be interested to know, and apparently she hasn’t told you, that she’s already married.”

A look of horror came to Linstead’s face.

“Married?” he croaked.

“Married four months ago,” said the Orator.

He saw the terror in Linstead’s face vanish. It was replaced by a look of wonder and then of infinite relief.

“Three months ago?” he repeated in a hollow tone. “But that is impossible—
—”

“It isn’t impossible,” said the Orator. “Horoscopes are impossible. I have just been examining a couple, and putting two and two together. Your Professor Hoylash drew up two horoscopes, one of your life and one of your niece’s, and he discovered that you would die the day she was married. And you’re alive.”

“But she never told me... why should she say she is going to be married... in a church... to-morrow?”

“There’s a very good reason, I suspect,” said the Orator drily. “A little one but a good one. I shouldn’t be surprised if there are a couple of heirs to your property in a few months’ time.”

THE COUPER BUCKLE

INSPECTOR RATER had a friend in the Inland Revenue Department who was almost as speechless as himself. When the Orator needed recreation he and this man used to go on long walking tours together. Sometimes it was Rater who remarked in the course of the day that it looked like rain and sometimes it was his friend. Occasionally the Inland Revenue man expressed the opinion that they had taken the wrong road, but more often than not they made no mistake and there was nothing to talk about.

To Mr. O. Rater this was the ideal holiday. There were, however, happy week-ends when he and his untalkative companion sat together on a punt moored near a mill stream and silently tempted the taciturn pike.

A certain Mark Ling, who was a criminal by preference, had a cottage near Marlow, and it was his daydream that one day the Orator would overturn the punt and be drowned. Mark, a tall, good-looking and always well-dressed man, used to lie face downward in the meadowland adjoining his cottage and watch the motionless figures for hours on end and picture himself assisting a drowning Orator towards eternity with the aid of a sharp-pointed boathook.

Sometimes he had a visitor himself. Steiny Lamb and he had interests in common, and had much business to discuss. And between talks about keys and windows and the best way of avoiding the Flying Squad, they used to be together in the long grass and watch the Orator fishing.

“You can’t hear yourself speak with all that chattering,” he said sardonically. “I wonder who is the other dummy.”

“He don’t look like a busy,” said Steiny.

“Busies don’t make friends with busies,” said Mark libellously; “they don’t trust one another!”

Mark had a flat in Soho, in addition to his Marlow cottage. He did not belong to the underworld—and by ‘underworld’ is meant that section of criminal society which lives in a state of semi-starvation for an average of three months every year, is riotously affluent for a fortnight, and spends the other eight and a half months in prison.

He made big money and used little men to hide him up. Steiny was such a little man. He was also an inquisitive little man.

“Who done that job in Leicester?” he asked on the occasion of his visit to Marlow.

Mark pulled an unpleasant face. The Leicester job was a sore point with him. He had been ‘tailing’ the Couper buckle for the best part of a year, and somebody else had got in ahead of him. There were fourteen stones in the Couper buckle—each stone turning the balance at fourteen carats; it was one of the pieces that every jeweller and dealer in precious stones knew as well as he knew the palm of his hand.

“I don’t know: the Birmingham mob, I should think,” he said sourly. “I’m glad it’s not me! How do they think they’ll get those stones out of the country? It will be murder for the man who tries it!”

There were many people in his world who were ignorant of Mark Ling’s graft. He was something more than a capable burglar: Mark was the cleverest ‘disposer’ in Europe. He could smuggle stolen jewellery in and out of the country; he knew every continental fence, could find markets for stolen bonds, and within a few days could ‘plant’ Bank of England notes in a dozen foreign cities. His reputation, however, was not of the best amongst the people who employed him. Stones and money had a trick of disappearing in transit. Sometimes his savage victims accepted his excuse that he had to give away a little loot to sweeten the continental police—but they were chary of employing him again.

Yet in some respects he was a necessity. Postal packets addressed to Brussels, Antwerp and Amsterdam are often opened by Customs authorities in their search for contraband, and big parcels of ill-gotten wealth had been lost from this cause.

So Mark thrived, for he spoke three languages and understood the tricks of travel and Customs evasion better than any other man.

But once he twisted a little receiver of Newcastle, and that receiver had a long memory.

Scotland Yard was in truth greatly active in this matter of the Couper stones—though you might not think so from an observation of the lethargic Orator, dozing over his fishing-rod.

Steiny, who was a shrimp of a man with a wizened, puckered face, had two weaknesses: he was loquacious and inquisitive. He was especially curious about a recent and lucrative robbery.

“You was in the Burrow Hill job, wasn’t you, Mr. Ling?”

Mark turned his cold eyes upon his companion.

“Who told you that lie?” he asked.

Steiny was instantly apologetic.

“You know how these things get about. Well, to tell you the truth, Mr. Ling, I happened to see you come out of St. Pancras Station the day after the ‘bust,’ and I put two an’ two together——”

“And made them seven,” smiled Mark pleasantly. “Well, let’s talk about this moneychanger’s. I can let you have the tools and tell you where you can get the car. How many of you will be on the job?”

Steiny thought that three would be sufficient.

“All right—I’ll take a fourth out,” said Mark.

For the loan of the necessary impedimenta he frequently ‘stood’ in for profit of ‘jokes’ in which he himself took no part.

“I hope you don’t take offence at what I said?” Steiny was sensitive to atmosphere. “You’re a big man an’ I’d like to work with you. I know more people in the game than you. Why, I know a ‘fence’ that I’ll bet you never heard of! I’m the only man who’s tumbled him and knows how he works....”

“When I want information from you I’ll ask you for it,” interrupted Mark.

“What I mean to say is that I saw you the other night——” began Steiny.

“You see a dam’ sight too much,” said Mark, with a smile that was not at all genial.

A week later Steiny, with two others, met near Soho and made their several ways to the vicinity of a shop which did rather a brisk business in foreign exchanges. It was Saturday evening and the place was closed. Mark’s plan was to open it, and he and his friends made their way to the rear of the premises, which was in a side street. Drawn up by the kerb less than a dozen yards away was a motor-van bearing the misleading title ‘Happy Days Laundry,’ but the only linen it contained was that worn by eleven men of the Flying Squad.

There was a bit of a fight—Steiny’s side lost. “All right, Mr. Rater, it’s a cop. How long have you been a ‘flyer’? Lord love a duck, I can’t keep track of some of your busies! One day you’re respectable, another day you’re in the Flyin’ Squad.”

Mr. Rater said nothing eloquently.

“Make it right for me, Mr. Rater,” pleaded Steiny. “We ain’t done nothin’—can’t you charge me ‘under the Act?’”

The Orator was in an obliging mood. Steiny was charged under the Prevention of Crimes Act, which meant a lighter sentence than if he had been charged with loitering with intent—a subtle difference.

Looking round the court from the vantage place of the dock, Steiny had time during the hearing of the evidence to pick out a friend or two. He saw Mark, very neatly attired, and with him a pretty girl—dark, tall, infinitely ladylike. Mark was a great finder of pretty girls. He caught Steiny’s eye and winked. Steiny did not wink back.

He had heard about Mr. Ling’s new ‘find’—Mark was inclined to be boastful about his conquests. This, then, was the ‘young lady whose father was in a big way of business.’ Steiny was interested. After he had received his ‘drag’ he saw the Orator.

“Who snouted on me, Mr. Rater?” he asked, and, when Rater shook his head discouragingly: “Good-lookin’ feller, was it? Very partial to the gels?” And then, in exasperation: “Bless my heart, Mr. Rater—I bet you don’t even talk in your sleep!”

“Not so much lip,” said the Orator.

Now there was only one ‘good-looking fellow’ in the criminal world, and that was Mark Ling. And it was, as the Orator knew, Mark who had informed the police about the money-changer’s raid. If there was any doubt in the inspector’s mind as to whether Mark was concerned in the theft of the Couper buckle he would have pursued the subject; but Mark’s alibi was unshakable.

“Know anything about those Couper stones, Steiny?” he asked.

Steiny shook his head.

“No, sir. And if I did I wouldn’t tell you. Nosin’ is for them that likes it.”

And then he began to laugh shrilly; he laughed so much that for a moment the Orator thought he was hysterical.

“It’s all right, mister.” Steiny wiped his eyes. “It’s only a little joke—thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

Outside the courthouse Mark was strolling westward with his pretty companion. She was the daughter of a respectable jeweller named Eddering—Pauline Eddering—and Mark had made her acquaintance in a picture-house, a method of introduction which occasioned her at times considerable misgivings.

“It was dreadful to see that poor man sentenced,” she said.

Mark laughed.

“It’s your own fault, my dear; you said you’d never seen the inside of a police court.”

She sighed heavily.

“I would never have dreamt of going, only you told me you had to be in court. I am a perfect fool about you—you exercise the strangest fascination over me.”

She occasionally talked like a character in a novelette, but Mark was always impressed.

“When are you going abroad?” she asked suddenly.

“Next Friday.” His answer was very prompt.

He was leaving on the Thursday—not being too sure of Steiny. Besides which, there was cause for alarm in the fact that twice his lodgings had been visited by obvious detectives, who had made too careful enquiries of the porter at his flat as to his movements. Mark little bungalow near Marlow abandoned.

She sighed again.

“I wish you weren’t,” she said. “On Friday I shall sleep over that horrid shop alone. Father is going to Manchester and I hate being in the house by myself. Suppose a burglar—like that man we saw sentenced—came whilst I was asleep. Anybody could open that old safe. If daddy would only put the emeralds in the bank I wouldn’t feel so bad——”

She checked herself as though she realised that she was saying too much.

“I oughtn’t to have told you about the emeralds,” said Pauline penitently; “but isn’t it ridiculous! Seventeen thousand pounds’ worth of emeralds in a tin-pot safe!”

He did not question her; apparently he took little or no interest in the information.

“A lot of money—your father must be rich,” was all he said.

“Rich! I doubt if daddy is worth a thousand pounds! No, the emeralds were left by a Russian lady to be reset. That was two years ago and we’ve never heard from her since. Daddy said she must have gone back to Russia and been murdered.”

He accompanied her home. This was the second time he had met her father, a bent, elderly man, who seemed to take very little interest in his daughter or her new friend.

The shop was a small one but did a fair trade in the cheaper kind of jewellery. The safe he now examined for the first time with a professional eye was under the counter. It was, as the girl had said, an antiquated affair; the sort of safe that any experienced cracksman could open with a butter-knife.

“Trade’s as bad as it can be,” grumbled Mr. Eddering, shaking his head dolefully. “I haven’t even sold a wedding-ring for a week.”

“I told Mr. Lewis” (this was one of Mark’s fancy names) “about the Russian lady and the emeralds,” said Pauline as they sat down to tea, whilst the youthful assistant attended to the shop.

Mr. Eddering rubbed his unshaven chin irritably.

“I’d like to know what my legal position is,” he said, frowning at Mark. “Some of my friends say that I ought to advertise that the goods will be sold to defray the cost of resetting, but that of course is absurd! The bill for the setting is under twenty pounds.”

“I’m rather fond of emeralds—could I see them?” asked Mark carelessly.

Mr. Eddering glared at him and shook his head.

“No, sir, you can’t see them,” he rasped. “They’re all wrapped up ready for the lady when she calls. I take no risks.”

“Are they insured?”

The jeweller’s thin lips curled.

“Am I the sort of man who would not insure them?” he asked.

He went into the shop later, leaving Mark and the girl alone.

“I think daddy is mad,” she said helplessly. “Look.” She pointed to the window and to a little courtyard behind.

At the end of the yard was a wall, little more than six feet high.

“Anybody could get over that wall and through this window in a jiffy,” she said. “He doesn’t even have burglar alarms fixed. Sometimes, Mark, I get scared to death; for although daddy has a revolver, I’m sure he would never dare to use it.”

“He oughtn’t to leave you alone,” said Mark, shaking his head. “Who else sleeps in the house with you?”

There was a young housemaid who slept in the basement apparently, and who double-locked her door every night; an aged porter who lived in an attic.

“Of course we have a telephone, but that’s in this room. What on earth should I do if I woke up in the night and heard people downstairs?”

“Open the window and shout,” suggested Mark.

“I wouldn’t have the courage,” she shivered. “I think I should put my head under the bedclothes and wait till they were gone!”

Mark stayed for an hour, and when he came out he had a little shock. Standing on the opposite side of the street, apparently interested in nothing but the passing traffic, was Cobbett. Cobbett was a C.I.D. man and one of the Orator’s most trusted assistants.

Mark walked a dozen paces, hoping that he had escaped observation, and then came face to face with Lane, yet another of the Orator’s men. This time he could not avoid recognition.

“Hullo, Mark!” said Lane cheerfully. “Been shopping?”

The familiarity of the man offended Mark Ling’s delicate sensibilities. He had never been in the hands of the police, and however much suspected he might be, no third-rate busy had the right to address him by his Christian name. It was, indeed, time to find a fresh land, where detectives were a little more respectful.

He passed on without a word, and that night went to Marlow, collected such of his personal belongings as he had left there and, returning to his flat, packed one trunk, which he sent by the porter to a railway cloak- room.

It had not been his plan to leave England alone, but he had found that Miss Pauline Eddering had rather stringent views about the propriety of single girls accompanying their gentlemen friends to the Continent. He might have persuaded her—the necessity had passed. Now she could be nothing but a cruel embarrassment.

He saw Pauline the next afternoon and made sure of his ground. His plans need not be altered, he discovered with satisfaction. Mr. Eddering was going to Manchester not on the Friday but on the Wednesday. This suited Mark admirably, for his cabin was already booked for the Thursday.

“And I’ve decided not to stay in the house on Thursday,” she said. “After the shop’s shut up I’m going to sleep in the house of a friend—that shop would give me the creeps.”

“I suppose your father will bring in a night watchman while you’re away?” asked Mark carelessly.

She shook her head.

“Father’s terribly mean—it’s an awful thing to say about one’s own parent, but there it is. No, he trusts that silly old safe.”

That night Mark Ling heard the bell ring, and opened the door of his flat to meet the one man in the world he did not wish to see.

“Can I come in?” asked the Orator.

Mark opened the door a little wider to admit the detective. His first inclination was, as soon as his back was turned, to make a bolt for it. He had to exercise all his self-control to stop himself taking this step. He followed Rater into his dining-room.

“All alone?” asked the Orator, and, when Mark nodded: “What about this Couper buckle?”

Mark grinned.

“If there’s one thing in the world you know, Chief, it is that I wasn’t in that job. In fact I’ve never been in any kind of job. Why the police should think I am a criminal I can’t for the life of me understand. I’ve never been in your hands——”

“Most of the people who have been hung had never been in the hands of the police,” said the Orator.

Mark chuckled.

“Well, you’re not going to hang me.”

Mr. Rater sat down at the table, opened his notebook and turned the leaves.

“I know you weren’t in the Midlands when that burglary was committed, but I’ve got an idea that you were in on the job. I’m going to put the matter very straight to you, Ling; I want those stones, and I’m authorised to pay a big sum of money to get them back.”

“Then you’d better offer it to somebody else,” said Mark cheerfully.

He could afford to be cheerful—for once in his life he was suspected of a crime of which he was perfectly innocent.

“I suppose you realise that the fact that you haven’t been in our hands will not prevent you getting a long stretch if you come our way?”

“Fine,” said Mark sarcastically. “But if I get a long stretch over the Couper diamonds I shall be the victim of police persecution!”

He felt lighter at heart when the detective had gone than he had before. His final preparations for departure were made. On the Thursday night as soon as dark fell he made his way to the jeweller’s shop. It was shuttered and locked; there was no light in any of the rooms upstairs.

Mark strolled through a back street till he came to the rear of the premises. There was nobody in sight; he was over the wall and in the courtyard in a few seconds, for he was something of an athlete.

The back window was easy: he climbed up into the dining-room, still redolent with the rank scent of Mr. Eddering’s tobacco—he smoked a South African brand which was very pungent.

The door communicating with the shop was bolted on the inside but unlocked. Mark Ling listened at the door which communicated with the living part of the house, and turned the handle softly. It was locked, and this was all to the good. He used only a small electric torch suspended from a button when he tackled the safe, employing an electric drill which he fastened to one of the lamp-holders, carefully removing the globes from all the others.

In three-quarters of an hour he had cut out the lock, and a pull brought the heavy door open. There were a number of account books, and at the back of the safe a small drawer, which was unlocked. Inside this was a flat package

wrapped in brown paper and heavily sealed. Attached to the string was a label:

Princess Litiffski—emeralds for resetting.

Slipping the package in his pocket, he made another brief scrutiny of the safe's interior. There was nothing worth taking. The value of the stock in the shop was negligible from his point of view.

He carefully reclosed the safe, disconnected and pocketed his drill, and went back the way he had come, bolting the door behind him, and being careful to close the window before he dropped into the courtyard below.

When he reached the main street again he looked at his watch. It was twenty to ten. He had chosen his day with great care. There was leaving a party of Rotarians on a visit to Brussels. A special train and boat had been put on, and when the ten o'clock special drew out of Victoria, Mark was an austere passenger sitting in the Pullman car eating a frugal supper.

Even with this big crowd he was careful to take no risks. He found one of the porters he usually employed and handed him his bag. At the same time he slipped the package from his overcoat.

"Put that in your pocket and give it to me when I'm on board," he said; and his precaution was justified, for he was one of the three men stopped at the gangway and taken to a little office and searched.

"Very sorry, sir," said the detective who conducted the inspection. "It is part of the regulations that one in every hundred passengers must have his pockets examined."

There was no such regulation, Mark knew.

On the lower deck he found his porter in a state of agitation.

"They searched your bag, sir," he said. "I've just put it in your cabin."

Mark followed the man; the porter slipped the package into his hand. Hanging flush with the deck, right opposite where he stood, was one of the ship's boats. By reaching out his hand he could touch the gunwale. Mark slipped the package gently on to what he knew was one of the side seats of the boat before he turned to his cabin.

A man was waiting for him; he was very urbane, very courteous and very pleasantly spoken, obviously Scotland Yard.

“I hope I am not going to inconvenience you, Mr. Ling,” he said, “but my colleague tells me that he has forgotten to search your overcoat.”

His colleague had told him nothing of the sort. Smilingly Mark submitted to the search.

They came to Ostend in the early morning before daybreak, and during the four hours they had taken to cross the sea Mark had employed himself well. He had discovered a middle-aged passenger who had been very seasick and seemed totally uninterested even in the fact that he had reached his destination. To him Mark was very helpful, and the passenger gratefully accepted his help in gathering his hand baggage together.

Mark was making his way to the Customs officers' bench when he was again stopped, this time by two Belgian detectives, who led him to a small office and again submitted him to a search. But the package was in the sea-sick passenger's ulster pocket, and whilst he was assisting him into a cab later, Mark retrieved his precious package.

He did not take a cab: leaving his bag at the station, he walked along the wind-blown quay of Ostend towards a small hotel at the northern end of the quay. He had turned the corner on to the deserted front when:

“Stick 'em up!” said a voice.

Out of the darkness a man had appeared, his face hidden by a handkerchief. The extended hand held a Browning. Mr. Ling's hands went up.

“Get the stuff, Annie,” said the hold-up man, and Mark became aware of a woman's presence.

She came nearer to him; her hand dipped into his pocket and took out the package....

Pauline Eddering used a peculiar scent. Mr. Ling sniffed and gasped.

“You know me, Ling,” said the man with a gun. “When I was fencing in Newcastle you caught me for three thousand pounds. I had to get this stuff away to the Continent, and you were the best fellow——”

So far he got when they were suddenly surrounded by a circle of light; glaring electric torches focused them. They were within a circle of armed policemen.

Mark heard the catch of the girl's breath, and felt the package which had been half drawn from his pocket thrust back again. Before he could rid himself of his encumbrance he heard the Orator's voice.

"Got a buckle belonging to somebody, haven't you, Mark?"

In Pentonville Prison, Steiny, who described himself as a painter, had ample leisure and opportunity for gossiping. He was gossiping now with a fellow sufferer.

"That's him that's just gone into that cell. He's going to Wormwood Scrubbs to-morrow.... You've heard of Mark Ling? Clever feller.... Mind you, I could have saved the snouting hound! The minute I saw him with that girl I knew he was doomed! I used to fence with her father, and she was as hot as the old man.... Mark's got seven years... it ought to have been seventy!"

THE CASE OF FREDDIE VANE

INSPECTOR RATER very seldom went to the theatre, and would not have been at the Elcho on that tragic night, but for the fact that Johnny Crewe, having more money than sense, had gone into theatrical management.

He knew Johnny—had known his father before him: but he never saw Freddie Vane until it was too late to be introduced to him.

Johnny was keen on Dian Donald—a small-part actress—more often a no-part actress, for the ideal understudy very seldom makes an independent appearance.

That was almost a daily saying of Alana Vane. Dian was, most uncannily, the double of Alana: the same hair, the same figure, the same voice. Her legs were indubitably pretty—theatrical gossip writers used to call them ‘shapely.’ Johnny Crewe objected, very naturally, to any reference to them at all.

Otherwise he was rather sensible, approved her stage career, had an implicit and unshakable faith in her ultimate success, and longed for its coming.

He could have married right away—he was a very well-off young man, even in the days of Alana. But—Dian must have her chance. Marriage would mean the breakdown of the ‘position’ she had built with such labour, and the shutting of the door which seemed at the point of yielding.

Alana used to sneer at this talk of marriage. Dian Donald did not know her in the days before she began to grow sour, and the straight lines deepened on each side of her face; to Dian she was always the most lovely woman in the world, and the public thought so too. The Elcho Theatre was never without its queues. She had saved more bad plays and given value to more valueless music than any woman on the stage. Her personality was electric, her voice glorious. She was one of the few musical comedy actresses that could act. Few spoke of her by her surname—she was ‘Alana,’ and so her name appeared on poster and programme.

“Marriage! Humph!” She laughed harshly. “It’s fine and it’s heartbreaking. You’re better off, Dian, as a single understudy than as a married star. And you’re a good understudy, darling. The world’s best. If you had the sense of a rabbit, you’d take the small parts Dowall offers you and get away from me. A little know-how, and your name would be in lights and you’d be drawing down three hundred pounds a week instead of six.”

“Miss Forsyant is ‘off’ to-night,” said Dian. Alana knew this.

“I know—she’s dining with Freddie. He said he was going to his club to meet a man, but he’s dining with Elsa.”

Freddie was big and florid, and notoriously gallant. He had been an assistant stage director when Alana found him, in a third-class show that she had made into a first-class show. His salary had been about on a level with Dian’s. And then Alana fell in love, and they were married; and after that, Freddie did no more work: only took people out to dinner—chorus-girls at first, and then principals, and then the lovely Elsa, who was blue-eyed and calculating. All this happened before the big break, and it was like Alana that she should play to the very last night of the show, should come smiling to the footlights and make her little speech before the curtain fell, never to rise upon her again.

A few people knew the reason. Alana had been the proprietor of the theatre, and that she had surrendered her holding to her husband. Fewer were aware of that scene in her dressing-room when Freddie had been very frank.

“If you want to quit, quit! When you ask me to give you back your shares, you are being childish.”

“You’ve swindled me!”

Alana was trembling—it was not all fury.

Freddie, floridly good-looking, a credit to his tailor and valet, could laugh at this.

“Darling angel! You made over your shares to me, and that’s that. There is no sense in calling me names. If you divorce me, I’m willing to make you a fair allowance. If you don’t, I’ll stand pat.”

She pointed to the door, not trusting herself to speak.

So passed Alana. So came Elsa Forsyant and a new type of performance. There was a failure, and another failure, and then a half- success. Freddie the florid began to grow streaky lines round his china-blue eyes—Dowall, the old director, grinned sardonically.

“It’s the type of show that’s wrong,” insisted Freddie. “Let’s get back the Alana kind.”

“Where’s your Alana?” sneered Dowall.

“Elsa could do it on her head.”

Freddie said this defiantly. Mr. Dowall made audible sounds of derision.

“It’s on her feet she’s got to do it,” he said, “and those kinds of show cost money.”

This significantly. He had a pretty shrewd idea that the financial position of Freddie and his new wife was not very sound.

“You get the show together. I’ll find the money.”

He might speak with confidence, but he had certain inward doubts. The theatre was a heavy responsibility. The first two shows had been financed by himself; for the next he secured backing, and he had exhausted that source of revenue in his one effort. Still, suckers were born at the rate of one a minute.

“So Great Heart” was born, but the particular sucker that Freddie sought did not attach itself to his clumsily baited hook, until one day he met a most agreeable young man waiting at the stage door to escort a member of the company to dinner....

The rehearsals of “Great Heart” remained a bad memory to those who took part in them. The “book” was bad, the music was in the main written by a surprising young aristocrat. Dowall said openly that Freddie had been paid a considerable sum by the composer for the opportunity. The hard-working chorus alone were efficient.

Elsa insisted upon her lines being altered again and again—she was not very strong on her h’s—and shamelessly took to herself not only the best lines but the best songs in the play. She would have no other pretty girl in the play. She must be alone, incomparable. She changed the leading man twice—once because he was so tall that he made her look short, once because his voice was so good that it drowned her own rather feeble notes.

Sometimes she did not come to rehearsal for days....

“I read the part,” said Dian, snatching a hasty tea with Johnny in the Palm Court of the Carlton. “Oh, Johnny! It is terrible at the theatre! Mr. Dowall just sits in the stalls and glowers. And Freddie doesn’t seem to care much. He was worried last week, but now he doesn’t trouble to come to rehearsals.”

John Crewe moved uneasily in his chair. He was a fresh-faced and youthful-looking man of thirty.

“Oh, really!” he said, awkwardly. “He seemed very cheerful about it all when I lunched with him on Monday.”

She looked at him incredulously.

“You lunched with Freddie? You didn’t tell me! I didn’t know that you had met him.”

Johnny was embarrassed.

He did not think it was the moment to confess that his lunch had cost him a lot of money. Freddie had found his sucker. He could change the subject more easily because he had a question to ask her.

“What were you doing in Baker Street this morning?”

She stared at him in amazement.

“I wasn’t in Baker Street—why?”

It was his turn to be astonished.

“But I saw you—I was with Joe Carteris— you passed us in a taxi, and when I waved my hand to you, you waved back.”

She shook her head.

“I have not been north of Oxford Street for ever so long. It is curious—one of the girls at the theatre said she saw me in Hyde Park last Sunday: and Hyde Park is the last place in the world I would go to on a Sunday! If Alana were in England I should know why I had been ‘seen.’ That sort of thing was constantly happening in the old days.”

“Where is Alana?” he asked, suddenly.

“In Chicago—I had a letter from her a few days ago. Just a letter about nothing, asking me to write. She said she was going West, and gave me her address in Los Angeles. How Elsa hates her! She wants that divorce, and I’m sure Alana will never give it to her. The newspapers are always referring to Alana and what she did for the Elcho, and what a big gap she made when she left London. Elsa was furious with the last notices—I’m afraid they will be worse this time.”

Again Johnny Crewe looked uncomfortable, and she misunderstood the cause of his uneasiness.

“It really doesn’t matter. If we ‘flop,’ we flop! And I’ll give up my silly dreams and become domesticated.”

Johnny drew a long breath.

“Yes,” he said, without the enthusiasm she expected.

Then came the last rehearsal.

The producer sagged back into his chair and wiped his bald forehead. The long line of barelegged chorus-girls stared at him anxiously: the little knot of principals gathered near the prompt support of the proscenium arch offered a languid interest in the forthcoming tirade. They were weary, exhausted. The dress-rehearsal lasted from ten o’clock on the Sunday morning until midnight. And then the chorus had been told to get into their practice dresses, and the principals to change. It was now four o’clock on a very cold Monday morning. The big theatre was like an icehouse, full of draughts. Only Mr. Dowall retained any heat in his system.

He reached for the butt of a cigar he had laid in a long ash-tray attached to the back of the seat, lit it, and puffed sourly.

“It’s a horrible company—there isn’t one of you who knows anything about your job, and if you did it wouldn’t be worth knowing. You girls are just... punk! You know less than you knew the day before you came to rehearsal. You won’t listen to nothin’—you just stand about and chatter like a lot of old crows... and we open to-morrow! No—to-night! All right—you can all go home. To-night I want everybody in the theatre at 5.30: chorus, principals, everybody. We open, and God help us! If we postponed we’d be worse. A’ right!”

He waved the company to the devil—they melted noisily.

He called his familiar to him. “Not a costume that fits, half the shoes haven’t arrived, the orchestra’s a crime and the stage-hands the biggest bunch of left-handed bimbos I’ve seen since I left the fit-ups. Fit-ups! Gawd, they’d give points to this mob! Twenty-five minutes changing one set! There’ll be a riot in the theatre to-night!”

Mr. Dowall was a gloomy man with a deeply lined face. His scowl was permanent.

Two girls came towards him, along the narrow space between the orchestra and Row A. Elsa came boldly, with the air and manner of a proprietress, a small, supple lady, expensively perfumed, her hands glittering.

“Listen, Dowall, I can’t open to-night. I’ve got no voice, and I’m simply a bundle of nerves.”

Dian, the understudy, would gladly have missed the interview, but she had been commanded to appear.

Mr. Dowall looked at the leading lady steadily. She was pretty: even her worst enemy could not deny the loveliness of regular features and faultless complexion. Her figure was sometimes described by ecstatic paragraphists as divine—Mr. Dowall would concede that also.

But he, of all men, knew the shrew behind those deep blue eyes, knew something of the meanness of her soul, and of those red lips of hers.

“You’re a bundle of nerves, and you’re not all you might be, Elsa, and you’ve got a doctor’s certificate tucked away in your stocking, and the show opens to-night.”

He stated the facts calmly.

“What do you propose we shall do? Postpone for a month, and bring the company down to Monte Carlo to give you a chance of rehearsing under favourable conditions?”

“You needn’t be sarcastic at my expense, Dowall.” Her voice rose a note.

“Shall I tell you something?”

The grim-faced producer put his thumbs in his armholes and looked up at her.

“If you were Alana I’d be foaming at the mouth and rolling on the floor. Alana matters. You don’t matter two rows of pins. You’ve got a part in the play, and you’ll just fill it: you’ll dance well and sing reasonably; your fans will say ‘Isn’t she wonderful?’ and the people who don’t like you will say they like you better when you’re doing something else. The play’s a flop that you couldn’t save. She could. When your young man changed his lady friend, he lost the best leading woman in the world.”

She was livid with fury.

Dowall listened to her comments, and yet didn’t listen. Dian crept away unnoticed.

“Say it with flowers!” snarled Mr. Dowall.

Freddie was waiting for her in a decidedly cheerful and conciliatory frame of mind. He listened without any comment to her shrill tirade...

“He insulted me, and you sat there snoring like a pig! I wonder I didn’t smack his face.... You’ll fire Dowall at once, Freddie!”

To her surprise, Freddie chuckled.

“He will be crushed in the general débacle,” he said.

She snapped at him.

“For God’s sake don’t use foreign words to me! I know you’re better educated than I am. What do you mean?”

“I mean I’m taking no further risks with the Elcho. I’ve sublet the theatre, and I’ve sold the production.”

She switched on the light of the car to see him better.

“You’ve sold the production?”

“Lock, stock and barrel, hook, line and sinker!” he said, almost gaily. “The bare cost of the production is eight thousand—I’ll have a cheque for twelve in my pocket to-morrow night—and the only contract is an exchange of letters. We’ll go away to Monte, and we’ll be married before we go.” She stared at him.

“Married? Has Alana——”

Freddie was very pleased with himself. “I was married in America: you didn’t know that, did you? And I have been divorced in America. It cost two thousand dollars, but it was worth the money. I had the whole thing framed. Alana was served with papers without knowing they were divorce papers. You know what a devil she is to process servers. I guess she doesn’t even know now that I’m here. The case was tried in her absence and I had a letter this morning from my lawyer saying it was through. Am I the clever boy?”

“When did this happen?”

“A month ago.”

She nestled closer to him.

The Orator came to the theatre on the opening night mentally protesting at his own frivolity. A glum-looking Johnny was in the vestibule, for he it was

who, in a moment of mental aberration, had conceived the bright idea of purchasing the show “lock, stock and barrel.”

He took Mr. Rater to the little office that had been placed at his disposal by the management, and briefly and very frankly explained the situation. The Orator, to whom money was money, listened with a falling face.

“You look as if you’re caught,” he said, “and unfortunately I can’t arrest him for obtaining money by false pretences.” Which was almost an oration for the Orator. “When is this robbery to be committed?” he asked, and Johnny explained that the deal was to be concluded that night, and the formal signing of the contract confirming the terms of the letter.

He had had, at any rate, the intelligence to consult his solicitor.

“Poor fellow!” said the Orator, and his sympathy made the young man writhe.

“It may get through. Dian had a cable from Alana this morning from New York, wishing her luck. There’s a funny message in it too.”

He searched his pockets and found the cablegram and handed it to the Orator.

**ALL GOOD LUCK FOR TO-NIGHT STOP DON'T FORGET MY OLD TRICK
OF LEAVING PRIVATE DOOR UNBOLTED STOP THAT IS A SURE LUCK
BRINGER.**

“What’s her private door?” asked the Orator, and Johnny explained that from the dressing-room led a private passage to a door that gave on to the street. Alana, in her whimsical way, always had this unlocked ready to fly from the theatre if her reception was a bad one.

“Of course she never used it, but I can understand her feelings.”

The Orator said nothing, but allowed himself to be led to an end seat. He also wanted a way of escape if the play was boring.

In her dressing-room sat Dian, numbed and panic-stricken. She was dressed for the first act, had been ‘made up’ and dressed for an hour.

She gazed hopelessly at inevitable failure. The play was bad, the music, the production, everything. To have made her appearance in the middle of a successful run... that would have given her a chance.

She looked round the resplendent dressing-room—it had been used by Elsa.

The play might run a week, a month perhaps; and it was Johnny’s. Failure might not ruin him, but it would hurt him badly. This added responsibility was disastrous.

Then she remembered Alana’s quaint warning and called her dresser into the room. To add to the tiresomeness and confusion of life, her dresser had telegraphed to say that she was ill, and a new woman had made her appearance—a brown-faced woman with grey hair drawn back from her forehead, her face still further disfigured by a strip of sticking-plaster.

“My old man gave me that,” she explained; but Dian was not in the mood to be interested in the domestic infelicities of dressers.

She was a capable woman, who handled the dresses expeditiously.

“Did you unlock that outside door, miss? The key’s not hanging on the ’00k. Miss Alana always had it unlocked on a first night.”

Dian remembered, and, searching her bag, gave the key to the dresser, who disappeared, and, returning soon afterwards, laid the key on the table.

“Funny ideas professionals have,” she said, in her shrill voice. “You ought to be able to open that door from the inside, anyway. Oh, by the way, miss,

somebody sent a bottle of wine for you—I think it must have been Mr. Crewe. He says you must have a drink before you start the show.”

“I don’t want a drink,” said Dian wearily.

“Oh, miss, you must. It will cheer you up. And besides, Mr. Crewe wants you to.”

Without waiting for instructions, she uncorked the bottle and poured the fizzing stuff into a glass....

For half an hour she sat looking straight ahead of her. The call-boy knocked at the door and bellowed her name, and she rose and went out with a feeling that it was not she who walked so light-heartedly along the dim passage that led to the stage.

Johnny did not reach his box till nearly eight o’clock, just before the curtain rose, and he was staggered to find the next box occupied by Elsa Vane. At least she might have had the decency to keep away that night!

The programme had been ‘slipped’ with the information that, owing to severe indisposition, Miss Elsa Forsyant would not make her appearance; and with this as a text, John Crewe made his way to Freddie’s box in an endeavour to save something from the wreckage.

Freddie met him at the door of the box and listened with half-closed eyes.

“Sorry, old man, but when I sold you the production I didn’t undertake that Miss Forsyant should appear. She’s terribly ill; she’s only come here to-night so that her fans can see her... the doctor thinks it’s a complete nervous breakdown and has ordered her away to the Riviera. But the show’s all right; don’t let old Dowall rattle you. And that young lady of yours is going to make a big hit, believe me.”

He slapped Johnny on the back, and John Crewe had to exercise a great deal of self-restraint to prevent himself slapping back.

He had hardly reached his seat when the curtain rose.

The opening was weak. The best producer in the world could have done nothing with the artistocrat’s music. There was a stir in the theatre; the gallery began to cough. Mr. Jevons, the conductor, a nervous man, mopped his wet brow and communicated his nervousness to the orchestra. The first comedy scene was painfully unfunny. Johnny writhed in his seat. And then, with a burst of music—all the good numbers in the show had been imported for Elsa’s benefit—there came Dian.

There was no doubt about her personal resemblance to Alana. For a moment the big house gasped, and then, as it recognised the likeness, it roared a welcome. She was a little taken aback by the reception, smiled nervously, bowed and began her number.

It was Alana, with all her vivacity, all her cleverness, all the tricks of hand and head: Alana's voice, Alana's twinkling feet. Again and again they called her back.

Crewe looked across to the box where Freddie was sitting. His face was white, his mouth wide open. He sat like a man stricken dumb. In some mysterious way the play had gathered itself together, as though the very presence of the great star added some galvanic quality to its composition which it had not possessed until she came on to the stage.

The first scenes passed like a flash. John saw the audience picking up the little slips from the floor and scanning them. Who was Dian Donald? Was it a new name by which Alana desired to be known? Had she been reconciled to her husband...?

The third scene was the interior of a shack. Dian made her entrance in the costume of a cowboy. There was an exchange of repartee between her and the comedian. Suddenly she pulled a long-barrelled automatic from the holster on her hip. She had to fire at the comedian, and by a trick his hat was pulled from his head. But she did not look at the comedian; she turned and faced the box, hesitated a second, then, lifting her pistol, fired, and Freddie fell forward limply over the edge of the box.

In an instant there was a pandemonium; a woman's voice screamed shrilly. Before Johnny could reach the box the curtain was down.

He lifted the man and laid him on his back. He was breathing heavily, and one glance told John that the wound was not fatal.

"Is he dead?" It was the Orator's voice.

Mr. Rater bent over the prostrate figure and made a quick examination.

"How do I get on to the stage?"

"It was an accident," said John. "She was nervous——" "How do I get on to the stage?" asked the Orator impatiently.

Crewe led the way down the narrow staircase and through a steel door. The stage was in confusion. He saw Dowall, the only cool man in that excited crowd.

“Miss Donald went to her room and the door’s locked,” he said.

“Show me the way,” said the Orator severely.

They came to the star’s dressing-room, but the door was locked and bolted from the inside, and all their repeated rappings on the door did not arouse an answer.

They had no need to send for the stage carpenter. He had followed them through the labyrinth of passages leading to the dressing-room, and he had a crowbar in his hand.

“I thought you might want it,” he said. “I tried to get into the room a few minutes ago.”

On the Orator’s instructions, he began to break the panel of the door. The key was on the inside, and, pushing through his hand, he turned it and the door was flung open.

Dian’s dressing-room was empty; on the long table under the mirrors and the naked lights there was a jumble of make-up material, an opened champagne bottle and two glasses. Three dresses lay on the floor as though their wearer had stepped out of them and had left them where they lay. There was no sign of Dian.

Off the dressing-room was a small recess, and, pulling back the velvet curtain that hid this, Rater saw a figure lying on the ground with a pillow beneath her head.

It was Dian, and she was sleeping. When the Orator lifted the rug which covered her he saw that she was wearing the flimsy dress in which she had made her first appearance. He went back to the dressing-table and sniffed at the glass, which still held a little wine.

“Doped,” he said laconically. “Better get a doctor. Where is the dresser?”

But the woman had vanished.

The carpenter, at his request, showed him the private passage communicating with the street. It was behind what looked to be a wardrobe door—a narrow lime-washed corridor which ended in a heavier door.

Rater pulled at this and it yielded: it was ajar. He stepped into the open and found himself in a side street. Snow had fallen during the performance and there were wheel tracks newly made.

By the time he had finished his investigations the doctor had arrived and was bringing Dian and the woman to consciousness.

“It wasn’t a very fierce dope,” he reported. “I’d like the contents of the glass for analysis.”

Freddie had been taken to hospital and the great audience had dispersed.

In a fever of anxiety Johnny sat beside the girl, who was still dull and heavy from the effect of the drug. The Orator made a brief visit to the hospital and came back full of information, and Johnny put his worries into a question.

“You’re not arresting Dian? It was an accident——”

“No,” said the Orator, “she shot to kill.”

John Crewe looked at him in horror.

“But that, Rater—that is a monstrous suggestion. Dian hardly knew him——”

“Alana knew him very well indeed,” said the Orator grimly. “Vane played a pretty unpleasant trick on the woman—divorced her when she wasn’t looking. Vane is well enough to squeal his troubles into a sympathetic ear.”

“What has happened to the dresser? Have you found her?”

Mr. Rater shook his head.

“No. And don’t expect to. Pretty good actress, Alana. And a fast worker. She got from New York to London in four hours, unless the wire was sent by a friend. And I suppose she’ll get back in two hours.”

Later Dian told her story, and heard in return of the missing dresser. She remembered drinking the wine and no more. Johnny advanced the suggestion that the Orator had offered, and she listened gravely.

“It comes to this, then, that Mr. Rater gives me the alternative of setting the police on Alana or saying that the whole thing was an accident? Well, it was an accident. I’m through with the theatre.”

Johnny was “through” too—he had already torn up the cheque that should have been in Freddie’s pocket.

THE GUY FROM MEMPHIS

THERE was a society of men and women who devoted their time and their little money to the reformation of the habitual criminal, and every Thursday night all the habitual criminals in London who were not wanted by the police at that particular moment, or who were not engaged in the exercise of their habitual criminality, would assemble in Duvern Hall and be addressed by eminent persons, some of whom were quite great novelists. At the committee meetings of this reformation society the organisers would congratulate one another upon the extraordinary progress they were making, and would detail such cases as:

H— X—. A man with 17 convictions, now doing honest work with Messrs. B. & C., and quite satisfied with drawing 35s. a week....

When it came out in evidence, as it were, that X— was supplementing his 35s. a week with a little private larceny at the expense of the firm which employed him, his name was ruled out of the book of grace and he was most conveniently forgotten. For this society, like many others, had not realised that, of every pound spent in the reformation of the habitual criminal, 19s. 10½d. was wasted—if the other 1½d. were devoted to the stamp on a letter telling the gentleman to go to hell his own way.

Sometimes retired inspectors of police came down and addressed their late lawful prey with honeyed words and brotherly love, and the silent and watchful audience would afterwards discuss with one another the appearance of their old foe.

“...See that diamond stick in his tie? I wonder who he pinched that from—the thievin’ so-and-so!”

Only one or two members of the active force had been induced to take an interest in the movement, and Inspector Oliver Rater, with great reluctance, consented to “say a few words.” The night he came to make his address the hall was crowded. He had so many personal acquaintances, so many people who resented his interference in their business, that it could not be otherwise.

His address was brief.

“Some of you fellows make me sick,” he began unpromisingly. “When you say you’re trying to get an honest living, you mean that between jobs you go round ear-biting the mugs! Two of you tried to catch me last week, when you found I was coming to speak in this hall—thank you for the compliment! The majority of you are only really comfortable when you’re in stir—you feel at

home with the screw. One of you fellows—I'm not naming names—came out of prison last week, and the first thing he did was to go round and scrounge a couple of kites! I have since found that you have a can in tow. I'm warning you! I'm not praying over you. Not a tear have I shed. I've only helped one man to get a job, and what did he do? He pinched a new suit of clothes from his boss and bust a house in Finsbury. He is happier on the Moor. There isn't one of you who doesn't say he's being hounded down by the police, and none of you that doesn't look upon a policeman as a house agent. This is the longest speech I've ever made in my life. I shall certainly see most of you again at the Assizes, and if I don't, it will be because I shan't be there."

It was not a successful address. The committee were horrified. Most of them didn't know that 'stir' was prison, that 'ear-biting' was borrowing, that a 'screw' was a warder, or a 'kite' a cheque, a 'can' a fool, and they invariably said 'burglary' where the Orator and his friends preferred 'bust.'

They were so horrified that they wrote to the Chief Commissioner; and the Chief Commissioner replied that he had their letter of the 21st and that the matter was receiving his attention.

"I should like to have been there when the Orator spoke," he said, as he dropped the letter of complaint in the wastepaper basket. "He has probably used up all his speech for the next two years and we shan't get a word out of him."

But there was one appreciative hearer. The society had a straw-haired typist whose name was Lydia Grayne. She was very pretty and fair and competent, and had declined seven separate invitations to have a little dinner with members of the committee. There were seven men on the committee.

She came shyly to the Orator as he was leaving the building.

"Would you be awfully offended if I asked for your autograph, Mr. Rater?"

The Orator looked at her with a twinkle in his grey eyes, took the book without a word and scribbled his name.

She was from Canada, she told him; had only been in the country three months. Later he heard that she had left her dismal job; but he did not know what the new one was until some time had elapsed.

Scotland Yard at this time had a sort of guest: Captain Martin J. Snell, of Philadelphia. Ordinarily, Chief Inspector Rater did not like talkative men, but for some reason which was inexplicable he tolerated the garrulity of the American—and not only tolerated it but encouraged the man. This was

during the period when the Orator was suffering from insomnia. Captain Snell was in Europe watching the operation of the criminal law; he had allocated a month of time to Scotland Yard and had been shown everything from the Black Museum to the Lost Property Office. At night he used to stroll west with Mr. Rater, or spend a less energetic evening in the Orator's sitting-room, telling tales of strange adventure.

"There was a guy down in Memphis named Lew Oberack. This bird was the slickest con man that ever talked money..."

Here the Orator's head would droop. That was why he liked Captain Snell: his voice was soporific. Yet, if he had listened to the clever American, certain strange happenings in the office of one Dimitri Horopolos would have been quite understandable.

Mr. Horopolos was a Greek and immensely wealthy. He controlled not only an extensive trading concern, but his firm were bankers and financial agents, and he had a finger in most of the big international flotations.

A singularly good-looking creature, with his girl's complexion, big dark eyes and black silky moustache, he was as singularly vain. He was vain of his prowess as an athlete, his riding, his beautiful house in Elman Square, and the fascinations he exercised over susceptible womanhood.

There was once an oblique complaint addressed to Scotland Yard, and Rater himself had interviewed the smiling millionaire.

"My dear fellow," drawled Dimitri, "how absurd! The girl threw herself at my head. I did my best to bring her to her senses, and when I found I could do nothing with her, I discharged her. A man in my position is subject to such charges."

"There is no charge," said the Orator briefly.

Later he interviewed the girl, but without success. The thought of publicity terrified her. Her successor left the service of Mr. Dimitri quite as hurriedly, and was as reticent about the reason. Mr. Dimitri Horopolos met the Orator by accident in Bond Street.

"Well, I've lost another of my secretaries," he smiled. "I really don't know what to do to please them."

The Orator was chewing at the end of a cigar. He eyed the gentleman unfavourably.

"Ever tried not doing things that displease them, Mr. Horopolos?" he asked.

Dimitri was tickled; he had a sense of humour. Moreover, he was rather pleased with himself that morning, for at last he had found a pearl amongst secretaries, a straw-haired girl with great blue eyes, who had accepted the job he offered with alacrity. She was a stranger in London, had no relations, no friends at all. She didn't like the idea of living in, but that was a difficulty which might be overcome. After all, as Dimitri said to a compatriot, you can't expect everything.

The Orator was well aware that the new secretary had arrived. He had an ocular demonstration, for Dimitri, with an audacity worthy of one of his classical forebears, sent the girl with a note to Scotland Yard.

My dear Mr. Rater, I have had so much trouble with my previous secretaries that I would like you to approve this one, and pass on the warning which I understand it is your practice to give to any pretty girl who comes into my employ.

The Orator looked up from the letter to the demure girl sitting on the other side of the desk.

"Well, Miss Grayne, they tell me you didn't like reforming criminals?"

She was delighted that he remembered her name.

"I've got such a nice place now, Mr. Rater," she said. "Mr. Horopolos is so very kind, and so handsome—I've never seen a better-looking man, have you?"

"Not since Madame Tussaud's was burnt down," said the Orator in his most offensive manner.

He hesitated, in face of this letter, to offer any advice whatever. In all probability Dimitri had told the girl that he was not popular at Scotland Yard, that he had lost certain secretaries. It was even probable... the charitable Mr. Rater shook his head and dismissed the idea.

"You'll find this Greek a very good fellow for pay," he said, "but a bit friendly. You can't help that—nobody can. If I were you, I'd have office hours and keep 'em."

She was very grateful.

"I don't know how the hours run in this country," she said. "What time ought one to leave work at night?"

"Just as soon as it's dark," said Mr. Rater.

That night he sat before his fire listening to Mr. Snell.

“Well, this guy Oberack—the bird I told you about—lived in Memphis...”

At this point the Orator’s head drooped forward and he slept.

Dimitri found his new secretary a great improvement on any that he had ever possessed. She had a ready sense of humour, was prepared to laugh at stories which with the average secretary would not have raised a smile, and would certainly have caused acute misgivings in the mind of more commonplace young women. She was certainly remarkably able, and rattled through his correspondence at an extraordinary speed.

“My dear, you’re both efficient and charming,” he said, and patted her on the shoulder.

He always started by patting them on the shoulder.

She looked up at him with her big blue eyes and smiled.

“I think I shall be very happy here,” she said. “My last place...”

She told him of her unfortunate experience in the office of a middle-aged tea man, and of the no less unpleasantness associated with her earlier work.

“Prisoners’ reform, eh?” He was amused, was Mr. Dimitri, who had never been to prison and therefore could never be reformed in a proper and official manner. “What a bore it must have been for you, little girl!”

He usually had a big correspondence by the early morning post, and he stayed long enough to deal with this before he went to the City. Generally he returned about four o’clock in the afternoon and dealt with such letters as had arrived in the course of the day. He had a big house, which he had built for himself, and maintained a fairly large staff.

“One of these days I’ll show you some of my nice diamonds,” said Dimitri, who was prouder of these treasures than of any others he possessed.

She was thrilled.

“Do you keep them in the house?” she asked.

Dimitri smiled.

“I keep them under the house,” he said, amused by her eagerness; “I’ll tell you something which will interest you. Six attempts have been made to burgle me. Twice the burglars, who were one of the cleverest gangs from

Paris, succeeded in getting into the house, but if there had been two hundred gangs instead of two they couldn't have got into my strongroom—it's the one burglar-proof vault in London."

Here he did no more than justice to his marvellous strong-room. It was constructed in the basement, a small room of steel and concrete, with a door two feet thick. He had in it a system of ventilation. It had served its purpose for his father during the war, for it was near to being a perfect bomb-proof shelter. It was under construction when the war started, and its ventilation, which was an afterthought, had been designed to make the place habitable during the hours when German aeroplanes were hovering over London.

"In fact, it is rather like a little room where one could sleep in comfort," he said. "You must see it one day."

He had no intention that she should see it one day, or even one evening, when he spoke; for this vault of his was most jealously guarded. A commissionaire was on duty day and night at the end of the passage leading to the underground room.

He was the most attentive of employers. She had not been working for him a week before he insisted upon accompanying her to the door when she left.

On this particular night he stood in the doorway, watched her trip down the steps and turn left. As he did so, he saw a man come out of the shadow of a lamp-post and talk to the girl. For a moment she stood, hesitant. He saw the man talking earnestly; then suddenly Lydia turned back and came quickly towards him.

"What's wrong?" asked Dimitri.

"I don't know. I think he's a police officer or something," she said, her voice tremulous. "He told me I ought to be very careful about staying late in your house."

Dimitri, in his fury, brushed her aside and went down to the man. He had a clear view of his face—thin, long, with a dark moustache and bristling black eyebrows.

"What the devil do you mean by speaking to that lady?" he demanded. "You're a police officer, are you? You can go back to Mr. Rater and tell him from me that if I am subjected to any more of this treatment I shall make a complaint to Scotland Yard."

He saw the man smile.

“Who told you I was a police officer?” he asked coolly. “And if I am, what objection is there to my warning a young girl about the perils of the street?”

It was on the tip of the Greek’s tongue to be very rude indeed. Instead, he mastered his emotion.

“Come in and have a drink,” he said, as genially as he could.

The man hesitated for a moment, and seemed a little reluctant. But his manner and tone immediately changed.

“I’m very sorry to give you any annoyance or any trouble, sir, and I’m not anxious to get in any myself. I have my duty to do...

“Come inside,” said Dimitri.

Obediently the man followed him. On the top of the steps they passed the girl, whom Dimitri dismissed with a brief good night. He led the way into a sumptuously furnished study. The man sat awkwardly on the edge of a chair, balancing his hat on his knee.

“I’m not asking you to betray any of your office secrets,” said Dimitri with a flashing smile as he poured whisky into a tumbler and sent soda fizzling after; but if your job is to watch me, I can save you a lot of trouble—I’ve no desire to be on bad terms with the police. On the other hand, I should prefer to be on good terms with them.”

The man coughed apologetically, reached out for the whisky- and-soda and gulped it down.

“Duty——” he began.

“Never mind about duty,” said Dimitri affably. “What you’ve got to do is to do your duty by yourself. Will you be here every day?”

The watcher nodded.

“Except Sundays,” he said.

Dimitri laughed.

“On Sundays I promise to behave myself.”

He took a note-case from his pocket, extracted a crinkling white oblong of paper and laid it on the table. The watchful man saw it was for ten pounds.

“I couldn’t take that, sir, I couldn’t really. I mean, I should get into very serious trouble.”

“Trouble!” scoffed the Greek. “What nonsense! You think of nothing but trouble. I suppose that naturally runs in a police officer’s mind.”

He pressed the note upon Mr. Olcott, which, his guest told him, was his name, and after a considerable show of reluctance the note was pocketed.

He saw Olcott again the next night. The man touched his hat to him respectfully. On the third night Dimitri again invited him into the house.

“I’d like to know exactly what your orders are,” he said, when he had his visitor sitting behind a large whisky-and-soda. Olcott coughed.

“Well, to tell you the truth, sir, I should get into serious——”

“Trouble, I suppose!” snarled Dimitri, who was no longer amused. “Well, you’re likely to get into trouble anyway, aren’t you? What are your instructions?”

After a while it came out. Olcott’s duty was to watch the house until the girl left, and to remain for an hour after to report if she returned.

“Suppose she does a little extra work, what happens then?”

“I report to Mr.—well, I don’t want to mention names—if she doesn’t come out by half-past ten.”

The Greek’s lips curled in a sneer. “That’s about the stupidest thing I’ve heard,” he said. “All right, Olcott—I’ll tell you the night you can leave early!”

His friendship with the girl was progressing satisfactorily. She had tentatively accepted an invitation to supper at a fashionable restaurant. Only Dimitri knew that the venue would be changed at the last minute.

She certainly displayed some evidence of apprehension when he suggested, on the morning of the proposed meal, that she should come back to the house at ten.

“A little tête-à-tête supper would be rather jolly,” he said. “We can have it in my suite.”

She shook her head. This straw-haired girl had suddenly developed a weakness for the proprieties, it appeared, for she suggested that she should bring a friend with her.

“That’s a perfectly stupid idea,” he smiled. “Think it over.”

She thought it over all day; and during that period the plans were adjusted to meet her objections. It was to be a dinner at seven; then a supper at nine; then a dinner at half-past eight, with an assurance that he would see her home. He agreed to every modification, for the beauty of the girl was like none that he had ever known.

Inspector Rater was at the Yard, and his American friend had installed himself in the chair on the opposite side of the desk, had clouded the atmosphere with cigar smoke, and had set the Orator’s head nodding.

“...Well, this guy in Memphis... smartest con man ever...”

When the Orator woke up he was alone, with no other proof of his visitor’s presence than the odour of his cigar. It was a messenger who had awakened him, and the Orator looked at the unfinished report which the arrival of Snell had interrupted, and groaned inwardly, for this document had to be before the Chief Constable at eleven o’clock in the morning.

He was half asleep and only dimly heard the messenger’s voice.

“What, boy?” he asked.

“He came about four or five minutes ago, sir. He said this had to go to you personally.”

The Orator took the crumpled piece of paper from the messenger’s hand, unfolded it, and smoothed it out. It was a thin sheet, evidently torn from a diary, and the message, in a shaky hand, was written in pencil.

For God’s sake help me. The Greek has locked me in underground room. I came to dinner... (here a few words were indecipherable)... Please help me.
— Lydia Grayne.

The Orator was wide awake now. He glanced at the clock: the hands pointed to ten. Lydia Grayne and the Greek! No further explanation was needed; as to how the message was sent to him, by what agency, he did not even trouble to guess. He touched a bell, and then, finding the messenger still in the room, sent him in haste to gather a squad. Five minutes later a police tender was flying westward. It pulled up with a jerk before the house of Mr. Dimitri Horopolos, and the Orator was the first to jump to the pavement.

He rang the bell twice before an answer came, and to his surprise it was Dimitri who eventually opened the door to him. He was wearing a dressing-

gown; on his face was a scowl, which might have been caused by the sudden appearance of Inspector Rater.

“What do you want?” he demanded wrathfully.

“I want Lydia Grayne,” said the Orator.

“Well, she’s not here,” stormed the man. “Your damned spy could have told you that!”

“You can admit me voluntarily or I’ll get a search warrant in half an hour,” said the Orator briefly.

The man threw open the door and stalked before them up the stairs. He paused at the head and snarled back: “Shut the door, one of you!” There were no servants to be seen, a circumstance which struck the Orator as curious. He learned afterwards that the servants of this strange establishment lived in a separate quarter of the house, which could be entirely shut off at its owner’s pleasure.

It was not to his study but to a little room on the first floor that Dimitri conducted them. The Orator saw a table laid for two, and on the sideboard a variety of cold viands.

“Now perhaps you’ll tell me what you mean by this, inspector?” said Dimitri loudly.

The Orator handed the little sheet of paper to his unwilling host. Dimitri read and frowned.

“It’s a damned lie!” he said when he finished. “She’s not here. She was coming, but she didn’t turn up.”

“Have you an underground room?”

The Greek hesitated.

“Yes, I have. I keep most of my valuables there. You don’t suppose I’d shut her away in a safe, do you? The whole thing is ridiculous. I tell you she was coming, but——”

“I should like to see that underground room,” insisted the Orator.

“But I tell you, she hasn’t even come tonight. I was expecting her; can’t you tell from the table nobody’s been here?”

“The table is not evidence,” said the Orator. “I want to see your underground room.”

The man turned purple and white and seemed as if he would explode in his fury. Instead, he went into another room, and after a time returned with two small keys on a key-chain.

“As you’re so darned curious, I’ll show you the place,” he said.

He went down a narrow flight of stairs, the detective at his heels, along a narrow corridor, and stopping before a steel door, inserted first one key and then the other. The great door swung backward. He put in his hand and turned a switch, and the Orator found himself in a small, dungeon-like chamber, illuminated by a bulkhead light in the roof. On small glass shelves were deposited hundreds of leather cases.

But that did not interest him. He saw a chair, a table and a camp-bed. The girl was not there.

“Is there any other room?”

“Of course there isn’t any other room,” snapped Dimitri. “I tell you she didn’t come.”

The Orator looked round and for a moment felt foolish. Had he been hoaxed? There was no place for a mouse to hide in that room. When he got upstairs to the ground floor level, Dimitri’s reserve melted. For five minutes he stormed in three languages at this disturber of his peace. His voice grew shrill with fury; the diamond rings on his hands made scintillating sweeps of light as he gesticulated.

“That’s very fine,” said the Orator; “but I only want to tell you that I’m entitled to make this search, and I’m not sure even now that she isn’t on the premises.”

“Search the house!” roared Dimitri.

It was an invitation which the Orator did not hesitate to accept.

But nothing was found. He went back to his car a puzzled man, and the door slammed on his heels.

Dimitri went back to his sitting-room, livid with rage; paced up and down; was on the point of telephoning through to the servants’ section to order his hidden menials to clear away the supper, when he heard a rat-tat at the door. Perhaps it was Lydia. His heart jumped at the thought. He raced along

the passage and threw open the door. A man was standing there: he recognised him.

“What the hell do you want?” he demanded.

“Let me in quick,” said Olcott in a low voice. “I’ve just left Rater and he’s furious with me. Did he search your strong-room?”

“Of course he searched my strong-room!” snapped Dimitri.

He closed the door, and the two men went back to the small room where the table was laid. Mr. Olcott closed the door of this behind him.

“Well, what do you want? You’ve been a lot of use to me! Have you seen the girl and headed her off?”

Olcott shook his head impatiently.

“What I want to know is, Mr. Horopolos, did he take the keys of your strong-room away with him?”

“Of course he didn’t,” said Dimitri.

“Are you sure?” The man was very earnest.

The Greek put his hand in the pocket of his dressing-gown and took out the ring with the two little keys.

“Here they are.”

“Hand them to me—and don’t move, or I’ll blow the top of your head off!” said Mr. Olcott, and the Browning in his hand was very steady, in striking contrast to Dimitri, who nearly swooned with horror.

He was placid enough; allowed himself to be tied up and gagged, before the leisurely Mr. Olcott with the keys went down to examine the strongroom.

When the Orator returned to the Yard he found the talkative Mr. Snell sitting in an armchair. The Orator was not in a mood for reminiscences. Snell was a wily man in the ways of criminals, and to him he told the story.

“Gee!” said Snell, drawing a deep breath. “That sounds like that guy at Memphis... the finest con man that ever lived. He used to work with his wife—the prettiest thing you ever saw—straw-headed, blue-eyed. She’d find a guy to fall for her, and she always picked a bad man. Then this guy from Memphis used to turn up, pretend he was a detective and clear out all that was worth clearing. I’d like to bet that that guy—”

Before he had finished, the Orator was racing back to the police car. It was just driving away when he leapt on to the footboard, and the two detectives who were in sight joined him.

By the time he got to Dimitri, broke in the door and untied him, “that guy from Memphis” was driving with his straw-haired wife somewhere east of Marble Arch.

THE DETECTIVE WHO TALKED

LET me say at first I was never a man for talking, and very early on in my police career I learned a lesson which should be taught to all young constables: "Don't talk at the wrong time or listen to the wrong people."

I was rather proud of my brevity in speech, and if anybody had told me that I talked too much, I should have been slightly amused. And yet I did when I tackled the most interesting case that has ever come my way, the Blidfield murder.

I knew old Angus Blidfield slightly. He was the owner of a big house in Bloomsbury Square. He had converted the property into flats, and he himself occupied the first floor, that is to say the entrance floor, with his niece, Miss Agnes Olford.

Old Blidfield was a bachelor, a very rich man and rather eccentric. In spite of his money he was very mean, and was something of a miser. I did not know then that he kept large sums of money in the house, and I suppose only about two other people did. His niece knew, though she wasn't aware how much money the old man had in that japanned tin box of his which he kept under the bed

She was very pretty, but a rather spiritless little thing, who occupied a position in his household which no self-respecting slave would have accepted. She did the housework—they kept no servants—attended to the old man's correspondence, and during his periodical breakdowns in health was nurse to him as well.

I knew his doctor, a young fellow named Lexivell, a very smart young man who had a suite of apartments in Gower Street. I got to know him through our divisional surgeon being taken ill. We had to get a doctor for something or other—to test a drunk, or something unimportant—and the station sergeant remembered young Lexivell and brought him in.

"Now your fortune's made," I told him, when I heard that the old man had appointed him a sort of doctor to the household.

Dr. Lexivell laughed.

"He wanted to make me a sort of honorary physician," he said, "but I very carefully explained to him that I had to live."

I wasn't very much surprised at this, because Mr. Blidfield never spent an unnecessary penny. He used to go out every morning with a market bag and

do his own shopping, going as far as the Edgware Road to save a penny on potatoes.

I don't think there was very much the matter with him, but he was something of a crank about his own health, and called the doctor in on the slightest provocation. If he had been a paying patient, the hobby would have been very acceptable to the doctor, who hadn't a very large practice, and who, as I knew, was living up to his income if not beyond.

One day I heard that the old man was seriously ill, and, meeting Dr. Lexivell by accident at the corner of Tottenham Court Road, he told me that Angus had "developed a heart."

"It is nothing very serious, but he will have to look after himself," he said. "I wanted him to get a nurse, but he wouldn't hear of it. I'm not at all pleased with the idea of that girl and an old man who may pop off at any moment being together in the flat alone."

He was going to tell me something, but stopped himself, and then, changing his mind, he said after a moment's hesitation:

"It's no business of mine, but when I have been there late at night I've always found a couple of men either outside the door or on the opposite side of the road watching the house. I saw one of them—a dark, foreign-looking fellow. It's the same two, I'm sure. I spoke to Mr. Blidfield about it, and to my surprise he knew the house was being watched, but immediately turned the subject as though he was not anxious to discuss it."

Dark, sinister men who watch houses are always interesting to me, and I strolled round one afternoon, not expecting, however, to find the watchers on duty. As a matter of fact they weren't. I rang the bell of the flat, and Miss Olford opened the door to me. Her uncle had gone driving. It was his one extravagance. He used to hire a car about twice a week from a local garage and be driven into the country.

Pretty little Miss Olford looked very tired herself. She had been up until three o'clock that morning.

"The doctor says that between eleven and three are the critical hours with uncle, and has told me I ought not to go to bed before three. He has been bullying uncle to get a nurse, but I don't think he will."

"What is the matter with him?" I asked.

She was very vague, apparently knew nothing except what the doctor had told her. I did not mention the dark watchers, because I did not want to alarm her. I suggested that she should go to sleep there and then, but she shook her head.

“Uncle may be back at any moment and he will want his tea,” she said.

So far as I could gather—I did not see Mr. Blidfield—the doctor’s efforts to procure a nurse were not very successful. Less than a week after I called, nurses became unnecessary.

I was anxious to know all about the two men who were watching the house. One of my detectives had seen two people behaving suspiciously in the square and had questioned them, but they had given satisfactory account of themselves. I called on Mr. Angus Blidfield on the Saturday afternoon, and this time had the good luck to find him at home.

We knew one another slightly, well enough, at any rate, for me to excuse my calling to enquire after his health.

“There’s little wrong with me but palpitation,” he grumbled. “That young doctor’s out after fees, but he’ll get nothing from me! He wanted me to get nurses in—they all work together, these medical people, and I’ve no doot that he’d get a commission out of their salary. A pound a day for nurses!”

Though he treated his illness lightly, it wasn’t difficult to see that he was a little uneasy about himself. Not so uneasy, however, that he was prepared to spend fabulous sums on nurses.

It was a Saturday night—and it was the night I talked too much, so I am not likely to forget it. A very unpleasant night it was for the month of May. Snow and sleet, which more properly belong to January, was being flung by a forty-mile wind in the faces of people who were foolish enough to venture into the great open spaces, as the cinema calls them.

The great open space in question was Bloomsbury Square, and the time was a quarter to one in the morning. I was battling along the bleakest stretch of the square, my umbrella held before me, though for all the protection it gave me I might as well have been without it.

If I had come into a head-on collision with another man similarly hidden (which was quite possible, for the wind was blowing from every direction) there would have been no more than an apology on either side. But the fellow who barged into me came sideways. The first impression I had was that he had been blown off the roof by the force of the wind; my second

impression was that he had come down a flight of steps leading from one of the houses in the square. It was so dark and miserable that I didn't even notice which house it was.

I was surprised by the collision into saying many things that I should not have said. I've got a far-reaching voice, and every word must have been heard in spite of the gale. He was cursing, not quite so loudly but distinctly, as he searched the pavement for something he had dropped. He found it at last, picked it up, fumbled and dropped it again. I heard the clang of it and knew that it was a key.

By this time my anger had evaporated, and the realisation that my remarks were somewhat uncalled for came to me. I stooped to aid in the search, touched a piece of sodden string, which was suddenly jerked away from me by the stranger. Without a word of greeting or farewell, apology or acceptance of apology, the man tried to brush past me. Again we collided, this time violently. There was a crash, and something fell to the pavement. By the light of a street lamp I saw that it was a very shiny silver case, larger than a cigar- or cigarette-case. It flew open as it fell and two or three tiny and indistinguishable articles fell out. With a curse, the man stooped, gathered them together and flew on. I did not see his face, but then, I had made no attempt to help him in his search— though he needed help. One hand still grasped the umbrella, which, even as he rose, was blown inside out.

That began and ended the incident. In a few seconds the man had vanished into the darkness, and I was on my way to my lodgings.

I had taken a few paces when I found something attached to the rubber sole of my shoe—a little obstruction that made for awkward walking. Bracing myself against a lamp-post, I lifted my sole and drew the thing clear.

I did not throw it away, because it was not my habit to throw away valuable things, but went home, put my find on the mantelpiece, had supper, and went to bed. I was just falling asleep when I realised that the man must have come from the Blidfield house.

I was called at half-past five by the telephone, and I learned that Angus Blidfield had been murdered. His niece had gone into his room at half-past five, at which hour he was invariably awakened, to take him a cup of tea, and had found him lying dead on the floor, with terrible injuries to his head. These had been inflicted by a life-preserver which the old man kept hanging on the rail of his bed as a weapon of defence against burglars.

A big steel deed-box which he kept under his bed was found to have been forced open, and was empty. By the time I arrived, the house was in the possession of the police, and the mechanical side of Scotland Yard were making the usual search for finger-prints. The room was still a little hazy from the smoke of burnt magnesium, for the photographer had just finished his work when I came in.

I found the girl in the dining-room, very white and shaky, but she told her story with great clarity.

This was her story, that the doctor had called at half-past eight the previous evening, had seen her uncle and had said that there was no longer any necessity for her nightly watch. She could not go to bed before eleven, but at that hour, absolutely weary to death, she had gone to bed and was instantly asleep. She was awakened by her alarm clock at half-past five, at which hour she invariably rose to make a cup of tea for her uncle. It was then that she discovered the murder.

“You heard nothing in the night?”

She shook her head.

“No sound at all?”

“Nothing,” she said. “I hardly heard the alarm clock.”

I went back to the room where the murder had been committed, and made a very careful examination. The window was drawn down from the top about two inches, but evidently the intruder or intruders had not come this way. Outside the window was a deep, wide area. The door of the flat opening from the passage bore no jemmy marks, and the lock, which was a particularly complicated one, had not been forced.

The girl could give me no information about the contents of the black box, except that it contained money—how much, or in what shape it was, she could not say. I was questioning her when Dr. Lexivell arrived. At her request one of the detectives had telephoned to him, the instrument being in the room where the body was lying.

He and the divisional surgeon arrived simultaneously and made an examination of the body, and Lexivell came in to see me.

“This is a bad business. Have you any idea who did it?”

I shook my head.

“Not the slightest,” I said, and it was then that I had my lesson that a still tongue makes a wise head, for I spoke foolishly. “It was a rotten night,” I said, “and I should imagine that even the policeman on the beat was not looking for burglars. I personally was in bed at midnight.”

It was one of those foolish lies which even clever people tell, though I am not particularly clever. I saw the girl’s grave eyes fixed steadily on mine, and something in that gaze emphasised my stupidity. I believe women have a sixth sense, or perhaps it’s only an animal instinct, which enables them to penetrate and look into a man’s mind. It was the only time in my life that I have felt, and probably looked, confused.

“Have you traced the men I spoke to you about?” asked the doctor.

To tell the truth, I had forgotten the watchers. My mind was so occupied with something more important that I did not give much thought to them even at that moment.

I sent the girl out of the house to a neighbouring hotel, and waited till the body was moved before I began an inch by inch search. There was nothing in the shape of documentary clues that could give us the slightest help. Stuck in the edge of a looking-glass on the old man’s dressing chest was a card bearing two telephone numbers, one of which was the doctor’s and the other the local garage from which he hired his car. On his bedside table was a white paper, bearing the label of a local chemist, which contained a sleeping-draught that he had not opened. I drew the attention of Dr. Lexivell to this and he nodded.

“Yes, I ordered that for him, but he had a great aversion to drugs of any kind, and though he promised me he would take it, apparently he did not.”

“Had you ordered a sleeping-draught before?”

He shook his head.

“No. You see I wanted to give this unfortunate girl a good night’s sleep. There’s no doubt that, although his heart was a little dicky, it wasn’t as bad as he imagined—in fact, much of it was sheer nerves.”

He had not, he said, heard from the old man after his visit, and an enquiry at the telephone exchange confirmed that no call had been put through.

I saw Miss Olford at the hotel. Her uncle was not aware, she told me, that she was in the habit of sitting up half the night. She and the doctor had

entered into an amiable conspiracy to keep from him the fact that any alarm was felt about his condition.

I asked her a question.

“Ordinarily, are you a light or a heavy sleeper?”

She smiled faintly at this.

“I am a very light sleeper. The least noise disturbs me. When Uncle Angus used to move about in the middle of the night he always woke me up, and I think this worried him a little, for he had ideas about young people having lots of sleep. He told the doctor, and Dr. Lexivell wanted to treat me for insomnia, but I hate drugs of any kind.”

That day I interviewed the lawyer, and discovered that the girl was Angus Blidfield’s sole heir. She had a brother, a ne’er-do-well who lived in London and had apparently been in some trouble with the police. It was not she but the doctor who told me this.

“I’ve often wondered if he was the fellow who was always hanging about the house.”

It wasn’t difficult to trace young Olford, but he could give my sergeant no other information than that, at the time the murder was committed, he was in bed. Such rough-and-ready enquiries as we were able to make immediately confirmed this alibi.

It was one of the most interesting days I have ever spent—or would have been but for that cloudy sort of uncomfortable feeling a man has when he realises every other minute how foolish he has been.

I pushed out two of my best men to pursue enquiries in a certain direction. I knew they would take some time to get the information I wanted, and that the period of waiting was full of unpleasant possibilities. At nine o’clock that night I was writing my first report. I do the work that requires a great deal of thought in my own flat, which at this time was off Guilford Street. My apartment was also on the ground floor, that is to say on the street level, and my dining-room overlooked a courtyard at the back of the flat, a small, square space which was approached by a door through which tradesmen come to deliver their goods. There was a wall about eight feet high, easily scalable; but I don’t think the gentleman who called upon me troubled to climb the wall, because afterwards the door, which was usually kept locked after six p.m., was found open.

It was quite dark, and the rain of the previous night had hardly ceased, though it was warmer. I had written about four folio pages when there was a startling crash. Something was flung through the window and dropped at my feet. If it had fallen under the table out of sight, I should not have been alive to-day, but fortunately I saw it. It was a Mills' bomb.

I didn't stop to pick it up and throw it back the way it came, because I know enough of Mills' bombs to realise that time is the essence of the contract. I made one leap for my bedroom and got to the cover of the wall before it exploded. But even so I didn't escape altogether, for a ricocheting segment of the bomb cut through my boot.

The noise was terrific. I staggered out into the wrecked room, so dazed that I didn't know what I was doing, and not until the fire engines arrived was I anything like myself.

Nobody was killed, thank God, but the flats above and below were partially destroyed. The bomb blew a hole in the floor, wrecked every stick of furniture there was in the room and gave the newspapers material for a two days wonder.

But to me that bomb spoke a message of four words: "You talk too much." And I've never forgotten it.

I got to Scotland Yard, and about midnight I had my room so full of bookmakers, moneylenders, bill discounters, keepers of gambling houses, etc., that I had to open the window to let in the pure air.

At half-past one in the morning there was an accident in Little Creefield Street. Two taxi-cabs collided, there was a smashing of glass and a wild hullabaloo raised by a passenger, who had to be lifted out of the cab although it wasn't even overturned. A policeman blew a whistle, and when Dr. Lexivell put his head out of the window to find out what had happened, he learned that the passenger had broken an ankle and had cut his face with glass.

"I'll come down in a minute," said the doctor.

When he got to the street he found half a dozen men surrounding something that lay on the ground. They opened to let him come through—and then grabbed him.

My Chief thought it was rather a theatrical way of making an arrest, but I was justified when we searched the doctor; he had an automatic in his hip pocket—he hadn't even put up the safety catch. When I searched his room I

found a couple of Mills' bombs in a locked cupboard—this was just after the war: he had been in the Army and had collected quite an armoury of deadly weapons.

All the precautions we took to arrest him would not have been necessary but for my telling him that I was in bed at the moment when, he knew very well, he had collided with me in Bloomsbury Square. He had recognised my voice, but had been pretty sure I hadn't recognised him, although, after he missed the silver end of a hypodermic syringe which he had dropped in the collision, and which I had found stuck in my sole, he might have supposed I had some clue.

I saw him after his conviction, and he was perfectly frank about the whole affair.

"I was broke and in the hands of moneylenders, and desperately pushed for 'ready,'" he said. "Patients will often tell doctors what they will not even confess to their lawyers, and almost the first time I met old Blidfield he told me that he kept eight thousand pounds in cash in the box under his bed. I don't know why, but probably he was dodging taxation.

"The difficulty was to find an opportunity for robbing him without incriminating myself. He was a bit of a hypochondriac, and my first idea was to persuade him he was ill, give him drugs, and, whilst he was doped, to help myself. Against this there was the fact that he had a niece in the flat and that he wouldn't take drugs in any circumstances.

"I did persuade him that his niece was looking ill, and that she was not getting enough sleep, and he agreed to give me the key of the flat so that if he called me at any hour of the night I could come in without disturbing the girl. But here again I was met with this difficulty, that Agnes Olford was a singularly light sleeper. I tried to treat her, but she shared the old man's objection to any kind of sedative. It was an inspiration to induce her to sit up until three o'clock every morning in case the old man wanted her.

"After a week of this I knew there would be no light sleeping on the night I made my attempt. It took a lot to persuade the old boy that one sleeping-draught would not start him on a career of drug-taking, but I thought I had convinced him, and when I called in the evening he told me that he would take it. I arrived at the house about half-past twelve. The girl, I knew, was so dead sleepy that I had nothing to fear from her. I thought all that was necessary would be to open the box at my leisure and get away before he woke up. I had planned, by the way, one or two artistic touches to give a verisimilitude to the theory of burglary. As it happened, they weren't

necessary. Blidfield was asleep: I didn't realise that he had not taken the drug until I had got the strong box open and heard his voice challenging me. There was a little struggle——” The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

“Of course, I recognised your voice the moment I heard it,” he went on, “but I was hoping that you hadn't recognised me, and there would have been no trouble if you had not made it very clear, not only that you suspected but that you knew I was the murderer. In your business it is a great mistake to talk too much.”

I have never forgotten my lesson.

THE FALL OF MR. RATER

THE ORATOR was a man who had very few hobbies, and, for so up-to-date an individual, he had an almost childish dislike of novelties. His wireless set had been given to him by an enthusiastic admirer, or he might never have owned such a contraption. As it was, it stood for six months in his sitting-room and was never once used. When he did attempt to play with it, the batteries were not working, and another six months elapsed before he could summon sufficient interest in the strange devil-box to take the necessary steps for its repair.

Gradually he became reconciled to hearing other people talk. Every day he studied the programme in the daily newspaper and switched on at such hours as would offer him the best opportunity of hearing people talk without there occurring any necessity for his reply.

He avoided music, chamber or otherwise, and concentrated upon those improving talks which have driven so many people to dog-racing. Sometimes, he would be woken up by the jazz band of the Orpheum Hotel, sometimes he would wake naturally. Occasionally—very occasionally—he would listen-in to dance music, and hear the languid clapping of the dancers, and strive vainly to distinguish and give coherence to those indistinct scraps of conversation which float from the dancers themselves and are probably caught and mangled by some special attachment in the microphone.

Once he heard a man, evidently a tired business man, discussing his favourite topic, which was business, and he heard as plainly as though the speaker were in the same room.

“... I never believe in letting business accounts slip past. I happen to know he’s written to us in Glasgow...” Here was a blur, caused by a woman with a strident laugh. “... I ran against the beggar in the Strand to-day and I said: ‘Hi! You owe us eight shillings!’ Rather marvellous, remembering, eh? I’d only seen him once.... No, we don’t supply arsenic except to agents....”

Now everybody knows about the Angel of the Odd: that if you hear about senna pods in the morning from your doctor, you’re pretty sure to hear the words ‘senna pods’ in the evening when you’re dining with your banker; and the Orator, who was a firm believer in the law of coincidence, which he had sought vainly to tabulate, was not surprised when the next morning brought arsenic to his table in the form of the first report issued by the Chief Constable of Wessex, dealing with the Fainer murder.

It came rather late to Scotland Yard. Mrs. Fainer was in prison, awaiting trial. The Orator read the letter slowly, as was his wont.

“...I am not absolutely satisfied that this woman is the murderess” (wrote the Chief Constable, who, in addition to being a good friend of the Orator’s, was the shrewdest man that ever held such a position), “nor am I satisfied that my detectives have made as good a job as they might have done. I was rather a fool not to call in Scotland Yard before, but if it is in order I would like you to come down, even though I am bringing you on a fool’s errand, to clear up one or two doubts that are in my mind.

The Orator carried the letter to his Chief. “Business” was slack that afternoon, and he travelled down to Burntown, and the Chief Constable met him at the station.

“The trial’s next week, and I don’t see what other evidence you can secure—we’ve got enough to hang this wretched creature—poor soul!” he added inconsistently. “Pretty girl, Rater... much too good for her husband—a grouching, whining semi-invalid who nagged her from morning till night. By gad, I almost feel that she was justified—if she did it.”

The dead man Fainer was a well-off merchant who had retired from business after he was thirty, and ten years later had married the girl who was now in prison. Their life was not a particularly pleasant one; he was a hard man to deal with. To all appearance Mrs. Fainer had borne her wretched life without complaint. She had one or two friends, the most important of whom was a Mr. Alexander Brait, who was an agent representing a number of hardware firms in that part of the country. He also conducted a general agency.

Mr. Brait was highly respected in Burntown; he was the leader of one or two local movements for the improvement of the young, he was a good speaker, sang in the church choir, was interested in church matters, and had a local reputation for good fellowship.

“There’s no doubt,” said the Chief Constable, “that Brait was trusted more by Fainer than he trusted anybody. But that’s quite understandable, because Brait is a very hearty soul with a large sense of humour, who could often talk Fainer out of his tantrums, and did, I think, make life a little smoother for Mrs. Fainer. The tragic thing is that he is the principal witness for the prosecution.”

“Exactly why is he the principal witness? Did he see the poison administered?” asked the Orator.

To his surprise the Chief Constable nodded.

“It was evidently administered at tea. There were present in the room Mr. Fainer, his wife and Brait, who saw the wife pass a plate of cakes to the husband, who was afterwards taken ill. He died the next morning, and the medical evidence is arsenical poisoning. Brait knew nothing about this till next day, and then the poor chap was in a devil of a stew, because that afternoon he had met Mrs. Fainer, who had made a most extraordinary request to him, namely, that he should secure her some arsenic from the local chemist. He was flabbergasted, and, not wishing to offend her, said that he could only procure it if he signed the poison book and told the chemist what it was for. She seemed perturbed at this and begged him to take no further action. He saw her that afternoon at tea, and she made no further reference.”

“Was arsenic found in the house?” asked the Orator.

The Chief Constable shook his head.

“No; we’ve turned the place upside down, and there’s not a sign of it, nor have we been able to trace where she bought it. She of course denies that she administered poison; she says she saw Brait that day at the very place he stated he saw her, which was at Broadway, which is the shopping centre, but that she made no reference to arsenic and made no request to him. Brait has taken that rather well. He’s a sensible man and he realises that this unfortunate woman must lie to save her life.”

“How long has Brait been here?”

“In the town? About five years. He’s highly respected....” He recited again Mr. Alexander Brait’s various accomplishments.

“Has she any lover?” interrupted the Orator.

“No—oh dear, no, nothing like that! Naturally we made the most exhaustive enquiries, but found no evidence of that at all.”

The Orator stirred his tea thoughtfully.

“I don’t see exactly what I can do, unless it is to find the place where she got the arsenic.”

“Exactly,” said the Chief Constable. “That is where our fellows have fallen down.”

Now the Orator never despised coincidences, and almost his first act was to call the head-waiter of the Orpheum Hotel, whom he knew.

“Talking about arsenic, were they? Oh, that would be Mr. Langfort from Glasgow. He’s got a chemical works. He was here last night, and he’s leaving for Glasgow in the morning. Would you like to speak to him?”

“I think I would,” said the Orator.

He had to wait five minutes whilst Mr. Langfort was paged, and after a while he was put through, evidently to a private room, and he instantly recognised the voice he had heard on the wireless. It took him a few seconds to reveal his identity, and apparently he was not without fame, for Langfort seemed impressed.

Mr. Rater explained what was the reason of his call.

“Well, well,” said the merchant, when he had finished—he spoke with a very distinct Scottish accent—“fancy your hearing me on the wireless! My wife will be very interested in that. Yes, I was talking about arsenic. By the way, I shall be grateful if you did not mention the fact that I was talking to a lady...” Here he got a little incoherent.

The Orator sneered privately and soothed him.

“It was about a fellow I met on the street yesterday. He came up to Glasgow—a traveller or something for a firm of general merchants—and I happened to see him. He bought a pound of arsenic. I can give you the date. My memory is perhaps the most remarkable of my assets....”

The Orator let him talk about himself for five minutes before he gently led him back to the subject of their discussion.

“His name?” Here for a moment the wonderful memory failed. “Grinnet—he had an office in Bristol, I remember. He did a small foreign trade. But the beggar never paid me, and after all these years I spotted him when I saw him....”

“Did he pay?”

“You bet he paid!” said Mr. Langfort triumphantly.

He was willing to give any item of information. Mr. Rater wanted only one. He listened carefully, making notes, without the slightest idea that the notes would be of any value to him.

That night he dined with the Chief Constable and put forward a request.

“Certainly. You can go into the prison to-morrow. I’ll get you an order from the Sheriff. I don’t suppose she’ll want to talk about it, and really I feel a scoundrel that I should try to incriminate her any further. But perhaps you could talk to her, Rater, and bring her to a sense of her responsibility. You might drop a hint that she’d be helping the cause of justice, and that there’s very little chance of her escaping sentence, if she told you all she knew.”

At nine o’clock the next morning the Orator passed through the black doors of Wilsey Prison and was conducted through a hall familiar to him to the women’s quarters. A door was unlocked and he was ushered into a waiting-room. Presently a door at the other end opened and a woman came in. She was very pale; her manner and mien were listless, but even so, she had dignity and poise and a beauty that is rarely seen.

The Orator was no sentimentalist. He had seen beautiful women who were little less attractive than the deadliest of cobras; but there was something about this girl—whether it was the terrible position in which she found herself or whether it was that she carried with her the very manner of innocence—that threw him momentarily off his balance.

“I am Detective Inspector Rater from Scotland Yard, Mrs. Fainer,” he said gently. “I thought I’d come and have a talk with you.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head wearily.

“I don’t know what I can tell you, inspector, that I haven’t told everybody already.”

He came round the table and sat at her side, so that they were not two feet apart, and he signalled the attendant to retire to the other end of the long room.

“I’ll tell you what I want to know.”

“Where the poison came from?” She shook her head. “I don’t know. I’m almost weary of saying that, but I don’t. And I don’t expect you to believe me.”

“Your trial is next week. Shall you persist in the story you told about Mr. Brait?”

She looked up at this.

“I never spoke to Mr. Brait about poison. I shall go into the box and swear it, but I don’t suppose it’ll make any difference.”

“Why should he say that it was not true?” he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“I can’t tell you.”

Now the Orator had an instinct that was almost uncanny. In that shrug, in that expression, he read something which she had not intended to tell.

“Are you a great friend of Mr. Brait?”

“No”—she hesitated—“not a great friend.”

“Has he ever wanted to be a better friend than he is?” asked Rater.

Her headshake was half-hearted.

“I don’t want to discuss it,” she said.

“Has he ever made love to you?”

She looked at him, startled.

“Who told you?”

“Has he ever made love to you?” repeated the Orator.

The sigh and the headshake came together.

“Yes, I suppose he did in a way.” And then: “Who told you?”

“What is Mr. Brait like in appearance?”

She stared at him in amazement.

“Haven’t you seen him?”

“I’ve seen nobody except the Chief Constable. I wonder if you believe me, Mrs. Fainer, but I really want to help you, and I’m not trying to trap you into saying something that will hurt you.”

She looked at him long and fixedly.

“Yes, I believe you,” she said. “I’ve heard of you, Mr. Rater. They call you the Orator.”

A faint smile transfigured the pale face.

“You’re talking more than usual.”

And, strive as he would against the impulse, the Orator found himself going red.

“Perhaps I am,” he said awkwardly. “Will you tell me about Mr. Brait?”

She hadn’t much to tell. There had been one or two uncomfortable moments, and he had written her a few letters.

The Orator knew she was keeping something back, that the uncomfortable moments had been very horrible moments for her, and as for the one or two letters...

“Did you keep any of them?” he asked.

Again she hesitated.

“Yes, I did. They scared me a little bit, but I wanted to keep them in case—well, my husband believed in Mr. Brait implicitly. And then I had a terrible fright. I had put them in a locked box, and I think one day when I was out my husband must have opened the box and taken them. They weren’t there. I don’t know why he should have gone to the box at all: I only keep stationery and odd scraps of writing-paper there.”

“Did your husband ever talk to you about them?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“One of the servants may have done it. You are sure they were stolen—that they’re not there now?”

“Absolutely. Just before I was arrested I looked. I think the police have the box. There’s no evidence in it against me.” She smiled again.

“What is Brait like?”

She described him in a few words.

“In many ways he is a very nice man—in every way that I know, except—well, what I’ve told you. And one really doesn’t blame a man for falling in love with a woman—at least, I suppose it was love. Very good-looking, fair-haired, much older than he appears, with wonderful blue eyes. You’ll probably see him.”

“I shall see him to-night,” said Mr. Rater. And then, to her obvious surprise, he rose. “I don’t think I want to ask you any more, except about that box where you kept the letters. Was it fastened with an ordinary lock?”

She shook her head.

“No; that’s the curious thing about it. It had a Yale lock. It was given to me on my marriage, and I have the only key. I have kept letters there before, one or two scraps of things that I wanted to keep in safety, but when I opened it there were no letters at all.”

“Why do you keep stationery in it?” asked the Orator, and saw the colour come to her cheeks.

“My husband hated me writing letters, and he was rather—mean. He used to count the sheets of paper in the stationery rack every morning; one had to account for every sheet that was missing and every envelope. It sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it? So I used to buy stationery in the town and keep it hidden. He was always jealous of my keeping up old friendships. I used to correspond with girls with whom I was at school. I don’t think you’ll have any difficulty in proving that, though I don’t see how it helps.”

“Why didn’t you tell the police when they arrested you about Mr. Brait’s love-making?”

She shivered.

“I don’t think that would help me very much,” she said.

The Orator went out of the prison a changed man. Not for the first time in his life he was on the side of the defence; but never before had he felt so strongly in favour of an accused person.

He met Mr. Brait that night, and told him in part of the interview. Mr. Brait listened and was unspeakably sad.

“I wish to God I’d never met her that day,” he said. “I very nearly didn’t go to the town. It was only a fluke that I passed along Broadway and saw her standing outside the chemist’s shop. I rather like her.”

“What do you mean by ‘rather’? Do you like her very much?” asked the Orator bluntly.

The man flushed.

“I don’t know why you should ask me that,” his voice had a note of hauteur. “I like her—she’s a nice woman. I liked her husband better—that is all.”

“Did you ever write letters to her?”

The man smiled.

“Has she told you I did? Well, if she did it’s rather stupid of me to deny it. I have written little notes saying that I was coming up to play at picquet with my poor friend, but that is all. Do you suggest there are other kinds of letters?”

“I’m suggesting nothing, I’m asking questions,” said the Orator in his most unpleasant manner.

After Brait had gone—the interview took place in the Chief Constable’s office late at night—that high official was a little reproachful.

“I don’t think you ought to upset Brait: he’s a very, very decent fellow, a man who wouldn’t hurt a fly. What did you think of her?”

“Who—Mrs. Fainer? Wonderful!” said the Orator.

A man who had reached the age of fifty-two years and was still a bachelor had no right to think of a prisoner, almost condemned to a shameful death, as the Orator thought about Mrs. Fainer when he paced up and down the identical pavement on which she had stood when she interviewed Brait.

Early the next morning he was abroad, and the young detective who had been placed at his disposal brought him one or two interesting items of news.

“Brait’s office-boy has been sacked for smoking in business hours. I’ve had a chat with him, and he’s rather an intelligent youth.”

“I hate intelligent youths,” growled the Orator; “I like ’em normal!”

Yet the intelligence of the youth was put beyond dispute when, at ten o’clock that night, he came to the lodging of Mr. Rater’s assistant and brought with him a day-book. Three times during the next day the Orator drove to a neighbouring town five miles away, where he could telephone without exciting the curiosity of the local exchange. He had distance calls put through to St. Helens in Lancashire, he interviewed by the same medium a vicar in a small country town in Somerset, and by night there was nothing left to unravel but the mystery of the locked box.

The Chief Constable had it in his store.

“It has no value. Mrs. Fainer gave us the key. It has got nothing but stationery in it.”

“Is the stationery still in it?”

“I suppose so,” said the officer in surprise.

Two minutes later the box was on the table before the Orator.

“Here’s the key.” The Chief Constable took it from a drawer, and the box was opened.

There were a dozen sheets of notepaper of varying sizes at the bottom, and beneath these half a dozen envelopes.

“I wonder why she bought two sizes of stationery?” mused the Orator.

He took the top three sheets out and laid them on the table. By the side of these he put the other sheets, which were larger.

“And why did she keep notepaper which is slightly soiled?” he asked.

“How on earth could I know that?”

Mr. Rater indulged in one of his rare smiles.

“I’ll take all this stationery home if you don’t mind. To-morrow I’m going to London; I shall be back on Sunday. Before I leave I want to see the prisoner.”

It was a curious interview he had with her. She came into the room with a firmer step; her eyes were brighter; there was more of resolution in her slim carriage. Yet the reason was far from what he had imagined.

“I’ve just given up,” she said, “and I’m preparing for the very easy way out.”

“You’re talking like a fool,” growled the Orator, and he saw laughter come into her eyes and die again.

“You see, Mr. Rater, suppose by some extraordinary fluke the jury returned a verdict of not guilty—I can’t imagine their doing so, but suppose they were influenced by my lawyer—and from what I’ve seen of him I don’t think they’ll be very greatly influenced”... again that light in her eyes. “I have nothing to live on. I should be a marked woman, I should have to leave the country. My husband left me penniless. His last act when he was dying—yes, he believed

I had poisoned him—was to revoke his will. I simply don't want to face life with that terrible burden on me. Really I don't think there's any necessity to contemplate facing anything."

"You could marry again," growled the Orator, without looking at her.

She at any rate looked at him curiously.

"What a strange man you are, Mr. Rater! You're not a bit like the descriptions I've had of you—one reads about you in the papers, and you are talking, aren't you?"

The Orator rose and cleared his voice.

"I'll tell you something," he said. "You've got to face life all right."

She stared at him open-eyed.

"Do you mean that they will return a verdict of not guilty?"

"Of course I mean that," said Mr. Rater testily. "I'm sure now. You see, the dustman's wife kept the coat for patching little Jimmy's pants."

She thought he was drunk: he could see that unspoken slander in her eyes.

"I'm not mad," he said, and made his escape hurriedly.

The dustman's wife had been the discovery of the young detective. Already a recommendation to headquarters, to appoint that young man to Scotland Yard, was on its way.

The Orator was two days in town, mainly in Whitehall. He came back by the six o'clock train to Burntown, and the Chief Constable met him on the station.

"We've asked Mr. Brait to come to my office," he said, a little shortly.

Already he regretted his tardy request for assistance from Scotland Yard.

"And look here, Rater, I don't want this man offended. He's been very useful to us, and has given us the fullest possible information."

"I don't know whether I shall annoy him or not," said the Orator, "but I've made the discovery that you asked me to make, and that ought to satisfy you, Chief."

"You've found where the poison came from?"

The Orator nodded, but he would say no more until they were in the spacious office in the Town Hall which the Chief Constable used as his own. There were two other officers in the room when they arrived, and Mr. Brait rose with a smile to greet the detective; but the Orator did not take the outstretched hand.

He took up a position before the fireplace.

“How long have you been in this town?” he asked without any preliminary.

“Five years.”

“Before that you were where?”

Mr. Brait told him.

“You were a general agent in that town too?”

The witness nodded.

“Were you very much surprised when Mrs. Fainer asked you to buy arsenic for her?”

“Naturally,” said the other.

“You’ve never handled arsenic in your life, I suppose?”

“No,” said Brait firmly.

“You’ve never bought arsenic from the wholesaler by the pound? I am asking this because I have evidence that a packet came to you by registered post on the day Mr. Fainer was taken ill. It is entered in your book as chemicals, but I have discovered the firm at St. Helens that supplied you.”

Brait nodded coolly.

“I remember now. I bought a pound—or a half-pound, I’m not sure which—and posted it on the same day to a customer of ours in Shanghai.”

“Do you remember the customer?”

“I can’t for the moment remember,” said Brait.

“Have you the receipt for the registered package that you sent on?”

A little hesitation.

“It wasn’t registered.”

“Why not?” asked the Orator bluntly. “You ordered that the arsenic should be sent to you registered. Why did you send it on to China unregistered?”

There was no reply to this.

“What time did you post it?”

“About one o’clock,” came the unguarded answer, and the Orator almost leaped at him.

“Ten minutes before you left Mrs. Fainer on the Broadway? You had it in your pocket then?”

The man turned from red to white.

“I’m not going to answer any questions——” he began angrily.

“You’ll answer every question I put to you,” said the Orator. “You didn’t go to the post immediately, did you?”

“No, I posted it that night,” said the other sulkily.

“So you had it in your pocket when you went to the Fainers’ to tea? I suggest to you that the packet was broken in your pocket when you came back to your house, and that the next day you burnt your coat—you have been unlucky: the dustman who removed the remnants kept a piece or two of the pocket, which had not been burnt, and that is impregnated with arsenic. Do you know that?”

The man sat down heavily.

“And I’ll tell you another thing. You bought arsenic five years ago from a firm in Glasgow, and didn’t pay until the other day, when the owner and manager of the business met you in the Strand. He will certainly come down and identify you. In this case the arsenic was sent to the town where you came from. You had a general agency business there. That was also intended for China, wasn’t it?”

The man did not answer.

“Three days after your first wife died.”

The man came to his feet with a howl of fury.

“What are you suggesting?” he breathed. “Why should I kill Fainer—my best friend?”

“Because you were in love with his wife; because you wrote her letters proposing that she should run away with you.”

“You’ve got to produce those letters.”

“I’ll produce them all right. There were three in a little box which Mrs. Fainer kept. She thought they’d disappeared. It was only the ink that disappeared. The man who writes love letters in invisible ink deserves more than the gallows you’re going to get. Take him!”

The Chief Constable leaped to the door to intercept the flying man. For a moment Brait stopped, as though uncertain what to do, and then, before the Orator could reach him, he had dropped his hand to his pocket.... There was a flash and a report, and he dropped to the ground.

The trial of Mrs. Fainer for the murder of her husband was a short one. The Orator, who was something of a driver, took her to London in his two-seater, and only once in the course of the journey did he speak. That was when they were drawn up at a wide bend of a hill road that overlooked a valley through which a river ran. It was here that he became really talkative.

His wife often reminded him of this beginning of his downfall.

THE END