THE STRANGE COUNTESS

BY

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Freeditorial

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CHAPTER I

Lois Margeritta Reddle sat on the edge of her bed, a thick and heavy cup of pallid tea in one hand, a letter in the other. The tea was too sweet, the bread was cut generously even as it was buttered economically, but she was so completely absorbed in the letter that she forgot the weakness of Lizzy Smith as a caterer.

The note was headed with a gilt crest and the paper was thick and slightly perfumed.

307 Chester Square, S.W.

The Countess of Moron is pleased to learn that Miss Reddle will take up her duties as resident secretary on Monday, the 17th. Miss Reddle is assured of a comfortable position, with ample opportunities for recreation.

The door was thrust open and the red and shining face of Lizzy was thrust in.

"Bathroom's empty," she said briefly. "Better take your own soap—you can see through the bit that's left. There's one dry towel and one half-dry. What's the letter?"

"It is from my countess—I start on Monday."

Lizzy pulled a wry face.

"Sleep in, of course? That means I've got to get somebody to share these digs. Last girl who slept here snored. I will say one thing about you, Lois, you don't snore."

Lois' eyes twinkled, the sensitive mouth curved for a second in the ghost of a smile.

"Well, you can't say that I haven't looked after you," said Lizzy with satisfaction. "I'm the best manager you've ever roomed with, I'll bet. I've done the shopping and cooked and everything—you'll admit that?"

Lois slipped her arm round the girl and kissed her homely face.

"You've been a darling," she said, "and in many ways I'm sorry I'm going. But, Lizzy, I've tried hard to move on all my life. From the National School in Leeds to that little cash desk at Roopers, and from Roopers to the Drug Stores, and then to the great lawyers—;"

"Great!" exclaimed the scornful Lizzy. "Old Shaddles great! Why, the mean old devil wouldn't give me a half-crown rise at Christmas, and I've been punching the alphabet five years for him! Kid, you'll marry into society. That countess is a she-dragon, but she's rich, and you're sure to meet swells—go and have your annual while I fry the eggs. Is it going to rain?"

Lois was rubbing her white, rounded arm, gingerly passing her palm over the pink, star- shaped scar just above her elbow. It was Lizzy's faith that whenever the scar irritated, rain was in the offing.

"You'll have to have that electrocuted, or whatever the word is," said the snub-nosed girl when the other shook her head. "Sleeves are about as fashionable nowadays as crinolines."

From the bathroom Lois heard her companion bustling about the little kitchen, and, mingled with the splutter and crackle of frying eggs, came shrilly the sound of the newest fox-trot as Lizzy whistled it unerringly.

They had shared the third floor in Charlotte Street since the day she had come to London. Lois was an orphan; she could not remember her father, who had died when she was little more than a baby, and only dimly recalled the pleasant, matronly woman who had fussed over her in the rough and humble days of her early schooling. She had passed to the care of a vague aunt who was interested in nothing except the many diseases from which she imagined she suffered. And then the aunt had died, despite her arrays of medicine bottles, or possibly because of them, and Lois had gone into her first lodging.

"Anyway, the countess will like your classy talk," said Lizzy, as the radiant girl came into the kitchen. She had evidently been thinking over the new appointment.

"I don't believe I talk classily!" said Lois good-humouredly.

Lizzy turned out the eggs from the frying-pan with a dexterous flick.

"I'll bet that's what got him," she said significantly, and the girl flushed.

"I wish you wouldn't talk about this wretched young man as though he were a god," she said shortly.

Nothing squashed Lizzy Smith. She wiped her moist forehead with the back of her hand, pitched the frying-pan into the sink and sat down in one concerted motion.

"He's not common, like some of these pickers-up," she said reminiscently, "he's class, if you like! He thanked me like a lady, and never said a word that couldn't have been printed on the front page of the Baptist Herald. When I turned up without you, he was disappointed. And mind you, it was

no compliment to me when he looked down his nose and said: 'Didn't you bring her?'"

"These eggs are burnt," said Lois.

"And a gentleman," continued the steadfast Lizzy. "Got his own car. And the hours he spends walking up and down Bedford Row just, so to speak, to get a glimpse of you, would melt a heart of stone."

"Mine is brass," said Lois with a smile. "And really, Elizabetta, you're ridiculous."

"You're the first person that's called me Elizabetta since I was christened," remarked the stenographer calmly, "but even that doesn't change the subject so far as I am concerned. Mr. Dorn—;"

"This tea tastes like logwood," interrupted the girl maliciously, and Lizzy was sufficiently human to be pained.

"Did you hear old Mackenzie last night?" she asked, and when Lois shook her head: "He was playing that dreamy bit from the Tales of Hoggenheim—Hoffmann is it? All these Jewish names are the same to me. I can't understand a Scotsman playing on a fiddle; I thought they only played bagpipes."

"He plays beautifully," said Lois. "Sometimes, but only rarely, the music comes into my dreams."

Lizzy snorted.

"The middle of the night's no time to play anything," she said emphatically. "He may be our landlord, but we're entitled to sleep. And he's crazy, anyway."

"It is a nice kind of craziness," soothed Lois, "and he's a dear old man."

Lizzy sniffed.

"There's a time for everything," she said vaguely, and, getting up, took a third cup and saucer from the dresser, banged it on the table, filled it with tea and splashed milk recklessly into the dark brown liquid.

"It's your turn to take it down to him," she said, "and you might drop a hint to him that the only kind of foreign music I like is 'Night Time in Italy.'"

It was their practice every morning to take a cup of tea down to the old man who occupied the floor below, and who, in addition to being their landlord, had been a very good friend to the two girls. The rent they paid, remembering the central position which the house occupied and the

popularity of this quarter of London with foreigners who were willing to pay almost any figure for accommodation in the Italian quarter, was microscopic.

Lois carried the cup down the stairs and knocked at one of the two doors on the next landing. There was the sound of shuffling feet on the bare floor, the door opened, and Rab Mackenzie beamed benevolently over his horn-rimmed spectacles at the fair apparition.

"Thank you, thank you very much, Miss Reddle," he said eagerly, as he took the cup from her hand. "Will you no' walk round? I've got my old fiddle back. Did I disturb you last night?"

"No, I'm sorry I didn't hear you," said Lois, as she put the cup on the well-scrubbed top of the bare table.

The room, scrupulously clean, and furnished only with essentials, was an appropriate setting for the little old man in his baggy trousers, his scarlet slippers and black velvet coat. The clean-shaven face was lined and furrowed, but the pale blue eyes that showed beneath the shaggy eyebrows were alive.

He took up the violin which lay on the sideboard with a gentle, tender touch.

"Music is a grand profession," he said, "if you can give your time to it. But the stage is damnable! Never go on the stage, young lady. Keep you on the right side of the footlights. Those stage people are queer, insincere folk." He nodded emphatically and went on: "I used to sit down in the deep orchestra well and watch her little toes twisting. She was a bonny girl. Not much older than you, and haughty, like stage folks are. And how I got up my courage to ask her to wed me I never understood." He sighed heavily. "Ah, well! I'd rather live in a fool's paradise than no paradise at all, and for two years—;"

He shook his head. "She was a bonny girl, but she had the criminal mind. Some lassies are like that. They've just no conscience and no remorse. And if you've no conscience and no remorse and no sense of values, why, there's nothing you wouldn't do from murder downwards."

It was not the first time Lois had heard these rambling and disjointed references to a mysterious woman, these admonitions to avoid the stage, but it was the first time that he had made a reference to the criminal mind.

"Women are funny creatures, Mr. Mackenzie," she said, humouring him.

He nodded.

"Aye, they are," he said simply. "But, generally speaking, they're superior to most men. I thank ye for the tea, Miss Reddle."

She went upstairs to find Lizzy struggling into her coat.

"Well, did he warn you off the boards?" asked Miss Smith, as she strolled to the little mirror and dabbed her nose untidily with powder. "I'll bet he did! I told him yesterday that I was going into a beauty chorus, and he nearly had a fit."

"You shouldn't tease the poor old man," said Lois.

"He ought to have more sense," said Lizzy scornfully. "Beauty chorus! Hasn't he got eyes?"

CHAPTER II

They went off to the office together, walking through the Bloomsbury squares, and only once did Lois look round apprehensively for her unwelcome cavalier. Happily he was not in sight.

"About that scar on your arm," said Lizzy, when they were crossing Theobalds Road. "I know a perfectly posh place in South Moulton Street where they take away scars. I thought of going there to have a face treatment. The managing clerk suggested it—Lois, that fellow is getting so fresh he ought to be kept on ice. And him forty-eight with a grown-up family!"

Two hours later, Mr. Oliver Shaddles picked up some documents from the table, read through with quick and skilful eyes, rubbed the grey stubble on his unshaven chin irritably, and glared out upon Bedford Row.

He turned towards the little bell-push on his table, hesitated a second, then pressed it.

"Miss Reddle!" he snapped to the clerk who answered his summons with haste.

Again he examined the sheet of foolscap, and was still reading when the door opened and Lois Reddle came in.

Lois was a little above medium height, and by reason of her slimness seemed taller than she was. She was dressed in the severe black which the firm of Shaddles & Soan imposed upon all their feminine employees. Mr. Shaddles had reached the age, if he had ever been at any other, when beauty had no significance. That Lois Reddle had a certain ethereal loveliness which was all her own might be true, but to the lawyer she was a girl clerk who received thirty-five well-grudged shillings every week of her life, minus the cost of her insurance.

"You go down to Telsbury."

He had a minatory manner, and invariably prefaced his remarks with the accusative pronoun. "You'll get there in an hour and a half. Take those two affidavits to the woman Desmond, and get her to sign the transfer form. The car's there—;"

"I think Mr. Dorling had it—;" she began.

"The car's there," he said obstinately. "You'll have a dry trip, and you ought to be thankful for the opportunity of a breath of fresh air. Here, take this," as she was going out with the foolscap. It was a little slip of paper. "It is the Home Office order—use your senses, girl! How do you think you'll get into the gaol without that? And tell that woman Desmond—; Anyway, off you go."

Lois went out and closed the door behind her. The four faded, middle-aged clerks, sitting at their high desks, did not so much as look up, but the snub-nosed girl with the oily face, who had been pounding a typewriter, jerked her head round.

"You're going to Telsbury, by the so-called car?" she asked. "I thought he'd send you. That old devil's so mean that he wouldn't pay his fare to heaven! The juggernaut will kill somebody one of these days," she added darkly, "you mark my words!"

Attached to the firm of Shaddles & Soan was a dilapidated motor-car that had seen its best time in pre-war days. It was housed in a near-by garage which, being a property under Mr. Shaddles' direction as trustee, exacted no rent for the care of the machine, which he had bought for a negligible sum at the sale of a bankrupt's effects. It was a Ford, and every member of the staff was supposed to be able to drive it. It carried Mr. Shaddles to the Courts of Justice, it took his clerks on errands, and it figured prominently in all bills of cost. It was, in many ways, a very paying scheme.

"Ain't you glad you're going?" asked Lizzy enviously. "Lord! If I could get out of this dusty hole! Maybe you'll meet your fate?"

Lois frowned.

"My what?"

"Your fate," said Elizabetta, unabashed. "I spotted him out of the window this morning—that fellow is certainly potty about you!"

A cold light of disfavour was in the eyes of Lois, but Lizzy was not easily squashed. "There's nothing in that," she said. "Why, there used to be a young man who waited for me for hours—in the rain too. It turned out that he wasn't right in his head, either."

Lois laughed softly as she wrapped a gaily coloured scarf about her throat and pulled on her gloves. Suddenly her smile vanished.

"I hate Telsbury; I hate all prisons. They give me the creeps. I am glad I'm leaving Mr. Shaddles."

"Don't call him 'Mister,'" said the other. "It is paying him a compliment."

The car stood at the door, as Mr. Shaddles had suggested, an ancient and ugly machine. The day was fair and warm, and once clear of the London traffic the sun shone brightly and she shook off the depression which had lain upon her like a cloud all that morning. As she sent the car spinning out of Bedford Row she glanced round instinctively for some sign of the man to whom Lizzy had made so unflattering a reference, and whose constant and

unswerving devotion was one of the principal embarrassments of her life. But he was nowhere in sight, and he passed out of her mind, as, clear of London, she turned from the main road and slowed her car along one of the twisting lanes that ran parallel with the post route and gave one who loved the country and the green hedgerows a more entranced vision than the high road would have given her.

Seven miles short of Telsbury she brought the car back to the main thoroughfare, and spun, at a speed which she uneasily recognised as excessive, on to the tarred highway. Even as she came clear of the high hedges she heard the warning croak of a motor-horn, and jammed on her brakes. The little machine skidded out into the road. Too late, she released the brakes and thrust frantically at the accelerator. She saw the bonnet of a long, black car coming straight towards her, felt rather than heard the exclamation of its driver.

"Crash!"

In that second she recognised the driver.

"Say it!"

The girl, gripping the steering-wheel of her ancient Ford, stared defiantly across a broken wind-screen, but Michael Dorn did not accept the challenge. Instead, he put his gear into reverse, preparatory to withdrawing his running-board from the affectionate embrace of the other guard. He did this with a manner of gentle forbearance which was almost offensive.

"Say it!" she said. "Say something violent or vulgar! It is far better to have things out than to let bad words go jumping around inside!"

Grey eyes need black lashes to be seen at best advantage, he thought; and she had one of those thinnish noses that he admired in women. He rather liked her chin, and, since it was raised aggressively, he had a fair view of a perfect throat. It struck him as being extremely perfect in spite of the red and yellow and green silk scarf that was lightly knotted about. She was neatly if poorly dressed.

"Nothing jumps around inside me except my heart," he said, "and, at the moment, that is slipping back from my mouth. I don't like your necktie."

She looked down at the offending garment and frowned.

"You have no right to run into me because you disapprove of my scarf," she said coldly. "Will you please disengage your strange machine from mine? I hope you are insured."

He jerked his car back, there was a sound of ripping tin, a crack and a shiver of glass, and he was free. Then:

"You came out of a side road at forty miles an hour—you'd have turned over certain, only I was there to catch you," he said half-apologetically. "I hope you aren't hurt?"

She shook her head.

"I am not," she said, "but I think my employer will be when he sees the wreckage. Anyway, your end is served, Mr. Dorn, you have made my acquaintance."

He started and went a shade red.

"You don't imagine that I manoeuvred this collision with the idea of getting an introduction, do you?" he almost gasped, and was thunderstruck when the girl with the grave eyes nodded.

"You have been following me for months," she said quietly. "You even took the trouble to make up to a girl in Mr. Shaddles' office in order to arrange a meeting. I have seen you shadowing me on my way home—once you took the same 'bus—and on the only occasion I have been to a dance this year I found you in the vestibule."

Michael Dorn fiddled with the steering wheel, momentarily speechless. She was serious now, all the banter and quiet merriment in her voice had passed. Those wonderful eyes of hers were regarding him with a certain gentle reproach that was hard to endure.

"Well, the truth is—;" he began lamely, and found himself at a loss for words.

She waited for him to finish his sentence, and then:

"The truth is—;" A faint smile trembled at the corner of her red mouth. "The truth is, Mr. Dorn, that it isn't a very terrible offence for any nice man to wish to meet any girl—that I recognise. And it would be stupid in me if I pretended that I am very much annoyed. But as I told your ambassador, Miss Lizzy Smith—;"

He blinked rapidly.

"I really do not wish to know you, and I have no doubt that she has conveyed that intelligence to you. Therefore your position is a little—what shall I say?"

"Offensive is the word you're wanting," he said coolly. "I'll admit that it bears that construction."

He got down slowly, walked to the side of her car, and stood, his hands resting on the arm of the seat.

"I want you to believe, Miss Reddle!" he said earnestly, "that nothing is farther from my wish than to annoy you. If I hadn't been a clumsy fool you would never have known that I was—;"

He stopped, at a loss for a word. It was she who supplied it, and in spite of his seriousness he laughed.

"'Dogging' is an ugly word. I'm trying to think of something prettier," he said.

She liked the ghost of a smile that shone in his blue eyes, and had they parted then, without another word, she might have thought more kindly of him. But:

"Where are you off to, on this bright autumn day?" he asked, and she stiffened.

"Will you start my car, please?" she said with dignity.

He cranked up the engine and stood aside. She could not resist the temptation:

"If you follow me now you'll have a shock," she said. "I am going to Telsbury Prison."

The effect on the man was startling; he stared in amazement and fear. His jaw dropped, and into his eyes came a queer look of wonder.

"Where are you going?" he asked huskily, as though he doubted the evidence of his ears.

"I am going to Telsbury Prison—please."

She waved him out of her way. The car with the broken wind-screen went noisily along the broad high road, leaving the man to stare. And then:

"Good God!" said Michael Dorn.

CHAPTER III

The grim entrance of Telsbury Convict Establishment is mercifully hidden behind a screen of thick-growing pines. Its red walls have mellowed with age, and but for the high tower in the centre of the prison a traveller would pass it unnoticed. Hiding all the heartache that has made the word "Dartmoor" synonymous with sorrow, Telsbury has missed the fame of its fellow-prison.
Lois had already made two visits to the prison on her employer's business. A client of the firm had prosecuted a woman who had been engaged in systematic fraud, and she had been sent down for five years. It had been necessary to secure her signature to certain deeds transferring back to their lawful owner stocks which had been fraudulently converted.

Stopping her car broadside on to the high black gates, she descended and pulled a bell. Almost immediately a grating was slipped back and two watchful eyes surveyed her. Though the gatekeeper recognised her, it was not until she had shown him the Home Office order which she carried that he turned the key in the lock and admitted her to a bare stone room, furnished with a desk, a stool, two chairs, and a table.

The warder read the order again and pressed a bell. He, his two reliefs, and the governor were the only men who came within those walls, and his sphere of operations was restricted to the room and the archway, barred with steel railings, which cut the courtyard off from the rest of the prison.

"Getting tired of coming here, miss?" he asked with a smile.

"Prisons make me very tired and very sick at heart," said the girl.

He nodded.

"There are six hundred women inside here who are more tired and more sick than you will ever be, I hope, miss," he said conventionally. "Not that I ever see any of them. I open the gate to the prison van and never catch a sight of them again, not even when they go out."

There was a snap of a lock, and a young wardress in neat blue uniform came in and greeted Lois with a cheery nod. The girl was conducted through a small steel gate, across a wide parade ground, empty at that moment, through another door and along a passage into the governor's small office.

"Good morning, doctor," she said. "I've come to see Mrs. Desmond," and displayed her papers before the grey-haired governor.

"She'll be in her cell now," he said. "Come along, Miss Reddle, I'll take you there myself."

At the end of the passage was another door, which led into a large hall, on either side of which was a steel alleyway, reached by broad stairs in the centre of the hall. Lois looked up, saw the netting above her head and shivered. It was placed there, she knew, to prevent these unhappy women from dashing themselves to death from the top landings.

"Here we are," said the governor, and opened the cell door with his pass-key.

For five minutes she was engaged with the sulky woman, who had a whining grievance against everybody except herself; and at last, with a heart-felt sigh of relief, she came out through the door and joined the governor. As he locked the cell, she said:

"Thank heaven I shan't come here any more."

"Giving up being a lawyer?" he asked good-humouredly. "Well, I never thought it was much of a profession for a girl."

"You give my intelligence too great credit," she smiled. "I am a very commonplace clerk and have no other knowledge of the law than that stamps must be put on certain documents and in certain places!"

They did not go back the way they had come, but went out through the hall into the parade ground. So perfect was the organisation that in the brief space she had been in the cell the yard was filled with grey figures parading in circles.

"Exercise hour," said the governor. "I thought you'd like to see them."

The girl's heart was filled with pity and an unreasoning resentment against the law which had taken these women and made them into so many meaningless ciphers. With their print dresses and white mob caps, there was something very ugly, very sordid about them, something which clutched at the girl's heart and filled her with a vague fear. There were women of all ages, old and young, some mere girls, some grown ancient in sin, and each bore on her face the indefinable stamp of abnormality. There were fierce faces, cunning faces, weak, pathetic faces that turned to her as the ghastly circle shuffled on its way; faded eyes that stared stupidly, dark eyes that gleamed with malignant envy, careless eyes that did not trouble to investigate her further than by a casual glance. Shambling, shuffling women, who seemed after a while to be unreal.

The circle had nearly passed in hideous completeness when Lois saw a tall figure that seemed to stand out from that ground of horror. Her back was straight, her chin uplifted, her calm eyes looked straight ahead. She might have been forty, or fifty. The delicately moulded features were unlined, but the hair was white. There was something divinely serene in her carriage.

"What is that woman doing here?" said Lois, before she realised that she had asked a question which no visitor must put to a prison official.

Dr. Stannard did not answer her. He was watching the figure as it came abreast. For a second the woman's eyes rested gravely upon the girl. Only for a second—just that period of time that a well-bred woman would look at the face of another—and then she had passed.

The girl heaved a sigh.

"I'm sorry I asked," she said, as she walked by the governor's side through the grill to his office.

"Other people have asked that," said the governor, "and haven't been satisfied. It is against the prison rules to identify any convict, as you know. But, curiously enough—;" He was looking round for something, and presently he found it, a stout calf-bound book that had been opened and laid face downwards on a filing cabinet.

Without a word he handed it to her, and she looked at the title. She was sufficiently acquainted with law books to recognise it as one of that variety. It was labelled Fawley's Criminal Cases.

"Mary Pinder," he said briefly, and she saw that the book was open at the page which was headed by that name. "It is rather curious, I was reading up the case just before you came in. I was looking up the essential details to see whether my memory was at fault. I don't mind telling you"—he dropped his voice as though in fear of an eavesdropper—"that I share your wonder!"

She looked at the title: "Mary Pinder—Murder," and gasped.

"A murderess?" she asked incredulously.

The doctor nodded.

"But that is impossible!"

"Read the case," said the other, and she took up the book and read:

Mary Pinder—Murder. Convicted at Hereford Assizes. Sentenced to death; commuted to penal servitude for life. This is a typical case of a murder for gain. Pinder lived in lodgings with a young man, who was reputedly her husband, and who disappeared before the crime occurred. It is believed that he left her penniless. Her landlady, Mrs. Curtain, was a wealthy widow, somewhat eccentric, believed to be on the border line of insanity. She kept large sums of money in the house and a quantity of antique jewellery.

After her husband had left her Pinder advertised for a temporary situation, and a lady, calling at the house in answer to the advertisement, found the

front door unfastened, and, after repeated knocking, receiving no answer, walked in. Seeing one of the room doors open, she looked in and found, to her horror, Mrs. Curtain lying on the floor, apparently in a fit. She immediately went in search of a policeman, who, arriving at the house, found the woman was dead. The drawers of an old secretaire were open and their contents thrown on the floor, including a piece of jewellery. Suspicion being aroused, the room of the lodger, who had been seen leaving the house just before the discovery, was searched in her absence. A small bottle containing cyanide of potassium, together with many pieces of jewellery, was found in a locked box, and she was arrested.

The defence was that the deceased had frequently threatened to commit suicide, and that there was no evidence to prove the purchase of the poison, which was in an unlabelled bottle. Pinder refused to give information about herself or her husband; no marriage certificate was discovered; and she was tried before Darson J. and convicted. It is believed that Pinder, being in urgent need of money, was seized with the sudden temptation and, dropping cyanide in the woman's tea, afterwards ransacked her secretaire.

The case presents no unusual features, except the refusal of the prisoner to plead.

Twice Lois read the account and shook her head.

"I can't believe it! It is incredible—impossible!" she said. "She was imprisoned for life—but surely she should be out by now? Isn't there a remission of sentence for good conduct?"

The governor shook his head.

"Unfortunately she made two attempts to escape, and lost all her marks. It is a great pity, because she's a fairly rich woman. An uncle of hers, who only learnt of her conviction after she had been five years in gaol, left her a very considerable fortune. She never told us who she was—he visited her here a few weeks before his death—and we're just as wise as ever we were, except that we know that he was a relation of her mother."

Lois took up the book again and stared at the printed page.

"A murderess—that wonderful woman!"

He nodded.

"Yes. Remarkable. Yet the most innocent-looking people commit bad offences. I have been here twenty years and lost most of my illusions."

"If they thought she was a murderess, why didn't they—;"

She could not bring herself to say "hang her." The governor looked at her curiously.

"Ha—h'm—well, there was a reason, a very excellent reason."

Lois was puzzled for a moment, and then suddenly the explanation came to her.

"Yes, the baby was born in this very prison—the prettiest little baby girl I've ever seen—a perfect child. I hated the time when she had to be taken away. Poor little soul!"

"She didn't know, perhaps doesn't know now," said Lois, her eyes filling with tears.

"No, I suppose not. She was adopted by a woman who was a neighbour and always believed in Mrs. Pinder's innocence. No, when I said 'poor little soul,' I was thinking of the fool of a nurse who let the child burn its arm against the top of a hot water bottle. A pretty bad burn. I remember it because it left a scar on the baby's forearm—the stopper of the water bottle had a star."

Lois Reddle clutched the edge of the table and her face went suddenly white. The doctor was putting away the book and his back was towards her. With an effort she gained control of her voice.

"Do—do you remember the name by which the baby was christened?" she asked in a low voice.

"Yes," he said instantly, "an unusual name, and I always remember it. Lois Margeritta!"

CHAPTER IV

Lois Margeritta! Her own name! And the star-shaped burn on her arm!

Her head was in a whirl; the room seemed to be spinning round drunkenly and it needed all her strength of mind to keep her from crying out.

But it was true. That dignified, stately woman who had marched so calmly in the circle of pain was her mother! Incredible, impossible though it seemed, she knew this was the truth. Her mother!

Obeying a blind impulse, she darted to the door, flung it open, and was half-way along the stone passage before the startled governor had overtaken her.

"Whatever is the matter with you, girl?" he demanded, half astonished and half angry. "Are you ill?"

"Let me go, let me go!" she muttered incoherently. "I must go to her!"

And then she came back to sanity with a gasp, and allowed herself to be led back to the governor's room.

"You sit down there while I give you a slight sedative," said the doctor, as he closed the door with a bang which echoed along the hollow passage.

He opened the medicine chest, deftly mixed the contents of three bottles and added water from a carafe on his table.

"Drink this," he said.

The girl raised the glass to her lips with fingers that shook, and the governor, hearing the glass rattle against her teeth, smiled.

"I think I'm a little mad," she said.

"You're a little hysterical," said the practical doctor, "and it is my fault for letting you see these people. We've broken all the rules by talking about them."

"I'm dreadfully sorry," she muttered, as she put the glass on the table. "I—I—it was so dreadful!"

"Of course it was," he said. "And I was several kinds of an old fool to talk about it."

"Will you tell me one thing, doctor, please? What—what became of the child?"

The doctor was obviously loth to discuss the matter any further.

"I believe she died," he said briefly. "She was taken away by some excellent people, but they failed to rear her. That is the story I have. As a matter of fact it was published in the newspapers—there was a great deal of interest in the case—that the child had died in prison, but that was not the case. She was a healthy little creature when she left here. And now, young lady, I am going to turn you out."

He rang for the wardress, who conducted her to the gatekeeper's lodge, and in another second Lois was standing outside the black door, behind which was—who?

She was mad to have made such a fool of herself. There was so much more she wanted to know, so many opportunities which might have been hers to see the beautiful woman who was—her mother? Her heart raced at the thought. It couldn't be! Her mother was dead; that stout, homely body who had been a mother to her. It was a coincidence. There must be other children in the world called "Lois Margeritta" than she, and it was possible that some had been branded in babyhood.

She shook her head; it was impossible, it was beyond all the bounds of probability that there could be two Lois Margaritas with a star-shaped burn on the left arm.

Climbing painfully into the car, her knees giving under her, her trembling hands manipulated the gears. The car wobbled painfully, and, as she came slowly out on to the little road that runs by the prison, she was conscious of a weakness which almost terrified her. She stopped the car a few inches from the kerb, and at that moment she heard a quick step, and, turning her head, saw the man with whose machine she had collided earlier in the afternoon. There was a look of deep concern on his saturnine face.

"Anything wrong?" he asked sharply.

"No—nothing," she said unsteadily.

He stood surveying her with a critical and speculative eye.

"You nearly drove into that lamp-post. Aren't you feeling well?"

"Not—not very," she said.

In another second he had swung himself into the car by her side, and she made room for him behind the steering wheel.

"I'll take you down to the Lion Hotel and get them to send up for my car."

She was dimly aware that the long machine with the damaged mudguard was parked by the side of the prison wall.

"I shall be quite all right—;" she protested.

"Nevertheless, I will drive you back to town," he said, and she made no further demur.

He stopped outside the Lion Hotel long enough to communicate with a little man who seemed to be expecting him; then turned the damaged nose of the Ford towards London; and she was intensely grateful to him that he made no attempt to improve his opportunity. For the rest of the journey was carried out in almost complete silence. From time to time he glanced at her, and once he looked at the crumpled papers which she held tightly gripped in her little hand, the documents which Mr. Shaddles' client had signed, and which were now in a more ruffled condition than most legal documents are supposed to be.

"179 Bedford Row, I think it is?" he said, as they crossed the traffic of Holborn, and she had recovered sufficient of her spirits to answer:

"I think you should know."

One side of his mouth went up in a smile.

"I'm pretty well acquainted with this neighbourhood," he said coolly. And then, as the car came to a standstill behind a big Rolls that stood before the doorway of 179:

"You've been awfully kind to me, Mr. Dorn," she said. "I am very grateful to you indeed."

"What worried you?" he asked. "At the prison, I mean?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing—only it is a rather dreadful shock, seeing so many women."

His eyes narrowed.

"You saw the women, did you? Pretty queer lot, eh?"

She shivered.

"Do you know the prison? Have you been inside, I mean?" she asked.

"Yes, I've been inside once or twice," he answered.

Glancing up at the window behind which was her office, she caught a glimpse of a short, tilted nose and a pair of wide open eyes, and, in spite of herself, laughed helplessly.

"Good-bye, Mr. Dorn."

She held out her hand and he took it.

"I'm afraid I've been an awful nuisance to you. Will you be able to get your car sent up to town, or must you go down to Telsbury for it?"

"Don't bother about my car; it is here," he said, and nodded to the end of the road. To her amazement she saw his black machine come slowly to the sidewalk and stop.

She was about to say something, but changed her mind, and, running up the steps, disappeared through the dark portals, the man watching her until she was out of sight.

CHAPTER V

The clerks had gone, only Lizzy Smith remained. That young lady came flying to greet her, all of a twitter with excitement.

"Oh, you artful one! You picked him up, did you? Haven't you got a nerve to come back with him? Suppose old Shaddles had seen you! What have you done to the juggernaut? All the mudguard's bent. Lois, the countess is here! She's in with old Shaddles, and she's got the Queen of Sheba skinned to death! I'll bet that chinchilla coat she's got cost a thousand if it cost a tenner. And me wearing dyed fox, and glad to get it! Not that I'm struck on chinchilla—it doesn't suit my complexion, anyway—; And isn't Mike lovely?"

"Mike?" said Lois, puzzled.

"Didn't he tell you his name was Mike?" asked Lizzy contemptuously. "Of course it is! Michael Dorn. You don't mean to tell me that you've been joy-riding with him all these hours and never called him 'Mike' once?"

Lois hung up her coat and hat, and sat down wearily. Miss Smith regarded her with a gathering frown.

"You're not looking very bright, old dear," she said, "What's wrong?"

"The prison upset me," said Lois. "How long has the countess been here?"

"You haven't had a row with him, have you?"

"With him—whom? Oh, the man, you mean, Lizzy?"

"Of course I mean the man! Who else was there to row with? You can't start any backchat with a pre-war Ford."

Happily Lois was saved the embarrassment of an answer, for at that moment a buzzer sounded and Lizzy darted into Shaddles' office, to return with an uplifted and bending finger.

"The countess wants to see you!" she hissed fiercely, "and the thing attached to her is her little boy—the earl!"

Lois went into the room and closed the door behind her. Mr. Shaddles glared up from his table as she handed him the crumpled documents.

"What's happened to these?" he asked.

"We had an accident with the car," said Lois, a little incoherently. She was not a fluent liar.

"'We'? Who are 'we'?"

"I mean, I ran into another car," said the girl in some confusion.

Mr. Shaddles smoothed out the rumpled paper, glanced at the signature, and then:

"This is the girl, your ladyship."

For the first time Lois was conscious of the woman's presence. "Majestic" was a word which fitly described the Countess of Moron. She was tall and stoutly made. The long chinchilla cloak which covered her dress from head to heel was open to show the rich velvet brocade dress, but for the moment Lois had no eyes for the woman's apparel, or her looped pearls, or the jewels which glittered from ears and fingers. It was the face that held her. Big, dominating, in some indefinable way menacing. Black eyebrows that met above a masterful nose; a pair of eyes of so dark a brown that they seemed black. They were what are called full eyes; the vulgar would describe them as bulging. They were hard and bright and stared unwinkingly at the girl. The mouth was big, the lips thin, and the chin full and powerful. Lois found herself trying to guess her age. Whether it was due to artifice or not, her hair was a jet black, untouched by a vestige of grey; and later she was to learn this was natural.

"You are Miss Reddle?" said the countess. Her voice was almost as deep as a man's, and she had a slow, deliberate enunciation which was a little disconcerting.

Lois had the feeling that she was in a witness-box, under cross-examination.

"Yes, madam, I am Lois Reddle," she said.

For a moment the countess said nothing; then she turned to her companion.

"This is Miss Lois Reddle, Selwyn," she said.

He was a thin, bent man, with a weak face almost innocent of chin, and a drooping yellow moustache, the twirling of which seemed to occupy most of his spare time.

"May I introduce my son, the Earl of Moron?" said her ladyship, and Lois bowed.

"Glad to meet you," murmured the earl mechanically. "Rather nice weather we're having, what?"

Having made this speech, he seemed to have exhausted his vocabulary, for he was silent during the remainder of the interview.

Lady Moron withdrew her scrutiny and turned her eyes slowly to the lawyer.

"She seems entirely satisfactory, Shaddles," she said.

Shaddles pursed his lips.

"Yes, she's a very good girl," he said, "quite reliable."

He glanced disparagingly at the crumpled documents on his blotting-pad.

"Quite reliable. I've no doubt that Miss Reddle, in her anxiety to get back to interview your ladyship, has slightly damaged my car; that will be a matter for adjustment between your ladyship and myself."

He had glanced out of the window and had taken in with an assessor's eye the amount of the damage. Lady Moron looked at him for a time.

"She had no idea I was here, Shaddles. And of course I shall not be responsible for any damage to your car."

He squirmed in his seat.

"And, personally, I should doubt if the car has any value. At any rate, in my eyes it has none. Come, Selwyn."

For a moment Lois had the illusion that the young man was holding on to his mother's skirt, and she had an insane desire to laugh, as her ladyship went forth majestically, followed by what Lizzy had described, not unfaithfully, as "the thing attached to the countess."

Shaddles bustled through the outer office, opened the door for them, and went down to see her ladyship into her car before he returned.

"Now, what the devil do you mean by smashing up my car?" he grated. "And look at the condition of these documents. Is that the sort of thing that can go before a Master in Chambers? Pah!"

Before she could reply:

"Whatever are the cost of the repairs I shall send the bill to you, and I shall expect you to act in an honourable manner, for I'm not sure that you are not liable in law. You will have a good salary and you owe your position entirely to the fact that I happen to be her ladyship's solicitor."

"If there is any damage, I will pay for it, Mr. Shaddles," said the girl, and was glad to make her escape.

Lizzy Smith did not find her a very communicative companion, and she was responsible for most of the conversation on the way back to their lodgings.

Lois was glad when her companion left her that night to join a girl friend who had two tickets for a theatre. She wanted to be alone, she wanted to think out this most terrifying problem of hers. There were other problems too, for suddenly she remembered the look of utter horror and amazement that had come to Michael Dorn's face when she told him she was going to the prison. Did he know, and was he dogging her footsteps for any other than the obvious reason—the young man's desire to get acquainted with the girl who had taken his fancy? That seemed impossible.

She was glad she was taking up a new post. She would have leisure, in the service of Lady Moron, and opportunities, perhaps, for meeting people who would be helpful to her in the conduct of her investigations.

A thought occurred to her as she was sitting before her untasted supper, and, getting up, she put on her hat and went eastwards to Fleet Street. She had been to the Daily Megaphone before to make searches on behalf of Mr. Shaddles, but now she found that the offices, which are usually open to the public, were closed. She sent up a note from the jealously guarded lobby of the editorial offices, and to her joy her request was granted, and a messenger conducted her to the file room.

Taking down one of the many big black volumes which filled the shelves on one side of the room and opening it at the date she had remembered, the messenger left her; and for two hours she studied the details of what she would ordinarily have dismissed as a sordid and wicked crime. She was half-way through the account of the trial when she saw a name that made her gasp. It was the name of a witness who had been called by the defence—Mrs. Amelia Reddle!

Then it was true! This was the kindly neighbour, about whom the prison governor had spoken. It was her mother, that tall, lovely woman who paced the prison flags with such unconcern. "A kind neighbour took the child"—Mrs. Reddle was the kind neighbour, and had brought her up in ignorance of her origin.

The printed page swam before her eyes as she sat, her hands tightly clasped, her mind confounded by the confirmation of this tremendous discovery.

Her mother was innocent. It was something more than a natural revolt against the thought that in her veins ran the blood of a murderess; it was a conviction, an inspiration, the faith which is knowledge.

She went back to her lodgings, calm and determined. She would prove her mother's innocence, devoting her life to that object.

CHAPTER VI

Charlotte Street was deserted when she turned the corner. Passing a small closed coupé that stood by the side-walk, she was half-way up the street, and was turning to cross, when she saw the car coming towards her at full speed, and stopped in the roadway to let it pass. Its headlights were burning very dimly, she noticed—in the idle way of one whose mind was fully occupied elsewhere. The car came on, gaining momentum, and then, when it was a dozen yards away, it swerved suddenly towards her.

Her first impulse was to step back, but an instinct beyond understanding made her leap ahead. If the driver had corrected his swerve she could not have escaped death. That spring saved her; the edge of the mudguard grazed her dress and some small and jagged projection ripped a two-inch strip from her skirt as neatly as though it had been cut by scissors. In another second the car had passed, speeding towards Fitzroy Square, its rear light dark, its number invisible.

For a second the girl stood, bereft of breath, trembling in every limb; and then somebody darted out of the doorway of her house and came towards her, and before she saw his face she knew him.

"Close call that," drawled Michael Dorn.

"What happened?" she asked. "They must have lost control, I think."

"Yes, they must have lost control," he said quietly, "You didn't see the number, I suppose?"

She shook her head. In her then state of nerves the question irritated her.

"Of course I did not see the number. Do you want me, Mr. Dorn?"

"I came to see how you were after your unpleasant experience."

She faced him squarely.

"What do you mean? What unpleasant experience?" she asked.

"I was referring to the little accident for which I was partly responsible," he answered coolly. "I regard any road collision as unpleasant. But possibly you're a more hardened motorist than I am."

She shook her head.

"You don't mean that at all. You mean—you mean—what happened at the prison."

He bent down towards her.

"What did happen at the prison?" he asked in a low voice.

"If you don't know, I can't tell you," she said, and, turning abruptly from him, went into the house and closed the door almost in his face.

Before she had reached her room she regretted her act of rudeness. It was too late now; she would not go back and apologise, even if she could bring herself to such an act.

An alarmed Lizzy was waiting for her.

"Do you know it is nearly twelve o'clock? I thought you were going to bed early?" she said.

"I've been to Fleet Street, looking up a case for—for Mr. Shaddles, and look at my dress—a car ripped it."

Lizzy's nose wrinkled.

"If it's true that you've been working overtime for that old skinflint—and it probably isn't—you've got something the matter with your head," she said, "and you ought to see a doctor. I'm disappointed with you."

"Why?" asked the girl, as she tossed her hat on to the bed and stooped to a further examination of her torn skirt.

"Well, I thought you'd been out to see a Certain Person. Then, on the other hand, I couldn't understand, if you were with him, how he could have sent you this."

On the table, standing amidst its loosened wrappings, was a beautiful round box, the satin cover of which was painted with a floral design.

"It was a bit of cheek on my part, taking it out of the paper," admitted Lizzy, "but I haven't touched a single choc."

"Chocolates?" said Lois incredulously, and lifted the cover, displaying the most gorgeous selection of confectionery that had ever come her way.

On the top was a small card with a line of writing: "From an Admirer."

She frowned.

"From an Admirer," nodded Lizzy. "No name? Now, I wonder who it can be?"

Her smirk of amazement was too extravagant to leave any doubt in Lois' mind.

"Did he bring it?" she asked.

"He? You mean Mike? Why, of course he brought it! At least, I suppose so. It was here when I came in. How many other admirers have you got, Lois?"

The girl replaced the lid with a vicious jab.

"I hate that man," she said vehemently, "and if he doesn't leave me in peace I shall complain to the police. It isn't enough to find him sitting on the doorstep—;"

"Was he here?" gasped Lizzy.

"Of course he was here! You knew he was here," said Lois unjustly. "Lizzy, you're helping and abetting him, and I wish you wouldn't."

"Me?" said the indignant Lizzy. "Abetting? I like that! You take him out driving all the afternoon and talk about me 'abetting'! Why, I haven't seen the bird to speak to for a month!"

"Where does he live?" demanded Lois.

"How the blazes do I know?" stormed Lizzy. And then, more soberly: "Yes I do. He lives in Hiles Mansions."

"Then this goes back to Hiles Mansions to-morrow morning," said Lois with determination. "And with it a polite note asking him to refrain from his attentions, which are getting a little objectionable."

Lizzy shrugged her thin shoulders.

"I don't know what you expect," she said, in despair. "A good-looker, with a nice car, and a perfect gentleman."

"He may be all these things and still be objectionable to me," said Lois shortly, and to her surprise the ungainly Lizzy put her arm around her with an affectionate hug and laughed.

"I won't quarrel with you the last few nights you are here. And another thing, Lois; I'm not going to take another mate. Your room will be waiting for you when you get tired of the aristocracy."

One big room in the suite had been divided by a wooden partition. There was a doorless opening that communicated between the two cubicles, over which a curtain was hung. And after Lois had made a parcel of the confectionery and had addressed it to her "admirer," she carried the package into her bedroom and put it on her dressing-table. She must not forget to return that gift, even though she could ill afford the postage.

They chatted across the partition (which did not reach to the ceiling) for some time, and presently Lois slipped into bed feeling unutterably tired.

"Good-night," she called.

"Hark at old Mac!"

From below stole the sad wail of old Mackenzie's fiddle. Softly it rose and fell, and to one of the audience at least the sound was infinitely sweet and soothing.

"He used to be an orchestra leader—what's the word? Conductor," said Lizzy. "I wish he'd keep his moonlight sonatas until I was out of the house."

"I like it," said Lois.

In truth the sad melody attuned to her own troubled heart.

"It gives me the hump," grunted Lizzy, as she jerked off her stockings and examined her toes critically, "after you've gone I'm going to ask him to give up his midnight folly."

"He has very little amusement," protested Lois.

"Why doesn't he go out and get it? The old niggard never leaves the house. He's got plenty of money. He owns this property."

Lois was listening. The old man was playing the Intermezzo from Cavalleria Rusticana, and, hackneyed as the melody was, it sounded to the girl as though it expressed all the sorrows, all the fears, all the inarticulate protests of her own soul.

"Music's all right in its place," said Lizzy, "if it's the right kind. What's the matter with 'Maggie! Yes, Ma?' I bought a copy of it cheap a week ago and gave it to him and he's not played it once!"

Presently there was silence on the other side of the partition. The music had ceased. Lois, turning over, fell into a troubled sleep. She dreamt she was in Telsbury Prison; it was she, among the colourless women, who was walking that dreary circle. Somebody stood watching her where she had stood by the doctor's side; a great, fleshy-nosed woman whose hard black eyes smiled sneeringly as she passed. In the centre of the circle was the little old man, Mackenzie, his fiddle cuddled under his chin, and he was playing a vulgar tune she had heard Lizzy whistle.

Suddenly she woke with a start.

A light had flashed on her face—somebody was in the room. She could hear their soft movements, and then came to her ears the rustle of paper. It was

Lizzy, of course. Lizzy frequently came in the middle of the night, when her cough was troublesome, for the voice lozenges which Lois kept in the drawer of her dressing-table. Without a word she stretched out her hand and switched on the little hand-lamp which was one of her luxuries.

As she turned the switch, she remembered drowsily that the battery had nearly run out. There was a flicker of white light, that died down to yellow, and then to darkness. But in that second of time she had seen the figure of a man standing by the dressing-table, and recognised him before she saw the startled face of Michael Dorn!

CHAPTER VII

For a second she remained, paralysed, and then, as the sound of his feet crossing the floor came to her, she screamed.

"What is it?"

She heard the creak and rumble of Lizzy's bed, the scratch of a match, and saw the white gleam of the gas as it was lit. In another second Lizzy was in her room.

Lois was out of bed now and with trembling fingers was lighting her own lamp. Otherwise the room was empty.

"Somebody was here—a man," she said shakily.

"You've been dreaming."

"I was not dreaming. Listen!"

There was the thud of a closing door. Running to the window, Lois threw up the sash and leant out. She had time to see a man's figure walking swiftly down Charlotte Street.

"There he is! Don't you recognise him? It is Dorn!"

Lizzy craned farther out of the window and after a time came in with a scared face.

"I shouldn't like to say it wasn't," she said cautiously. "Do you mean to say Dorn's been here?"

Lois nodded. This shock, coming on top of the other, had almost unnerved her.

"But was he here—in this room?" Still Lizzy was not convinced, but one glance at the girl's face told her that Lois had not been mistaken.

She hurried out into the kitchen, drew a glass of water. Lois drank the refreshingly cold liquid eagerly.

"Well, he's got a nerve!" said Lizzy, sitting down on a chair and staring blankly at her companion. "What was he doing?"

"I don't know. He was standing in front of the dressing-table. I only saw him for a second, and then this wretched light went out."

"He's got a nerve," said Lizzy again. "There's a limit to everything. Going into a young lady's bedroom in the middle of the night to get an introduction seems to me to be ungentlemanly."

Lois laughed weakly.

"He didn't speak to you?"

She shook her head.

"Jack scuttled off like a rabbit, I suppose."

Lizzy walked to the door and opened it, gazing reflectively at the stairs, as though she wished to visualise the undignified character of the visitor's exit.

"He sends you chocolates overnight—;"

Lois' eyes strayed to the dressing-table, and she sprang to her feet with a cry.

"They're gone!" she said, and the stenographer's jaw dropped.

"Gone? Were they there?" She pointed.

"I put them on the dressing-table to remind me in the morning—at least, I think I did."

A hurried search of the kitchen discovered no trace of the missing package.

"Perhaps he knew you wouldn't like them and came to get them back?" was the inane suggestion that Lizzy offered.

"I don't know—I don't understand."

At that moment a voice hailed them and Lizzy opened the door.

"Is anything wrong?"

It was old Mackenzie.

"That man never sleeps," groaned Lizzy under her breath. "He ought to be a night watchman. No, everything's all right, Mr. Mackenzie."

"I heard somebody come down the stairs and go out a little time ago," said the old man, "I thought maybe one of you was ill."

"This is where our characters go west," said Lizzy, and, in a louder voice. "No, Mr. Mackenzie, it was only me! I went down to make sure that Miss Reddle had closed the front door. Good-night."

She came back, looking very thoughtful.

"'Three o'clock in the morning' is a pretty nifty fox-trot, but it is a bad time for young men to come sneaking round other people's rooms. What are you going to do, Lois? Anyway, he's saved you the postage on the chocolates. It seems to me to be the moment for tea."

Any occasion was the moment for tea so far as Lizzy was concerned. She bustled off into the kitchen and came back in ten minutes with a hot decoction which was very gratifying to Lois, and, in spite of Lizzy's making, unusually palatable.

"There are two things to do; one is to inform the police, and the other is to see Mr. Dorn, and I think I will take the latter course. Will you give me his address again?"

"You're not going now?" said Lizzy, in a tone of horror.

"No, I'll go before working hours."

"He'll be in bed. Maybe you'll be able to get the chocolates back while he is sleeping," suggested Lizzy. "As I remarked before, he's got a nerve."

Hiles Mansions was a magnificent block of flats near Albert Hall, but Mr. Dorn's apartment was the least magnificent of any, for it was situated on the upper floor and consisted of two rooms and a bath and a tiny hall. The elevator man was in his shirt-sleeves, polishing brasses at the early hour at which Lois made her call. But he showed no surprise at her enquiry.

"Top floor, miss. If you'll step into the lift and excuse my shirt-sleeves, I'll take you up."

The elevator stopped at the sixth floor and the liftman pointed to a plain rosewood door, one of three on the landing. She hesitated, her finger on the bell-push, and then, mastering her courage, she pressed, expecting to be kept waiting for a long time, for if Mr. Dorn was really the night visitor, he would still be in bed. To her surprise, however, her finger was hardly off the bell- push before the door opened and Michael Dorn confronted her. He seemed to have been up for some time, for he was dressed and shaved, and there was no evidence in his eyes that he had spent a sleepless night.

"This is an unexpected pleasure, Miss Reddle," he said. "Will you come in?"

The study into which she was ushered was larger than she had expected and the sloping roof gave it an odd but pleasant character. She saw at a glance that the furniture was old, and probably valuable. The writing-table, from which he had evidently just risen, for the morning newspaper lay open at the top, was undoubtedly Buhl, and the deep arm-chair before the fire

was the only modern article in the room. Etchings covered the soberly painted walls, and in one alcove was a well-filled bookcase.

"Mr. Dorn, I have called on a very serious errand," she said.

"I am sorry to hear that," was his reply as he pushed a chair forward.

"I won't sit down, thank you. Last night you sent me a box of chocolates. I can understand that your intentions were well meant, though I thought I had made it very clear that I do not wish to know you, or to improve an acquaintance which began only yesterday. I am very grateful to you for all you did," she went on a little incoherently, "but—;" she paused.

"But—;?" he suggested.

"Your conduct is abominable!" she flamed. "The gift of chocolates was an impertinence, but to follow that up by breaking into my lodgings was criminal! I've come to tell you that, unless you cease your persecution, I shall complain to the police."

He did not answer. Standing by the table, he fiddled with a long poignard which was evidently used as a letter-opener.

"You say I broke into your house—what makes you think that?"

"Because I recognised you," she said emphatically. "You came and took away the box—though I could have saved you the trouble. I intended returning it in the morning."

To her amazement, he did not deny his presence, but, on the contrary, gave confirmation of his action.

"If I had known you were going to return it this morning I should certainly not have called in the night," he said with a calmness which took her breath away. "I have been guilty of conduct which may seem to you to be unpardonable, but for which there is a very simple explanation. Until a quarter to two this morning I had no idea that you had received the chocolates."

He walked across the room to a cabinet, pulled open one drawer and took out the painted box.

"These are the chocolates, are they not?"

She was so taken back by his audacity that she could not speak. He put back the box carefully in the cabinet and closed the door.

"I underrated your intelligence, Miss Reddle," he said. "I have done that all too frequently in my life—taken too light a view of woman's genius."

"I'm afraid I don't understand you," she said helplessly. "Only I want to tell you—;"

"You want to tell me that if this act of mine is repeated, you will notify the police." He took the words from her mouth. "And I think you would be wise. When do you take up your new position?"

"On Monday," she was startled into telling him, but, recollecting that the object of her visit was not to furnish him with information about her movements, she walked to the door. "You don't deny that you came into my room?"

He shook his head.

"No, why should I? You saw me. It was the flash of my lamp which woke you. I am very sorry. But for that stupid blunder you would not have known."

She stared at him.

"You admit you were there?" she said, with growing wonder, as the nature of his offence began to take shape in her mind. "How could you, Mr. Dorn!"

"It is much easier for me to admit my fault than to lie about it," he said coolly. "Even you must give me some credit for my frankness."

He followed her out on to the landing and rang for the elevator.

"You must keep your door locked, Miss Reddle," he said. "No matter where you are—even in the palatial establishment of the Countess of Moron—you must keep your door locked."

He looked down the lift shaft and saw that the cage at the bottom was not moving. The elevator man was outside the building and had not heard the signal.

"I don't think, if I were you, that I should write to your mother," he said. "You may raise false hopes. At present she is well balanced. The knowledge that you are alive—and know—may cut the thread that has held her up all these years."

"What do you know?" she gasped, gazing at him in terrified amazement.

Then came the whine of the ascending lift.

"I don't think I should write if I were you," he said, and with a smile handed the dazed girl into the elevator and waited until the clash of the lift-gate told him that she had reached the ground floor. Then he walked slowly back into

his flat, closed the door behind him, and resumed his place at the table, but this time he did not read.

For half an hour he sat, his chin on his hand, and then, rising, he opened the door that led to the second room. A spare little man, with a dark and melancholy face, sat patiently on the edge of a chair, as he had sat ever since the ring at the door had announced the girl's arrival. A beckoning jerk of Dorn's chin brought the man to the study.

"Go along and pick up Chesney Praye. Find out what he was doing last night, and where he went. I think he was playing baccarat at the Limbo Club, and, if so, find out what he lost. That is all."

Without a word the little man made for the door. His hand was on the latch when Dorn called him back.

"Call in at Scotland Yard and discover the owner of a blue Buick, No. XC2997. I pretty well know, but I should like a little moral support."

When the door had closed behind his servitor Michael Dorn took several sheets of paper from the stationery rack and for half an hour was writing rapidly. When he had finished, he addressed an envelope, stamped the letter, and, going out to the landing, rang for the liftman and handed him the letter to post. Then he returned to his flat, and, taking off his collar and his tie, lay down on the bed for the sleep he so badly needed; for Michael Dorn had not closed his eyes for thirty-six hours.

CHAPTER VIII

All her life, Lois Reddle could never recall what happened that morning. She went about her work mechanically, like one in a dream; and that she did not commit the most appalling blunders was due to the natural orderliness of her mind. She went out with Lizzy to lunch at a neighbouring restaurant, and this was usually the meal of the day. But she could eat nothing, and her room-mate was genuinely alarmed.

"Was it fierce, dear?" asked Lizzy anxiously.

Lois roused herself from her thoughts with an effort.

"Was what fierce?" she asked.

"The fight you had with his nibs?"

At first Lois did not comprehend what the girl was talking about.

"Oh, you mean Mr. Dorn? No, it wasn't fierce at all. It was a very—mild encounter."

"Did you tell him about his nerve?" asked Lizzy.

"He seemed to know all about that!" said Lois with a smile.

"I'll bet he was upset and asked for mercy. Did he go on his knees?"

She was anxious for details, but Lois shook her head.

"Nothing sensational happened. He was a little bit penitent, but only a little bit. I am scared."

"Scared?" said Lizzy indignantly. "What have you got to be scared about? I'll go and see him."

"No, you'll do nothing of the kind. He's not likely to worry us again," said Lois Reddle hastily.

"But what happened? Didn't you ask him what he meant by it?" said her disappointed friend.

"Yes, I asked him something of the sort." Lois was anxious to get off the subject, but Lizzy was insistent.

"Of course, if you were properly engaged and you were ill, and you'd had a tiff, it would have been all right his coming," she began.

"We aren't engaged, properly or improperly, and I am in disgustingly good health, and we haven't had a tiff, so it wasn't all right. He'll not trouble us again, Lizzy."

"I've been trying all morning to get a word with you," said the disgruntled typist, "but you've been going about all blah and woozy, and naturally I thought you'd been raising hell—if you'll excuse the unladylike expression—and that there had been an awful scene, but I did think you'd tell me when we came out to grub."

But Lois was adamantine, and the meal passed in what was to Lizzy a wholly unsatisfactory discussion of her friend's plans.

The one happy result of the morning's interview was that, neither that day nor the next, did she so much as catch a glimpse of Michael Dorn and his long black car. But, as the days passed, this relief was not as pleasant as she had anticipated, and on the Saturday afternoon she found herself wishing that she had an excuse for meeting him.

What did he know about her mother? Had he known all the time, and was that the reason he was taking so great an interest in her? That he could have been associated, even remotely, with the case was impossible. His age, she guessed, was in the neighbourhood of thirty; possibly he was younger; and he must have been a child when Mary Pinder stood her trial.

Lois remembered with a start that her own name must be Pinder, though the question of names did not matter very much.

On the Monday morning she packed her two boxes, and, with Lizzy's assistance, carried them down into the street to the waiting cab. Lizzy was inclined to be tearful. Old Mr. Mackenzie, in his black velvet coat, hovered anxiously in the background, though he did not emerge from the house which had been his voluntary prison for twenty-five years.

"What's he shoving his nose in for?" demanded Lizzy viciously. "I'll bet he'll play 'The Girl I Left Behind Me' when you drive away!"

But it was to no such accompaniment that Lois left her old lodgings, and she came to the chaste atmosphere of Chester Square without any of the mishaps which Lizzy had so gloomily prophesied. The door was opened by a liveried footman, and she was apparently expected, for he led her up the broad, carpeted stairs to a wide and lofty room looking out on to the square.

Lady Moron was sitting at her small writing-table when the girl was announced, and rose magnificently to meet her. She was arrayed in a bright emerald velvet gown, which no other woman could have worn. On her ample bosom sparkled and flashed a great diamond plaque which was suspended from her neck by a chain of pearls. Her face was powdered dead white, against which her jet-black eyebrows seemed startlingly prominent. Lois

noticed, now that she had time to inspect her new employer, that, though the blackness of her hair was natural, both eyebrows and eyelashes had been treated, and the scarlet lips were patently doctored.

"The maid will show you your room, Miss Reddle," said the countess in her deliberate way. "I hope you will be happy with us. We are extremely unpretentious people, and you will not be called upon to perform any duties that would be repugnant to a lady."

Lois inclined her head slightly in acknowledgment of this promise, and a few minutes later was viewing her new bedroom with pleasant surprise. It was a big room at the top of the house, overlooking the square. There was here everything for comfort, and, for some reason which she could not define, she compared the furnishings with those she had seen of Mr. Michael Dorn's and decided that they were in the same category of luxury.

She changed and came down to the drawing-room, which was also, she learnt, Lady Moron's "work-room." She opened the door and stopped. Two men were there; the first of these she recognised as the weak-kneed holder of the title. The second man was shorter and more sturdily built. His fleshy red face was eloquent of his love of good living, and when he smiled, as he did frequently, he showed two lines of large white teeth, that in some manner reminded the girl of a tiger's, though there was certainly nothing tigerish about this gentleman, with his plump body and his curly red hair that ran back from a rather high forehead.

"Let me introduce Mr. Chesney Praye," said her ladyship, and Lois found her hand engulfed in a large moist palm.

"Glad to meet you, Miss Reddle." His voice was pleasantly husky. His keen eyes looked at her with undisguised admiration.

"You know Lord Moron?"

His lordship nodded and muttered something indistinguishable.

"Miss Reddle is my new secretary," said her ladyship. She pronounced the four syllables of the word as though they were separated. "You may see a great deal of her, Chesney—Mr. Praye is my financial adviser."

He certainly did not look like one who could offer any other advice than on the correct cut of a morning coat or the set of a cravat. He himself was perfectly dressed. Lois had often read the phrase "well-groomed" and now for the first time realised all that it signified, for Mr. Chesney Praye looked as though he had come from the hands of an ardent, hissing hostler, who had brushed and smoothed him until he was speckless and shining.

"A pretty nice pitch for you this, Miss Reddle," said Praye. "If you don't get on with her ladyship, I'm a Dutchman! Ever been on the stage?"

"No I haven't," she said, with a faint smile, as she recalled old Mackenzie's warning.

"A pity. You ought to have done well on the stage," he prattled on. "You've got the style and the figure and the voice and all that sort of thing. I've played for a few years in comedy—it's a dog's life for a man and not much better for a woman."

He laughed uproariously, as though at some secret joke, and Lois was surprised that the majestic countess did not chide him for the free and easy attitude which seemed hardly compatible with that of a trusted financial adviser.

"I'd like to go on the stage."

It was the silent Lord Moron, and his tone had a note of sulkiness which was surprising. It was as though he were a small boy asking for something which had already been refused.

The countess turned her dark, unfriendly eyes upon her son. "You will never go on the stage, Selwyn," she said firmly. "Please get that nonsense out of your head."

Lord Moron played with his watch-guard, and moved his feet uncomfortably. He was, she judged, between thirty and forty years of age, and she guessed he was not married, and had more than a suspicion that he was mentally deficient. She was to learn later that he was a weakling, entirely under the domination of his mother, a quiet and harmless man with simple, almost childish, tastes.

"Not for you, my boy," said Mr. Chesney Praye, as he slapped the other on the shoulder, and Lord Moron winced at the vigour of this form of encouragement. "There is plenty of occupation for you, eh, countess?"

She did not answer him. She was standing by the long French windows looking down into the square, and now she turned, and fixing a pair of horn-rimmed lorgnettes, lifted them to her eyes.

"Who is that man?" she asked.

Chesney Praye looked past her, and Lois, who was watching at the time, saw his mouth twitch and the geniality fade from his face.

"Damn him!" he said under his breath, and the countess turned slowly and surveyed him with a stare.

"Who is he?" she asked.

"He's the cleverest 'busy' in London—that's who he is. Detective, I mean. I'd give a thousand for the privilege of going to his funeral. He's got a grudge against me—;"

He stopped, as though he realised he was saying too much. Lois looked over his shoulder at the man in the street. He was walking slowly on the opposite pavement.

It was Michael Dorn!

CHAPTER IX

Lady Moron was talking.

"A detective? Really, I don't see why you should be worried about detectives, Chesney. You are not, I hope, a member of the criminal classes?"

"Of course I'm not," he said brusquely, almost rudely, "but I loathe this fellow. His name's Dorn—Michael Dorn. He is the only private detective in England who is worth twopence. They call him into Scotland Yard for consultations; they think so much of him. He was the fellow that organised the raid on the Limbo Club, and he tried to get a conviction against me for being one of the proprietors, which of course I wasn't."

Michael Dorn had passed out of sight now, and the girl was thankful that their interest had been so concentrated upon his hateful presence that they had not noticed her; otherwise she must have betrayed her knowledge of the man.

A detective! At this moment Mr. Chesney Praye was amplifying his description.

"That fellow's got the nerve of the devil," he said, unconsciously echoing Elizabetta Smith. "He is utterly unscrupulous, and would 'shop' his own maiden aunt to get a conviction. He used to be a Deputy Commissioner of Police in India, but resigned to take up the case of an African millionaire who lost some documents and paid him a fortune for recovering them—at least, that's the yarn I've heard."

What did "shop" mean, she wondered, and guessed that it was synonymous with "betray." And what sort of a man was this Mr. Chesney Praye that he could use these cant terms in the face of his noble employer. She had heard of men and women who occupied so well-established a position in the households of the great that they could grow familiar with the people they were paid to respect, and she supposed this was one such.

It was left to Lord Moron to protest.

"Don't like 'shop,' old thing," he quavered. "Sort of a low-down term to use before a young lady—what?"

Again those menacing eyes of his mother cowed him.

"It does not shock me, Selwyn, and I have no reason to suppose that my secretary will be shocked either."

He wilted under the glance, muttered something incoherent and stole guiltily out of the room. Lois would gladly have followed, but there was no excuse. Instead, it was Mr. Chesney Praye who was dismissed.

"You must run along now, Chesney," said the countess. "I want to have a little talk with Miss Reddle."

Chesney, with his ever-ready grin, took a somewhat elaborate farewell of his hostess, bending to kiss her plump white hand that was so covered with jewels that Lois wondered whimsically whether he would cut his lip.

"You, young lady, I hope to meet again," he said briskly, as he shook hands with unnecessary warmth, his bright eyes never leaving hers. "I might take her around a bit, don't you think, countess? Is she from the country?"

"Miss Reddle has lived for some years in town," said Lady Moron, and the reproof in her voice would have chilled most persons, but Chesney Praye was not the kind to be snubbed.

"Anyway, she hasn't seen the sights I shall probably show her. Perhaps her ladyship will let you come and dine one night at the club. Do you dance?"

"If I'm allowed to choose my own partners, I dance rather well," said Lois.

"Then you shall choose me," said the thick-skinned young man, "for I'm a dandy hopper!"

It was some time after they were left alone before Lady Moron spoke. She stood, surveying the square below, her hands behind her, and Lois thought her ladyship must have forgotten that she was present, until the countess spoke, without turning her head.

"There will be nothing for you to do to-day. I've answered all my letters. We lunch at one-thirty, and you, of course, will invariably be at our table except when we have visitors. Dinner is at eight o'clock. You will be allowed to go out every other afternoon from five to ten, and such week-ends as I am in the country will be your own. Thank you very much, Miss Reddle," and with this dismissal Lois went up to her room, wondering how she would fill in her time between meals.

When Chesney Praye left the house in Chester Square he looked left and right, and presently saw what he sought. An idle man, standing at the corner of the street, his back towards the red-faced young man. Hesitating only a moment, he turned resolutely towards the seemingly unconscious Michael Dorn.

"Look here, Dorn!"

Dorn turned round slowly.

"Good morning, Mr. Praye," he said, with a lift of his eyebrows, as though the man who confronted him was the last person in the world he expected to meet in that place at that time.

"What's your idea in tailing me?"

Michael Dorn's eyebrows met in seeming perplexity.

"'Tailing'? Oh, you mean following you, I suppose? I haven't quite got used to the argot of the London underworld. In India we call it—;"

"Never mind what you call it in India," said the other roughly. "What's the great idea?"

Dorn looked at him with a thoughtful expression.

"Are you under the impression that I'm tailing you?"

"I'm not only under that impression—I know," said the other, his face growing darker. "I spotted you this morning when I came out of my rooms in St. James' Street, and thought you were there by accident. And one of your bloodhounds has been up to the Limbo Club, pumping the waiters. What's the general scheme?"

"Curiosity," murmured the other, "just idle curiosity. I'm thinking of writing a book on the bizarre criminal, and naturally you'd have a few pages all to yourself."

Chesney Praye's eyes were veritable slits as he tapped the other gently on the waistcoat.

"I'm going to give you a tip, Dorn," he said. "Keep your finger out of my pie, or you're going to get it burnt!"

"One good tip deserves another," said Dorn. "And mine is, keep your finger off my waistcoat or you'll be severely kicked!"

He said it in the most pleasant manner, but the furious man knew that he meant every word, and dropped his hand. Before he could master his wrath, Dorn went on:

"You've got a good job, Praye—don't lose it. I understand that you're financial adviser to a very noble lady—unprepossessing, but noble. If, by chance, I hear you're advising her to put money in some of your wildcat schemes, or advising her to finance some of the little gambling houses which you have found so profitable in the past, I shall be coming along after you with a real policeman."

"You damned amateur!" spluttered the other.

"You have found the chink in my armour." Dorn was coolness itself, and the shadow of laughter gleamed in his fine eyes. "I hate being called 'amateur'! I have warned you."

"You're not in India now—;" began Chesney, and recognised his mistake too late.

"I am not in India now, nor are you," Dorn's voice was gentle, almost silken. "Seven years ago I was in India—in Delhi—and there was a certain smart young Government official, also a financial adviser to some heads of departments, whose accounts went a little wonky. He was some twenty thousand pounds short. The money was never discovered. It was generally thought that the financial authority was more of a fool than a rogue, and, although he was dismissed from the public service, he was not prosecuted."

Chesney Praye licked his dry lips.

"I, for my part, advised his prosecution," Dorn went on. "In fact, I knew that the money was lying at a bank in Bombay, in the name of a lady friend. The Simla big-wigs were so scared of a scandal that the thief"—he paused and watched the other wince—"this thief was allowed to transfer his ill- gotten gains to Europe. And lo! I meet him again in the rôle of financial adviser!"

Chesney found his voice.

"There's a law of libel in this country," he said.

"There are several other laws, including the very excellent criminal law," said Dorn. "And the statute of limitations does not apply to felonies. One loud squeal in an irresponsible newspaper, and they'd have to pinch you, whether the Government liked it or not."

Chesney Praye looked first one way and then the other, and presently his eyes caught the detective's. He was paler than he had been.

"I didn't associate you with that business," he said. "I knew I had an enemy somewhere in the background. It was you, was it?"

Dorn nodded.

"It was I—by-the-way, where is your dissolute friend, Dr. Tappatt, located? I thought he must have drunk himself to death, but I hear that he is in London—you introduced him to the countess a year ago. Did you tell her about his queer record? Or is he now her medical adviser? Or is he running one of the famous unregistered homes for mental cases? That man will hang sooner or later."

Praye did not reply. His face was working nervously; for a second he had a mad impulse to strike at his tormentor, but thought better of it. It was in a calmer voice that he said:

"I don't see why we should quarrel over what is past. You're wrong when you think I made money out of that Delhi business, and I haven't seen Tappatt for months. But I know I can't convince you. Let's bury the hatchet."

Michael Dorn looked down at the extended hand, but made no effort to take it.

"If I bury any hatchet with you, Praye," he said, "it will only put me to the expense of buying a new one. You go your way and let your way be as straight as possible. If you run foul of me, I'm going to hurt you, and I shall hurt you bad!"

He saw the flaming hate in the man's eyes, and his own gaze did not waver. Suddenly Praye turned on his heels and walked away.

The detective waited until the man was out of sight, then strolled along the side-street, passed up the mews at the back of Chester Gardens, and made a careful examination of the back premises of No. 307. The stables and garages on the other side of the mews interested him considerably, and it was some time before he was clear of the mews, and met the silent little man whom he had sent out on an errand the morning Lois Reddle had visited his flat.

"Wills, there's a garage to let in this mews. I have an idea that it belongs to her ladyship—her own cars are at the Belgrave Garage. Go along and see the agents, tell them you wish to rent the place and get the keys—to- night if possible—to-morrow certain."

He handed a note he had made of the agent's address to the other, and without a word the silent Wills strolled away. He never asked questions—which, to Michael Dorn, was his chief charm.

Michael came into Chester Square from the opposite end. He saw Lady Moron's big Rolls standing at the doorway, and presently had the felicity of seeing her ladyship, accompanied by her son, enter the car and drive away. She was going shopping and would come back to lunch, he thought, and loafed along the side-walk, slackening his pace as he came opposite the house. There was no sign of the girl, but Michael Dorn was a very patient man. It was not Lois whom he expected or wished to see. The man for whom he was waiting came out ten minutes after Lady Moron's car had turned from Chester Square. He was a tall, broad- shouldered man with a somewhat unpleasant face, whom Michael knew to be Lady Moron's butler. Him he followed at a distance, and this time Michael made a very profitable trail.

CHAPTER X

The Countess of Moron, Lois discovered, had one amiable weakness; it was for jigsaw puzzles, which were made especially for her—pictures in greys and blues and elusive shades which would have driven an ordinary puzzle expert to despair. They were cut in tiny pieces, and her ladyship would spend hours before the big table in the library, putting them together. This she confessed at luncheon, and it was the first time that Lois had seen the human side of her employer. In the main the conversation was confined to the two women, Lord Moron being in the party, but not of it. When he spoke, as occasionally he did, his mother either ignored him or answered him in monosyllables. And apparently he was used to such treatment, which he did not seem to resent. The only servant present throughout the meal was the butler, Braime, for whom Lois conceived an instant dislike. He was a man with a forbidding face, sparing of speech, and though he was polite enough, there was something about his height and bulk which produced in the girl a sensation of uneasiness.

"You don't like Braime, Miss Reddle?" asked the countess, when the man was momentarily absent from the room.

Lois marvelled at the intuition of her employer, and answered laughingly:

"I don't know whether I like him or not."

"He is a very satisfactory person," said the countess in her majestic manner. "I like tall servants, and the fact that he is unpleasant-looking is an advantage. None of my callers will try to steal him. In society one finds one's best servants so frequently enticed away by people who pretend they are one's friends."

It was then that she told of her passion for jigsaw puzzles.

"Braime is very helpful and quite clever at that sort of thing, and I have frequently had to call on him for help."

"Have you had him long?"

"Some six months. He was recommended to me by some people anxious to reform criminals," was the startling thing she added.

Lois nearly jumped from her chair.

"You mean that he has been in prison?" she asked, bewildered.

Lady Moron inclined her head in a stately agreement.

"Yes, I believe he has been in prison for some foolish offence—stealing silver, I think. I have given him a new start, and the man is grateful."

When the butler returned, Lois gave him a more careful, if more furtive, scrutiny. Despite his powerful physique, he moved with a gentle, almost feline tread and his big clumsy hands manipulated the delicate china with a dexterity which was surprising.

Partly to her amusement, but more to her embarrassment, Lois found that a maid had been allocated to her—a fresh-faced country girl who had been recruited from her ladyship's own village in Berkshire. For the Earls of Moron were wealthy landowners, and Moron House, near Newbury, was one of the show places of the county.

The maid had all the loquacity of her kind, and Lois had not been very long in her room before she learnt that her distrust of the butler was generally felt throughout the servants' quarters.

"He's always prying and spying, miss," said the maid. "He's just like a great cat, the way he walks; you can't hear him until he's behind you. And us servants are not good enough for him. He has all his meals in his pantry, and whenever we get a new servant here he watches her as if she was a mouse. I wonder her ladyship stands such an ugly, bad-tempered man about the house."

"Is he very bad-tempered?" asked Lois.

"Well," admitted the girl with reluctance, "I can't exactly say that. But he looks bad-tempered," she said triumphantly, "and you can always judge a man on his looks. Her ladyship took a lot of trouble about you, miss."

"About me?" said Lois in surprise.

The girl nodded.

"She had these chairs put in for you and chose your bed, and—hullo, what's this? Is this yours, miss?"

She had pulled open the empty drawer of a bureau, and now she held in her hand a large cabinet photograph. Lois took it from her; it was the picture of a young man; she judged him to be in the early twenties. He was singularly good- looking, and there was about the face something that was vaguely familiar.

"I don't know how that got there," said the chattering girl. "I cleared these drawers out myself yesterday. Her ladyship must have brought it up and left it."

Lois saw, though it was only a bust photograph, that the young man wore the uniform of a Highland regiment, and she tried to recall the badge. As a child she had been interested in regimental insignia.

"He's good-looking, isn't he, miss?"

"Very good-looking," said the girl. "I wonder who he is?"

"We've got lots of photographs in the house and nobody knows who they are. Her ladyship collects them," said the girl.

"I will take it down to Lady Moron," said Lois.

She found the countess sitting with her head in her hands before a half-completed puzzle picture.

"Where was that? In your room?"

Lady Moron took the photograph from her hand, looked at it disparagingly and dropped it into a table drawer.

"He was a boy I knew some many years ago," she said, and did not trouble to discuss how the photograph had appeared in Lois' room.

Lois went back to her own room. It was a sunny afternoon and rather warm. The long windows were open and one of these led on to a small stone balcony, one of the many which ornamented the front of the house. Across the window opening, however, was a light wooden gate which barred access to the inviting place.

"We're not allowed to go out on the balconies in the daytime," said the girl. "Her ladyship is very particular about that."

"Does that apply to me?"

"Oh yes, miss," said the girl. "Her ladyship doesn't go out on to her own balcony, except in the evenings. Nobody is allowed out by day."

Lois was wondering what induced the eccentric countess to prohibit a very pleasant lounging place during the day.

The afternoon post brought a number of letters, which, contrary to Lady Moron's express principles, had to be answered that afternoon, and she was busy until an hour before dinner. And then the stately lady made a suggestion for which the girl was very grateful.

"If you have any girl friend you would like to ask to tea you may—any afternoon I am out. To-morrow will be a free evening for you. I shall be going out to dinner."

That night, before she retired to her comfortable bed, she wrote a long letter to Lizzy Smith and posted it herself, and Lizzy's reply was characteristically

prompt. Lois was eating a solitary breakfast the next morning when a footman came in to say that she was wanted on the telephone. It was Lizzy.

"That you, kid? I'll be coming along to-night. Are you sending the car, or am I taking the old No. 14? Don't dress for me; I'm a plain woman without any side."

"Don't be silly, Lizzy. I shall be all alone and expecting you."

"What sort of a crib is it?" asked Lizzy.

"Very nice, very nice, indeed," said Lois, but without any enthusiasm. "Only there isn't enough work to do."

"'Only' is not the word you want, it's 'and,'" said Lizzy. "What is coming over you, Lois? Find me a job without work—here's old Rattlebones!"—the latter in a lower tone told Lois that the girl was telephoning from the office and that the managing clerk had arrived.

Lady Moron and her son had gone out to dinner and a theatre party, and Lois was alone when the girl came.

"This is certainly great," said Lizzy in a slow tone, as she looked round the resplendent dining-room. "That big chap's the butler, I suppose? I can't say that I like his face, but he can't help that. How many courses do you have?" she asked, after the third course. "My doctor says I mustn't take more than six."

Following dinner the two girls went up to Lois' room and Lizzy sat down to stare and admire.

"I always thought these sort of jobs didn't exist outside of good books," she said. "I mean the books they give you for Sunday School prizes. You've certainly rung the bell this time, Lois!"

"It seems too good to be true, doesn't it?" laughed Lois.

"You haven't seen Him, I suppose?"

"You mean Mr. Dorn? Yes, I saw him this morning. He was walking up and down Chester Square. And Lizzy, he's a detective."

Lizzy's eyes lit up.

"A real detective?" she said, in an awestricken tone. "And I thought he was the other way about—that he was one of the people detectives catch. What did he say, Lois?"

The girl shook her head.

"I didn't speak to him. I only saw him through the window. Lizzy, I'm so worried and puzzled about it all—and he's such a queer man! The things he could have said when I collided with his car!"

"I don't know why you need be worried," said the philosophical Lizzy. "Even detectives have their feelings. There was one married the other day—I saw a bit in the paper about it. And some of them are quite respectable men." She looked up suddenly.

"What is it?" asked Lois.

"I thought I heard footsteps outside the door."

Lois walked to the door and threw it open. The corridor was empty.

"What made you think there was somebody there?"

Lizzy shook her head.

"I don't know," she said vaguely, "only I've got sharp ears, and if they weren't slippers moving on a carpet, I've never heard 'em!"

Lois closed the door and sat down on the bed.

"Lizzy, I'm going to tell you something," she said, and the interest of Miss Elizabetta Smith quickened.

"Ah!" she said, drawing a long breath. "I knew you'd tell me sooner or later. But, my dear, it won't be any news to me. He is one of the nicest men I've ever met—;"

"What on earth are you talking about?" demanded Lois, aghast. "Are you thinking of that wretched Mr. Dorn?"

"Well, what else have you got to tell me?" demanded Lizzy indignantly; and Lois, in spite of the seriousness of the subject she was about to broach, fell into an uncontrollable fit of silent laughter.

"My dear, I can't tell you now, not—not in this mood," said Lois. "You poor little matchmaker! Mr. Dorn is probably married, with a large family. We won't talk about him either." Then, as a thought struck her: "Would you like to see this wicked city by night, with all its lights? I'll show you." She walked to the French windows and opened them. "This little balcony is forbidden territory by day, but it is rather wonderful now, isn't it?"

She stepped out on to the balcony and, walking to the balustrade, rested her hand upon the broad parapet, looking down into the street, which seemed a terribly long way below. And even as she did so, she felt the balcony sag slowly beneath her.

She turned in a fright and leapt towards the window; but at that minute there was a loud crack, and the stone floor dropped suddenly beneath her.

CHAPTER XI

As she fell, Lois clutched wildly, and her fingers caught a projecting ridge of stone an inch wide; the jerk nearly pulled her arms from their sockets, but for the moment she hung.

She heard the frightened scream of Lizzy.

"Are you there? Oh, for God's sake hold on, Lois! I'll get them!"

And then, looking up, she saw the girl jerked violently backwards. She was falling; she could not hold on a second longer. There was a terrible, unendurable pain in her shoulders and her head was swimming.

And then, just as her fingers were slipping, a big hand grasped her wrist, and she felt herself drawn upwards until another hand caught her under the arm and pulled her into the room. She looked up into the unpleasant face of Braime, the butler.

He laid her on the bed, then, going to the window, knelt and peered down. The crash of falling masonry had attracted one of those small crowds which gather from nowhere at any hour of the day or night in London. Braime saw a policeman running across the street, and, rising, dusted his knees carefully, closed the window door and latched it. He said not a word to the girl, but went out of the room.

Lois, on the very verge of collapse, lay white of face, as pale as death. But her distress was as nothing to Lizzy Smith's, who was paralysed by all the tragic happening, until the girl's moan aroused her to action.

Lois came from semi-consciousness to a clearer understanding, with a sense that she had been drowned, then, as out of a haze, loomed the white-faced Lizzy with a water-jug in her hand.

"That was a close call!" breathed the girl.

Something in the words was reminiscent; Lois had heard them before. Then in a flash she remembered the motor-car which had nearly killed her, and Michael Dorn's words. She struggled up to a sitting position and found that the sensation of drowning was not altogether illusory, for Lizzy had been very lavish in her use of the water-jug.

She had hardly got to her feet when there was a tap at the door and the butler came in, followed by a policeman.

"The officer wishes to see the balcony," said Braime, and opened the door for the policeman's inspection.

With the aid of his lamp the officer made a cursory examination and brought his head back into the room. He looked strangely at Lois.

"You'll never get nearer to trouble than that, miss," he said. "There's an old crack in the slab that you trod on, and the balustrade doesn't support the flooring at all. I'd like to see some of the other balconies," he said, and disappeared with the butler.

This was the second accident in a few days; her spine crept at the thought. What malign influence was following her? For the first time she wished she were returning to her humble little room in Charlotte Street, and she said good-bye to Lizzy with real reluctance.

The countess came home soon after the girl had gone, and came immediately up to Lois' room as she was undressing.

"I knew that balcony was unsafe," she said, "and I told that fool of a butler to keep the gate fixed. Where is the gate?"

"It was here this afternoon; I did not notice it before I went down to dinner, Lady Moron," said Lois. "I thought it had been moved to allow the windows to be closed."

The countess bit her red lip thoughtfully.

"There is more in this than I care to think about," she said. "I hope you're not going to have a sleepless night, Miss Reddle. I cannot tell you how distressed I am. How were you saved?"

Lois told her and Lady Moron nodded.

"Braime?" she said. "But what was he doing on the third floor at that time?"

She looked searchingly at the girl and then, without another word, went to her own room.

It was two o'clock in the morning before sleep came to Lois; and by that time her nerves were on edge, so that she started at every sound. Something was keeping her awake—something she was trying to remember. Some thought was working insistently at the back of her mind, demanding revelation. As she tossed from side to side, consciousness of this inhibited memory made her grow wider and wider awake. And then, as she came back to bed, after the second tramp to the washstand for a glass of water, it flashed upon her.

"Keep your door locked—even in the palatial home of the Countess of Moron!"

Michael Dorn's warning! It was that. She went to the door and felt for the key. But there was none, nor was there any bolt. Turning on the light, she

lifted one of the smaller arm-chairs, carried it to the door, and pushed the back beneath the handle. Then she went back to bed and was asleep in a few seconds.

She awoke the next morning to find the sun streaming past the edge of the blind. There was a gentle tap-tapping at the door. She jumped out of bed and pulled away the chair to admit the maid.

"Good morning, miss," said the maid cheerfully, and was inclined to discuss the accident of the night before, but that Lois was most anxious to forget.

"Her ladyship's very much upset. She hasn't had any sleep all night, miss," said Jean. "She asked me if I'd warned you about the balcony. Of course I told her I did, but only in the daytime—I didn't know it was unsafe. I've only been here a fortnight. Her ladyship was in the country until then."

She drew the blinds, and, crossing to the window, Lois looked out. The jagged edge of the broken balcony was there to remind her of her narrow escape and she shuddered as she recalled that dreadful moment when she had hung in space.

"It was the butler's fault," said Jean maliciously. "I shouldn't be surprised if he got the sack."

"If it hadn't been for the butler I should have been killed."

"If it hadn't been for the butler, miss, you wouldn't have been in danger," said the girl, and there seemed some truth in her remark. "Her ladyship told me to move you to-day to his lordship's room on the floor below."

"But surely she's not turning out Lord Moron?" asked Lois, aghast.

Apparently the household staff entertained towards his lordship something of the contempt which his mother displayed, in public and private.

"Oh, him!" said the girl with a shrug. "He doesn't mind where he sleeps. He'd be just as happy in the garret. All he wants to do is to go on the stage and play with his silly old electricity! I wonder her ladyship allows him to go on in that childish way."

So the Earl of Moron's queer desire was public property, thought Lois. Apart from the shock of the news that he was being turned out of his apartment to make room for a secretary, Lois was not sorry that new accommodation was to be offered to her, and her pleasure was intensified after her interview with the countess.

Her ladyship, who had a predilection for strong colours, wore a gown of petunia that morning. Lois thought it made her look old. She made no reference to the accident, and for the first hour after breakfast they were

engaged in letter-writing. Lady Moron had many correspondents, and there was the usual sprinkling of begging letters which had to be dealt with in the usual way. When Lois had finished her work and brought the last letter for her employer's signature, the countess looked up.

"You are not suffering any ill effects from last night's terrible experience?" she asked.

"No," smiled Lois.

I have told the maid to move you into Selwyn's room. As a matter of fact, it is never used by him; he prefers his little study at the top of the house and sleeps there nine nights out of ten. You are not worried about what happened?"

Lois shook her head.

"Or nervous?"

The girl hesitated.

"I was a little nervous last night."

"I thought you would be, and I have been considering what would be my best course to induce you to stay. I like you. And there is another reason; I want a woman in the house to whom I can talk confidentially." She turned in her swivelled chair and looked up into Lois' face. "I don't want to be alone," she said, "I am rather frightened of being alone."

"Frightened, Lady Moron?"

Her ladyship nodded. There was certainly nothing in her voice to indicate her fear. She picked and chose her words with characteristic care. "I can't explain why, but I am frightened—of certain people. If you care to remain with me, I will raise your salary, and I am quite willing that your friend should sleep in the house."

"My friend?" asked the surprised Lois. "Do you mean Miss Smith?"

Again the countess nodded, her dark eyes never leaving the girl's face.

Lois hesitated.

"That might be very—very awkward for you," she said.

The countess waved a flashing hand.

"I have considered the matter in all its aspects, and if it is agreeable to you and to your friend, I will have another bed put into your room. Perhaps you

would like to see Miss Smith and discover her opinions on the subject? I will have the car ready for you in a quarter of an hour."

Looking over the edge of the wire blinds, Lizzy Smith saw the glistening limousine pull up at the door, and Lois alight, and, defiant of all the rules of the establishment, she ran out of the office and came half-way down the stairs to meet the visitor.

In a few words Lois told her of Lady Moron's proposal.

"Gee whiz!" said Lizzy, flabbergasted. "You don't mean that?"

She gripped Lois by the arm and pulled her upstairs. "Come right along to the 'phone!" she hissed, "and tell her royal highness that I'll be on the mat at six!"

CHAPTER XII

Lois did not go into the office; she left her friend on the threshold and went on to the appointment she sought. Leaving the car in Parliament Street, she walked down Whitehall to the Home Office building, and, filling in a blank, took her place in the waiting-room.

There was very little possibility, she told herself that the august Under-Secretary, of whom she craved an interview, would grant her that privilege, in spite of the pressing nature of the note which she had sent with the official form. She began to despair and was looking round at the waiting-room clock for the tenth time, when a messenger came for her.

"Miss Reddle?" he asked, "will you follow me?"

Her heart beat a little faster as he knocked on an imposing door, and, opening it, announced her name. An elderly man, who was sitting at the far end of a big room, his back to an empty fireplace, an immense desk before him, half rose from his chair.

"Sit down, Miss Reddle," he said, with official brusqueness. "I read your note, and I'm sorry to have kept you waiting. I had an important conference here." And then, without further preliminary: "You say that Mrs. Pinder is your mother?"

"Yes, sir, I am certain of that."

There was a big folder before him, and this he opened.

"The case is familiar to me," said the Under-Secretary. "As a matter of fact, I was a junior engaged in the courts when she was tried, though not in the case. I don't know what I can do for you. Her sentence has nearly expired, and if I were you I should wait until she comes out before you take any further steps. There are certain other people interested in the case, as you probably know, and that is the advice I have given to them."

"But my mother was innocent," said Lois, and he replied with an almost imperceptible shrug of his shoulders.

"Innocence has this much in common with guilt," he said, "that after twenty years it is very difficult to prove or disprove. I followed the case very closely and it seemed to me that there were two essential pieces of evidence, one of which might have proved her guilt beyond doubt, and one her innocence. And these were not produced at the trial."

"What were they?" asked Lois quickly.

"The first was the key of the box in which the jewellery and the cyanide were discovered. If that had been found in your mother's possession any doubt in

my mind would have been removed. That was the judge's view also. The other is the letter the murdered woman—or rather," he said hastily, "the woman who was found dead—would have written had it been a case of suicide. You know, of course, there was a pen and ink on the table and a pad of paper, but no letter was found. It was a new pad, purchased by the dead lady that morning, and one sheet had been torn away. The view of the defence was that, preparatory to committing suicide, she had written a letter, as people do in such circumstances. However, it was not found, although a very careful search was made."

And then, abruptly, he began to question her about herself, her life. When she had told him the means by which she had identified herself with Lois Margeritta, Mrs. Pinder's daughter, he agreed.

"I should think you were right there," he said.

"Even Mr. Dorn thinks I am right," she said with a half-smile.

"Dorn?" he said sharply. "You mean the Indian man, the police officer? Do you know him?"

"Not very well," she said.

Could he be amongst the "other people interested in the case"? She dismissed the possibility as absurd.

He looked at her keenly.

"In what circumstances did you meet Dorn?" he asked, and Lois was very frank.

"Humph!" said the Under-Secretary. "Dorn isn't that kind of man. I mean, he wouldn't go chasing round after a girl if there wasn't something else to it. He is a man of the highest integrity and honour," he said emphatically; and for some extraordinary reason she was pleased to hear this tribute to the man who had so often annoyed her.

There was nothing more to be done, and when he rose to signify the end of the interview and shook her hand, he put into words her own thought.

"When your mother comes out of prison she will be able to give you a great deal more information than any of us possess. There is the question of your father, for example, who disappeared a week or two before the crime and was never seen again. What happened to him? I remember there was a half-hearted attempt on the part of the prosecution to hold your mother responsible for his disappearance."

"How horrible!" said Lois indignantly.

"Yes, I suppose it was horrible."

From the Under-Secretary's tone it seemed to Lois that he did not regard the matter quite in that light.

"In criminal cases, my dear young lady, the prosecution have to presume the most horrible things, and they're usually right!"

There was very little profit for the girl from this interview, but at least she had the satisfaction of knowing that she had made a start. Somehow she had never thought very much about her father and his disappearance. That seemed so unimportant by the side of her mother's suffering.

The letter and the key; these were two new points which she had never considered or known about before. She went back to Chester Square with a sense of accomplishment, and arrived in time to witness perhaps the strangest incident that mortal eye had seen.

As she opened the door of the drawing-room, she heard a shrill voice raised in anger, recognised it as Lord Moron's, and would have drawn back, only her ladyship, who had seen her, called her into the room.

Moron was beside himself with rage. His sallow cheeks were pale, and, as he spluttered his annoyance, he stamped his foot in childish anger.

"I refuse, I absolutely refuse!" he almost screamed. "I appeal to Miss What's-er-name. I appeal to you, miss. Is it right that a man in my position should do what any wretched boozing doctor tells him to do? Don't think that I'm afraid of this horrible creature, because I'm not! I know the law, by gad!"

"Braime simply carried out his instructions," said the countess in her deep, booming voice.

She was standing near her writing-table, slowly sharpening a pencil with a little knife, and did not look up from her task.

"I don't mind giving up my room for a young lady," said the earl rapidly, "any gentleman would do the same. Besides, my study's awfully jolly. But if I want to go out alone, I'll go out alone, and I won't have any beastly criminal butlers going with me—not if all the beastly doctors in the world order it. I've stood enough, my dear mother."

He shook a trembling finger at the woman, who, seemingly oblivious to the scene, continued her pencil-sharpening.

"I've stood enough. You may marry this wretched Chesney Praye, the infernal blackguard! Ah, yes. I know all about that! I know a lot of things you don't imagine I know! You may use my money as you jolly well please, you may—;"

Lois saw Lady Moron's hand go up and touch her son's face with a caressing gesture.

"You're a naughty boy," she said, her thin lips curled in a smile.

And then, with a scream of pain, the man stepped backwards and put up his hand to his bleeding face.

Lois could not believe the evidence of her eyes. Yet there it was—a long, straight cut, and the little knife with which the woman was sharpening her pencil showed a tiny red stain.

CHAPTER XIII

"You're a very naughty boy," said the countess, intent again upon her pencil- sharpening, "go back and play with your batteries!" and, with a gasp of fear, the man turned and ran blindly from the room, his face dabbled red.

There was a dead silence, and then the countess looked up.

"I suppose you think I'm very horrid? But Selwyn is difficult at times—shockingly difficult, and shockingly sulky. I must impose my will on him for his own good. And really, he isn't hurt any more than he would have been if his razor had slipped."

The cold-bloodedness of the thing left Lois breathless and shaken. She could hardly believe that she was not dreaming horribly.

"It was rather—drastic, wasn't it?" she said, speaking with difficulty.

Again the dark eyes met hers.

"Drastic? Yes. Dr. Tappatt wishes me to be even more drastic. Did you speak to your friend?"

"Yes," said Lois, almost grateful to be lifted out of the scene.

"And she will come? How dear of her! I told you I was afraid this morning, Miss Reddle. I don't suppose you guessed why, even after Moron's amazing exhibition of childish temper?"

Lois did not guess and was wisely silent. Her ladyship made no further reference to the scene. When Lord Moron came to lunch with his face conspicuously plastered, his mother did no more at the end of the meal than say:

"Please don't come to dinner like that, Selwyn. One would imagine you had been in an earthquake."

To which he answered, with a meek:

"Yes, madam."

The change of rooms had been effected, and Lois was now in what might very well have been a small state apartment in one of the royal palaces. The new bed had been erected, and as the hour approached for Lizzy's arrival, the uneasy qualms which Lois had been feeling all day began to dissipate. Though she had given strict injunctions as to the appearance her son should present at dinner, the countess herself dined out. She sent for Lois before she left the house.

"If you could amuse Selwyn, please do so. He is quite a good companion if you can reduce your mentality to the level of his. Possibly your friend will find him easier than you," she added, and Lois would have been amused if she were not a little shocked.

Lizzy came promptly at six, bringing with her a battered black bag containing what she described as her "court dress and coronation robes" and the girl prepared her for a shock.

"You're dining to-night with the Earl of Moron," she said, and Lizzy collapsed into a chair.

"I can't and I won't," she said energetically. "I knew there was going to be a catch in this!"

Lois soothed her fears, and, though she did not wish to follow the example of the servants and speak of his lordship in terms of disparagement, she sufficiently reassured her friend that Lizzy neither fainted nor flew when she was introduced to the vacuous, young-old man.

He was standing with his back to the empty fireplace in the drawing-room, a cigarette drooping from his lips, when Lois ushered her friend into his presence. He gave Lizzy a feeble handshake.

"Awfully glad to meet you. Nice weather we're having," he said, and to Lois: "Her ladyship's gone, I suppose? That beastly bounder Praye called for her."

Lois remembered the scene, of which she had been an unwilling witness, and Mr. Chesney Praye's attitude towards the countess, which seemed inexplicable, was within her understanding. Chesney Praye was something more than a financial adviser. Apparently he had advised the lady in affairs of the heart only too well, though Lois found it rather difficult to imagine the masterful countess in a tender mood.

"Perfectly beastly bounder," said his lordship with such energy that she realised that the spirit of revolt was not wholly crushed. "That wretched boozing doctor is bad, but Chesney Praye is worse! I call him a bird of prey—that's not bad, what Chesney, the bird of prey!"

He chuckled at his mild jest and visibly brightened under the influence of his own humour. This was the second reference that had been made to the mysterious doctor. Lois wondered if she would be called upon to meet him.

"Well, I'm glad she's gone with her bird of prey. Let's go along and have some grub."

Lizzy's jaw dropped at the sound of this familiar vulgarism; and that moment probably marked the beginning of an interest in the aristocracy which was fated to grow in intensity.

It was one of the most cheerful dinners that Lois remembered, and certainly for his lordship it was an hilarious feast, for he trotted out his joke about "bird of prey" some half a dozen times, and on each occasion with an increasing measure of amusement.

"I didn't see the joke at first," said Lizzy, wiping her eyes. "His name's Praye," explained his lordship eagerly. "I call him the bird of prey—rather good, what? Let's play draughts. I'm rather a dab at draughts."

It was an opportunity to learn to know him better and Lois very skilfully drew him out. He had been to a public school—he thought it was Harrow; in fact, he was pretty sure it was Harrow—for two years, and then his mother had taken him away. He hated school life; it was rough. Since then he had practically not left his mother. He thought he was a member of one of the clubs, but he wasn't quite sure which one; at any rate, he had never been there.

"You aren't married?" asked Lois boldly.

The question afforded him a tremendous amount of enjoyment.

"Married—me? Good gracious, no! Who wants to marry a silly old johnny like me? Oh dear, no! There was a girl who wanted to marry me, I understand, when I was rather young, but her ladyship wouldn't have her at any price."

He had never occupied any responsible position. His mother managed his estate with the aid of bailiffs and lawyers; from time to time documents came to him for his signature; and he had been to the House of Lords once to take his seat.

"Never again—too silly," he said. "They dress you up in red velvet and put crowns and things on your head!"

She discovered, to her surprise, that he had a hobby, and incidentally, his mother's sneering remarks about his "batteries" were cleared up. He had a passion for electrical apparatus. His study, into which the girl had not been invited, was a litter of model dynamos, electric trains, and batteries.

"I've done one of the neatest little jobs for her ladyship in the library—ask her to show it to you." His face went serious, "Perhaps you'd better not," he said hastily.

Electrical work was not wholly an amusement to him. He claimed with pride to have fixed all the bells in the house, and later the girl learnt that this was true.

Whatever terrors the peerage had for Lizzy were quickly dissipated; towards the end of the evening she was hotly disputing the bona fides of a piece which had mysteriously appeared on his side of the chequer-board.

"Never had such a perfectly jolly evening in all my young life," said his lordship. He had been glancing nervously at the clock for some time. "Now I think I'll toddle, before the madam comes."

He made one of his rapid exits, and the two girls came out into the hall. Braime was standing by the front door, staring through the glass panels into the street.

"Good-night, miss," he said respectfully, and then continued his vigil.

"I don't like that man," said Lizzy, when they got to their room.

"Braime? I didn't, but I owe him so much. If he had not been there last night—;"

"How did he get there—that's the question?" said Lizzy. "He must have been in the room when the balcony fell, for almost at once I felt somebody pulling me aside."

"What do you think of Lord Moron?" asked Lois, anxious to turn the conversation to pleasanter channels.

"He's wonderful," said Lizzy dreamily. "From what I heard about him I thought he was dippy; but that boy's got brains!"

Lois was in bed, and Lizzy, who was too intensely interested in her own views to be a quick-change artist, was in that condition of deshabille which made her least presentable, when there came a frantic tapping at the door.

"Who is that?" asked Lois.

"It's me, young lady. Can I come in?"

It was Lord Moron's voice.

CHAPTER XIV

"I'm afraid you can't come in now. Is there anything you want?"

"Yes, I forgot something," said the agitated voice.

"Can I get it for you?" asked Lois, now at the door.

"No, I'm afraid you can't, it's—er—;"

His voice died down into a rumble of sound. Then!

"Never mind. I don't suppose—I say, don't be alarmed or anything of that sort—I mean, don't mention to the madam anything that seems remarkable, will you?"

The girl shook her head in bewilderment.

"I don't know what you mean. Is there something I can get for you?"

But he had evidently gone. Lizzy, who had a practical mind, suggested that the articles he required were false teeth.

"He's got that kind of delicate mind that wouldn't mention them to a lady," she said.

But her companion did not accept that explanation.

Lizzy, who was not affected by the stateliness of the surroundings, was asleep almost as soon as she had finished talking. But Lois Reddle had never been more wide awake in her life. She heard the clock strike the quarter and the half and the hour. She turned from side to side and counted sheep and furnished houses and followed all the prescriptions for sleeplessness which had ever been offered. But at half-past one she was alert and wakeful. She heard the whine of a car as it stopped in front of the house. That was Lady Moron returning, she guessed.

The bed she occupied was a small four-poster. Perhaps it was this unusual factor which kept her awake. She stared up in the dark at the silken canopy above her head, wondering whether she would sleep more comfortably upon the big settee at the foot of the bed.

The deep breathing which came from Lizzy's bed irritated her unreasonably. She rose, touched the pillow, and turned over again, and then—;

"Did she know the photograph?"

She sat up with a jerk. It was the voice of Chesney Praye and had come from the canopy above her!

It was as though somebody was lying on the top and speaking, for the words were clear and distinct. It was the voice of the countess who answered him.

"No," came the deep tones. "I put it in the drawer just before she arrived."

A pause, and then presently he spoke again.

"You took a risk."

She heard the deep laugh of Lady Moron.

"I've taken a greater one to-night, I think, Chesney."

"My dear Leonora," Chesney's voice was pained, "surely you can trust me?"

"I have to," the deliberate tone of her ladyship came down from the canopy, "and I think you will be wise not to play the fool. Selwyn is worrying me."

"Selwyn!" contemptuously.

"Selwyn. He knows more than I gave him credit for. How did he know that we were to be married? He came out with it in his rage to-day. And how did he know that I'd been lending you money—;"

"Come into the dining-room."

There came the sound of a knock and then the voice of Braime spoke very faintly.

"I've set the table, my lady."

After that Lois heard no more.

"Who was that? Was it somebody talking?" It was Lizzy who spoke. "Was it you, Lois? I heard somebody say they'd lent money."

Lois was out of bed now, and had switched on the little lamp that stood on the table by the bedside. She looked up fearfully at the canopy. It had the heavy, respectable appearance which all such articles of furnishing have. Lois had a wild idea that a door had been left open, but the only door in the room was that which led to the corridor, and it was locked, as she knew.

"What was it, Lois?" Lizzy was struggling into her dressing-gown.

"I don't know. I heard somebody speaking. It seemed to be in the room."

"It came from the direction of your bed," said Lizzy. "Lord! This is a queer house. I don't like it, Lois. I'd sooner have old Mackenzie and his fiddle any day or any night."

Lois Reddle jumped on to the bed, lifted the table lamp and began an examination of the valance above. Presently she uttered an exclamation. In one corner, suspended by two wires, was a black, bell-shaped piece of ebonite, which at first she thought was a telephone receiver. Behind was a flat and circular box, and this was wired to the canopy.

"That is where the voice came from; it's a loud-speaking telephone!"

She found the wire; it was cunningly hidden along the valance, descending one of the bed-posts, where it ran in a red flex to a wall-plug. The mystery was a mystery no longer, and now she understood the agitation of Lord Moron. She appreciated, too, his skill as an electrical engineer. He had been spying on his mother, if such a term applied to one who heard rather than saw. Somewhere in the house, probably in the drawing-room, was a concealed microphone, and too late that night he had remembered that he had not disconnected the instrument. Lady Moron was puzzled as to how her son knew so much. Lois could have told her.

"What a bird!" said Lizzy admiringly. "Fixed it all up himself! That boy's got brains! What did you hear, Lois?"

But the girl was not inclined to be communicative. She pulled out the plug from the wall, sent her companion to bed, and followed her example.

Whose photograph was it that had been placed for her inspection? And what risk had Lady Moron taken? She remembered the picture of the handsome young officer who was "a boy I once knew" to her ladyship. And what risk had the woman run in leaving that under her secretary's eyes. She got out of bed again and re-fixed the plug, feeling that she was being guilty of a despicable act. But something was happening which was so vital to her, that she could not afford to allow niceties of conduct to weigh against her need. No sound came from the microphone. But perhaps after supper they would return here. And, in any event, the weariness and monotony of waiting might induce the sleep which refused to come to her eyes.

Three o'clock struck, half-past three, four and half-past, and the chill of dawn began to show on the white blinds. Lois was not as far from sleep as she had been, and she was beginning to doze when a faint sound brought up her head from the pillow.

Click, click!

It was as though somebody were turning on the lights in the drawing-room. She waited tensely for the next sound. Presently there was an

indistinguishable whisper, and then a voice spoke. Clearly the words came to her.

"Lois Reddle is very near to death!"

She knew the voice, in her imagination could almost see the speaker.

It was Michael Dorn.

CHAPTER XV

In a second she had recovered, and had leapt out of bed. Better the known than the unknown. All fear had vanished; she would face Dorn and have the truth. Snatching up her dressing-gown, she went to the door, turned the key noiselessly and ran down the dark stairs.

The drawing-room faced her as she came on to the landing, and she did not hesitate, but flung open the door. The place was in darkness, and reaching out, she felt for the light switches and turned them. The room was empty; there was no sound save the musical ticking of a French clock on the mantelpiece, no sign of Michael Dorn or of his unknown companion. She gazed bewildered. Then she heard a noise behind her and spun round.

"What is it?"

It was the countess, who slept on the same floor as the girl.

"Turn on the landing lights," said the woman calmly, and when she did so, Lois saw the older woman standing on the landing above, wrapped in a white ermine coat, as calm and imperturbable as ever.

"I thought I heard voices and came down."

"In the drawing-room? Of course, it is under your bedroom!"

Lady Moron descended the stairs without haste and walked into the salon.

"You must have been mistaken, there's nobody here," she said. "I'm afraid your nerves are on edge. The opening of your door woke me. What did the noise sound like? The windows are fastened. None of the furniture has been moved."

"I heard somebody speaking," said Lois.

"Go to bed, my child."

Her large hand patted the girl gently on the shoulder, and Lois went meekly up the stairs and into her room.

She came down to breakfast the next morning feeling a wreck, and Lizzy, warned by her friend, made no reference at the table to the voices of the night. She saw the girl off and came back to the dining-room. A footman was clearing the table under Braime's watchful eye. When the man had gone:

"Her ladyship says you heard somebody speaking in the night, Miss Reddle?"

"I thought I did. Perhaps I was dreaming, or imagined I heard her ladyship in my sleep."

"Lady Moron did not go into the drawing-room last night," was the surprising reply.

Lois stared at the man, who went on:

"Her ladyship went into the library, but you would not hear her from your apartment."

The library! That was where the microphone was fixed, and all the time she had been talking to Lady Moron on the landing Michael Dorn and his assistant had been on the floor below. The library was situated on the ground floor at the back of the house. She was thankful that she had not found him whilst that watchful woman was hovering in the background.

"I thought I heard you come out of your room, miss," Braime continued; "in fact, I was on the point of coming downstairs when her ladyship came up. By-the- way, her ladyship will not be down until one o'clock, miss, she has two friends coming to lunch. She asked me if you would deal with any letters which are not marked personal."

Lois was in the midst of this occupation when Lord Moron came into the drawing- room, a nervous and apprehensive man.

"'Morning, Miss Reddle," he said, eyeing her keenly. "Well?"

"Not very well, thank you!" smiled Lois.

"Queer house this," he mumbled. "All sorts of odd noises. These old places are like that, you know. Nothing disturbed you, I suppose? Nobody—er—talking in the street?"

"No, nothing disturbed me," she said untruthfully, and he heaved a sigh of relief.

"Awfully glad. You don't mind my going into your room to get the things I left behind, do you? I say, don't mention this to her ladyship, will you, because she thinks I'm a careless devil and she'll rag me most fearfully!"

Lois promised, and he hurried from the room. When she went up to prepare for luncheon, she examined the canopy and found, as she had expected, that the microphone and its attachments had been removed.

In other circumstances she might have been amused, but she was conscious that a terrible danger was hovering over her, and in some way that the menace was associated with the countess and her friend.

"Lois Reddle is near to death!" She shivered at the recollection.

Twice in a week she had escaped destruction by a hair's breadth. Those were not accidents; she was sure now. But who could desire her harm? And what had the photograph of the young man in uniform to do with her?

On one point she was determined, and she had confided her intention to Lizzy that morning whilst they were dressing, before they came down to breakfast. She must leave this house and take the risk of unemployment for a while.

Lady Moron came into the drawing-room just before lunch, looked over the letters and signed such as required her signature, and then Lois broke the news. To her surprise the big woman was neither indignant nor entreating.

"When I saw you early this morning I was afraid this would happen," she said. "And really I cannot blame you, Miss Reddle. You have had a most terrifying experience, though I believe that last night's trouble was purely imaginary."

Lois said nothing.

"When do you wish to go? As soon as possible, I gather from your hesitation. Very well, I am not blaming you. I feel partly to blame, and I will pay you a month's salary and arrange for you to leave to-morrow."

The two visitors were Chesney Praye and a man whom Lois had not seen before, though she had heard his lordship's views on him. Later she felt she had no particular desire to meet again. He was a bald man of fifty, with a face even redder than Mr. Praye's, a big, bulbous nose, a loose mouth. She might, had she met him in the street and not in this chaste atmosphere, have analysed him as a typical drunkard. Nor would that description have been uncharitable. His frock coat was old and shone at the seams, and she observed that he had made only a half-hearted attempt to make his nails presentable.

"I want you to meet Dr. Tappatt."

So this was the famous doctor. She was not impressed.

"Glad to meet you, young lady, very glad to meet you," said the doctor with spurious heartiness. And with his words came the faint aroma of something that was not entirely whisky and not entirely cloves. "This is the young person your ladyship was speaking about? Hears voices, eh? Dear, dear, that's a bad symptom," he chuckled, "a very bad symptom. Eh, Chesney? We've had 'em for that! We've had 'em for that!"

Lois saw the butler fill this strange creature's glass with wine, and when she looked again the glass was empty. Apparently Braime, if he did not already

know the peculiarities of the guest, had been carefully coached, for, without asking, he had refilled the glass.

Lord Moron appeared at the lunch table, a sulky and silent young man, his face less extensively plastered.

"Had an accident, eh? Been in a railway smash?" demanded the doctor. "Your lordship should be more careful."

"I haven't been in a railway accident," said Selwyn sulkily.

He evidently knew the doctor, and the girl had a feeling that he was afraid of him, for once or twice she saw him glancing furtively and a little fearfully in the direction of the untidy man.

"There's another one who hears voices, eh? Your lordship hasn't been followed by a dog—a nice black dog with a waggly tail, eh?"

"No, I haven't," almost shouted Lord Moron, going red and white. "I never said I had, did I? I'm perfectly—I know what I'm doing and all that sort of thing. You leave me alone, sir."

It was in every way an uncomfortable meal for Lois Reddle. The glowering resentment of Moron, the calm indifference of his mother, the crude jocularity of Chesney Praye, and the presence of the doctor, who, when he was not drinking, was boasting of the wonderful cures he had effected in India, brought a sense of nightmare to the girl. Only once more did Dr. Tappatt turn his attention to Lois.

"What's this I hear about your trying to throw yourself over the balcony? Come, come, young lady, that will never do!" He wagged his animal face at her, and the bloodshot eyes gleamed unpleasantly.

"Don't be stupid." It was Lady Moron who spoke. "The balcony gave way under Miss Reddle; there was no suggestion that she attempted to throw herself into the street."

"A joke, a mere jest," said the doctor unabashed, and pushed his glass towards the watchful Braime. "That's a good wine of yours, your ladyship, a fine, full- bodied wine with a generous bouquet. Romanee-Conti, I think?"

"Clos de Vougeot," corrected the countess.

"There is very little difference between the wines of Vougeot and Vosne," said the connoisseur. "As a rule, I prefer the Conti, but your ladyship has converted me."

The lunch did not end soon enough for Lois. When the countess had risen, she strolled to where her son was standing.

"When you come down to dinner to-night, be so good as to have the last of that ridiculous plaster taken from your face. I wish, at any rate, that you should look like a gentleman and not like a prize-fighter." She mouthed the words deliberately. "Otherwise, perhaps I shall have to consult Dr. Tappatt."

Lord Moron shrunk at the ominous words, and his muttered rejoinder did not reach Lois' ears.

The suggestion that she should work in the library was one which Lois was glad to accept; for beyond a glimpse, she had never seen the room wherein the Countess of Moron spent so many hours with her jigsaw puzzles. And there was another reason; she must find the artfully concealed microphone which Lord Moron had installed.

It was a pleasant room, low-roofed and long, and ran from the wall of the reception-room at the front of the house to a small conservatory which hid the ugliness of the tiny courtyard at the back. Every wall was covered with bookshelves, and there were, in addition, more than a dozen big filing cabinets in which the countess had accumulated, and carefully docketed, the little souvenirs which had come to her in the course of her life; theatre programmes, newspaper cuttings, correspondence which most people would not have thought worth preserving. But Lady Moron was a methodical woman and had a horror of waste. This she told the girl when she introduced her to the room.

Left alone, Lois made a careful inspection of the library, without, however, discovering the hidden receiver or its wiring. She noticed that one section of the bookcase was covered by a strong door, covered with fine wire mesh, through which the titles could be seen; and studying these in the ample leisure she had, she was more than a little surprised at the precautions taken to prevent casual reading of this forbidden library. The books were of the most innocuous type, and she surmised that there had been a time when this section held literature less innocent.

She had finished her work and was browsing about the books, taking down one after the other and glancing at their contents, when Braime came in. One glance at the man told her that something unusual had happened. His face was twitching, and he was evidently labouring under the stress of great excitement which he had not succeeded wholly in suppressing.

"Will you go to the dining-room, miss? There's a gentleman wishes to see you."

"A gentleman? Who is it?"

"I don't know his name," said the man, "but if he's not there, will you wait for him?"

"But who is it, Braime? Didn't he give his name?"

"No, miss." The hands clasped before him were trembling, his eyes held a strange light.

"In the dining-room?" she said as she went out.

"Yes, miss."

To her surprise, when she looked round, she found he had not accompanied her. The dining-room was empty, except for Jean, her maid. The girl was engaged in dusting, and seemed surprised at the arrival of Lois.

"Braime told me a gentleman was waiting to see me?"

Jean shook her head.

"I don't know anything about a gentleman, miss, but I do know one thing," she said viciously. "He's no gentleman. I caught him coming out of the countess' room just now and I'm going to tell her ladyship. A sneaking, prying—;"

"Please find out who it is wishes to see me," said the puzzled girl. "Perhaps he is in the hall."

Jean went out, but returned in a few minutes, shaking her head.

"Nobody there, miss. Thomas, the footman, says that there have been no callers since Dr. Tappatt left. Mr. Praye is with her ladyship in the drawing-room."

What did this mean? Lois frowned. Braime's story was obviously an excuse to get her out of the room. She hurried back to the library. The door was closed and she threw it open.

"Braime—;" she began, and then stopped and said no more.

The butler lay on his back in the middle of the floor, a silent, motionless figure, a look of agony on his white face, his lips distorted in a grimace of agony.

CHAPTER XVI

Her first impulse was to fly, her second, more merciful, was to run to his side, and, kneeling down, loosen his collar. Was he dead? There was no sign of life or sound of breath. The hands, upraised, as though to clutch an invisible enemy, were stiff and rigid.

She flew out of the door and called the maid.

"Telephone for a doctor, please. Braime is ill," she said breathlessly, and rushed up the stairs.

Lady Moron was deep in conversation with her visitor, but at the sight of the girl she came hurriedly across the room.

"What is it?" she asked in a low voice.

"It's Braime," said Lois breathlessly. "I think he's dead!"

The countess followed her down the stairs at a pace which Lois did not think was possible for so heavy a woman. For a moment she stood in the doorway, surveying the silent man.

"This is not for you to see," she said gently, and, pushing the girl back into the passage, closed the door.

Presently she came out.

"I'm afraid he's dead. Tell me what happened. Or first ring through to the Limbo Club for Dr. Tappatt."

Lois told her that she had already given an order for a doctor to be called, and her instructions were fulfilled more efficiently than she had supposed. For Jean had rung the Virginia Hospital, which is within a hundred yards of Chester Square, and even while they were talking in the passage there came the clang of an ambulance bell, and the footman hurried to open the door.

The youthful house surgeon who had accompanied the ambulance made a brief examination of the prostrate figure and was obviously puzzled.

"Was this man subject to fits?" he asked.

"I am not aware that he was. He has been quite well since he has been in my employ," said Lady Moron. Lois, who had been attracted to the room, was looking down fearfully at the still figure.

"There is no wound of any kind that I can see," said the doctor, peering through his spectacles. "I will have the attendants in and we'll rush him to the hospital."

He went back to the hall and signalled for his assistants, and a stretcher, withdrawn from the ambulance, was brought into the library.

And then, as they were about to lift the man on to the canvas, there came the sound of running footsteps in the hall and a man burst violently into the room. He was hot and hatless and stood breathing heavily in the doorway, looking from one to another. Presently his gaze, fell upon Lois.

"Thank God!" he said shakily.

Then, with two strides, he was by the side of the prostrate figure.

"Are you a doctor?" began Lady Moron.

"My name is Michael Dorn—a name probably unknown to your ladyship," said Dorn brusquely.

His keen eyes searched the room. Rising, he lifted a china bowl filled with roses, swept the flowers on to the floor, and dashed the water into the man's face. Ripping off the collar of the man he knelt over Braime's head and drew up the stiff arms, pressing them back again to the body. Lois watched him in bewilderment. He was applying the restorative methods which are used for people who are partially drowned.

"Are you a doctor?" asked the young surgeon, a little irritably.

"No," said Michael, without ceasing his work.

"May I ask what you think you're doing with this man?"

"Saving his life," was the brief reply.

Lady Moron turned at that moment. She had heard the voice of her son in the hall, and, sweeping out of the room, she intercepted him.

"What do you want, Selwyn?" she asked coldly.

"Something's happened in the library. They say old Braime's got a fit or something—thought I might be useful."

"Go back to your study, please, Selwyn," said her ladyship. "I will not have you excited over these matters."

"But dash it all—;" began his lordship, but the look in his mother's eyes silenced him, and he grumbled his way back to his den.

The countess waited until he was out of sight, and then came back to the little party that was watching Michael Dorn and his seemingly futile efforts. A few minutes passed, and then:

"I really think this man should be taken to the hospital, Mr.—er—Dorn."

Lady Moron's visitor had by now joined the group. Chesney Praye had witnessed the arrival of the detective and had thought it wise not to offer his advice. But now, morally strengthened by the presence of the countess, he added his voice to the argument.

"You're probably killing that man, Dorn. Let him go to the hospital, where he'll be properly attended to."

Michael made no reply. The perspiration was pouring down his face; he stopped only to strip off his coat before he resumed his work.

"I hope you're a better doctor than you are a detective," said Chesney, nettled by Dorn's attitude.

"In the present case, I am as good a doctor as you are an embezzler," said Dorn, without turning his head. "And, in any circumstances, I am a better detective than you are a crook. He's reviving."

To Lois' amazement, Braime's eyelids were flickering. She saw the slow, unaided movement of his chest.

"I think he'll do now," said Dorn, getting up and wiping his forehead.

"Are you a detective?" It was the doctor who asked the question.

"Sort of a one," said Michael with a smile. "I think you'd better get him into hospital as soon as you can, doctor. Please forgive me for butting in, but I have had a case like this before."

"What is it?" demanded the puzzled medico, as the butler was lifted on to the stretcher and carried from the room. "I thought it was a stroke of some kind."

"It was a stroke of a pretty bad kind," said Michael grimly.

He did not attempt to follow the ambulance party, but, putting on his coat, he strolled round the room on what appeared to be a tour of inspection. He examined the ceiling, the floor, and ran his eye over the library table.

"He fell six feet from the table, didn't he?" he mused. He pointed to the patch of water that had discoloured the carpet. "Do you mind telling me where his feet were? He had been moved when I came in."

"Lady Moron would prefer to discuss that matter with the police when they arrive," snapped Chesney Praye. "You've no right whatever to be here, you know that, Dorn."

"Will somebody tell me where his feet were?"

It was Lois who pointed.

"He was lying across the room."

"Of course—yes." The puzzled Dorn stroked his chin. "You weren't here when it happened, I suppose, Miss Reddle?"

"I forbid you to answer any questions," said the countess in her most ponderous manner. "And I completely agree with Mr. Praye that this is not a matter for outsiders. Do you suggest the man was assaulted?"

"I suggest nothing," said Dorn, and again his eyes sought Lois Reddle's. "You have quite a lot of accidents in this house, don't you, Miss Reddle?" he asked pleasantly. "If I were you, I think I'd go back to Charlotte Street; you'll be safer. When I saw the ambulance at the door I must confess that I nearly died of heart failure. I thought you were the interesting subject."

Her ladyship walked to the door and opened it a little wider.

"Will you please go, Mr. Dorn? Your presence is unwelcome, and your suggestion that any person in this house is in the slightest danger is most offensive to me"—she looked at Praye—"and to my friend."

"Then your ladyship should change your friend," said Dorn good-naturedly, "and, lest you should think that the fine feelings of Mr. Chesney Praye are lacerated by my suggestion, I will relieve your mind. There are only two things that annoy Chesney, and they are to lose money he has and to be thwarted in any attempt to get money which doesn't belong to him. Can I speak with you alone, Miss Reddle?"

"I forbid—;" began the countess.

"May I?"

Lois hesitated, nodded, and preceded him from the room.

It was in the hall, deserted even by the footman, that he spoke his mind.

"I confess I didn't expect the succession of accidents which have followed one another at such close intervals since you have been in this house," he said. "I only consented to your coming here at all because I thought that—;"

"You consented?" Her eyes opened wide. She flushed with sudden anger. "Does it occur to you, Mr. Dorn, that I do not require your consent?"

"I'm sorry." He was humility itself. "I am on the wrong track, but my nerves are a little jangled. What I wanted to say was that I ought to have known, after you received those poisoned chocolates—;"

She went pale.

"Poisoned?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"Of course they were poisoned. Hydrocyanic acid. Why did you think I came into your room that night to get them away? I came with my heart in my mouth as I did a few minutes ago, expecting to find you dead."

"Why are you so—so interested in me?" she asked, but he evaded the question.

"Will you leave this house to-day and go back to Charlotte Street?"

She shook her head.

"I can't until to-morrow. I've promised Lady Moron that I would stay with her until then, and I'm sure, Mr. Dorn, that you're mistaken. Who would send me poisoned chocolates?"

"Who would try to run you down with a car?" he countered. "Look at this." He put his hand in his waistcoat pocket and took out a little roll of cloth. "Do you recognise this stuff?"

Her mouth opened in astonishment.

"Why, that is a piece of my skirt that was cut out when the car—;"

"Exactly, and I found it hanging on the car. The people who garaged it were in such a hurry that they didn't attempt to examine or to clean the machine."

"But who—who is this enemy of mine?" she asked in a low voice.

He shook his head.

"Some day I will tell you his name. I think I have already told you too much, and made myself just a little bit too conspicuous. My only hope is that the knowledge that I am around will scare them. You can't leave to-night?"

"No, it is impossible," she said.

He nodded.

"All right." He glanced past her to Lady Moron, who was standing at the door of the library, deeply engaged in conversation with Chesney Praye. Presently he caught the eye of the red-faced man. "I want you, Praye."

He walked out of the house, waiting on the side-walk for Chesney to join him.

"Now see here, Dorn—;" began the other loudly.

"Lower your voice. I am not deaf. And, anyway, there's no call for you to talk at all. Understand that. I've been to the India Office this morning, and sounded the Secretary. There will be no difficulty in getting a warrant for you in connection with that Delhi business if I take a little trouble. Let fact Number One sink into your mind. The second is this; if any harm comes to this girl Reddle—and I can trace your strong right hand in the matter—I'll follow you through nine kinds of hell and catch you. Absorb that." And with a nod, he turned and walked away, leaving the man speechless with rage and fear.

CHAPTER XVII

Lois thought it was kind of Lady Moron to give her the afternoon and evening to herself.

"My dear, I'll be glad to get rid of you," said her ladyship frankly. "That wretched man Dorn has quite upset me, and I'm not going to visit my resentment on you. Go away for a few hours and begin to forget that there is such a place as 307 Chester Square. And if you feel you'd like to go to a theatre later, please do so. I will leave instructions for the night footman to wait up for you. I have just heard from the hospital that Braime is quite conscious and perhaps he will give us an account of the mysterious happening. I've had the library searched, and I've not found anything to account for his extraordinary seizure. I doubt even whether the clever Mr. Dorn will be any more successful," she added, without evidence of malice.

Lois was glad to get away, and her first thought was to acquaint her friend with what had happened. She made her way to Bedford Row, and as she reached that familiar thoroughfare, she saw the ancient Ford at the door and Mr. Shaddles pulling on his gloves preparatory to departure.

He lived in Hampstead, was invariably the first and last user of the old machine. His glare was distinctly unfriendly as she mounted the steps.

"Well?" he asked. "You've come back, have you? Tired of your job, eh? I never thought you'd be much good as a private secretary."

"I'm not tired of it, but I'm leaving," she smiled.

"Young people must have change," deplored Mr. Shaddles. "It is the cursed unrest of the age. How long were you with me?"

"Some years, Mr. Shaddles."

"Two years, nine months, and seven days," he said rapidly. "That seems like eternity, I suppose, young woman? To me it is"—he snapped his fingers—"yesterday! I brought you down from Leith, didn't I? One of my clients mentioned you, and I gave you your chance, eh?"

"Yes," she said, wondering why he had grown so unexpectedly reminiscent.

"Ah!" He looked up at the sky as though for inspiration, or applause—she wasn't quite sure which. "You'll want to come back to your old job, I suppose?" And without waiting for her reply. "Well, you can start to-morrow. I'll give you three pounds a week, and you can start to-morrow morning at half-past eight." He laid special emphasis on the last words.

"But, Mr. Shaddles," said the dazed girl, "that is awfully kind of you—most kind. I'd love to come, but I can't come to-morrow morning."

"Half-past eight to-morrow morning," he blinked at her. "Don't keep me, I'm in a hurry."

He went down the steps, mounted his car, and she stood watching him until he was one with the traffic in Theobalds Road.

So great was the shock of the lawyer's generosity that this was the first news she told the sceptical Lizzy.

"There's been something strange about him for the last two days," decided that young lady. "Softening of the brain, I think. He didn't mention about putting up my salary? Maybe he's not so far gone as that. I shouldn't take too much notice; he'll probably change his mind to-morrow. Three pounds a week? He must be mad! I'll bet he'll come down to the office in the morning in his pyjamas, playing a cornet, and calling himself Julius Caesar."

The clerks had gone; Lizzy was alone in her office; she had stayed behind to type an interminable memorandum of association, which was never finished after Lois had told the story of what had happened at the house that day.

"I think Mike's right," said Lizzy, nodding vigorously. "That house is too full of tricks. I hate the idea of leaving Selwyn—;"

"You mean Lord Moron?"

"He's Selwyn to me," said Lizzy calmly. "I'm going to the pictures with him to- morrow night. He's a nice boy, that. What he wants is a mother's care and he's never had it."

"And you're going to be the mother?" Lois laughed, and then, seriously: "I can't leave at once. You must please yourself what you do. I promised Lady Moron I would stay."

Lizzy pulled a long face.

"I can't desert you, but I'll tell you straight, that I'd rather sleep on the top shelf of a mortuary than at Chester Square to-night. I'll go with you, but I'm doing you a favour. Put it down in your book. As to old Shaddles he'll be in charge of a keeper to-morrow. If anybody else but you had told me about that three pounds a week business, I'd have known they were lying. And now, what do you say to coming back to Charlotte Street and pretending we are poor again?"

To Lois there could have been no more attractive way of spending the evening. The old room with its shabby furniture, its faded chintzes, was home; and even the squalling of playing children in the street had a special charm which Lois had never observed before.

There was, too, a welcome awaiting them. Old Mackenzie saw them through the window of his room and came down to greet them in the passage. He was pathetically disappointed when he learnt they were not staying the night, but cheered up after Lizzy told him their plans.

"Let us ask him up to dinner," said Lois, as she sat on the kitchen table, watching the girl manipulating the frying-pan.

Lizzy nodded. She was a thought distrait, and later Lois learnt the reason.

"If I'd had any sense, I'd have asked Selwyn to drop in, and he'd have come," she said. "He's democratic—one of the best mixers I've ever met. He told me last night, when you went out to get a handkerchief, that he felt thoroughly at home with me, and that I was the first girl he'd ever felt at home with all his life. That's something for an earl to say, knowing that I'm a thirty-five bob a week key-shifter."

Her voice trembled slightly and Lois regarded her with a new interest. She had been acquainted with Lizzy for many years and had never known her so emotional.

"He's never had a mother's care, that boy," she said again, her voice shaking.

Lois charitably overlooked the fact that the boy in question was somewhere in the region of thirty-five.

"That woman hasn't got any more sympathy with Selwyn than I've got with her. She's got a heart like a bit of flint, she's—;"

"Mr. Mackenzie will be a poor substitute for your Selwyn, but shall we have him up?" asked Lois again.

"Yell for him," was the terse reply.

In many ways Mr. Mackenzie was a more entertaining guest than Lizzy had hoped. In the first place he was very interested in her account of the Morons' house and daily life, for it was Lizzy who spoke as an authority on the subject, appealing only occasionally to Lois for confirmation.

"Silk curtains? Really!" said Mr. Mackenzie, impressed.

"And satin ones," said Lizzy recklessly. "At least, they look like satin. And silver mountings everywhere. And real marble walls in the bathroom. Am I right, Lois? And a silver fire-grate in the drawing-room."

Old Mackenzie sighed.

"It must be very gran' to live amidst such surroundings," he said, "though I never envy any man or woman. And the countess is a charming lady?"

"I wouldn't call her that," said Lizzy. "She's all right up to a point. She's a bad mother but a good scout, if you understand me."

"She has young children?" Mr. Mackenzie was interested.

"He is not exactly young," Lizzy was careful to explain, "he's a young man in what you might term the first prime of life. No, he's not at school," she snapped to the unfortunate question. "He's a wonderful man. Selwyn wants to be an actor, and why his mother doesn't let him go on the stage is a wonder to me."

Again Mr. Mackenzie sighed.

"It is a bad life, the stage. I think I have told you young ladies before, all my sorrow and troubles come from my association with the stage." And he went on disjointedly: "She was a bonny girl, with a beautiful figure and a face like a—a—;"

"Angel?" suggested Lizzy, pausing with uplifted fork.

"'Madonna' was the word I wanted. To me it is still a matter of wonder that she ever looked at me, let alone accepted my humble suit. But at that time, of course, I was in a very good position. Some of my comic operas were being played. I had a considerable sum of money which, fortunately, I invested in house property, and she was a little—er—extravagant—yes, that's the word, she was a little extravagant. It was perhaps my fault."

There was a long silence while he ruminated, his chin bent on his chest, his eyes fixed upon the table-cloth.

"Yes, it was my fault. I told my dear friend Shaddles, when he suggested a divorce—;"

"Shaddles?" squeaked Lizzy. "You don't know that old—that gentleman, do you?"

Mackenzie looked at her in surprise.

"Why, Mr. Shaddles is my lawyer. That is how I came to have the good fortune to secure you as my tenants. You remember Mr. Shaddles recommended my little house?"

"Shaddles! Good Lord!" said Lizzy, pushing back her plate. "I don't think I could ever have slept in my bed if I'd known!"

"He is a good man, a true man, and a friend," said Mr. Mackenzie soberly.

"And he's a mean old skinflint," said Lizzy, despite Lois' warning glance.

"He's a wee bit near," admitted Mr. Mackenzie. "But then, some lawyers get that way. His father was like that."

"Did he ever have a father?" asked Lizzy, with assumed surprise.

"His father and his father's father were the same way. But the Shaddles are great lawyers, and they've managed great estates. They've been lawyers to the Moron family for hundreds of years."

"Do you know the Morons then?" asked Lois.

He hesitated.

"I cannot say that I know them. I know of them. The old earl, the father of the present boy, I have seen once. He lived abroad for many years, and was—weel, I'll no' call him bad, but he was a gay man by all accounts. And a scandalous liver. Willie, his son, was a fine boy, but he died. Selwyn, the younger son by the second wife, must be the lad to whom you're referring."

Even Lizzy was impressed by the old man's knowledge of the Morons' genealogical tree.

"It is a good thing for the family that they have this fine boy, Selwyn; though, if her ladyship had a daughter, she would succeed to the title, the Morons being one of those families where a woman succeeds failing a male heir."

After dinner was cleared away he brought up his violin and played for half an hour; and Lizzy, whose respect for the musician seemed to have taken an upward curve, tolerated the performance with admirable fortitude.

The evening passed all too quickly, and at ten o'clock Lois looked at her watch and the two girls exchanged glances. Lizzy rose with a shiver.

"Back to the house of fate," she said dramatically. "And thank heaven this is the last night we shall sleep there!"

She could not guess that neither Lois Reddle nor she would ever pass into that house of fate again!

CHAPTER XVIII

At five o'clock that afternoon there was a great thudding of doors and snapping of keys in Telsbury Prison. The evening meal-hour was over. The last visit had been paid by the chief wardress. Laundries, cook-houses, and workshops had been locked up by the officers responsible, and the five halls, that ran, star-shaped, from the common centre, were deserted except for the wardress on duty at the desk, who was reading the letters which had come addressed to the prisoners and which would be delivered to them in the morning. She worked with the sure eye and hand of an expert, using her blue pencil to cover up such items of general news as convicts are not allowed to receive.

So engaged, she heard the burr of a "call," and, looking round, saw that the red disc had fallen over one of the hundred apertures in the indicator. She put down her pencil, walked along the hall, and, stopping before a cell, inserted her key and pulled the door open.

The woman who rose from her bed did not wear the prison livery. Instead, she was dressed in a dark blue costume; her hat and coat lay on the bed and on top a pair of new gloves. In one corner of the cell was a small Gladstone bag and an umbrella.

"I am sorry to trouble you, madam," said the prisoner nervously, "but I wondered if they had forgotten, if—;" Her voice shook and she found it difficult to speak.

"They haven't forgotten, Mrs. Pinder," said the wardress calmly. "The officer should not have put the lock on you." She pushed the door open wide. "If you feel lonely come out and sit with me."

"Thank you," said the woman gratefully, and the official saw that she was very near to tears. "Only the governor told me that he had telegraphed to my friends. There has been no reply?"

"There wouldn't be," said the tactful wardress. "They will be here very soon. Probably they think that you would prefer to wait." She laughed. "Usually prisoners are discharged in the morning, but the Home Office allowed the governor to use his discretion in letting you out overnight. I don't think I should worry, Mrs. Pinder."

She waited at the door.

"Come out when you want," she said good-humouredly. "There's the whole hall to walk in and the lock is on, so you won't be seen by any of the women."

Mary Pinder came slowly into the wide hall and looked along the familiar vista of small black doors, tier upon tier, at the big window at the end of the

hall through which the light of the evening sun was shining. For the first time in twenty years she was free of restraint, could walk without observation, and soon would pass through that steel-barred grill into God's sweet air and into a world of free people.

She checked the sobbing sigh that came, and, her hands tightly clasped together, stood motionless, thinking. She dared not believe the story she had been told; dared not let her mind rest upon what happiness lay beyond the bars.

The wardress had gone back to the desk and her occupation, and the woman watched her wistfully. She was in contact with the world; had a husband perhaps, and children, outside these red walls. Mary Pinder had been cut off from life and human companionship for nearly twenty years. Outside, the world rolled on; men had risen and fallen, there had been wars and periods of national rejoicing; but here, in this shadowy place, life had been grey, without relief, and even pain had become a monotony.

She walked timidly towards the officer and sat down in a chair near her. The wardress stopped her work to smile encouragingly, and then laid down her pencil again.

"I hope you're going to forget this place, Mrs. Pinder?"

The other shook her head.

"I shouldn't think it were possible—to forget," she said. "It is life, most of the life I have known. I was eighteen when I came here first; twenty- three when I was transferred to Aylesbury, and thirty when I came back. I have little else to remember," she said simply.

The woman looked at her curiously.

"You're the only prisoner I've ever known that I had any faith in, Mrs. Pinder," she said.

Mary Pinder leant forward eagerly.

"You believe that I was innocent?" And, when the woman nodded: "Thank you. I—I wish I had known that somebody believed that."

"I wish I had told you," said the wardress briefly. Then, as the sound of a turning key came to her: "Here comes somebody who thinks you were innocent, at any rate," she said, and rose to meet the governor.

"All dressed and ready, eh?" said he cheerfully. "You're a lucky woman! I wish to heaven I were free of this wretched place. But I am a prisoner here until I die!"

It was a stock joke of his and the woman smiled, as he took her arm and paced with her along the hall.

"Your friends will not be here until ten o'clock. I've just had a wire. They thought you'd rather leave after dark. Do you know where you're going?"

"I haven't any idea," she said. "The address I gave you will always find me." And then, in a changed tone: "Doctor, I wasn't dreaming that you told me about—about—;"

"That young lady who saw you? No, it is a most amazing coincidence. If I'd had any brains I should have known, the moment I saw how upset she was, that she was the girl with the branded arm."

"My daughter!" she breathed. "Oh God, how wonderful! How wonderful!"

"They didn't want to let you know. They were afraid of the effect it might have upon you. She's a pretty girl."

"She's lovely," breathed Mary Pinder. "She's lovely! And does she know?"

He nodded.

"She knew that day she was in my room, when I told her about Lois Margeritta. If there's any doubt about it the letter I had from the Under-Secretary should set your mind at rest. She went to see him with the idea of getting further particulars about the—about the crime you were charged with committing. Mrs. Pinder, will you tell me something?" He dropped her arm and faced her. "I am an old man and haven't a very long time to live, and I've lost most of the little faith in human nature I ever possessed. Were you innocent?" He paused. "Were you innocent or guilty?"

"I was innocent." She raised her eyes fearlessly to his. "What I have told you has been the truth. I went out to look for work, and when I came back I was arrested."

"What about your husband? Where was he?"

She shook her head.

"He was dead," she said simply. "I didn't know then, but I have learnt since. Doctor, do you believe that?"

He nodded silently.

"You've been wonderful to me, sir," she said in a low sweet voice. "I wish I could repay you for your kindness."

"Well, you can," he said in his gruff way. "When you get out into the world, you're bound to meet some poor women who will suggest that you have your hair dyed red—don't do it."

He found an especial pleasure in the soft laughter that his jest evoked.

"And now you can come along and dine with my wife and me," he said. "The only satisfaction I've ever got out of having a house within the prison walls."

At five minutes past ten that night a small saloon motor-car drew up before the gates of Telsbury Prison and the driver got down and pulled the bell. He was challenged, as usual, from the wicket.

"I've called to take away Mrs. Pinder," he said.

"You had better come in and see the governor."

"I'd rather stay." The driver lit a cigarette and paced to and fro to kill the time. But he had not long to wait; five minutes after, the little wicket-gate swung open and a woman stepped out.

"Is that Mrs. Pinder?" asked the man in a voice little above a whisper.

"Yes, it is I."

"Let me take your bag."

He opened the door of the car, pushed the bag inside and put out his hand to help her enter. Then, swinging into the driver's seat, he closed both doors and sent the car spinning along the London road. In the shadow of the prison-gate the doctor watched the departure, and turned back with a sigh towards his office. Telsbury Prison had lost something of its interest with the passing of one whom the newspapers had described as "The Hereford Murderess."

CHAPTER XIX

Lois Reddle was in no mood to return to Chester Square; but she was less willing to break faith with the woman whom she was beginning to dislike, and debated the question, she and Lizzy, on the Charlotte Street doorstep.

"Let's stay," urged Lizzy. "At any rate, don't let's go back yet. We shan't see anything of Selwyn. Besides, remember what Mike said."

"What Mike said means nothing to me—if by 'Mike' you mean Michael Dorn," said Lois quietly. "We must go back, Lizzy—I've promised."

Lizzy groaned.

"Oh, these honourable people—you make my head ache! Well, don't let's go back yet," she urged. "The old lady said you could stay out to do a theatre. What's the hurry?"

Again Lois hesitated.

"No, we'll go back now," she said firmly.

She looked across the road. An idler was standing with his back to the railings and she knew at once that it was not Dorn. No sooner had they moved towards Oxford Street than the lounger was galvanised to life and followed at a slow pace on their trail. Once Lois looked back; the man was following them.

"Let us turn round to the right," she said. "I'm almost sure we are being followed."

"We will keep to the main street," said the intelligent Lizzy. "I prefer being followed that way."

They reached Oxford Street, and crossed the road, the shadow coming after them at a respectful distance.

"Try Regent Street," said Lizzy, "and when we get a little way down we'll cross the road and come back on the other side. Then we'll be sure."

The movements of the man, when this manoeuvre was completed, left no doubt. He, too, crossed the road and came back with them, and, when they boarded a westward bound 'bus, Lois saw him call a cab, which kept behind them all the way.

"If I thought it was Mike, I'd go back and give him a bit of my mind," said Lizzy.

"It's not he," Lois assured her. "Mr. Dorn is not so tall and he's smarter looking."

They got out of the 'bus near Victoria, and, as they hurried across the road, Lois saw that the cab had stopped and the man was getting out. Surely enough, by the time they had plunged into silent Belgravia, he was on their heels. He never attempted to overtake them, showed not the slightest inclination to be any nearer to them than he was. If they dawdled, he slackened his pace; when they hurried, his stride lengthened. Then suddenly, ahead of them, Lois saw Michael Dorn. He stood squarely in the middle of the pavement and it was impossible to avoid him.

"I want a word with you, Miss Reddle," he said. "You're not going back to Lady Moron's?"

"That is just what I am doing," said Lois quietly.

"That is just what you're not doing," he said firmly. "Miss Reddle, I've rendered you many services. I would like you to do something for me in exchange." He seemed momentarily at a loss for words. "And I have a personal interest. I don't suppose you like me very much, and, anyway, that doesn't count in the argument. But I like you."

"Thank you," she said.

"You can afford to be sarcastic—I do not complain of that; but I am telling you the plain, naked truth. I like you as any decent man would like a girl of your character and—;"

"Sweetness," suggested Lizzy, an interested audience.

"That is a very good word," said Dorn with a faint smile. "But because of this personal interest and—liking—I realise I'm being very lame and unconvincing, but I'm rather a fool in my dealings with women—I want you to go back to Charlotte Street."

Lois shook her head.

"I quite understand that you are disinterested," she said.

"I'm not," he interrupted. "I'm too interested in you to be disinterested."

"Well, in spite of that, or because of that, I am staying with Lady Moron to-night. To-morrow we are leaving, Miss Smith and I, and are returning to Charlotte Street."

"You are returning to Charlotte Street to-night," he said, almost harshly, and she stiffened.

"What do you mean?" she demanded coldly.

"I mean just what I say. I will not have you stay in this devil house another night. Won't you be persuaded, Miss Reddle?" he pleaded. "You don't imagine for one moment that this is a caprice on my part? Or that I have any unreasoning prejudice against Lady Moron and her son? I beg of you not to go to that house to-night."

"Can you give me any reason?"

He shook his head.

"You must trust me, and believe that I have a very excellent reason, even though I can't for the moment disclose it. That is, unless you see some reason yourself?"

"I don't," she said. "There have been a number of accidents; do you suggest Lady Moron is responsible?"

"I suggest nothing."

"Then I'll say good-night," she said, and was passing on; but he barred her way, and at that moment he must have signalled to the dark figure in the background, for the tall man came forward.

"This is Sergeant Lighten, of the Criminal Investigation Department," he said, and then indicated the girl: "This is Lois Reddle. I charge her with being concerned in the attempted murder of John Braime!"

The girl listened, thunderstruck, rooted to the spot.

"You charge me?" she said hi horror. "But, Mr. Dorn—;"

Michael Dorn made a signal, and the tall man caught Lois gently by the arm. Within half an hour of the prison gate opening for her mother, a cell door in a mundane police station closed upon her daughter.

CHAPTER XX

"And that's that!" said Michael Dorn lugubriously, as he left the police station in company with the tall officer.

"Lighton, I'm going to catch a real thief now, if my theories are sound. And my main theory has something to do with an envelope which I begged from a clerk at the Home Office to-day, and which was posted to my address this afternoon."

"Letter-box stealing?" asked the other, and Michael did not reply until he had secured the cab that was crawling on the other side of the street and they were seated.

"Let us say letter-delaying. I got on to this business owing to the fact that all the letters that came to me from my stationer and from a friend of mine in a Government office were unaccountably delayed twenty-four hours in the post. After giving the matter some thought I reached the conclusion that this coincidence was due to the fact that they were both enclosed in blue envelopes."

"How is Braime?" asked the sergeant.

"Better," was the reply. "I had a talk with him to-night—he's had the shock of his life." He chuckled softly, though his heart at that precise moment was aching for the dazed and indignant girl who was occupying the matron's room, a large and airy cell, at the Chelsea police station.

The cab stopped before Hiles Mansions, and the liftman took them up to Michael's cosy flat. There were two or three letters waiting for him in his letter-box. He took them out and examined them. Then he went on to the landing and rang for the elevator.

"You brought these letters up?"

"Yes, sir."

"What time did they arrive?"

"Half-past nine, sir," said the man.

"There was a blue envelope posted to me this afternoon at three-thirty. It is not here. How do you account for that?"

The liftman looked past him.

"I'm sure I can't tell you, sir," he said, studiously avoiding Michael's eyes. "I bring the letters up as they come and put 'em in your box."

"You're on duty from nine at night until nine in the morning, aren't you?" asked Dorn.

"Yes, sir."

"You handle the morning and the night posts. Why is it that all letters enclosed in blue envelopes fail to reach me until twenty-four hours after they are due?"

"I can't tell you that, sir."

"Tell this gentleman. He's a detective from Scotland Yard. And tell him without hokum, or you'll sleep uncomfortably to- night, my friend."

For a while the man blustered and protested, and then suddenly collapsed.

"I've got a wife and four children," he whined, "and there's an Army pension I shall lose—;"

"You'll lose nothing if you tell me the truth. Who employed you to stop my letters?"

"A man, sir. I don't know his name. If I die this minute, I don't know his name! He gives me two pounds a week to hold up all the blue envelopes and the official ones. They're not stolen, sir, they're always put into the letter-box—;"

"I know all about that," interrupted Michael curtly. "You're wasting your breath, man. Who is your employer?"

"I swear I don't know him, sir. I met him at a public-house one night. He kidded me on to this job. I wish I'd never seen him."

"Does he call for the letters?"

"Yes, sir, he called this morning after the post came in, but I didn't give him the blue envelope because I hadn't got it then. The postman overlooked it and came back a quarter of an hour later."

"The blue envelope? Which blue envelope?" asked Michael quickly.

"It is downstairs, sir," whimpered the unfaithful servant of Hiles Mansions.

"We'll go down with you and get it."

In the lobby below was a small cubby-hutch which served the porters as an office, and from beneath a stained blotting-pad he drew out two blue envelopes.

The first Michael recognised as that which he had written himself; the second he tore open and read, and the detective-sergeant saw his face change. Thrusting the letter into his pocket, he turned to the frightened servant.

"What else came for me to-day? Come, across with it, quick!"

Without a word the man put his hand into the pocket of a jacket that was hanging against the wall and took out a telegram, which had obviously been opened and reclosed. Michael read it in a fury of anger.

"Deal with this man," he said, and flew out of the hall, springing on the first empty taxi he saw.

A run of ten minutes brought him to his garage. Almost before the cab could turn round, the long black car was running out of London in defiance of all speed regulations.

Midnight was booming from Telsbury Parish Church when the car shot up to the entrance of the prison and Michael leapt out and pulled the bell.

"The governor's in bed, sir."

"I must see him at once. This is a matter of life and death. Take my card to him." He thrust it through the bars of the grating and waited impatiently until he was admitted and conducted to the doctor's house.

The governor, in pyjamas and dressing-gown, was waiting for him in his small study.

"Mrs. Pinder left at ten o'clock. Didn't you send down for her?"

"No, sir, I knew nothing whatever about the release. The letter from the Home Office giving me the information had been held up. Ten o'clock? Who called for her?"

"I don't know, I thought it was you. I saw the car and didn't trouble to make enquiries."

"Do you know which way they went?"

"They turned towards the London road. The car was a small saloon—a Buick, I think, with an enclosed drive. Hasn't she turned up?"

Michael shook his head.

"No, she's not in London."

There was no time to be lost. He got into his machine and flew back along the London road. At the junction of the Telsbury by-road was a filling station, and he knew that an attendant slept upon the premises. It was some time before he could get an answer to his knocking, and then he was rewarded with valuable information.

"I saw the machine pass. It went south, towards Letchford."

"It didn't take the London road?"

"No, sir, it turned there." He pointed. "I could see the rear light going up over the hill. It was just before I closed down for the night."

Michael got back into his car, and, opening out, flew over the hill and covered the fifteen miles that separated Telsbury from Letchford in exactly fifteen minutes. Here again he was in luck. One of the town police had seen the machine; it had taken the westerly road. But thereafter his fortune failed him, for he came to a place where four roads met, and there was no trail that could help him determine which route the unknown driver had chosen. They were not bound for London at any rate. He tried one road without success; worked across country to intercept the second, but could meet nobody who had the slightest information to offer.

At four o'clock in the morning a weary man brought his machine to a standstill before the Chelsea police station and went slowly up the steps into the charge-room.

"Hullo, Mr. Dorn!" said the sergeant. "The superintendent's been looking for you all night about that charge."

"Well, what about it?" asked Michael drearily.

"There's going to be the devil to pay. It appears that the countess says the girl wasn't in the room when Braime was hurt. We've had a full statement from her in writing, and the superintendent says he's got something to say to you that you won't forget in a hurry!"

Dorn's lip went back in an angry snarl.

"If he should say anything that's worth remembering I'll go out of business," he said. "Anyway, you can release her. I'd like to offer my apologies."

"Let her out!" laughed the sergeant. "You're a bit late. She was released at one o'clock this morning."

Dorn's eyes narrowed.

"Released at one o'clock this morning?" he said softly. "Did she go away by herself?"

"No, sir, she did not. A gentleman called for her in a blue Buick."

Michael Dorn staggered back; his face was drawn and haggard. Of a sudden he seemed to have grown old.

"The man who released that girl may be an accessory to murder!" he said. "Tell your superintendent that when you see him!"

And, turning on his heel, he left the charge-room.

The Public Prosecutor's office opened at ten o'clock, and Michael Dorn was waiting for him, a dusty, unshaven, grimy figure, when that official arrived.

"Hullo, Dorn! What is wrong?" he asked, and, in as few words as possible, the detective explained the position.

The Prosecutor shook his head.

"We can do nothing. You haven't the evidence we want, and no charge would lie. We've given you the freest hand, in view of all the remarkable circumstances of the case, but I cannot consent to a warrant for arrest until you bring me proof positive and undeniable."

Michael Dorn bit his lip thoughtfully.

"In the old days, when they couldn't get a man to tell the truth, what did they do with him, Sir Charles?"

"Well," said the other drily, "they tried something with boiling oil in it! Those were the days when criminal investigation was a little easier than it is now."

"No easier." Michael shook his head. "I'm going to get the truth. I'm going to find out where they have taken these two women. And the rack and the thumbscrew will be babies' toys compared with what I will use against them! I'll have the truth if I have to pull Chesney Praye limb from limb!"

CHAPTER XXI

Lois was wakened from an exhausted sleep by the opening of the cell door; she got up unsteadily, not quite knowing what she was doing, and followed the matron to the charge-room, dizzy with sleep, inert from the very shock of the charge levelled against her. She heard the desk-sergeant say something, and dimly heard the name of the countess. And then somebody shook hands with her; she thought it was the sergeant. And a young man, who had appeared and disappeared in her focus of vision and had not entered into recognition, took her arm and led her slowly into the dark street. He jerked open the door of a car, and, before she knew what was happening, had sent the car in motion. She experienced a pleasant sensation of languor—her head drooped.

It was the bump of her forehead against the driver's seat that wakened her. It was nearly daybreak.

"Where are we?" she asked.

She was uninterested in the identity of the driver, but, as he turned his head to answer her, she saw that it was the red-faced man, Chesney Praye.

"It's all right, Miss Reddle," he said, showing his big teeth in a grin; "I'm taking you down into the country."

She frowned, trying to remember clearly the events of the night before. She was still dazed with sleep, then she recalled her arrest and became wide awake. Before she could ask any further questions, he was explaining over his shoulder.

"Her ladyship thought you'd better be kept out of the way of that sleuth for a day or two. He's got a grudge against you, and he's a vindictive beast."

"Mr. Dorn?" she asked. "Why did he arrest me? I knew nothing whatever about Braime's injury."

"Of course you didn't," he said soothingly. "But that was his way of getting even."

With whom he was getting even he did not explain, and even to the girl's tired brain it seemed a little illogical to suggest that Michael Dorn had procured her arrest in order to get even either with Mr. Chesney Praye or the Countess of Moron.

They were passing across the wide slope of a hill. Beneath them she saw the glitter of a meandering river and the grey smoke rising from little cottages in the valley. The road was narrow and bumpy and was little more than a lane. She wondered why he came this way, for down the hill-side she saw a

broader thoroughfare which seemed to be running more or less parallel with that they traversed.

"We are nearly there."

They were reaching the mouth of the valley. The lane dipped unexpectedly into a thick plantation of young trees, turned abruptly at right angles over a cart track, and five minutes later she sighted a long discoloured wall, which enclosed a squat, low-roofed building. She saw that the other side of the house faced a road, and again she wondered why they had not reached their destination by a more comfortable route. Evidently she was expected, for the weather-beaten gate was pulled open and they passed into an untidy farmyard. Half a dozen chickens scattered at their approach; from a patched and broken pen came the grunt of a pig.

"Here we are."

He stopped the car, and, jumping out into the litter, he jerked open the door and helped her to alight. The girl looked round in surprise. She saw a long, rambling farm-house, and of the windows that were in view, all except two had not been cleaned for years. To her left was a cavernous black barn, its doors hanging on broken hinges, and, she guessed, immovable. It was empty save for a rusted old plough and the wheelless body of a farm waggon. The place smelt of decay and she noted in that brief survey that at one end of the building the roof was nearly innocent of tiles.

"This is not on Lady Moron's estate?" she asked.

"No, it is a little place that a friend of ours—hers I mean—has. You've met Dr. Tappatt?"

"Dr. Tappatt?" she frowned. Of course, it was the queer, uncleanly doctor, with the bulbous nose, who had lunched at Chester Square.

"Is he here?" she asked dismally. The last person in the world she wanted to spend a day with was the doctor.

"Yes, he's here. He's not a bad fellow; I knew him in India, and I think you'll like him."

They had evidently come in the back way of the farm, for the only visible door into the house was closed and bolted. He knocked for a little while before a woman's harsh voice asked who was there, and in a little time there was a sound of rusted bolts being drawn and a tall, gaunt female showed in the doorway. She wore a soiled print dress; her face was sallow and grimy.

"Come in, mister," she said, and they passed into a dark corridor.

The house smelt damp and sour, and the ancient carpet on the floor was too thin to deaden the hollow echoes of their footsteps.

"The doctor is here." She wiped her hands mechanically upon her black apron, and showed them into a room leading off the passage.

It was a dingy apartment, as unsavoury as the house itself. Huddled in one corner of a horsehair sofa, before the ashes of a wood fire, a man was sleeping, wrapped in an old dressing-gown. The air was thick and redolent of stale smoke and whisky fumes, and the girl drew back in disgust.

Chesney went past her and shook the sleeping man.

"Here, wake up," he said roughly. "There's somebody to see you."

Dr. Tappatt's head jerked up. If he had been unpleasant at midday in Chester Square, he was repulsive now.

"Eh, what?" he grunted. He got up on to his feet and stretched himself. "I'm tired. I told you I should go to sleep. You said you'd be here before now. She's sleeping. I'll bet she's got a more comfortable bed to-night than she's had for twenty years."

"Shut up, damn you!" said Chesney under his breath. "Here's Miss Reddle."

The doctor blinked at the girl.

"Hullo! Glad to see you, miss. Sorry for you to see me like this, but I've been up all night with—with a patient." He boomed the last word as though by its very emphasis it would carry conviction.

"Now listen, Tappatt. There's a warrant out for this lady, but we've succeeded in getting her away from the police, and she is to remain here for a few days until her ladyship can square matters."

Lois gasped.

"A warrant out for me?" she said in amazement. "But you told me that Dorn had no right to arrest me!"

He smiled and signalled to her to keep silence.

"Has the woman got Miss Reddle's room ready? She is very tired and wants to sleep."

"Surely, surely," mumbled the doctor. He held a bottle upside down over a glass, and a very small trickle of liquid came out, to his annoyance. "I must have a drink," he grumbled. "This fever is playing Old Harry with me."

"But, Mr. Praye," said Lois. "I don't quite understand the position. Why am I staying here? Where is this place?"

"Near Nottingham," replied Praye. "And, for heaven's sake, don't stray out of the farm and lose yourself. You'll be all right; you needn't be here longer than a few days, and I assure you that there is no cause for worry."

He looked at his watch and uttered an impatient exclamation.

"Is Miss Reddle's room ready?" he asked sharply.

The doctor led the way out along the passage and up a narrow flight of stairs. On the top landing he unlocked a door and threw it open.

"Here it is."

"But I'm not tired, Mr. Praye; in fact, I was never so wide awake, and I'd rather stay up, if I could have some tea?"

"You can have anything you like, my child," said the doctor gallantly. "Where's that woman? Hi, you!" he roared down the stairs. "Bring this lady up some tea, and bring it quick!"

Lois walked into the bedroom. It was poorly furnished but clean. She had the impression that every article of furniture had been newly placed.

"This was the room we got ready for the other," began the doctor, "but when I heard the young lady was coming—;"

Chesney Praye silenced him with a look.

The other? Twice he had made reference to another visitor who had already arrived.

"That door at the end leads to a bathroom," said the doctor. "It is the snuggest little country lodging you could hope to find."

He closed the door on her and softly turned the key. The two men went down the stairs together. When they were alone in the doctor's room:

"Where's Pinder?" asked Chesney Praye.

"She's all right," said the other carelessly.

"She's nowhere near this girl?"

"No, she's in the other wing. She's easy. Twenty years of prison discipline behind her. She won't kick!"

"What did you tell her?"

"The yarn you told me, that somebody wanted to get at her, and she had to lie here quietly for a day or two. That housekeeper of mine will look after her, believe me. She had charge of one of my homes in India."

Chesney looked at his watch again.

"It is four miles to Whitcomb Aerodrome; you can drive me over."

"Why don't you take the car?"

"Because, you fool, I don't want the car to be seen. Hurry up!"

In five minutes the doctor had harnessed a raw-boned pony to a dilapidated trap. The blue car had been driven into a shed and the door locked, and they were bowling down the road to Whitcomb as fast as the ancient animal could pull them. A quarter of a mile short of the aerodrome Chesney got down.

"Those two women are not to meet—;"

"They're not likely," interrupted the other.

"And you'd better keep to the house."

"What about money?" asked the doctor.

Chesney took a pad of notes from his pocket and passed two to the man.

"And try to cut out the booze for the next week. You've got a chance of making big money, Tappatt, but you've also got a chance of being pinched. If Dorn so much as smells the end of the trail, he's sure to have you before you realise you're suspected."

Tappatt grinned.

"On what charge?" he asked. "They both came of their own free will, didn't they? I don't pretend they're certified."

"They may want to go away of their own free will," said the other significantly.

He walked rapidly along the road through the big gates of the aerodrome and crossed the field towards a two-seater scout that had been drawn out of its hangar and was attended by three men.

"Good morning. I'm Mr. Stone," he said. "Is this my machine?"

"Yes, sir. You've got a good morning for your trip."

Praye looked at the frail machine dubiously.

"Will that make Paris in one trip?"

The aerodrome manager nodded.

"Two hours and fifty minutes," he said. "Maybe shorter. You'll have a following wind."

He helped the passenger into a heavy leather coat. The pilot had already taken his place, and, when Praye had been strapped and gloved and received his final instructions, the propellers turned with a roar, and the machine, running lightly along the grass, swept up into the blue sky and was soon a speck of white above the eastern horizon.

CHAPTER XXII

When Michael Dorn left the police station he hurried his car to Charlotte Street. At such an early hour of the morning there was no sign or life in this thoroughfare. He expected to be kept waiting before there came an answer to his knocking. But had he known something of old Mackenzie's habits, he would not have been surprised at the promptitude with which his signal was answered.

The old man was in his dressing-gown and had not been half an hour in bed when Dorn arrived. He looked with mild suspicion at the visitor—a suspicion which was intensified when he learnt the object of his visit.

"Yes, sir, Miss Elizabetta Smith is in the house. Are you from the police?"

"Yes," said Michael, without stretching the truth. "Can I speak to Miss Smith?"

"She came in late and very distressed. I understand that the good countess has promised to do all in her power to secure the release of my young friend, Miss Reddle. It is indeed an awful thing to have happened. Will you come in, sir?"

Michael followed him up the stairs to his little room and sat down whilst the musician went up to arouse Lizzy. She also had heard the knocking and was waiting in the doorway of her room when Mackenzie came up.

"Dorn, is it?" she said viciously. "I'll come down and Dorn him! He'll be 'sunset' by the time I've finished with him!"

She came into Michael's presence a flaming virago.

"You've got a nerve!" she said. "After swearing away the life of poor Lois—;"

Michael shook his head.

"She's not here?" he interrupted with a touch of asperity.

"Here? Of course she's not here! She's in the police station, and how you could—;"

"She's not in the police station, she's been released, and I want to find the man who released her."

Something in his tone silenced the girl.

"Isn't she with Lady Moron?" she asked.

"I am going to Chester Square, but I don't expect to find Miss Reddle there. I locked her up to save her life—I suppose you realise that? There have been two attempts made to kill her, and I had information that the third would be more successful. I knew her mother was on the point of being released from prison—she was in fact released last night. It is vitally necessary that I should have Lois Reddle under my eye."

Lizzy had collapsed into a chair.

"Her mother released from prison?" she said hollowly. "What are you talking about? Her mother's dead. And killing? Who's going to kill Lois? Why! It was an accident—the balcony."

"It was no accident," said Michael quietly. "The balcony has been unsafe for a year past and was condemned by the borough surveyor on the advice of a local builder who was brought in to repair the slab. Until Miss Reddle occupied that room in Chester Square the French windows leading to the balcony had been kept locked up."

Lizzy gasped.

"But the servants—;"

"The servants were all new. None of them had been longer in the house than a fortnight. Sergeant Braime came up from Newbury, and even he knew nothing."

"Sergeant Braime?" she repeated, wide-eyed.

"Braime is an officer of the Criminal Investigation Department, who has been in the countess' household for six months," was the staggering reply. "Nobody was allowed to go on to the balcony. A gate was fixed to prevent the servants from forestalling the plan—it was removed the night Lois went to her room."

"By whom?" asked Lizzy quietly.

Michael Dorn shrugged his shoulders.

"Who knows? I shall discover later."

"Where is Lois now?"

"That is exactly what I want to know. I'm going to Chester Square right away. Will you come with me?"

She was out of the room in a flash.

"But, Mr. Dorn, this is a terrible thing you say; that any person should conspire against the life of that innocent lassie!" said old Mackenzie, horrified. "You will surely find Miss Reddle at the good countess' home."

"I hope so, but I very much doubt it, Mr. Mackenzie," said Michael.

The old man's lips were tremulous.

"Is there anything I can do? It is not my habit to leave the house, but I would even take that step—;"

Michael shook his head.

"I am afraid you can do nothing, except in the unlikely event of Miss Reddle returning here. You will see that she does not go out again, and that she does not receive visitors in any circumstances. I very much doubt," he smiled faintly, "whether you will be called upon to render this help. I can only wish to heaven that you will be!" Lizzy was down in a very short time, dressed for the street, and, as they drove towards Chester Square, she told him the part she had played in securing Lois Reddle's release.

"I went and found the countess; she was at a friend's house, and told her about Lois. She was very much upset. I'd never seen her before to speak to, but she was quite decent to me."

"Did she have anybody with her? Do you know Chesney Praye?"

Lizzy shook her head.

"No, I've heard of him from Lois, but I've never seen him."

Michael described the man and again she shook her head.

"No, he was not there."

"What did the countess do?"

"She telephoned to somebody and said she was sending a letter to the police officer in charge. She told me to go home to Charlotte Street and wait in patience until Lois came back."

Michael nodded.

"You could rest in patience because she knew that Lois wasn't going back to Chester Square!" he said grimly. "And if she hadn't come back to Chester Square and you were there waiting for her, you would have wanted to know where she had been taken."

The car drew up before 307, and Michael got out and pressed the bell. There was no reply. He rang again, and followed this up by knocking. Still there was no answer. Stepping out from under the porch he looked up at the windows, just as a sash was raised and a touselled head thrust forth. It was Lord Moron, and apparently he was sleeping on the floor which was usually given over to the household staff.

"Hullo! What's the trouble, old thing?"

"Will you come down?" called Michael, and the head was withdrawn.

They waited for a longer time than it would have taken for him to reach the ground floor, before the door opened, and then the explanation for the delay was unnecessary, for with him the countess stood in the hall, wrapped in her cloak, a majestic and imposing figure.

CHAPTER XXIII

"What is the meaning of this?" she demanded.

"I've come for Lois Reddle," said Dorn shortly.

"She is not here. I have put her beyond your vindictive reach."

"Where is she?"

"I refuse to make any statement, after your disgraceful conduct last night in arresting this poor innocent child—;"

"You can leave that out, Lady Moron," said Michael savagely. "Nobody knows better than you why she was arrested. Where is she?"

"I've sent her away to friends of mine."

"The address?"

The Countess of Moron smiled slowly.

"A very persistent young man," she said, almost pleasantly. "Will you come into the library? I cannot speak in this draughty hall. Is that Miss Smith you have with you? She may come in too."

"She'll be safer outside," said Michael coolly, and passed into the hall.

All this time Selwyn had said nothing, but now he turned to his mother.

"Where is Miss Reddle? Perhaps your ladyship will tell me?"

"I shall tell you nothing," was the cold reply. "You may go back to your room."

"I'll be blowed if I'll go back to my room," protested Lord Moron. "There's something remarkably fishy here, and I want to know just what the deuce it is all about."

It was a most heroic speech for him, and Michael, who knew all the courage that was required to oppose this woman, felt a little glow of admiration for the bullied man. Even the countess was taken aback.

"Why, Selwyn," she said in a milder voice, "that is not the tone to adopt towards your mother!"

"I don't care what it is or what it isn't," said Selwyn doggedly. "There's something fishy—I've always said there was something fishy about—things. Now, where the deuce is Miss Reddle?"

"She is with some friends of ours in the country," said her ladyship.

The reply seemed to exhaust his power of resistance.

"Very well," he said meekly.

He looked through the open door at Lizzy, smiled and waved his hand at her, looked back at his mother, and then, visibly bracing himself for the effort, walked boldly down the steps in his pyjamas and attenuated dressing-gown to talk to the girl.

"Are you satisfied, Mr. Dorn?"

"No, I am far from satisfied, your ladyship," said Michael, as he followed the woman into the library.

He noticed the dull patch on the carpet where the water had been thrown upon Braime, and saw her eyes also fixed upon the spot.

"And now, Mr. Dorn," she said, almost amiably, "there is no reason why we should quarrel. What is this mystery that you are making about Miss Reddle? The poor girl was beside herself last night. It was an act of mercy to send her off into the country."

"Who drove her?"

"My chauffeur." His keen eyes were fixed upon her, but she did not falter.

"Not Mr. Chesney Praye by any chance?" he asked softly.

"Mr. Praye is in Paris. He has been there some days," was the staggering reply. "You've found a mare's nest. Really there is no mystery at all about anything that has happened to this young lady in my house. What reason in the world was there for me to engage her, except my desire to find a comfortable job for a very, very nice girl?" And then: "Is Braime better?"

"Sergeant Braime is much better," said Michael, and saw that he had got beneath her guard.

She cringed back as at a blow, and her voice had lost a little of its assurance when she faltered:

"Sergeant Braime? I am talking about my butler—;"

"And I'm talking about Sergeant Braime of the Criminal Investigation Department, who has been in your service for six months."

Her mouth was an O of amusement.

"But—but he was recommended to me by—;"

"By a spurious Prisoners' Aid Society," said Michael. "The idea was that, if you believed that the man had a criminal record, he had a better chance of coming into your ladyship's service."

She had recovered herself in an instant.

"But why?" she drawled. "Why put a detective in my household? It is an abominable outrage and I shall report the matter to the Commissioner of Police immediately."

He was looking round the room and his eyes rested upon that section of the bookshelves which was protected by the wire-covered door.

"You have a book there that I should like to see. I intended coming last night, only something prevented me."

"A book?"

"A book called The Life of Washington—sounds a fairly innocuous title, doesn't it?"

She walked to the bookcase, and, taking a key from the drawer of her desk, opened the wire net cover.

"There it is," she said. "Read it and be improved."

She turned to walk to the door and stood there watching him. And then he did the last thing she expected. From his pocket he took a thick red glove and drew it on his right hand. Reaching up, he seized the back of the book and jerked it loose. There was a click, a spark of blinding white light, but nothing else happened, and he laid the book with some difficulty on the table.

"A very good imitation," he said quietly, "but it is less of a book than a steel box, and any person who attempts to pull it out automatically makes contact with a very powerful electric current. Where is the switch?"

She did not reply. Her face, under the powder, was drawn and haggard. Walking to the door, Michael searched for a while, then, stooping down, he turned over a big switch that was well concealed by a hanging portière.

"Have you the key of this box?"

"It is not locked," she said, and, coming to his side, pressed a spring. The lid sprang open.

The "book" was, as he surmised, hollow. It was also empty.

"Is there a law against having a safe-box made like a book?" she asked, and her voice was almost sweet. "Does one get into very serious trouble for protecting one's property from thieving butlers and—inquisitive amateur detectives?"

"There's a law against murder," said the other shortly. "If I had touched that book without rubber gloves, I should have been as near dead as makes no difference. It did not kill Braime, because he is constitutionally a giant."

"I did not ask you to take down the book," she said.

"Neither did you warn me," Michael smiled crookedly. "Empty, eh? Of course, it would be. You suspected Braime, and left a little notebook around carelessly in your bedroom, in which you made reference to the Life of Washington. Braime saw it and fell into the trap. He came to the library, and would have been a dead man if I hadn't applied first aid."

There was a silence.

"Is that all?" asked Lady Moron.

"Not quite all. I want to know where is Miss Reddle?"

"And I'm afraid I cannot tell you. The truth is, when she was released last night, or in the early hours of this morning, she refused to come either here or to her house in—wherever her house may be. She said she wanted to go into the country—;"

"And did Mrs. Pinder express a desire to go into the country?" he asked, his cold eyes fixed on hers.

"Mrs. Pinder? I do not know Mrs. Pinder."

"Did Mrs. Pinder express a desire to go into the country?" he asked again. He raised a warning finger. "Madam, there is very considerable trouble coming to you, and to those who work with you."

She shrugged her broad shoulders.

"If it takes any other form than an early morning call by a melodramatic detective I shall bear it with equanimity," she said, and stalked through the doorway into the hall, Michael following.

As she stood aside for him to pass through the door, she saw the grotesque figure of Selwyn leaning over the side of the car—intently occupied—and her lips curled.

"My son has found his intellectual level," she said, and called him by name.

To Michael's surprise the young man merely turned his head and resumed his conversation with the girl.

"Selwyn!"

Even then he took his time.

"Good-bye, young lady. Don't forget"—in a stage whisper—"pork sausages, not beef. Beef gives me indigestion." And, waving her an airy farewell, he went back to the woman whose face was a thundercloud of wrath.

"It sounded almost as if you were making a date with that young man," said Michael as they drove off.

"He's coming to supper," said Lizzy. "Was Lois there?"

"No, I didn't expect she would be."

Even the prospect of a tête-à-tête meal with a scion of the nobility was not sufficient to compensate for this news.

"But where is she, Mr. Dorn?"

"She's somewhere. I don't think she'll come to any harm for a day or two."

She looked at him quietly.

"You don't think that."

"Yes, I do," he protested.

She did not take her eyes from him.

"You look nearly dead," she said. "You're pretty fond of her, aren't you?"

He was startled by the question.

"Fond of Lois?" The question seemed in the nature of a revelation. "Fond of her—why—I suppose I am."

At that moment Michael Dorn realised that he had something more than a professional interest in the girl he sought, and he was shocked at the discovery.

He dropped Lizzy Smith in Charlotte Street, and, declining her invitation to come in, drove home, and, leaving his car in the courtyard of Hiles Mansions, he dragged himself wearily up to his room. He was sleeping on

the top of his bed when the silent Wills came in with a telegram in his hand, and, struggling up, he tore open the cover and read the message. It had been handed in at Paris at eight o'clock and ran:

WILL YOU PLEASE INFORM ME NAME OF DISTRICT COMMISSIONER, KARRILI, DURING PERIOD YOU WERE IN PUNJAB.

It was signed "Chesney Praye, Grand Hotel."

"An 'I'm here' enquiry," said Michael, handing the telegram to Wills, "the idea being to establish the fact that he is in Paris at this moment. Get on the 'phone, Wills, to all the private hire aerodromes within a radius of a hundred miles of London, find out if anybody hired a private machine in the early hours of the morning to take him to Paris. Report to me later."

Wills nodded and stole forth silently.

"To try that stuff on me!" said Michael wrathfully, as the door closed upon his man.

CHAPTER XXIV

It was three o'clock in the afternoon when Lois Reddle woke from a heavy sleep, feeling ravenously hungry. She got off the bed, and, putting on her shoes, walked to the window. The prospect was a dreary one. She saw the farmyard into which she had driven that morning, and recognised the slatternly woman who was feeding the chickens as the janitress who had opened the door. Beyond the discoloured wall was the slope of a treeless down, and, by getting close to the pane and looking sideways, she could see no more than a further fold of the hills, surmounted by a black copse.

She felt refreshed when she had bathed her face and hands, but the pangs of hunger had grown more poignant, and she went to the door and turned the handle. It did not budge; the door was locked. The window sash, she found, only opened a few inches, but it was sufficient to call to the woman in the yard, and presently she attracted her attention, for she waved her hand impatiently and went on feeding the chickens. Then, after a few minutes, she went out of the girl's line of vision. It was some time before her heavy tread sounded on the stairs and obviously the locked door was no accident, for, when the woman came in carrying a tray, the key was hanging from a chain fastened to her waist.

"Please do not lock the door again," said Lois, as she surveyed the very plain fare with some appreciation.

"You get on with your eating and never mind about the door," was the unexpected reply.

Lois was left in no doubt as to the woman's hostility and wisely did not continue the argument. Then, to her amazement, as the woman went out of the room she turned the key again. Lois ran to the door and hammered on the panels.

"Unlock this door," she said, but there was no reply save the sound of the dour attendant's footsteps on the stairs, and the girl went slowly back to her meal to confront a new problem.

The appetite of youth was not to be denied, and when she had finished her meal some of her confidence and poise had returned. It was impossible that they could be keeping her prisoner; she scoffed at the idea. Possibly the locking of the door was the act of an over-zealous custodian who was to keep her safe from—she shook her head. Not from Michael Dorn. Whatever views the countess might have of him, however unforgivable had been his behaviour, he was not vindictive, nor would he pursue her in any spirit of revenge. That was the greatest impossibility of all.

She tried the door again; it was undoubtedly locked. And then, in a spirit of self-preservation, she attempted to open the window, and found that two slats of wood had been so screwed as to make it impossible for the sash to

rise or fall more than a few inches. The other window had been similarly dealt with. She was examining this when she saw the doctor in the yard. He wore his rusty frock coat, but he was collarless, and on his head was an old golf cap.

Walking with unsteady steps to the gate through which she had come, and which was open, with some difficulty he closed it. She needed no special knowledge of human weakness to see that he had been drinking more than was good for him, for his gait was unsteady, and when, turning back to the house, he saw her, and yelled a greeting, it was interrupted by a hiccough.

"Had a good sleep, young friend?" he shouted. "Has that old hag brought your lunch?"

"Doctor "—she spoke through the slit of the sash—"can't I come down? She has locked me in."

"Locked you in?" The statement seemed to afford him some amusement, for he rocked with laughter. "Well, well, fancy locking you in! She must be afraid of you, my dear. Don't you worry, you're all right. I'll look after you. You've heard no voices, have you? Seen nobody following you around, eh? You'll be all right in a day or two."

His words filled her with apprehension. Once before, at the luncheon where she had met him, he had spoken about mysterious voices and people following her. Did he think she was mad? She went cold at the thought. Going to the door, she waited for him to come up the stairs, but there was no sound from below, only a soft patter of feet, and presently something snuffled under the door and there was a low growl. The woman's harsh voice called from the passage.

"Bati, Bati, hitherao! Come down, you black soor!"

She heard the animal running down the stairs, there was the sound of a smack and a sharp yelp. Later, she saw the dogs—there were two of them—in the yard. Great black beasts, bigger than Alsatians, but lacking their fineness. They were prowling about, nosing into stable refuse. One of them saw her, growled and showed his fangs, the bristles stiff, and she hastily drew out of sight. She knocked again on the door, stamped on the floor, but attracted no attention, and though she heard the doctor's voice and called to him he ignored her. Her situation was a dangerous one, and she began to understand dimly the reason for Dorn's drastic action.

Where she was she could not guess. So much of the country as she could see had no meaning for her; and, except that her window faced northward, she was unable to locate her position.

The woman brought her up some more tea in the afternoon—vile stuff beside which Lizzy Smith's concoctions were veritable nectar.

"I insist that you leave this door open," said the girl.

"They'd tear you to pieces if I did," said the woman. "There is no holding them with strangers. Hark at Bati now!"

There was a snuffling and growling outside the door.

"Go away, you! Juldi!" she cried shrilly in her queer mixture of English and Hindustani.

The girl faced her.

"I am not afraid of dogs," said Lois steadily, and walked to the door.

Before she was half-way the woman had overtaken her, and, catching her by the arm, had swung her round.

"You'll stay where you are, and do as you're told, or it will be worse for you," she said threateningly.

"Where is the doctor? I wish to see him."

"You can't see any doctor. He's gone down to the village to get a drink."

She kicked away the dogs that strove to get through the half-open door, closed and locked it, and for half an hour Lois sat before her untasted meal, trying to think. The light was fading in the sky when there came the second dramatic interruption of that day.

Lois was standing by the window, looking into the dreary yard and thinking of Michael Dorn. He had certainly become a bright nucleus of hope. Michael Dorn would not fail her; wherever she was, he would follow. Why she should think this, she could not understand. Why he should give his time and his thoughts to her protection, was a mystery yet to be solved. But he was working for her—working for her now. It was a comforting thought; she almost forgot her fears.

Then from the yard below came the screaming voice of the gaunt woman.

"I told you to wash those dishes, didn't I?" Never mind what you're doing; when I give you an order you carry it out, you old gaol-bird."

"Why am I kept here?" Another voice spoke sweet and soft. Lois trembled at the sound. "He told me that—;"

"Never mind what he told you," shrilled the other. "Wash those dishes, and then you can scrub the floor; and if it is not done in half an hour I'll put you

in the cellar with the rats, or give you to the dogs, and they'll tear you to pieces! Hi, Bati! Mali!"

There was a harsh growl from the dogs and a clanking of chains.

"I refuse"—again the gentle voice—"I refuse!"

Crack!

"Refuse that! Give me any trouble and I'll whip you till you bleed. Ah, you would, would you?"

There was the sound of a struggle and the horrified girl, craning her neck, saw a frail woman stumble and fall to the ground, saw the cruel whip rise and fall—;

"Stop!" cried Lois hoarsely, and at that instant, as the old hag stooped over the stricken woman and jerked her out of view, the knees of Lois Reddle gave beneath her and she fell to the floor in a swoon.

CHAPTER XXV

Lois came to consciousness almost at once, as she thought, though she had been lying on the floor for half an hour before she moved, and, sick and shaking, dragged herself with difficulty to the bed.

She felt ill and shaken and sat with her hands before her eyes trying to shut out that hideous scene. The raised whip—;

She lay down on the bed, her face in the crook of her arm, trying to reconstruct from the confusion of her mind a sane and logical explanation, and always her thoughts flew back to Michael Dorn, with his saturnine face and his soul-searching eyes. Why he should weave in and out of her troubled thoughts, she could not fathom, except that she came back to that sure foundation of faith. Who was this other prisoner? What had the countess to do with this experience of hers? Was it true, as Michael Dorn had hinted, that the falling balcony and the motor-car incident were not accidents, but deliberate attempts to kill her?

When the woman brought her supper, Lois was outwardly calm, recognising the futility of questioning her. When she came up to clear away, she brought a small oil lamp and lit it. She pulled down the two ragged blinds before she left, and at the door paused for her good-night message.

"If you want anything, stamp on the floor," she said. "If you take my tip you won't send for the doctor, because he's raving drunk; and don't take any notice of that woman downstairs, she's crazy!"

It was not a very cheering farewell. One thing was certain, she was free from interruption for the rest of the night; and she decided to put into operation the plan she had formed.

She had found in her little handbag a small nail file. The slats that prevented the windows opening had been screwed into the sash grooves, and Lois guessed that by breaking off the point of the file she would be able to improvise a screwdriver. The snapping of the file was an easy matter, but when she came to fit the jagged end in the screws, she found both the instrument and her strength insufficient for the purpose. She tried another screw with no better result, and finally gave up her task in despair. The windows could be broken, but they were scarcely a foot wide. And the dogs were below; she heard them growling as she worked.

There was nothing for her to do, nothing to read. She did not even know the time, for her watch had stopped, and she could only judge the hour by the light of the sky. Pacing up and down the room, her hands behind her, she resolutely refused to be panic-stricken. The blind impulse of panic, which came to her again and again, had made her want to scream aloud. What was Lizzy doing now? And Michael Dorn? Always her thoughts came back to Michael Dorn.

"I wonder if I'm in love with him?" she said aloud, and smiled at the thought.

If she was, then he was the last person she had ever expected to love, and Lizzy would never believe that she had not been fond of him all the time. He would find her. She was sure of that. But suppose he did not? She drew a long sigh. Turning down the light and resting her elbows on the window-sill, she stared out into the darkness. The moon was rising somewhere on the other side of the house. She saw the ghostly light of it turn the dark downs to silver. Then she heard hurried steps in the hall below, and, going back to the table, turned up the light. The lock snapped back and the door was thrust open. It was the doctor, and he was not drunk. He was, in truth, haggardly, tremblingly sober.

"Come out of this!" he jerked, and dragged her from the room down the stairs into the hall. "Go up and put that light out," he said to some one in the darkness, and the gaunt woman, appearing from nowhere, brushed past her and ran up the stairs.

"What do you want, doctor? Is anything—;"

"Shut up!" he hissed. "Have you put that light out?"

"Yes," said a sulky voice from the stairs. "What is there to be scared about? You've been drunk and dreaming."

"I'll smash your head if you talk to me like that!" said the man without heat. "I tell you I saw the car coming over the hill. It stopped in front of the house. Do you think I'm blind? You go up to my room and you can see the lights. He got out and came along the wall, then I lost sight of him."

Lois' heart so thumped and swelled that she almost choked.

"Where is he now?" asked the woman.

"Shut up."

Again a dreadful, long silence, broken at last by the faint sound of the howling dogs.

"He's at the back!"

The doctor still held Lois' arm in his firm grip, and now he gently shook her.

"If you scream or shout, or do anything, I'll cut your throat. I mean what I say—do you hear?"

"Why didn't you leave her upstairs?" growled the woman.

"Because I wanted her here, where I could see her. Find my silk handkerchief; I left it in the study. And bring the irons, I'm not going to take any risks."

The woman went into the room and came back. Suddenly Lois felt the handkerchief against her mouth.

"Don't struggle; I'm not going to hurt you, unless you shout. Get the irons."

"Here!" said the woman's voice.

Lois felt her wrists gripped and dragged behind her. In another second she was handcuffed.

"Sit down there." He pushed her into a chair, felt at the gag, and grunted his satisfaction.

"Listen! He's knocking."

Tap-tap-tap!

Silently the two stepped into the darkness of the front yard and the woman called.

"Who's there?"

And then came a voice that made the girl half-rise from her chair.

"I want to see the master of this house," said Michael Dorn.

CHAPTER XXVI

It was the worst kind of fortune that Michael Dorn received news of two early morning departures from aerodromes situated a hundred miles apart; and worse that he should have chosen the Cambridgeshire venue first. Here the telephone enquiries he made gave him little information, and it was not until he arrived at Morland that he found the early morning passenger was an undergraduate from Cambridge who had been summoned home through the serious illness of a sister and had left for Cornwall.

"I wasn't in the office when you enquired," said the aerodrome chief, "or I would have told you that."

"It can't be helped," said Michael.

He went back to his car and studied the map. He was separated from Whitcomb by a hundred and seven miles of road, mainly indifferent; and, to add to his troubles, he had two bad punctures in the first twenty miles and went into Market Silby on a flat tyre. By the time the new tyre was purchased and fixed he had lost a good hour of daylight and had still the worst of the road to negotiate. And it was by no means certain, even when he reached his objective, that he would be any nearer to finding the girl.

During the period of waiting while the tyre was being fitted he studied the little time-table he had made that morning. The girl had been taken from the police station in the neighbourhood of two o'clock, he had discovered. She had left in the car for an unknown destination, and at eight o'clock—six hours later—Chesney Praye had wired him from Paris. Supposing he had flown from a private aerodrome near London, it would have taken him two hours to reach the French capital, which meant that he must have departed somewhere about five o'clock.

Between two and five o'clock was the unknown quantity of distance. By accepting this period he had decided that Lois had been taken to a spot between an hour and a half and two hours distant from the Metropolis. He also guessed the aeroplane theory was right, that the place of detention and the aerodrome were within twenty miles by car, and six or seven miles if the abductor drove or walked.

The Cambridge aerodrome was an ideal fulfilment of his calculations. So was Whitcomb, on the borders of Somerset. He came to the aerodrome in time to catch the manager just before he left for the night, showed his authority, which had a more official value than Lady Moron had imagined, and accompanied the manager to his office.

"The gentleman's name was Stone. We had a telephone message late last night from London, asking us to have a machine waiting to take him to France, and he arrived on time."

He described the traveller so faithfully that Michael could almost see Chesney Praye standing before him.

"That is the gentleman," he said. "How did he get here?—Did he come here by car?"

The manager shook his head.

"No, he came up in a trap to the end of the field and walked the rest of the distance."

"A horse-drawn trap? Who drove him?"

"That I cannot tell you. It was too far away to see. I know very few people about here."

Michael considered for a moment.

"Perhaps you will show me where the trap set down." And, as a thought struck him: "Have you an Ordnance map of this district?"

This request the manager was able to satisfy. He could also show him on the plan the point at which the passenger had left the cart. Michael traced the road with the tip of his finger, and then began a wide sweep in search of houses.

"That's Lord Kelver's place. I do happen to know that, because I've been there. That's the house of his bailiff." When Michael touched another red square: "That's the road to Ilfey Village. There is an inn there, the Red Lion, where he may have been putting up," he suggested, but Michael rejected the likelihood of Chesney having stayed in the neighbourhood.

"What is this place?"

His finger paused, but the manager shook his head.

"I don't remember it. Perhaps one of my mechanics will be able to tell us."

He went out and came back with a workman, who bent over the map.

"That is Gallows Farm," he said. "It is an old place—been there for hundreds of years. I don't know who has it now, but he isn't a farmer—at least, I never saw any cattle coming out of his yard."

There was a telephone on the table; Michael took it up and gave the number of the nearest police station. He introduced himself and then put his question and waited whilst the particulars were found.

"Gallows Farm was let twelve months ago to a Mr.—;" He gave a name which was unfamiliar to Dorn. "There's nobody there except the gentleman and his housekeeper."

This was not very informative, but Michael was not discouraged. Again he went over the map, and in the end concluded that Gallows Farm was the only house in the neighbourhood which was in any way under suspicion. He snatched a hasty meal in the aerodrome mess, and it was growing dark when he skirted the field and took the road along which the cart had come in the early morning. Presently, as he came over the crest of the hill, the farm showed dimly in the circle of his powerful head-lamps. There were no lights or sign of life about the house. The long, white, ugly wall was surmounted by broken glass, and the gate, which opened on to the road, was securely fastened. There was no evidence of a bell-pull.

He went back to the car, and, finding an electric torch, continued his investigations. The farm building lay on the slope of the hill and he had to descend to get to the back of the premises. Here the gate was larger and more insecure, and his attempt to open it was followed by a furious barking and straining of chains. He listened, interested; the barking had a familiar sound. It was not the deep roar of the mastiff, or the half-frightened, half-angry discordance of the terrier; there was a howl in that note that he had heard before on dark nights as he had passed through sleeping Indian villages.

"If they're not native dogs, I've never heard any," he said softly, and continued his circuit.

From the declivity at the back of the house he could not see the top windows of the building, low as it was, and he turned to the front of the house and rapped on the heavy black wooden gate.

Somebody must have been aroused by the barking of the dogs, for almost immediately the sharp voice of a woman called:

"Who's there?"

"I want to see the master of the house," said Dorn.

"Well, you can't see him, not at this time; he's in bed."

"Then let me see you. Open this gate," said Michael.

There was an interval of silence, and then the woman said:

"Go away, or I'll telephone for the police."

That pause before she spoke betrayed the situation to the keen-witted man at the gate. There was somebody else behind that barrier, somebody who was prompting the woman in a whisper.

"Will you please tell your master, who is in bed, but not, I think, asleep, that unless you open the gate I'll come over the top?"

This time the woman needed no prompting.

"If you dare, I'll set my dogs on you!" she screamed.

He heard her footsteps running on the cobbled yard, and presently the throaty growl of the dogs as they came flying before her.

"Now will you go away?" shrieked the woman. "If they get out they'll tear the heart out of you, ek dum!"

Michael Dorn uttered an involuntary exclamation. "Ek dum"? Who was this who used the Indian phrase?

"I think you'd better let me in, my sister," he said, and he spoke in Hindustani.

There was no reply for a moment, and now he was sure somebody was whispering—whispering fiercely, urgently.

"I don't know what you mean by your outlandish gibberish," said the woman's voice huskily. "You get away, mister, before you're in trouble."

Michael, thrusting his lamp in the direction of the gate-top, looked up at a row of rusty iron spikes. Should he take the risk? These people might be law- abiding, and it was not remarkable that the woman should have a few Indian phrases. She might have been a soldier's wife who had lived in India and had acquired the habit of that pigeon talk.

"Won't you be sensible and let me in? I only want to ask you a few questions." And then, as an inspiration came to him: "I am from Mr. Chesney Praye."

This time the silence was so long that he thought they had gone. Then the woman spoke.

"We don't know Mr. Chesney Praye, and we're going in."

"We? Who's your friend?" asked Michael, but there was no answer.

Presently the door was slammed ostentatiously. Behind the gates he could hear the growling and snuffling of the dogs, and when he put his toe cautiously under the space between earth and gate he heard the vicious

snap of a jaw, and smiled in the darkness. Soon after, the man and woman at the upstairs window heard the whine of a motor and saw the two white beams of its head-lamps moving towards London.

And Lois Reddle lay sobbing on her bed, and in her heart the despair of hopelessness.

CHAPTER XXVII

Two hours after Michael Dorn had gone, Dr. Tappatt sat in his parlour, his elbows on his knees, his big face cupped in his hands. Beside him was a half- filled tumbler of whisky, and he was gazing into the fire, which was lit for him summer and winter since he had left India. There had been a time when his name had ranked high in the profession of medicine, but an unsavoury incident had driven him from Edinburgh, where, although he was young, he had established an excellent practice, and he found himself in India, with no other assets than his undoubted skill, the meagre remnants of his savings, and a taste for good wine. For a time he had been attached to the court of an Indian prince, and then, in an evil moment, he had conceived the idea of a mental home for wealthy Indians.

But for the growing craving for drink he might have retired after a few years, with sufficient to keep him for the rest of his life. But there was a kink somewhere in Dr. Tappatt's nature and it showed itself only too clearly in his conduct of the home. He had to leave the North-West Provinces in a hurry and settle in Bengal, where there were queer stories about the home he founded there. There were applications at court by the relatives of patients who had been put away by interested people, and in the end his home was closed and he moved into the Punjab.

His brilliant brain had been sharpened by conflict with authority, and he had become something of a strategist, for strategy is the art of knowing your enemy's mind.

Staring into the fire, he was studying the mentality of Captain Michael Dorn and he reached certain conclusions. The woman attendant had long since gone to bed, and was asleep when he shuffled down the passage and knocked at her door.

"Come out; I want to speak to you."

He heard her grumbling, and went back to the study. Once in the period of waiting he looked at the telephone and reached out his hand half-way to take it. But he knew that the person he had in mind was not to be lightly disturbed again, and he had already made his report. No, his method was the best, he decided; and if he was mistaken in his estimate of Michael Dorn no harm would be done.

When the woman came blinking into the light, buttoning up her dress, he nodded to a chair and for half an hour they talked, the woman interpolating sour objections which he dismissed without ceremony.

"I haven't had any sleep for two nights," she complained, "and I don't see why—;"

"Are you expected to see anything?" he snarled. "You're a listener—no more!"

She had served him for the greater part of twenty years and was afraid of no other person in the world. And from grumbling she came to whining, until he waved her out of the room.

At seven o'clock in the morning Dr. Tappatt, dressed in a thick woollen overcoat, for he felt the chill air of the morning, drew up the blinds and opened the windows of his parlour, having previously made a tour of inspection. Heaping two more logs on the fire, he gathered some scraps of meat and carried them out to the dogs, who greeted him with hoarse barks of welcome. He took his time, finding a malicious joy in his tardiness. Then, when he had toured the yard, he went round to the front of the house again, turned the key, unbolted the gate, and pulled it open. A man was standing squarely opposite the entrance, and the doctor started.

"Good morning, Dr. Tappatt," said Michael Dorn. "I had an idea I should see you if I came early enough."

"Good gracious!" said Tappatt, in feigned surprise. "This is an unexpected pleasure, Captain Dorn!"

"I am glad you think so. Did Miss Reddle sleep well?"

The doctor's brows furrowed.

"Miss Reddle? I can't remember—oh, yes, of course, it was that delightful young lady I met at the Countess of Moron's house. What a queer question to ask me!"

There was a silence.

"You haven't invited me in. You've lost your old Anglo-Indian sense of hospitality," bantered Michael.

Tappatt stood in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, his inflamed face thrust forward.

"I don't remember that we were especially good friends, Dorn," he said. "I seem to remember certain unpleasant encounters—;?"

"Nevertheless—you are going to invite me inside, or else—;"

"Or else?" repeated the doctor.

"Or else I shall invite myself. I have a particular wish to look round your little place."

Tappatt's big mouth twisted in a smile.

"With or without a search warrant?" he asked politely.

"Without, for the moment. You and I are two old law-breakers, Tappatt; we have never been great sticklers for formality."

By this time he had walked through the gate, and, curiously enough, he did not seem to expect the dogs. Tappatt noticed this and grew even more alert. He had matched his brain against this some-time chief of police, and so far the honours were with him, he felt.

"I can't resist you, Dorn," he said, and waved his hand to the open door of the house. "Step right in."

Michael did not require a second invitation. He strolled carelessly into the house, and turned to the study as though he had been there before. Following him, the doctor closed the door.

"Now, what do you want?"

"I wish to search these premises—I am seeking a lady named Pinder and her daughter, Lois Margeritta Reddle, whom I believe are forcibly detained here."

Tappatt shook his head.

"I'm afraid you're on a wild goose chase. Neither of these ladies are inmates of my house. In fact, I have no patients just now—;"

"Nor yet a licence to take patients," added Michael. "I took the trouble to look up the records—they are available even in the middle of the night—fearing that short-memoried authority had overlooked your many grievous faults; I was happy that the official mind has showed commendable discretion."

"I haven't applied for a licence," said Tappatt shortly. Any question regarding his profession touched him on the raw. "I don't see why I should allow you to make a search," he went on. "You have no more authority to act as a detective than I have to run a mental home. You can start here—look under the table or under the sofa," he grew heavily sarcastic, "I may have some unfortunate person concealed there!"

Dorn walked from the room, along the passage, and stopped at the door at the foot of the stairs, turning the handle.

"My housekeeper's room."

"Where is she?" asked Michael.

"She's in the kitchen."

Michael passed into the room, pulled up the blinds and again looked round. Though he did not show by any sign his state of mind he was neither uneasy nor unalarmed at the readiness with which permission had been given to him to make the search. Rather were matters working out according to his expectations.

"There are two rooms upstairs; would you like to see them?"

Dorn nodded and followed on the man's heels to the landing.

"This is a ward I should use if I had luck enough to get a patient." He threw open the door of what had been Lois' room. It was empty; the bed was stripped of all its clothes and the blankets were neatly folded at the foot. Michael walked into the room, inspected the little bathroom, tried the windows, and came out without a word. Most women use a distinctive perfume. He had noted that Lois was faintly fragrant of lavender—the room had that scent too.

The room opposite was even less completely furnished, and it was also tenantless. He knew that there was no space between the ceiling and the roof to conceal any but a willing fugitive, and satisfied himself with the briefest of scrutinies.

The other wing of the house was scarcely habitable; in some places the sky showed through the gaps in the roof, and all the upper floors were rotten with storm-water and would hardly bear the weight of a child.

"Where does that lead?" asked Michael when he came out from the inspection of the lower floor of the old wing. He pointed to a flight of steps that terminated in a door.

"It is a cellar of some kind; you can go in," said the other carelessly.

Michael pushed the door open and stepped into a little apartment. A certain amount of light and air was admitted through a small grating that had been let into the wall, but there was little of either. Other light or ventilation there was none, except for the spyhole in the door. He flashed his lamp around, saw an old bed in one corner and a washstand. He walked to the bed, turned over the folded blankets, and then came into the daylight.

"Quite an airy apartment," he said drily. "Is this for a patient too?"

"There is many a poor fellow sleeping out at night who would be glad of that room," said Dr. Tappatt virtuously, and Michael showed his teeth for a moment in an unpleasant smile.

"Ever been in prison, Tappatt? I don't think you have, have you?" he asked, as he ascended the steps again.

Nobody knew better than Michael Dorn that the doctor had escaped conviction, but it was his way of giving a warning.

"I have not had that distinction."

"Yet," finished Dorn. "The cells of Dartmoor are much more wholesome than this black hole of yours—as you will find. Plenty of fresh air, immense quantities of light—and the food is good."

Tappatt licked his lips but made no answer.

"What is in here?" He stopped before a locked shed.

"A motor-car belonging to a friend of mine. Do you want to see it?"

"A blue Buick, by any chance?"

"Yes, I think it is a Buick."

"Left here the night before last, I think?"

Tappatt smiled and shook his head.

"It has been here a week. There are times when you are just a little too clever."

"Let me see it," said Michael.

The doctor went back to the house for keys, whilst Michael made a rapid inspection of the remaining buildings. The two dogs broke into a fury at his approach, straining at their chains until it seemed that they must choke or the leashes break. Then the doctor returned and found Dorn contemplating the back gate with absorbed interest; the ground was hard and showed no footmark—even the car had left no tracks.

"Here is a key."

"I don't think I want to see the car," said Dorn slowly. "I know it rather well and the owner more than a little." He looked round. "I don't see your housekeeper anywhere."

"I expect she's gone into the village to do her marketing," said the other.

Slowly Michael took a gold case from his pocket, selected a cigarette and lit it, throwing the match towards the dogs, an act which angered them to madness.

"You want to be careful of those dogs," warned the doctor. "They're not the kind to monkey with. I don't know what they would do to you, even if I were with you."

"They want to be careful of me," said Dorn. "I had the death of more pariahs on my soul than any other police official in India during the term I was serving."

"They would get you before you got them," said the doctor angrily.

Michael Dorn smiled, and stretched out his hand stiffly before him.

"Do you see that?" he asked. "Watch!"

Where it came from, how it got there, Tappatt could not for the life of him tell; but though the hand apparently had not moved it was holding a short-barrelled Browning of heavy calibre.

"Where on earth did that come from?" he gasped. "You had it there all the time—;"

"No, it came out of my pocket," laughed Michael. Again he was engaged in one of his subtle acts of intimidation.

"I'll swear that it didn't."

"Watch!"

Again the hand was held stiffly. An imperceptible movement, whether up or down or backward Tappatt could not say, and the hand was empty.

"It is a trick," said Dorn carelessly. "And if you speak dog language you might explain to these hounds of yours that I am a man to leave severely alone. By-the-way, dog patrols have always been a speciality of yours? Wasn't the trouble in Bengal over a patient who had been worried to death? Refresh my memory."

The doctor swallowed something, and then Dorn asked:

"Why are these dogs chained up?"

"I keep them chained."

"They weren't chained last night. You knew I was in the neighbourhood, and that doesn't seem to be the time to put them on the leash. Yet at four o'clock this morning they were fast. Why did you tie them up, doctor?"

Their eyes met.

"Shall I tell you why?"

Tappatt was silent; the detective had returned at four o'clock in the morning; he had just missed the little procession that had crossed the fields!

"Shall I tell you why?" Dorn asked again.

"You're in an informative mood," sneered Tappatt.

"Very. You tied them up because you took those two women out of the house last night, out through this yard, and you could only do that when you had put the dogs on the chain. Correct me if I'm wrong. They went out this way and they will come back this way."

Dr. Tappatt's jaw dropped; this was a turn to his disadvantage with a vengeance. He had expected Dorn to be satisfied with his search and to leave some time during the day. His plan was not working as he had expected.

"You can invite me to breakfast; I shall stay until they return."

"I swear to you that I know nothing whatever about any women," protested Tappatt violently. "You're making a mistake, Dorn! Anyway, you've no right here—you know that!"

Michael shook his head.

"I never make mistakes," he said arrogantly, "and I have every right to be here. It is the first duty of a citizen to frustrate any wrong-doing, and the first duty of a host to ask his guest if he is hungry. Now you can invite me to breakfast. And over that pleasant meal I will tell you something which will interest and amuse you."

The baffled man looked first one way and then the other. He was trapped; his ruse had not only failed, but had rebounded against himself. Dorn, out of the corner of his eye, saw the quick rise and fall of his chest, and knew something of the panic in him.

"You can't stay here. I don't want you!" exploded Tappatt angrily. "That story about women being in my house is all moonshine and you know it. I'll give you one minute to clear out! You can't bluff me!"

Michael Dorn laughed softly.

"What will happen if I don't clear out? Will you send for the police? There is the opportunity to get back on the cruel police commissioner who shut down your little home in the Provinces and might have got you five long weary years in Delhi prison if the official mind had only moved a little quicker. Send for the police, my good man; it will be a grand advertisement for you."

Dr. Tappatt had no intention of sending for the police; the force was not a popular constituent of public life with him. From the height of his intellect he looked down upon all other professions and callings than his own.

"All right," he growled, "come in. And as for the women, you'll find you were mistaken."

"Don't let us discuss them," said Michael with an airy gesture of his hand.

CHAPTER XXVIII

He could almost afford to feel jubilant at the contemplation of his partial success, only he was a man who never counted eggs as chickens; nor did he underrate the resourcefulness of the man he was dealing with.

The doctor was thinking rapidly, and a stiff glass of whisky helped further to clear a mind which was only normal when it was stimulated. Dorn was there to stay; such subterfuges as came into his mind to rid himself of the unwelcome visitor, he rejected.

"Tell me where the coffee is and I will make it myself," said Dorn. "Please forgive me if I'm a little suspicious, but doctors have an uncanny knowledge of the properties of certain drugs, and I should hate to feel myself going to sleep for no other reason than that you had found an opportunity for doctoring my drink."

He went into the kitchen, kindled the fire and put on the kettle. In one of the cupboards he found a tin of biscuits and a can of preserved milk—there were the elements of safe refreshment here. He knew his doctor very well—he had set a train of thought in motion. Would he take the obvious step, or go outside the detective's plan?

The doctor crouched before the fire in his study, his mind working in all directions. It was a curious fact that, until Dorn's jesting remark, he had not thought of drugs. He heard Michael whistling softly to himself, and, rising noiselessly, crossed to his desk and searched among the bottles that were arrayed on various shelves and in divers pigeon-holes, and presently found what he sought.

He slipped a grey pellet from the phial, dropping it into the palm of his hand, and, replacing the bottle, pulled down the desk cover. There might be no opportunity. Against that, every man as self-assured as Dorn was left himself open at one point.

Wedging the pellet between the second and third fingers of his left hand, he came back to the fire, and was there when Michael Dorn came in later with coffee, cups, and saucers on a tray, the biscuits under his arm.

"I've been thinking that perhaps, after reflection, you will tell me what time you expect our friends to return?" he asked. "Or, failing that, would you tell me what is the signal you are to give to signify that the coast is clear?"

"You're mad to make such suggestions," said Tappatt gruffly, "I thought you weren't going to talk about the women. They are not here."

"Somebody has got to talk about them," murmured Michael apologetically. "Have some coffee? It is infinitely better than that yellow stuff you've got on the mantelpiece, and costs about one twentieth the price."

He poured out a cup and pushed it towards his companion, but the doctor did not so much as turn his head.

Michael sipped luxuriously at the hot comforting fluid, his eyes fixed upon Tappatt's moody face. Suddenly the doctor lifted his head as though he had heard something.

"There is somebody coming now," he said, and the detective walked to the door and listened.

When he turned the doctor was in his old posture.

"You're getting jumpy—it is the whisky, my friend," he said.

He refilled his cup, stirred it vigorously, and dropped in a liberal supply of condensed milk.

"What is this interesting thing you were going to tell me?" asked Tappatt, still staring into the fire.

"It concerns you. There is a movement to get you brought before the General Medical Council for that Indian trouble, which means, I suppose, that you will be struck off the medical register."

This was news to the doctor, and he sprang to his feet.

"That is a lie!" he said loudly.

Suddenly Michael bent his head.

"What was that?" he asked.

Tappatt looked round.

"I didn't hear anything."

But the detective motioned him to silence. He rose, picked up his coffee, and walked to the door, listening.

"Stay here," he said and disappeared from view.

He was back again in a minute, but remained standing by the door, sipping at his cup, and the doctor affected to be amused.

"You've got nerves, man," he said. "If you'd trusted me enough to leave your cup behind I'd have given you something to cure you!"

"So I suppose," said Michael, setting down the vessel nearly empty. "I hate showing discourtesy to a host, but I have made a practice all my life of pouring out my own drinks when I'm in dubious company, and hanging on to them until I'm finished."

The doctor glanced at the cup and his face cleared. It had been so absurdly easy, though the danger was by no means over.

"What I like about you, Dorn, is that you're a gentleman. I'm not paying you a compliment, I'm merely stating a fact. I've had to do with a few police officers who have been the scum of the gutter, and the contrast is refreshing. You were kidding about striking me off the register, weren't you?"

Michael shook his head.

"I never kid. I am the man who intends making a personal application at the next meeting of the Council," he said. "You can be sure that I shall be able to lay before them sufficient proof to make your position in England a pretty uncomfortable one."

Tappatt forced a smile.

"In that case," he said, rising, "I'd better do what I can to get on the right side of you. If you will come with me, I will show you something you've overlooked."

He smiled in the other's face, and Michael followed him down the passage into the yard.

"You were rather unkind about the airiness of this admirable place of detention," said Tappatt. He stood on the top of the steps which led to the underground room. "Did it occur to you that it might be just a little more airy than you had imagined? Come!"

He ran down the steps, pushed open the heavy door, and went into the cellar chamber.

"You did not see the trap-door in the corner of the room, did you?"

Michael pushed past him and strode across the brick floor. He had taken three steps when the door shut. The key squeaked as it turned and there came to him the sound of Tappatt's mocking laughter....

"That is a trick of mine—now show me your trick with the gun!" laughed the doctor.

A splinter of wood leapt from the door; there was the sound of a muffled explosion and Tappatt scrambled up the steps, laughing hysterically.

He ran back to the room. Michael's cup stood on the table, and he spooned a quantity of the lukewarm liquid and tasted it, smacking his lips.

"Brain against brain. I think I've scored the final point!" he said with satisfaction. It had been so crudely simple. What would happen after, he did not stop to consider.

For Dr. Tappatt the game was almost finished. His employer had been more than generous—a large sum was due for his latest services, and the whole world was open to him. For two years he had served his friend faithfully and well. It had been an unromantic service, a service that kept him well within the boundaries of the law. The doctor had a very clear view-point. He knew that the end of this adventure meant the worst kind of trouble, and one more offence against the law would make little difference if he faced a jury. He was determined to avoid juries. The detention of Michael Dorn gave him a breathing space—a respite. The machinery of the law moved slowly, and nowadays a man who took forethought might go from one end of Europe to the other between sunrise and sunrise.

Half an hour passed, an hour. He looked at his watch for the twentieth time, and, pulling open a drawer of his desk, he took out a pair of handcuffs, humming a tune as he worked the hinges.

Returning to the cellar room, he knocked loudly on the door and called the prisoner by name. There was no reply, and he unlocked the door and peeped cautiously inward. The slit afforded him a view of the bed. Michael Dorn was lying face downward, his head on his arm and motionless.

Without hesitation, the doctor went into the room, and, turning the inert figure on its back, began a quick search. There was no pistol in the hip pocket; he found that in a specially constructed pouch inside the coat. Dorn's eyelids flickered as the doctor made the search, and there came from the lips an unintelligible mutter of sound.

"You are not so talkative now, my friend," said Tappatt pleasantly.

He took some papers from the detective's pocket, and these he transferred to his own. Watch and chain he left; but anything that might be used as a weapon, even the little penknife, he took away. When he had finished he fastened the handcuffs and gazed upon his finished work with a smile of satisfaction. Returning to the house, he found the tin of biscuits, and, filling a ewer full of water from the yard pump, he brought them back to the prison. These he placed near the bed.

"Michael Dorn, you were easy," he said, addressing the unconscious figure. "Much easier because you have no official standing, and have few friends who will worry about you, or notify the police of your disappearance. And if they are notified, where are they to search? Tell me that, Michael Dorn!"

He locked the door and, passing through the gate at the front of the house, he made a reconnaissance. There was just a chance that the man had left his motor- car near by, and a standing machine might attract the attention of the constabulary. There was even a possibility that he had not come alone. But, though the doctor walked a mile in either direction, there was no sign of a car, and he returned to the house, tired but triumphant. Never again would the thought of Captain Michael Dorn come like a shadow over his pleasant dreams of the future.

CHAPTER XXIX

Dear Miss Smith,—I have been trying to get into communication with a Mr. John Wills, who is an assistant of mine, and possibly I have succeeded. But in case, by any mischance, my messages have failed to reach him, I should esteem it as a great favour if you would find him and hand him the enclosed, which is a duplicate of the instructions already posted. I think I have located Miss Reddle, and hope to have good news for you to-morrow. But I am dealing with a man for whose genius I have a profound respect. Miss Reddle is at Gallows Farm, near Whitcomb in Somerset, and, if you do not hear from me by telegram in the course of the day, it is extremely likely that I shall also be there—against my will. I have calculated every contingency; foreseen, I think, most of the possibilities, but there is always a big chance that I may not be as clever as I think I am! Will you therefore remain all day at Charlotte Street? I suggest that you should ask your employer, Mr. Shaddles, to let you off for the day, and, if necessary, show him this letter. He may remember me by name; I met him many years ago.

Yours very truly,

Michael Dorn.

The words, "If necessary, show him this letter," were heavily underlined.

The letter had come by special delivery, a red express label on the face, and the postmark was a town in Somersetshire. Lizzy Smith read it three times, once to master the caligraphy, once to understand it, and once out of sheer enjoyment, for she felt more important with each reading; though it struck her as humorous that Michael Dorn should, in his most extravagant mood, imagine that her flinty-faced employer would grant her leave of absence on the strength of a meeting which he must long since have forgotten and would most certainly disclaim.

The news was too vital to be kept to herself, and she took the letter down to old Mr. Mackenzie, and found him engaged in fitting a new string to his violin.

"Wore it out last night, I should think," said Lizzy, not unkindly. "I heard you tuning and tuning."

"Tuning!" said old Mackenzie in surprise. "I was no' tuning, young lady. Perhaps, to the ear of one who is not acquainted with the peculiar qualities of classical music, it may have sounded that way. I was playing the aria from Samson and Delilah. 'Tis a bonny piece."

He pulled on his spectacles from his forehead, and took the letter from her hand.

"You would like me to read this?" he asked, and when she nodded, he followed the quaint crabbed writing line by line. "It seems very good news," he said. "Will Miss Reddle be back to-night?"

Lizzy sighed impatiently. It was the sort of question he would ask.

"How do I know whether she'll be back to-night?" She was annoyed that he was not as impressed as she had expected. "She may not be back at all! Don't you understand anything you can't play on your fiddle, Mr. Mackenzie? She may be in the power of this Gallows man! The whole thing now depends on me. Mike understands human nature, and when he got into trouble naturally his mind flew to Elizabetta Smith. That man has got experience."

"Naturally," murmured Mr. Mackenzie.

"Now the thing is," considered Lizzy, her face wearing a frown of profoundest thought, "shall I try to find this fellow Wills first, or shall I go to the office?"

"You might telephone to Mr. Dorn's flat," suggested the old man helpfully, and Lizzy was irritated that that simple solution had not occurred to her.

On her way to the office she stopped at the first telephone booth and called Michael's number, and after a long wait was told there was no answer. The news pleased her rather than otherwise, for the responsibility, vague as it was, gave her a pleasing sense that she was intimately associated with great happenings, though she looked forward with trepidation to her meeting with old Shaddles. That he would grant her the day was a forlorn hope. Much more likely he would point his skinny finger to the door and order her from his room. Nevertheless, though she sacrificed her livelihood, she was determined to be on hand in case her services were required—though what she could do, and in what capacity she could act, she did not trouble to consider.

Before she reached the office she had created three alternative excuses, none of which unfortunately had any relation to the other. Happily she was only called upon to produce two.

Mr. Shaddles had arrived before her; he was invariably the first-comer and generally the last leaver. Without taking off her hat, she knocked at the glass panel, and when his gruff "Come in!" reached her she all but abandoned the interview. He scowled at her as she came in, noted her coat and her hat.

"Well, what is the matter? Why aren't you at your work? You're five minutes late as it is!" he demanded.

Lizzy rested her hand lightly on his desk, and in her most genteel voice began:

"Mr. Shaddles, I'm sorry to ask you, but, owing to a family bereavement, I should like the day off."

"Who's dead?" he growled.

"An aunt," she said, and added: "On my mother's side."

"Aunts are nothing," said the old man, and waved her to the door. "Uncles are nothing either. Can't spare you. What do you want to go to funerals for?"

"Well, the real truth is," said the disconcerted Lizzy, and produced the letter, "I've had this!"

He took the message with apparent reluctance and read it through with typical care. He sat for a long time, and she thought he was searching for misspelt words—a horrible practice of his.

"There is nothing about your aunt in this," snarled Mr. Shaddles.

"Mr. Dorn has been more than an aunt to me," said Lizzy with dignity. "It is my pet name for him. And if he's not dead, he may very well be."

He looked out of the window, scratched his rough chin angrily, then glared round at her.

"You can have the day," he said, and she nearly dropped with amazement.

Murmuring her incoherent thanks, she was making for the door.

"Wait."

He put his hand in his pocket, laid a note-case on the table, and took out three bank-notes.

"You may not want these," he said; "I cannot conceive that you will, but you may. I shall require you to give me a very full account of any expenses you incur. If you need a car, hire one from the Bluelight Company—they are clients of ours, and they allow me a rebate."

Like a woman in a dream, Lizzy staggered out of the office. Each note was for £20. She had no idea there was so much money in the world.

She did not answer the clerk whom she passed on the stairs, and had not wholly recovered by the time she reached Hiles Mansions. Mr. Dorn was not in, the liftman told her unnecessarily; and Mr. Wills had not called since the previous day. Lizzy went out into the Brompton Road, called a taxi-cab magnificently, and, reaching Charlotte Street, discovered she had only sufficient loose cash to pay the fare.

Such a tremendous happening could not be reserved to herself, and she took Mr. Mackenzie into her confidence.

"Shaddles is a grand man," said Mackenzie soberly, "a big-hearted fellow."

Lizzy shook her head.

"I don't know whether I shall get into trouble with the police for taking this money from the poor old man," she said. "He has been strange for a long time: I've seen this coming on for days. When he raised Lois Reddle's salary to three pounds a week I knew something else would happen." She looked at the three notes in awe. "They get like that when they're about ninety," she said. And then a great inspiration came to her—so daring, so tremendous, that it left her gasping.

Borrowing some loose change from the old man she dashed down to the telephone box from which she had called Hiles Mansions and gave Lady Moron's number. The footman who answered her told her that her ladyship was in bed.

"Oh, pray don't trouble," said Lizzy in an exaggerated tone. "Will you ask his lordship to hop along?"

"To what, madam?"

"To speak to me," corrected Lizzy.

"What name shall I give him?"

"Tell him the Lady Elizabetta," said Lizzy, and lolled languidly against the cork-lined 'phone box as she would have lolled had she been a person of title.

She had to wait for some time before his lordship, who was sound asleep at that hour, could be aroused and sufficiently interested in the caller to come down to the drawing-room, where there was a telephone extension.

"Hullo?" he asked feebly. "Good morning and all that! Sorry I didn't catch your name."

"It's Miss Smith," said Lizzy in a hushed voice, and she heard Selwyn gasp.

"Really? Not really? I say, there's been an awful bother here! Everything's at sixes and sevens, and all that sort of thing. That beastly bounder, Chesney Praye—you remember the fellow—bird of prey, what?" (Even Lizzy could not laugh at that hour in the morning.) "Well, he's in the library with her ladyship!"

"Listen—Selwyn!" She had to summon all her courage to voice this familiarity. "Can you see me? You know where I live—you were coming to dinner to-night; but I want you to come before. There's something I want to see you about, something—well, I can't describe it."

"Certainly," he interrupted. "I'll come right along. I'm supposed to go to the South Kensington Museum to see some models, but—; All right, colonel, thank you very much for calling!"

The tone was louder and more formal. Lizzy, not unused to such innocent acts of deception, guessed that a servant or his mother had come into the drawing- room.

She went back to her lodging with a feeling of exaltation. Not only had she secured the aid of a member of the aristocracy, but she had also, with great daring, and exercising a woman's privilege, addressed him by a name which, to say the least, was intimate. She confided to Mr. Mackenzie, with an air of nonchalance, that she was expecting Lord Moron to call upon her, and he was impressed to a gratifying extent.

"I told him to drop in—I know him rather well." Lizzy flicked a speck of dust from her skirt with a fine air.

"Is that so?" he asked, looking at her in wonder. "Well now, I never thought that one of the Morons would ever do me the honour of entering my house! They're a fine family, a handsome family. I remember the old earl: he frequently came to the theatre, though not, I fear, in the most presentable condition."

Miss Lizzy Smith was not interested in the old earl. She was, however, immensely absorbed in the new one; and when Lord Moron's taxi-cab pulled up at the side-walk she was at the door to admit him.

"I say, what an awfully jolly kitchen!" he said, looking round at a room of which even Lizzy was not particularly proud.

"I wouldn't have asked your lordship here—;" she began.

"I say, don't give us any of that 'lordship' stuff," he pleaded. "I'm Selwyn to my friends. That's a wonderful frying-pan: did you make it?"

Lizzy disclaimed responsibility. But he had his views, apparently, upon culinary apparatus, had invented an electric chafing-dish, and had plans for a coke oven. Until then she had not known that coke was ever cooked.

"I've often thought I'd like to run away from this awful 'my-lording' and do some work. I've got a bit of money of my own that even her ladyship can't touch—and you can bet your life that it's pretty well tied up, old thing, if she and the bird of prey can't get their hooks into it!"

He was delightfully, restfully vulgar, and Lizzy, who only knew this much about electricity, that lamps light up when you turn a switch, without exactly understanding why, could have listened for hours to schemes which might even have interested an engineer. But she had the letter to discuss.

He read it through, and, by stopping at every other line and asking for explanations, understood the gist of it. She had noticed before how, on really important matters, Selwyn had quite intelligent views; and that he was no fool she discovered later in the day, when he confided to her that he had countered his mother's veiled threats of getting him certified as mentally incompetent to deal with his estate, by making a visit to three Harley Street alienists in consultation, and procuring from them a most flattering tribute to his mentality.

"I don't know what it's all about," he said, as he handed the letter back. And then, answering her pained look: "Yes, I understand the letter, but I mean all these accidents and things—old Braime dropping dead, or something, in the library. Madam is my mother, and I suppose I ought not to loathe her. But she's fearfully devilish, Miss Smith, fearfully devilish!"

He fingered the red seam on his cheek tenderly.

"You can never be sure what she's up to, and since that bounder Praye and that awful boozy doctor have been around the house she's been queerer than ever. Do you know what she told me once? She said that if she thought she'd be any happier by me being dead I'd be dead to-morrow—those were her very words! Dead to-morrow, dear old Lizzy! Isn't it positively fearful?"

"What a lady!" said Lizzy. "You've heard nothing at the house about this business—I mean Gallows Farm?"

He shook his head.

"They never talk in front of me. But something's happening: I'm sure of that! That chap Chesney has been in with her ladyship since eight o'clock this morning—they told you she was in bed—well, she wasn't: she was in the library. And the telephone seems to have been ringing all night. I say, what do you think of that detective johnny putting the young lady in gaol? A bit thick, what? I meant to have a few words with him the other morning."

"He did it for a very good reason," said Lizzy mysteriously. "I can't tell you everything, Selwyn; one day you will know the truth, but at the present moment I'm not at liberty to talk."

"Nobody seems to be at liberty to tell me anything," said the dismal man. "But what's the idea of that letter? Somebody's got her in that place with a fearful name!" He slapped his side. "Tappatt—the chap who worries the wine! You know this fellow—the perfectly horrible doctor! I'll bet he's the

perfectly awful villain of the piece! He hasn't been near the house for days, and he had been sleuthing round Chester Square a lot lately. And"—he slapped his knee again—"and there was a trunk call came through from the country last night! I was in the hall when the bell rang, and I'm sure he was the johnny who called. He asked for her ladyship. Gallows Farm: that's the place he lives!"

Suddenly he jumped up, his eyes bright with excitement.

"She's there—I'll bet a million pounds to a strawberry ice! Gallows Farm, Somerset." He tapped his forehead. "I signed a paper about that, I'll swear! It is one of the job lots her ladyship bought two or three years ago, or one of her bailiffs bought. She is always buying old properties and selling 'em at a profit. And I know old stick-in-the-mud has got a home somewhere—Tappatt, I mean—because her ladyship said she'd send me there if I wasn't jolly careful. That rosy-nosed hound has got Miss Reddle!"

They looked at one another in silence.

"You're a detective, Selwyn!" she breathed ecstatically, and he pulled at his moustache.

"I'm pretty smart at some things—what about a rescue?" said his lordship suddenly.

"A what?" Lizzy's heart beat faster.

"A rescue," he nodded. "What about hopping down into Somerset, seeing old stick-in-the-mud, and saying: 'Look here, old top, this sort of thing can't be tolerated in civilised society. Hand over Miss Reddle or you'll get into serious trouble'?"

Lizzy's enthusiasm died down.

"I don't think that would make much difference to him," she said. "And it would be unnecessary, Selwyn; if Michael Dorn is there she will be released this afternoon."

Selwyn was disappointed.

"Besides," Lizzy went on, "what would her ladyship say if you were away all day?"

"Blow her ladyship!" He snapped his fingers. "I've had enough of her ladyship—I have really. I've made up my mind that I'm through with Chester Square, and I've got my eye on a dinky little flat in Knightsbridge," he said rapidly. "I feel it is time I asserted myself. My idea is to live incognito. I'm going to call myself Mr. Smith—;"

"Indeed?" said Lizzy coldly.

"It's a pretty good name. Anyway, Brown is as good." He amended his plans in some haste. "Now what about a little bit of lunch somewhere?"

An hour later Lizzy went dizzily into the great dining-room of the Ritz-Carlton, and Lady Moron, entertaining a guest at a corner table, looked at her through her lorgnettes and shrugged her large shoulders.

"Selwyn is sowing his wild oats rather late in life," she said, and Chesney Praye, who had returned from Paris that morning, was mildly amused.

CHAPTER XXX

Though she could remember one or two uncomfortable days in her life, Lois Reddle could not recall one that bore any comparison with the twenty hours that followed her departure from Gallows Farm. She had been awakened by the woman at some unknown hour in the middle of the night, ordered to dress and come downstairs. The first order was easy to obey, for she had not taken off her clothes. When she came down into the passage she found the doctor waiting for her. He was wearing his heaviest overcoat, and carried a thick stick, and was testing a flash-lamp as she joined him.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, as he led her across the yard to the accompaniment of the savage chorus of the dogs.

"You'll find out in good time," was the uncompromising reply. "I don't want you to ask questions or to speak until I tell you. After you leave this house you are to be silent—understand that?"

They mounted the gentle slope of the downs and presently descended into a valley on the other side. Although the moon was obscured, there was sufficient light to enable her to pick her way across the rough ground and to dispense with the arm he offered her. Once they made a wide detour to avoid a marshy patch, and once he had to help her through a fence of hawthorn. Ahead of them was a dark line of trees, which was on the estate. He told her there were twelve hundred acres of land attached to the farm, only a small portion of which had been sub-let, and none of which was under cultivation.

"It is poor land, anyway—most of this downland is. That is Gallows Wood," he said, indicating the trees ahead. "The farm takes its name from the wood. There used to be a gallows on the crest of the hill years ago. Not scared, are you?"

He chuckled when she answered "No."

After a while they struck a rough track which led into the heart of the copse, and now for the first time he produced the flash-lamp; a necessary precaution, for the path was overgrown and difficult to follow. Although her voice was steady and her attitude one of sublime confidence, Lois was inwardly quaking. There was something very ominous in this move. Yet it was not the fear of what would happen in the wood that frightened her. She guessed that the doctor was moving her from the farm because he expected the return of Michael Dorn. She dreaded only this; that Michael would search the house and be satisfied that she was not there. Would the doctor move the grey-haired woman too, she wondered? After ten minutes' walk he stopped, and she thought he had lost the way, until the light of his lamp revealed a small stone cottage, standing back from the path and almost hidden by trees and undergrowth. This, then, was the new prison, she thought.

"Hold this light," he ordered, and she obeyed, whilst he tried key after key in the lock.

After a while the door swung open and he went in, turning his head to see that she was coming after. The floor was thick with dust; the only furniture in the room into which he invited her was an old backless chair. On one of the walls was a yellow almanac for the year 1913, and probably the house had not been occupied since then.

"You'll stay here and keep quiet. There will be light in a few hours. If you want anything, ask Mrs. Rooks—she will be here presently."

He went out, but did not lock the door; she found afterwards that it was lacking in this appendage. Followed half an hour's wait, and then she heard footsteps in the hall, heard another door open, and a mutter of conversation. Something dropped with a thud on the passage, and for a second Lois' heart came into her mouth. But it seemed that Mrs. Rooks, who, she guessed, was the sallow-faced woman, had come heavily laden, for the sound of her complaining reached the girl. Evidently she had brought the provisions necessary for the party—the weight of them was not very promising, and Tappatt was seemingly prepared for a long stay.

"Nearly broke my back," she grumbled. "Why couldn't she carry it, doctor?"

Lois crept nearer to the door and listened, hoping to hear something that would confirm her theory that she was being hidden because the doctor expected a return visit from Michael Dorn.

"Get a chair from the other room," she heard him growl. "What are you making all this fuss about? It is no worse for you than for me. This isn't the first time you've sat up all night, is it?"

"I don't see why you should take all this trouble," grumbled the woman. "He'll not come back again, and, if he did, what's to stop him coming into the wood?"

"He will come back—you need have no doubt about that. I know the man. And you can make your mind easy about his finding them. He isn't likely to search every copse in the neighbourhood."

A few minutes later the front door slammed as he went out, and she heard the woman grumbling to herself. She was sitting within a few feet of the door, and could hear every sound and move in the bare room. To open the window might be possible, but to do so without her hearing was a hopeless impossibility.

Soon after daybreak Mrs. Rooks took her into the kitchen, and, passing the room which held the second prisoner, Lois saw that there was a key in that door. If the conditions were the same in the other prison room it was as

impossible for the unknown woman to escape. Who was she, she wondered? Some poor creature, perhaps, who had been entrusted by her friends to the tender mercy of Dr. Tappatt. Her heart ached for the woman, and in her pity she forgot her own danger and discomfort.

Throughout the long and weary day that followed she saw no sign of any human being. The wood was situate on a private estate, and the overgrown condition of the path had told her that it was not frequented even by those who had authority to cross the land. From the windows she could see only the trunks of beeches and the green tracery of leaves. The oppressive loneliness told even upon the uncommunicative Mrs. Rooks, who must have been unused to a solitary life, for that afternoon she came into the room where Lois was sitting. Lois had opportunity for studying her. She must have been in the region of fifty, a harsh, sour-faced woman, with a grievance against the world and its people.

"It's so pesky quiet that I should go off my head if I was here long," she complained.

Lois wondered if she could make the woman talk about other things than the loneliness of the wood.

"Have you been in England a long time?" she asked.

Mrs. Rooks had to master her natural repugnance to gossip before she spoke.

"Only two years. We were in India before then. I don't know what that has got to do with you, anyway."

"I heard you call your dogs by Indian names. 'Mali' means money, doesn't it?"

"Don't you ask questions, young lady," said the woman. "You behave yourself, and you won't be badly treated. Act the fool, and you'll—;" She nodded significantly. "Of course 'Mali' means money. Do you mallum the bat?"

Lois shook her head smilingly. She guessed that she was being asked if she spoke or understood Hindustani.

"Why am I kept here—can you tell me that?"

"Because you're not right in your head." The reply would have driven Lois to a fury, but she had already guessed the excuse that would be made for her detention. "You've been hearing things and seeing things. An' people who hear things, voices an' all that, are batty."

Lois laughed quietly.

"You know that I am not mad, Mrs. Rooks."

"Nobody thinks they are mad," said Mrs. Rooks alarmingly. "That's one of the symptoms. The minute a person thinks she's sane, she's mad! The doctor knows: he's the cleverest man in the world."

She glanced back at the open door. Lois heard a steady echo of footsteps, as though somebody was pacing the floor.

"Who is in the other room?" she asked, without expecting any very satisfactory reply.

"A woman—she's nutty."

"I thought I saw her the other evening," said the girl with affected carelessness. "Weren't you—talking to her in the yard?"

The woman's shrewd eyes looked her up and down.

"You saw me quietening her with the whip. She gets fresh sometimes—most of 'em do. You will too." Lois shuddered at this ominous prophecy. "Bless you, they don't mind a licking! Lunatics ain't human beings anyway, they're just animals the doctor says, and you've got to treat 'em like animals. That's the only kind of treatment they understand."

Lois tried to veil her horror and disgust and felt that she had not wholly succeeded.

"I hope you will not treat me like an animal," she said, and Mrs. Rooks sniffed.

"If you behave yourself, you'll be treated well. All nutty people have a good time if they don't get fresh and obstrepulous. That's the doctor's way."

It was clear to Lois that, whatever faults this woman might have, however brutal she might be, she had accepted without any question any diagnosis that the doctor might make. To Mrs. Rooks she was crazy, just as was the other woman. And if she became "obstrepulous" she would be served in the same way.

"Why did you call her a gaol-bird?"

Again that shrewd, suspicious scrutiny.

"I call her lots of things," said Mrs. Rooks indifferently. "If you hadn't been spying you wouldn't have heard. Names don't hurt anybody. They're better than the whip anyway—did you know that man that came last night?"

"Mr. Dorn?"

"Yes, who is he?"

"He's a police officer," said Lois.

The effect of the words upon the woman was unexpected. Her sallow skin became a pasty white.

"A detective!"

Lois nodded, and Mrs. Rooks' face cleared.

"That's part of your crazy ideas," she said calmly. "He is a man the doctor owes money to. I know, because the doctor told me. The doctor's been in difficulties, and he's not the kind of man who'd have any trouble with the police. They told a lot of lies about him in India, but he's a good man, the best man in the world."

And then a thought struck Lois, and she asked:

"What is supposed to be my delusion?"

Mrs. Rooks shot a cunning glance at the girl.

"I'm surprised at you asking that, young lady! You think you're somebody who you're not!"

Lois frowned.

"You mean I am under the impression that I am somebody important?"

Mrs. Rooks nodded.

"Yes—you think you're the Countess of Moron!" she said.

CHAPTER XXXI

Lois could hardly believe her ears.

"Me?" she said in amazement. "I think I am the Countess of Moron? How absurd! I think nothing of the kind!"

"Yes, you do," nodded Mrs. Rooks. "The doctor said you think you're the countess. You tried to murder Lady Moron because you wanted the title!"

The suggestion was so ludicrous that Lois laughed.

"How ridiculous! Such an idea has never entered my head. Lady Moron! Why, I am a secretary—where did you hear this?"

"The doctor told me," said the woman stubbornly. "He never tells lies—except to people he owes money to, but that's natural, ain't it?"

She went out of the room soon after and was gone for half an hour, apparently attending to the needs of the other prisoner, for when she came back she had something to say about discontented people.

"She's had all she wants to eat and all she wants to drink and still she's not satisfied. That shows she's mad. I never knew a crazy woman that was satisfied."

Lois thought it was a weakness not entirely confined to the crazy.

"When are we leaving here?"

"I don't know—to-night I guess," said the other, vaguely. "Anyway, the doctor will be here to take my place and I'll get some sleep. I'm nearly dead."

Mrs. Rooks was not disposed for further conversation and as the day progressed she grew more taciturn and irritable. When night fell, she seemed to be spending her time either at the door of the cottage or outside. Lois heard her walking under her window, talking to herself. She was dozing in her chair when she heard the doctor's voice and was instantly wide awake.

"You take the other, I'll bring this one along. You can leave all the truck here. We may want to come back. I don't think it is likely, but we may."

The room was in darkness when he came stamping in and flashed his lamp upon her.

"You've had an uncomfortable day, but you've got your friend to blame," he said. "You'll be able to sleep to-night in your own bed, which is more than he will do!"

She did not answer him; the reference to Michael's bed was too cryptic to follow.

"Clever fellow, Dorn, eh? Brilliant detective? He's got all his wits about him, don't you think?"

Still she did not answer.

"Oh yes, he's clever," said Tappatt. He was in a cheerful, almost a rollicking mood, and she guessed with a sinking heart that if Michael Dorn had come back, he had been outwitted. "Look at this." He flashed his lamp on an object which lay in his palm. It was a heavy-calibred automatic pistol and she uttered an "Oh!" of surprise.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to kill you, my girl. We don't kill people, we cure 'em! That is what they are here for."

As he patted her shoulder, she shrank back from him.

"No, I wanted to show you that, because it is Dorn's. I took it away from him as easily as you might take money from a child. I just took it out of his pocket and he said nothing! And he's clever."

"Is he dead?" she asked, and the question tickled him.

"No, he's not dead," he said jovially. "Nothing so dramatic. I don't kill people, I tell you. I cure 'em! He's cured! The mania for investigation has been entirely eradicated!"

Mrs. Rooks and her prisoner had, by this time, left the house. Lois heard them swishing through the undergrowth and saw a momentary flicker of light through the window, as the old woman sought for the path.

"We'll give them a start," said the doctor, "and then we'll follow them. Rooks is slow; getting old, I guess."

"Who is the other woman?"

"A patient of mine," said the doctor casually. "She's got some strange delusions."

"Why did you tell Mrs. Rooks that I was mad?"

"Because you are," was the calm reply. "I have diagnosed you as suffering from delusions, with suicidal tendencies. And my diagnosis has never been questioned, my dear. And now, if you're ready—;?"

"Why do you say that I think I'm the Countess of Moron?"

"Because you do! I've put that in my case-book, and case-books are evidence!"

And he roared with laughter as if he had made a good joke.

They returned to the other cottage, and even in her weariness Lois looked forward to the walk across the fields, for her legs were cramped and she ached in every limb. As they mounted the last gentle slope, the long wall of Gallows Farm came into view. The gate was open and they passed through. Half-way across the yard he caught her arm and they stopped. She heard the rattle of the chained dogs and wondered if he was about to warn her again of the dangers that attended an escape. Instead:

"There's a nice little place down there," he pointed into the darkness—"a room that has been described as airy, though it is a little below the level of the ground. I must show it to you some day—it has an interesting story."

"Are you going to put me there?" she asked, her courage almost failing her.

"You? My dear, you're the last person in the world I should put there." Again the hateful encouragement of his caressing hand. "Go ahead, your own handsome apartment is ready for you."

He took up the lamp that was waiting in the passage and showed her to the landing. Glancing at the room opposite, she saw that a new staple had been fixed to the doorway and guessed that the other woman was now her neighbour. Tappatt followed the direction of her eyes.

"You'll have company," he said. "The old home is filling up rapidly! All you require in any mental establishment is a start. Satisfied clients are the best advertisements!"

"Where is Mr. Dorn?" she asked as he was leaving the room.

"He has gone back to London with a flea in his ear. That fellow won't bother me again in a hurry."

"Do you ever speak the truth?"

For some reason the question infuriated him and his manner changed in an instant.

"I'll tell you the truth one of these days, my young lady, and it won't be pleasant to hear!" he stormed.

With that he slammed the door and turned the key on her.

CHAPTER XXXII

Earlier that day somebody else had asked for the truth. As a rule, Mr. Chesney Praye had little use for that quality, but, as he explained to the countess over their protracted meal, he wanted to know "exactly where he was." He knew a lot, more than she guessed, for he was a keen man with an instinct for hidden facts. He was also a professional opportunist, as she was to learn.

"You're going to marry me, Leonora, as soon as this business is cleared up. But before we go any further, I want all your cards on the table. And first I want to know what I have been doing. Blind obedience is all right in a soldier, but I'm not a soldier. I've muddied my hands pretty badly over this business and I can see myself getting five years' imprisonment if Dorn ever gets on to my trail. But there is a lot that you haven't told me and I'd rather like to know where I stand."

The countess took the cigarette from her mouth, blew a cloud of smoke, following it with her eyes until it dissipated, and then, slowly extinguishing the cigarette in the ash-tray, she made her revelation and Mr. Chesney Praye listened without interruption for half an hour. And all that he heard he sorted for his own advantage.

She paused only once, and that was when she saw her son, pilotting the girl into the palm court.

"She's prettier than I thought," she said, "a chorus-girl's prettiness, but—;"

"Never mind about her," said Chesney impatiently. "What happened after—;"

The Countess told him, concealing nothing, and when she had finished, he sat back in his chair, hot and limp.

"My God!" he breathed. "You—you are wonderful! And that's the 'why' of Gallows Farm, eh? I confess I was puzzled."

"That is the why of Gallows Farm," said Lady Moron, lighting another cigarette.

Chesney Praye left the hotel alone; the Countess was going down to her place in the country, and, when she invited him to accompany her, he had invented an appointment on the spur of the moment, for Chesney was a quick thinker, and on the occasion of which Michael Dorn never grew weary of reminding him, he owed his immunity from arrest to this quality.

He glanced up at the street-clock. There was time to carry out one essential part of his scheme and, if his plan was not entirely worked out when he picked up a taxi, it was complete in all details when he reached St. Paul's Churchyard.

From the top of a plebeian 'bus Lord Moron and his companion saw the cab flash past.

"My stepfather!" groaned his lordship. "You wouldn't think a horrible, common bounder like that would attract a woman like her ladyship, Elizabeth?"

But Lizzy pressed her lips tightly together and expressed no opinion, other than the non-committal one that "likes attract like," which may or not have been as complimentary as she intended.

There was no telegram for her in Charlotte Street when they arrived.

"And there won't be," said Lord Moron with satisfaction. "I'll bet you any amount of money that the purply doctor has got away with it. Mind you, Elizabeth, I know him! He's had his skinny legs under my mahogany, and whatever you may say about me, I'm a judge of character!"

"I think you're clever," admitted Lizzy, "and I've always said so. What is your mother going to say about us going to lunch at that posh restaurant?"

Lord Moron expressed his complete indifference.

"From to-day I am on my own; I can't start too soon," he said. "Her ladyship doesn't mind being seen in public with that perfectly impossible Chesney Praye—the bird of prey, as I sometimes call him—;" He waited for applause, but received no more than an approving smile. "And if she doesn't mind, I don't see how she can object to me going to lunch with one of the—at any rate, a very nice girl," he added lamely, and Elizabeth raised her eyes in the shy wistful way she had seen in the best films.

At eight o'clock the post office was closed. Moron went down to the nearest branch office and enquired for a telegram, but none had been received; nor were they able to get into communication with Mr. Wills.

On his way back to the house, Selwyn telephoned the Bluelight Garage, in accordance with instructions, and they were flying along the broad expanse of the Great West Road, when a faster car overtook and passed them and Selwyn involuntarily shrank back to cover.

"Who was it?" asked Lizzy, who had not seen the occupant.

Lord Moron raised his fingers to his lips, though the possibility of being overheard was negligible. It was not until the overtaking car was a steady speck in a revolving cloud of dust that he turned dramatically to her and whispered:

"Chesney—Chesney Praye. He's going down too! I knew he was in it. A bounder like that would be in anything dirty!"

"Did he see us?"

Selwyn shook his head.

"No. He was driving; but he was grinning like an ape. That shows!"

At Maidenhead they passed the car standing outside an hotel.

"He's gone in to grub," said Selwyn, all a-twitter with excitement. "The thing for us to do is to be careful when he passes us again."

But no care was required, and his elaborate plan to be immersed in an evening newspaper that completely hid himself and his companion when the car came abreast, was unnecessary, for it was dark when the syren of Chesney's machine called for a clear road, and the car swept past.

Within ten miles of the farm there were a number of enquiries to be made. The exact situation of the farm was difficult to locate, and it was only when they reached Whitcomb village that they were able to take the road with any certainty. And there were other difficulties to be overcome.

"There is no sense in our dashing up madly to this old Gallows and saying 'Where is she?'" said his lordship, with perfect truth. "If we're on the track of something fishy, and I'm sure everything connected with Chesney is fishy, we shan't get a civil answer. On the other hand, if there is nothing fishy about the business, we'll be getting ourselves a bad reputation if we barge in and there's nothing—er—;"

"Fishy," suggested Lizzy helpfully.

Two miles from Whitcomb they held a council of war, and decided to send the machine back to the main road and to continue the journey on foot. This was his lordship's idea.

"The situation requires a certain amount of tact, and if there's anybody more tactful than me, I'd like to meet them."

They trudged up the dusty road, keeping a watch for Chesney's car. It was dark by now and they were without any kind of light except the matches that Lord Moron occasionally struck, and both were dead-beat by the time they came in view of the farm.

"Not a very cheerful looking place, is it?" said Selwyn, some of his enterprise evaporating. "Beastly dismal hole. Shouldn't be surprised if there was a real gallows somewhere around. I think it was a mistake to have left the car."

"It is too late to talk about mistakes," said Lizzy brusquely, and led the way. "We've found the place, that is something. Not that it looks as if it is worth finding."

They came at last to the big black gate and the forbidding wall.

"Shall we ring or knock?" asked his lordship. "There's a car inside—do you hear it?"

Lizzy compromised by kicking on the wood. Her foot was raised to kick a second time, when there came from the house a woman's scream, so vibrant with fear that Selwyn's blood seemed to turn to ice and his knees touched together.

At that moment the gates burst open with a crash, almost knocking them down, and the bonnet of a car showed.

"There's a woman in the car," screamed Lizzy, but the roar of the engines drowned her voice.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Mr. Chesney Praye was a welcome visitor. He had parked his machine in the forecourt, and now, sitting before the small wooden fire, was warming his chilled hands, for the night had turned unusually cold and he had come at full speed across the windy downs.

"Br-r-r!" he said, as he held his hands before the blaze. "And this is what they call an English summer! I'll be glad to get back to India."

"Do you think of going?"

"I may. Everything depends—;"

"You were lucky to find me in," said the doctor, putting glasses on the table.

"Why?" asked the other, in surprise. "I thought you wouldn't leave this abode of peace, at any rate not now."

Briefly the doctor related the cause of his excursion and Chesney looked serious.

"Is there any likelihood of Dorn coming back?" he asked.

Tappatt's merriment reassured him.

"He's back! In fact, he is practically under this roof!"

Chesney sprang to his feet.

"What the devil do you mean?" he asked roughly.

"Sit down. There's nothing to be alarmed about. He is behind a two-inch door, with handcuffs on his wrists and a pain in his head that will take a lot of moving. I'd have telephoned, only I don't trust the exchange."

And then he told the visitor of his encounter with Dorn.

"It was a question of foresight, and I saw farthest," he said. "It is as good as a bottle of sparkling wine to match your brain against the mind of a man like that, to look ahead and see what he will do in given circumstances, and to counter and re-counter his plans. Somebody had to come out on top—he or I. He failed to take an elementary precaution—the veriest amateur would have known that, if his attention was distracted for a moment, I'd doctor his drink; and it was absurdly simple. I don't even take the credit for it. He played so completely into my hands."

Chesney pursed his lips.

"Has he recovered from the drug?" he asked, a little apprehensively.

Tappatt nodded.

"Oh yes, I've had quite an interesting conversation with him through the door. There's a little spyhole that makes it easy to exchange pleasant badinage. Captain Michael Dorn is a pretty sick man at this moment."

Chesney Praye was pacing up and down the room, a worried frown on his face. This was a development that he had not looked for.

"Perhaps it is better," he said. "I shall be taking away the girl to- night."

"The countess didn't—;" began the doctor.

"You needn't worry about the countess. She'd have telephoned, but she shared your fear of the exchange. The girl and Mrs. Pinder are to be moved. The risk of keeping them here is too great. Dorn has people working for him and you'll wake one morning to find a cordon of police round the house."

"Where will you go?"

"I shall take her abroad."

"And the other woman?"

Chesney looked at him oddly.

"I may want the other woman—later," he said.

"I had better bring Reddle down," said the doctor, rising and going to the door, but Praye beckoned him back.

"There is no hurry," he said.

He evidently had something which he had hesitated to say.

"What are your plans, Tappatt?"

"Mine? I shall have to flit, I suppose. They're striking me off the register, at least Dorn told me so."

"What will you do with him?"

An ugly smile showed for a second on the doctor's face.

"I don't know. He is going to be a difficulty. I've seen that from the first. I could leave him, and that is what I shall probably do. Nobody would come near the farm perhaps for months, perhaps for a year."

Chesney Praye's face was ashen.

"Leave him to starve?" he whispered.

"Why not?" asked the other coolly. "Who would know? I thought of going to Australia. And I'd take my nurse with me. She would think that I had let Dorn out, and anyway she's not the kind of person to ask questions. This place is Lady Moron's property. Who would visit it if I left? It might be empty for years."

Chesney Praye's mouth was dry, the hand that went to his lips shook.

"I don't know—it seems pretty awful," he said irresolutely. "To leave a man—to starve!"

"What will happen if he gets after me?" asked the doctor, stirring the fire that had almost gone out. "I should either starve or get my meals too regularly! I understand the food is fairly good at Dartmoor, but I am willing to take anybody's word for it. I do not want to have a personal experience. And anyway, there's always a way out for a medical man. I owe Dorn something. He hounded me from India, and he's not exactly a friend of yours, is he, Chesney?"

"No," said the other shortly, "only—;"

"Only what? You're chicken-hearted! What do you think is going to happen to you and me if that gets out?" He pointed to the ceiling. "It would mean the best part of a lifetime for you—more than a lifetime for me. No, sir, I am well aware of the risks I am taking and more than determined what further risks I'll accept. You'd better have the girl down. I suppose you want to be alone?"

He nodded and the doctor went out of the room, and was gone for a long while. When the door opened, Lois Reddle stood framed against the dark background of the passage. At the sight of Praye she stopped.

"You!" she said in wonder.

"Good evening, Miss Reddle. Won't you sit down?"

Chesney was politeness itself and his manners were unimpeachable.

"I'm afraid you've had a very unhappy experience," he said. "I only learnt about it this afternoon and I came down immediately to do whatever I could. The doctor tells me that you have been certified."

"That is not true," she said hotly. "I know very little about the law, but I have been in Mr. Shaddles' office too long to suppose that any person can be certified as mad by one doctor! Are you going to take me away?"

He nodded.

"And that other unfortunate woman?"

"She may go too," he said slowly, "on conditions."

She looked at him steadily.

"I don't quite understand you, Mr. Praye."

He motioned her to a chair, but she did not move.

"Now listen to me, Miss Reddle. I am taking big risks for your sake. I needn't particularise them, but if I fail this evening, my future, and probably—- "—he hesitated to say "liberty"—"at any rate, my future is seriously jeopardised. I've made this journey without the knowledge of a person who shall be nameless and I am betraying the trust she has in me. She will not forgive me."

"You mean the Countess of Moron?" she asked quietly.

"There is no use in beating about the bush. I refer to the Countess of Moron."

"Am I here by her orders?"

He nodded.

"But why? What have I ever done to her that she should wish to injure me?"

"You will know one of these days," he said impatiently, "but that is beside the point. I can save you and your mother—;"

She fell back a pace.

"My mother?" she breathed. "That woman—;" she pointed her trembling finger to the door—"not my mother?" He nodded. "Here? Oh, my God! Why?"

"She's here for the same reason that you are here," was his cool reply. "Now, Miss Reddle, you've got to be an intelligent being. I want you to be sensible and recognise the sacrifices I am making for you, and to agree to my conditions for taking your mother away from this place."

"What are the conditions?" she asked slowly.

"The first is that you marry me!" said Chesney Praye.

CHAPTER XXXIV

She looked at him, bewildered, as though she could not grasp the meaning of his words.

"That I marry you?" she repeated.

"That you marry me to-morrow. I took the precaution this afternoon of going to Doctors' Commons and securing a special licence, which allows me to be married to-morrow morning. I had some trouble in getting it, but it is here—;" he tapped his breast pocket. "Before leaving London I telegraphed to the vicar of Leitworth, a village some thirty miles from here, and asked him to perform the ceremony at ten o'clock to-morrow morning."

His face was white; he was obviously labouring under the stress of some tense emotion. Presently he went on in a lower voice:

"I will make you a rich woman. I will place you and your mother beyond want. I will give you a position in the world that you could not dream you would ever occupy. I'll do something more." He came closer to her, and before she realised what he was doing had gripped her shoulders. "I will clear your mother's name—I can't give her back the years she has spent in prison—;"

She drew back out of his grasp.

"No!" she said. "I'm sorry, but I can't. It may be true—all these things you say—but I can't marry you, Mr. Praye, and I—I don't believe you. My mother is in prison."

"Your mother is in this house."

He strode to the door and, pulling it open, called the doctor by name.

"Bring down Mrs. Pinder," he said.

The girl stood at the farther end of the room, her hands clasped together, waiting, hoping, yet not daring to hope. She heard a light step on the stair, again the door opened and the woman came in.

One glance at that serene face was sufficient. In another second they were in one another's arms, and the girl was sobbing on her mother's breast.

For a minute there was silence in the room, and only the murmured endearments of the older woman interrupted. Then Mrs. Pinder held the girl at arm's length and looked into her tear-stained face.

"My little Lois!" she said softly. "It hardly seems possible."

Lois tried to speak.

"And have you come to take me away?"

Watching the girl, Chesney saw her nod, and his hopes bounded as he introduced himself.

"I am Chesney Praye," he said awkwardly, "a—a friend of Miss Reddle."

"Reddle? Then Mrs. Reddle gave you her name?" She looked at Chesney. "When do we go?" she asked.

"As soon as certain conditions are fulfilled. Will you leave us, Mrs. Pinder?"

The woman's eyes fell upon the girl. Gathering her in her arms, she kissed her tenderly. Chesney, in his feverish anxiety, almost tore them apart in his urgency. He closed the door upon Mrs. Pinder and came back to the girl.

"Well?" he said. "I told you the truth?"

She nodded.

"And you'll do this?"

"Marry you?" She shook her head.

"But you told your mother you would!" he said furiously. "You know what it means, don't you, if you refuse?"

"I can't, I can't! How can I marry you, Mr. Praye? You're engaged to the Countess of Moron—;"

He interrupted her with an oath.

"Never mind about the countess! You know what I'm doing for you, don't you? I'm saving your life, I'm giving you your mother—;"

She looked past him at the closed door.

"I can't!" she said helplessly. "How can you ask me to decide? I—I don't know you, you must give me time."

"I'll give you as much time as it will take you to sign this paper."

He pulled out a sheet of foolscap from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"What is that?" she said.

"It's an agreement. You needn't trouble to read it. Just put your signature here, and I'll bring in the doctor to witness it."

"But what is the document?" she asked, and tried to turn it back to the first page, but he prevented her.

Her suspicion was growing, and the reaction from that tremendous meeting had left her chilled and numb. Into her heart had crept an uneasy suspicion that the conditions he offered were not in his power to fulfil. All her instincts told her this man's word was valueless.

"I can do nothing until I have seen Mr. Dorn."

Why she mentioned the detective's name at all, she could not understand. She wanted time. She mentioned the first name that occurred to her, and might as well have referred to Mr. Shaddles.

"Dorn! So that's how the land lies, eh? Michael Dorn is the favoured gentleman? Well, Dorn or no Dorn, you'll marry me to-morrow morning at ten o'clock. I've gone too far to pull back now. And Dorn's dead, anyway."

"Dead?" she cried in horror.

"He came here this morning, looking for you, and—;"

The door was opening slowly.

"I don't want you, Tappatt. Shut the door, damn you!"

But still it was moving, slowly, slowly. And then around the edge came the black muzzle of a pistol, an arm, and then, last, the smiling face of Michael Dorn!

"Put up your hands, Praye!" he said. "I want you!"

As the door opened and the hand came in, Chesney Praye's fingers closed around an ebony ruler, and then, at the hateful sight of Michael Dorn's face, he struck at the oil lamp that stood on the table. There was a crash, a jangle of broken glass, and Lois screamed.

Praye darted past her; she heard the thud of the door, and a grunt from somebody. In another second the two men were at grips and she shrank back farther and farther into a corner of the room, as tables and chairs became involved in the struggle. She heard Chesney screaming for the doctor at the top of his voice.

"Doctor—help! Get this swine!" And there came to the frightened ears of the girl the sound of the door being wrenched open, the scurry of footsteps, and Chesney's voice was silent.

"Stay where you are!"

The room reeked with the smell of kerosene.

"Don't strike a light," said Michael's voice, but even as he spoke a white flame leapt up from the hearth. The flowing oil had reached some red-hot embers, and in a second the whole floor was blazing.

The girl was paralysed with fear, but before she could move he had picked her up and carried her into the passage.

"Go into the back, quick! The dogs won't hurt you," he said, and flew up the stairs, bursting into Mrs. Pinder's prison.

The room in which Mrs. Pinder had been confined was empty. There was no sign of the doctor or of the woman. He came down into the hall again and ran to the front door. As he opened the door, he saw Chesney's big car going full speed towards the closed gates. There was a crack and a crash, the gates flew open, and the tail lights disappeared as the car turned on to the road.

The front room was now blazing. He tried the housekeeper's room: that also was empty. There was no need for further search. Dr. Tappatt had got away, and with him the unhappy mother of Lois.

He rejoined the girl and she told him what had happened before he came into the room.

"That is it," he said bitterly. "The doctor was listening at the door and, thinking he was going to be left in the lurch, decided to make his getaway. When Praye turned your mother from the room he must have put her into the car, and probably unfastened the gate when he heard the fight."

"Where will he have taken her? What will happen?" she asked fearfully.

Her nerve had gone, and she clung to him like a frightened child, and as he held the quivering figure in his arms, the world and all its sordid horrors dropped away from him and for a second he lived in a heaven of happiness.

"Child, child!" His hand trembled as it touched her cheek. "Your mother is not in danger—they dare not."

"I am an hysterical fool!" she sobbed as she rubbed her face against his coat. "But, Michael, mother?"

"Nothing; they will not dare injure her."

The fire had taken hold; great tongues of flame were leaping up from the roof.

"It will burn like tinder. I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" she said, in surprise.

"I mean I'm sorry to see property destroyed. I don't suppose it is insured," was his strange reply. "I'll pull the Buick out of the shed before the fire gets to it."

As they were walking across the yard to the extemporised garage, he caught her arm and drew her from the path, and, looking down, she saw the stiff figure of a dog.

"I had to shoot them," he said, "I used a silencer, because I thought the doctor would hear."

"But they told me you were dead?"

"I'll tell you about it some day," he answered briefly, and gave his whole attention to breaking the lock of the shed.

Presently he hauled out the car and examined the petrol tank.

"There is enough to get us to the nearest village," he said; "the spare tin is full."

He got the car round to the front of the house, and was standing watching the havoc of the flames when the first police cyclist came thunderously from the direction of Whitcomb.

"Nobody is hurt except me," said Michael in answer to the man's enquiry, "and in my case it is only a question of feelings. You didn't pass a car on your way?"

"Yes, I passed a big car, with three or four people in it."

"Which way did they go?"

"They took the Newbury Road."

"Then we also will take the Newbury Road," said Michael.

On the journey back to London he told Lois what had happened to him.

"I pretty well knew that he'd get you out of the house in the night, but I also knew that he couldn't take you far. It was impossible to watch all sides of the house, and besides, it would have been as impossible to get back on foot

in time to intercept him. As I expected, the house was empty when I made my search. I had formed a plan which was fairly elementary. When he showed me the underground cellar room, I slipped a spare gun and a small kit of tools amongst the bedding, for I guessed that would be the place he would put me—that is, if he managed to catch me. Honestly, I don't believe he thought of drugging me until I suggested it myself, and then he did his work in the most clumsy way. He told me that he heard somebody moving outside in order to distract my attention, and of course my attention was distracted. When he had dropped the dope into my coffee, I had a little distraction of my own. I found an excuse to go out into the yard, poured away the coffee, and when I came back I stood in the doorway, giving him the impression that I was drinking. I was standing and he was sitting, so he couldn't tell whether there was coffee in the cup or not. But he was so smugly satisfied that he did what I knew he would do—'lured' me down into the underground room—and I was glad to be lured. I knew that the moment I was safely under lock and key, he would bring you back again. I had cached my gun and tools, and when he came in and found me unconscious, he did not trouble to search the room again. If he had, he would have been shocked to have had a most unpleasant beating from the helpless creature on the bed!"

"But how did you get out?"

"That was easy. Almost any key could have opened that old-fashioned lock, and I came prepared with several. I waited all day because I was certain that he would not bring you back until night. The handcuffs were the most difficult part; I hadn't a key to fit them. It took me two hours' hard work and a nearly dislocated thumb to slip them off."

They stopped at an all-night filling station, replenished the tank, and continued their way to London.

"I know one person who will be happy to-night," said Michael, as the car sped up the Bayswater Road. "I wonder whether she got the day off?"

"Whom do you mean?" asked the girl, aroused from an unpleasant reverie.

"Miss Elizabeth Smith."

"Mr. Dorn, do you really think that there's no danger to my mother?" she asked, for the moment oblivious to everything except the woman's danger.

"None, I should imagine," he said.

The car stopped before the house in Charlotte Street, and Mr. Mackenzie answered the knock.

"Have you Miss Smith with you?" he asked after he had welcomed the girl.

"Lizzy?" said Lois in surprise. "She wasn't with me. I haven't seen her. Why do you ask?"

"She went to Gallows Farm with his lordship."

"With his lordship?" said Michael, in surprise. "Do you mean Lord Moron?"

"They left at eight o'clock," said the old man, "in a hired car."

Michael and the girl were in the old man's room when he gave them this information and the two exchanged glances. Here was an unforeseen complication.

"I saw no sign of a car, hired or otherwise," he said. "And Moron—phew!" He whistled.

"Perhaps they lost their way," suggested Lois, and he seemed prepared to accept the suggestions.

"If you don't mind, Miss Reddle, I'll wait here until they have returned," he said, and then: "You don't wish to call up Lady Moron, I suppose?"

Lois shuddered.

"No, no, not that terrible woman."

"So you know—or rather, you guess?"

Lois shook her head.

"I know nothing. The whole thing is a mystery to me. It is so confusing that I think I should go mad, only I'm so grateful to be here," she smiled, and held out her hand. "And I knew that it would be you who would come for me, just as I know it will be you who will restore my mother to me."

He took her hand and held it, his eyes searching hers.

"I'm going to tell you something," he said in a low voice. They were alone in the little room, and she felt her heart beating in time with the cheap American clock on the table. "I suppose I really oughtn't to say anything," he said, "because I have no right. But I feel if I don't tell you I may never have another opportunity."

She had dropped her eyes before his, but now she looked at him again.

"I love you," he said simply. "I can't marry you, I won't ask you to marry me, and that is what makes this folly of mine all the more mad! But I want you to believe that it has been a happiness to work for you."

"For me?" she said. "Why, of course, you've worked very hard for me."

"And I have been paid very well," was the disconcerting rejoinder. "But I would do it again and pay all the money I have in the world for the privilege."

Suddenly he released her hand, and when she smiled up at him he, too, was smiling.

"Two declarations of love in one night is more than any reasonable girl can expect," he said flippantly.

"One declaration of love," she said in a low voice, "and one offer of marriage—quite different, isn't it?"

"I'm not an authority on these matters," he said with a sigh, and looked up at the loud-ticking clock.

Michael saw the hour and frowned.

"I'm rather worried about these people; where on earth can they have got? You don't feel worried about sleeping here to-night alone—if you have to sleep alone?"

She shook her head.

"I'm troubled about Lizzy," she said. "Poor Lord Moron! I wonder what his mother would say if she knew."

"She probably knows," said Michael.

It was at that moment they heard Lizzy's voice in the hall and the sound of feet on the stairs.

Lois ran out to the landing and looked down into the lighted hall.

"Michael!" she called wildly, and he was at her side. "Look—oh, look!" she said in a hushed voice.

And Michael Dorn looked—and wondered!

CHAPTER XXXV

As the gates burst open violently and the car lurched on to the road, Lizzy pulled her companion back to the shadow of the wall. At that moment a man came flying through the gateway and leapt upon the running-board. Again the car slowed perceptibly.

"He's there," whispered Lizzy fiercely. "Quick—luggage rack!"

In an instant she was flying after the machine, caught the iron rail of the rack and sprang on. The car was gathering speed as Selwyn Moron stumbled forward, his hand gripping the rail, his legs moving faster than nature had intended. Kneeling down, Lizzy caught him by a garment which ladies do not mention, let alone grab, and hauled him up to her side, breathless, almost dead.

"Hold tight!" she squeaked in his ear, and there was need for the caution, for the car was bumping from side to side over the uneven road, at a speed beyond her computation.

"A thousand miles an hour!" she jerked into his ear, and he nodded his complete agreement.

Now they were on the post road. The bumping had ceased, and the machine was going even faster. Lizzy held tight to the luggage support and adopted an attitude of passive fatalism. Once a motor-cyclist snapped past, going in the other direction, and she had a glimpse of a uniform cap. It was a policeman, but by the time she realised the fact he was out of sight.

The seat was most uncomfortable. She began to realise the sensations of a herring on a gridiron and wondered if the luggage-rack would leave the same marks.

Selwyn was trying to whisper to her; he had recovered most of his breath and all his sense of obligation.

"What about that car of ours? We hired it by the hour," he whispered hoarsely, and she put her lips to his ear.

"Shaddles will pay," she said gaily, and found a delight in the prospect.

A little while later the car stopped, and the two unauthorised riders got ready to jump. Peeping round the back of the machine, Lizzy saw the cause of the delay. They had pulled up at a sort of sentry-box and one of the party was unlocking the door. She knew that the hut was an automobile station equipped with a telephone, before she heard a muffled voice speaking. Presently the telephoner came out.

"All right," he said, as he climbed in and the car started again.

They had not gone twenty miles when, to her surprise, the machine slackened its speed again, slowed almost to a halt, and then turned suddenly through a pair of old gates that had been opened for them. She felt a communicated excitement from her companion as he bent over towards her.

"Old family estate," he whispered. "Country seat and all that sort of thing! Knew it as soon as I saw the gates."

"Whose?" she asked cautiously.

"Mine," was the surprising reply.

And then, feeling that he had overstated the case, he added:

"Her ladyship's really. Beastly house—never liked it. Moron Court, Newbury. Rum place—;"

They passed up a long avenue of elms, going slower and slower. Selwyn tapped her on the shoulder and dropped off the rack, and, recognising his wisdom, she followed, darting into the shadow of an elm only just in time, for at that moment the car stopped and the voice of Lady Moron sent a shiver down the back of her son.

"Go to the west entrance: you'll find nobody there. What were you doing in Somerset, Chesney?"

"I will tell you later," he said shortly.

The car passed on and the two watchers saw the tall woman walking slowly in its wake. How had she known they were coming? And then Lizzy remembered the car stopping at the telephone box on the side of the road.

"Queer old crib, eh?" Moron was whispering. "See that bump in the roof? That's the alarm bell—works from the music-room...in case of fire and all that sort of thing."

They waited till Lady Moron had disappeared from sight, then they followed cautiously. The west entrance was reached through a glass-covered porch, and the door was closed when they came up to it. Moron smiled benignly at the girl, and took a small object from his pocket.

"Pass-key," he whispered, so loudly that he would have been heard if there had been a listener.

Inserting the key, he turned it and signalled the girl to follow. Before them stretched a vista of red-carpeted corridor; a light burnt in a ceiling lamp at the farther end. Moron crept along with extravagant caution, and he was

half- way up the passage when he stopped and raised a warning finger, pointing energetically to a door before he beckoned her past it. A little farther along was a broad marble staircase. Up this he went, with Lizzy, feeling like a conspirator, at his heels.

They must have presented a terrifying sight. White from head to foot, their faces were masks of dust. Lizzy's crumpled hat hung drunkenly over one ear. At the top of the stairs was another corridor, with the same meagre illumination. He drew her head to his.

"That is the gallery of the music-room!" He indicated a small door. "For heaven's sake don't make a row," he implored her, and opened the door an inch at a time.

The door itself was shadowed by the broad musicians' balcony from the light in the room below. They heard voices talking as they came in, and, keeping flat to the wall, they edged forward until it was dangerous to go any farther. Then Selwyn gave a start that nearly betrayed their presence. Turning, he communicated what he had seen.

"She's not there—Miss Reddle, I mean. It's an elderly lady with white hair."

"So you have seen your daughter, Mrs. Pinder?"

"Yes, madam, I have seen Lois."

Lois! Lizzy clapped her hand over her mouth. Lois Reddle's mother, and her name was Pinder!

"A very beautiful girl," said Lady Moron suavely.

"A dear, sweet girl! I am very proud, whatever happens to me."

"What do you think will happen to you?"

"I don't know, but I am prepared for anything now."

Lizzy glanced at her comrade. He was staring open-mouthed into the hall below.

"She is too pretty a daughter to lose. Now, Mrs. Pinder, I am going to make you an offer. I want you to take your daughter to South America. I will pay you a yearly sum, more than sufficient for your needs. If you undertake to do that, you will never be troubled again."

Mary Pinder smiled and shook her head.

"Madam, your offer comes too late. Had it been made whilst I was still a prisoner, had it been supported by any efforts to obtain my release from that

cruel punishment, I would have gone on my knees and thanked you and blessed you. But now I know too much."

"What do you know?" asked Lady Moron.

And then Mrs. Pinder began to speak, and as she went on, Lizzy gripped the hand of the man at her side, and laid her face against his arm. He turned round once during the narrative, his weak face transfigured, and smiled down at her, as though he read in her gesture all that her heart conveyed. Mrs. Pinder spoke without interruption, and, when she had finished:

"You know a great deal too much for my comfort, madam," said her ladyship's voice, "and much too much for the safety of my friends."

"So I realise," said Mary Pinder gravely.

"I repeat my offer. I would advise you to think well before you reject your chance of safety."

"Look here, Leonora—;" began Chesney Praye.

"Be silent. I have found one friend to-night—one I can trust. It is not you, Chesney. The doctor has told me all that has happened. You thought you would go behind my back and forestall me. To-night you will do as you're told. Now, madam—do you accept my offer?"

"No," was Mrs. Pinder's reply.

Lady Moron turned to the red-faced doctor. He nodded.

"Now, Mrs. Pinder," he said, advancing to her, his tone jovial, his manner friendly, "why can't you be sensible? Do as her ladyship asks you."

"I will not—;"

He was near to her now. Suddenly his hand shot out and strangled the scream in her throat. She struggled desperately, madly, but there was no denying those relentless hands. Chesney Praye took half a step forward, but Lady Moron's arm barred him.

And then came the interruption. A wild-looking, dust-stained man, unrecognisable to any, leapt from the balcony and gripped the doctor by the shoulders from behind. As Tappatt staggered back, releasing his hold upon his victim, Selwyn sprang to the long red bell-cord that hung on the side of the wall, and pulled. From overhead came a deafening clang. Again he pulled.

"You fool, you madman, what are you doing?"

His mother rushed towards him, but he pushed her back. Presently he ceased.

"That's the alarm bell. We'll have all the house and half the village in here in a minute. And I don't want to say before them what I'm saying to you now." He pointed an accusing finger at his mother. "You think I'm a fool, and perhaps you're right. But I'm not a wicked fool, and I'm going to send you and your damnable friend before a judge!"

"Get him away quick!" screamed the countess, as a patter of feet came along the corridor. "I can say it was an accident."

"Don't touch him!"

A girl, almost as great a scarecrow as the panting Selwyn, was leaning over the balcony.

"You can tell them what you like, but you can't tell them anything they'll believe after they've heard me!"

The door was pushed open at that moment, and a man half-dressed came running in, and stopped dead, gaping at the scene that met his eyes. Almost immediately the doorway was filled with dishevelled men and women.

"Is there any trouble, my lady?"

"None," she said sharply, and pointed to the door. "Wait outside."

She looked up at the girl in the gallery.

"I think you would be well advised to ask my son to change his plans," she said, in the same calm, even voice which Selwyn knew so well. "The matter can be adjusted to-morrow. Selwyn, go back to your friend and take this lady with you."

Mrs. Pinder was sitting on a chair, her frail frame shaking convulsively, while Selwyn strove to comfort her. At Lady Moron's words she stood up, and, with the man's arm about her, passed into the crowded corridor, and in a few seconds Lizzy Smith had joined them.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Leonora, Countess of Moron, paced her long dressing-room, her hands behind her, a calm, speculative woman, for emotion did not belong to her. Chesney Praye and the doctor she had left in the music-room, and through the windows that overlooked the stone porch at the front of the house she had, a few minutes before, seen the car pass which carried Mary Pinder to happiness and freedom.

Lady Moron felt no resentment against any save the weakling son she had hated from his birth. There was still a hope that the wheel would turn by some miracle in her favour. All she had played for, all she had won, was gone. It was the hour of reparation and judgment, not yet for her the hour of penitence.

Opening a little safe that was set in the wall, concealed by a silver barometer, she took out a tiny box and shook on to the table a folded sheet of newspaper and a key. This she put into her bag. From the back of the safe she pulled to view a small automatic pistol, and, jerking back the cover to assure herself that it was loaded, fixed the safety catch. This too went into the bag. Then she rang the bell, and her scared maid answered after a long interval.

"Tell Henry that I wish the Rolls to be at the door in ten minutes," she said, and at the end of that time, with her cloak wrapped about her shoulders, she stepped into the car, pausing only to give directions. "Charlotte Street," she said, and gave the number.

She turned over in her mind the events of the past few weeks, striving to discover the key flaw of her plan. Some force had been working against her. Dorn was the instrument, but behind that was a power the identity of which she could not imagine.

The car ran through the deserted streets of Reading along the long road to Maidenhead. Still her problem was not solved. Who was behind Dorn? She had for him a certain amount of admiration. She had known, the moment he came into the case, that the little men who had seemed so big, Chesney Praye and the doctor, were valueless.

The car came noiselessly to the door of Lois Reddle's home. She looked up at the lighted windows and was slightly amused. Selwyn would be there, basking in the approval of the bourgeoisie. Even her feeling of bitterness towards him had been blunted on the journey. This was to be the last throw.

Old Mackenzie, on his way up to Lizzy's kitchenette to brew more coffee, heard the knock and called to Lizzy:

"There's somebody at the door, miss: will you open it for me?"

A transfigured Lizzy, dustless and tidy, ran down the stairs two at a time and pulled open the door. At first she did not recognise the woman, and then:

"You can't come in here, ma'am," she said.

"I wish to see Miss Reddle," said the countess. "Please don't be ridiculous!"

She had still an overawing effect upon Lizzy, and the girl stood on one side, and followed the leisurely figure up the stairs.

The door of Mackenzie's room was open, and as she walked into the chamber, a sudden silence fell upon the gathering. She looked from face to face and smiled. But the smile faded when her eyes rested upon the man who sat by the plain deal table near the window.

"Mr. Shaddles!" she faltered.

He nodded.

"So it was you? I might have guessed that."

"Yes, madam, it was I. My family have been the Moron lawyers for hundreds of years, and it was not likely that I should cease to study their interests."

"It was you!" she said again. "I should have guessed that. You opposed my marriage to Lord Moron."

He nodded.

"I should have opposed it more if I had known what I know now," he said. "Will you be seated?"

She nodded and sat down, her bag on her knees, opened. Michael Dorn stood by the lawyer's side, and his eyes never left her face.

"Well, I suppose everybody knows now?" said the countess pleasantly.

"Nobody knows—yet. I particularly asked Miss Smith, when she called me on the 'phone, not to tell the story until I came. It is not a long story, madam, if you will permit me?"

She nodded.

"The late Earl of Moron married twice," said Shaddles. "By his first wife he had a son, William. By his second wife—which is your ladyship—a son, Selwyn, who is with us to-night. William was a high-spirited, honourable young man, who served Her Majesty Queen Victoria in a regiment of

Highlanders. He was a thought romantic, and nothing was more natural than that, when he met Mary Pinder—;"

"Mary Pinder!" gasped Lois, but he did not notice the interruption.

"—; when he met Mary Pinder, who was then a very beautiful girl of seventeen or eighteen, he should fall in love with her. He did not reveal his identity. He had a craze for walking tours, and at that time was travelling through Hereford—not under his own name, which was Viscount Craman, but under the name of Pinder, which was his mother's maiden name. He met the girl several times without telling her who he was, and married her by special licence, in the name of Pinder, intending to reveal his status after the marriage. They had been living together for a month, when he was suddenly called home by the illness of his father, and arrived in Scotland to find the late Earl dying of malignant scarlet fever. By a cruel fate, William was infected with the disease and died two days after his father, leaving his widow ignorant alike of his identity and where he was staying.

"As he was dying, he told his stepmother, the present Lady Moron, the story of his marriage, and begged her to send for his wife. This she refrained from doing, especially when she learnt that the girl did not know where or who he was. Lord Moron, as of course he was then, was buried. Some time after the countess went to Hereford to seek out the widow. Mrs. Pinder was living in the house of an eccentric woman, a drug-taker and slightly mad. The woman had threatened to commit suicide many times, and it happened that on the morning her ladyship arrived in Hereford and made a call at the house to satisfy her curiosity about her stepson's wife, the landlady took the fatal step, and when the caller walked into her room, she found her dead, with a letter on the table announcing why she had committed suicide.

"Lady Moron is a woman of infinite resource. Here, she thought, was an opportunity of removing for ever a possible claimant to the Moron estate. On the table were a number of jewels and some money, which the woman had put there in her madness. Gathering these, her ladyship went into the girl's room. She guessed it was hers when she saw the photograph of William on the mantelpiece, a photograph which was afterwards left in Lois' room to discover if she knew her father. Lady Moron placed the jewels and the poison in an open box, locked it, taking away the key, and also a letter which would not only have established Mrs. Pinder's innocence, but if the part Lady Moron played became public property, would also establish hers! That is the explanation for what would seem at the most to be an indiscretion.

"As you know, Mary Pinder was tried, sentenced to death, and her sentence commuted. In the prison her baby was born and taken in charge by a neighbourfriend—though for some reason it was announced in the newspapers that the child of the 'Hereford murderess' had died. That, at any rate, satisfied Lady Moron, and she made no attempt to verify the story until she learnt by accident one day that Lois Reddle was the missing girl. How

she discovered this I do not pretend to know—I am under the impression that one of her servants was connected with the Reddle family.

"For years," Mr. Shaddles went on, "I have been satisfied in my mind that William was married, and have been trying to find his wife. I saw him soon after he was dead, and there was a gold wedding ring on his little finger, which was not there when he was buried. I also believed that the child was alive, and sought her out. I found that she was working at an office in Leith, and brought her down to my own office so that she should be under my eye, and eventually engaged the cleverest detective I could find to protect her. I then discovered that Lady Moron had some inkling of her identity, and I confess I hesitated when her ladyship suggested that the girl should go to her house as secretary. It was only after consultation with Mr. Dorn that I agreed. I had notified my suspicions to the Home Office, and a special service officer, Sergeant Braime, had been planted in her household to make enquiries, and to discover if she had been foolish enough to preserve the suicide's letter."

He paused.

"I think that is all."

"An excellent story," said Lady Moron, "and in confirmation—;"

She took something from her bag and threw it on the floor.

Dorn stooped and picked up the key and the letter, gave one quick glance at its contents, and handed it to the lawyer.

"And now I have something else to say." There was a dreadful silence. The pistol was in her hand, and the safety-catch had been lowered. "Most people in my position would commit suicide. But it will be very poor satisfaction to me to go out of the world and leave my enemies to triumph. I have a son—of sorts." She smiled across the room to Selwyn, and he met her gaze steadily. "I should not care to leave him behind. Nor this wretched shop-girl"—her eyes sought Lois Reddle's, and instantly her mother was by her side, her frail body interposed between the woman and her vengeance. "That is all," said her ladyship.

And then Selwyn saw a look of horror come into his mother's face. She was staring at the doorway. Little Mackenzie, a tray in his hand, had not seen the new visitor and he put down the tray with a chuckle.

"It's a curious thing—;" he said.

And then he saw the woman with the pistol.

"Martha!"

"My God!" she moaned. "I thought you were dead!"

The room was very quiet.

"I'd have recognised you if I hadn't heard your fine, deep voice," said the old man, blinking at her. "It's Martha, my wife—you've met her, Mr. Shaddles?"

"I thought you were dead!" she said again, and the pistol dropped from her nerveless hand.

"The point is," said the disconsolate Selwyn, "I am in a perfectly painful position, old dear. I'm not Lord anybody; I suppose I'm a Moron of sorts. I'm what you might term a naughty Moron. I'm really not worried about the mater—she's in the south of France, and she's jolly lucky she's not in a hotter place! She's been a perfectly fearful mother to me, and I don't suppose I shall ever see her again, and I don't jolly well want to! She'll probably live to ninety—she's that kind of mother."

"Don't be silly, Selwyn. Of course it makes all the difference!" said Lizzy. "If you'd asked me when you were a real lord and I was a typist—I'm a typist still, for the matter of that—I simply couldn't have allowed you to ruin your career. As it is—;"

They were walking along a quiet by-path of the park when suddenly Lizzy caught him by the arm and swung him round.

"Not that way," she said. "Here's a path through the rhododendrons. They'll never think of coming round here, and there's a perfectly beautiful seat—and at this time of the morning there's nobody about. We can sit and talk—;"

Michael saw the hasty retreat and smiled to himself.

"That's the queerest aspect of the whole case."

"Do you think so?" asked Lois, Countess of Moron. "I know lots of things that are queerer. I had a bill this morning from Mr. Shaddles. He has charged me one pound six shillings for the damage you did to his Ford!"

"He never has?" said the admiring Michael. "What a man! He must have spent ten thousand pounds on this case if he spent a penny. Most of which," he added, "went to me."

"Do you feel repaid?" she asked.

He nodded.

"I shall when your ladyship has said 'thank you.'"

"Haven't I said that yet?" she demanded in feigned surprise. "And please don't say 'ladyship'—you give me the creeps. Well, I'll thank you, now—no, not now."

They paused at the end of a little path.

"Let us go down here," she said. "I think I remember there's a shrubbery at the other end, and a garden seat, and it's hardly likely that at this time of day ..."

THE END