THE TERRIBLE PEOPLE

BY

EDGAR WALLACE

The Terrible People

CHAPTER I

HARRY THE LANCER came into Burton Street Station to show his "brief," for he was out of Dartmoor only that Monday, having served twenty-one months short of seven years.

He slouched in, a scowl on his yellow, scarred face, and produced his document to the station sergeant.

"Henry Beneford, S'ar'nt—convic' on license. Gotta report here—"

And then he saw Inspector Long (or, as they called him, "Betcher,") and his eyes blazed. It was unfortunate in many ways, but most unfortunate for the Lancer, as it proved, that Betcher was present. He had called round to identify a much-desired shoplifter.

"Morning, Inspector. Still alive, I see?"

"And kicking," said Sub-Inspector Arnold Long cheerfully.

The ugly lip of Harry the Lancer curled.

"Wonder your perishin' conscience don't keep you awake at night—you got me seven by lyin' an' artfulness!"

"And I hope to get you another seven," said Betcher cheerfully. "If I had my way, Lancer, I'd put you in a lethal chamber—where they put the other mad dogs. And the world would be a better place."

The long upper lip of the man began to twitch spasmodically. People who knew him best flew to cover at this ominous warning, but though Arnold Long knew him well enough, he was not alarmed.

Truly, the Lancer had been a lancer in His Majesty's Army for eighteen months, at the end of which time he went down for three years for kicking a corporal to unconsciousness. He was a bully, a thief, and a dangerous man. But then, Betcher was also a dangerous man.

"Listen to me, mister. I'm not going to threaten you. I'm not givin' you a chance to send me back to the Awful Place, but what I'm a-goin' to say to you is this: you watch out!"

Betcher smiled.

"You talk too much, Lancer," he said pleasantly. "One of these days you'll be going into Parliament."

The convict was trembling with fury; the twitching upper lip quivered again. He tried to speak but could not, and, turning to the sergeant at the desk, laid down his papers with a hand that shook.

"Clever—you're all clever. People like me are easy to catch—why'n' you get Shelton, hey? All the busies in England can't get him. Not even amachers!"

Betcher did not reply to this, being wholly uninterested in Clay Shelton at the moment. He did, however, recognize that the slighting reference to "amachers" was immediately directed to himself, but that reproach had never worried him, for he was a good professional, as Lancer had reason to know.

Returning to Scotland Yard, he discovered that Mr. Shelton was indeed a vital interest in life.

There was, in truth, no such man in the world as "Clay Shelton." Yet for fifteen years he had been engaged in the forging and uttering of letters of credit, bills of exchange, and other negotiable security. And fifteen years is a long time. "Clay Shelton" was merely a label that indicated his activities— it was the name written in the register of the White Hart Hotel at Dorking on September 3, 1899, by a thin, near-sighted man who took seven thousand pounds out of the Sussex Bank by one of the simplest of tricks and the most elementary of forgeries. It was the first name by which he was known, and it served to mark him on record cards at police headquarters.

Lieutenant-Colonel Hillerby, of the Army Pay Corps, who drew twenty-five thousand seven hundred pounds from the Bank of Africa by means of a forged warrant, was undoubtedly the same gentleman, with a moustache and monocle. The bank detective who, being well acquainted with military matters, suspected this new colonel and followed him to Wynberg was found knifed in a pine wood near Kenilworth, for "Clay" supported his ingenuity with violence.

Fleet-Paymaster Corban-Smith, who took almost the same amount from the Portsmouth and Southern Bank, had no moustache and wore a naval officer's uniform, the left breast of which was gay with medal ribbons.

The bank messenger who walked into the Bank of England and withdrew sixty- five thousand pounds on behalf of the Midland & Western had a gray moustache and Scottish accent. Frederick G. Tennycold, of Chicago, who presented a letter of credit to another branch of the same bank and carried off six thousand, wore horn-rimmed spectacles and the badge of the Knights of Columbus—there were scores of other names that the police entered on his dossier, but officially he was "Clay Shelton."

Inspector Vansittar, a depressed and gloomy man, had an interview with his chief.

"I'm extremely sorry, Vansittar, but you've only had the experience which other officers have had," said the chief, shaking his white head, "and the best I can do for you is to take you off the case and give it to somebody else. Fortunately for you, as I say, every other man who has touched the Shelton forgeries has fallen down."

Mr. Shelton had, three months before, obtained eighteen thousand three hundred and twenty pounds from the Foreign Department of the City of London Bank by means of a forged cable transfer. All the experts agreed that it was the neatest "job" that had ever been done, but whilst police headquarters could offer a detached admiration for a clever piece of work, it was vitally necessary that it should not be repeated.

"We can't catch him because we don't know him," said the inspector, "but mostly because he works alone. Even the cable job was single-handed. The cable advice was forged and delivered in London, and so was the confirmation. A man clever enough to work on his own can only be caught by the act of the Lord! If there was a woman attached to him, if he had a wife or a side partner of any kind, he wouldn't have run fifteen years."

There was an awkward, even a painful, silence here. The chief, liking the officer and desiring to let him down lightly, could think of no way but a harsh one for ending this talk; the inspector had no further excuses.

But there was a suggestion to make, and this he offered.

"I don't believe anybody will catch him unless he makes a bad slip, but there is a man who might—"

He waited for encouragement. Colonel Macfarlane knew just whom he meant, and did not speak, wishing that the responsibility for the suggestion should at least be halved.

"Betcher?" suggested Vansittar, and the Colonel's nose wrinkled.

"Umph! Betcher!" He shook his head disparagingly.

Betcher Long, his vulgar nickname notwithstanding, was a university man, and he was the son of a millionaire in spite of the fact that he was a policeman. Why the son of Sir Godley Long became a policeman at all is too long a story to tell. On a certain gloomy day, he was sent down from Cambridge by an enraged vice-chancellor, his crime being that he had fought and beaten a lowly official of the university, to wit Tom Helpford, the bulldog guardian of a proctor.

Therefore was he sent with ignominy to his parent. And his parent, being rather testy over the matter, advised Arnold Murry Long to go forth into the world and earn his own living. And Betcher obeyed. He turned up at his father's house in Berkeley Square one month later wearing the uniform of a

constable of the Metropolitan Police, and not all the pleadings and stormings of Sir Godley could induce him to change it.

That is most of the story: they called him "Betcher" because that was a favoured challenge of his.

His father did not wash his hands of his only son. He took a certain pride in his eccentricity; was wont to talk at his very exclusive club of "my son, the copper." He had once waylaid Arnold at the corner of Hill Street one foggy night and offered him beer. How Arnold had emptied the can joyously and then threatened to arrest his father for loitering became a legend of clubland.

Because of his wealthy associations, authority would have kept Arnold walking a beat, being fearful of a charge of favouritism and the questions which would be inevitably raised in Parliament if he received promotion out of his turn. Yet in two years he was a sergeant, and not an ill-natured question could be asked, for he had taken Lew Fredding, wanted for lifting a quarter of a million dollars from the New York Security Bank, and had followed up this exploit by tackling with his bare hands those notorious gunmen, Sullivan and Veilt, after the killing of Parlyvoo Smith, the informer. Nothing could hold back his stripes after that. Scotland Yard transferred him to the Criminal Investigation Department, where he would be overshadowed by greater men. Driving home one night in the fog, he overtook a man with a limp who, because of the propitious weather, had ventured from his hiding place for a little exercise. Betcher stopped his car, jumped out, and, miraculously avoiding two bullets, arrested with some difficulty Ernie Budlow, bank robber and blackmailer, "wanted" on six distinct charges.

"Luck!" said the Yard, but they had to give him an acting inspectorship because the Home Secretary made the recommendation over his own sprawling signature.

He was not the ideal of Scotland Yard. They did not hold him up as a model for young detectives to follow. He had, he admitted, been so often on the carpet that he had worn a hole in it. Suspension from duty had come his way; a severe reprimand, afterward expunged from his "sheet," had blotted his record; and once he had earned the censure of a judge for his unconstitutional methods.

In height he was sixty-nine inches, and gave the impression that he was rather thin. He could run like a hare but more intelligently; as a boxer, he held the amateur championship for two years; he could climb like a cat, and had something of the cat's sensitiveness. He called himself English to annoy Macfarlane, the chief, who never allowed the word "English" to pass where "British" would serve.

His face was thin and long and had an everlasting smile, for life and the world were a great joke. When the Boylans caught him off Limehouse Reach and gave him five minutes to prepare himself for a rapid translation to another world, his white teeth showed in glee.

"You don't kill me for a thousand—betcher!"

And they didn't. He swam two miles with hands and feet tied, and when he was rescued by the Thames police, the first words that came from his chattering teeth (the time was mid-January and the river was full of ice) were: "I'll get Joe Boylan in twenty-four hours—betcher a thousand!" And Joe he caught.

Colonel Macfarlane might well wrinkle his nose at the thought of putting Betcher Long on the Shelton case. In England the third degree is unknown—Betcher had invented a fourth. Did he not hold the head of Lew Brayley until he confessed where he had hidden the small son of Mr. John Brisbane, the millionaire shipowner, kidnapped and held for ransom? Was it not Betcher who earned the censure of a High Court judge for breaking open the safe of Lester Glommen and securing there from the proof, and the only proof obtainable, of his connection with the Texan oil swindle which was so profitable to Lester that he might have retired a very rich man in a few months?

"Betcher?" The chief pulled at his lower lip thoughtfully. "I daren't do it! Betcher would do something outrageous, and the kick would come back to this office... Still..."

He mused on the matter all day, and at five o'clock in the evening Mr. Arnold Long was summoned to his superior's bureau.

Betcher listened with his set grin.

"No, sir, I don't want to see the papers—I know Shelton's record by heart. Give me three months and I'll put him where he'll keep regular hours."

"Don't be too sure, Mr. Long!" warned the Colonel.

"Betch—I mean I'm pretty sure," said Arnold respectfully.

So, with many admonitions, warnings, and sundry words of good advice, Betcher Long went forth and reported to the Chairman of the Bankers' Association.

CHAPTER II

ONE fine spring morning, Mr. Shelton strolled down Lombard Street, a thoroughfare entirely devoted to banking establishments; and as he walked, gently swinging his tightly rolled umbrella, he allowed his fancy to roam back through the ages, when this little street had been packed tight with the houses of Germanic money-lenders, and the Lombard rooms, or lumber rooms as the word had been corrupted, were crowded with the pledged furniture of their clients.

He paused before a building that was dour and mean-looking in spite of its polished granite face, and stared up, as a tourist might stare, at its monotonous rows of windows.

"What is this place?"

A City policeman stood in the roadway near the edge of the sidewalk, and the City policeman is a guide-book as well as an incomparable director of traffic.

"City & Southern Bank, sir," he said.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Shelton mildly, and gazed at the building with, as it seemed to the policeman, a new respect.

A car drove up; the chauffeur jumped out and opened the door, and there alighted first a very pretty girl, and then an elderly, sallow-faced woman, and lastly a good-looking young man with a black moustache and a monocle, and carrying his glossy silk hat in his hand, for the height of the car roof had made its wearing a precarious business.

They passed into the bank and the policeman strolled up to the chauffeur.

"How long will they be before they come out?" he asked.

"Five minutes," said the chauffeur, stretching himself comfortably.

"If they're any longer, pull out and park." The policeman gave the driver some instructions and strolled back to the sightseer.

"You a stranger to London, sir?" he asked.

Mr. Shelton nodded.

"Yes, I've just come back from South America. I've been there twenty-five years. The Argentine Bank is somewhere along here, isn't it?"

The policeman pointed, but Mr. Shelton made no attempt to continue his walk.

"It is very difficult to believe that in this street are stored millions and millions of gold."

The policeman smiled sardonically.

"I've never seen any of it," he said, "but there's no doubt—"

He stopped and his hand went halfway up to a salute. A taxicab had drawn in behind the car, a young man had jumped out. He flashed a reproachful grin at the policeman, took in Mr. Shelton with one comprehensive glance. and disappeared into the bank.

"Who was that—a police officer?" For Shelton had detected the interrupted salute.

"No, sir, he's a City gentleman I know," replied the officer, and strolled off to give instructions to the taxi-driver.

Betcher Long passed into the bank, was attracted for a second by a pretty face at one of the tellers' desks, and disappeared into the holy of the general manager's office. A stout little man, completely bald, rose and shook hands vigorously.

"I'll only keep you a minute, Long," he said. "I've got a customer to see."

He darted out of the room and was gone a few minutes and returned rubbing his hands, a smile on his rubicund face.

"There's a woman of character," he said, shaking his head ecstatically. "Did you notice her?"

"I thought she was rather pretty," replied Betcher, and Mr. Monkford was good-naturedly impatient.

"That was the secretary. The elderly woman I'm talking about—Miss Revelstoke. She's been one of my customers for nearly thirty years. You ought to meet her; she's a character. The young man with her is her lawyer. He's a bit of a dude, but he's one of the rising men in the law."

There was in the manager's office a foot square of unclouded glass, which commanded a view of the long counter at which the three people were standing. The elderly lady was counting with great deliberation a bundle of notes that had been passed across to her by the teller, and the girl, a little bored, he thought, was gazing up at the beautifully carved ceiling of the bank. It was an unusual face: that was his first impression. Certain types of prettiness are commonplace, but there was a distinction in her face, a vitality that was arresting. He hardly noticed the smiling young man at Miss Revelstoke's elbow. And then, suddenly, her eyes met his, and for a second

they looked at each other with an absorbed interest. As quickly, she turned, and he became conscious that the banker was speaking.

"...I don't suppose you'll ever catch him; I don't suppose anybody will catch him. He's like an eel, that fellow! My theory is that he's a member of a very clever gang

"I wish to Heaven he was," smiled Betcher. "You can drop that idea, Mr. Monkford. There is no honour amongst thieves—only amongst good thieves. The man is working single-handed, and that is his biggest asset."

The banker had taken from a drawer of his desk a large portfolio, which he laid on the table.

"Here are all the facts, not only relating to the City & Southern, but to every bank that has been victimized by this man," he said. "All his original signatures are here, but I don't think they will teach you much. The 'm's' are similar—"

"All 'm's' are similar," interrupted Arnold Long. "It is the one letter of the alphabet that has no character."

He spent half an hour examining the dossier and found no profit in his inspection.

"I notice that these documents have been tested for finger prints?"

Mr. Monkford nodded.

"That is one of the features of every forgery. The left hand, which kept the document steady, was invariably gloved."

When Betcher came out of the bank, he looked left and right, undetermined as to which way he should go, and at last decided to go toward Gracechurch Street and make a call at a shipping office in Fenchurch Street. At the corner of Gracechurch and Lombard streets he saw a slim, elderly man standing, apparently absorbed in the streaming traffic. He was looking sideways at the stranger as he passed, and Betcher read the message of that scrutiny. It was only for a fraction of a second, but as plainly as words could speak, those gray, watchful eyes said: "I know you: you are a detective!"

Betcher experienced a little shock, but could neither analyze its genesis nor find a reason. He crossed the road to Fenchurch Street and turned to buy a newspaper. The man was still there, a well-dressed, debonair colonel of infantry he might have been, with his white felt hat and his well-fitting tweed suit. Betcher purposely gave the boy a shilling in order to have an excuse for waiting for the change, and in that time he took stock of the stranger. A City swindler of some kind; one of the little army of men who thrive on questionable enterprises. He had caught in that one glimpse of the

man's mind a hint of resentment as well as knowledge. For a second he had a mind to return and find an excuse for speaking to the man. But he was a Scotland Yard man in the City of London. The City has its own detective force and is jealous of encroachment.

As he stood, the figure in gray hailed a passing taxicab, which turned up Lombard Street and disappeared. It was hardly out of sight when, acting on an impulse, Betcher Long called a cab.

"Lombard Street," he said quickly, "and keep well behind the yellow taxi. You'll catch him up in the block before the Mansion House."

Presently the taxi came in sight, and, holding the outspread newspaper which hid his face, he saw his prey look back through the peephole.

That night, when Colonel Macfarlane was leaving his office, a jubilant young man intercepted him.

"Call me lucky!" he chortled. "I've found Clay Shelton."

"You never have!" gasped the Commissioner. "Betcher!" said Mr. Long promptly.

CHAPTER III

A WEEK later, as Mr. Clay Shelton was passing through the dingy little town of Chelmsford, he had an inspiration—a sudden unaccountable fear that depressed him so much that for a second he could not breathe naturally. He threw his gear into neutral, pressed his foot slowly on the brake and came to a halt by the side of the road. On his right was a high wall of dingy red, and, standing back from the roadway, a grim, black gate.

Mr. Shelton stroked the white moustache he had so carefully cultivated for the past six months.

Chelmsford Jail. He must have seen the place without realizing that he had seen it, and the depression lay at the end of a chain of subconscious reasoning.

A little wicket door set in the black gate opened and a warder came out, and then four men and another warder. The four men wore ordinary civilian clothing, but they were chained together. Convicts on their way to Dartmoor, Mr. Shelton mused. They would be in London in time to catch the one o'clock train for Plymouth. The wicket gate remained open. The jailer at the door and the warder in charge discussed something. What it was Mr. Shelton guessed when a taxicab came furiously from the town end of the Colchester Road and pulled up at the prison gate. The prisoners were bundled in, one of the warders with them; the other took his seat by the driver's side and the cab went away.

"Humph!" said Shelton thoughtfully, and stroked his moustache again.

Stepping on the starter, he turned his machine and went back to Chelmsford and, stopping his car at the Saracen's Head, got out. There was a booksellers' and stationers' shop which had a notice in its window:

He went into the shop, asked for a blank, and filled it up. There was some delay here, for the only person in the shop at this early hour was a youthful assistant who had begun his employment that day and was strange to the routine. Eventually the necessary forms were discovered.

"That is to go in the personal column of the Times," he said, and paid the fee.

The youth took the blank and read it carefully, though there was little need for care, for every word was printed. Mr. Shelton went on his way with a lighter heart, and the young man who had accepted the advertisement put it for safety between the pages of a book he had been reading, and which he was still reading, to the neglect of his duties, when his new employer came upon the scene and in a fit of choler discharged him.

When he jerked back to its shelf Mr. Anthony Trollope's fascinating study of clerical life, he filed away unconsciously the advertisement. Mr. Shelton's lightness of heart was, in the circumstances, premature.

Outside of Colchester, Shelton drove his machine into a side lane, took from a locker beneath the seat a compact suitcase in which were the change of clothing, the scissors, cream, and razor that would in the shortest possible time change him into a rather seedy-looking person, and, having examined every article with care, he walked jauntily to the place where the tramcars start, boarded one, and was jerked uncomfortably to the centre of the town—Colchester being notably unhappy in its street transportation.

Ten o'clock was striking as he entered the premises of the Eastern Counties Bank.

He laid down a paper and a book, and the spectacled clerk examined both carefully before he disappeared into the office of his manager. When he came back it was with the respectful and apologetic smile of one who found that his worst fears were without foundation.

"Seven thousand six hundred," he said cheerfully. "How will you have this, Colonel Weatherby?"

"In hundreds," said Mr. Shelton.

Pads of notes came into view, the cashier's finger moved with extraordinary rapidity; he scribbled the numbers in his book.

"Thank you," he said.

Mr. Shelton turned, putting the notes into his breast pocket. There were two men in the room, and one passing through the swing doors. The first of these was a weary-looking gentleman who supported himself at the counter. At him Shelton did not look; but the man with his back to the door, showing his white teeth in a smile. "'Morning, Shelton."

Betcher Long—of all people in the world! Shelton stopped, his face outthrust, at bay.

"Do you want to talk to me? My name is not Shelton."

Arnold Long nodded; he took off his hat and ran his fingers through his black hair.

"Thought I would," he said.

And then Shelton leapt at him.

In a second three men were struggling on the floor. Up to his feet came Shelton; the second policeman fumbled and bungled all the time in Betcher's way. And then the weary man at the counter took a hand, and thrust into the tangle of whirling arms and straining bodies.

"Here, I say! Confound it!"

There was a deafening explosion, the second policeman went down on the tessellated floor, bleeding hideously. "Put that pistol down or I'll shoot!"

Shelton turned his head. The bespectacled clerk covered him with a heavy army revolver, and his hand was wonderfully steady. There had recently been a war, in which bespectacled bank clerks had learnt to kill people with the greatest nonchalance.

Betcher Long snapped cold irons on the wrist of the white-faced man. Two uniformed policemen came into the office whilst the clerk was 'phoning the hospital.

"I want you for forgery," said Arnold; looked down at the limp heap and the widening circle of blood, and then:

"Thought you never carried a gun?"

Shelton said nothing, and the detective turned to the languid stranger who had intervened.

"Thank you, sir. I'm obliged to you." And then, recognizing the helper:

"You're Mr. Crayley, aren't you?"

The face of this man of fashion who had intervened in the fight was the colour of chalk; his yellow moustache drooped pathetically.

"Might have been killed, by gad!" he croaked. "Did my best for you. Let me know if I can do anything more. Is he dead?"

"I guess so." Betcher stared gloomily at the still figure. "Wish you hadn't done that, Shelton. But it will be easier to prove than the other murders. We'll take him to the station house before the crowd get him. Show me the back way out of here."

The manager led the party through his private office to a courtyard at the back of the bank. A small gate led to a narrow street, where a car and two policemen were waiting. Betcher had planned this exit.

He pushed his prisoner into the machine and followed. Where had Shelton seen manacled men thrust into a cab? At Chelmsford—a thousand years ago!

CHAPTER IV

ON THE 14th of June, Inspector Arnold Long left London at five o'clock on a perfect morning, when the sun was shining and every cottager's garden he passed was ablaze with blue and gold. The roads were empty save for the farmers' lorries, and he came into Chelmsford before a shop was open, and only the labourers on their way to the fields to speculate upon his haste.

He had passed through a little village and was speeding down a straight road that ran between green fields when he passed a man sitting on the top of a field gate. In that instant he recognized the idler, and, jamming on his brakes, went at reverse and ran back to where he had seen the man. He was still sitting on the top rail, a cigarette drooping limply from his lips, and met the astonished gaze of the detective without embarrassment.

"Good-morning, Lancer. Have you taken to the agricultural life?"

The Lancer took out his cigarette, looked at it thoughtfully, and threw it away.

"Doin' any harm to anybody?" he demanded truculently.

"Are you on the road?" Betcher asked politely, using the term which most euphemistically described a tramp.

"I've got a job, if you want to know—a good job!" There was a queer expression on the Lancer's face. "Where you off to—blood'ound?"

Arnold Long smiled—he hadn't dreamt that he would smile that morning.

"Thief-catching, Lancer." He looked round the deserted fields. The only building in sight was a big black barn. "You haven't slept out, I'll swear! And you haven't walked far—there is no dust on your boots. Lancer, what is the game?"

But the Lancer did not reply. With a gesture he waved his hand toward distant Chelmsford, and, chuckling to himself, Arnold Long went on his way.

His car drew up before the black dates of Chelmsford Jail as the clock was striking seven. He rang the bell and was admitted to a little lobby, whence he was conducted by a warder along a narrow passage out of which opened a door.

The Governor was in his tiny office, alone, for neither the under-Sheriff nor the other officials peculiar to such an occasion had arrived.

"The chaplain is with him now. I hope it isn't going to be very painful for you—I hate these affairs!" Arnold nodded.

"I've been praying all the way down from London that he'd change his mind and wouldn't see me."

The Governor shook his head.

"I don't think that's likely," he said. "The last question he put to me last night was whether you were coming. I told him I'd sent the request to the Home Office, and that I'd had a telegram to say that you would be here this morning."

He rose from his chair, and the detective followed him along the corridor, down two steps, the end of which was barred by a heavy steel door. This the Governor opened, and they were in a large hall, lined on both sides with three tiers of doors. Outside the cell nearest them when they had entered a warder was on duty. The cell door itself was ajar, and a gleam of light showed from the interior.

"Wait," said the Governor, and went into the cell.

Presently he came out and beckoned Long, and, with a heart that beat a little faster, Arnold went into the chamber of death.

Shelton sat on his bed, his hands in his pockets. He was in his shirt-sleeves and colourless. His face was covered with a gray beard, and the detective would not have recognized him.

"Sit down, Long. Give him a chair, will you?"

But Inspector Long stood, waiting—for what?

"I thought I'd see you before I went off."

He took out the cigarette he was smoking and puffed a ring, watching it till it struck the stone roof and was dissipated.

"I've killed four men in my time and never regretted it," he said meditatively. "There was a bank detective in Cape Town, and a bank manager in Bombay. I didn't intend killing this fellow, but the dope I gave him put him out. Then, of course, there was the case in Selby. He trailed me to my houseboat—it was rather a nasty business; you'll find him buried near the two big poplars at Wenham Abbey."

Arnold waited.

"The fourth..." Again Shelton puffed a ring to the ceiling and watched it. "The fourth I will not trouble you about, because it was a singularly unpleasant affair... and rather messy!"

He smiled up at the stern-faced man before him.

"And now I'm going to pay, you think—you're wrong! They will drop me and they will bury me, but I will live! And I will get you, Mr. Betcher Long! I will get every man who brought me to my death!"

Then, seeing the look in the detective's face, he laughed softly.

"You think I'm crazy with the heat! There are things in this world undreamed of in your philosophy, my friend, and the Gallows Hand is one of them!"

His eyes sank to the paved floor and he frowned for a second, then laughed again.

"That is all," he said curtly. "You'll remember that, Mr. Long—the Gallows Hand that will come up from the grave and grip you by the throat sooner or later!"

Long made no reply, and followed the Governor into the big hall.

"What do you make of that?" asked the Deputy, wiping his forehead. He was rather white and shaken. "The Gallows Hand... my God!"

"It won't get me," said Arnold Long, nodding slowly. "And what's more, I'll betcher!"

He did not wait for the end. Just outside Chelmsford is a tiny village with a very old church. He saw the hands approaching the hour, stopped his car, and removed his hat. Suddenly the hour boomed forth, one—two—three—four—five— six—seven—eight.

"God rest the poor gink!" said Betcher Long, for he knew that at that second the soul of Clay Shelton had passed to eternity.

"Gallows Hand!" he mused, and smiled, and at that moment something struck the wind-screen and scattered into fragments.

He jerked the car to a standstill.

Ping!

The second bullet carried away his hat; he felt the wind of the third pass his lips.

In a second he was out of the car, gazing round the placid, smiling countryside. There was nobody in sight, no hedges that could hide an assassin, except-He saw a little hedgerow, above which was a pale vapour of smoke. He sprinted across the meadow which separated him, and as he ran he heard a fourth shot and dropped flat on the ground. No sound of the

bullet came to him, and, rising, he continued to run, zigzagging left and right.

Then he saw something that brought his heart to his mouth. Rising above the grasses near the hedgerow was a great white hand, its stiff fingers convulsively clutching at nothingness.

In a second he had reached the spot. A man lay on his back, his hand thrown up to the smiling sky. By his side was a service rifle which the other hand clutched in the grip of death.

And then Arnold saw the face.

It was Harry the Lancer, and he was dead!

CHAPTER V

HARRY THE LANCER! Arnold Long stared down into the gray face, almost unable to believe the evidence of his eyes. A brief examination showed the cause of the convict's death. He had been shot at close quarters from behind. Betcher picked up the rifle: the barrel was still hot, and there was a live cartridge in the chamber.

A few yards away was the hedge, and beyond this he discovered a steep bank leading down to a sunken road. There was no sign of life here, but the narrow road twisted out of sight fifty yards beyond, and there were wheel tracks on the white dust. He climbed the bank again to where the body lay, and was stooping when he heard the "pop-pop" of a motor-cycle, and caught a glimpse of the leather-covered head of its rider.

He was going along the road where the detective had left his car, and, raising himself, Long signalled the rider to stop. The man, whoever he was, must have seen him, but he did not arrest his speed, though he seemed to slacken a second as he came abreast of the car. In a few seconds, he was out of sight behind the alders that fringed the road.

The detective looked round for help The shots must have been heard. And then he saw in the distance a black barn which seemed peculiarly familiar, and he remembered that it was at this spot on the road that he had seen the Lancer that morning.

There was nothing for it but to drive into the nearest village and procure help. He was more than halfway across the field when he saw a bright, straight tongue of flame leap up from the place where he had stopped his car; there was a deafening explosion, and in a second the air was filled with scraps of flying wood and metal.

Betcher stood still, paralyzed by the shock, and then, sprinting the remainder of the distance, he leapt over the low hedge into the road. His car was a mass of twisted metal and smouldering wood; and then, by great luck, a cyclist policeman came along. He had heard the explosion and, bending over his handlebars, was flying toward the spot. He leapt off his machine as he came abreast of Arnold.

"What's happened to your car—blown up?"

"It has certainly blown up," said Betcher grimly; "and as certainly I am not troubling to look for the bomb that did it!"

"Bomb?" gasped the rural policeman.

The question of his wrecked machine was an unimportant one to Betcher Long. In a few words, he explained the tragedy and guided the policeman to the spot where the man lay.

"There are car marks in the sunken road," said Betcher, "but unless we have an airplane, I doubt whether we can overtake the two gentlemen responsible for this little surprise."

It was five o'clock that night when he came to the Yard and reported, and Colonel Macfarlane listened with a darkened brow.

"The whole thing is inexplicable and, I would have said, impossible," he said. "Shelton was hanged at eight, and there is no doubt about his being dead. You were unable to trace the motor-cyclist or the car?"

Betcher shook his head.

"No, sir, neither the car nor the bomb-thrower was seen, but that is very easily explained. The car could have turned right and doubled back, joining the main road west of Chelmsford. The only machine that passed through the village was a tradesman's Ford, evidently a greengrocer's, for there were baskets of cabbages and potatoes at the back. The cyclist—well, I know what happened to the cyclist. I want to be mysterious for a week or two. Chief, we're up against the Terrible People!"

Macfarlane frowned at him.

"I don't quite get you," he said. "Shelton worked on his own. He ran no gang, he had no friends. And certainly, as far as we know, there is nobody in the world sufficiently interested in the man's fate to care whether he lived or died."

Betcher bit his lip thoughtfully.

"All that is true," he said, "and yet—well, I'm standing for no Gallows Hand; that supernatural stuff doesn't get past me, not by so much as a millimetre! There's going to be trouble—bad trouble! I don't know where it's coming from, but it will be hot and fierce and gory.

The Terrible People will not sit still. They employed the Lancer, knowing he was a pretty good shot, to settle me on my way back from Chelmsford; and he was easy, because he hated me. When they found he'd missed the target, they shot him. If he hadn't missed the target they would have shot him. He was marked for death the moment he took on his dirty work. "

In the months that followed, Betcher Long found a new zest and interest in life. The knowledge of his own danger, the certainty that somewhere behind this lonely forger existed an organization more terrible than any that he had met with or even had read about in the grisly records of police headquarters, gave his step a new spring and brought a new brightness to his eye.

He had trailed the Lancer from the moment he had left Dartmoor; had interrogated the people with whom the convict had been brought into touch; and at every turn he was puzzled. None of the Lancer's acquaintances could give him the slightest clue that would lead to the detection of his employers.

The year that followed was one of fearful happenings. Murder upon murder was planned and carried into execution, and yet no word of these deeds appeared in any newspaper. Only the wise men in that dark building that broods on the Embankment knew of the terror that stalked abroad. Men, famous and notorious, were sent into the vales of death, and no startling headlines dominated the news pages of the London press.

For the Gallows Hand went cunningly to its task and left no trace of its devilish work.

And then, fate brought to Arnold Long's life an even more poignant interest, and, as it proved, a cause for a fear that had been a stranger to him hitherto. For he met the secretary of Miss Revelstoke.

CHAPTER VI

MISS REVELSTOKE was a lady of great age and with few observable fads. She garnished neither her parlour with long-haired dogs of diminutive proportions, nor her person with cameo brooches. She preferred radio concerts to solitaire, and never bought a car until the demonstrator had proved to her satisfaction that the machine could hold the road at sixty-five. A tall woman with a lineless yellow face and black, inscrutable eyes, she had, so far as Nora Sanders knew, no objectionable characteristics, which is remarkable in any lady of wealth who employs a companion-secretary.

The big house in Colville Gardens was from every point of view a perfect setting for such a jewel of a woman. Externally it symbolized Victorianism at its stodgiest phase, for there was a sunken area to it and a stolid stucco porch and step that led up to a highly polished black door. The liver-coloured curtains, the flower boxes in the window sills, the two tubs of well-trimmed box-bush that flanked the doorway—all these things fitted the external view of Miss Revelstoke.

The superficial observer imagined horsehair couches of elegant design and gilt pier glasses and rosy-patterned carpets beyond and behind the baffling curtains. Intimately, Miss Revelstoke belonged to the age in which she lived. Even Nora's room was artistically and tastefully furnished, which was also an unusual experience for a companion-secretary who had slept under garret roofs and had once shared a room with a sentimental housemaid.

One day in midsummer, Miss Revelstoke sat at her little writing table and penned an address in her neat hand, damped the small label with a sponge, and fixed it carefully on the oblong parcel.

"You will find Mr. Monkford a very amusing person," she said, in her precise way; "he has the facetiousness which is peculiar to men of his stature. Stout men are invariably humorous. Even as a branch manager, he erred on the side of flippancy, which, as a rule, is not an asset in a banker. The parcel is rather heavy for you?"

Nora lifted the package. It was lighter in weight than she had expected.

"He will probably ask you to stay to tea. I dine at nine, half an hour later. Mr. Henry is coming to dinner, and I feel sure he will never forgive me if you are not here."

The girl laughed at this. It was a tradition, the nearest to a jest that Miss Revelstoke could approach, that Nora was the reason, whatever might be his excuse, for frequent calls of Miss Revelstoke's good-looking young lawyer.

"Tell Monkford that he need not write—he is very welcome to this horrid negress. I shall be seeing him at 'Little Heartsease' next week. You booked the suite?"

A taxicab carried Nora to Paddington and to the beginning of a new and an amazing experience. Life began when she bought a third-class return for Marlow-on-Thames, since, at the end of the line, and within the confines of that sleepy Georgian town, began her acquaintance with the Terrible People and Betcher Long, that unusual detective.

For her part, "terrible people" would have been illustrated in her mind by a picture of uncouth folks who ate with their knives, or that impossible family she had met on a trip to the fjords, or at worst the bookmaker and his lady wife (one hopes) who lived at No. 705 and came home noisily every morning at three and argued thickly with the cabman.

For the Terrible People were as yet in the stage of secrecy; they were mentioned in confidential minutes, as between the Secretary of State and the Chief Commissioner of the Police. Only Betcher Long spoke of them freely, even cheerfully, just as a man might speak of a plague which happened to be in another country. He gave them their title; though in the guarded minutes that went criss-crossing between Whitehall and Scotland Yard were heard "Very Secret and Confidential. Re a Supposed Illegal Organization Operating to Defeat the Ends of Justice."

Betcher called them plainly the "Terrible People." Sometimes he added adjectives of force and colour.

With no other emotion than one of joy at the prospect of a day in the out-of-doors, Nora came to Marlow.

Harry, the boatman at Meakes, straightened his back, wiped his forehead with a bare brown arm, and regarded the inquirer with the respectful interest which all boatmen assume so naturally toward all folks who are not equipped or costumed for the river.

"Mr. Monkford's house?"

He shaded his eyes from the reflected glare of the sun and pointed up river. Here the stream turns abruptly toward Temple Lock. In the one bank the meadows stretch to the long woods; behind the trees on the other, the tower of Bisham Church shows grayly. It was toward Bisham that the boatman looked.

"You can't see the house from here," he said, with an air of disappointment which suggested that for the first time in his life he realized and regretted the invisibility of Bendham Manor. "It's old—you can see the place if you walk up the path. A red house with twisting chimneys."

He looked at her doubtingly. There were twelve punts to be baled and a four-oared skiff to be made ready for a picnic party almost due. She was very pretty. It was lady-prettiness, fragile and dainty and white. Red lips and gray

eyes that held the ghost of a smile. She wore a little black felt hat without ornamentation and a blue costume that was nearly black, severe, and straight, yet for some reason peculiarly feminine. Also there was a suppleness and grace in the slim lady who had arrested his eye as she walked toward him along the towpath, long before he had seen her face.

"It's a long way round by road," he said, emphasizing in his fashion the service he was about to offer. "You cross the bridge and take the second lane to your right where the war memorial is—a long way. I'd better row you across, ma'am."

"You're very good," she said.

She had a nice voice, sweet and rich. Some gentleman's wife, he thought, for she was not a flapper. There was a maturity in her manner, a self-assurance in the decision she revealed. Nora Sanders was in truth an old woman of twenty-two and reconciled to her great age and exceedingly blank prospects. Her years troubled her not at all, though the terrible thirties lay over the brow of the hill; nor did her emphatic singleness, for she had met no man whose quality of mind and heart set her dreaming in the quiet dusk. But it was very dreadful to be companion-secretary to a woman of sixty and to absorb from day to day her acrid philosophies. She had gone halfway to meet middle age (this was her pet illusion), and there was no way out. Marriage was only a jump from one rut to another and maybe a worse. Such dreams as she had were curiously temperate. If she gave a brevet to her fancies, they moved soberly to posts that a woman might hold in some great business organization, where the salary was large and the possibilities of promotion at least encouraging.

As Harry went to find oars, her eyes roved up and down the river. The roar of the weir was pleasant and soothing, the clang of the clock in old Marlow Church as it struck three belonged to the harmonies of the place and the time. A racing four came swinging round the bend of the river; the rhythmic thud of oars against steel outriggers was a concert in the melody of that drowsy summer afternoon.

Harry brought the boat to the side of the towpath, and she stepped in.

He was inclined to be informative as he set the nose of the boat upstream.

"...there's a trout in that hole, the biggest in the river. Some say he's thirty years old an' more. Lots of young gentlemen have tried to get him, but he just laffs at 'um! Got away with more tackle than any fish that ever lived. You'll see him to-night; he feeds at a quarter of eight."

She murmured a polite interest. The "hole" must be imagined as a deep depression in the river's bed beneath the placid and unbroken water. Harry's tit-bit was to come.

"That's Shelton's boat." He jerked his head sideways to a weather-beaten craft moored to the lawn of an empty house. A whale-decked power boat that had once been brave and white and was now water-rusted and uninviting. She wondered who Shelton was, and, even as she wondered, he supplied a startling scrap of biography.

"Shelton was hung for killing a copper—policeman. Biggest forger in the world, so the newspapers say—not that you can believe newspapers. They said Marlow was flooded in the spring an' the water hardly came over the path!"

She was looking at him in open-eyed wonder, and from him she turned back to scrutinize the tragic craft.

"Hanged?"

Harry nodded. He seemed to take credit himself for the operations of justice.

"You wouldn't believe it if you read it in a book; Shelton's boat there and Mr. Monkford's home just round the corner!"

"Is that a coincidence?" she asked.

Evidently it was. All Marlow had been talking about it. Shelton once had a little bungalow beyond Temple where he lived alone. That power boat of his had held a small printing press, and some of the famous letters of credit which had alarmed the financiers of two continents had been created in the cabin of the Northward.

"There's nothing in it, though—the coincidence, I mean." Harry was explicit on this point. "After Shelton was hung, his bungalow and boat was sold up. A man named Finney bought the boat, and he sold it to another gentleman."

He explained the vicissitudes and fortunes of the Northward in detail.

"But where does Mr. Monkford come into all this?" Nora was interested to ask.

"He hung Shelton," said Harry solemnly, "him and Mr. Long, the celebrated detective, he's over there now. I saw him rowing about in the dinghy this afternoon."

She knew that Joseph Monkford was a prominent member of the Bankers' Association. It was the only subject on which Miss Revelstoke grew voluble. The old woman had known Monkford when he was the branch manager of the Southern Bank—she had her account with him. And Mr. Monkford had risen, by sheer native genius, to the position of general manager of the Southern and to the chairmanship of the board of directors of the Bankers' Association.

"Him and Betcher Long," said Harry, with relish, "hung Shelton. Long found him an' was goin' to pinch him when Shelton pulled a gun and killed an officer named Lacy, who was with Long. You don't mean to tell me you never heard about it, ma'am? Why, it was only a year ago."

Nora shook her head. She never read horrors of any kind. It was a grievance with people she met at Miss Revelstoke's that she knew nothing of topical events, and had no view as to whether He was to blame or She was to blame in the current cause célèbre.

The house was in sight now. A rambling Elizabethan mansion of dull red brick. It stood back amidst the poplars, a wide green lawn separating the building from the river.

Harry pulled vigorously at one oar, and the boat shot through the small landing stage. Here the stream shallowed; the sandy bottom was free of weeds, and she saw a school of roach pass leisurely under the boat across the sunlit bed. Two men were fishing from the lawn—one at either end. They looked up as the boat came to the bank, and surveyed her absently. Then they returned to the contemplation of their red floats. Gathering up the parcel she was carrying, Nora reached out her gloved hand and caught the edge of the pier.

"No, thank you, ma'am."

She had opened her bag and was searching for her purse, as she stood on the stage, but Harry pushed off the boat and signalled his farewell.

"Mr. Monkford will have you brought back, ma'am," he shouted.

She gave him a little smile which he valued, though he was a married man, and made a way across the close-cut lawn.

CHAPTER VII

THE entrance to the house was on the shore side, and a footman took her parcel and ushered her into the big hallway..

"Mr. Monkford has a gentleman with him at the moment, miss," he said, opening the door of a small drawing room, but she had taken two steps to the place of waiting when the man she sought appeared in a doorway on the opposite side of the hall. He was short, stout, and rather bald. She could not help thinking at that moment that nobody less like the nemesis of the unfortunate Shelton was imaginable than the jovial, red-faced man, with his ludicrous spectacles and his polka-dot waistcoat.

"Come in, Miss Sanders, come in—it is Miss Sanders, isn't it? Did Miss Revelstoke get that statuette for me? Splendid! What a superstitious lady she is, to be sure!"

Miss Revelstoke and her sometime banker shared one hobby, the collection of Roman antiquities. The statuette which Nora had brought had been acquired by her from a dealer—its gruesome character made the transfer to Mr. Monkford a perfectly natural one.

"Come right in. That parcel must have been heavy. If I had known you were coming, I'd have sent the car.

I'd like you to meet a friend of mine—one of the best—yes, one of the best! "

He had a trick of repeating his final sentences that amused the girl. A stimulating, vital man, who radiated a heartening life force, his friendship was as much part of him as the average man's superficial courtesy.

"Let me take your umbrella"—he bustled with it to the hat-stand, talking all the time—"an umbrella on a day like this!"

As she followed him into the big library that overlooked the river, she saw, standing by one of the windows and gazing gloomily across the lawn to the river, a man she had seen somewhere before. Then, in a flash, she knew him and saw the sudden recognition in his eyes.

"Miss Sanders, this is Mr. Long."

Long! The name was familiar, but for the moment she could not place him. And then she remembered the boatman's story and Shelton, who was hanged. Betcher Long, the detective! She wondered if Betcher were a Christian name bestowed by an eccentric parent.

He was looking at Nora; his gaze enveloped her, item by item. She felt this, yet was not uneasy; her dominant expression was of the power she had overlooked when she had seen him first. The tremendous strength of him,

the queer magnetic qualities of his eyes. Was it imagination, born of the mystery of his profession? she wondered. Was she endowing him with ideal qualities? She had never met a detective before. They belonged to a terrible and a romantic world. He was wonderfully alive, communicating to her a sense of immense completeness—hand and eye, brain and thew, and above all a transcendent individuality. She was eager, impatient to know all about him, his beginnings, his life, his strange career. And just as she was hoping that he would speak and disillusion her, Monkford bustled to the fireplace and rang a bell.

"We'll have tea," he said. "The other matter can wait."

Betcher Long seemed content to wait. He strolled to the window and resumed his staring. The fishermen interested him.

For a few minutes, Nora was occupied with the object of her call.

"Miss Revelstoke would have sent the figure by post, but I rather think it got on her nerves," she said, with a half-smile.

The banker was busy unwrapping the parcel. An uncovering of paper wrappers showed a small wooden box, and the lid of this he prized off with a paper- knife. Beneath was a mass of wooden shavings into which the hand of the collector dived. It emerged holding a small object wrapped in silver tissue, and, when this was removed: "Wonderful!" He was awe-stricken.

And wonderful it was—a nude figure of a negress, about six inches high. Betcher himself found the statuette of greater interest than the landscape, and came slowly across the room.

"Perfect! The workmanship... exquisite!" Monkford gasped his admiration in disjointed words. The woman was carved from ebony—erect, chin raised, defiant. The tiny hands held across her an ivory sword. Girt about the bare waist was a metal belt from which hung an empty scabbard, the only other metal being a thin golden fillet about the woolly head.

"I don't see the inscription."

"It is underneath, on the base of the pedestal," said Nora, and Monkford turned the figure upside down. And now the inscription was decipherable, though the characters were almost microscopic in their smallness.

"Latin," said Monkford, unnecessarily. "Can you read it, Long?"

To her surprise, the detective nodded. He scanned the writing, his lips moving, and then he read aloud:

I am Death who waits at the end of all roads. Men see me and forget their happiness, straightway falling upon their swords. Beware, 0 Stranger, lest for love of me you too die by your own hand!

Betcher Long was watching her as he read. Though she could not see his face, she had no doubt. When he had finished reading, Monkford chuckled.

"Great! That is unique—almost! They have one in the Cluny Museum—the Black Fate. She's supposed to possess all sorts of mystical powers... genuine, I'll swear. There are three in Europe and one in America. You can tell your lady, Miss Sanders, that I'm a proud and happy man."

"Black Fate?" Betcher's brows met in a frown. "Black Fate—hum!"

Again he read the inscription. When he finished and looked up, his eyes were fixed on hers.

And then she asked a question that was out before she could govern her tongue. It was apropos of nothing. It was, she knew, in execrable taste, but a force within her, beyond her own power to resist, impelled the words.

"Who was Shelton?"

There was a dead silence; her heart beat wildly at her own temerity. They saw the colour come and go from her cheeks.

"Oh, I'm so sorry—I don't know what made me ask such a stupid thing!"

Monkford's face was gray; there was a wild, hurt look in his eyes. From being a figure of rubicund fun, he had become a worn and tragic man.

Whatever effect her question might have upon Monkford, the corner of the detective's mouth twitched in secret amusement.

"Shelton was a forger who killed a policeman," he said simply. "I arrested him, and he shot the officer who was with me. He was hanged."

He glanced at his silent host, and, watching him, Nora saw in that glance a hint of worry.

"Nobody guessed he would pull a gun: I suppose he went mad. We wanted him for forgery and fraud. He took more money out of the American and English banks than they like to remember, and we could never get him."

Again she saw him look anxiously at Monkford.

"Mr. Monkford and I went after him—we laid a trap and he fell into it. That gun play was certainly a surprise. If his hanging is on any man's hands, it is on mine. I ought to have killed him before he fired."

She knew instinctively that he was telling an oft-repeated story; and that the moral of the story was Monkford's innocence of responsibility.

Somehow, she could not understand why he needed excusing. Even if the stout man had been consciously responsible, why should he blame himself for the death of a man who had butchered an officer of the law in cold blood? But Betcher's next words explained a great deal.

"Naturally, Mr. Monkford worried himself sick about it all. He got an idea—"

"Oh—well—we'll change the subject. Here's the tea—let us talk about something else."

Monkford's voice was harsh and unsteady. Not the flippancy of words could hide his emotion. His face had paled to an unhealthy gray, the hands that raised the statuette and examined the inscription were shaking. His very interest in his new possession was badly simulated.

"The Black Fate! Cheerful, upon my soul!" His chuckle was thin and mirthless. "I'll take back what I said about that superstitious lady of yours, Miss Sanders. But I'll not die by falling on my sword, or even on my fountain pen!"

After tea she strolled out on to the lawn. There was a wait of two hours before her train went back to town, and she thought the men wanted to be alone. In this surmise she was wrong. She had reached the water's edge and was standing watching a small pike's lightning dart at a school of minnows, when she heard a voice behind her and turned to meet Arnold Long.

"Mr. Monkford has gone up to his room to lie down," he said.

"And it was all my fault." She was the picture and tone of penitence. "Why I ever mentioned that wretched man I don't know. And I just hate murders—I never read them or talk about them."

"I read nothing else," he said, and rubbed his nose irritably. "Morbid—I've got that way lately."

She felt a return of the fatal curiosity of the afternoon. "You really don't look like a detective," she said, and Betcher sighed.

"I've come to the conclusion that I'm the worst detective in the world," he said; "and yet, the first time I saw you, I guessed I was nearly the biggest. But it was luck, after all."

"When did you see me first?"

She told herself that the challenge was a stupid one, and the reproach in his eyes made the colour come to her face.

"Southern Bank," he said laconically. "You remember—betcher!"

She was furious with him, but only for a second.

"A year ago I was a light-hearted young man. I'm now a hundred—maybe a hundred and fifty."

"Why?" she asked.

He took a cigarette from his case and, asking her permission with a lift of his eyebrows, lit it.

"Because," he said, as he threw the match into the river, "they are going to kill Monkford next week, and I don't exactly know how I can stop 'em."

CHAPTER VIII

SHE gazed at him, horror and incredulity in every line of her face.

"You don't really mean that?"

He nodded.

"I'm telling you this because I know you and because you know me. Understanding at first sight is more common than love at first sight. I knew you the day I saw you in the Southern Bank. You're an affinity. I hate the word, because it has had its bloom worn off in the divorce courts. Come for a row and forget all about Mr. Monkford. He's still alive."

She got into the dinghy without a word, secretly pleased to be with him. She could not grasp the full significance of his calm survey of Monkford's fate. And yet she knew that he was not the type of man who would exaggerate for the sake of making a sensation. Her mental attitude toward this stranger amazed her. In the shadow of his influence she felt she could relax, put down all the guards and screens that women erect to keep the world at bay. She had never been susceptible to strong prejudices; her nature was cautious; experience had made her a little suspicious of men and women alike. She could hardly believe that it was possible in her to conceive so sudden an interest in a man of whose existence she had been ignorant an hour before.

"How old are you?"

He was pulling to midstream when he fired the question at her head.

"Nearly twenty-three—I am very old," she said, and despised herself for casting so clumsy a bait.

"You don't look old. I thought you were about twenty when I saw you." He looked over her shoulder as he spoke, watching the house recede. "That's the queer thing about beauty—it destroys age. A beautiful woman is any age you want her to be; not that I've wanted—much."

She sat up, her eyes kindling with laughter.

"Are you in the habit of—of being so frank with all the women you know?" she asked. Modesty demanded that she should add: "All people are—well—nice- looking who have a healthy skin."

"I knew a woman in town who had a peach skin. She was cross-eyed and had a nose like an elephant," he said. "No, I don't have a great deal to do with women. I knew Kate Lacrosse—she was pretty. Golden hair and wonderful features. Last time I saw her she was painting angels down in Aylesbury."

"Painting... Where is Aylesbury?" she demanded, puzzled.

"Convict prison for women. I got her twenty years," said the rower, with melancholy satisfaction. "Her line was blackmail."

She was shocked at this, but he went on to make a startling statement.

"I know everything—except about women. They get me guessing. When I was a boy I read the encyclopaedia through twice. I know everything. It has been useful as a policeman. Do you mind my saying that you're beautiful?"

She laughed.

"I rather like it," she confessed.

The boat was headed downstream now. She had no thought for anything but this strange personality.

"You've got the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen in a woman," he said after a pause.

She raised a warning finger.

"Mr. Long, I believe you are trying to flirt with me," she said solemnly.

"No, I'm not." He was telling the truth, as she knew. "I'm just remarking. You're engaged?"

She shook her head.

"No. I am unique. I have never been engaged." He drew a long breath.

"That's certainly unique," he said, and, shipping his sculls, reached out and caught hold of something. Looking round, she saw to her surprise that it was the murderer's boat.

"I'll show you something," he said, and jumped on board, stooping to grip her hand in his.

The air of neglect was more striking nearer at hand. The planking of the whale- deck was rotting; the well was inches deep in water that rolled and gurgled with every motion of the boat as they moved.

"He had his press in here." Betcher pulled back the sliding door of the poop cabin. "Ran it off batteries—the batteries are still there. Come inside."

She followed him, stooping, into the darkness of the cabin and he lit a match.

"How's that for high-class prophecy?" he asked.

On the woodwork of the cabin walls a string of dates had been carved. There were nine in all.

June 1, 1854. J. X. T. L.
Sept. 6, 1862.
Feb. 9, 1886.
March 11, 1892.
Sept. 4, 1896.
Sept. 12, 1898.
Aug. 30, 1901.
July 18, 1923.
Aug. 1, 1924.

Against the date July 18, 1923, a small, plain cross had been carved.

"High-class prophecy; he's got Ezekiel beaten," murmured Betcher Long, and shook his head in admiration.

The girl was perplexed.

"But did he carve those dates?" she asked. "What do they mean?"

"Give a lot to know—for sure," he added cautiously. "July 18, 1923—that's easy. He was hanged that day!"

She drew a sudden breath and shrank back. The light of the long wax match went out; for a second they were in the darkness, and then, with a wild and uncontrollable sense of fear, she pushed past him through the door into the sunlight. Presently he followed and pulled the door tight. She gathered from his attitude that he was the present proprietor of the Northward, and this proved to be the case, though none of the locals knew.

"The carving was only discovered last year when I bought the boat and started to strip the panels—you saw where they came off? The panel over that interestin' memento wasn't screwed to the wall. It was just hinged. When I started in to investigate I found the list."

"But he couldn't have anticipated the date of his death?" she urged.

He shook his head.

"No. The Terrible People did that."

Nora looked at him straightly. Was he jesting? More than a little she suspected laughter behind the most portentous of his words.

"I have never heard of those," she said at last.

"Heard of witch-doctors and voodoo men? Listen, young lady. Step down into the boat—we're too close to shore here."

He was not joking. His eyes were searching the tangled lawn before the empty house. He stood squarely in the centre of the dinghy, both hands resting on his hips, but even when he extended one of these toward her, he did not look in her direction—his attention was for the house and the drawn blinds and the little shrubbery near the tradesman's path.

For a second her flesh crept. She had a terrifying sense of danger; she felt the presence of an unseen watcher, the menace of hateful eyes.

"Imagination—there's nothing there."

He was speaking as though he read her thoughts. "Somebody was there last night. I had cotton across the doorway, and it was broken to-day!"

CHAPTER IX

HE MUSED on this, arriving the boat against the stream with long, powerful strokes. They passed the lawn of Benham Abbey, and then he guided the boat to the shade of trees that overhung the water and, gripping a branch, held the dinghy steady. And as usual, when he spoke, he went off at a tangent.

"It takes a clever man to live a double life. Shelton lived six that I knew. There used to be a fellow who wrote stories for the Child's Magazine, all about the little dogs that find their master lying in the snow. A fellow named Grinstead Jackson. His other name was Shelton. And another man who wrote a book about the mind—that was Shelton. Down at Lambeth there was a small printer's business run by a man named Simon Cole. Mr. Cole and Mr. Shelton went about under the same hat. In Oxfordshire a poultry farmer used to advertise eggs and birds for the table. He did a good business and had two dozen people working for him. And more hens. H. P. Pearce was his name in the telephone book. At Scotland Yard, we called him Shelton. Up by Temple Lock an elderly gentleman had a bungalow and a power boat. He used to fish a lot—one of the best barbel fishers on the river. Walter James Evanleigh was the name on his letters—most of the recording angels opened the page under Shelton. That's what I know about him. What I don't know would fill a big shelf in Mr. Monkford's library."

"Was he married?" she asked, fascinated.

"Never appeared to be," said Betcher. He fixed her for a second with a glance that seemed to go searching behind her eyes.

"Of course, he couldn't have prophesied his own death—Oh!"

She suddenly remembered the last date, August 1st—and it was now July 23d! "What is happening on August the first?" she asked.

"Ah!" said her companion, and then, before she could press her question, he went on again:

"Nobody really knows about the Terrible People—except me, and I know next to nothing. You smell 'em now and again—get a sort of glimpse of 'em. Old Shelton made a million out of the banks, but the high cost of living six lives ate it up. Maybe he played the races. Most crooks are mad in one direction or another. He paid high for his messengers. It was costly to send people to America to cash letters of credit—why, once he ran a man from New York to Sacramento by special train, just stopping off at the big places to collect, an' going on to the next. The agent was back in London before the first squeal came. Clever— but it cost money. Still—a million's a lot. Behind him all the time were the Terrible People. Mr. Monkford had a brother who went to Ilfracombe for a holiday; that was the week after I caught Shelton. This brother was drowned. They found him in his bathing suit on the beach early

one morning. Mr. Monkford thinks it was an accident. It was. They got the wrong Monkford!"

She looked at him open-mouthed.

"Murdered?" she said hollowly.

Betcher nodded.

"Got the wrong Monkford," he said, and for a second the skin about his eyes wrinkled. Something had amused him.

"Going up to town by the six-fifteen? I'll be going, too. I travel third class. I'm democratic—"

She saw him stiffen and his head thrust forward toward the wilderness of bushes that fringed the bank. One hand dropped to his pocket. The other held rigidly to the branch of the tree. Again her heart raced; again her skin crept. He was staring wide-eyed at the bushes—she thought she heard a strange and stealthy rustle of sound.

The dinghy was slowly turning, and she discovered why, for the wrist of the hand that held the branch was also turning. Presently the motion stopped and he rose, so light on his feet that the little boat scarcely rocked. As he stood now he was immediately between her and the place where she had located the sound.

His head drooped, he was listening; then, as unexpectedly as he rose, he sat down again, put out the oars and drew the dinghy to midstream.

"Terrible people!" He was speaking to himself.

"Terrible people—there's something doing and I don't know what it is."

He said no more of them, offered nothing in the way of explanation, and rowed out toward the opposite bank, as she thought.

"Seen our neighbour?" he asked, in his abrupt way.

"Ought to see him—he's one of the sights of Marlow. I call him Hercules. Folks round here got another name for him. He was in the bank the day we caught Shelton, and considering he's naturally languid, he certainly mixed it! These languid birds sometimes fight well. When I was at Cambridge—" He stopped here for no apparent reason.

Presently the untidy fringe of bushes came to an abrupt end and she sat open- mouthed at the loveliness which flashed into view. The house behind the inevitable lawn was smaller than Benham Abbey, and the lawn itself the merest parallelogram of vivid green that served as a frame for the most

beautiful garden she had ever seen. Crimson and gold and cobalt blue, deep purples and dusty reds flamed in harmonious confusion. The house was half hidden under crimson rambler and wisteria. Two long stone-pillared pergolas ran from the river to the house, flanking the lawn, their beams hidden under climbing roses. Near to the edge of the water was a red-and-white striped umbrella tent, and this protected a man who was stretched in a deep cane chair. He rose wearily as the dinghy came inshore, a thin man with a long, weak face, who screwed a monocle into his eye and surveyed the approaching visitors, his face a picture of vacuity.

"Hullo, Long," he drawled, as they stepped ashore.

He offered a limp hand to Mr. Long, but his pale eyes were all for the girl.

"I'd like you to meet Miss Sanders—this is Mr. Crayley."

"Jackson Crayley," murmured the lean man. "How do—sit down, won't you?"

His hand was so inanimate that Mary would have found his empty glove more human.

"I thought Miss Sanders would like to see your garden."

"It is wonderful," said the girl enthusiastically.

"Ya-as! not bad." The owner seemed reluctant to admit the beauty of his pleasant lands. "Got a good head gardener. Show the young lady round—pick anything you like, Miss—er—"

Almost before they had moved away, he had sunk down in his chair and was immersed again in his newspaper.

"What do you think of him?"

Nora hesitated.

"He seems rather—tired," she said, and Betcher chuckled.

"Born that way. He's nothing much. Only—well, curious thing was that he was in the bank when we pinched Shelton, an' helped arrest him—as much as he could help anybody. Sort of dived at him when he broke loose from me. Of course, Shelton pushed him over—that kind of man is made to be pushed over. Mr. Monkford likes him. He's a fashion lizard and only here in the season. Just come back from Deauville—or maybe just off to Aix. You going to Heartsease for the golf week?"

"Why, yes," she said, in surprise, "but I didn't know that that was a very fashionable gathering."

He said something half aloud which she did not catch. She gathered from his tone that it was disparaging to the game of golf.

When they returned to their host they found him parleying with a lady who, from the depths of a luxurious punt, was apparently fixing an appointment. Nora had one glimpse of her as she paddled away. A rather plain girl, beautifully dressed.

"Deuced awkward, people asking me if they can see my garden," grumbled Mr. Crayley, and then, conscious of his lack of grace, he added, hastily for him: "I mean—asking if she can come on Thursday and bring some friends—sort of hotel idea—public gardens and all that sort of thing. Going, Miss—er ?"

"Thank you for letting me see your lovely flowers." She shook the lifeless hand and went down into the dinghy.

"Come some other day," called Mr. Jackson Crayley, already in his chair. He did not disguise, either in his voice or attitude, his great relief at their departure.

Betcher's face was set in a smile that was almost satanic as he rowed her back to the abbey.

"What amuses you?" she asked, smiling.

"Fashion lizard—did you see his yellow spats? Men have been smothered for less!"

Evidently Monkford had changed his mind about resting. He was pacing up and down the bank when they came back to the abbey.

The fishermen still sat at each end of the lawn, their attention concentrated upon their floats, and Mary wondered if they ever caught anything and why they chose this clear and shallow water for their sport.

"I'll be seeing Miss Revelstoke at Little Heartsease next week," said Monkford, as they walked to the house. "Tell her she must take up golf—never too late, never too late!"

She went to the station by car. Betcher kept her waiting a little while before he came out with his friend. The grounds at the back of the house were narrow. Three times the width of the carriage drive separated the manor from the red wall that hid the road. Waiting in the machine for the big man's reappearance, she had time to observe this wall. It had not long been built; was unusually high, and along its parapet stretched a triple row of revolving spikes. By the big green gates—also new—stood a sturdily built man. He was smoking a short briar pipe and was seemingly as unoccupied as the fishermen. Nora looked from him to the wall and wondered.

On the way to the station, Betcher was in his most inquisitive mood. How long had she been working? What did she do? She had a somewhat humiliating record of posts held and lost. Her typing was indifferent—her shorthand negligible. She spoke three languages well—

"Danish?"

He stopped dead in the centre of the booking hall to ask the question.

"No—why Danish? German, French, Italian, and a little Spanish."

In spite of his boasted spirit of democracy, he ushered her into a first- class carriage.

As the train moved out of the station toward Bourne End, he asked her if she kept secrets.

"Most people think they can, but most people are born reporters, an' a reporter just lives to tell somebody else."

He opened the carriage window and looked out—repeated the process at the opposite window, and then sat down facing her. His blue eyes were laughing.

"I've got a joke on a fellow," he explained. "There's a man from the Yard watching me—just friendly. He's travellin' in the guard's van; there's a little projecting window so you can see up and down the train. Ever read philosophy, Miss Sanders?"

She nodded.

"A little; I can also keep a secret," she added invitingly.

"Ever read Leibniz on Causation? No, I thought not. Why is this train going? Because up in Derbyshire a man went down a mine and dug out a heap of coal. Why did he go down the mine? Because he has a wife to keep. Therefore, his wife is pullin' this train—got that?"

There was a flaw in the logic, but she did not interrupt. Moreover, he was well aware of the irregularity.

"First causes—go back to 'em. You can't get Shelton's because you don't know what his trouble was. But when they dropped him through the trap, a new series of First Causes got down to their job. I'm telling you this because I'm fond of you. Not in love with you—don't get ideas, Nora. Just fond of you!"

She listened, too dumbfounded to speak. He went on:

"Up at the Yard they laugh about me and my Terrible People, but where is the judge who sentenced him? Dead! Where is the prosecuting lawyer? Dead! Where is the hangman? Dead! I'm alive an' Monkford is alive—"

Crash!

The glass of the window splintered into fragments; something whizzed past with the drone of an angry bee; the roof of the carriage dropped a shower of splinters.

Betcher's grin was fiercely joyous.

"The man that fired that rifle is dead—I'll betcher!" The train stopped at Bourne End, and Betcher took a characteristic farewell.

"Just going back to identify the body," he said cheerfully, and then, with a glance at the girl's white face, he went on quickly: "A little joke! There's a rifle range about a mile away, and I'm betting I shall find a left-handed recruit doing a little anti-aircraft practice."

She was not deceived; nevertheless, she forced a smile, and was still smiling mechanically as the train drew out.

"Theatrical fool!" said Betcher cold-bloodedly, as he saw the end carriage go out of sight round a bend. "Sensation maker and girl scarer!"

He was addressing himself in this strain as the station taxi carried him back to the place from which the shot had been fired. It took very little finding. The train was passing a railside but used as a store by the platelayers when the bullet struck. There was no house in sight—running parallel with the line was a field of oats that went back to the road along which his taxi had driven, with the sergeant of police he had commandeered at Bourne End.

He expected to find his man near to the rail, and here he was wrong. There was a pond in the field surrounded by a low mound which barely rose to the height of the growing crops. Here, amidst a riot of flowering weeds, he saw the still figure of a man. He was poorly dressed, a tramp of some kind, and an ex-army man, for there were three soiled medal ribbons on his tattered waistcoat.

"Shot from behind," said Betcher, after a brief examination. "Poor devil! What is that book, Sergeant?"

The officer passed the shabby memorandum book he had picked up, and Betcher Long turned the greasy pages. It was the pencilled entry at the end which interested him.

Third coch from engin.
Secon winder
Dont shoot if girl at winder.

Long examined the remaining pages. He found a name.

"Joe Hanford," and two addresses, one in Sussex, the other in a London street.

"He was methodical, this fellow," said Betcher thoughtfully, "and being methodical, he entered his instructions. Now, how the devil did the information get here?" He looked round, and, as he did so, a splash of light appeared on the shoulder of a hill three miles away. Six times it quivered.

"B-C-N-F-L-D," spelt Betcher. "Beaconsfield!"

The unknown signaller was sending a mirror message to somebody. It might be a detachment of Territorials engaged in harmless military practice. Presently the light flickered again.

"L-N-G S-R-C-H-G F-L-D."

"Long searching field!" Betcher would have given a lot for a pair of field glasses as powerful as those which the mysterious watcher was using.

That was the last signal he saw. Evidently the young man watcher had seen Betcher's face turn toward the hill and had realized his message was being read.

The detective made a rough calculation. The range of heliograph was very wide, and the murderer might be well clear of Marlow Town and yet be able to read the warning. There was probably no telephone nearer than Bourne End. He must take his chance. But he could not afford to neglect even the vaguest possibility, and, leaving the sergeant with the body, he hurried back to the road, and the taxi flew on its return journey.

There was a long delay before he could get in touch with the Beaconsfield police, and then he heard what he had expected.

"Cars are passing through here at the rate of ten a minute," said the officer in charge. "Can you give me any idea of what it looks like?"

"Get a man to take every number that goes through in the next quarter of an hour," said Betcher.

There was very faint hope that this record would lead to any discovery. In all probability, the machine had already passed through Beaconsfield before he had put the police on their guard.

It was after dark when he left Bourne End, and near to midnight when every newspaper in London received a paragraph with an urgent request that it might be inserted in the news columns:

Warning to Ex-Soldiers

There is in this country an organization which offers a large reward to unemployed ex-soldiers, particularly men who are marksmen, the services required being of an illegal and felonious character. Ex-soldiers are warned that it is fatal for them to accept any such commission, apart from the inevitable consequences of their act if they are detected by the police. Ex-soldiers receiving any such offer should immediately communicate with Inspector Long, Room 709, New Scotland Yard. The sum of Â£500 will be paid for any information which will lead to the arrest and conviction of the said employers.

Mr. Jackson Crayley, at breakfast the following morning, opened his newspaper, fixed his monocle, and read the paragraph. And as he read, he stroked his long yellow moustache thoughtfully. He rose and, leaving his breakfast untasted, strolled into his handsome library that overlooked the garden which had been the delight of Nora Sanders's eyes. Taking up the telephone, he gave a number, and presently a voice answered him.

"Have you seen the newspapers?" he asked, and, when the reply came:

"We shall have to cut off the military gentlemen," he drawled. "Betcher is going to be very difficult."

He listened whilst the person at the other end replied, and then:

"Yes, I quite agree—next week, I think. We shall probably be able to get them both together."

And he went back to his breakfast with a feeling of comfort; for the voice that had spoken to him had pronounced the doom of Betcher Long.

Down at the Telephone Exchange, a Scotland Yard man had cut in and listened to every word. But he was no wiser at the end of it, for the conversation had been carried on in the Danish language.

CHAPTER X

NOTHING ever excited Miss Revelstoke. She had that imperturbable type of mind which would accept an earthquake as an interesting phenomenon of nature, and it was told of her that, in one of the worst air raids that London experienced, she had not so much as put down the fine sewing she was engaged in when the warning came.

She listened now with a certain detached interest to the girl's story.

"Highly dramatic," she said drily. "Really, Nora, you are in danger of becoming notorious! What was the name of this peculiar detective?" And when Nora told her, she nodded. "I remember; he was engaged in the Shelton case."

Until then the girl had not told her of her other queer experience, but now she narrated almost all that had happened that afternoon.

"I hope your spine crept when you went into that dreadful boat," said Miss Revelstoke grimly. "It must have been delightfully thrilling. Mr. Long rather interests me; we must have him up to dinner one night, but, in the meantime, my own dinner is waiting, and poor Mr. Henry is beside himself with impatience."

Frederick Henry, man of law and a dabbler in letters, was one of those negative quantities which had neither attracted nor repelled Nora. He was a nice-spoken young man, rather good-looking, and reputedly clever in his profession; and the legend that his frequent visits to Colville Gardens had their cause in his admiration for Nora Sanders was not even irritating to the girl. She liked Mr. Henry, because he was not the sort of man that one could dislike. He was too inactive, much too negative, to arouse any very strong feeling.

A quarter of an hour later she followed Miss Revelstoke into the dining room. Henry was standing with his back to the empty fire grate, his hands behind him, his brown eyes surveying the carpet, and he seemed to the girl to be revolving some abstruse problem of law.

And that apparently was the fact, for he started as Miss Revelstoke came in, and apologized.

"I've had rather a puzzling case sent to me," he said, as he pulled out a chair for his hostess, "and a gruesome case at that! You've heard of Wallis?"

"I haven't had that pleasure," said Miss Revelstoke. "But I may suppose that he is a famous character, because only such are called and recognized by their surnames."

"Notorious' is the better word," said Mr. Henry, a little grimly, as he sat down and opened his serviette. "He was, in fact, the public hangman."

Miss Revelstoke turned her imperturbable gaze upon him.

"Wallis lived at Oldham, and we happen to be agents for his solicitors," Henry went on, and then, quickly: "If you object to this unpleasant subject, I will talk about butterflies."

He addressed the girl rather than Miss Revelstoke, and smilingly she shook her head.

"It appears that, although he was rather a dissolute person, he was to some extent thrifty. He had some house property in London—three little cottages in Bermondsey, and until his death nobody knew he was married; at least, nobody knew that he had married twice without going through the formality of obtaining a divorce from his first wife. He left no will, and it looks as if there will be a lawsuit."

Interest in the late Mr. Wallis passed soon after, and the talk drifted to Marlow.

"There you have made an impression, my dear," said Miss Revelstoke. "I had Monkford on the 'phone to me, and he was almost ecstatic about your charm and colouring and general excellence."

"About me?" asked Nora, in surprise. "Why, he hardly looked at me! You probably misunderstood him, Miss Revelstoke. He must have been talking about the Black Fate."

"Hullo! What is the Black Fate?" asked Henry, looking up from his plate.

Miss Revelstoke described in a few pungent and sardonic words the statuette which she had sent her banker.

"So you met Jackson Crayley, did you?" asked Miss Revelstoke. "What did you think of him?"

Nora hesitated.

"Well, he was not very impressive," she compromised.

"I should say he was not!" said Henry indignantly. "In fact, I know of nobody less imposing than Jackson."

"He lives an entirely selfish life," said Miss Revelstoke. "Oh, yes, I know him very well indeed."

Evidently Mr. Crayley was not very popular, either with her employer or the lawyer. And then, as conversation flagged, Nora Sanders did something which she regretted. She spoke of the Terrible People. There was no reason why she should not, but she had a conviction in her mind that the story Arnold Long had told her was, so to speak, for private circulation only, and she could not escape the uncomfortable feeling that she had betrayed a confidence. So strong was this sense that she made, as she thought, a blundering effort to turn the talk back to Mr. Monkford. The dark eyes of Miss Revelstoke surveyed her keenly.

"I'm afraid your policeman has made rather an impression on you, Nora," she said good-humouredly. "You have an idea that you should not have told us about the Terrible People?"

This strange woman had the extraordinary gift of reading thought, a gift which had often embarrassed the girl, and she flushed red as she realized how surely Anna Revelstoke had probed her mind. Henry was laughing softly, and she wondered why, till he spoke.

"You needn't be worried about telling us these awful secrets," he said. "I've already heard a whisper. But the whole thing is too absurd for words. Shelton, on whose life I'm more or less an authority—I've probably the largest collection of data outside Scotland Yard—was essentially a soloist. He had no friends, no relations, and no intimate associates. That is why he was able to keep the police at bay for so many years."

He addressed the two women generally.

"Organized revenge is unknown in this country," he went on. "After all, why should anybody wish to come back on the judge, the prosecuting counsel, and the hangman who were instrumental in sending Shelton to his doom? The only people who would bear them animosity are those who bore toward him some strong personal affection—some relation, and we know that he had no relation in the world."

"For which he ought to have been grateful," said Miss Revelstoke with a sigh.

"Vendetta is unknown in this country," Henry went on, "and certainly vendetta carried on by men who risk their lives for the sake of avenging a man who cannot possibly reward them, not even with his gratitude, is unthinkable."

"Did your Mr. Long tell you of anything that had happened—any particular deeds that the Terrible People had committed?" asked Miss Revelstoke.

"No," said Nora; "only he feared—"

Again she was saying too much. But happily Henry came to her rescue.

"Feared for Monkford. That is an open secret, too," he said, with a smile. "I don't suppose he fears for himself, because he's not that kind of man, so far as I know him."

"Monkford only did his duty—what nonsense to think he is threatened!" said Miss Revelstoke impatiently. "Really, Nora, I must meet your detective—he is of a type which has been extinct since the excellent novels of Gaboriau went out of fashion!"

"He's really very nice." The girl was spurred to his defence. "And not a bit melodramatic."

Henry was looking at her thoughtfully, fingering his little black moustache.

"I can endorse that," he said. "Betcher is eccentric and has methods which are wholly at variance with the usual systems of detection, but he is not at all a sensationalist."

"Who is he?" asked Miss Revelstoke, and then Nora learnt for the first time of Arnold Long's wealthy associations.

"One of these days he'll be a baronet and have the best part of two million pounds," said Henry, "which accounts for a lot of his unpopularity at Scotland Yard. They are scared of a charge of favouritism."

Nora Sanders was looking forward to the remainder of the evening with no great eagerness. Her employer was an enthusiastic player of picquet, and Nora was usually her opponent. But to-night the yellow-faced lady could dispense with her. She had a considerable amount of house property in London, and after dinner marched Henry off to the little study behind the drawing room, and the lawyer went meekly, carrying a large dispatch case crammed with papers.

"I'm going to have a very pleasant evening," he said soto voce as he passed her, and she could smile sympathetically, for she knew Miss Revelstoke as a keen business woman with an uncanny instinct for figures.

They were still busy at eleven o'clock when she knocked on the door to bid her employer good-night. She heard Miss Revelstoke's high-pitched voice declaiming bitterly about the improvidence of her tenants, and guessed that Henry's worst anticipations had been realized.

There was much to occupy her thoughts: her strange experience had made this day stand out above all others, and her mind continuously roved between speculations on Arnold Long and the mysterious confederation whom he had described as the Terrible People. She heard a taxi draw up before the door, and Henry's voice came to her through the open window as he bade his hostess goodnight. Half an hour passed, and she was as wide

awake as ever. The church clock was striking one as she fell into a troubled sleep, from which she was awakened by a gentle tap on the door.

"Are you asleep?"

It was Miss Revelstoke, and, rising and slipping on a dressing gown, the girl went to the door and opened it.

"I'm sorry if I've disturbed you. Can I come in?"

Nora switched on the light and Miss Revelstoke entered. She was still wearing the black silk, which was the invariable material of her evening dress.

"Henry asked me if he might pay his addresses to you," she said, so calmly that the girl was staggered. "His addresses—you mean—"

"He wants to marry you," said Miss Revelstoke; "and, of course, I told him it was nothing whatever to do with me, and that I should not influence you one way or the other. He is a rising man in his profession, rather well off, I believe, more than a bore, I'm certain, but he might make a fairly good husband. Good- night."

She went out and closed the door behind her, leaving the girl puzzled and a little distressed; for this was an unforeseen complication, and its novelty was somewhat overbalanced by the uncomfortable knowledge that Mr. Frederick Henry was the last man in the world she wished to marry.

When she eventually fell asleep, it was to dream of the olive-skinned Mr. Henry in rivalry with Betcher Long—a condition which she die not dare to suppose in her waking moments. Then she dreamt that she had fallen into the power of four terrifying men; terrifying because they were faceless and had neither shape nor substance. She lay bound, helpless before them, and she knew that they were the Terrible People, and sought vainly to pierce the veil that hid their identity.

And somewhere in the background hovered three shapes even less tangible. A judge, a lawyer, and a thin-faced executioner, who had been sacrificed to the manes of Clay Shelton.

CHAPTER XI

THE "Terrible People" was a phrase until then, and no more. It stood for obscure causations that had cast not even the shadow of men. To no individual could the finger of suspicion be pointed. No spot on earth was suspect. Behind the effects that were produced were not even the nebulae of a mind that might be designated "cause." The police chief was patently bored when Betcher interviewed him that night.

"Terrible People!" he snapped at last. "Betcher, I'm sick of you and your Terrible People! Who are they—where are they? We know nothing whatever about them. I wish to Heaven you'd stop putting these ideas into the Secretary's head. I have a confidential minute from him almost every day!"

"I call them Terrible People, and I'm right," said Arnold confidently. "People--human volition—any fancy name you like to call it. Don't ask me who is the king pippin of the crowd—there's no crowd that I can see. If there was, we'd thin it down to the men I want. Shelton's gang? He never had a gang. He just worked solitary, so far as we know. But I won't swear to that. He was like a man you only see four days a year, and you've got to guess what he was doing in the other three-six-one. Agents? Hundreds of them! But they were just workmen. They did their graft and had their pay, an' they're trying to forget they ever helped him. They didn't kill the judge, the lawyer, and the executioner! They didn't try to catch me. What happened to Sir James and Mr. Crewe and Wallis?"

"Accidents in every case," murmured the police chief wearily.

"Accidents my grandmother's puddin'-faced poodle dog!" replied Betcher—but he said it to himself. Aloud, he asked: "Was it an accident they shot me up this afternoon? Was it accidental that the Lancer laid for me and was caught himself?"

The chief sniffed.

"The Lancer didn't like you: he tried to put you out, and when he found that he had failed, he committed suicide."

Betcher's nose went perceptibly higher.

Scotland Yard had never accepted the theory of the Terrible People except with marked scepticism. Correspondence passed to and fro, but the heads of the departments took the view that Betcher Long had impressed upon a romantic Secretary of State a story that had its proper place in a work of fiction.

And yet

Apart from death by drowning of the elder brother of Monkford, the following were the incidents on which Betcher had based his hypothesis. Sir James Cargill, the judge, who had tried and condemned Clay Shelton, had died suddenly a few months after the trial, but had died in perfectly natural circumstances. He had contracted measles whilst he was on circuit, and was making a fairly normal recovery, when he caught cold, pneumonia supervened, and he died. His nurse had made the error of leaving the lower sash of the bedroom window open on a raw, wet night. Some time after the death, Sub-Inspector Arnold Long interviewed the nurse and discovered that the woman had read a quasi-scientific article in her favourite periodical, in the course of which it had been demonstrated that there was a very grave danger to nurses in infectious cases unless this means of ventilation were adopted. It also went on to prove that such a system was best for the patient.

Doctors are prejudiced against this method [said the writer], but the wise nurse is she who not only protects herself but assists her patient to recover.

Betcher showed the article to a specialist, who was dumbfounded. He interviewed first the editor of the paper and then the writer of the article, a woman. She only knew that a newspaper cutting had been sent to her containing the gist of the article, with a blue-pencilled inscription suggesting that she should write an article on those lines. The reference to the wise nurse was heavily underlined. She thought it had come from the editor. This happened weeks before Sir James was taken ill. But Betcher was not satisfied. The nurse was the woman who had looked after the judge when he was down with influenza. She was likely to be called in again. And the article was intended for her. When he came to examine the "cutting" from which she was inspired, he discovered that it was a "proof" pulled on a piece of ordinary proof paper. He spent a fortnight discovering the cause of the infection—some underclothing sent from the laundry. The judge's valet was also infected.

That was one case. The case of the Prosecuting Attorney was much more sensational. Purley Crewe, King's Counsel and Senior Counsel for the Treasury, had been the prosecutor of Shelton and had destroyed one by one the defences which the murderer had set up. The week Shelton was hanged, Crewe joined a shooting party in Norfolk. He was staying at Norwich and drove out to the shoot, leaving Norwich at nine o'clock. He was an expert car driver, given to speeding, but he knew every yard of the road, and though there was a heavy mist in the hollows, he kept his klaxon going and maintained a speed above the normal. On the highlands the visibility was good. There is a place called Eveleigh Hollow, where the road dips steeply and rises again at as acute an angle. The road is straight. From the brow of the hill he looked upon an impenetrable pocket of mist that hid the bottom, but he saw the road rising on the other side and, sounding his horn, he went down the hill at fifty-five miles an hour. In the hollow was a small steam roller directly across the road. The chauffeur broke his leg, but Crewe died that night in Norwich County Hospital. Here was the curious fact, that,

ten minutes before, a farmer passed through the hollow and saw the steam roller, which had been used the previous day on road repair. Then it was standing in a field to the left of the road. It had been left on sloping ground, but there was no steam in it and the gears were, according to the engineer, locked. They were not locked when the police made an examination after the accident. It was easy to trace the course of the heavy roller, but though the ground was soft, no footprints were discoverable, except the rough imprint of the labourer's boots. The coroner's jury returned a verdict of accidental death.

The third case was the most sensational of all from the public point of view. The hangman who executed Shelton was William Wallis, who was the chief assistant public executioner. Wallis, between hangings, followed the calling of a shoe repairer. He had a little basement shop outside Oldham, and was a man of low mentality, who sometimes drank a little more than was good for him, but otherwise was a very respectable citizen. Wallis was a picture fan: twice a week he was in the habit of visiting the local Rialto, and usually he went alone. He was a single man who lived with an invalid mother. He was returning from one of these jaunts on the Christmas Eve following the death of Shelton, when he fell in with a crony, Herbert Starr, a machine operative, who was an authority on whippet racing, a sport in which Wallis also indulged. They called in at a public house and had a couple of drinks before resuming their walk. Snow was falling heavily and they had the greater part of a mile to go. Early the next morning Police-Constable Bently, of the Lancashire Constabulary, rode along the strip of lonely road which separates Oldham from the village where Wallis and his friend lived. He was passing an allotment when he saw two snow heaps of queer shape and, dismounting, turned the covering over with his foot and found first Starr and then the hangman. They were both dead. A half-empty whisky bottle bearing the label of a well-known distiller lay between them, and the theory was that they had got drunk and had been overcome by the storm. The whisky was analyzed—it was just whisky. There was no trace of poisoning—in this case the jury found a verdict of "Death from Misadventure."

Betcher was on the spot in six hours after the discovery. Three facts came to light. The first of these was that the whisky had not been purchased at the public house where the men had made their call, nor was it in their possession then: Wallis had asked the landlord to supply him with a bottle, but the host, knowing the man and seeing that he was already lit up, had refused. The second fact was that the cork had been removed on the place where the bodies were found, and neither of the men had a corkscrew. The third was not discovered until some time after. A jobbing shoemaker bought up Wallis's kit of tools, pricked his finger with an awl, and a week later showed symptoms of tetanus. Betcher collected the tools and sent them for examination. Almost every instrument was in a poisonous state.

He himself had had two narrow escapes from death. Once in a dentist's chair, once at the hands of a racecourse gang. But who substituted for the cylinder of dental gas one identical in shape and description, filled with the

deadliest vapour known to science? And how did the Terrible People know that the dentist would use that cylinder on his first patient that morning? The chemical company which prepared the gas was baffled; the dentist could only explain that the cylinder he intended to use had inexplicably run out, and he had to employ the spare supply which he kept for emergency.

And when the race-boys lay in wait for him at Paddington, who told them that he was the man who "shopped" Tilini, their polyglot leader? They themselves did not know—they spoke vaguely of a message which had come out of jail from Tilini telling them to "get" Long. The attack ended abruptly, and, for one member of the gang, unpleasantly. Betcher had a terrible left hook and he used a knuckleduster to make sure.

The country knew nothing of these happenings, seeing in the death of the judge no more than nature's exaction, and in the killing of the famous counsel one of those deplorable accidents which occur almost every day of the week. The death of Wallis created a mild sensation, but none saw in this an act of vengeance.

Macfarlane pulled at his gray moustache, a moody frown on his face, as, for the third time in a week, Inspector Arnold Long recited the fate that had overtaken the three men instrumental in bringing Clay Shelton to his death.

"I'll admit there is a possibility that you are right," he said at last, "and if Joshua Monkford is killed, my last doubt will go."

Betcher looked at him a little resentfully.

"Am I to understand, sir, that Mr. Monkford must die to bring conviction to Scotland Yard?"

It was the sort of comment that made Betcher so very unpopular with his superiors.

"Of course not!" snapped the Colonel. "And it is your job to see that he doesn't die! You have taken every precaution?"

"I have two officers at Marlow, and those two private detectives engaged by the Bankers' Association," said Betcher, "but it isn't at Marlow that the danger lies."

"Where, then?"

"At Little Heartsease," said Long, and went on to enlighten the chief. "Little Heartsease is a sort of road club—in reality, a country hotel. It is run by a man named Cravel, and is the last word in comfort."

The name was not unfamiliar to the Colonel.

"Isn't there a golf tournament connected with this establishment?" he asked.

Betcher nodded.

"The swellest in England," he said. "It is the Ascot of golf—an excuse for house parties and pretty dresses. Monkford doesn't know a tee from a brassie, and hundreds of other people who attend know as much; it is largely a social function. I shall be there, wearing my new plus fours and a look of resignation. For it is at Heartsease that Monkford will be in danger. Don't ask me why, sir, because I don't know. I've a hunch, and a hunch is worth a volume of exact information."

Macfarlane studied his blotting pad for a while, and then:

"There is one peculiar feature about Clay Shelton; I don't know whether it's occurred to you, Long," he said slowly.

"What is that, sir?" asked Betcher, prepared to hear something commonplace.

"He never robbed your father."

Betcher stared at him.

"Why, neither did he!" said he, in wonder.

His father was head of one of the biggest banking corporations in the city, and one, moreover, run on old-fashioned lines. Getting money out of the Western & Somerset was rather like taking money from a blind beggar.

"That is certainly queer," he said.

Macfarlane had performed the seemingly impossible. He had given his subordinate something to think about.

CHAPTER XII

BETCHER, after his interview with the chief, took a taxicab to Berkeley Square. He had not made half a dozen visits to his father in the past twelve months, and Sir Godley, whose recreation was the Italian Renaissance, was correcting the pages of his monograph on Savonarola when Arnold stalked into the little library. His father took off his glasses and surveyed him with an air of mild interest.

"Is this a police visitation or an act of filial piety?" he asked.

"Neither," said Betcher gloomily, as he opened the silver box on the table and dubiously examined the Corona he extracted. "Is this a real cigar or is it one you keep for your friends?"

"You're an ungrateful devil," said Sir Godley, leaning back in his chair. "The value of two of those cigars would represent your day's pay."

"Are you a member of the Bankers' Association?" asked Betcher, as he pulled up a chair to the writing table.

"Why?"

"Answer my question," said Betcher severely.

"The bank, of course, is in the Association, but I have no official position. Weldon represents us. Anyway, I couldn't serve on a committee with Monkford: he is too wearing."

"Have you ever heard of the Terrible People?" asked Betcher.

"I've heard of many terrible people; to which particular lot do you refer? You don't mean the gang you wrote about?"

Betcher nodded.

"No, I've not heard of them. Shelton, of course, I knew by repute, but he never took a penny from my bank. Do you seriously think that Monkford is in danger?"

"I seriously think he's a dead man," said Betcher, so soberly that his father was startled. "Will you be frank with me?"

"I'll try."

Betcher was silent for a moment, and then:

"Why did Clay Shelton never try to catch your bank?"

Sir Godley frowned.

"I don't quite understand your slang. What do you mean by 'catch my bank'? Rob it?" And when Betcher nodded: "I don't know." His tone was not wholly convincing. "I suppose he didn't think we were big enough game for him."

He turned the conversation abruptly.

"Arnold," he said, "if you think there is danger from the Terrible People, as you call them, why on earth don't you quit? There's absolutely no reason why you should continue in your present profession any longer. You have had your amusement—I suppose it is an amusing job—and now that I can offer you a really good position in the bank—"

He met his son's steady glance and stopped.

"That is the second big offer you've made to me in the past year," said Betcher slowly. "When I told you that I was going after Clay Shelton, a little more than a year ago, you offered me ten thousand a year to take charge of your South American branch. You were almost as anxious that I should quit then as you are now—why?"

Sir Godley did not meet his eyes. Instead, he laughed as though he were amused at something, but there was an uneasiness in his assumed merriment.

"What a suspicious beggar you are!" he said. "Police work has completely spoilt your faith in humanity! Ring the bell, Arnold: I want a drink."

There the conversation drifted to minor matters, and they talked no more about Clay Shelton or the Terrible People. It was nearly midnight when Betcher Long strolled out into Berkeley Square, and his father accompanied him to the door.

His house was on the west side of the square. The traffic, taking a short cut through Grosvenor Square to Oxford Street, was almost continuous along the east side.

"You had better wait till I 'phone for a taxi," said his father, surveying the deserted street, and Betcher laughed.

"The best argument you have offered to induce me to leave the force is the fact that you seem to be getting nervy, my parent!" he said.

He waited till the door was closed, then strolled toward Oxford Street. Across the central gardens he could see the lights of cars and taxis passing north and south, but the sidewalk along which he strolled was empty.

He had gone fifty yards when he saw somebody running swiftly toward him, and by the light of a street lamp he saw it was a woman and wondered what was her hurry. And then—Plop!

The bullet came unpleasantly near. Somebody was shooting through a Maxim silencer. He saw a man standing in the roadway. Was he shooting at the woman? The answer was very convincing. The bullet struck the railings not a foot from where he stood, and ricocheted off, humming and buzzing like an angry wasp. In a second he had whipped out his Browning, without which he never went abroad in these days, but before he could raise the gun the woman, gasping and breathless, had reached him and flung herself into his arms.

"Save me, save me!" she gasped. "The Terrible People—the Terrible People!"

CHAPTER XIII

THE man in the roadway had disappeared as though he had been swallowed up in the night. Betcher dropped his gun into his coat pocket and lifted the half- fainting girl in his arms. He heard somebody call behind him, and, turning, saw his father and a footman coming toward him.

"What has happened?"

"A little promiscuous shooting, I think," said Betcher. "Help me get this girl into the house."

Together they supported the swooning woman up the steps and into Sir Godley's study. She was rather pretty, though her features were strong and a little coarse, and, looking at her, Betcher Long was puzzled. He had seen her before somewhere, and he strove vainly to place her. Presently, she opened her eyes and looked wildly round, staring from Long to his father.

"Where am I?" she asked. The colour had come back to her cheeks, but she was still shaking.

And now the detective recognized her. She was the girl he had seen in the punt, talking to Jackson Crayley. She was in evening dress of a fashionable and expensive cut. There was a large diamond bar across the tightly fitting bodice, and her fingers blazed with gems.

"I don't know what has happened," she said, a little shakily, when he questioned her. "Only I saw those—" She shuddered.

It was not until they had forced a little wine between her chattering teeth that she was sufficiently recovered to tell her extraordinary story. She and her brother were the proprietors of a country hotel. They had a small flat in John Street, where they stayed when they came up to town. She had been to a theatre, and, the night being fine, she had decided to walk home alone, and had reached the end of Berkeley Square when she saw a car drawn up by the side of the road. As she came level, the door of the car opened and two men sprang out.

"They had white cloths over their faces," she said, "and I was so terrified that I couldn't move or offer any resistance, until they tried to push me into the car."

And then a third man had appeared from nowhere who had said: "You fools, that is not Nora Sanders—"

"Nora Sanders?" said Betcher quickly. "Are you sure of the name?"

The girl nodded.

"The man who held me was so surprised that he released my arms and I ran. I heard someone say 'Get her,' and then I heard a shot, and that is all I remember."

Save for the interruption forced by his surprise, the detective listened in silence to the narrative.

"I have seen you before. You are Miss—"

"Alice Cravel," she said. "My brother and I are proprietors of Little Heartsease."

"Little Heartsease!" Bather Long stared at her in amazement.

"You are sure they said Nora Sanders?"

"Perfectly sure," said the girl emphatically.

"Do you know her?" And, to his surprise, she nodded.

"I know her by name. She is secretary to Miss Revelstoke, who usually comes to Little Heartsease for the big week. In fact, she's coming next Monday. I don't know her well, but she was at Heartsease last year; rather a pretty girl."

Betcher bit his lip thoughtfully.

"What theatre were you at to-night?" he asked, and she replied without hesitation, naming a well-known playhouse.

Little Heartsease! Not only was Nora Sanders to be there, but John Monkford had booked two rooms, one of which the detective had arranged to occupy. It was at Little Heartsease that Monkford was to be done to death. Of that Arnold Long was certain. He did not believe in coincidences, and especially so marked a coincidence as this was.

He called a taxi and saw the girl home to her flat, and then walked back to Scotland Yard, turning over in his mind the problem of this attempt to kidnap the young proprietress of the hotel in which John Monkford was to spend the next week. She could not very well have been mistaken for Nora, for she was shorter than the girl, her colouring was altogether different, and what should Nora Sanders be doing in Berkeley Square at midnight?

Early the next morning, he left for Berkshire, and came to the road club at an hour when most of the guests were thinking about their morning bath.

It was a beautiful old building standing in a great park; its eighteen-hole course was famous throughout the world, and the hotel had equal fame for its kitchen and the beauty of its appointments. Its patrons were wont to

complain that the cost of living for a week at Little Heartsease would maintain a man of average income for three months in the most fashionable of the continental spas. It boasted a chef with an international reputation, a staff of the best- trained servants in the country, and it was, he knew, the last word in comfort and luxury.

His first inquiry was for the proprietor, and he learned that Mr. Cravel had been out early that morning and was at that moment taking breakfast in his own office. A tall, rather serious-looking young man came out to greet Betcher Long. His morning suit was of an irreproachable cut. He had the indefinable air of an upper servant, which a certain type of manager never seems to lose.

"Yes, I've heard of my sister's unpleasant adventure," he said. "She was on the 'phone to me last night. You are Inspector Long? I think I have a room reserved for you next week."

He was very calm, very unperturbed; not even his sister's peril ruffled his serene surface. Betcher Long, who was not easily surprised, was taken aback by the calm way in which the news of his sister's adventure had been accepted. But in a sentence Mr. Cravel explained his lack of distress.

"My sister and I have no enemy in the world, and we have many good friends. It was impossible that this attempt against her could have been anything but a mistake. I suppose the people who held her up have not been arrested? No? I am not surprised. Would you like to see your room? It adjoins Mr. Monkford's."

"I'd like to know who will be guests here next week."

"I can show you a list," said the manager.

He picked up a folder, opened it, and took out a foolscap sheet covered with neat writing. The detective's eyes went down the list of coming guests.

"Miss Revelstoke is a regular visitor, I take it?"

Cravel nodded.

"She is not really interested in golf, but I think she likes the society. The lady whose name was mentioned by the gang that attacked my sister is her secretary."

Betcher said nothing, but went farther down the list.

"Jackson Crayley—is he a regular visitor for the golf week?"

"He was here last year," said the proprietor. "Mr. Crayley is rather a friend of ours, if one may presume to claim friendship with guests. Or perhaps it

would be more exact to say that he is a friend of my sister's. In fact"—he hesitated—"well, they are very good friends. My sister and I have visited his house at Marlow."

He went on to volunteer the information that Miss Alice Cravel was in charge of the reception. She had a clerk and an accountant under her, and she was also by way of being the cashier of the establishment.

The detective went up to inspect his room. It was part of a suite of three, consisting of two bedrooms and a saloon. The apartments were panelled halfway up the wall with dark oak, except the sitting room, which was half-panelled in some white wood. There was, he noticed, a telephone in each room connected with a wall plug, and each of the bedrooms had its own private bath.

"This will be Mr. Monkford's room," said Cravel, opening the door and showing the beautiful interior. "It is rather larger than the one we have given you, and it has perhaps a finer view."

The rooms were on the second floor, and, opening the lattice window of Monkford's apartment, Betcher looked out. Beneath, he saw a glass roof extending for about twenty yards, and the manager explained that this was the roof of the restaurant. From the detective's point of view the situation was admirable; it was almost impossible that danger could come to the banker from outside, for the glass made it impossible that a ladder could be erected against the window.

There were three doors to the room, each of stout oak and each fitted with not only locks but bolts. One led to the small bathroom, one to the corridor, and the other into the private saloon. He went round the room tapping the panelling, and Mr. Cravel smiled.

"We have no secret traps or doors—I think that is what you detectives look for in these old houses?" he said. "In point of fact, there is very little left of the old interior. I had everything taken out, and only the walls remain of the original building."

As they were walking down the stairs together, the manager asked: "Is there any special reason why you should be staying with us, Mr. Long? That sounds impertinent, but is there any special reason?"

"What reason could there be?" asked Betcher.

Mr. Cravel shook his head.

"I don't know, but one has heard all sorts of queer rumours about Monkford. Mr. Jackson Crayley, who is a neighbour of his, says he lives in terror of assassination. Is that true?"

"Mr. Jackson Crayley seems to know a great deal about his neighbour," replied Betcher drily.

Mr. Cravel laughed.

"I often think that Mr. Crayley knows much more than people imagine," he said.

Betcher returned to town with an uncomfortable feeling in his mind for which he could not account. It was not until he was going to bed that night that he realized the cause of his uneasiness. It was the knowledge that he was returning to that beautiful old house within a few days; for there, it seemed, lurked the very shadow of tragedy.

CHAPTER XIV

MISS REVELSTOKE, who invariably unlocked the letter box and sorted her own correspondence, handed the registered package to the girl across the breakfast table.

"For me?" said Nora, in surprise.

"If the address means anything, it is for you," said Miss Revelstoke, who was inclined to be difficult in the early hours of the morning. "Is it your birthday?"

"No," said Nora, as she cut the strings of the package and unfolded the paper in which it was wrapped.

It was a small cardboard box which, in its turn, contained a smaller leather case about an inch and a quarter square.

"A ring?" said Miss Revelstoke, watching with interest.

Nora snapped open the lid of the case and gasped her amazement. She had never seen a diamond quite as big as that which was set in the gold ring.

"This must be a mistake," she said, and then she saw the folded paper and opened it.

There were four words in printed characters.

from an admiring friend

Miss Revelstoke took the ring and examined it carefully. She was something of a connoisseur in the matter of jewellery.

"A blue diamond," she said, "worth three hundred and fifty pounds, if it's worth a penny! Come now, Nora, who is your unknown admirer?"

The girl could only shake her head helplessly.

"I'm sure it isn't meant for me," she said.

But there was the address staring her in the face. The package bore the date stamp of a West End office.

"The old fool!"

Miss Revelstoke was mildly amused, and there was no malice in her unflattering description.

"Who?" asked the startled girl.

"Monkford—who else? The man is as susceptible as a boy of twenty—he has always been like that. Why, I remember about ten years ago—"

"But surely it can't have come from Mr. Monkford!" interrupted Nora. "Why, I have hardly met him!"

"Then it must have come from Henry," said Miss Revelstoke with decision, as she spread butter upon her toast. "I'll ring them up and tax them both."

"Please don't do that," cried Nora, in a fright. "I shall feel horribly uncomfortable as it is. If I knew for certain that Mr. Monkford had sent it" She stopped.

"You'd send it back? Then it isn't he but you who are the fool," said Miss Revelstoke calmly. "My dear, in my sixty years' experience, I have been an onlooker of love-making, and I've reached one conclusion about woman in relation to man, and it is, that she should take everything that is given to her and set it aside against the day when much more will be required in exchange.

By the way, is there any possibility that your queer detective may be the donor of this elegant souvenir?"

"Of course not, Miss Revelstoke!" Nora felt her face grow red and was the more embarrassed and incoherent. "Why should he? And have detectives so much money that they can afford to send diamonds to people they admire?"

"Long has," said the woman, with truth. "You forget, my dear, that his father is a very rich man."

The girl was silent. Not that she for a moment imagined that such a beautiful trinket could have come from Betcher Long. He was not the type of man who would indulge himself in such an act of gallantry. She looked at the ring again, a little bewildered, not a little worried.

"What am I to do with it?" she said.

"Keep it!" snapped Miss Revelstoke. "You needn't wear it. Put it aside until you feel less uncomfortable. That ring will take a lot of explaining away to your fiancé when you find one, but it is worth three hundred and fifty pounds, and those are three hundred and fifty good reasons why you should not dream of returning it, even if you knew. Happily, you do not know the giver."

Miss Revelstoke was an uncomfortable sort of person. She had a trick of presenting the fait accompli, a habit which was sometimes a little

staggering. Nora came back from a shopping excursion in Westbourne Grove to find the young lawyer in the drawing room, and Miss Revelstoke greeted her with a statement that turned her red and white.

"It was not Henry who sent the ring," she said. "I had an unhappy feeling that it might have been."

The direct attack destroys embarrassment, and the girl could only laugh helplessly.

"It wasn't your birthday, was it, Nora?" asked Mr. Henry, a trifle anxiously.

He had got into the habit of addressing her by name, and though she did not exactly resent this form of address, there were moments when his assurance irritated her. It was futile to wish that Miss Revelstoke had not been so communicative; that was part of the woman's character, and no secret was safe in her keeping if it could form a subject for her mild malice.

"There is no fool like an old fool—I would stake all the money I have in the world on Monkford being the sender," she said.

"But Mr. Monkford doesn't know me!" Nora was on the point of exasperation.

"He is an idealist," said Miss Revelstoke, with an air of finality. "Get through to Heartsease and ask Cravel if he can let me have an extra room for Wednesday night. Henry is coming down—he will be the one man in the hotel who really plays golf," she said, and the girl went into the library to carry out her employer's instructions.

When this was done, she ran up to her room, and, taking out the little blue-leather case, examined the ring again. She would not have been human if, behind all her embarrassment, she did not feel a considerable amount of gratification at being the owner of so beautiful a jewel. But there was something more than uneasiness in her attitude of mind. She wished she could see Betcher Long and ask his advice. Perhaps he would adopt the worldly view of Miss Revelstoke and advise her to take what the gods had given her, and set it aside for the day which would bring her into contact with the unknown donor.

She put away the jewel and went downstairs. Henry had gone; she had seen him drive away in a taxi from the door whilst she was still in her room.

"I am afraid I've rather upset our young legal friend," said Miss Revelstoke grimly. "He wanted to know more about your ring than I could tell him. I wish I hadn't told him now."

"I can heartily echo that wish," said Nora ruefully. Miss Revelstoke smiled.

"Henry is a good fellow," she said, "and you might do worse, Nora."

To which Nora Sanders made no reply.

Her employer was dining out that night, and for once dispensed with the attendance of her secretary. Ordinarily, Nora went everywhere with her, and it was very unusual for the elder woman to excuse her.

"Go to a theatre—see something bright and cheerful, and forget all about your mysterious people," she said. "And especially the mysterious person who is sending you his family heirlooms!—Yes, the ring is an old one didn't you know that? The form of setting has been out of fashion for ten years."

Nora had her dinner in the pretty dining room alone.

She had finished her meal and was reading the evening newspaper when a maid came in.

"Would you see Mr. Long?" she asked, and Nora sprang up, her colour coming and going.

"Mr. Long?" she said awkwardly. "Yes, I'll see him in the drawing room."

Perhaps there was another Mr. Long; it was not an uncommon name. But it was Betcher who stood in front of the empty fireplace, calmly regarding the big oil painting of a pretty girl in the costume of the 'sixties which hung above the mantelpiece.

"Hullo!" he said, in his unconventional way. "Miss Revelstoke, I presume? At that period of life when the world was very rosy."

Nora stared at the picture, realizing only then, for the first time, that the portrait she had seen every day was that of her employer as a girl.

"I hope she won't mind my calling. Is she in?"

The girl shook her head.

"She has gone to the theatre."

"I thought she might be. Her car passed me in Piccadilly," he said coolly. "Miss Sanders, how often do you go to the theatre?"

"Not very often," she said quickly; "and of course, when Miss Revelstoke is out"

"I'm not inviting you," said the calm man, with a twinkle in his eye. "I only wanted to know if you were in the habit of wandering about on foot in Berkeley Square? I see by your maidenly indignation that you are not."

She laughed in spite of herself.

"You imagine my maidenly indignation," she said. "I don't think I know Berkeley Square. At any rate, I've never walked there consciously."

"In your sleep, perhaps?" he suggested, so gravely that she thought he was serious.

"Why? Have I been reported to the police for somnambulism?" she challenged.

He shook his head.

"You're going to Heartsease next week, aren't you?" And, when she answered: "Are you a golfer?"

"I play golf, but I should be terrified to play at Heartsease," she said. "No, I am going in attendance on Miss Revelstoke. Why do you ask me? And what is the news of the Terrible People?" she added quickly.

Betcher Long sighed.

"I hoped you had forgotten all about them," he said. "I'm loquacious—that's what's the matter with me. Why I put such thoughts into your"—he paused for a proper adjective, and unaccountably she felt herself grow hot—"your head, I can't for the life of me understand."

He turned round and looked at the portrait of Miss Revelstoke again.

"Pretty girl, rather," he said. "Wonder why she never married?"

She could supply him with no reason. And yet, looking at the painting, she could only share his wonder. "Isn't it strange I never thought of her—like that?" All the time her mind was debating the question: should she tell him about the ring? That afternoon she would have welcomed such an opportunity, but now—suppose it was he who had sent it? She took her courage in both hands.

"Do you ever send presents to people?" she asked, and his eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Me? Good Lord, no! I think it is a waste of time and money. Birthday and Christmas gifts, you mean? No. Usually you send people a thing they don't want or something they already have. Why do you ask?"

For some extraordinary reason she was a little piqued by his answer.

"I wondered, that is all."

"You wondered, that is all," he said slowly, a frown gathering on his forehead. "Who has been sending you presents?"

"Nobody." She was being childish, she felt; there was no reason in the world why she shouldn't tell him about the diamond, and at the same time there was no reason why she should.

"Let me see it."

The calm insolence of the request took her breath away.

"Why should I?" she said, before she realized the admission in the words.

"Because I'm rather curious to see presents that are sent to"—another pause— "to girls, to my friends, I mean."

"I'm not even a friend," she said with a half smile. "And really, Mr. Long, I can't imagine why you should be so interested."

But he was.

"I might say that I don't see why you should interest me," he said, "but repartee was never my long suit. Will you show me?"

She hesitated for a second, then went up to her room. It was feeble of her, she told herself, to be dominated by a man who was little more than a stranger; and yet, for the moment, she could not resist the imponderable authority he wielded. She carried back the little box and sprung the lid. He looked at it for a little time and then took it in his hand and carried the ring to the window.

"Who sent this?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know. It came by registered post this morning. Miss Revelstoke thought"

Here she hesitated.

"She thought?"

"Well, she thought it might have been sent to me by somebody who liked me very much and didn't care to have me know."

He nodded.

"Have you any idea? Has Miss Revelstoke any idea who that 'somebody' was?"

Again she hesitated.

"She thought it was a friend of—of hers; a man I've only met once in my life."

"Monkford?"

She went red at this.

"Really, I think we ought not even to speculate upon the sender," she said. "I'd like to know who it was, because I should send it back by the next post."

He was examining the ring carefully, turning it overhand over between his fingers, looking at the interior of the gold circle as though he were searching for some mark which she had overlooked.

"Have you tried it on your finger?"

"No," she said, in surprise.

He took her hand in his and slipped it over first one finger and then the other. "It was originally made for a larger finger, but would have been shortened, and it fits your engagement finger—do you notice that? Now, how did he know?"

"Who—Mr. Monkford?"

He shook his head.

"No, Monkford didn't send you this; at least, I don't think so."

He handed the little case back to her.

"Monkford's a queer beggar, and even a detective who has been watching him does not pretend to know the secrets of his heart. The cleverest detective in the world can rarely discover the woman's man! Ever stand in a window of an hotel or an office and watch the crowds going up and down and try to place the professions of the passers-by? That's easy compared with knowing what your most intimate friend looks like from the point of view of his wife!"

He pondered the matter, his eyes fixed on the carpet, for fully a minute.

"You're going to Heartsease, aren't you?" he asked abruptly. "Where is your room?"

"I don't know," she answered, in surprise. "Miss Revelstoke usually has one of the best suites."

"I ought to have discovered that," he said thoughtfully, "but there'll be plenty of time. Who is going down besides you and Miss Revelstoke?"

"Nobody—oh, yes, Mr. Henry, Miss Revelstoke's lawyer, will be there for one day."

"Anybody else you know?"

She shook her head.

"Is Crayley a friend of Miss Revelstoke's?"

She frowned.

"Why, of course; yes, Mr. Jackson Crayley. Will he be there?"

"Yes, he will be there—and I shall be there, too," he said simply, "and I wish to Heaven—No, I don't. It is going to be hard work, but I'm going to get a lot of excitement—"

The door opened at that moment, and, to Nora's amazement, Miss Revelstoke walked in. She smiled at the girl, and for a second her eyes rested on the ring that was still in Nora's hand. From the girl her dark eyes wandered to the detective.

"And this is Mr. Long?" she said, with a quizzical smile. "Is he the guilty man? Has he confessed, Nora?"

Nora Sanders's lips had opened to answer, when, to her astonishment, Betcher Long nodded.

"Yes, Miss Revelstoke, I've made a clean breast of it. It's been in the family for years—my uncle bought it in Copenhagen in 1862!"

Miss Revelstoke's dark eyes did not flinch, but her sallow face had gone suddenly gray and old.

CHAPTER XV

FOR a moment the girl thought Miss Revelstoke would faint. She swayed slightly, and then, with a supreme exercise of her iron will, she smiled.

"How very interesting!" she said.

Arnold Long was looking at her curiously, eagerly, and his eyes had for the elder woman all the fascination of a snake. Try as she did, she could not look elsewhere than into those gray deeps.

"How very interesting!" she said again.

She spoke slowly, and he knew that she was deliberately masking the emotion his words had evoked.

"And you sent it to Nora? Well, that was very nice of you, Mr. Long."

Nora stood, paralyzed to inaction, looking from one to the other with startled eyes. What was the meaning of this extraordinary lie which Betcher Long had told? She was as certain as she was of anything that he had not sent her the ring—he had said as much. And yet, in the presence of her employer, he not only claimed to be the giver, but could invent its history.

But the effect of the words upon Miss Revelstoke was even more staggering. Never be ore in her association with the woman had she seen her so shaken.

"Won't you come to my study? There are one or two things I'd like to talk to you about, Mr. Long," said the woman at last.

From that moment on, she did not seem to be aware of Nora's presence.

"Why, yes." Betcher considered the request for a second. "I would like to have a talk with you, Miss Revelstoke, but before I go, I'd like to ask this young lady if she really objected to my sending her the ring?"

It was then that Miss Revelstoke looked at the girl.

"Well?" she asked, almost harshly.

"I don't think I ought to accept so handsome a present," said Nora, and, to her astonishment, he reached out and took the ring and the case from her hand.

"I was afraid you wouldn't," he said, and slipped the ring into his pocket. "Now, Miss Revelstoke."

For a second she did not move, and then, with a visible effort, she turned, and he followed her to the little study that opened from the drawing room. She closed the door behind him.

"Won't you take a chair?" she asked steadily, and he waited till she was seated and then sat down on the edge of a big Morris chair.

It was obvious to him that she did not know how to begin, was searching for an opening, and presently this was found.

"Naturally, I feel responsible for Miss Sanders," she began, "and when people send her expensive presents, I think I am entitled, being an old-fashioned woman, to ask—"

She was at a loss to proceed, and he filled the gap for her.

"To ask my intentions?" he smiled. "They are perfectly honourable. She is a nice girl; I like her very much. But when I sent the ring I was perhaps a little precipitate."

Her unwavering black eyes did not leave his face.

"You're a gentleman," she said, "and a college man, I believe? There is no reason why you should not wish to pay your addresses to Miss Sanders. Only it seems a little odd " Again she stopped.

"That I should send her valuable presents at the present stage of our friendship? That does seem odd, I admit," said Betcher. "In fact, it's the oddest thing I've ever done in my life. My uncle—"

"I'm not very much interested in your family history." The colour was back in her face; two red spots showed on either cheek. "I am very anxious, however, to know just how you feel toward Miss Sanders. Do you love her?"

Betcher's smile was broad.

"I will be equally frank with you, Miss Revelstoke," he said. "I do not love your secretary, and it is very unlikely that I should fall in love with her. She is not my type, and nothing is farther from my thoughts than matrimony."

"Then the gift of a ring was in the nature of a freakish impulse?" She shook her head slowly. "I cannot quite believe you. Indeed, I have a feeling that you are very fond of my little girl. Will you let me see the ring again?"

He took it from his pocket and passed it across to her, and, without warning of what she was going to do, she rose, walked to a safe in the farther wall, opened it, and, putting in the ring, shut the door quickly and turned the key.

"I think I had better keep this little trinket until you are better acquainted. Possibly Nora, who is a very young girl, will change her mind. It will not be necessary for me to notify you when her feelings are altered."

She rose and offered her cool hand.

"Good-night, Mr. Long, and good luck!"

There was nothing but admiration in his eyes when he took the hand in his.

"Going to Heartsease, Miss Revelstoke?" he asked, in his bantering tone "I shouldn't if I were you—I really shouldn't!"

She had a trick of smiling with her eyes, and though her lips did not move, he saw the evidence of her amusement.

"That is advice which I might very well pass on to you," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN Betcher Long got back to his office at Scotland Yard, the man who had spent all that morning searching the records at Somerset House, and bad supplied him with news that had taken his breath away, was now to supplement his information with facts that were even more startling. He gave some directions that sent his assistant hurrying to catch the Northern mail, and, going back to his flat in St. James's Street, found his trunk packed and strapped to the back of his car. He telephoned to Marlow, and learnt from Mr. Monkford's housekeeper that the banker had already left for Heartsease. It was his practice to arrive two days before the opening of the festival, and he had gone off in his car accompanied by "the gentleman who had been staying at the house," whose other name was Sergeant Rouch of the Criminal Investigation Department.

Betcher pulled on his gloves, turned up the collar of his mackintosh (it had been raining all afternoon), and took a last look round at his flat. And then he saw the letter on the table and called his servant.

"How long has this been here?" he asked.

"Just before you came, sir."

"Who brought it?"

But here the man could tell him nothing that was illuminating. He had found the envelope in the letter box and had put it on the table and forgotten all about it until Arnold Long drew attention to his omission.

The address was pencilled in an illiterate scrawl. The gum on the envelope was still wet when he pulled it open, and, taking out a dirty-looking sheet of paper, read:

Don't go to Heartsease.

Only those words. Betcher turned it over and over, placed it carefully in a drawer for future finger-print examination, and went out. The rain was pelting down; his chauffeur had pulled over the hood and was operating the screen-wiper when his employer appeared.

"I shan't want you, Marchant," he said.

"You won't want me, sir?" said the man, in surprise. "I thought you said—"

"Never mind that," said Betcher. "You've got a wife and family, haven't you?"

"Yes, sir," said the man.

"Then stay in London: it's safer," replied the other, and sent the car spinning down St. James's Street into the park.

It was nine in the evening when he arrived at Heartsease, and it had rained throughout the whole journey. He handed the car to the garage-keeper and strolled into the big, old-fashioned hall of the hotel. Although it was two days before the opening of the golf week, the lounge was well filled. He reported to the reception office and greeted the girl behind the polished counter with a friendly smile.

Miss Cravel had evidently suffered no ill effects from her alarming experience. She was all smiles as she greeted him, and in her neat black dress looked prettier than she had in the more elaborate costume she wore when he saw her last.

"Mr. Monkford is expecting you," she said. "You know the suite, Mr. Long?"

He looked left and right, lowered his voice, and asked: "Will you tell me something, Miss Cravel?"

For a second he saw suspicion in her eyes, and then:

"Certainly, if I can."

"Who is paying my bill?" he demanded.

"Why, Mr. Monkford, of course."

"Thank heavens!" said Betcher, and left her puzzled, for she had no sense of humour.

Monkford had had dinner, which had been laid in the sitting room. He was in his brightest and most cheerful mood, for on the way down he had stopped at a curiosity shop in Guildford and discovered some authentic specimens of Bristol glassware: four emerald-green goblets that he had arrayed upon the mantelshelf.

"By the way," he said, "the Black Fate is a fake. I shall have to write to Miss Revelstoke, but she'll be here next week."

"The Black Fate?" For the moment, Betcher had forgotten the existence of the little negress.

"A fake, sir! A German copy. I took it to Bethini's, and they detected the imposture immediately. I don't know whether I ought to tell Miss Revelstoke; I'm afraid of upsetting the dear old lady."

A waiter came in at that moment to clear the table. When he had gone, Betcher put a question which he had intended asking before.

"Is Miss Revelstoke a very rich woman?"

"Ye-es," said Monkford, with all a banker's reluctance to discuss his client's affairs. "She's a fairly rich woman. In fact, I should say she was a very rich woman. She lives simply and her income is a pretty large one."

"How large?" asked Betcher.

But Monkford was not to be drawn.

"I've carried her account for a long time, even when I was a country banker," he said. "At one time, it was an enormous amount. I think she was trustee for her brother's estate. Which reminds me that, when the account was transferred to London, we nearly lost it. It was offered to your father, but for some extraordinary reason, he wouldn't touch it. At that time she had the greater part of three quarters of a million pounds to her credit."

This was news to Betcher Long. His father, he knew, was a very keen business man who would go to a great deal of trouble to secure an account of such dimensions.

"Wasn't that rather remarkable—the refusal, I mean?" he asked.

Mr. Monkford nodded.

"Yes, extraordinary," he said. "Most bankers would jump at such an account; and it wasn't through any affection for me that Sir Godley turned it down. The Western & Somerset are rather old-fashioned, but for Heaven's sake, don't tell your father I said so!"

"I've already told him, or he has told me—I'm not certain which," said the detective.

The fact that only two nights before he had discussed Miss Revelstoke with his father, and that Sir Godley had made no reference whatever to the account, would in ordinary circumstances have perplexed him. But now he had got beyond confounding.

Mr. Monkford was nervous; Long had noticed a subtle change in his appearance. He started at the slightest sound, and confessed that he had been sleeping badly.

"I wonder if Miss Revelstoke is going to bring that girl of hers?" he asked, just before Betcher left him for the night.

"You mean Miss Sanders?"

Mr. Monkford nodded.

"Yes—a charming girl," he said, speaking to himself; "a very, very charming girl." Then, as abruptly as he had opened, he changed the subject. "Crayley is coming down to-morrow," he said. "You don't like Crayley?"

"It is rather difficult to like anybody who has no other mission in life than to look silly and grow roses," said Betcher, and the banker chuckled.

"Old Crayley isn't a bad sort—not at all a bad sort," he said. "And the fellow's got pluck. Do you remember how he threw himself into the struggle when you were arresting Shelton?"

"What was he doing at Colchester? I've often wondered," said Arnold Long.

"He has an estate just outside the town. I've been to the place twice," replied Monkford. "Crayley plays at farming in Essex."

Without alarming the banker, Betcher had made a very close inspection of the bolts and fastenings of the door, and now, momentarily released from his vigil, he went into his own room and conducted as careful a search of that, not even neglecting the old-maidenly precaution of looking under the bed.

The window looked down upon a strip of garden that ran parallel with the building, the end wall of the restaurant being immediately opposite the centre of the sitting room. Locking the door communicating with the saloon, he fastened the bathroom door, though here there was no necessity, for the little bathroom was built on the American plan, and depended for light upon an electric lamp in the ceiling. Putting the key into his pocket, he strolled downstairs. Miss Cravel had disappeared, her place having been taken by a girl clerk. Cravel himself was in the lounge talking to one of his guests. He was in evening dress, but instead of the usual dinner jacket he wore a long black frock coat. Presently, catching the manager's eye, the detective drew him aside.

"I'd like to see some of your more expensive suites," he said.

Cravel shook his head.

"I'm afraid they're all booked " he began.

"I'm not thinking of taking them," interrupted Betcher, "but I'd like to know just what sort of accommodation I should get another year."

"Come upstairs." Cravel took a key from the reception clerk and led the way to the first floor. "This is Miss Revelstoke's suite," he said, "and is one of the best in the house."

Little Heartsease had once been a country mansion that in itself was the relic of a more pretentious castellated building, and Miss Revelstoke's principal room was almost like an apartment of state, with its turret alcoves.

He followed the manager into the room and strolled from one bedroom to the other.

"I suppose this will be for Miss Sanders?" He indicated the smaller of the two beautiful rooms.

The manager was watching him with mild amusement. When he came back: "I really believe, Mr. Long, that it wasn't idle curiosity that made you ask me to show you this suite. You're here on duty!"

"I'm always on duty," evaded Betcher.

"Honestly, Mr. Long, do you expect any kind of a rumpus here? I wouldn't have it for the world! Especially next week, when the place will be packed out. Heartsease wouldn't survive a scandal."

Betcher looked at him and winked.

"It has survived many," he said, "unless my memory is at fault."

"I don't mean those kinds of scandal," said the manager hastily. "Naturally, that sort of thing happens, and you can't prevent it; and nobody thinks any the worse of us. But if somebody was shot up—well, it would ruin the place, that's all."

"It might also ruin the person who was shot up," said Betcher, showing his teeth in a mirthless smile. "You need have no fear, Mr. Cravel. We shall do our very best to avoid anything that looks like a tragedy."

The next day was Sunday, and, strolling through the lounge in the evening, he saw a familiar face and crossed the room to shake the limp hand of Jackson Crayley. "Perfectly horrible weather," grumbled the languid man, pulling dismally at his yellow moustache. "If I'd had any sense I'd have gone to Deauville. Golf is a beastly game, anyway."

Betcher saw him smile and nod at somebody behind the detective's back, and, turning, he had a glimpse of Miss Alice Cravel passing through the hall to her office.

"Deuced nice girl that. Quite a lady and all that sort of thing," said Mr. Crayley. "To tell you the truth," he said, in a burst of confidence, "I wouldn't come to this wretched place at all if it wasn't for that dear little girl."

"A friend of yours?"

"Ya-as." Mr. Crayley took out his monocle, wiped it, and replaced it in his eye. "Yes, and I'm not ashamed of it. She's one of the dearest little ladies I have ever met."

"And yet," said Betcher, very deliberately, "when I saw you speaking to her at Marlow, you told me she was a visitor who wanted to see over your garden, and that you were rather annoyed at her impertinence."

"Did I?" said Mr. Crayley, unabashed. "Well, the truth is, old man, I'm not the sort of bird who wears his heart on his sleeve. I don't mind telling you in absolute confidence that I'm particularly attached to that dear little girl. Naturally, a fellow has to be careful—what? How are Scotland Yard and all kind friends?"

"They're bearing up bravely in my absence," said Betcher. "Have you seen Mr. Monkford?"

"He's here, is he? Why, of course, I ought to go up and pay my respects to the old boy. Very useful having a banker for a friend—what?"

He dug his finger facetiously in Betcher's ribs, but his gesture was almost as feeble as his jocularity.

"I have a strange room this year," he complained. "That wretched woman Revelstoke has bagged the suite I usually have, and I'm fearfully annoyed about it."

"Don't you like Miss Revelstoke?"

"Hate her!" said Mr. Crayley, with unexpected vehemence. "She's most unkind. She can't say a decent word to a fellow—always snapping and snarling at him. I loathe her!"

There was truth in this, if the concentrated venom of his tone meant anything.

"I'll totter up and see dear old Thingummy-tight."

It was his eccentricity that he remembered names with difficulty, but Betcher guessed he meant Monkford. He saw the weary Jackson Crayley later in the evening; he was leaning over the counter talking to Miss Cravel, who usually at this hour had been relieved by the girl clerk; and he wondered what community of interest there was between this rather flashy type of lady and the exquisite man of fashion whose life seemed to be one blank boredom.

That Sunday was the longest day that Betcher Long ever remembered spending. He went out with Monkford and played an execrable game of golf in the morning and the afternoon was a weariness and a trial. And then he

began to understand just what it was that was lengthening this day so inordinately. It was the knowledge that the morrow would bring Nora Sanders to Heartsease, and that the big period of peril would begin.

The storm had cleared; the sun was shining in a blue sky when Miss Revelstoke's fast limousine flashed up the drive and came to a noiseless halt before the portal of Heartsease. Mr. Cravel was in attendance to welcome his guests, and the presence of Inspector Long seemed a little superfluous. So Miss Revelstoke seemed to think, for she passed him with a curt nod, her attention seemingly concentrated upon the obsequious manager.

"You have a few parcels: let me help you."

Nora had seen him the moment the portico of the hotel had come into view, and laughingly she waved aside his assistance, which was unnecessary, since a small army of porters was in waiting to deal with the baggage which was piled on the top of the car.

"Welcome to Heartsease!" said Betcher solemnly.

"I'm a deputation from the Town Council to offer you the freedom of our ancient borough."

"You don't even know the name of the borough," she laughed.

"Betcher!" said Mr. Long promptly, and apologized incoherently.

She went quickly in the wake of Miss Revelstoke, and he did not see her again until after dinner that night, and then only for a few minutes. Tuesday came, and the beginning of the great tournament. Heartsease was crowded out, the broad lawn had disappeared under gaily hued umbrellas and tea tables, and the hall was rather like the entrance gate at a popular football match.

To keep track of newcomers would in ordinary circumstances have been impossible; but the Heartsease golf course lay within a ring fence: there were two entrances to the park, and at each of these two detectives kept a look-out for suspicious characters. Beyond a fashionably dressed pickpocket or two, and a confidence man from London who thought the occasion might yield profit to himself, there were no ignominious rejections, nor did Betcher Long anticipate there would be.

Wednesday brought Mr. Henry, the lawyer, and, seeing him dismount from his car, Betcher groaned.

"Here's a bird who has come golfing in a top hat," he said over his shoulder (he viewed the arrival from Mr. Monkford's sitting-room window).

"Who is it?" asked the banker.

"Henry, the lawyer. Do you know him?"

"Know him!" scoffed Monkford. "Why, I should say so! He's Miss Revelstoke's lawyer and a rising man."

"Rising! He'll be coming up for the third time if he goes golfing in a stovepipe hat," said Betcher.

It was not surprising that Mr. Monkford should have many friends. He was a popular figure in the City of London, and as a connoisseur, he had been brought into touch with a certain artistic and literary set. Visitors flowed into his room all day long, for beyond the hour's walk he had in the morning, in company with Betcher, he seldom left the hotel, for professional golf was anathema to him. So that he did not join the crowds of enthusiasts that hampered the putting of the only great golfer England has ever produced.

Except on the night of his arrival, he had his meals in the great dining room, and found his chief pleasure in these functions, and in the crowd that thronged the lounge after dinner. And as day followed day, and no sign of danger appeared, he forgot his fears and was his old cheerful self. On the Tuesday he was elected President of the Dance Committee, and threw himself into the work of organizing the fancy-dress ball which was to conclude the week's festivities.

That evening, looking from his window, Betcher saw the banker walking up and down the side lawn immediately beneath the detective, and he was in earnest conversation with Henry and Crayley. For half an hour they paced to and fro, and obviously the subject of their talk was a serious one. Once, Monkford looked up and saw him, but did not wave the friendly greeting which Betcher anticipated.

They must have gone into the hotel soon after, for five minutes later he heard the three men talking in the saloon, which was next to his own room. They were together for about a quarter of an hour, at the end of which time the detective heard the outer door close and went in. The banker was alone, and obviously something had happened which had upset him.

"Anything wrong?" asked Long.

"Nothing—nothing!" Mr. Monkford almost snapped the words. And then:

"I want to see you after dinner, Long."

"Why not see me now?"

"It can wait," said the banker.

"Does it concern you?"

"In a sense, yes," said the other shortly. "But it concerns a—a young friend of mine more. But, really, I do not wish to speak about the matter at the moment. If you will see me immediately after dinner, we can discuss something which has rather distressed me. Yes, it has distressed me."

No more would he say, and Betcher went out of the room more than a little puzzled.

He buttonholed Crayley in the hall.

"What have you been telling Monkford to make him so infernally depressed?" he asked.

Jackson Crayley looked at him open-mouthed.

"We were talking about a purely personal and private matter. If he didn't tell you, I'm afraid I can't. I'm on my honour."

Betcher looked at him closely. There was something about him that was unusual and difficult to define. His voice was a little sharper; he gave the impression that he was labouring under some extraordinary strain—there was an unusual tenseness even in his attitude. Betcher was puzzled. He did not know Henry—at any rate, well enough to discover from the lawyer what had been the subject of that lawn conference—and it was the more baffling because, all that day, Joshua Monkford had been in his gayest mood, and had even suggested a visit to the links to follow two popular players.

As a rule, he dined with Monkford, but, just as he was dressing for dinner, the banker's valet came with a note.

Do you mind dining at another table to-night? I have one or two things that I wish to discuss with Crayley and young Henry.

He was not so much annoyed as worried. What could be Monkford's new preoccupation? He searched round in his mind, trying to find a clue, but he could remember nothing that the banker had said which would explain this sudden business of his.

He saw him at dinner that night, but, more to the point, was placed at a table next to that occupied by Miss Revelstoke and her secretary. For one fleeting second the girl's eyes met his, and he remembered, with a start of guilt, that he had yet to explain to her (and probably would never be in a position to explain) the lies he had told about the ring.

Miss Revelstoke's little bow was graciousness itself. There was in her eyes a look of malicious triumph which made Betcher Long grin inwardly. Dinner was over and he was taking his coffee in the lounge when Joshua Monkford pushed through the press toward him.

"Come upstairs to my room in five minutes, Long, will you, please?"

There was a cold menace in the tone which left Long speechless. He watched the clock till five minutes had passed; then, rising, he made his way to the elevator.

The saloon was empty when he strolled in, but he heard Monkford's voice speaking from his own room, and he was evidently at the telephone.

"Hullo—hullo!... Who has

Then Betcher heard an explosion and the sound of a body falling, and strove to force the door. It was locked and bolted on the inside, as he remembered now, and, flying through the saloon into the corridor, he tried the outer door. That also was locked.

He threw himself against the door but it was of stout oak and resisted his efforts. And then, looking round, he saw Cravel running up the stairs, and on the man's white face was an expression of consternation.

"Was that a shot?" he asked in a horrified whisper. Betcher nodded.

"Open this door," he said.

The manager felt in his pockets.

"I haven't a pass-key—wait," he said, and ran down the stairs.

He was back in a minute and, inserting the pass-key with a trembling hand, the lock snapped and the door flew open.

Joshua Monkford lay huddled on the floor, face downward, his hands gripping the receiver of the telephone, and in the room was the acrid smell of cordite.

CHAPTER XVII

HE WAS dead. One glance told the detective that. "Get a doctor," he said over his shoulder. "Is he killed?" whispered the manager.

"Get a doctor!" snarled Long. "Do as I tell you."

Left alone, Arnold Long closed the door. There was no key in the lock except the manager's pass-key, which still protruded on the outside. He crossed the floor to the bathroom; it was bolted and locked, as also was the door to the saloon, as he knew. The windows were dosed, for the night was chilly, and, moreover, fastened with a latch. Above the three windows were little fanlights, and these alone were opened. He flung back the window and looked down. The glass roof of the restaurant annex glowed with light; sign of ladder there was none.

A long wardrobe near the end of the bed was empty, and the bed itself concealed nothing. Taking up a hairbrush from the dressing table, he tapped the panelled walls on the side of the room opposite to that which divided the apartment from the saloon. And as he sounded the wall he knew that his work was futile. The weapon that killed Joshua Monkford had been held within an inch of the man's head, and from the position where he lay, it was clear that, even if there were a secret panel, it must open into the saloon where he himself had been a second before the shot was fired.

Making a rough measurement with Monkford's umbrella, which happened to be in the room, he was satisfied that, even were there an opening into the saloon, it was impossible that the murderer could have shot at so close a range.

The opposite wall marked the boundary between the Monkford suite and a room occupied by two girls, the daughters of a Member of Parliament who were staying at Heartsease for the week.

Betcher Long breathed heavily. Here was a man done to death in a room that could not be entered—that was, in fact, impossible to enter except by the door through which the manager's key had admitted him.

As he walked out into the corridor, Cravel nearly ran into him. His face wore an expression of fear, and he was talking excitedly to the servant girl who accompanied him.

"Mr. Long," he said urgently, "something has happened in Miss Sanders's room."

Betcher glared at him.

"Happened? What has happened?" he almost shouted.

Behind the manager was a quavering servant maid. "I don't know, sir; I heard something explode—"

Before she could finish the sentence he was halfway down the stairs. The girl's room he knew. It was locked, and, looking through the keyhole, he saw a thin film of smoke suspended in the atmosphere, and his heart turned faint. And then: "Whatever do you want, Mr. Long?"

He leapt round. It was Nora Sanders.

"Have you got the key?" He could hardly recognize the sound of his own voice.

He almost snatched the key from her hand, and, flinging open the door, strode in. There had been some sort of an explosion here: he could smell it. And then he saw a white, smouldering paper on the hearthstone, and picked it up, dipping it without ceremony in a jug of water which stood on the washstand.

"What has happened?" asked the bewildered girl. "Nothing very much. Will you stay here?"

In a second he was out of the room and going up the stairs two at a time. He had left the manager in Monkford's room, and now he found him outside in the passage, the door closed.

"I thought I'd better lock it while you were away."

Betcher nodded his thanks, and together they entered the room. In the relaxation of death the telephone receiver had fallen to the floor and lay stained with the blood of the man. Monkford had been shot through the head at close quarters, almost as Harry the Lancer had been shot, and as the unfortunate ex-soldier at Bourne End had been shot.

Betcher looked round. By this time one of the detectives on duty in the hotel had either sensed or heard of the occurrence and had arrived. They turned the manager out of the room, locked the door, and began a careful examination.

The room had been empty when Betcher had opened the door: of that he was certain. There was no place where a man could be concealed. Then, inch by inch, he began another examination of the wall, tapping each panel, whilst his assistant tested the other. The ceiling was of plaster. There was no fireplace except a vent to carry off the hot air generated by an electric stove. He picked up the telephone, wiped it clean on a towel, and called up the office. It was Miss Cravel who answered him, and evidently from her tone she knew that something terrible had happened.

"Is that you, Mr. Long?" she asked. "Is it true—"

She was speaking in a low voice, evidently from that part of the building which was more or less public.

"Who called Mr. Monkford five minutes ago?" asked Betcher.

"Nobody—he called here. I had his signal and answered it, and then I thought I heard a shot."

He put down the instrument as somebody tapped on the door. It was a doctor, one of the guests, who had been hastily summoned. He looked at the still figure and shook his head.

"You don't want me to tell you he's dead, do you?" he asked, as he stooped and made a cursory examination. "Shot through the brain. I should say death was instantaneous. And at close quarters, too—you see the burning?"

Betcher nodded. The wound had been inflicted by something that had the appearance of a bullet from an automatic pistol.

"Have you got your man?"

Evidently the doctor had been told of Arnold Long's identity.

"No, we have no man, because there was no man here when we came into the room. It was empty."

"Suicide?" asked the doctor, in surprise.

That possibility had been the first to occur to the detective. But there was no sign of any weapon. Mr. Monkford had carried a Browning pistol for protection, but this the detective had found in a drawer of his bureau, and it was clean, and, what was more, unloaded. How had the murder been committed? For murder it was, undoubtedly.

He finished his inspection and went in search of Crayley. He had no need to be a psychologist to realize that the story of the tragedy had already reached Monkford's neighbour.

"This is terrible, terrible! Why should he shoot himself? He was in the most cheerful mood this afternoon when I spoke to him"

"Now, listen, Crayley. I'm going to ask you a few questions. That young lawyer and you were with Monkford this afternoon. You told him something that depressed him—"

"He told me something that depressed me!" said Crayley loudly. "And don't bully me, Long, because I'll not stand for it! I'm all rattled and upset by this

poor chap's death, and my nerves can't endure any bullying. I tell you, I won't even discuss the subject of our conversation."

"Maybe you'll discuss it with the coroner to-morrow," said Betcher, and the man's eyes narrowed.

"Threatening me, are you, by gad! Threatening me! And I saved your infernal life at Chelmsford!"

"Now, see here, Crayley, let's get this matter right. I'm not threatening you; I am asking you questions that any police officer would ask any honest man. And, what is more, any honest man would answer. What was the subject of your conversation with 'Monkford this afternoon?"

Crayley shrugged his shoulders.

"I am not at liberty to say. You had better ask Henry: it concerned him more than me. And I feel, Long, that I ought to see my lawyers before I make any statement after this terrible tragedy."

Betcher Long went in search of the lawyer, only to learn that Mr. Henry had left the hotel immediately after dinner and was well on his way to London.

CHAPTER XVIII

MISS REVELSTOKE brought the news to Nora, and the girl was speechless with horror. "Dead?" she whispered. "Oh, no, Miss Revelstoke, that can't possibly be! Did he—"

"I don't know. The doctor seems to think it's a case of suicide," she said. "But why poor Monkford should commit suicide I can't imagine."

She was visibly agitated. Usually a very phlegmatic person, she paced the room restlessly.

"He has been threatened with death for a long time. Crayley told me, but of course I didn't believe him. That is why the detective is here—your Mr. Long. A pretty detective!"

"I thought you said it was suicide, Miss Revelstoke."

"It was not suicide. Simpkins says no weapon has been found. He is a foolish kind of man, even for a doctor."

"But who could have killed him?"

"Don't ask fool questions, child," said the yellow-faced woman savagely. "He's dead, that's sufficient! I can only hope that his bank is not insolvent or something equally dreadful. As to Mr. Long—well, he doesn't enjoy any too enviable reputation at Scotland Yard, according to Henry, and this ought to be his finish."

There was a note of cold malignity in her voice that made the girl sit bolt upright and stare at her.

"Don't you—don't you like Mr. Long?" she faltered.

It seemed incredible that there was anybody in the world to whom Betcher Long was not an attractive personality.

"He'll blame the Terrible People, of course. The Terrible People are probably an invention of his to account for his failures. Like him? Herr Gott!"

She said something in German, and checked herself.

"Nora," she said, "every woman has got something in her past which she does not wish should be raked into public view. By some extraordinary accident your Mr. Long has unearthed an old folly of mine that I thought was dead and buried. I won't tell you what it was. You would probably be bored and think I was mad. It happened in Copenhagen when I was a very young girl—"

She drew a long breath.

"Let it go at that. No, I do not like your Mr. Betcher Long!"

The girl was silent. In the circumstances, it would be worse than foolishness to attempt to defend a man who she felt had done his duty. She could not imagine Arnold Long failing in his trust.

"What is this story of an explosion in your room, Nora?" she asked suddenly.

The girl could only tell her what had happened.

"I knew nothing until I saw Mr. Long trying my door. One of the maids told me she had heard three or four shots fired, and there was something burning on the hearth when Mr. Long and I went in: a thick strip of white paper."

"What happened to that?" asked Miss Revelstoke curiously, and Nora told her.

Evidently it did not seem a very alarming happening to the elder woman, for she made no further reference to it. She went down to join the guests, leaving the girl to pack—hearing of the tragedy, she had announced her intention of returning to London in the morning. Nora was so engaged when there was a knock at the saloon door. It was Mr. Cravel, and he was a very self-possessed man.

"Everybody is leaving," he said. "The news got out through the doctor. This is ruin for me!"

Yet his voice was very calm and his attitude was that of a man who was viewing another's misfortune.

"I suppose the thing will blow over between now and next year, and anyway, I intended to make big alterations here. We shall cut out the room where this wretched suicide happened—I can bring the staircase through it without any great difficulty."

His whole interest in the tragedy was the effect it had upon his own fortunes. It was natural, perhaps, thought the girl, and yet there was a certain cold- bloodedness in his disregard of the horror which had swept Joshua Monkford into eternity that was almost repulsive to the girl.

When Miss Revelstoke returned, Nora spoke of the manager's seeming callousness.

"My dear, you don't expect him to weep over poor Monkford, do you?" asked the elder woman testily. "He is probably ruined—certainly so far as this season is concerned. Only the lunatic golfers are staying; the rest of the

guests are leaving in the morning; some have already left. The week is spoilt from Cravel's point of view, and I think it is rather wonderful that he can keep his head as he is doing. I saw your detective downstairs. He asked me if he might come up and speak to you—you don't mind?"

Nora shook her head.

"What information he expects to get from you, I can't imagine," said Miss Revelstoke. "You won't object to being left alone with him? The very sight of the man irritates me."

It was soon after this that Arnold Long made his appearance. He was looking dreadfully tired, the girl thought; the strain was telling on him, and her heart went out to him in sympathy.

Contrary to Nora's expectations, Miss Revelstoke did not mark her disapproval by leaving them together.

On the contrary, she made no sign of departing.

"Well, Mr. Long, have you made any discovery?"

"None," he said curtly, "except, of course, that Monkford was murdered."

"But how? The manager tells me the room was empty when you went in, and that the only man near poor Monkford when he was shot—was you!"

Betcher looked at her quickly.

"Was me? That view certainly hadn't struck me," he said ironically.

"I daresay it will occur to others," said Miss Revelstoke. "Mr. Cravel tells me that he was on the second floor, heard a shot, and ran upstairs, and found you standing at the door, apparently trying to open Mr. Monkford's door. Why should it be locked?"

"I have wondered that, but it was locked." The yellow-faced woman shrugged her shoulders, and her lips twitched with amusement.

"Apparently, there is no key, and Mr. Cravel said the door could not have been locked on the inside; otherwise, he could not have opened it with his pass-key. But perhaps you have found the key of the door?"

"There is that possibility," replied the detective coolly. "It was, in fact, in poor Monkford's pocket." Miss Revelstoke's eyebrows arched inquiringly.

"Cravel said that the key was still hanging in the reception office, and is there still. As you found the key in Monkford's pocket, it must have been one quite unknown to the hotel."

She saw Betcher Long start, and a smile dawn on his tired face.

"That's it!"

Of a sudden his face had changed; the tiredness had vanished, and a new light had come to his eyes.

"That's it, of course! What a fool I was! What an utterly stupid fool!"

The effect of his sudden enthusiasm on Miss Revelstoke did not pass unobserved. Nora saw the woman's face lengthen, her lips parted as though she were going to say something, but no sound came; and then the arched brows came down to a deep frown.

"That is it?" she repeated. "What do you mean?"

"Miss Revelstoke"—he was almost jovial—"you have supplied me with the obvious solution to this terribly queer mystery. And now I will unburden my soul. I lied to you just now when I told you I had found the key in his pocket. As a matter of fact, I didn't find the key in his pocket, and I've been searching the room for it since the crime was committed. But I lie naturally, and a lie's the most exciting and provocative statement I know, especially to those—"

He did not conclude the sentence, and Miss Revelstoke waited, but waited in vain. He turned to the girl.

"I was going to ask you a whole lot of questions about the explosion in your room," he said, "but that is not necessary. I know every fact now, except one: how did the man who killed Joshua Monkford escape from the room?"

Miss Revelstoke's lips curled.

"That seems to be rather more important than any other question," she said, with her arid smile.

"It is and it isn't," said Betcher Long, speaking half to himself. "The really important question that I have not yet answered is: why did Mr. Henry, that eminent lawyer, call at Staines police station at a quarter to nine and report to the inspector in charge the loss of a wristwatch which he had left behind in his room?"

The woman's eyes were wide open now, and the smile had left her face.

"You're almost as mysterious as the mysterious people, Mr. Long," she said.

"Mysteriouser," said Betcher Long. "For at the very minute Henry called at the police station, Monkford was shot dead. I have never heard of a better alibi!"

CHAPTER XIX

MISS REVELSTOKE had not exaggerated when she had said that more than half the guests were leaving. Arnold Long, who had made a flying visit to town, returned to find no more than half a dozen people in the big luncheon room, and the settled air of melancholy upon the faces of the waiters was convincing proof that the season was spoiled.

At Cravel's earnest request, three joiners had been engaged since the early morning in removing the panelling from the room where the crime had been committed, and this had been carried out under the supervision of Detective- Sergeant Rouch.

Betcher went up to inspect the devastation. The walls had been stripped to the brickwork; a section of the floor had been taken up, and the detective needed to be no architect to understand that it was impossible for any person to have entered or left the room.

Sergeant Rouch was a fair, stout man of middle age, whose principal characteristic was his optimism, and his admirable faith that the most complicated problem would solve itself. This had been the guiding principle of his life, as he explained to Betcher in a moment of confidence.

"It doesn't matter how clever these fellows are, they're bound to hang themselves in the long run," he said cheerfully. "My own idea is that poor old Monkford was shot by a marksman from Grundley Hill—it's only five hundred yards away—"

"The windows were closed, and the bullet that killed Monkford was fired from less than six inches' distance," said Betcher curtly.

He took out of his pocket a little package and unfolded it, revealing the soiled end of the burnt and sodden paper he had taken from the hearth in Nora's room.

"What is that?" asked Rouch curiously.

"It is all that remains of a cracker. You can buy them at a shilling a packet—
"

"Fireworks?" asked Rouch, in surprise.

"Fireworks," agreed Mr. Long gravely. "The delight of your childhood, Rouch— if you ever had a childhood."

"Certainly I did," said Rouch indignantly. "Why, when I was four—"

"Don't let us go into your horrible past," interrupted Betcher. "This was thrown through the window of Miss Sanders's room, or introduced in some

other way, the object being at a crucial moment to attract me from Monkford's room, and, like a fool, I was attracted! Whilst I was away, something happened—"

"The murderer escaped," said Rouch comfortably. "I've seen that done before. When I was on the Gonleston bank case—"

"The murderer couldn't have escaped, because the murderer wasn't there," Betcher Long went on, displaying admirable patience with these interruptions.

"Then how was he killed?" asked Mr. Rouch triumphantly.

Betcher regarded him more in sorrow than in anger. "Rouch, you have everything in the world that man can desire, except brains!" he said.

"Well, how was he killed?" persisted Rouch. "It is all very well to say that I haven't brains, Mr. Long, but here is a man killed in a locked room, the only human being near being you—"

"You've got that theory, too, have you?" Betcher grinned. "Sit ye down, Rouch. I'm going to put you through the third degree. Where did you get that 'you were the only man' stuff?"

"Well"—Sergeant Rouch was a little uncomfortable, wiped his profusely perspiring brow with a rapid sweep of his handkerchief, and shrugged his plump shoulders—"I'm only saying—" he began.

"Where did you get your say? You could never have acquired that illuminating theory out of your own nut. Who has been talking to you?"

"It is what Cravel thinks, anyway," said the disgruntled detective. "He said it was very curious that you were the only person near at hand when the shot was fired."

"Bring Cravel here: I want a little talk with him."

Mr. Cravel came. It seemed that by now he was resigned to the inevitable monetary loss that the tragedy brought to him. He could even smile as he glanced round the dismantled room.

"Well, Mr. Long, have you found any secret traps or secret panels?"

Betcher did not reply.

"Shut the door," he said to his subordinate, and, when this was done:

"You remember, Cravel, that when you came upstairs after you heard the shot, I was standing at the door, trying to open it?"

For a second the ghost of apprehension appeared in the manager's eyes.

"You're not going to take seriously anything I've said to Rouch, are you? I merely remarked that you were the nearest living person, so far as we know, to Mr. Monkford when he was murdered. That is so obvious a fact that you won't think I suggested—"

"I'm not worrying about what you suggest," interrupted Betcher. "I'm merely going to ask you a few questions. You remember my turning to you and asking if you had a key to the door?"

Cravel nodded; he was watchful, alert, all his senses tense.

"And you also remember that you went downstairs and returned with a pass- key?"

"I did, yes."

"From whom did you get it?" asked Betcher.

"From the floor waiter."

"Find him," said Betcher curtly, addressing Rouch. He did not speak till the waiter was brought into the room.

"Have you a pass-key for this floor?"

Only for the fraction of a second did the man glance at his employer, and then: "Yes."

"Let me see it."

Reluctantly the waiter took the key from his pocket and handed it to Betcher Long, who slipped it into the lock of the door and tried to turn it.

"This doesn't fit," he said. "In fact, this pass-key doesn't function on the third floor at all, does it?"

The waiter did not answer this, again shooting that furtive glance at his master which Betcher had detected before.

"Who has the pass-key of the third floor?"

The waiter shifted uncomfortably.

"I don't know, sir," he said. "Probably the floor waiter."

"Get him," said Betcher again, and dismissed the man with a nod.

"What is the idea, Long?" asked Cravel, when they were left alone.

"I'll take you into my confidence," replied Arnold Long quietly. "When Monkford went to his room after inviting me to follow him, it is an intelligent view that he did not lock the door. Why should he? And it is obvious to the meanest mind that he could not lock the door if he had no key. Therefore, it is a logical sequence that the door was locked by somebody else, either from the outside or the inside. I heard Mr. Monkford call the office, and I am satisfied that he called the office because he found the door had been locked on him from the outside. I heard him say 'Who has—' and then a shot. What he was trying to say was, 'Who has locked my door?'"

Cravel's face was the colour of chalk.

"I am suggesting, further, that the man who locked the door was you; that you had the pass-key in your pocket, and that your running downstairs to get the key was the merest blind to hide that fact from me."

At this moment Rouch came back to report that the floor waiter who had been on duty on the night of the murder had gone on leave.

"I expected something like that," said Betcher slowly.

"What in hell do you mean?"

The man was in a cold fury, but he was mortally afraid, too.

"Are you going to say that I unlocked the door whilst you were there, went in, and shot Monkford?"

"I suggest that you locked the door before he was dead, well knowing what would happen to him—now, come across, Cravel."

"It's a lie!" stormed the manager. "I had not been anywhere near the door. Why should I lock it? You have fallen down on this case, Long, and you're handing up all sorts of wild theories to save your coat."

Betcher thrust his face forward till it almost touched the shrinking man.

"I've got enough theories, as you call them, to put a rope round your neck, Cravel, my Terrible Man! Enough theory, at any rate, to hold you for the murder of Joshua Monkford. I can take you right now, but I'm giving you a little more rope. Sooner or later, you're going to put the rope where I want it. If you did not kill Joshua Monkford, you were one of those who planned his death. If all I believe is true, I will put your feet on the trap where Clay Shelton stood!"

He had got home! Cravel's lips parted in a grin of diabolical fury; his eyes were blazing.

"You will, will you?" The words seemed to strangle him. "By God, you will! Put me—where you put Clay Shelton! You—"

Betcher slipped aside and missed the hammer blow that the man struck at him. Quick as light, his arm went round Cravel's neck and jerked back his head. The manager struck out wildly, lost his balance, and was flung breathless to the floor.

"Gotcher!" Betcher Long was smiling ecstatically. "Touched you on the raw, didn't I, Cravel? You've brought me nearer—just that much nearer—to the place I want to be."

The man rose slowly; he was trembling in every limb; his eyes seemed to have sunk deeper into his head, but he had control of himself.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You rattled me a bit. No man wants to be compared with a murderer, let alone accused of being one! I'll report this matter to Scotland Yard, Long."

"Come up and see the Chief : he'll be glad to see you. How old are you, Cravel?"

The manager did not reply, but, turning on his heel, walked unsteadily out of the room.

"My Gawd!" whispered Rouch, staring in dismay and admiration at his chief. "There'll be trouble over this when he reports."

"He'll never report—betcher!" said Mr. Long. "Betcher a thousand," he went on extravagantly, "that he doesn't stick his nose under the arch! Betcher a million that we never hear one little word about my disgraceful behaviour!" He glanced round the room. "You can tell the ancient guild of wood cutters that they can put their panels back."

He went to his room and packed his grip, and carried it himself to the hall. The man had brought his car from the garage, and he threw the grip into the back of the machine. One foot was on the step when he heard his name called. He turned: it was Alice Cravel, and her face for the moment was inscrutable. She held a piece of paper in her hand.

"You haven't paid your bill, Mr. Long," she said.

He took the account and examined it, and then he laughed until he was helpless. The exorbitance of the charge was not without its humour. He handed the bill back to the girl.

"Send it to Mr. Monkford's executors," he said cold-bloodedly. "And, Miss Cravel—"

She waited, her lips tightly pressed together, cold hate in her eyes.

"Will you tell your brother I'll be meeting him at Chelmsford one of these days? Harry the Lancer was no friend of mine, but I promised myself the pleasure of hanging the man who killed him. Good-morning!"

Her steadfast eyes did not so much as waver, but when he had said "Chelmsford," he had read the momentary surprise in them. Wandsworth was the jail where a Berkshire murderer would hang—she had forgotten Harry the Lancer.

CHAPTER XX

THE office of Mr. Frederick Henry was in Lincoln's Inn Fields. He occupied the ground floor of No. 742, and it was as neat an establishment as one would have expected in so immaculate and proper a young man. His private office looked out upon grass and trees and a bed of scarlet geraniums. There was none of the mustiness or disorder which is usually associated with lawyers' offices. Iron shelves holding well-dusted deed boxes formed a dado about the room. The desk at which he sat was of sober mahogany. And if the room held any exotic feature, it was the blue china bowl filled with red roses that had been placed on the marble shelf.

He was standing by the window, looking out upon the pleasant gardens, when his clerk announced the arrival of Betcher Long. Mr. Henry looked at the card with a smile, and then:

"Show him in, please."

He came halfway across the room to greet the detective.

"You've come about Monkford, of course?" he said. "I wrote to you last night, but fortunately I got on to the telephone and found that you had left Heartsease."

He pushed up a chair for his visitor, then seated himself behind the desk.

"Now, Mr. Long, what do you want to know?"

Betcher Long had not expected to be met halfway, either literally or figuratively, and the friendliness of the greeting was a little disconcerting.

"I will be quite frank with you, Mr. Henry," he said. "A few hours before Monkford was murdered, I saw him in conversation with Jackson Crayley and yourself. You were promenading the lawn under my window. When I subsequently saw Monkford, his attitude toward me was distinctly chilly. I want to know what was the subject of your conversation and why Monkford adopted this extraordinary attitude to one who had hitherto been a very good friend of his."

"That, I think, can be easily explained," said the lawyer. "Mr. Monkford learnt from me that you were an admirer of Miss Nora Sanders and had sent her a valuable ring."

For a second the detective was staggered. Not in his wildest moments had he dreamt that this little act of deception on his part was the cause of Monkford's curious attitude toward him.

"And why should that have affected Mr. Monkford?" he demanded. "Even supposing it were true that I was in love with Nora Sanders and sent her a

present, why should he be annoyed?" Henry regarded him with a queer smile. Mr. Henry had a peculiar sense of humour, and the situation had its amusing side.

"Because Monkford was in love with her himself," he said, and was well satisfied with the effect of his announcement.

"In love with her?" repeated Betcher incredulously.

"So much in love with her," said the lawyer, emphasizing every word, "that on the afternoon preceding his death he made a will in favour of Nora Sanders, leaving her his entire fortune!"

Betcher Long got up to his feet with deliberation. "Like hell he did!" he said slowly.

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders, and his gesture was one that indicated both his indifference to the eccentricity of the dead Monkford and all its consequences.

"I have the will in my possession," he said. "It was drawn up at Monkford's request and witnessed by myself and Crayley."

"Who are the executors?" asked the detective, after a moment's thought.

"Miss Sanders herself is the sole executrix. Naturally I advised him against making such a will, and suggested he should send for his own lawyer, and I was very strongly opposed to Miss Sanders being the sole executrix—I wished the estate to be administered by the Public Executor. But he was very firm on the point. He told me he intended to see you after dinner and explain what he had done. I rather think that he was in some fear of an immediate death, and he wished the will made immediately. I advised him strongly against it—"

"You told me that before." Betcher's voice was cold, his whole manner sceptical; but, happily, Mr. Henry was not susceptible to an antagonistic atmosphere.

Betcher Long had never thought so quickly or so surely in his life. He made one lightning review of the case from the very moment he had arrested Clay Shelton till this identical moment when he stood watching the shadows of the trees throw dancing arabesques of green and purple upon the lawn.

"I've got to work fast," he said slowly. "Faster than the fastest—and I'll do it, I'll betcher!"

The lawyer's expression was one of inquiry.

"I don't see exactly how this affects you, Mr. Long."

"It affects me a whole lot," said Betcher. "What is to- day—Wednesday?"

He had a boyish trick of counting on the tips of his fingers.

"Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday." , He paused at Sunday. "Four days are a lot of days—ninety-six hours. Now, the question is," he mused, "can I keep awake for ninety-six hours? Because, if I can, there are quite a number of people going to toe the chalk mark and pass out into a better and, I hope, a brighter world. How old are you, mister?"

"I?" said the lawyer, in surprise. "I'm twenty-three or twenty-four, I'm not quite certain which. Why do you ask?"

"You look younger, that's all. I'm naturally complimentary." And then, abruptly: "Where can I find Crayley?"

"At his club," suggested Mr. Henry.

"The Arts and Sciences, isn't it? Pretty inappropriate, for Jackson is neither artful nor scientific, and if he isn't a squealer, I've never met one."

"A squealer?" Henry caressed his little black moustache. "It never struck me that Jackson Crayley would squeal, as you call it."

"Betcher he does!" Mr. Long nodded his head emphatically. "Betcher a thousand he squeals before the hot irons touch him!"

Henry laughed.

"Are you going to put him to the torture?" he asked drily. "And if you do, what do you expect to find? That the will is a fake and that Mr. Monkford's signature is a forgery? Really, Long, I never dreamt that that kind of detective existed outside of melodrama."

Betcher Long grinned as he took up his hat and walked to the door.

"Melodrama—you've said it! That's what this is going to be, a melodrama with all the villains under arrest in the last act and virtue triumphant! Ever heard of Elmstrong, the fellow who poisoned his wife down in Hereford? He was a lawyer, and they hanged him."

"Well, what about it?" asked the amused Henry.

"It was a hell of a good precedent," said Betcher.

CHAPTER XXI

A BOULDER dropped into a piece of delicate mechanism does not more completely disorganize the smooth running of the machinery than does any extraordinary act which throws out of gear the revolution of the social wheel. Miss Revelstoke confessed bitterly that her season was wasted. Usually, she spent a month at Heartsease, staying on for three weeks after the festival, and from Berkshire she journeyed immediately to Scotland, where she usually spent another month before she went on to Aix.

"I have three weeks to spend in London," she said, "when everybody is out of town!"

Nora suggested a French plage.

The horror of Mr. Monkford's death was still upon her; she could not shake off the impression of the tragedy, and the knowledge that the Terrible People were a reality. Although she had not spoken to Arnold Long about the mysterious confederation since that memorable journey to Bourne End, he had told her enough then to convince her that Mr. Monkford's death was due to their machinations. She had tried, unsuccessfully, to elicit the views of her employer.

"Stuff and rubbish!" said Miss Revelstoke. "The Terrible People, indeed! I don't know what has come over Scotland Yard that they should listen to such preposterous nonsense! Happily, Mr. Inspector Long will not be in a position to spread these romantic stories after this week."

The girl listened, disturbed.

"But surely they are not blaming him for Mr. Monkford's death?"

"Why shouldn't they?" demanded Miss Revelstoke. "Wasn't he sent to Heartsease to protect the wretched man? And how well he protected him!"

"The Terrible People—" began Nora.

"Terrible fiddlesticks! Write to the Cap Martin Hotel, Bournemouth, and ask them if the suite I had two years ago is unoccupied; and please get the Terrible People out of your silly little head, my dear."

She glanced out of the window as a taxicab drew up to the door and a silk-hatted man alighted.

"Here is the faithful Henry, and he seems in rather a hurry."

It was not until Henry had been in Miss Revelstoke's study for twenty minutes that the girl was sent for, and the news she heard stunned her.

"Two million pounds—for me!" she gasped. "It can't possibly be true!"

She sat white and shaking, looking from one to the other. Mr. Henry was smiling with good-natured amusement.

"I'm afraid you'll have to accept the responsibility of the estate, Nora," he said. "I want you to let me act for you and apply for probate. Most of his assets are liquid, and by the terms of the will you receive one million two hundred thousand immediately."

"The sly old fox! He was in love with you, after all!" Miss Revelstoke's black eyes transfixed the girl.

"But—but " stammered Nora helplessly.

The elder woman put her arm about her shoulder, and, for some reason which the girl could not understand, she shuddered. It was as though a flexible bar of steel had gripped her, and the unsuspected strength in the woman's arm was a little frightening.

"You go upstairs and lie down. I'll talk to Henry about this legacy. It isn't to be expected that she should take in her good fortune." She was addressing the lawyer.

Meekly, Nora Sanders allowed herself to be taken up to her room. The door closed on Miss Revelstoke, leaving Nora to order her scattered thoughts.

Two million pounds! It was incredible! Presently she would wake up and find that she had been dreaming. But it was a very vivid dream. She looked round the room, cataloguing every article that met her eye. The bureau, a little writing desk, the portrait of her father that hung above, the open window—a man was standing on the opposite side of the street, and her heart leapt as he raised his hand in greeting.

It was Betcher Long! He put his finger to his lips and then beckoned her to the street and raised three fingers. Three o'clock! She looked at the timepiece on the desk: it was then half-past twelve. She nodded. But where? He carried a newspaper under his arm, but this he unfolded and showed a full-page advertisement which had occupied that space in every morning newspaper. It was the announcement of a bargain sale at Cloche's. She nodded.

And then, again, he put his finger to his lips. She was not to tell Miss Revelstoke. She signalled her understanding, and he walked on with a little wave of his hand and disappeared. She wondered what the other people in the gardens thought of these eccentric signals of his, but apparently his presence had passed unnoticed. Nobody in Miss Revelstoke's house had seen him. Why had he not telephoned? There were two instruments in the house, one in the hall and one in Miss Revelstoke's study, both within her

hearing—but then, of course, it was impossible that she could carry on a conversation without her employer's knowledge.

When the lunch gong sounded, she went downstairs, and passing through the open door of the drawing room, arrived in time to hear the end of a vigorous denunciation of French plages by Miss Revelstoke.

It was not what she heard but what she saw that astonished her. She had not been into the drawing room since the night of Betcher Long's visit, and now she saw that there was an oil painting above the mantelpiece, but it was not the picture of a beautiful and youthful Miss Revelstoke that had been there before they left for Heartsease. The sallow-faced woman smiled as she caught and interpreted the glance.

"I meant to have that picture taken away a long time ago. And now, thank heavens! it has gone! The portrait was too ghastly a reminder of my great age," she said. "Nora, my dear, we have been discussing your good fortune. I want you to be sensible and appoint Mr. Henry to act for you."

It was a little bewildering to the girl that she should be so important, and she needed an agent; and she laughed self-consciously.

"I'm in the state of mind when I prefer that anybody should act except me!" she confessed. "I still cannot understand why Mr. Monkford should have left me his money; it is almost impossible to believe."

"He might have left it in worse hands," said Miss Revelstoke, practically, as she led the way to her study. "Poor Joshua was queer. But in this case I think he has behaved perfectly sanely. He liked you, Nora. Of course, he liked you!" she scoffed at the girl's silent protest. "And therein he showed most excellent taste!"

On the blotting pad of the library table were two written documents.

"You sign on the dotted line," said Mr. Henry humorously, quoting from an American comedy that had recently been staged. "The first of these is a formal assignment of your responsibility; the second is a letter authorizing me to act for you. A power of attorney will have to be signed again before a commissioner of oaths, but the letter will serve for the moment. As soon as this is signed, half your worries and doubts will be transferred to my shoulders."

She sat down in the chair by the desk and took up the pen, hesitating. She was being asked to do something definite. It was as though the signing of those papers placed her in the position of a claimant to that to which she had no moral title.

"Must I sign these now? I am so confused that I don't quite realize what is happening. Won't you leave them till this evening, until I've got over the shock?"

She was looking at Henry and she did not see the swift warning glance that Miss Revelstoke sent in his direction.

"Why, certainly! We can do nothing to-day. Miss Revelstoke will explain them to you—I would rather you understood before you signed. So long as I get these papers by the first post in the morning, there is no immediate hurry."

Miss Revelstoke gathered up the documents, opened the safe, and put them in.

"And now let us have lunch," she said almost gaily.

Henry left the house at half-past two, and the girl went straight to the study, where she knew her employer would be.

"May I go out for an hour?" she said. "I think a walk would do a lot to clear my head."

The woman eyed her steadily.

"A very good idea," she said, bit her lip in thought, and then:

"I don't think it would be wise of you to discuss this matter until. Henry has put the will in legal shape. And the last person in the world you ought to speak to on the matter is Mr. Long. I suppose I am prejudiced against Long—the truth is, I don't like his father. He once put me in a very embarrassing position by his boorishness."

It was news to the girl that Miss Revelstoke was even acquainted with Sir Godley Long. She had never met the banker, and when, in her curiosity, she had turned up a popular work of reference, the details concerning Betcher's parent were meagre and uninformative. It struck her that Miss Revelstoke was not entirely agreeable to the afternoon jaunt.

"Where will you go?" she asked.

To Nora Sanders, even such a mild deception as this was repugnant. She could, however, tell the truth.

"I will go through the Park and probably call at Cloche's; there is a sale on," she said.

The elder woman smiled faintly.

"My dear, you are in a financial position which makes you superior to sales!" she said. "Still, it will be an occupation for you. Be back by five o'clock."

CHAPTER XXII

CLOCHE'S is a big store, and since it had been impossible for Betcher Long to tell her exactly the spot where they would meet, she lingered for a while at the main entrance, but saw no sign of him, and then strolled into the shop. The ground floor of the store was crowded, and she looked left and right, expecting every moment to see the detective. But still there were no signs of him, and she began to think that she had misunderstood his signal or that some unexpected call had prevented his keeping the appointment, when a commissionaire with a sweeping cavalry moustache approached her and touched his cap.

"We have found your bag, miss; it is in the lost property office. Will you come this way?"

Before she could protest that she had lost no bag, he had turned and was marching ahead of her, and she followed, vainly striving to overtake him to tell him of his mistake. He turned into a little bureau above which was painted "Lost Property" and here she came up with him.

"I think you've made a mistake; I've lost no bag," she began.

He opened a door, showing a smaller waiting room. "Will you come in, miss?" he said.

"I tell you I have lost nothing." She was a little irritated by his stupidity.

He almost pushed her into the room and closed the door behind her.

"Excuse me for appearing like a stage detective," said Betcher, as he stripped his moustache. "But you simply must lose a bag!"

She stared at him in amazement.

"I hate doing this sort of thing," said Betcher. "I feel that I am infringing somebody's copyright. But old Cloche is a great friend of ours, and there was no other way of approaching you without giving a lot of information to the gentleman who trailed you into the shop and has probably been following you all afternoon."

"Following me?" she repeated, incredulously. "Surely you're mistaken?"

"So far from being mistaken, I know the man, his name and address, and his previous convictions," grinned Betcher. "The commissionaire's coat was loaned for the occasion, and Cloche has so many liveried servants that one more or less was not noticed. You've heard of your luck?"

"Is it true?" she asked. "I can't believe it."

"It is true all right," he said quietly. "The will is beyond dispute—in the circumstances. Monkford is alleged to have signed it on the afternoon of his death, which, by the way, was the first of August—does that strike you as being very significant?"

She shook her head wonderingly.

"Was it remarkable that he should die on the first of August?"

And then, in a flash, she remembered the old power boat moored near Monkford's lawn, and the dates that had been carved behind the moving panel.

"Oh!" she gasped, and turned pale.

"The prophecy was fulfilled, that is all. If it had been on the second of August they would have been a day out, and the inscription would have been inartistic." And then, abruptly, "What documents has Henry asked you to sign?"

She sat down suddenly.

"How on earth did you know?" she asked, amazement in her face.

"Have you signed anything?" he demanded quickly. She shook her head.

"Not yet."

"Then they have asked you to sign something—what?"

"I don't really understand what it is, but apparently it is quite in order. Mr. Henry showed me two papers, one authorizing him to act for me, and the other an assignment—"

"You'll sign neither," he interrupted. "You understand?"

"But Mr. Henry is a lawyer and he is acting for me."

"He will not act for you, and you will sign nothing—is that clear?" said Betcher roughly. He took from his pocket a folded paper and smoothed it open on the table. "I'm going to test your confidence in me," he said, and he was very earnest. "This letter is an authority to Wilkins, Harding & Bayne, my father's lawyers, and I want you to sign it. I will see that it is delivered this afternoon."

"What is it?" she asked, looking up at him.

"I guess it is nearly a duplicate of the document that Mr. Henry wanted you to sign—an authorization to act. In other words, you put your affairs in the hands of a firm of lawyers—above suspicion."

She looked up at him quickly.

"Are you serious?"

He nodded.

"Then, Mr. Henry—"

"Mr. Henry is not above suspicion, for many reasons which I cannot explain at the moment. Will you do this for me, Nora?"

She took up the pen from the table, dipped it in the ink, and, without reading the document, signed.

"There is going to be an awful scene when I tell Miss Revelstoke what I have done," she said, with a sense of coming trouble.

"You need not tell Miss Revelstoke until to-morrow. When were you supposed to sign Henry's little dossier? To-night, eh? They are fast workers, without a doubt! Do you think, if you tried very hard, you could tell a lie?"

She smiled.

"I shouldn't care to lie, but if you wish me to—"

"Tell Miss Revelstoke that you have decided to put your affairs in the hands of your father's lawyers, and that they will consult with Henry. You can add, to justify your action, that, as Henry is one of the witnesses of the will, you think it best that an outsider should watch your interests."

There was a small handbag on the table. He picked this up and smilingly put it into her hand.

"You have recovered your lost property, and the gentleman who is watching you from outside is growing very impatient."

"When can I see you again, Mr. Long? I'm rather scared about the whole thing."

"I shall be seeing you again in five minutes, and in all probability I shall be within a few yards of you for the next week," he said, and took her hand in his. And then he said a strange thing:

"You're going to have a bad time; it would be wicked not to tell you this," he said, lowering his voice and looking her straight in the eyes. "But you are

the kind who will stand up to anything that comes your way, and if it is any comfort to know that there are eighteen thousand policemen in London all doing their best for you, and that one miserable inspector will be going gray in the course of the next few days, entirely on your behalf, why, then you will be able to get through and not look a day older!"

A second later, she was out in the busy store, curious to discover who was watching her. Apparently, every member of the crowd was intent upon his own business, but presently she saw a man glance furtively toward her. Almost immediately he turned his eyes away, but she knew instinctively that he was the watcher.

She walked through a few departments and made a purchase or two, and every time she furtively glanced back she saw this respectable gentleman within a few paces of her.

Why should she be watched? What danger threatened her? For some remarkable reason, the warning which Betcher Long had given, and which, considering the matter soberly, she knew should have reduced her to a condition of panic, neither frightened nor disturbed her. Rather, it gave her courage to meet the inevitable disapproval of her employer as the lesser of the trials that lay ahead.

She did not wait for Miss Revelstoke to remind her about the documents, but as soon as she had gone to her room and changed, she went down in search of the woman. She found her in the drawing room, a piece of fine sewing in her hands, and Miss Revelstoke looked up over the glasses which she wore when she was thus engaged.

"I have decided to put my affairs in the hands of my father's lawyers," said Nora, without preliminary.

Miss Revelstoke put down her sewing, took off her glasses, folded them carefully, and placed them on the table by her side.

"When did you arrive at that decision, Nora?"

"This afternoon," said the girl boldly. "I have been thinking the matter over, and it occurred to me that it was very undesirable that Mr. Henry, who had so much to do with the making of this extraordinary will, should act for me."

CHAPTER XXIII

MISS REVELSTOKE pinched her lip thoughtfully, and her dark eyes did not leave the girl's face. "That was very considerate of you," she said, and there was a note of faint irony in her voice; "and I am sure that Henry will appreciate your consideration. Unfortunately, I have already told him to go ahead and put Monk ford's affairs in order, so I am afraid, my dear, you'll have to change your mind. It would be extremely awkward for me, and I should look a perfect fool otherwise."

Nora's mouth was dry; she was seized with an unexpected terror in the face of the woman's opposition.

"I have already written to my father's lawyer's," she managed to say.

"Indeed?" Miss Revelstoke put on her glasses again and threaded the needle with great deliberation. "That is unfortunate. I thought that you would be guided by me in this matter. However, it cannot be helped. Will you tell Jennings that I shall want the car in half an hour?" She had taken the matter very calmly, but Nora, who knew her employer, was not deceived. Miss Revelstoke was in a cold fury, though the hand that held the needle had not trembled and her voice was as steady and as untroubled as ever it had been. But the two red spots which came into her cheeks were beyond her power to control.

From her room she saw the car drive away and went downstairs again, with a sense of relief that she was for a moment free from the woman's oppressive presence.

Her position was becoming a little impossible; that had occurred to her on her way back from the store. And yet she could find no reasonable excuse for leaving Colville Gardens. Indeed, she realized that she had a great deal for which she should be thankful to Miss Revelstoke. The woman had treated her kindly and humanly. She had made no undue demands upon her time, and was the first employer Nora had had who had not treated her as an upper servant.

It was nearly six o'clock before Miss Revelstoke returned, and the trip she had taken had evidently dispelled her anger, for she was in her most humorous mood.

She sent for the girl as soon as she returned.

"I've been up to see Henry," she said. "And Henry, not unnaturally, is a little peevish, but he quite understands your point of view and he thinks on the whole that you're right. Will you write and tell him? What is the name of your father's lawyers? He asked me that."

Nora realized with a sense of dismay that she did not know! The detective had told her, but she had forgotten almost instantly. Whether Miss Revelstoke detected her confusion or not, she did not pursue her inquiry.

"Fortunately, Henry hadn't got very far," she said. "He had already been in communication with Monkford's own lawyers, and they are annoyed, too. The worst of these wretched lawyers is that they all want their picking from an estate like Monkford's. The will will not be contested, you will be pleased to know. Monkford had no relations, and the earlier will he made left most of his money to charities."

She rose from the table where she was sitting with a little laugh.

"I resent the sense of unimportance which your fortune has given me," she said good-humouredly. "Yesterday you were just my secretary—a very nice girl, but, if you will forgive me, of no great importance. To-day, I dare hardly give you an order."

The girl was so relieved by her employer's attitude that she was more easily amused.

"You've already given me several," she said, and the answer seemed to tickle the woman.

"Then I will give you another. 'Phone Henry's clerk that I've changed my mind and will dine with him. I met that wretched creature, Jackson Crayley, in the city, and he asked me if he might come in and take coffee to-night. He had something of interest to tell me. Will you entertain him if he arrives and get rid of him as quickly as you can? You can tell him that I have been called out unexpectedly. I simply cannot endure an evening of Jackson Crayley!"

She did not leave until a quarter after seven. Dinner was arranged to be served at the half-hour, and Nora, who was not unused to dining alone, and to- night preferred the solitude, was glad to hear the door close upon the energetic lady. Miss Revelstoke's last order, delivered to her parlourmaid in Nora's presence, was characteristically domestic.

"Have coffee served in the drawing room at eight o'clock," she said. "Use the Sèvres set; Mr. Crayley is rather fastidious as to his china."

Left alone, the girl had her dinner at leisure, pondering the events of the day. She wondered if Betcher Long knew of Miss Revelstoke's departure, and whether he would take advantage of the absence. In spite of the promised call of Crayley, she hoped he would.

Eight was chiming from the silver clock on the mantelpiece when the maid came in.

"A gentleman to see you, miss," she said.

"Mr. Crayley?" asked the girl, knowing that Crayley was a frequent visitor.

To her surprise the maid shook her head.

"No, miss, it is a strange gentleman. I don't remember seeing him before."

Nora hurried into the drawing room, to find that the visitor was equally unknown to her. He was a man of the superior artisan class, she thought, and wondered if it was one of the tradesmen who were frequently summoned by Miss Revelstoke at this hour to account for the errors in their bills.

"Miss Sanders?" he asked, in a tone of authority.

"Yes," she answered, wondering, "I am Miss Sanders."

"I've come from Inspector Long to have a little talk with you, if you don't mind. I am Sergeant Smith of the C. I. D."

"A detective?" she asked in surprise.

"That's my profession, miss." He glanced at the silver tray and the coffee-pot. "I'll wait until you've finished your coffee, if you don't mind. I'm in no hurry."

She hesitated and glanced at the drawing-room clock. Mr. Crayley might appear at any minute, and the presence of Betcher Long's man would be a little embarrassing. As though he read her mind, the man went on "I'll slip out the moment you have any visitors, miss. I can see people coming from here." Which was true, for the drawing room commanded a view of the steps leading to the front door.

"Perhaps you will have some coffee, Sergeant?" she said, as she poured out a cup.

He shook his head.

"No, thank you, miss."

She filled her own, waiting for him to begin.

"The Inspector asked me to escort you to Scotland Yard. He wants to see you particularly to-night." Nora was in a dilemma.

"I cannot possibly go; I am expecting one of Miss Revelstoke's friends," she said, and the man smiled.

"You needn't worry about Mr. Crayley; he won't be here to-night," he said, to her astonishment. "He's with Mr. Long."

"With Mr. Long?" She was in the act of dropping sugar into her coffee when he made this startling statement.

"Yes, asking him a few questions, that's all, miss. And the inspector wants you there to confirm a statement that Crayley has made. Have you got the two papers that Henry wanted you to sign?"

She shook her head.

"I think they are in Miss Revelstoke's study," she said, and hurried out of the room to find them.

They were under a paper weight on the woman's desk and she came back with them in her hand.

"Does Mr. Long want these?"

"He thought he'd like to see them, miss," said the man, and looked at his watch. "We won't keep you an hour. If you'll drink up your coffee, we'll make a move."

She served the coffee and drank half its contents.

"I'll be ready in a moment," she said.

She took two steps toward the door, and then everything went black as she fell forward into the man's arms.

CHAPTER XXIV

SERGEANT SMITH lowered the girl to the ground, walked to the door, opened it carefully, and looked out. The hall was empty. He went back to the drawing room, rang the bell, and awaited the maid's coming in the hall.

"Will you go upstairs and pack Miss Sanders's bag?" he said. "She and Miss Revelstoke are going into the country for the night. Are there any other maids in the house besides you?"

"No, sir," said the girl, "only the cook. Miss Revelstoke gave the other girls the evening off. What clothes will Miss Sanders want?"

"The things she took to Heartsease," said the man glibly, and he watched the maid until she had disappeared on the landing above.

Returning to the unconscious girl, he lifted her in his arms, walked quickly along the hall into Miss Revelstoke's study. From here a door communicated by means of a flight of round stairs to the small courtyard behind the house and the brick shed where she garaged her car. Since her departure, another machine had backed into the garage, an old limousine, the blinds of which were drawn. The man opened the door of the car and with some difficulty bundled her inside, dosed and locked the door, then, opening the gates, he started up the machine and brought it into the narrow mews.

He got down from his seat and closed and locked the door, then sent the car moving at a leisurely pace through Colville Gardens and Elgin Crescent to Ladbroke Grove. Here he turned to the left, struck the main road a few hundred yards farther along, and, increasing the speed of his car, headed for the Great West Road.

Once or twice he glanced back through the uncurtained front window, but Nora had not stirred. The new road runs through fields, but the importance of the thoroughfare had brought the speculative builder on to the spot, and at one point stood a solitary red-brick house, glaringly new. He turned off the road, passed to the back of the house, and stopped before what was intended to be the kitchen door. The car was invisible from the road, and behind was a stretch of deserted fields. He unlocked the kitchen door, lifted the girl from the machine, and carried her into the house and laid her down on the dusty floor.

She was returning to consciousness before the car had stopped. Her head was splitting, and she felt deathly ill. When she opened her eyes, the light from the window was painful, and she turned away with a moan to face the wall. Only then was she dimly conscious of her unhappy position, and, struggling up on her elbow, she stared wildly at the man who was surveying her dispassionately.

She looked round. The kitchen reeked of new paint and was innocent of any kind of furnishing.

"Where—where am I?" she asked dully, as she sat up, her head between her hands.

The man took a flask from his hip pocket, poured out a golden-coloured fluid into the aluminum cup and put it to her lips.

"Drink this," he said. "It is only brandy—you needn't be scared."

She tried to push the cup away, but he forced the scorching liquor between her teeth. The spirit was choking, but it had the effect of reviving her to a clear understanding. She looked at the door, and from the door to the man who was replacing the flask in his pocket.

"Where is Mr. Long?" she asked.

"In hell, with a bit of luck," said he. "Deader than Harry the Lancer—one of the best lads that ever came out of Deptford!"

Harry the Lancer? Who was Harry the Lancer? She strove vainly to think. The name was familiar in a vague way.

"Why am I here?" she asked at last.

"You're here because I brought you here," said the man, "and you're miles from everywhere, so, if you start screaming, you'll waste your breath."

Faintly she could hear the whirr and rumble of car wheels. She was near some main thoroughfare, and yet it did not seem possible, looking through the window upon the endless vista of green. She might be in the midst of some remote part of the country. And then the truth came to her.

"This is the Great West Road," she said, and the man was taken aback.

"Great West Road or Great East Road," he said deliberately, "if you try to squeal, I'm going to make you wish you hadn't. Keep quiet and nobody will hurt you. Start something, and watch out!"

There was no effective reply to this. She could only sit in wonder and fear, as the daylight faded from the sky, and night, with all its horrible possibilities, brought dusk and then darkness to her prison.

It was Betcher Long's boast that he had outgrown sentiment and that his interest in woman was detached and philosophical. Yet he had no sooner parted from Nora Sanders than he sought round in his mind for an excuse to see her again. He told himself that here his interest was professional, but the honest ego in him gave the lie to this explanation.

He had work to do at the Yard, and his office for the moment was a central intelligence bureau, for it was here that his men reported every half-hour. Soon after eight the detective who was watching Colville Gardens reported that a stranger had called at the house and had been admitted. At eight-thirty he reported that the visitor had not yet come out. At nine and half-past nine this information was repeated.

Betcher Long knew that Miss Revelstoke was dining with Henry. He could, by asking a question, have discovered how far she had progressed in the meal, for here again the reports were very complete. He hung up the receiver and sent for Sergeant Rouch.

An evening visitor to Miss Revelstoke's house was not unusual. Nora Sanders had probably quite a circle of friends, interests of which he knew nothing—he seemed to remember her telling him that she was taking lessons in Spanish, and the appearance of the man as described by the watcher was not very alarming. Yet Detective Sergeant Rouch reported at that moment. "Come a little drive to Colville Gardens, Rouch," said Betcher, and told him of the caller.

"Maybe her young man," suggested Rouch, with a desire to help.

"He's a middle-aged person and not very attractive," said Betcher coldly. "He is no more her young man than you are."

"Or you, for the matter of that, Inspector," said Rouch. "She's a very nice girl; she ought to marry well, with all that money. Maybe a duke or something. It is about time some of the dukes married English girls, especially now the American heiresses have got wise to 'em."

"You've been reading the Sunday supplements," said Betcher severely.

They went down the broad stairs together into Scotland Yard and turned on to the Embankment. It was growing dusk and, as they stood on the edge of the curb, they saw a car with very bright lights coming at a rapid rate along Whitehall, close to the curb.

"Speeding, that fellow," said Rouch disapprovingly. "And fast traffic has no right to be on the inside."

The car was less than a dozen yards away and suddenly Betcher Long gripped his subordinate and flung him backward, only just in time, for the machine, moving at fifty miles an hour, swerved violently to the left, mounted the sidewalk, and missed the two men by the fraction of a second before, with a grind of brakes, its great shining radiator smashed into the iron railings behind them. So close a call was it that a jagged edge of the mudguard caught Betcher Long's cuff and ripped it open.

A policeman came running across and to him Betcher Long turned.

"Take that man," he pointed to the driver, "and keep him under close arrest until I see him."

And then, to Rouch's surprise, he grabbed his subordinate by the arm, and ran back toward Scotland Yard.

To the grim police headquarters there are two entrances, the one from Whitehall and the other from the Thames Embankment, and Rouch was intrigued by the fact that they passed the entrance of the office, continuing on their way to the arch which spans the Embankment entrance.

"Walk!" hissed Betcher. "In fact, stroll."

"But what—"

"Don't ask questions; do as I tell you. And get ready to jump."

They were on the Embankment pavement now, and stood on the edge of the sidewalk like men about to hail a taxicab. As they waited, Betcher saw a big car move toward them from the direction of the House of Commons, gathering speed every second. The roar of its accelerator was audible above the sound of the passing traffic.

Nearer and nearer it came, faster and faster, and then:

"Jump!" yelled Betcher Long and leapt obliquely.

The machine flew up on the sidewalk, swerved, and, with a banging of bursting tires, skidded round until its bonnet was pointed back the way it had come. In a second Betcher had leapt upon the running board and, gripping the driver by the collar, had jerked him out of the machine. The man was unknown to him; a wizen-faced, chinless individual, half-dead with shock. Five minutes later he was standing in the steel pen, listening, dazed and uncomprehending, to the charge which was read to him.

"There was a man at each entrance to signal when I came out," explained Betcher to his dumbfounded assistant. "The moment the signals were given, these machines, which had also been waiting, were sent forward to organize a fatal accident. The Terrible People knew that I hadn't a car here and that I am in the habit of walking out to get a taxi, and they had probably been waiting hours for this opportunity. If they hadn't seen me on the sidewalk they'd have charged the cab I was in, on the off-chance of putting me out of action."

They were in a police car now, travelling westward, and it was an opportunity for Rouch to deliver himself of certain views he held upon the Terrible People.

"They're too clever for us, Mr. Long," he said. "Ordinary detectives won't catch 'em. The little hooks they use for their dirty work know nothing about their bosses, and I'll bet you that Ruffy Jones has got no more idea than the man in the moon who put him on to this job. Who's this professor he talked about?"

"He's been reading detective stories," said Betcher shortly. "On one point I'm certain—I know every member of the Terrible People!"

"Ruffy says—" began Rouch.

"Ruffy is the sort of man who would say anything for a pint of beer," said Betcher. "He's had ten convictions and two laggings, and that hasn't stopped him talking."

Ruffy's favourite offence, Arnold Long learnt, was to act as motorman to the hold-up gangs that travel the country and secure a precarious livelihood by halting before a jeweller's shop, smashing the window and taking what hands can reach, thereafter vanishing on the car into the blue.

By this time they had reached Colville Gardens, and, stopping the machine, Betcher sprang out. He gave one glance at the face of the maid who opened the door, and his heart sank.

CHAPTER XXV

"NO, SIR, Miss Sanders went out an hour ago. I didn't see her go—there is her bag."

Betcher turned to Rouch, and the sergeant signalled the man who had watched their arrival from the other side of the street. There was a brief consultation. The watcher was emphatic that nobody had left the house.

"I've been here for the last hour and a half, and I'll swear that neither the man who called nor Miss Sanders has left," he asserted.

Betcher returned to question the maid and learnt all that she knew.

"When I came down with the bag, Miss Sanders had gone," she said. "I didn't, hear the door close on her, either."

Betcher strode into the drawing room. The silver tray was still where the girl had left it, and he picked up the half-empty coffee-pot and smelt.

"Smell that, Rouch."

The sergeant sniffed.

"That's 'knock-out' all right," he said.

Betcher went out into the hall.

"Is there any other way out of this house?" he asked the frightened girl.

"There's a door in Miss Revelstoke's study that leads to the garage," she said, and led the way.

The door was unlocked, indeed ajar. They passed down to the garage, the big door of which was also open. Betcher took a flash-lamp from his pocket and examined the little building. There was no clue here, and, unfastening the door, he went out into the mews.

Here he had better luck. A woman, the wife of a chauffeur who occupied two rooms above a garage in the mews, had seen the car come out and the man get down to lock the door behind him. It was a very old Daimler, she told him, for, being a chauffeur's wife, she was wise in the makes of cars.

The detective who had been watching the house and had joined them remembered seeing an old Daimler pass in front of the house a quarter of an hour after the man had gone in.

"Its blinds were drawn; I thought it was one of those soft-goods travellers' machines," he said.

He had seen it pass along Elgin Crescent out of sight. A police officer on duty in Ladbroke Grove had also seen the car, Betcher discovered later. It had gone in a westerly direction, he reported. He had noticed the car because the number plate at the back was damaged, and he tried to attract the driver's attention, intending to pull him up.

Only one hope remained. There had been an epidemic of car robberies in the preceding week, and officers had been detailed to watch all the principal avenues, to detect a Rolls that had been stolen from the sacred courtyard of the Houses of Parliament. He knew that he would find these watchers at the London end of the Great West Road, and, by great good luck, he reached that arterial thoroughfare just as the second of the police officers was leaving for the night.

"Yes, I remember the old Daimler," said the officer. "She had blue blinds, which were drawn."

He, too, had thought it was the car of a commercial traveller.

Betcher sent his machine along the surface of the broad road, stopping at every police point to continue his inquiries. He picked up the trail on the Bath Road. Here an automobile scout identified the machine.

"It went along the Staines extension," he said. "You can't mistake it; the car has a defaced number plate at the back. The policeman on point asked me if I had noticed it."

Midway between the Staines and the Bath Road end it had been seen again, but when they reached the final stretch of the new road and came to the filling station on the Hounslow Road the trail was lost again.

Both the scout and the policeman who had been on duty at the time were emphatic that no such machine had passed them. And they had a reason for being so sure. An officer farther up the road had telephoned asking them to stop the machine because of its battered number plate.

The police car went back on its tracks. There were two side thoroughfares down which the machine might have passed. There were also a number of newly built houses; one block of six, and one that stood by itself, and obviously empty. Long went to the occupied block and made inquiries which yielded no satisfactory result, and he drove on to the house that stood alone.

It seemed hardly worth while to make an inspection of the place, but he saw there was a private roadway across the path, and he guessed a garage, and opened the gate.

The builders had not yet completed their work. A heap of gravel stood on the drive, which had not yet been made, and here, on the soft earth, he saw

recent tracks of car wheels. He followed them until they came to the back of the house. And then his heart leapt, for a dust-stained car showed in the rays of his lamp.

It was the old Daimler!

He looked inside; the car was empty and the engine, when he felt it, was cold. He tried the door to the back of the house, but this was locked; the windows were fastened.

The two detectives sent their lamps into the untidy looking room, but there was no sign of life. Without hesitation, Betcher pulled out his Browning and smashed the window. In another instant the catch was unfastened and the sash was raised. The room was empty, but somebody had been here, and recently. There was a half-filled paper of sandwiches on the floor, and the bread was new.

And then Rouch, flashing his lamp along the wall, uttered an exclamation.

"What's this?" he asked.

Betcher Long stooped and read. Scratched upon the distemper was a word:

"Marlow!"

He made a rapid search of the house. There was not a stick of furniture in the place, and obviously this had been intended merely as a halfway station. But there was in this little villa something which he did not expect to find—a telephone newly installed. He rang up the exchange and revealed his identity.

"Have any calls come through here to-night?"

There was a pause while the operator made inquiries, and then she said:

"Yes, two; both from London. One at eight-thirty and one just before ten. There was no answer to the eight-thirty call."

Betcher called the local police station. When he came back to the sergeant, Rouch was still continuing his search, but he had found no further clue.

"I've sent for a man to guard that car all night, and to arrest anybody who comes for it, though it is very unlikely that the devils will take such a risk," he said.

"Where do we go from here?" asked Rouch as they climbed into the police car.

"To Marlow," said Betcher Long briefly. "To the house of Mr. Jackson Crayley— and God help him if any harm has come to that girl!"

CHAPTER XXVI

NORA SANDERS'S head was still aching when the telephone bell rang, and the man, who had sat in silence for the past hour, rose noisily.

"Don't you try to escape out of that window, because, if you do, you'll get hurt," he said, and from the hollow sound of his footsteps on the uncarpeted floor she guessed, rather than knew, that he had gone into the hall.

Presently she heard the rattle of the receiver being taken off, and heard him speaking in a low tone. Evidently he was expostulating about something, but finally she heard his sullen agreement, and then he uttered an incautious word.

"Marlow? All right."

Then he came back to her:

"You've got to get ready to walk."

"Where am I going?" she asked.

"Never mind where you're going; you'll have to walk for a mile at least, and then they'll pick us up. That friend of yours is a little too hot; he's trailed us to the end of the road."

Her heart leapt. "That friend of yours" could only mean one man. What could she do? She was confident that sooner or later he would find the house. Could she leave him a message? She had neither pencil nor paper.

And then her hand touched the distempered wall, and with her finger-nail she scratched the word.

"What are you doing?" he asked suspiciously, as he turned his lamp upon her.

"Nothing," she said unsteadily. "I can't possibly walk; I'm too tired, and my head is aching."

By this time he had opened the door.

"You'll walk and be glad that you have a chance of walking," he said ominously, and, gripping her by the arm, led her out into the open.

Until then she had not realized that her aching head was due in no small measure to the fact that she had been sitting in an unventilated room. The fresh air of the night revived her, and she walked obediently by his side, through a little gate in the fence, into the wilderness behind the house.

Evidently, he was not well acquainted with the topography of the place. Once they nearly stumbled into a pond, but, skirting this, they came at last to a field-path which led, she knew not whither. Ahead of them and to the right she saw the lights of a house, and heard the barking of a watchdog, and this seemed to make the man nervous, for he dragged her from the path, and they stumbled through high grasses, so heavy with dew that her stockings and shoes were wet through before they had gone far.

A quarter of an hour's walk brought them to a hedge, along which he walked in search of an opening. After a while, they found a gate and passed on to a rough wagon track.

"This is the place," he said, evidently relieved.

They turned now to the right, and twenty minutes over this rough roadway brought them to what was clearly a main road, for, long before they reached the gate that gave on to the thoroughfare, she could see the lights of automobiles passing to and fro.

At some distance from the road he stopped.

"You can sit down," he said. "We've got to wait a little while."

She was glad of the rest; her feet were sore, her limbs aching, and she sank down to the ground breathless and weary.

Only now she was beginning to understand the extent of her peril. Why she should have been abducted it was hardly worth while considering. In a misty way she realized that it had something to do with the Monkford legacy.

She marvelled at her own courage, and facing facts, she knew that it was based upon her faith in Arnold Long.

"Get up," said her captor's voice. "Here he is!"

A car, its lights burning so dimly that she did not see it until she heard the whine of its brakes, had stopped before the gate, and, grasping her arm, he hurried her forward. The gate was fastened with a chain and padlock; she had to climb over with his assistance. The door of the car was opened and he pushed her inside, springing in after her.

They were on the Bath Road, and soon they were passing through a town which she recognized as Slough. At one place they were held up by a traffic policeman to allow a big steam lorry to pass, and she had a wild impulse to scream and attract his attention. The man must have felt her muscles tense, for he still held her arm.

"You shout, and see what happens to you!" he said in a fierce whisper, and she relaxed into a corner of the car.

They passed through Maidenhead, turned right and up the hill that led to Quarry Wood and Marlow. Whither were they taking her? Not to Monkford's house. Then where else? And then she remembered Jackson Crayley and his rose-covered lawn, and the little white house that stood behind. Apparently this was their objective, for they turned abruptly before they reached Marlow Bridge, and through the window she saw the twisted chimneys of poor Monkford's home. The next house would be Crayley's. To her surprise, the machine did not slacken pace, but continued until it stopped at the edge of a meadow. Her arm tightly held, she was hurried across the grass before she saw the sheen of the river, and far away the glow of a Chinese lantern that bobbed to and fro on the prow of a belated punting party.

Drawn up close to the bank was a big launch, and into the well of this she was assisted. The launch was unattended, as she learnt.

"There's only you and me here," said the man, as the unknown chauffeur unfastened the ropes that tied them to the bank. "We're going through Temple Lock, and you'll remember what I told you before. I suppose you know, miss, what I'll get if they catch me—fifteen years! There's no life in the world that is worth fifteen years. I'd strangle you where you sit and drop you into the water before the lock-keeper knew what was happening!"

There was a fearful malignity in his tone which made the girl shiver. Crouched in the cover of the little cabin, she listened to the chug-chug of the engine as it faced the running stream. Presently, she heard the man call, "Lock ahoy!" The launch slowed speed and stopped, and then went on again cautiously. She heard the rattle of the lock gates closing. Higher and higher the launch rose, until it was level with the edge of the lock. The man at the wheel uttered a few commonplace remarks, and now they were clear of the lock gates and going slowly and steadily upstream.

West of Temple the river turned abruptly, and the left bank was black with overhanging trees. It was toward such a patch that he sent the launch. Peeping round furtively, she guessed rather than saw a wooden bungalow, so near the water's edge that its stoep was supported on piles driven into the river bed.

"Get out," said the man roughly, and she obeyed.

He followed her, and, taking a key from his pocket, inserted it in the lock and with considerable difficulty opened the door. Stopping long enough to secure the launch, he followed her, bolting the door behind him, Striking a match, he looked round and found a candle.

She was in what was apparently one of the two small rooms the bungalow held. It was well furnished, but every article was inches deep in dust. On the

weather-stained walls hung a number of Medici prints; the windows were curtained with heavy velvet, lustreless under their coatings of dust.

"You know this place, I guess? Used to be Shelton's," said the man, suddenly communicative.

Shelton's! An unaccountable fear gripped her. It was as though the spirit of the man who had made this place his home, who from here had gone about his dangerous and finally fatal work, brooded over the place.

The man consulted a watch on his wrist and then walked round the room, looking at the windows. When he drew one of the thick curtains aside, she saw that they were heavily shuttered. Clay Shelton had worked and schemed here in the black of the night. At this very table, where the tiny footsteps of mice showed in the dust, his marvellous pen had produced signatures so like the originals that the men whose names were forged were baffled and could not tell them apart from their own.

"I'm going out to see to the boat—stay here!"

Her captor closed the door softly behind him and the key turned. She heard the whirr of the launch's engines; and might have realized that she was being left alone. But for the moment her thoughts were concentrated upon the dusty room and the man who was once its occupant.

This was the home of the Gallows Hand!

She shivered. Some uncanny trick of light and shade seemed to people this room with tangible shapes that moved and leered at her. So vivid was the illusion that she closed her eyes for a second.

She was standing directly opposite the door which she thought must lead to the bedroom, and when she opened her eyes again, they fell upon the handle of the door, and she saw with a start of fear that it was turning. Slowly, slow ... and then the door moved inward, and round its edge crept a long yellow hand.

CHAPTER XXVII

SHE shrank back, her eyes staring with horror at the terrifying apparition. Then a cuff came into view, stiff and white, with a little enamelled link and the end of a black sleeve.

"Don't be alarmed."

It was Jackson Crayley!

Presently he came into view; his long face was lined, his yellow moustache drooped dismally. He was wearing a dinner jacket, and the incongruity of his appearance in this place of dust and desolation would at any other time have made her laugh. For his monocle was fixed in his eye and the thin yellow hair still parted neatly in the middle.

He stared round the room fearfully.

"Where's that fellow?" he asked.

"He has gone," she said steadily. "Mr. Crayley, why am I here?"

He rubbed his chin and she thought his hands were trembling, but that may have been her fancy.

"I don't know," he said awkwardly. "You'll be all right here, young lady."

There was a pause, during which he surveyed her, the lugubrious expression of his face never lightening. And then it slowly dawned upon the girl that he was more frightened than she. From time to time he glanced nervously behind him, and once she saw him hunch up his shoulders in a gesture of fear, and saw that it was the grotesque shadow which the candle had thrown upon the wall which had momentarily scared him.

"He's gone, has he?" he said, referring to her departed custodian. "Deuced awkward!"

He cleared his throat with an effort.

"I'm afraid you're in rather an awkward position, Miss Nora," he said, "deuced awkward!"

He paused as though to collect his thoughts, and added:

"I don't suppose anybody's been in such a perfectly awful position as you're in."

The repetition of those inane words brought a fugitive smile to the girl's face.

"Well, I can't be in a very bad position, Mr. Crayley, now that you are here to look after me."

He did not meet her eyes.

"Sit down, won't you?"

He pulled a long silk handkerchief from his sleeve and dusted a chair.

"I've got to have a little talk with you, and I suppose by the time it is through you'll think I'm an unutterable cad."

Obediently, she seated herself, wondering what was coming.

"The only way you can get out of this fearful difficulty is—marriage," he began disjointedly, "and, really, when you come to think of it, one fellow is as good as another fellow—I mean one chap's as good as another chap—I mean, as a husband."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Crayley, I am not thinking of marriage, and if I were—"

"Exactly," he nodded wisely, as though he had anticipated what she was about to say, though in point of fact he had done nothing of the sort. "If I ask you to marry me, you'll be fearfully upset?"

"To marry you?" She wasn't upset, but she was very much surprised.

"That's it," he said doggedly. "You marry me tomorrow, and everything is as right as rain. You'll have somebody to look after you and all that sort of thing."

She shook her head.

"I could never marry you, Mr. Crayley," she said, and the look of dismay on his face was almost comical.

"You'd better—by Jove, you'd better!" he said urgently. "I'll tell you the truth, Miss Nora: I've no more wish to marry than you have. But I should be fearfully relieved if you would marry me, because"—his unsteady hand went up to his lips, and again he looked left and right and lowered his voice—"it would be better for you if you did what I told you," he said, in an agitated voice. "You promise me on your sacred word of honour that you will marry me to-morrow, and I will look after you—I swear I will! If you don't"—he mopped his streaming forehead with a gay bandanna handkerchief—"Lord! I don't know what will happen!"

Her bewilderment showed in her face, and he made matters no clearer by his incoherent attempt at explanation.

"I'm the merest child, the merest cipher. I hate the whole cursed business! I hate it, I hate it! God! If I could only get away! If I could only leave this blasted river and country! I nearly did once, when I was in Italy—actually got on a boat at Genoa, but hadn't the pluck."

He drooped his shaking head.

"Hadn't the pluck," he muttered. "God! What a cur I am!"

She waited awhile, and when he did not speak:

"I don't know what all this is about, Mr. Crayley, but I feel that somehow you are trying to be friendly with me. But marriage is impossible—absolutely impossible. Won't you help me get away from this place? Why have I been brought here?"

Suddenly his head came up and he raised his finger in warning.

"Stay here," he whispered, crossed to the door, tried to open it and finding it was locked, hurried with long strides across the room and passed into the room from which she had seen him emerge, closing the door behind him. Now she heard the murmur of voices, so low that, though she crept a little nearer, she could distinguish no words. Three people were talking, deep-voiced men, one of whom spoke in a hissing whisper.

Then Crayley raised his voice.

"Can't do it, can't do it! My God! I can't do it!"

She heard one of the men growl something fiercely, and then the shuffle of feet, and she tiptoed back to the place where she had been when he left her. If she could only get through the door or one of those windows, the river held no terror for her; she could swim like an otter, and if she had not been paralyzed with fright, she would have taken her chance on the way up the stream.

The door handle turned slowly, and Crayley slipped into the room. If he had looked worn and ill before, he was ghastly now. Again his shaking finger warned her to silence. He was listening intently, and presently it seemed that he was satisfied that the two who had spoken with him in the darkness were gone.

There was something else in that haggard face she had not seen before; a strange, queer resolution, a certain definite set to a face which had been almost without character.

"Sit down and take no notice," he said, and found a dusty chair for himself, which he brought to the table. "You've two hours to decide," he said, "and then they are coining back."

"Who are they?"

He shook his head.

"Nobody you know. They are the Terrible People."

"Are you in their power?"

He nodded vigorously.

"In their power—yes, I'm all that!"

He seemed to find a difficulty in speaking, in breathing, even. Once or twice his hand went up to his scrawny throat. He wore a big black intaglio ring on the little finger of his left hand, and it was shaking so violently that it was a gray blur and she could not distinguish the figure that was carved.

"Would you marry me to save your life?"

She shook her head.

"I don't want to hurt your—" she began.

"You're not hurting me," he said roughly. "That doesn't hurt a bit! And for God's sake don't worry about my feelings. But would you marry me to save your life? Would you marry me—" he lowered his voice.

She heard and shuddered.

"I wouldn't marry you in any circumstances," she said. "You're in love with somebody else, are you?"

He seemed to be interested, as if, in his curiosity, he had discovered something that for the while took his mind from the fearful prospect ahead of him.

"I—I don't think so," she said. "I hope to marry some day."

There was a wistful expression in his face that made her choke, and then, unexpectedly, he rose and tiptoed back to the inner room. He was gone five minutes, and when he returned she saw he was carrying a long army revolver, the chambers of which he examined as he turned.

"Come along," he said.

She obeyed without question, followed him into the little room which, as she had suspected, was a bedroom, and through a narrow passage to an open door. A waning moon rode in the sky; she saw a pathway apparently across an endless meadow, but, as it proved, to a narrow road that ran parallel with the bungalow.

"Just wait here."

"Here" was a rickety little garden gate. She followed him with her eyes until he vanished in the dark, then she heard his voice calling her, and she went stumbling across the weed-grown garden, until she reached another path, covered with round pebbles that crunched under her weight.

He was at the water's edge, bending over something. She heard the rattle of a chain, and then:

"Can you see the end of the punt? I haven't a light, and we'd better not show one, anyhow."

It was pitch black, for the bushes met over their heads. Stooping, she felt the steel-bound edge of the punt and felt gingerly with her foot for the bottom. She found it at last.

"Get well to the back," he whispered, and she picked her way along the well until she reached the farther end. The punt lurched for a second, and then began to move.

"Can you use a paddle? You'll find one near you." He was still speaking in whispers.

She nodded, though she knew he could not see her, and, groping, found the paddle-handle and began to back water. In a few seconds they were in midstream.

"Down river," he whispered.

On her right she saw dimly the dark bulk of the bungalow.

"No noise," he whispered warningly.

Very gingerly she swept the paddle to and fro, not taking it from the water, but turning its sharp edge to bring it back into position. They were passing through a stretch of river that held neither bungalow nor houseboat. Ahead of them was the black outline of a hill.

It was the hill she remembered having seen as she came up the river.

A small river launch was passing downstream, and they were just in time to catch the lock. Crayley did not speak again until they were clear of Temple

Lock and making their way round the bend to Marlow. He came to the end of the boat where she was sitting.

"There is only one danger," he said. "If they have missed us, they've got an electric canoe near Temple Lock, and they could easily cut across—"

Something palely white, like an elongated swan, shot out from the bank on their right.

"Paddle!" His voice came in a sob. "To the bank—we can run."

The thin, white, sleek thing was moving swiftly. When they were still half a dozen yards from the Bucksbank, it streaked alongside. Somebody leant over and gripped the girl by the arm, and she screamed. In another second she was pulled sprawling across the power-canoe, one foot dragging in the water. She struggled desperately, but her strength was no match for the man who held her. And then, in a moment of inspiration, she remembered a jujitsu trick, and, catching her assailant under the chin with the palm of her hand, thrust his head back. For a second he released his hold, and like lightning she dropped into the water, dived beneath the canoe, and struck out for midstream.

She saw the flash of a lamp and saw something else—a red and green light coming from Marlow. A launch! Rising to the surface, with all her strength she screamed again, and as the electric canoe turned in her direction, dived, coming up behind and to the right of it. The canoe swung round, but now the green and red lights were nearer. She heard a man shout, and a beam of white light shot out from the launch. There was a shot—another—She heard the whine of the bullets overhead. Something struck the water dose at hand and flung a wisp of spray to her face.

She was focussed in a ray of light and a hand gripped her arm! With a shriek, she tried to free herself. Better the river than those lurking horrors of the night. And then she looked up—it was the face of Betcher Long!

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE two detectives arrived at Mr. Jackson Crayley's house at half-past ten. His sedate butler ushered them into his sitting room, and the dregs of pale whisky in a glass and a half-smoked cigar on the silver ash-tray advertised his proximity.

"I will tell Mr. Crayley you are here," said the butler. He returned in a few minutes, however, with the announcement that his master was not in the house.

"I haven't seen him for nearly an hour, sir, but he very often strolls in the garden at night, and sometimes he takes his little power boat down river."

"Where does he keep it?" asked Betcher curtly.

The butler showed him the way to the boat house. "The boat is there; he must have gone in his car." When they looked in the shed where the car was usually kept, there was confirmation of this theory, for the garage was empty.

"Has anybody been here to-night?"

"Nobody, sir. We have very few visitors. As a matter of fact, we shouldn't be here at all, only that dreadful tragedy at Heartsease has upset all Mr. Crayley's plans."

"Are you sure nobody has been here to-night?" Betcher faced the man squarely.

"Perfectly certain, sir."

The detective thought a moment.

"How many 'phone calls have you had to-night?"

At first the butler was inclined to give a brusque refusal of any information until Arnold disclosed his official position.

"I believe there have been two."

"Where is your 'phone?"

The 'phone was in the sitting room, and, taking it up, Betcher called the office. He had maintained a detective officer at the exchange ever since Jackson Crayley had come under suspicion, but the difficulty of finding a man with a knowledge of Danish had led to his withdrawal. It was the chief night operator who answered.

"Two calls, Mr. Long, both from London. I cut in, but they were in the usual language, in Danish, of course."

"Can you give me the exact times?"

"One came about half an hour ago and the other earlier in the evening."

Betcher was satisfied now that the latest call had sent Jackson Crayley out on to the river.

So it was not here that the girl had been taken—where else? He knew that Shelton had had hiding places on the river bank, and although one of these had been identified, there were probably others. He sent Rouch down to Meakes's boat house to hire a launch, and waiting in the garden, paced up and down by the edge of the lawn, until the launch came round the corner and pulled in to the bank. Marlow Church clock was striking eleven when the craft began to feel its way upstream.

They were midway between Marlow and Temple locks when Betcher heard the scream and spun the wheel to the direction of the sound.

"Somebody on the river bank, perhaps, skylarking," ventured Rouch.

Again the scream, and then, right ahead of him, Betcher saw the canoe; heard the cry, "Help!" The sound was not more than twenty yards from him. He flashed his lamp on the water and presently saw a head. A woman! Even as he looked, the first shot whizzed past the launch. Somebody was firing at him, but he did not extinguish the light. Nearer and nearer he came to the swimmer, and now he saw her, and shouted her name...

She was unconscious when he hauled her on to the cushions of the launch, and by the time he had her safe, the electric canoe had vanished. Had his attention been less occupied, he would have seen it slip toward the mill and disappear in the shadow of the overhanging trees.

"Get back to Crayley's place," he said, and the boatman turned the launch and headed downstream.

She was wide awake by the time they came to the rose bank, and with assistance was able to walk to the house, but not for a long time could she tell them of the horrors of the night.

And now occurred a vexatious delay. The telephoned request for assistance from Marlow had brought the inspector. But Marlow is in Buckinghamshire, and the southern bank of the river in Berkshire, and a search of the southern bank is a matter entirely for the Berkshire police. It was an hour before the first contingent arrived by motor tender from Maidenhead, and two motor-boats having been requisitioned, the parties went upstream, one on the south, the other on the northern bank. The electric canoe they found

in midstream, and it was empty. The canoe had been salvaged earlier, opposite Jackson Crayley's garden as it floated downstream. There was no sign of Crayley, though the rush-lined banks were carefully searched.

The lock-keeper reported that no other boats had passed through the lock, and that he had seen nothing.

"I heard the shots fired and somebody scream," he said. "In fact, I have not been to bed, expecting there had been a murder or something."

Beyond the lock they came to Clay Shelton's old bungalow, and, landing on the stage, Betcher forced the door with a crowbar he had brought for the purpose. The candle had burnt down until it was guttering in the socket. There was no evidence of human occupation. Betcher went into the bedroom and found it empty; the door at the end of the little passage was also closed.

"There is nobody here. They were hardly likely to come back," he said. "Light the candle, somebody. Or that." He pointed to a dusty oil lamp hanging above the table.

Minutely he examined every article in the two rooms, but there was no document or paper of any kind, and the only thing of interest he found in a bookshelf against one of the walls. It was a slim volume entitled "Weaklings," and the author was "Gregory Bates."

Betcher, who had made a study of the man, knew that this was one of the pseudonyms for Clay Shelton. A clever man—how clever he was, nobody quite knew, or, for the matter of that, would ever know. Betcher knew that he held views that were at once novel and reprehensible. He had an itch for scribbling, suffering no ill effect from the habit, and this was one of his sidelines.

He turned the dusty pages and was arrested by a passage:

Man in his relation to society must either accept the place made for him by his more fortunate fellows (all of whom are determined that he shall not be as well placed as they), or he must jump the hedges which bar his given road, and, by his own volition, find a peak and a castle for himself. Such an achievement calls for the suppression of sentiment, for complete isolation of his personality from any identifiable kind of species, and his absolute segregation from community interests...

Betcher smiled grimly as he read, for here was Clay Shelton's whole philosophy in a nutshell, and here, too, lay the inmost secret of the Terrible People!

"We shall get daylight in an hour, Mr. Long," said the chief of the Berkshire police. "I think we had better put off making any further search until then."

There was enough light to show wheel tracks in the road, but it was a considerable time before they discovered the little two-seater car that had brought Jackson Crayley to this desolate house. It was hidden in a little copse about a hundred yards away from the bungalow, and the dust coat he had worn on the journey was still lying across the seat.

"I wondered how he had got here," said Betcher. "I wonder more how he escaped."

"You'll get a warrant for him, of course?" asked the Berkshire man.

"Ye-es," said Betcher dubiously. "I could always have got a warrant for him, but the devil is that I'm not so sure that his arrest is going to be very helpful."

He knew enough of Jackson Crayley's habits to realize how he must have hated that drive in the night; for, whatever else he was, he was constitutionally lazy, something of a fool, Betcher guessed, and a kind-hearted fool at that. He had a sneaking admiration for this weakling, who had faced unknown perils in order to help the girl.

But where was Jackson Crayley? He was the key to the position, the weak link in the strong chain of the Terrible Folk.

He walked out on to the stage before the house and stood in silent contemplation of the lightening sky. Here, by the curious convolution of the river, he was looking into the dawn. The trees were silhouetted black against the morning sky, and beneath one of its branches he saw what he thought to be a broken limb swaying gently to and fro. He called the Berkshire man's attention to this.

"Don't let any of your men go under that tree or they'll be hurt," he said. "Somebody ought to cut it down."

His attention was directed elsewhere, and when he looked up to the tree, it was lighter, and the broken limb was visible to his keen eyes. He uttered an exclamation, called hurriedly for the launch, and, jumping in, went slowly downstream toward the swaying object. It was the body of a man in evening dress. His hands were roped behind him, and across the soiled white dress shirt was written in red: "Sorroeder!"

"What the devil is that?" asked the astonished Berkshire man.

Betcher Long did not reply. His knowledge of Danish was small, but he knew that "Sorroeder" meant "Traitor!"

CHAPTER XXIX

IT WAS a theatrical flourish, "reported Betcher to Colonel Macfarlane." The poor fellow was dead before they hanged him—shot through the heart, the doctor says. "

"Are they Danish, these people?"

Betcher shook his head.

"No, sir. Exactly what nationality they are, I have yet to ascertain. Some of them may have had their education in Denmark, for reasons which are fairly obvious to me. Did I ever show you this?"

Betcher Long took out of his pocket a little card on which a number of dates were written:

June 1, 1854. J. X. T. L.
Sept. 6, 1862.
Feb. 9, 1886.
March 11, 1892.
Sept. 4, 1896.
Sept. 12, 1898.
Aug. 30, 1901.
July 18, 1923.
Aug. 1, 1924.
Aug. 16.
"Yes, I have seen it."

The Commissioner, a methodical man, counted the dates.

"Why, there is one more than there used to be," he said, and Betcher's quick smile was one of genuine delight.

"Added quite recently—in fact, two days ago."

"The first August date was, of course, for Monkford," said the Chief thoughtfully. "Do I understand that August 16th—"

"Is my humble self," said Betcher cheerfully. "Yes, they've decided that I must go over to the great majority, and August the 16th is the date they have chosen, so that, roughly, I have a week to live. And, in a sense, I'm glad."

The Chief stared at him.

"Tired of life?"

"Ye-es, tired of this kind of life," admitted Betcher. "Chief, do you remember remarking that it was curious that my father had never been caught by Clay Shelton?"

"I remember. Did you speak to your father about it?"

Betcher nodded.

"I'm going to speak to him again to-day," he said, and there was a curious note in his voice that made Colonel Macfarlane look at him.

"You're good friends with your father, aren't you?"

"Excellent friends. But my aged parent has been annoying me for quite a while, and I think it is about time I got back on him."

He did not explain that the annoyance, which was more or less imaginary, was due to Sir Godley's repeated efforts to get him out of the police. That morning, when he returned to town, he had found a letter from his father, and it was this letter which had decided him upon his course of action.

He went straight from Scotland Yard, as he had done before, to Berkeley Square, and Sir Godley, who was dressing for a garden party, sent down to ask him to come to his room.

"Have you digested my letter?" he said.

"The kind of letter you write to me," said Betcher, settling himself down in the easiest chair in the room, "so far from being digestible, makes me feel sick."

"Uh-huh?" grunted Sir Godley, struggling with his cravat.

"Do you remember my remarking how strange it was that Clay Shelton never caught you?"

"I seem to remember something of the sort."

"And yet he took sixty thousand pounds out of your bank—I've only just discovered the fact."

Sir Godley did not turn round.

"There's the making of a great detective in you," he said.

"Sarcasm is wasted on me," said Betcher calmly. "Old man, I've discovered your guilty secret! In fact, it has been discovered for some days, but I haven't had time to spring the bombshell on you. Who was born on June 1, 1854?"

"Heaven knows," said his father, carefully examining himself in the glass.

"Who was J. X. T. L.—John Xavier Towler Long?" asked Betcher quietly. "And to save your lying to your only child, I will tell you. John Xavier Towler Long was Clay Shelton!"

"Really?" Sir Godley placed a stick-pin carefully into his silken cravat, but showed no other interest.

"And Clay Shelton, whom I sent to the gallows, was your brother!"

CHAPTER XXX

NOT by a flicker of eyelash did Sir Godley Long betray his emotion. "How did you know?" he asked.

Betcher sat down again.

"On Shelton's river yacht I found a number of dates carved, and I guessed that each one of those had some special significance. The first of these was a date which left me in no doubt that it represented the birthday of a man—June 1, 1854. Against this were the initials J. X. T. L. Now 'X' is a very peculiar initial, and could only mean one of about five names. I searched the records at Somerset House for the name of every child born on the first of June with these initials. And I didn't have to search far before I discovered that John Xavier Towler Long was born on that day. Towler was our family name, the name of my great-grandmother, if I remember rightly."

Sir Godley nodded.

"I should have been struck anyway by the coincidence of the surname, but there, plain to be seen, was the name of J. X. T. L.'s father, which is the name of my grandfather, who married twice—you were a son of the second marriage."

Sir Godley nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

His father laughed softly.

"One doesn't exactly boast of one's association and relationship with a man of John's character. And, in truth, I scarcely knew him. He was ten years older than I, and I only remember him as a young man who was always in scrapes, who robbed my father, and disappeared after a particularly scandalous episode, probably the most disgraceful thing he ever did in his long and wicked life."

"You know no more about him?"

"Nothing at all. Until I saw his portrait in the papers I had no idea that he was related to me; and even then, I would not have recognized him."

"And you've known all the time that he was Clay Shelton?"

Sir Godley turned; his face was a little bleak.

"Yes, I've known most of the time that he was the biggest scoundrel that ever lived, that he broke my father's heart and all but ruined me and our family. That is why I wanted you to come off the job. Naturally, I had no desire to

see you hound to his death a man in whose veins ran the blood of my father. And more especially did I want you to keep out of the business when I knew that he had left a gang behind to carry on his work."

"Forgery? I thought that had stopped."

"It has and it hasn't," said Sir Godley. "Clay, as I will call him—that, by the way, was his nickname as a boy—must have been a most indefatigable worker.

He probably left behind him a large number of forged instruments, some of which have been since passed. The gang is without money. Clay was not the kind of man who would save, either for himself or his confederates. You can believe me that the Terrible People are in a bad financial position, and that is the reason you're going to have trouble."

"What trouble?"

Sir Godley shrugged his shoulders.

"I understand that Monkford has been killed; you may be sure there's a money side to that. Now, you're bursting with news, Arnold—tell me what has happened."

He listened in silence until his son had finished, and then he nodded slowly.

"They're after Monkford's money, and the girl, of course, is merely a blind instrument in the scheme. Poor old Crayley!"

"You knew him?"

"Knew him?" said Sir Godley. "Why, of course, everybody knew Crayley. You say you suspected him? When did this start?"

"The day I arrested Clay Shelton in Colchester, Crayley was there," said Betcher. "And he was there to cover the forger; of that I am certain. Clay Shelton never carried a gun. I examined his clothing after he was arrested, and there was no indication that he had had a Browning in his hip pocket. It was the 'cover' who carried the gun—and the 'cover' in this case was Crayley, and he bungled it. When he came into the fight, it was with no other intention than to slip a pistol into Clay Shelton's hand, and this he did. I traced the Browning. It was bought in Belgium six months before—and six months before, Jackson Crayley had been spending the winter at Spa. In fact, he was at Spa when the pistol was bought, though we were never able definitely to prove that Crayley was the actual purchaser. He probably got some Belgian servant to buy it for him, but the coincidence was a little too remarkable to get past. Since that time I've had Crayley under observation. Father, do you know Miss Revelstoke?"

The baronet shook his head.

"I've seen her—in fact, I've been once introduced to her, but I do not know the lady, and had never heard of her before in connection with Clay Shelton until you hinted just now that she was a member of the gang. I must say that it seems extremely unlikely, for she is a lady of irreproachable character according to the accounts I have had."

"A perfect lady," breathed Arnold Long. "Shall I tell you what she is—or was? She was the treasurer and money-holder of Clay Shelton's gang. Monkford himself told me that at one time she had three quarters of a million in his bank, the proceeds of a mythical brother's estate. She has never had a brother, so far as I can discover. She may have been a cat's-paw; she may even be acting without the slightest knowledge that she is materially assisting the Gallows Hand."

"Women of that age are naturally silly. You may find that she is under the thumb of men like Henry—and why Henry, with his respectable practice, should be under suspicion as a potential murderer, I fail to understand. In all probability Clay did organize this extraordinary confederation, because he was a born schemer and a brilliant general. But why they should continue after his death—"

"You've already supplied the reason, Father," said Betcher quietly. "These people are broke. They have certain documents to dispose of. They've got to find money, and revenge is a mere sideline. They killed Monkford so that they could transfer his fortune to Nora Sanders—"

"In whom you are most inordinately interested," said his father, with a sidelong glance at him. "And I think I would even tolerate a daughter-in-law for the pleasure of seeing you engaged in some respectable and productive work."

Betcher snorted.

"Banking!" he said contemptuously. "Money-lending on the grand scale! I'd rather be a good live detective—"

"That is what I'm scared about. You'll never be good, but I'm most anxious to keep you alive."

Arnold Long had experienced a queer little thrill when he had learnt, after a patient search of the records of Somerset House, that the man he had sent to his death was a man of his own blood. Callous as he was to the fate of wrongdoers, he had a little creepy feeling up his spine when that fact was brought home to him. Clay Shelton was his uncle—he wondered if the Terrible People knew this, and hoped that they didn't! And then an idea occurred to him. Arnold Long's favourite weapon was surprise. His most successful method was to drop some verbal bombshell and watch the effect

upon his victim. There were circumstances in which the best-balanced mind, the best-controlled face would betray itself, and Miss Revelstoke was both self-possessed and sphinx-like. He determined to fire a mine under her feet which would at least shake loose the mask behind which was hidden the real woman.

He made this resolve on the way to the nursing home where Nora Sanders was lying.

CHAPTER XXXI

IF THERE was one place in the world to which Nora Sanders was not qualified for admission, it was a nursing home. So she protested to Arnold Long, but he was very firm on the point.

"I am not run down and I haven't an attack of nerves," she said. "And really, I think it is most unnecessary."

"The doctor says " he began.

"The doctor!" She was contemptuous. "I felt all the better for the swim, and that horrible drug—what was it?"

"Butyl chloride," said Betcher. "It is famous amongst violent dopes. I will grant your magnificent physique, Nora Sanders; I will accept the view that drugging and drowning are the finest tonics that the human system can absorb; I know that you could push a 'bus over, and that all you want is a day's rest, a best seller to send you to sleep, and a glass of ice water to arouse you. Nevertheless, I am going to stand by the doctor, and I insist upon your going into this nursing home and seeing nobody—remember that little bit, seeing nobody—for a week."

"I must see Miss Revelstoke."

He scratched his chin doubtingly.

"I don't know about Miss Revelstoke. Yes, perhaps you may—in my presence. Otherwise, she must not be admitted. I admire Miss Revelstoke immensely," he went on, "but she has never struck me as a joy-bringer. I want you to get well."

"You want me to be out of danger, and you think that if you can keep me tied down in one place, with a detective sitting outside the door and a policeman walking outside my window, I shall not get into trouble," she accused him, and was surprised when he accepted this interpretation.

"Yes, that is perfectly true," he said.

"What happened to Mr. Crayley?" she asked.

"We don't know yet, but I rather fancy he got clear away," lied Betcher.

"You're not taking any action against him?"

He shook his head.

"None whatever. In fact, we have nothing but kind thoughts for him."

When he left the big room overlooking Dorset Square where she was in reality a prisoner, he took aside the matron of the nursing home and gave her certain instructions.

"No newspapers of any kind whatever. Magazines, all the novels she wants, but no newspapers and no gossip."

And on receiving the lady's assurance that his instructions would be carried out, he went away, easier in his mind than he had been for some time.

They telephoned him later in the day that Miss Revelstoke was calling on her secretary at six o'clock, and five minutes before that hour he was waiting in the drawing room of the home. She did not seem at all surprised at meeting him there, and her manner was cordial and even jocose.

"You're the very man I wanted to see, Mr. Long," she said. "What has happened to this unfortunate girl? Your Mr. Rouch, who isn't the most informative of men, told me she had been kidnapped and nearly drowned, but that, of course, can't possibly be true."

By the hard light of day he was scrutinizing her critically. In the past week she had become an old woman. He remembered her lineless face, her serene carriage, but only the undimmed brightness of her eyes remained of her former self. Deep lines had appeared in her face; there was a haggard expression which was new, and the firm mouth drooped at the corners. Yet he could not be sure that her gaiety of manner was wholly assumed. If it were so, then she was the best actress he had ever met.

"Crayley is dead, they tell me?"

He nodded.

"Don't tell Miss Sanders," he warned her. "Yes, he is dead."

She shook her head.

"It is very terrible—first Monkford and then Crayley. I am very worried about him."

"You've forgotten Clay Shelton," he said, innocently enough, watching tensely, "My unfortunate uncle—"

He got home! The face grew fixed and hard.. The black eyes narrowed in unbelief, and then stared at him.

"I didn't hear you, I think? Your—"

"My uncle. He was my father's half-brother: I thought you knew that. His real name was John Xavier Towler Long. But perhaps you didn't know that

either? I know quite a lot about Uncle John." He laughed mirthlessly. "He was married to a girl named Paynter in '83, and basely deserted her. My father tells me that she has been dead only a few years."

In a second she was her normal self.

"I never realized you had such discreditable family connections, Mr. Long," she said, and looked at her watch. "Do you think I can go up and see Nora now?"

"We will go up together," said Betcher, and this arrangement came as a surprise to the woman.

"There were several matters I wanted to discuss with her in private."

"I'll put my fingers in my ears," said Betcher obligingly, and reluctantly the woman accompanied him to Nora's room.

She was in bed, wearing a dressing jacket, and she turned down her book as her employer appeared.

"You poor child!" The elder woman's voice was sympathy itself. "Really, Nora, you're almost as bad as Mr. Long, you move perpetually in an atmosphere of melodrama! Are you feeling very bad?"

The girl shook her head and fixed her reproachful eyes upon Betcher.

"I've never been better in my life," she said, "but they insist upon my staying here."

"'They,' of course, is Mr. Long. What a blessing it is for you to have such brotherly devotion."

"Motherly," suggested Betcher.

The woman looked at him for a second.

"Can I speak with Nora alone for a moment?"

He strolled over to the other side of the room, looking out into Dorset Square. He had wonderful hearing, and as though she was conscious of this, Miss Revelstoke dropped her voice to a whisper.

"Can Henry come to see you?"

The girl hesitated and glanced across to where Betcher was standing.

"Don't ask him, because he hates Henry," said Miss Revelstoke. "I want you to see him alone. Can you?"

Again Nora looked toward the detective, doubt and uncertainty in her face.

"I don't know. I believe instructions have been given that I'm not to see anybody. Can't you tell me what he wants?"

"He has something to tell you—something that Monkford said just before he signed the will."

Then, as she saw the girl's eyes wander again to the detective, she smiled.

"Well, I won't bother you, and please don't tell him that I asked."

"Miss Revelstoke, has anything been heard of Mr. Crayley?" The detective heard the words and turned quickly.

"Nothing," said the woman, after a moment's thought. "Nothing at all."

The girl sighed.

"He was very kind to me," she said in a low voice, "and I am afraid " She shook her head in silence.

Betcher Long knew well of what she was afraid. It would not be difficult to break the news of Jackson Crayley's passing.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE next morning, two men stood up in the dock at Westminster Police Court, and they were both subject to the same charge, dangerous driving of motor cars without being in possession of the necessary licences, and both took the six months which was handed to them without complaint—indeed, with evidence of relief.

"You two fellows ought to be hanged," said Betcher Long, when he interviewed them in the corridor after sentence had been pronounced.

"Say, listen, Mr. Long," complained the chinless man loudly, "we've had our medicine, and you've no right to come here bullying us."

"I've got thirty-three charges I could bring against you fellows," said Betcher extravagantly. "Maybe it's thirty-five, so don't get fresh with me, or I'll 'prison-gate' you, and you'll be walking out of Wandsworth into Wormwood Scrubbs. You were both sent out to murder me, and I don't take kindly to homicides with designs on my young life. If you come across with all you know about this business—"

"You've asked us that before and we said nothing," said the bigger man sturdily. "It was an accident, as you well know, but being a copper you can't take the witness stand and tell the truth. I wonder some of you fellows don't drop dead when you're taking the oath!"

His shifty eyes looked everywhere but at Long. "Come on, bo'," he addressed his companion, and they would have shuffled off toward the cells had not the jailer detained them.

"Let 'em go," said Long, with a wicked smile. "And you fellows watch out. I'll be waiting for you on the mat."

The chinless man turned, obviously uncomfortable.

"We've spilt all we know, Mr. Long," he said, more respectfully. "We had this job from an old fellow who was trying to scare you, and—"

"Aw, shut up!" said the other. "You talk too much!"

There were many things about the Terrible People which puzzled Betcher Long, but none quite so much as the mysterious communication which existed between some one of the Terrible People and the lowest dregs of the underworld. As for the "old fellow," who was also called "the professor," he gave little credence to what he regarded as a clumsy invention.

The Terrible People themselves were a class apart. They were too clever to attach to them the drab creatures without honour, without faith, who stream through the police courts or the Old Bailey year in and year out, go

their long and dreary way to Dartmoor and return again for a brief spell of liberty before they tramp again their via dolorosa.

There is no honour amongst thieves. Betrayal can be had for the price of a good dinner. They know no masters but their own appetites, no loyalty save that which fear inspires.

Who was the liaison officer? To that question he could find no answer. Whoever it was must be in a position to meet the lower world in its own environment without creating suspicion or attracting the attention of the watchful police. Supposing Mr. Henry were that kind of man, he, as a lawyer, would be in a favourable position. But he was without a criminal practice; indeed, he had little dealing with the common law, his practice being mostly in the Chancery Court.

Rouch, for all his deficiencies, was an authority on one subject, the low thief. He knew every little crook in London; had their family histories by heart—for he possessed a wonderful memory, and was mildly interested in their reformation. When Betcher approached him on the subject, he shook his head.

"I don't know," he confessed. "If there was any of that funny business going on, the organization of criminals into gangs, the same as you read about in books, I should have known years ago. But hooks work on their own, and the only gangs I know are the scrapping gangs of Hoxton, a few big cracksmen, and the race-track crowds."

Though he was discouraged, Betcher pursued his inquiries; sent two men, one to Deptford and one to Notting Dale (the East End and Limehouse as hotbeds of criminality exist only in the fertile imaginations of writers), and these he reinforced with a small army of police informers, those stool pigeons without whose assistance police work would falter in its stride.

When he got home to his flat that night a letter was awaiting him. There was no need to look at the postmark. Scrawled in neat characters on the envelope's flap were the words "Little Heartsease, Berkshire," and he recognized the handwriting of Mr. Cravel.

He opened the letter. It was typewritten and dictated.

DEAR MR. LONG:

As you may well suppose, the season has ended rather disastrously for us. But Mr. Monkford was so good a friend of ours that his death overshadows all my personal disappointment. I wonder if you would be interested in a theory of mine which may seem fantastic? If you would care to come down somewhere about the 16th, when I shall be back at Heartsease, I should like to talk the matter over with yo

Betcher grinned. August 16th! It was the proverbial invitation of the spider, and he determined to walk into the trap. Perhaps "the professor" would be there to welcome him.

He folded the letter and put it away in a drawer of his desk; but though he was smiling, he was not especially amused. The date on the panel—the date in the letter. The blatant openness of it could have only one meaning. The date had been carved, the invitation issued, to fix his mind upon a date and to give him a false sense of security until the sixteenth dawned. Between the sixteenth and that moment lay the period of danger. Every morning must dawn a day of doom- -a prospect which was not pleasant. The Gallows Hand that had stretched out to hold him and brought low the humble hangman, that had struck at the judge, had slain the counsel, and had killed the banker whose ingenuity had trapped Clay Shelton, was reaching for him, to pull him down at that very second! So intent was he upon the reality of danger that, when his servant tapped at the door, he jumped.

"Phew!" said Betcher, impressed with his own nervousness. "I'm getting wrong! Come in!" And in that command he invited danger, covert and overt, and stiffened himself to meet whatever fate held for him.

His valet came into the room and, closing the door behind, lowered his voice.

"Will you see Miss Alice Cravel, sir?" he asked.

CHAPTER XXXIII

BETCHER nodded. "Show the lady in," he said, and presently Alice Cravel came into the room. She was, as usual, beautifully dressed. Betcher knew a great deal about women's fashions, and he realized that the two-piece dress she wore must have cost a great deal more money than many rich women could afford. But it was not her dress which arrested his attention; she was a different Alice from the laughing girl he had seen at Heartsease. Her face was hard and pale; she looked as though she had not slept for a week. She stared at him in silence until the sergeant had left the room.

"No, thank you, I'll stand."

He remarked the same quality in the voice as in the face. Evidently life was not running smoothly for Miss Alice Cravel, and the change in her could not be wholly explained by the disaster which had robbed Little Heartsease of its handsome profits.

Her first words were startling enough.

"Are you very fond of life?" she asked.

"Pretty fond."

He had an eye for her gloved hands, which were folded before her, and from which dangled a golden-meshed bag.

"So was Crayley," she said, staring at him.

Her manner was so strange that he thought she had been drinking, or worse.

"Jackson Crayley loved life—he seemed a fool to you. You thought his flower garden was an affectation and that he wasn't interested in it. But the colour of it, the scent of it, made life worth living. Jackson loved pretty things."

He waited expectantly, and all the time he was watching her hands.

"I suppose there is something that you love in life—besides putting people into prison and—and on the gallows? Perhaps you love pretty things, too? You like to see the sun rise and set—and the flowers—and the spring " Her voice trembled, and it was with an effort that she regained control.

"Yes, I love pretty things, and I hate ugly things," said Betcher Long bluntly.

He stood squarely before her, his hands in his jacket pocket, his head bent a little forward, for she was much shorter than he.

"I love the things that are good, and I loathe the things that are bad. Is that abnormal?"

She shook her head.

"No. But Jackie felt the same way," she said in a low voice. "And now he's dead—dead!" She covered her eyes with one gloved hand, and swayed a little so that he thought she was about to fall and pulled a chair for her.

"No, no, I don't want that," she said impatiently.

"And I'll tell you another thing I don't want, Betcher Long. I hate you!" Her voice was almost inaudible, but he did not question her hate; it blazed in her eyes, the straight line of her lips was an emphasis. "I hate you! You don't know how I hate you! But I don't want you dead—do you believe that? I—don't— want—you—dead!"

She hammered her little hand on the table with every word.

"I want you to live—live, do you hear? I'm tired of it, sick of it! The smell of blood is in my nostrils all the time." Her arms went out wildly; he thought she was going to break into hysteria. But again she caught hold of her emotions.

"There's no reason why I want you to live, except that. I'm tired of dead men and their ghosts and the things they used to wear and do and look."

She screwed up her eyes tight with an expression of intense anguish.

"Will you get out of this case and go away and leave them to it, all of them?"

"Why do you want me to go? I know you've told me. But how do you think I could escape, supposing that I cleared out of the case, as you say?"

"You could go abroad for four months—for two months, for one month would be long enough."

Her bosom was rising and falling rapidly. The colour had gone from her cheeks; they were quite bloodless.

"I'll tell you something," she said breathlessly. "They nearly got you one night. I was sent along to prevent your pulling a gun. You remember the night they shot at you? And I put up that story about being kidnapped. You saw through it—I knew that when you asked me what theatre I had been to; and I don't care what you do with me. I wish to God you'd put me in prison and keep me there till everything—everything is over. I've told you, haven't I? You heard what I said? I was in the plot to murder you!"

"Who was the man?"

She jerked her head impatiently.

"I can't tell you that—you know I can't tell you. But I was in it—I—I!" She struck her bosom with her clenched hand. "Isn't that enough? Can't you take me? That's why I came. That, and to warn you."

"Who was the man?" he asked again.

"You fool, what does it matter? Why, do you think for one moment I'd tell you?"

"Was it your brother?"

"My brother was in Little Heartsease that night, you know as well as anybody; you made inquiries. The very next day you went down to see him, and you put one of your men on to question the servants and the waiters. And that didn't satisfy you; your man questioned the guests one by one."

"Henry?" he asked.

"Henry!" Her lips curled. And then she grew terribly serious again. "I risked something, coming to see you. You've been watching my hands all the while I've been here, haven't you? But three times I could have killed you. You think I am boasting, but I'm telling you no more than the truth. Some day, perhaps, I'll prove what I've said."

His face must have shown some scepticism.

"You're scared of me because I am a woman," she said, "and you'd hesitate to draw upon me. But even if I were a man, you could neither seize nor shoot."

She raised her gloved hand above her head and seemed to snap her fingers. There was a brilliant flash of light that blinded him and made him stagger back. When he opened his eyes again, he could not see her for the golden suns that danced before his eyes; and then he saw a thick white cloud of smoke rolling slowly along the ceiling.

"A magnesium flash," she said calmly. "My eyes were closed when I fired the light; yours were open. I could have shot you down like a dog if I'd wanted to. Now do you believe me?"

Arnold drew a long breath.

"You bet I believe you!" he said fervently. "That is a new one on me, Miss Cravel."

"A new one? They've hundreds of new ones," she said contemptuously. "They've bungled you three times, but they'll get you in the end, Betcher Long."

She looked at him steadily.

"I've got an honest fit to-day, and I'm going to tell you something. I'm afraid of two things: I'm afraid of their killing you, and I'm afraid of their failing! Because, if they fail, the next time you'll have them, and that will be the end of everything. Are you going to take me? I'll go down on my knees to you this minute if you'll put me behind bars. I'm not crazy, Long. I was never as sane in my life. But I'm through—through!"

He took the letter from his pocket and handed it to the girl. She had read a line or two and handed it back to him.

"I know," she said. "Are you going?"

He nodded.

"On the sixteenth?"

He nodded again.

"What do you expect?"

"Trouble," he said laconically.

"And you'll get it!" she said between her clenched teeth; "you don't know what is waiting for you at Heartsease!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE warning chilled him, but he made no reply, watching her as she took her blackened gloves from her hands and deliberately pulled on another pair that she took from her bag.

"I can do nothing with you. That is what I was afraid of. Where's the Sanders girl?"

"In a nursing home," he said, unnecessarily, as he knew.

"She's safe there, is she?" She smiled as she asked the question.

"Pretty safe. A detective is patrolling back and front of the house, one downstairs sitting on a hard wooden chair all night."

"They'll get her if they want her."
"Betcher!" said Long.

"You'd lose."

She made as if to say something more, then changed her mind, and turning, pulled open the door, to pause on the threshold and deliver her final shot.

"Nora Sanders is very necessary to your Terrible People," she said, and her lips twitched. "Vitally necessary. You'll never guess why."

"Because they're broke," he said promptly, and he saw her expression change.

"Broke? Who told you that?" Her voice was shrill; she was genuinely astonished.

"They're broke. Somebody has been dipping into the reserve and somebody else is covering it up."

She eyed him thoughtfully, pursing her lips.

"Is that so?" she said in a low voice. "But look out for your Nora Sanders!"

Somehow he knew that she spoke the truth. Long after she had gone, he paced up and down his room, stopping now and again to watch the feeble efforts of his valet to drive the smoke through the open window. For the fumes of exploded magnesium are difficult to disperse.

Then he sat down at his blotting pad and with a pencil drew a plan of the nursing home where Nora Sanders was staying. It was true, as the girl had said, that he had made the most elaborate preparations to prevent a repetition of the outrage which had nearly ended so disastrously for the girl.

He looked at the house from every angle; supposed every possibility that he could summon. The end of the Terrible People was at hand. The gang was disintegrating before his eyes. But there was a last kick in them.

He went along to interview the matron of the nursing home. She was a homely little body, rather birdlike in her manner, and she scoffed at the idea of an abduction.

"Why, of course, she's quite safe. Especially with the place surrounded by detectives."

As they walked out into the hall, a sound of moaning came down to him from above, and the matron smiled. "That is not very serious. In fact, it is no worse than a case of nerves—a young woman who was brought in this afternoon. There's really nothing the matter with her except hysteria. She has an illusion that she's very ill, and she is welcome to that if she'd only keep quiet about it."

"Isn't she rather a nuisance to the other patients?"

"We're moving her to-night. I've seen her doctor and I've told him that I cannot have her here. The wretched creature can walk as well as you and I, yet she insists upon being treated as an invalid."

He went back to his flat feeling more happy about the girl, although he could not wholly disregard the warning of Alice Cravel.

His servant was out but had left a scribbled note on the table:

"Please call up Sergeant Rouch."

He got through to his assistant with little delay.

"I think I've found the communication between the People and the boys." Rouch always referred to the underworld as "the boys."

"Can I come along to you?"

"Come right along," said Betcher, and a quarter of an hour later Sergeant Rouch arrived, bringing with him a pallid man whom he knew as the best "nose" in London. A "nose" is a police informer, and derives a certain amount of financial benefit from his despicable calling. And this man, who was known to the underworld as "the chef"—he had once been a cook in a popular restaurant— was unique amongst noses, for he succeeded in maintaining some sort of respect amongst the very class he betrayed.

"Tell the inspector what you told me, chef."

The chef looked uneasily from one to the other, licked his dry lips, and began in his perennially hoarse voice.

"It's the Perfessor you're looking for," he said. "I've often seen him down Bermondsey and Deptford, and he knows all the heads: Kallini, and Jacobs, and Paul the Greek."

"What is he like?"

"Not so tall as you—a little taller than me," said the chef, "and thin. Always dressed in black with a big tie like them artists wear in the pictures."

"How old?"

"I don't know." The man considered. "Pretty old. His hair's white, and he's got a lot of it. That is why they call him the Perfessor."

He had never been seen in any of the haunts where men meet to arrange their plans or divide or plant their swag. The "nose" knew them all. The Blue Cushion in the Blackfriars Road, where some of the biggest jobs in England had been organized; the Fishpond over at Notting Hill, where you could plant diamonds to almost any value; or that little saloon in the Whitechapel Road, where all the big silk thefts were arranged and the proceeds sold almost openly.

"He always meets them in the open. Near the Canal Bridge is one of his favourite places. They say down in Deptford that he's a big West End fence, but I never heard that he bought anything from the boys, and he certainly never hired anybody except for a roughhouse."

"You know Ruffy the motorman?"

"Sure I do," nodded the spy. "He's a lad from Deptford. He's just got six months for dangerous driving. They say that the Perfessor gave him a hundred for a West End job."

"There is no place where this Professor can be seen?"

The chef shook his head.

"No. When he's coming along he sends a message to one of the heads saying where he is to be met, and they are closer than oysters. I'll tell you who he got a long time ago—Harry the Lancer. Do you know him, Inspector? He's the fellow that a farmer shot in a field by mistake." (This was the version of Harry the Lancer's death which had emerged from the coroner's inquiry.)The Professor again! Of all the baffling features of the case, he was the most difficult to understand.

Betcher gave instructions to the chef that whenever the Professor appeared, or was likely to appear in his favourite haunts, the Yard was to be notified. For the first time since the shadow of Clay Shelton fell across his path, he was worried. It was not extraordinary that this should be the case, for now Nora Sanders had come to be the focal point against which all the ingenuity and villainy of the mysterious People were directed.

He was weary to a point of exhaustion, and he remembered his boast that he would keep awake for four nights as he took off his coat and began to unfasten his collar. One night's sleep, at any rate, could be snatched; he was entitled to that, he thought, with a grin, as he stripped his collar, and, walking into the bathroom, turned on the tap.

Above the noise of the rushing water he did not hear the telephone bell ring until he came back to the sitting room to find his slippers. He picked up the receiver.

"Call office," said the operator's voice.

It must be Rouch, he thought; but it was a woman's voice that spoke to him, and although an attempt had been made at disguise, he recognized it as that of Alice Cravel.

"Is that you, Long? Get Nora Sanders out of that nursing home quick!"

"Why?" he asked.

"Don't 'why'—just do! You've got less than half an hour. If you're not a fool, you will do as I tell you!"

"But " he began, and then he heard the dick of the receiver being hung up.

CHAPTER XXXV

A RUSE? Was it a plot to get the girl out of the home so that she would be more accessible? And yet he could not mistake her sincerity, the intense urgency of her tone. If he understood men and women, he must believe she was in earnest, that she was absolutely certain that some terrible and immediate danger overhung the girl.

He called up the nursing home; the matron had gone to bed, but the sister in charge gave him a satisfactory account.

"Yes, your officer is here. Nothing has happened and Miss Sanders is asleep."

He spoke also to the detective, and had the same satisfactory report.

He walked slowly back to the bathroom and turned off the tap, hesitated for a few seconds, then, pulling the waste plug, he began to dress. And for no reason that he could define, he was wide awake again.

It was not until he was fully dressed that he began to feel foolish. He could do no more at the nursing home than the man he had left in charge. Nevertheless, he decided to take a leisurely walk to Dorset Square. It was a fine night; the West End was crowded, for the theatres were turning out their crowds, and the streets were lined with flying cars.

His way led through Berkeley Street and Berkeley Square, and it occurred to him that he might call on his father, who, despite the lateness of the hour, would certainly be in his study. There was a light in the hall and he pressed the bell and was admitted by his father's valet, who usually replaced the footman when Sir Godley was working late at night.

At the sight of the man's troubled face Betcher Long's heart sank.

"Where is my father?" he asked.

"I don't know, Mr. Arnold. He went out about an hour ago to post a letter. Sir Godley always takes his own letters at night for the little walk, but usually he's only away five minutes."

Arnold walked into the library; the lights were all burning—a sure sign that his father expected to return immediately, for he was rather a faddist in the matter of wasted current.

"Did he take his hat?"

"Yes, sir, his hat and his walking stick."

One of the drawers of Sir Godley's desk was half closed, and Betcher pulled it wide open. It was empty. He whistled softly. In this drawer Sir Godley kept a small Browning pistol. In the old days, when Betcher was a boy, it used to be a navy revolver, and once he had been severely spanked for allowing his curiosity to get the better of him and examining the strange and beautiful instrument that the drawer held.

Betcher called to the old servant, from whom his master had few secrets.

"Does Sir Godley generally take his pistol when he goes out to post a letter?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, lately," said the valet.

And then the detective's eyes were attracted to the hearth. The grate was filled with burnt papers. There was no reason in the world why he should pry into his father's business, but he was alarmed more than he dared confess to himself; and though these charred and blackened cinders were probably old bills which, in a fit of energy, his father had destroyed that night, he stooped down and raked them over. One little bundle of letters had been burnt en bloc, and in the centre there were some scraps of scorched paper that had escaped the flames, but only on one could he detect any writing. It was a triangular piece of paper which contained what had evidently been an address and a date. The whole of the address was not there, but he saw the word "...hagen" and the date 12th of January, 1881. He turned the paper over, and half a dozen words written in a beautiful hand were visible:

... least you can do ... help ... brother ... crisis.

Evidently, attached to this, had been some sort of memorandum, an oblong slip, the charred remnants of which Betcher carried to the light. The ink was still visible. It was a bill of exchange, drawn on his father; the name of the drawer, however, he could not distinguish. He threw this back into the fireplace, the old valet watching him.

"You needn't mention to my father that I've been nosing his private affairs, Johnny," he said.

The old man, who in the course of his life had stood between his young master and many troubles, nodded. "Where do you think he's gone, sir?"

"Gay!" said Arnold laconically.

Going out into the square, he walked toward the nearest post box, and here he met the inevitable point man, one of those mines of information without which the detection of crime would be an infinitely more heartbreaking business than it is.

The policeman had seen Sir Godley and had spoken to him, and had rather an alarming report to make.

"I must say your father behaved very queerly, sir," he said. "While I was talking to him a cab came past, and I think he must have recognized the gentleman inside—as a matter of fact, I saw him myself; an old gentleman with white hair and a big black flowing tie and horn-rimmed spectacles—"

Betcher gasped. It was a fairly faithful description of the Professor.

"What did my father do?" he asked.

"That's what I think was queer. He ran across the road and jumped into another taxi, and the last I saw of him he was leaning out of the window, giving instructions to the driver. I got an idea he was trying to overtake the old gentleman."

Arnold Long went back to the house, a very puzzled man. He spoke a few reassuring words to the valet and continued on his way to Dorset Square. The exercise stimulated his mind, and it required more than ordinary stimulation to explain his father's eccentricity.

What did Sir Godley know of the Professor? And why should a glimpse, caught in that prosaic atmosphere, induce him to throw aside all caution and pursue the cab in which the man was travelling? The Professor! The more Arnold Long thought of this unaccountable being, the more puzzled he became. He was the one member of the confederation he could not place. More than this, he was the dominant partner, the brains and the heart of the Terrible People.

Crossing Oxford Street, he walked up Baker Street, and as he came abreast of a line of houses familiar to every lover of fiction, he grinned to himself. How would that supernaturally clever detective have dealt with this present problem, he wondered? A shot of cocaine, a violin obbligato, and this man, like another famous professor, would be revealed.

He heard a clock chime and looked at the illuminated dial of his watch. Half-past eleven! He would satisfy himself that everything was all right in Dorset Square and go back to await the return of his father.

The square was deserted, the only sign of animation being at the Great Central station at the far end, where taxicabs were arriving with theatre-goers on their way to the country. A man outside the nursing home saluted him.

"Nothing has happened, sir," he reported. "They got away that hysterical girl, and an awful fuss she made."

"The hysterical—oh, yes, I know whom you mean!" He remembered the matron's description of her new patient.

The officer on duty in the hall was a useful servant to the nurses, for he answered the tap on the door immediately. He, too, had nothing to report, and the night sister, coming downstairs at that moment, told him that the girl was sleeping quietly.

"I just had a peep at her as I came down," she said. "I was afraid our shrieking sister would keep her awake all night."

"I wonder if I could see her?"

Why he asked such a ludicrous question, he could not explain even to himself. The night sister was not shocked, because she was a member of a profession that has outgrown the processes of surprise. Yet she hesitated.

"I don't know whether the matron would like that," she said, "but—you must only look, you mustn't speak."

He followed her up the stairs, feeling exceedingly foolish. On the big landing of the first floor she stopped and cautioned him to silence. Opening the door of Nora's room, she beckoned him forward.

A shaded nursery lamp was burning in the room and gave just sufficient light to distinguish the figure in the bed. The girl had her back toward the door and only a stray curl showed above the edge of the sheet.
A curl? He frowned.
And the curl was black!
In two strides he was across the room, ignoring the protestations of the night sister.
"Here—you!"

He dropped his hand upon a thin shoulder and shook it. The girl was not asleep. She turned her startled eyes upon the detective. They were brown eyes and the face turned up to him was sharp and pinched.

"Mr. Long, what are you " began the nurse, and then she saw the face on the pillow.

"That is not Miss Sanders!" she gasped.

Nor was it. Nora Sanders at that moment was speeding as fast as a high-powered motor-ambulance could carry her into Berkshire where the manager of Heartsease was prepared to receive her—and this time she would not have Jackson Crayley to deal with, but a man who knew neither pity nor fear.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BETCHER LONG guessed what had happened before the girl in the bed began her stammering excuses.

"Get up and dress. I'm arresting you for conspiracy," he said. And to the other: "Send a nurse to remain with this woman until she is ready to be taken away."

He went downstairs with the night sister, who told him what had happened.

The girl had been brought in in the afternoon on their commendation of a doctor. She was apparently in a state of hysteria, and had moaned and wept till late in the evening. When the "doctor" called before dinner, the matron had asked could she be taken away because she was disturbing the other patients, and he had promised to send an ambulance for her later at night. The ambulance had duly arrived, accompanied by two uniformed stretcher-bearers, and under the supervision of the doctor the patient had been lifted into the stretcher.

"I was present until then," said the night sister, "but the doctor asked me to go downstairs to get an extra blanket. I was gone about three minutes—"

"And during that time the stretcher-bearers either doped or terrified Miss Sanders to silence and she was put on the stretcher instead of the girl. Did you hear a shriek?"

The woman nodded.

"Yes, just as I got to the foot of the stairs. I thought it was Mrs. Dennsey."

Betcher Long was white to the lips.

"I see," he said simply. "I can't very well blame you. I should have anticipated something like this happening when I heard of this patient who had been brought here during the afternoon. Her room was next door, of course?"

There was nothing for him to do but to make the usual notification to Scotland Yard, warn all stations to seek information of the motor-ambulance, the number of which had been taken by the officer on guard outside the nursing home.

He had forgotten all about his father, until, at three o'clock in the morning, when he was receiving reports at Scotland Yard, the valet telephoned him.

"Sir Godley has not returned yet, sir," he said, and Betcher Long turned cold.

He had need now of all his courage and resolution. He sat back in his chair, and, with a tremendous effort of will, swept all sentiment from his mind. He was a detective officer engaged in tracing the disappearance of a man named Godley Long and the secretary of Miss Revelstoke. If he thought of them in any other way, he would go mad.

And these were not the only two people who had disappeared that night. Miss Revelstoke had gone out early in the evening to a party and up to three o'clock she was still away. Henry, the lawyer, also was absent; apparently, he had accompanied Miss Revelstoke. But one man was at his post. At four o'clock in the morning, in answer to a 'phone call, Mr. Cravel spoke.

"Long, is it? Anything wrong?"

"I've been calling you since midnight," said Betcher Long. "Where have you been?"

"Calling me since midnight, have you? That's a lie! I've been asleep since eleven, and the 'phone is by the side of my bed. What do you want?"

It was not the voice of a man who had been aroused from sleep; it was clear, virile, very wakeful.

"I'm coming along to see you," said the detective. "Is your sister there?"

There was a pause.

"No, my sister isn't here. She's in town. You know her flat?" He gave the number.

"I'll be down in an hour," said Long.

He had already called the girl, but could extract no information from her, and when he sent an officer to bring her to Scotland Yard, he found that she had gone out a few minutes before the detective's arrival.

Day was breaking bleakly and a gentle rain was falling as the police car roared along the Great West Road, on its way to Berkshire. As they passed the empty house to which the girl had been carried, Betcher was half inclined to stop the machine and conduct a search; but common sense told him that, wherever else in the world the Terrible People had taken Nora, it would not be there. Cravel knew, and Cravel should tell. That was the thought uppermost in his mind. Before he had left Scotland Yard he had got into touch with one of his superiors and the wise old police chief had uttered only one note of warning.

"Go easy on that third-degree business, Betcher," he said. "Get any information you can, but use legal means."

"All means are legal to me, Colonel. But I'll make a memorandum that you have warned me."

This, then, was the great stroke that had been planned almost at a minute's notice. They had secured Monkford's money through the girl, and now they were to find a means whereby the money could be safely transferred to them. She was to be married to one member, and once that was accomplished, in conditions which made it impossible for Nora Sanders to bring a charge, they hoped to present him with an accomplished fact and dare him to risk the ugly consequences which would follow exposure.

He was clear of Egham, dipping steeply down the hill toward the Ascot road, and Sergeant Rouch dozing by his side, when he saw a figure standing by the side of the road. It was a woman, and she was signalling him to stop. He jammed on his brakes, the car slithered and skidded ominously, but came to a standstill within a yard of where the girl was waiting. Before he came up to her, he saw it was Alice Cravel, and a little car that lay on its side in the ditch explained her presence.

"I thought it was you," she said breathlessly. "Where are you going?"

"To Heartsease to see your brother."

She shook her head.

"For God's sake, don't!" Her hands were clasped in supplication. "Don't go, Mr. Long! I tried to get there before you, but my brakes jammed coming down the hill. You're not going—promise me you won't!"

She was a pitiful object; there could have been hardly a dry stitch on her, for the rain was pelting down by now and she had not even troubled to lift the hood of her car.

"What are you afraid of? What is he going to do? You know Nora was taken last night?"

She nodded.

"I knew—I warned you. But don't make matters worse. It is death for you to go to Heartsease, Mr. Long. I never dreamt that I should ever try to save your life, but I am doing it!"

"Where have they taken her?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know—honestly, I don't know. If I knew, I probably should not tell you—but I don't."

He looked at the wrecked car, and from the car to the girl.

"Get in here; I'll take you the rest of the trip."

She shook her head.

"Take me as far as Sunningdale; I can hire a car there," she said.

"You're not coming on to Heartsease?"

"No."

Rouch scrambled to the back of the car, and she took his place.

Betcher felt her shivering with the cold and, taking a rug from the back seat, he put it about her, she submitting meekly.

"Do you know my father has gone also?"

"Your father? Oh, Sir Godley Long, isn't it? Where has he gone?"

Evidently she did not regard Sir Godley's disappearance as an act of the Terrible People, for she seemed scarcely interested.

"I'm getting weak, horribly weak," she said. "I think it must be Jackie's death that was responsible. Poor Jackie!"

Tears rolled down her pale face, and he heard her sob, and was just as embarrassed as the average man would be in the presence of a weeping woman.

Beyond the level crossing at Sunningdale he stopped the car at her request before a garage which showed no sign of life.

"You'll never get a car here."

"Yes, I will," she insisted. "There's a caretaker on the premises."

"Where are you going?"

"Back to London," she replied. "I've done my best—I've done my poor best!"

She held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Long. I ought not to wish you well out of this, but I do. And if there is another world, as some people think, and you're conscious after life of all that is past, you will remember that I tried."

She turned away, her voice broken, and he stared after her as she went rapidly down the little road by the side of the garage toward a door which she evidently knew gave entrance to the night watchman's quarters.

He continued on the road with a queer little fear at his heart—a fear that had been a stranger to him hitherto. She was so sure that death awaited him at Heartsease that she had almost communicated her faith to him.

CHAPTER XXXVII

TEN minutes' drive brought them to the big gates of Heartsease Park, and as he passed up the twisted drive, Betcher was oppressed by an unusual sense of danger. Anything less sinister than Mr. Cravel could not be imagined. He was waiting under the porch for Betcher Long's arrival, and though the hour was early he was dressed with scrupulous care, and, the detective observed, shaven.

"Did you see my sister by any chance, Mr. Long?" he asked.

"No," said Betcher, and Cravel laughed.

"She telephoned me five minutes ago from Sunningdale and said you had given her a lift to the garage."

"In that case," replied Betcher coolly, "I must have seen her."

In the hall on a little tray was a steaming pot of coffee.

"I thought you would like a drink after your cold ride," said Cravel. "I can assure you that it is not poisoned or doped."

Then, as he still seemed undecided:

"Perhaps you would like to try it on Mr. Rouch first?"

The coffee was welcome, and Betcher Long drank a cupful gratefully.

"I am glad you brought Sergeant Rouch with you," said Cravel, apropos of nothing.

"Why?"

Cravel shrugged his square shoulders.

"When one is suspected of all sorts of terrible crimes, one likes to have a witness, even a hostile witness," he said "I've had a fire put in No. 7. That is Monkford's old suite. You're not nervous?"

"Why there?" asked Betcher steadily.

Again the manager shrugged.

"I don't imagine that you have come down here at five o'clock in the morning to book a room for next year," he said drily. "In fact, I expect rather an unpleasant interview, and, having some self-respect, I prefer that our conversation should be more or less private."

The elevator was not working, and they climbed the two flights of stairs, and Cravel stood aside to allow the detectives to pass into the familiar sitting room.

A wood fire was burning on the hearth, and Betcher stripped off his coat. He looked at Rouch thoughtfully.

"On the whole, I think you had better stay downstairs, Sergeant," he said.

The obedient Rouch went out of the room.

"I am afraid I am rather short of servants," said Cravel. "I only keep enough staff to run the hotel during the winter, but if there is anything you want while you're staying here, I shall be happy to get it."

Evidently Cravel had carried out his intention of converting the suite into a stair-head. When he had driven up to the hotel, Betcher had noticed the presence of a builder. A new wall was being built out from the main front, and he gathered, from the general untidiness of the saloon, that the builders had already started to convert the suite.

"Now, Cravel, I want a few words of explanation from you, and I'm warning you that you're very nearly at the end of your tether—where is Miss Sanders?"

Cravel smiled.

"Why should you imagine that I know?" he asked. "I have been in this place for the greater part of a week and haven't stirred out. The last news I had, which was from Miss Revelstoke, was to the effect that Nora Sanders had been carried off by some person or persons unknown, and had been most heroically saved by that prince of detectives, Betcher Long!"

"She was taken away from a nursing home last night," said Betcher, "your friend the Professor being responsible—"

"My friend the Professor? And who on earth is my friend the Professor?"

"I'm not going to argue with you; I'm going to find Nora Sanders, and you're going to tell me where she is."

They faced one another, and in Betcher Long's eyes was a light which Cravel had seen once before. Yet he did not flinch; the hard lips were still curved in a smile.

"Maybe you are a little distraught, Mr. Long," he said quietly, "and until you are calmer, I am afraid it is useless to talk to you, especially as the only information I can give you will come as a terrible shock to you."

"Is that so?" said Betcher softly. "What is the nature of the shock?"

Cravel walked over to the fire and stood with his back to it, his hands behind him.

"A most unfortunate thing has happened," he said slowly, "and I'm going to confess to you that I know a little—a very little—about this affair. Miss Sanders is by way of being a friend of mine—you probably didn't know that, but I have had a number of letters from her, and she has honoured me with her confidence. It appears that she was rather distressed by the marked attentions which you have shown to her."

Betcher nodded. The man was talking to gain time. He was also speaking with a purpose.

"Naturally, you would not imagine that your attentions would distress any woman, and I am not blaming you for that. It is consonant with human vanity—"

"You're talking more and more like Clay Shelton," interrupted Betcher. "That kind of shadow philosophy and half-digested logic was a specialty of his."

A red flush crept to the man's face for a second, his eyes blazed, and Betcher could hear his deep breathing. And then:

"I am not concerned with the philosophy of Clay Shelton, whoever he may be," he said evenly. "I am merely advancing the view that you naturally would not dream that your attentions would be disagreeable to anybody. Miss Sanders did not like to hurt your feelings. Your attentions were so insistent, however, that she became alarmed, and she asked a friend of mine to help her escape from your rather embarrassing vigilance. I do not know the exact details of the case, but I understand that my friend succeeded in rescuing her last night. Unfortunately

He paused here, and Betcher waited, his eyes on the man's face.

"Unfortunately, the shock of her terrible experience a few days ago proved too much for poor Nora, and on her way to Heartsease "

"Is she here?" Betcher asked quickly.

Mr. Cravel nodded.

"On her way to Heartsease she collapsed, and in spite of all the assistance which could be rendered by the doctor in town—died."

"Dead?" Betcher Long's eyes were half closed. "You're a liar, Cravel! You're trying to rattle me. You can try again! And if she is dead"—the gun in his

hand did not so much as shake—"if she is dead, I'm going to carry out my promise, and nothing can save you."

Again the man shrugged.

"It is a lamentable fact," he said. "I thought you knew. My sister is not usually so reticent."

"She knew?" asked Betcher softly.

Cravel nodded.

"Where is Nora Sanders?"

To his amazement, the man waved his hand in the direction of the door leading into the room where Monkford had met his death.

"We put her there," he said. "Your friend the Professor is with her. What a clever fellow you are!" he went on, with heavy jocularity. "To come straight to this place! You must have a lover's instinct!"

"Walk!" said Betcher curtly, his gun pointing to the man's waist, and his other hand to the door. "We'll see how far your joke carries," he said, "and I have an idea it will be a poor joke for you, my friend."

The man strolled leisurely up the room to the door communicating with the bedroom, turned the handle, and threw it wide open.

"Go in!" said Betcher, and followed slowly, all his senses alert.

The curtains of the bedroom had been half drawn. The gray light that streamed through the narrow space between gave the apartment an eerie, unearthly look. But of this he was not conscious. He stood, paralyzed with amazement, in the open doorway.

Facing him was a bed pulled up level with the wall, and on the bed, her face white as milk, her lips colourless and her eyes closed, was Nora Sanders! He could only stare open-mouthed, his brain for a while refusing to function.

It was true, then; she was dead. Why else had they brought him here?

A movement at the foot of the bed, and he saw in the shadow of an alcove a queer, unfamiliar shape—an old man, his untidy white hair falling about his cheeks. The light glinted on his big spectacles. He was glaring at Betcher with a grin of hate.

"Don't move, anybody! Stand over there, Cravel. If either of you pull a gun I'll shoot!"

His eyes came back to the still figure on the bed. Dead! It was impossible to believe. Then, through the frozen surface of his sorrow bubbled the hot rage within him.

"You swine!" he hissed.

He took a stride forward; his second step brought him to the centre of the carpet by the bed. He felt it yield under him, and strove to fling himself back. But he was too late; the balance had shifted before he could recover. He flung out his hand to reach the edge of the great hole in the floor which the carpet had hidden, missed it, and fell. His head struck violently against a scaffold pole and he knew no more.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

A FEW minutes later Mr. Cravel walked leisurely down the stairs out to the porch where Rouch was standing, gazing dismally at the falling rain.

"Inspector Long is staying to breakfast," he said.

"Oh, is he?" said Sergeant Rouch, in his most unfriendly tone. "Does he want me to go up?"

"Not yet. He has asked for certain documents which he is examining, and in which, I presume, he expects to find some evidence of my criminal mind."

"Oh, does he?" Sergeant Rouch permitted himself to ask coldly.

Cravel unlocked the door of his office and went in, and presently Rouch heard him come out and the snap of the key turning. He did not trouble to look behind him, and that was his undoing.

The blow that Cravel struck would have killed an ordinary man, but the sergeant wore a thick derby hat. Under the impact of the blow he stumbled on to his knees. The truncheon rose and fell again. Cravel stooped and, grasping the man under the arms, dragged him out to where Betcher's motor car was standing, and, hoisting him into the tonneau, threw the rug over him. From his office he wheeled a light motor-cycle, and this he strapped leisurely to the side of the car, resting the wheels on the running board. This done, he got up to the driver's seat and sent the machine down the drive.

A quarter of an hour later the car passed through Egham, turned abruptly into the Runnymede Meadows, and followed the Windsor road, which runs parallel with the river. At a point where the bank drops steeply to the water he got out, leaving the engines running, and detached his motor-cycle. Turning the wheel, he threw in the gear and the car jerked forward, wobbled up a little rise, then down a steep slope, and plunging into the river, turned turtle.

He looked at his watch; it was now half-past five, and, mounting the motor-cycle, he went back to Heartsease.

The girl and the old man were gone when he entered the room, and, looking round, he saw the pistol which the detective had dropped. It was still lying where it had fallen at the edge of the pit. Slipping the Browning into his pocket, he rolled up the carpet, removing it to the saloon. The bed had already been dismantled of sheets and coverings, and with a final glance round he locked the door of the untidy room and went downstairs.

There was work for him to do. From his office there was a narrow flight of stairs that led down to a cellar, from which the wine had been removed only

a few days before. With a lamp in one hand and his truncheon in the other, he descended the stairs and walked along the brick floor until he came to a place immediately beneath a square hole that had been cut in the vaulted roof by the builders. Had he looked up, he could have seen through the scaffold pole the gap through which Betcher Long had fallen. But he had come upon another errand, and he caught his breath as, flashing the lamp to and fro, he failed to discover the man whom he thought to find dead or dying on the brick floor.

Betcher Long was gone! There was no evidence that he had ever been here; no sign of blood. He uttered an imprecation under his breath. It was impossible that the detective could have escaped serious injury. Perhaps the others had moved him. Again he searched the cellar, opening an interior room and examining it, too.

Betcher Long, alive, maddened by the sight he had seen... ? Never before in his life had this hard-faced man felt the twinge of fear, but he was terrified now. He locked the door of his office the moment he reached ground level, and, pouring out a stiff dose of brandy, drank it in one gulp. There was a knock at the door; it was the early-duty cook, who had been to Cravel's room for the keys of the kitchen.

The old woman was deaf and was the only servant that had slept at Heartsease that night, for it was mid-week, and there were no guests in the hotel. He unlocked the door, handed the kitchen keys to her, though this was not necessary, for he had made the coffee that morning and had left the kitchen door open, as she came back to explain in some alarm.

He went up the stairs to the second floor, and walked to the far end of the passage, and put a key into what appeared to be a part of a solid wall. It was a door of steel, and beyond this was a suite which did not appear in the list of apartments available for guests. This consisted of two rooms, a tiny bathroom, and a kitchenette, and was Cravel's winter quarters when the hotel was closed. He fastened the steel door and went into the smaller of the two rooms. A girl was lying on the bed, perfectly motionless and apparently lifeless, save for the slight rise and fall of her breast, which only a keen eye would detect.

He lifted the bare arm and examined the three punctures, one of which was recent. On the table by the bedside was a small green bottle and an open hypodermic case. Raising an eyelid with his fingertip, he saw that she did not flinch, or show the slightest sensibility to light, and, with a grunt of satisfaction, he went to the other room.

This was empty. On the table was a note scribbled in pencil, which he read, and, having read, burnt in the open fireplace.

Where was Betcher Long? That was the absorbing problem. There was no reference to him in the note. He took the detective's pistol from his pocket,

examined it curiously, and laid it on the table behind him—the very appearance of the gun deepened his anxiety. For a long time he sat on the edge of the table, a cigarette between his lips, his arms folded, gazing moodily out of the window, which showed the angle of a wall and a clear view across the golf links. Supposing Betcher was dead somewhere and had been removed after the note had been written? The search for him would not begin until later in the morning. The car would be found in the river, and the body of Rouch would lead to dragging. That would take time.

He wondered what had happened to Alice. Why had she gone back to her flat instead of coming on and taking her part in that crisis? Alice puzzled him. She had been as hard and as remorseless as any, had taken all risks and feared nothing, and now she had weakened at a moment when she would have been so helpful.

A voice called him from below. He opened the door quickly and ran to the balustrade overlooking the hall.

It was his sister; the soddened clothing hung to her figure; the face, wet with rain, was looking up at him. "Come down," she said, and he obeyed.

"Where have you been—"

She interrupted him with an impatient gesture. "Where is Long?"

He shook his head.

"I don't know; he got away."

She did not believe him—the very fact that she refrained from putting any further question was proof of it.

"I've been on the Sunningdale road," she said, "and I found something—a taxi- driver!"

Cravel frowned at this.

"Don't be more mysterious than you can help," he growled. "What has a taxi-driver to do with me?"

"A lot, I think," she answered. "He was standing at the end of the lane that runs along the park boundary, and he seemed fairly pleased with himself. I saw his cab parked under the elms, and he said he had been there since soon after midnight. He drove somebody here."

"Who?"

She shook her head.

"That is what I wanted to know. I 'freshed' him, but he wouldn't tell me. A gray-haired man who picked him up at the corner of Berkeley Square—that was all he would tell me, though I have an idea that he could have told me more. Sonny, there is somebody in this house—somebody you know nothing about."

He blinked rapidly in his perturbation.

"Fiddlesticks!" he snapped. "There is nobody here except—"

She rightly understood his hesitation.

"She is here, then? You're playing with fire—and not ordinary fire either!" she said intensely. "Sonny, get out of it while you can. You may be too late in an hour's time. The going isn't any too good, but there is at least a chance. Won't you take it?"

A smile dawned on his harsh face.

"When everything we want is in our hands?" he asked contemptuously. "Am I a fool? No, we've gone too far. There is only one thing to do now, and that is to stick it out."

She was looking at him thoughtfully; he had the feeling that she was not especially interested in his fate any longer and that she would presently change the subject in her abrupt way to something which touched her more nearly. Here he was right.

"I'm wet through—I think I will change," she said.

Her apartment was immediately under that of her brother, and resembled it in all particulars, except that there was no mystery about the door.

He waited for her, pacing up and down the tiled floor of the lounge, until she came down again. Then he saw, to his surprise, that, over her dry clothes, she wore a rubber coat.

"You're not going out again, are you?"

"Yes; I told the garage man I was returning. They are bringing in my car, and the garage is useful. It is on the main road, it has a telephone. I expect to be there all morning."

He smiled again.

"What else do you expect?"

"Trouble," she said in a low voice, "bad, bad trouble. Have they gone—the other people?"

He nodded.

"You've lost your nerve, kid. Jackie, I suppose? It was an accident—he shot himself in the struggle, the poor fool." Then, as he saw the blank face, "I'll swear to it, Alice! He was dead when we pulled him out of the water the second time. The hanging was ghastly, but you know—the Professor never forgave Jackie for the Colchester business. Hated him—poor devil."

He waited, his hands flung wide in protest, but she was not convinced; no more now than when he had first told the story.

"An automatic killed him," she said briefly. "Jackie had only an old service revolver; the newspapers were very certain about the Browning bullet, but we won't go into that."

She walked to the door and glanced left and right. The rain was teeming down, but she was not inspecting the weather.

"If he is not in the house, he is in the grounds. I should search, if I were you—no, I shouldn't! I should bolt!"

"You're not me," he said tritely.

She had come to the house on a bicycle, one she had borrowed at the garage. He watched her till she had passed out of sight; then, going up to his room, he took up Betcher's pistol, thrust it into the pocket of the raincoat he donned, and, with one glance at the drugged girl, he closed and locked the door and went out to search the grounds.

First he made a careful scrutiny of the immediate neighbourhood of the hotel and found nothing.

Part of the lawn facing the portico had been dug up to divert the electric cable that supplied the house. Here, on the soft loam, he found the trace of a footstep—a big, square-toed foot and the impress of a rubber heel.

At the sight of this, his interest in the girl's theory quickened. Presently he found two more footprints in a patch of the lawn where the grass had worn thin. They came from the direction of the drive.

He lit a cigarette with difficulty and stood for a while debating the problem.

Who was the man who had come in the cab and what was his object? There was a short cut to the boundary lane and, acting on an impulse, he crossed the lawn and, following the path which led through a clump of laurels, he came to a wicket gate which opened on to the lane.

Drawing back the heavy bolts, he went out into the narrow lane and looked up and down. Presently he saw the cab, and, sitting on the running board, smoking philosophically, the driver.

The man turned quickly and half rose at the sound of footsteps, then sank down again.

"Thought you were my fare," he said. "I hope he won't be long. I've got to turn this cab over to my day man at eight o'clock."

He explained that the cab was his own property and that he employed another man to drive it by day.

"I am afraid your fare will be a long time," said Cravel. "Won't you bring your cab into the hotel grounds?"

But here the man was immovable.

"He told me to wait here, and here I'm waiting," he said. "If I miss him, I miss a teener."

He looked curiously at the other, and Cravel frankly introduced himself.

"I can't quite understand who is your fare," he said, and strove to secure a little more information. But here he was unsuccessful. The description given by the taxi-man was unfamiliar to the manager. Then the garrulous driver said something which made Cravel jump.

"I hope he's not going to bilk me," he said. "I don't like these jobs of following cars, though I kept up with the Fiat all the way down, and it was a 'six,' too!"

Fiat!

That was the car which had brought the Professor and his companion.

"What time did you pick him up?"

The cabman told him. He knew, also, the minute he and the car he chased had arrived at Heartsease. Cravel drew a deep breath. They had been shadowed! This possibility had not occurred to him.

The danger was now apparent, and his sister's warning rang in his ears as he retraced his steps to the grounds.

He was nearing the place where the hole had been dug in the lawn when he saw something shining on the grass and, stooping, picked it up. It was a pair of pince-nez horn-rimmed reading glasses. Though they were drenched with rain, he guessed that they had not been there for very long.

He examined the glasses carefully—somehow, they fitted the picture which the cab-driver had drawn of his fare. He went straight into his little office and, shutting the door, descended to the cellar. Supposing the unknown had rescued the detective, there would be muddy marks on the floor, but for these he looked in vain. Baffled, he came out and went upstairs to his room. He was walking along the short landing that divided the two stairs when he stopped dead. On the red carpet, plain to see, was a muddy footprint that had not been there when he went out!

CHAPTER XXXIX

HIS head bent forward, his heavy jaw outthrust, he turned slowly. There was no sound, no evidence of the intruder. Bending down, he felt the print. The mud was still wet. In a panic, he flew up the stairs and did not stop until he had reached his apartment, outside of which a tray rested on the floor—his breakfast brought here in his absence.

His first thought was of the girl. She was lying just as he had left her; her eyes were closed, she was very still, but the colour was beginning to flow back to her face.

"Phew!"

He mopped his streaming forehead, thrust his handkerchief down between his collar and throat. Going out, he brought the tray to the sitting room and drank a hot cup of tea with relish.

It was the old cook's footprint he had seen, of course. Who else? He wished now that Alice had not told him of the cab—almost wished that he had refrained from questioning the driver. In his present state of mind, he would almost have welcomed the ability to deceive himself.

He scoffed at his own weakness. He, the most terrible of the Terrible People, was afraid! Walking to the window, he threw it wide open. The chill of the rain- washed air was a diversion. He had reached the point where he could be glad of physical discomfort, so long as it carried his mind away from the crouching fear that seemed ready to spring upon reason and overwhelm it.

Slipping off his raincoat, he put the pistol ready to hand on the table and gave himself up to thought, and unpleasant thought it was.

Suppose Betcher Long were alive? Suppose the trailing shadow that had followed the Professor were at this moment in the hotel? Suppose—

Then he heard a sound which made him leap from the table—the sound of a key turning in the door. Quick as lightning, he faced about.

"Don't move, or I will kill you!"

He could only glare at the amazing apparition that met his eyes; for a second, he was incapable of speech or movement.

Here was a danger and a menace that in his wildest speculations had never occurred to him.

It was Nora Sanders.

Behind her he saw the length of the corridor, for the communicating door was wide open—it was the sound of the turning key that had aroused him.

"Don't move!"

He was looking into the muzzle of a Browning pistol held in a hand that did not tremble.

CHAPTER XL

CRAVEL could only gape at the unexpected vision. Nora's face was white; she was clad only in her nightgown, but the hand that held the pistol was marvellously steady. It was Betcher Long's pistol—she must have taken it from the table behind him.

"Don't move, please!"

She opened the door wider. Beyond was the corridor, and at the end the stairs, and safety. He heard the voice of his own waiter in the vestibule below. She had but to reach the foot of the stairs... He must temporize now for his very life's sake.

"Miss Sanders," be stammered, "you—you don't know what you're doing. You've been very ill."

"I know well what I'm doing," she said steadily, and yet her voice was curiously weak.

Perhaps she was more conscious of this than he. It seemed as though some other person were talking—she was listening to that sound of a strange voice.

"You'll catch your death of cold if you're not careful. Let me get you a coat."

He lifted one from the hook in the tiny hall and held it toward her, but she retreated into the passage as he advanced, her gun levelled.

"Go upstairs," he whispered urgently. "There is a fire in No. 6. Here is the key."

He threw it down at her feet.

"I won't touch you—I swear I won't touch you!"

He picked up the coat, and then, as she hesitated, he flung it over her pistol arm. In another second, he had strangled the scream in her throat. She struggled feebly, for she was still under the effect of the drug, but he dragged her back, closing the door with his foot, and flung her on the bed.

"If you keep quiet I'll not hurt you. If you scream, by God! I'll kill you!" he whispered fiercely.

She stared up over the big hand that covered her mouth. She was helpless now, and her eyes spoke her despair.

With one hand he picked up the hypodermic; it was still half filled with its pale green fluid. Keeping the other hand over her mouth, he jabbed the

needle into the white arm and pressed home the plunger. She tried to struggle from his grasp, but she was powerless, and presently she lay still, and when he closed her eyes they did not open.

Cravel was ashen with fear. The girl must be moved at once. He looked at his watch; it was too early to get the people he wanted, but as soon as it was possible, she must be moved from Heartsease. He tidied himself to remove the evidence of the struggle, changed his collar, which she had wrenched from his throat, and went out, locking the door behind him.

The drug would keep her under for an hour, and in the meantime, he must get rid of the few servants who were in the hotel. As to the strange man whose footprint he had seen, he must dismiss him as a factor, otherwise the fear of him would lead to madness.

The cook did not matter; she was deaf, and, moreover, would keep to her kitchen now that his breakfast had been served. The one waiter he disposed of readily, sending him to London on a fictitious errand. In the off-season the garage man acted as "boots" and assisted generally in keeping the hotel clean, and he, with the restaurant waiter and the cook's assistant, comprised the staff. He must take the risk of acting suspiciously. He sent the garage man to the main gate to intercept the waiters when they arrived and tell them their services would not be required that day.

All this took time. He concluded his arrangements and went into his office and called a number. To his relief, a familiar voice answered him, and for five minutes he spoke in Danish.

"You'll have to get her away, that's all," he said in conclusion. "I don't care how—no, no, I don't know what has happened to him. I searched the cellar but there was nobody there. Send Billy down as soon as you possibly can. If we can get through to-day we are safe."

He hung up the receiver and went back to his suite; he had told nothing of the square-toed shadow. That would take too long in the telling.

The girl's door was closed, as he had left it, and he sat down to find yet another explanation for the disappearance of Betcher Long.

It was impossible that he could have escaped. He had fallen three floors, and if that had not killed, it would certainly have crippled him. How slowly the time passed! It seemed that when he took out his watch it had stopped.

He recalled his talk with Betcher, striving to remember every second. Sir Godley had disappeared, he recollected, but of Sir Godley he knew nothing, except that he was Betcher Long's father, and that a scheme had been discussed by the Professor for bleeding the banker. It was not strange that he did not associate Sir Godley with the footprints.

He could not afford to stay here, he realized. Somebody must be downstairs to meet the postman when he came. At all costs, he must behave normally.

He looked in at the girl; she was lying still. But she had been lying still before and had deceived him. To make absolutely certain, he used the needle again, and, satisfied, went downstairs to await developments. And they came swiftly.

As he strolled out to the open he saw a big car sweeping up the drive. It came to a halt before the portico and three men got out.

"I am Inspector Claves of the Berkshire Constabulary," said the oldest of the three. "On a complaint laid this morning, and at the request of Scotland Yard, a warrant has been issued to search the hotel."

He produced the document; it was signed by a local justice of the peace, but Cravel stood petrified, uncomprehending.

"To search the hotel?" he croaked. "What—what is the meaning—"

"I don't know what it is all about, Mr. Cravel," said the inspector, "but I have my duty to perform, and I hope you are not going to obstruct me in its execution."

Cravel could only shake his head dumbly, conscious that the other two men had ranged themselves on either side of him.

"You have no guests in the hotel?"

"None." Cravel's voice was cracked; he could scarcely recognize it himself. They were going to search the hotel, and upstairs was the girl...

They passed from room to room and presently ascended to the first floor. The suite which Miss Revelstoke had occupied yielded nothing. The next room in the corridor was locked.

"Have you the key of this?"

"I have a pass-key in my office."

"Go and fetch it," said the officer briefly, and Cravel went down, accompanied by one of the men, and searched his desk. But the pass-key, which was kept in one of the smaller drawers of the desk, was not to be found. He found, however, in the reception office, the actual key of No. 3, and this he took back.

His mind was in a whirl; it was impossible for him to think consecutively or logically. All that he knew was that, by some horrible mischance, the clever

plans of the Terrible People had been brought to failure; that disaster slowly and surely was overtaking them.

Why were the police searching the hotel? On whose information, he wondered dully, as the inspector opened the door of No. 3? Here was a chaos of scaffolding and builders' material; a great square hole had been cut in the floor. Cravel caught only a glimpse of this, for the inspector slipped into the room and, after a while, came out and closed the door.

"What is this?"

"It—it is the new elevator that I am putting in," stammered the man. "That is why I kept the door locked, in case some of the servants fell through. There is a hole in the floor—"

He made some incoherent statement about the alterations and their cost, and the party moved on to the next room and finally mounted the stairs to the second floor. Cravel followed numbly. Perhaps they would not notice the door in the wall? It was a dull morning, and the wall had a solid look.

His heart sank as the inspector went straight to the hidden door of the suite. He found his voice now:

"You can't go in there," he said.

He found a difficulty in speaking; was conscious that his agitation was patent to all beholders.

"I've—I've got a friend—he is sick."

"Give me the key."

"I tell you I have a friend who is—"

The grip tightened on his arm.

"Come, come, Mr. Cravel, don't let us have any trouble. You have nothing to hide?"

He could only shake his head, and, like a man in a dream, he passed the key to the big officer, who opened the door and walked into the dining room, which faced them.

"There is another room here, isn't there?"

Cravel did not answer, and the inspector tried the door of the bedroom, opened it slowly, and walked in. Cravel set his teeth and waited, and presently the police officer came out.

"Nobody here," he said.

He had not closed the door, and, peering past him, Cravel saw that the bed where he had left Nora Sanders was empty!

CHAPTER XLI

THE remainder of the search seemed to occupy an eternity. The manager followed the men from room to room, hypnotized by this new shock. At long last they came to the lounge, and the police inspector handed him his keys.

"This sort of search is very unpleasant for all concerned," he said, and he was almost respectful. "But you realize that I had no choice in the matter."

Cravel said nothing. He saw only the empty bed; could think of no other matter.

The officers who had accompanied the inspector had gone out to their car—only the chief remained.

"That is all, I think, Mr. Cravel," he said politely. "I am sorry to have given you so much trouble. And now I'm going to bother you a little further. May I ask you to come with me to your suite?—I want to ask you a few questions."

He accompanied the baffled manager, and behind the closed door:

"This is a very old house, isn't it, Mr. Cravel?" The manager forced a smile.

"The minds of the police seem to run on secret passages. Was it to discover that that you got your search warrant?"

"Mine doesn't run at all, it is walking just now," replied the officer. "But it is a very old house?"

"Goes back to Tudor days; some parts are older," said Cravel, wondering what was coming next.

Why had the police taken their departure? Why was he being questioned now? "Will you tell me what brought you here?" he asked.

"I have in my mind the death of Mr. Joshua Monkford." The officer spoke slowly, and he fixed Cravel with a glance. "It has suddenly puzzled the Berkshire police as much as it has puzzled Scotland Yard, and I am wondering whether you would care to make any statement on the matter."

"Am I under arrest?" asked Cravel quickly.

The inspector shook his head.

"No, you're not under arrest. You are not even being detained. I am asking you in the most friendly way." Cravel had recovered his nerve by now.

"I have been questioned before and I have given all the explanations which have occurred to me," he said shortly.

The inspector hesitated.

"Of course, if a man had anything to do with the killing—not a vital part, mind you, Mr. Cravel—it wouldn't be a bad idea for him to turn King's evidence- -that is, State's evidence. A man who did that might escape the worst punishment."

Cravel laughed. Really, there were times when the police were childish.

"I suppose you realize that you are suggesting that a respectable property owner of Berkshire has been guilty of a cruel and wicked murder?" he said deliberately. "You have no illusions on that point, Inspector?"

"None whatever," said the other.

He seemed at a loss as to how he should proceed, and when he resumed, it was to ask seemingly pointless questions about the number of guests that were entertained at the hotel in the course of the year. There was some object in this laborious cross-examination, and for the life of him Cravel could not guess what it was. For a quarter of an hour he was plied with stupid questions which could have no bearing upon the matter which was uppermost in his mind, and it was only toward the end that the examination became vital.

"I have information that Inspector Long and Detective-Sergeant Rouch came to this hotel this morning. What happened to them?"

"They went away again," said Cravel coolly. "Mr. Long is not a good friend of mine and suspects me of all sorts of trickery which I should never stoop to perform. Apparently, the secretary of Miss Revelstoke, a very good friend of mine, disappeared last night from a nursing home, and because he knew," he cleared his throat, "that I was interested in the young lady, he came down at five o'clock in the morning and stayed about a quarter of an hour. I haven't seen him since," he added truthfully.

"He drove away, did he?"

"He had a car, so he didn't walk," said the other sarcastically.

There was a knock, and the inspector got up and opened the door, and held a whispered colloquy with his subordinate.

"All right, Mr. Cravel, that's about all I want to know," he said. "I'm going now."

They went down into the hall again, and, to Cravel's unspeakable relief, the police car drove off with its phlegmatic passengers.

Now he had time to think clearly. First Betcher Long and now the girl had vanished into thin air. There was danger for him, big danger. He had got to the place where "Sauve qui peut" was a good family motto.

There was a little mahogany desk in his sitting room, and in the lower steel-lined drawer a cash box. He took this out and opened it; it was filled to the top with American bills, and these he laid on the table. From his current cash box he extracted a handful of English bank and treasury notes, and this done, he went into the room where he had left the girl and changed quickly into a tweed suit. His powerful car was garaged at the hotel, and his plans were already made. Week by week for three years he had ticked off the sailings of the liners that go out of Genoa to New York, and he had an American passport brought up to date.

Clay Shelton's amusement had been the forging of passports, and there was not one member of the gang who had not the necessary documents to take him into safety when real danger threatened. And real danger was here.

He heard a quick step in the hall, ran into the dining room, and swept the money into his pocket, and when the key turned in the lock and Alice Cravel came in, there was no evidence of the hasty departure he contemplated.

"The police have been here."

"I met them on the road," she said. "They stopped me and asked me a lot of foolish questions. They didn't say a word about Long or the girl. Where are they?"

He shrugged.

"God knows!" he said.

She looked at him in amazement.

"They're not here?"

"So far as I know, they are not here."

"Where are the others? Have they taken the girl with them?" she asked.

He smiled.

"You had better ask them," he said, and her glance was full of suspicion.

Then slowly she began to understand.

"They got away with her: I saw the ambulance on the Sunningdale Road ten minutes ago," she said. "I'd have stopped it, but I wasn't sure."

It was his turn to be astonished.

"The ambulance? Which way was it going?"

"Toward London."

He ran his fingers through his coarse hair, bewilderment in his face. Events had passed beyond his understanding.

"So far as I know, she was not in the ambulance, unless they came back while the police were here and smuggled her away. I had thought of that possibility."

In a few words he told her what had happened.

"And Betcher Long?"

He groaned.

"Don't ask me about Betcher Long. I tell you we dropped him, and he ought to be killed, but he wasn't."

"I want to see the room where he dropped," she said, and, wearily, he accompanied her to Monkford's suite.

"There's the hole and that's where he dropped, and if that isn't enough to kill a man, I don't know what is. I never dreamt he'd fall for it, but the sight of the girl threw him off his balance."

She looked down. The corners of the pit were scaffold poles; there were cross- supports to keep the scaffolding in place at three points.

"He may have struck those," she pointed, "and been thrown into one of the rooms down below."

"It couldn't have been on the ground floor, because the builders have boarded it in. If it happened at all it must have been in No. 3, and the police searched No. 3. Besides, he'd be knocked out. No, the thing is a mystery and I'm not going to attempt to solve it."

"Where are you going?" She looked at his unusual costume.

"Going to town," he said evasively. "There are one or two things I have to do."

"You're quitting!" she nodded accusingly.

"Don't be a fool," he said roughly. "Why should I quit?"

"Who else should quit but you?" she demanded. "Who has more to lose? Who is deeper in the mud and blood of this rotten graft than you? What did you do to Rouch?"

He made no answer.

"You clubbed him, and you are thinking this moment that he's in the river under Long's car by Runnymede Meadows. He's not!"

The man glared at her.

"He's not?" he said in a hushed voice. "Who told you?"

"He's alive, and wasn't in the car when you turned it into the river. He dropped out near Sunningdale level crossing; he must have recovered."

A dead silence, and then:

"How do you know?" he asked.

"The garage man at Sunningdale told me when I got back there—that is why I have returned," she said. "Rouch went there to telephone to the Berkshire police. You fool, that is why they came! Why else, did you think?"

Cravel put his hand up to his bloodless lips.

He raised his eyes slowly to hers.

"You've got money, haven't you?"

"I've enough money to last, yes," she replied.

"You'd better get out of England the best way you can."

"Do you know—any 'best way'?" asked the girl, her dark eyes regarding him gravely.

"What do you mean?"

"What is the best way out for a mouse when the cat is playing with it?" she asked. "For that is where we are."

He glanced round nervously.

"You'd better get them on the 'phone and warn them."

"I've already been on the 'phone in the hall," she said. "And to whom do you think I spoke? A police officer at the exchange. Get out of England!" she

mocked him. "There is only one way out for you, Sonny, and that is the way Jackie went."

He dropped his eyes before hers. Now he pretended no more.

"I had to do it," he said in a low voice. "You know."

"I know," she nodded, "but it is the only way out for you. Where are you going?"

"I'm going round to get my car."

"Shall I tell you how far you'll travel in your car?" she asked, her hands upon her hips, standing with her back from the door.

"See here, what do you know?" he asked.

"I know there are two Berkshire policemen at each gate, and one of them is a motor-cyclist. There's no more chance of getting away from Heartsease than of getting away from hell!" she said.

She left him, a broken, fearful man, and he sat at the table biting his nails, turning over and over the might-have-beens of yesterday, and he was so planning and so rejecting each plan as fast as it was made when a voice called him from the corridor outside, and he reeled to his feet, and, flinging open the door, came face to face with Betcher Long!

CHAPTER XLII

TWO narrow strips of plaster held a small square of lint on his forehead, but beyond that and the discolouration he could see extending past the dressing, he bore no marks of a fall. In manner and flippancy it was the old Betcher Long.

"Talking about bodies," he said, "you're the worst morgue keeper ever! Had a talk with my Berkshire rival, didn't you—Inspector Thingummy from Windsor? A good fellow, but short on ideas. How does that King's evidence scheme strike you?"

The man recovered his speech at last.

"Where did you come from—!

"'Baby dear," completed Betcher. "'Oust of the everywhere into here!' And if you want to know where the 'everywhere' is, I'll tell you. It is in No. 3. And maybe I'd have died there, but the goodest of all the good Samaritans happened to be on the spot."

"Where is Nora?"

"Miss Sanders, I think you mean. She is on her way to London. What a stupid oaf you are, Cravel! Why do you imagine the inspector took you up to your room and kept you engaged in conversation for the best part of a quarter of an hour? We were getting Miss Sanders away from the house. My friend borrowed your pass-key very early in the morning, and I seized the opportunity while you were downstairs of making an inspection of your room. I'm rather glad you did not come up then, or I should have taken a course which would have defeated the ends of justice. In other words, I should have broken your neck. You know why I'm here now?"

"I can guess it," said Cravel.

He was quite calm now. Fear had dropped from him like a cloak in the presence of real danger.

"I have come to give you a faint chance. I can promise you nothing," said Betcher Long. "I want to know how Monkford was killed, and if you were not instrumental in his death, then you've a chance."

"If I turn State's evidence!" sneered the man. "And do you think, for one minute, knowing all you do, that I'm the sort of man to squeal on my friends?"

He considered for a while.

"So you had the pass-key? I didn't miss it until that damned inspector sent me down to get the key of No. 3."

"And it was while you were looking for it that I opened No. 3 from the inside and revealed myself to the astounded constabulary," said Betcher. "You will remember that the Berkshire man came in alone to search the room. He did that because he knew that there were three people hidden there, and it also gave me an opportunity of telling him what I wanted him to do."

"Where is my sister?" asked Cravel suddenly.

"She has gone away with a friend of mine."

"Arrested?" he asked quickly.

Betcher nodded.

"I think she will get off, but I rather fancy she will be the only one. Jackson Crayley might have escaped, too, but you anticipated the course of the law, judged and executed him. That was diabolical, Cravel—a most evil deed."

Cravel did not meet the stern eyes of the detective; he was looking down at the ground. Betcher saw the patch of red come back to his face, but it was not the red of shame. Suddenly he looked up.

"You want to know how Monk ford was killed, and I suppose the best thing I can do in the circumstances is to tell you."

"Did you shoot him?"

"No, I didn't shoot him."

"Did any of the others?"

"No." Again he shook his head. "He shot himself." And seeing the unbelieving smile: "He shot himself, I tell you."

"No weapon was found."

"The weapon was found," said Cravel, "only you didn't know it when you had it in your hand. You want to know?"

Betcher pointed to the door and the man walked out.

"I'll borrow that pass-key of mine," he said, and the detective handing him the key, he opened the door of Monkford's bedroom.

Cravel glanced at the yawning hole in the floor and smiled crookedly.

"You want to keep away from that hole; we nearly had an accident there this morning," he said, and Betcher Long, whose sense of humour was never entirely suppressed, could appreciate the humour of the man he intended hanging.

"The whole thing was very simple and very ingenious," began Cravel, "but like most of the simple and ingenious things of life—"

Suddenly he stopped and dropped his head.

"My telephone bell is ringing. Can I go down?" he asked.

Betcher nodded. There was no possible chance of the man's escape. The front and the rear of the house were guarded. He looked round the room, so full of poignant, painful memories. The bed was still drawn up on the far side of the cavity—how cleverly that trap had been planned for him! And here in this room Joshua Monkford had been stricken down in his health and pride, by an unknown assassin.

He heard Cravel running up the stairs and went to the door to meet him. "It was for you," said the man, a little out of breath, "I've switched it through to this 'phone."

Although the room had been partially dismantled, the telephone was still connected with a wall plug. He bent to the floor and picked it up, took off the receiver and listened.

"There's nobody here—the line is dead," he said. "Exchange often gets that way. Wake 'em up."

Betcher's finger was on the hook when a queer premonition of danger made his flesh creep.

It was too late to inhibit the action. The hook was half pressed, but he dropped the receiver a little and then...

The explosion deafened him, and he dropped the instrument to the ground and spun round, one hand to his ear. Cravel was standing bolt upright against the opposite wall, a look of comic surprise on his white face. Blood was pouring from his face, and in the centre of his forehead was a tiny red patch. He swayed slowly left and right, then fell in a crumpled heap on the ground—dead!

CHAPTER XLIII

RUNNING to the head of the stairs, Betcher called to the man who was in charge below, and together they lifted the man on to the bed. Not an eyelash flickered. Betcher felt his wrist; it was pulseless, and, tearing open the shirt, listened at the man's heart.

"But how did it happen, sir?" asked the officer.

Arnold Long did not reply. He picked up the telephone and examined the receiver. In the centre, as in all telephone receivers, was a hole about half an inch in diameter, but, unlike other receivers, it was not backed by the sensitive diaphragm and he glanced down a rifled steel tube. Unscrewing the top, the mystery was a mystery no more. The telephone receiver was in fact modelled on the pattern of a humane-killer, with a chamber for the cartridge halfway up, and the shell was fired by an electric contact made when the hook was depressed.

And then he remembered that he had both seen and handled the telephone and had actually called the office immediately after Monkford's death. Now he understood why the firework had been thrown into Nora's room, and why Cravel had distracted his attention elsewhere. It was to take away this instrument of death and to substitute the genuine telephone.

He stopped at the local police station on his way back to town to break the news to Alice Cravel. To his surprise and relief, she learnt of her brother's death with great calmness.

"I am very glad," she said simply. "It is better that he went—in that way. He must have been behind you in line with the receiver. You had a narrow escape, Mr. Long."

"Did you know he had set that trap for me?"

She shook her head.

"No, I never dreamt he could persuade you to use the telephone. I was afraid of—of something else altogether."

By the time he got back to his flat it was midday.

"Sir Godley's valet has been telephoning all morning, sir," said his servant. "He wants me to tell you that your father has returned."

"You surprise me," said Betcher.

There was still work to be done. He interrupted a metropolitan police magistrate at his lunch, and secured certain authorizations which were necessary to him, and at half-past three, accompanied by the undaunted

Rouch, who was officially on the sick list, he called at Lincoln's Inn Fields and was shown into Mr. Henry's neat office.

At the appearance of the detective, Henry collapsed. It was the first intimation he had had that Betcher Long had escaped from the trap which had been set for him.

He had not Cravel's power of dissimulation—none of his iron nerve. He sat, a limp and shaking figure, in his office chair, incapable of movement or of speech.

"Sorry to distress you. I presume that you were under the impression I had passed to my fathers? You know me, Henry, and I think you can guess why I have come. I am going to take you into custody on a charge of being concerned in the wilful murder of Joshua Monkford on the 1st of August of this year. It is my duty to caution you that what you now say may be taken down and used in evidence against you."

Still the young man did not speak. His brown eyes stared into vacancy. He was powerless to move, beyond consecutive thought, and not until the detective caught his arm and pulled him erect did his senses function.

"Where's—where is Cravel?" he asked thickly.

"Dead," said Betcher Long.

The man gazed at him uncomprehendingly.

"Dead, eh?" and then he began to chuckle. "That is funny. Sonny dead, eh? Damn' funny!"

He was rolling his head from side to side, shaking with stupid laughter, as they hurried him across the sidewalk into the waiting taxi.

CHAPTER XLIV

MISS REVELSTOKE had spent a very exasperating forenoon. She was bereft of her secretary at a moment when her correspondence was unusually large, and she had no inclination to open the pile of letters that waited on her desk. Some of the letters were registered, all were urgent, for they contained bills which had been shelved for months.

Her financial position was not a particularly good one at the moment. She had had to sell stocks at a loss; her expenses had been very heavy, and there had been certain vexatious lawsuits initiated against her. One immediate effect of Joshua Monkford's death which she could not have foreseen was that the bank had called in a very large overdraft, and had followed up the notice of its intention with a writ and the attachment of certain securities.

Among the minor troubles of that morning was the eccentric behaviour of her telephone. She had made three attempts to get through to Heartsease, and every time the number was engaged. Nor had she been any more successful when she attempted to communicate with her lawyer; and the note she had sent by hand, dispatching a maid in a taxicab, had never been delivered, though this she did not know.

In moments of distraction Miss Revelstoke had one sure refuge. She opened her work-basket and took out a piece of delicate cambric, threaded a needle, and began to sew. And she was so working when, glancing through the front window, she saw the taxicab stop and Betcher Long get out, and with him two other men, who, she did not doubt, were police officers.

The maid was hurrying along the hall to answer the bell when Miss Revelstoke intercepted her.

"I will answer the door. Go back to the servants' hall," she said, and watched the girl until she was out of sight.

She had a small pair of scissors in her hand, and the fine wire communicating between bell-push and servants' hall ran along the wall within her reach. She stretched up her arm and cut the wire, passed out through her study into the courtyard behind, stopping only to put on her hat and take her bag from the table.

Opening the garage door, she started the engine and swung the machine, not to the right, which would bring her to the front of the house, but to the left. She could, and did, slip through a side street here, and came to Ladbroke Grove near the railway station. Here she stopped the machine and went up the steps and bought a ticket for Liverpool Street. Within a quarter of an hour of her reaching that terminus, the Clacton express pulled out of the station, carrying in a first-class carriage an unconcerned woman who was systematically examining the evening papers she had bought.

She was alone in her compartment, and with the aid of a comb and a small powder bag, she managed to produce a remarkable change in her appearance.

Clacton-on-Sea is a popular resort, crowded, at this period of the year, with trippers and holiday-makers. And three times a week an excursion steamer called on its way from Tilbury, and for a very small sum it was possible to travel to Ostend, spend a night in that resort of beauty and fashion, and return on the following morning. The boat left within an hour of Miss Revelstoke's arrival, and she was one of its passengers. She carried no baggage but her umbrella and the two tightly packed pockets attached to an underskirt which she wore by day and had folded under her pillow by night.

No passports were required from the excursionists, and if they had been, Miss Revelstoke had one to produce. She walked over the cobbled streets of Ostend until she came to the broad promenade, crowded at this hour with gay humanity.

Miss Revelstoke was not gay, but was very adaptable, and the quasi-carnival in progress had a special appeal for her. She might sacrifice her dignity and wear a mask with the rest of the revellers, but there was no reason why she should. She was here on business; there were quite a number of good shops where women's clothing could be bought, and on the Place des Armes a store or two where she could acquire the dress of a well-to-do peasant woman. She hated black bonnets, but she bought one, and an old-fashioned mantle and a long, heavy skirt and spring-side boots. These, with a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles and a heavy- looking bag, were all the disguise that she needed. When she had changed in the little hotel where she took a room, and had washed some of the dye out of her hair with strong soda-water, even Betcher Long might not have recognized her.

She made her discarded clothes into a bundle, which she put under her arm, and, paying her bill—the landlady was so interested in some grievance of her own that she scarcely noticed the transformation—she walked to the marine station. On the way, she acquired a large umbrella, and this, with her bundle, completed the picture.

That night she reached Brussels and slept in a third-rate hotel, confiding to the concierge that she was a Walloon and had been on a visit to her son in eastern Flanders. Her French was perhaps a little too classical for a Walloon, but the concierge never for a moment thought that she was anything but what she pretended to be, for she tipped him meanly and refused a cab to carry her to the eastern station.

She went no farther than Liege. Here she got lodgings in a respectable part of the town and spent her time in studying the English newspapers which she purchased at the railway station, mispronouncing their titles vilely.

Cravel was dead, Alice and Henry under arrest. She worried much about Henry, for she was very fond of him, and worried more when she learnt that "the prisoner was unable to appear, and the doctors certified that he was in such a condition of mind that he might not be fit to plead."

A month passed. The preliminary hearing of the two was adjourned from week to week. And then she noticed with a frown that the Crown proposed to offer no evidence against Alice, and that she had been discharged. She had never liked Alice. Alice was a friend of Jackson Crayley, and Alice was full of scruples at times.

Madame Pontière, as she called herself, seemed likely to become a settled institution of Liege. She had obtained a police card of identity, duly filled up, and nothing seemed likely to disturb her serenity, for she learnt from the newspapers that she had disappeared and was believed to have gone to America.

And then, one morning, when she was coming out of the Cathedral, her big prayer book in her gloved hand, she came face to face with a man who raised his hat to her.

"Miss Revelstoke, I presume?" he said politely, and she walked back to the police office with Betcher Long, offering no comment, no reproach, and no threat. But Betcher felt that he was walking on those sunlit streets with stark murder personified.

The extradition proceedings were not protracted. One morning Miss Revelstoke stepped out of the SÃ¹retÃ© office accompanied by a woman police officer, and was put into a train that made a non-stop run to Brussels all too quickly. The transfer across Brussels was carried out with dispatch, and at five o'clock on a gray morning she landed at Dover. It was only then that she spoke directly to Betcher. Throughout the journey she had maintained a stony silence, and when he had spoken to her, had apparently not heard him. Now, as they walked up the platform to the train, she turned her head slightly. "How is Henry?" she asked.

"I am afraid," said Betcher, "that your son will never be able to plead."

She made no reply; not so much as a flicker of eyelid betrayed the despair in the heart of this iron-willed woman.

As the train was running through Bromley she spoke again.

"Alice squealed, of course? She was born that way—soft as butter. Not even the doctor could stiffen her."

It was the first news that Betcher Long had of Cravel's profession.

On the day "Miss Revelstoke" was sent to penal servitude for life, and the smiling, foolish young man who stood by her side in the dock was ordered to be detained during the King's pleasure, Betcher Long came into the office of his chief and handed him a written letter.

Colonel Macfarlane read it very carefully.

"I'm sorry about this, Betcher," he said. "Just when your name has gone forward for promotion. You have a record now—due to be a chief detective-inspector at twenty-seven would beat all records. But if you feel you ought to go, I can't stop you. And on the whole, I think you are right to cut out police work and turn your mind to money-making. When do you want to be released?"

"At once," said Betcher, "if that is possible."

Colonel Macfarlane put the letter into his "immediate" basket.

"I'll see what I can do about it. It may be two or three days before we can get your discharge through. but what is the hurry?"

Betcher did not answer this quite satisfactorily. He reached Berkeley Square at the moment his father's car stopped before the door, and Sir Godley and Nora Sanders got out. She had been away in the country; had not heard how the trial had ended. When, later, Betcher told her, she shuddered.

"It is very dreadful," she said in a low voice. "And I'm sorry for her—in a way."

"I suppose I ought to be sorry, too," said Sir Godley, selecting a cigar from the box on his library table. "And yet I can't be."

"Why should you be so especially sorry?" asked Nora in surprise.

The older man hesitated.

"Tell her why you should be sorry," said Arnold Long quietly.

"Because"—he lit the cigar, blew out the match and put it down with tantalizing deliberation—"because—"

The telephone bell rang at that moment. He took up the receiver and listened. Betcher Long saw a frown gather on his father's face.

"But that is extraordinary," said Sir Godley. Somebody at the other end spoke earnestly—afterward he learnt that it was the prison chaplain.

"Very good—I will come." He put down the instrument, and the eyes of father and son met. "She wishes to see me," he said shortly.

"You? Why on earth" began the girl, and saw something in his face which silenced her.

"I think I had better see her," he said, and went out of the room.

CHAPTER XLV

IT WAS a fine afternoon, but it might have been I thundering or snowing for all the baronet noticed as he drove through the outer circle of Regent's Park and came to the shabby dreariness of Camden Town.

The newspaper bills that gave the only colour to the streets said "Revelstoke Sentenced" or "Heavy Sentence on Terrible Woman," for such the reporters, with one accord, had christened her.

Sir Godley hunched back farther in his car and sighed. The Terrible Woman! It must be twenty-five—thirty years since they met face to face. The coming interview would be unpleasant—might even be fearful—but he had a strong sense of duty. He had the merchant's desire to rule a red line under her account in the place where "Finis" comes in a story-teller's tale.

And here was the end of high adventure and heartache and regretful memories such as middle-aged men have when they approach the sixties.

Holloway Prison has an appearance of mediaevalism. It has turrets, and frowning battlements, and a high central keep elongated into a tower where, it is popularly supposed, armed warders watch the walls, though this legend is not substantiated. A great forbidding gate blocks the central archway.

He found an entrance, and was admitted to the gate-keeper's lobby, and identified himself before he was handed to a bright-faced woman of thirty in the uniform of a wardress and by her conducted to a superior officer.

The acting chaplain was waiting for him, a nervous young man who had taken the place of the prison chaplain then on vacation.

Here, Sir Godley learnt for the first time that he was admitted to the prison by Home Office order, that the circumstances were unusual (with this he was in mental agreement), and that he must make no statement to the press. The last injunction seemed superfluous.

"She is in wonderful spirits," said the chaplain fervently (it was his first important prisoner, and he found Miss Revelstoke a fascinating object of interest), "and of course, ordinarily, I should not have applied to Whitehall. But she was so insistent—she has something to communicate, and as you are the president of the Bankers' Association..."

Godley Long had, to his surprise, been elected that week to fill the post rendered vacant by the death of Monkford. "I quite understand," he said.

It was queer that he should have come to Holloway Jail to soothe a fluttered chaplain.

"We will go. The interview will be private, though officially I shall be present."

He had a quick, nervous way of talking as he walked, and as they traversed the corridor he made other unnecessary explanations; unnecessary, because the banker knew exactly why he had been sent for.

They came to a hall that was garlanded with steel galleries and had little doors set at regular intervals in the distempered walls.

Miss Revelstoke occupied a roomy cell on the ground floor—he suspected, with some justification, that it was the cell usually occupied by women under sentence of death, but he made no inquiries.

The wardress snapped back the lock and pushed the door inward.

"The door will be left open," said the chaplain hurriedly. "I will remain outside."

It required now a conscious effort, and the banker made it. He was in the cell, light and airy and meagrely furnished.

The woman was standing with her back to the farther wall, very composed, her dark eyes smiling. Usually, a prisoner, on entering the jail, changes her clothing for prison garb, but she wore the dress she had on at the trial—a neat blue suit. He learnt afterward that she was to be transferred immediately to one of the women's convict establishments outside of London, for reasons which, to the authorities, seemed good and sufficient.

"Good afternoon, Godley—it was very nice of you to come."

He inclined his head slightly.

"That boy of yours is rather clever—he inherits that from his mother, I suppose?"

The studied insolence of the greeting did not surprise him. She had not altered in twenty years, was the same self-possessed, contemptuous creature he had known.

"Naturally, I never dreamt that he was a relation of Clay's," she said; "the name struck me as a coincidence. If I had known, it might have made a lot of difference to me—and to you."

If she hoped to provoke him to speech, she was to be disappointed. He nodded silently.

Age had brought changes to them both, but for all the lines and wrinkles, the sallowing of skin and hollowness of cheek, he would have recognized her.

"I want you to look after Alice and Henry," she went on calmly. "Alice doesn't interest me a great deal, and she can fend for herself. And Henry, I suppose, will be looked after. But it would make me happier to know that somebody outside—had him under his eye."

"I will do that for you," said the banker readily.

She was looking at him oddly.

"You have changed, but your voice is the same—I would know it anywhere. Life is queer, isn't it? Clay dead—and the others, and your boy brought it all about! Wherever he moved, death came."

She spoke without heat or bitterness. She might be reviewing the lives of people in whom she had no direct interest. Godley could only marvel at her self- possession.

"The police officers I have spoken to call him 'Lucky Long,' and I suppose chance played its part. Godley, why do you think I am taking this punishment so easily? Does that seem strange to you, knowing how clever a general Clay was?"

"That occurred to me," he said.

She was watching him with her dark eyes.

"He was so wonderful," she went on, "he provided for all contingencies. He would never have been hanged, only, in the struggle with your son, his coat was ripped down the back, and the dull fools at the police station provided him with another."

He could dimly understand her meaning.

"As I remember the case," he said, "nothing was found in the pockets of the coat but a few papers."

The reply seemed to amuse her.

"I want you to think about what I have said," she continued after a pause.

The chaplain's anxious face appeared at the open door. He had a watch in his hand. Obviously, her time was short.

"I want you to digest the facts. Clay would have been alive, Sonny Cravel—Jackson Crayley, all would have been living; Henry, that poor boy, would be sane and in the enjoyment of life; I should have been sewing in my room in Colville Gardens, if it had not been for your—son."

His stem eyes fixed hers.

"And Monkford—and the other people he killed. The judge and the lawyer and the wretched hangman," he said harshly. "I tell you this, Alicia, that I am thankful to God that Arnold caught this man, thankful for all he has done to bring your confederates to ruin. If you think you can deceive me, as you deceive yourself, and can arouse in my heart pity or remorse, you are wasting your time!"

She was not offended. The eyes were still smiling as she took a folded piece of paper from the little table-ledge and held it out to him.

"This will explain my point of view," she said, and as he reached out his hand to take the paper, she released her hold and it fluttered to the floor.

He took a step forward and stooped to pick it up...

It was the cry of the clergyman at the door that saved his life. The hand that she had held in the fold of her dress came up, something glittered for a space and fell, driven by all her strength. The warning cry of the chaplain made him fling himself to one side. The thin knife snicked his shoulders, and in a second the fury was struggling in his arms. She had the strength of a man. Twice the knife missed his face by a hair's-breadth and then, with a superhuman effort, she flung him back from her, tore at the lapel of her coat and put her hand to her mouth.

The cell was full of wardresses by now, but she offered no resistance, and the knife dropped with a clang to the hard floor—and then they saw that its handle had the shape of a shoe-heel. Clay had indeed been a good general, or throughout her trial that razor-sharp blade had been sheathed between the upper and lower sole of the shoe she wore.

Sir Godley, white and shaken, went back to the governor's office and was left there alone for a long time.

Presently the deputy came in. His face was black with trouble.

"Did you give the woman anything?" he asked.

Sir Godley looked at him in wonder.

"Give her anything—what do you mean?"

"Poison?"

The banker was aghast.

"Good God, no!" he said. "Is she—"

The deputy nodded.

"She is dead," he said simply; "one of the buttons of her coat is missing—I think the poison must have been in that."

And now the banker understood why the changing of Clay Shelton's coat had stopped him from cheating the gallows.

A good general—but even the best of generals make their blunders

CHAPTER XLVI

A FORTNIGHT had passed—the inquest had been a day's wonder and had been forgotten. Betcher did not see his father, but Nora Sanders was his daily companion. She needed his advice, for she had decided not to apply for probate of the Monkford will.

"The signature may have been a forgery," she said, and Betcher, who had no doubt at all on the subject, agreed.

Sir Godley came back from Bournemouth a new man, though the attack on him had shaken him more than he cared to confess. That night, when dinner was finished and the servants had withdrawn, he rested his elbows on the table and turned to the girl.

"Did you read the account of the inquest?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Arnold wouldn't let me see the newspapers," she said, "and even if he had, I shouldn't have read the account. The only thing I saw was a big placard which said: 'Banker's Amazing Story'—was that you?"

"That was me!" said Sir Godley grimly, "and the amazing story was the one I was about to tell you when I was interrupted."

"Who was Miss Revelstoke?" she asked.

Sir Godley drew a long breath, reached out mechanically for a cigar, and cut it with a hand that was surprisingly steady.

"She was my wife," he said.

CHAPTER XLVII

THE full story of the Terrible People did not come out in court, and thank Heaven it wasn't necessary that I should be in attendance. Clay Shelton was my brother—or rather, my half-brother. He was a wild, unscrupulous young man, who robbed my father and was afterward to rob me. At the time he bolted, as eventually he did when our father discovered the theft, I was engaged to a pretty Danish girl, a Miss Ostrander, who had come to England to act as governess to a neighbour of ours. I met her at a garden party, fell in love with her, and soon after my brother's departure, I married her. "

He knocked off the ash of his cigar with a grim little smile.

"I hope it will never be your experience to make the discovery which was mine. Outwardly, she was the sweetest, dearest girl you could imagine. On the day we married, she told me something that knocked me over—she was in love with my brother, and had only married me in order that the child she was expecting should not be nameless. Why she told me at all, I have never understood. I think she wanted to hurt me, or perhaps revolt me so that I should show her no marks of an affection which she confessed she loathed.

"I was a pretty good-natured fellow in those days, with a tremendously high opinion of women, and the discovery was the severest blow I have ever received. We had gone off to Copenhagen on our honeymoon, and it was on the boat crossing the North Sea that she dropped this bombshell. Three days after we reached the Danish capital, she left me. She had gone out to do some shopping, and I waited an hour for dinner, at the end of which time I received a note, delivered by hand, saying that she did not intend to return, and that she had gone where true happiness was to be found. I immediately filed a suit for divorce, citing a lover who I swore was unknown to me. The divorce was granted, and I believe they married—"

"On February 8, 1886," interrupted his son. "That was the third date carved on the cabin panel. The second was the date of his wife's birth. The fourth was the birth of Crayley, or in other words, Jackson Crayley Long."

"Crayley was the name of our family seat in Yorkshire, by the way," Sir Godley went on. "I never saw or heard of them until one day my manager came to me in a great state of mind and told me that we had paid out sixty thousand pounds on a forged bill of exchange. My first thought was, of course, to put the matter in the hands of the police. I sent for the bill, and on the back of it I saw pencilled two letters 'J. X.' They had escaped the attention of the cashier, but I knew from the peculiarity of the writing—John's X was different from any other X in the world—that the forger was my brother, and that he had put those initials there as a challenge. I paid sixty thousand pounds out of my own private fortune, and inserted an advertisement in the agony column of the Times beginning 'J. X.: This time I have honoured, but next time I will betray you.' He never attempted to catch

me again, but very soon after this began the series of international forgeries which made the name of Clay Shelton infamous.

"There was one thing about Clay Shelton that I can admire—I use that name in preference to any other—his iron restraint. He was married, he had a growing family, yet he was never with them except for three weeks in the year, when they all met at a little Danish watering-place on the Baltic. The children were brought up in Denmark, and learned to speak the language as fluently as their own. And then, as they came of age, Clay had the courage to tell them of his profession. He knew that, if they were kept together, sooner or later he might be detected, and disgrace would fall upon every member of the family.

"So he hit upon this novel expedient: each member was trained to be a distinct identity. None of them was to pretend he was related to the others, except when they met for their yearly reunion. The mother came to England and established herself as a maiden lady of independent means. The boys went to different schools under different names, and as they grew up they were entered in different professions. Crayley became a landed proprietor; they bought him a farm, which he mismanaged on behalf of the family; they bought a house on the river for him, and his job was to travel the Continent, get in touch with wealthy people, and not only procure their signatures but learn everything there was to be learnt about their private lives.

"Henry became a lawyer; a practice was bought for him, but this did not happen until after the second son, Cravel, was established as proprietor of Heartsease. In this role, not only did he turn over his capital at a profit, but a home was found for the one daughter of the marriage, Alice. Cravel was the right-hand man of his father. Jackson Crayley, as we called him, was the family fool. He bungled everything—I am telling you now what I have learnt from Arnold. He even brought about his father's death by his stupidity in passing him the pistol the moment he was arrested. His mother hated him, for some reason which even Arnold doesn't understand, and eventually was to achieve his death.

"Crayley was a good fellow who hated his work, and sought every opportunity of shaking himself free from the trammels of his horrible association and living a decent life. In this he was seconded by his sister Alice. These two were great friends. But the strong man, after his father's death, was Cravel, though it was Miss Revelstoke, as we called her, who employed the riff-raff of the underworld to carry out the work of the Terrible People; she who, in a man's garb and wearing a white wig, hired the thugs. But it was Cravel who was near at hand to kill the assassin, whether he failed or succeeded.

"Cravel had bad sight, or he would have done his own shooting. On the morning Arnold came back from Chelmsford Jail, he was shadowed by Henry on a motorcycle, Henry's task being to bomb my son's car if the marksman failed to get him. It was fairly simple, wasn't it, Arnold?"

Betcher Long nodded.

"Yes; they had a greengrocer's Ford in the cut road, and as soon as Harry the Lancer was dead, the car went on, picked up Henry and his motor-cycle, and got clean away."

"One by one they killed the men who had brought their father to his death, and Cravel was the leading spirit. He had taken a doctor's degree before his father gave him the money to buy Heartsease, and there can be little doubt that he infected the judge and organized the artistic accident which ended the life of the counsel; but it was he and Henry who lay in wait for Wallis, the hangman.

"Poor Jackson Crayley! He bungled all things. Even his heliographed signal was a blunder, for it nearly cost Cravel his liberty. And all the time, behind Cravel and behind Henry, was the directing force and generalissimo of Colville Gardens!"

"Was it due to any machinations that I became her secretary?" asked the fascinated girl.

Sir Godley shook his head.

"It was an accident that she employed you, but once you were in her house she searched to find a use for you. It was the day you visited Monkford that Miss Revelstoke decided how you were to be employed. You have told us how, when you came back, she said that Monkford had rung up and had been loud in his praise of you.

Monkford had not touched the telephone. And then this was followed up by the arrival of the mysterious ring—Monkford again. All this was intended to give plausibility to the will, which had already been drawn up by Henry and the signature forged.

"Unfortunately for the wretched woman, the ring she gave you was one which Arnold had seen on a picture of her when she was a girl. The identical setting, the identical ring. It was that clue which put him on the trail. When he came to me with a description of the jewel, I was able to tell him that it was the identical ring that I bought for the woman the first day we arrived in Copenhagen!

"Alice Long has been able to tell us what happened the afternoon before Monkford's murder. Henry and Crayley—I suspect Henry as being the prime mover— carried a story to Monkford to this effect, that Arnold had been spreading stories about Monkford and you, Nora. Monkford was naturally furious. Though he may have liked you, he had not the slightest idea of love or marriage. He was, in fact, a confirmed bachelor. But they needed this attitude of his to prevent his consulting with Arnold. That was the devilish

ingenuity of it. They knew that if he was sore with Betcher he would keep my son at a distance, and they wanted him kept at a distance until their wicked work was finished. How he died, you know. The telephone was probably the invention of Cravel, who was an ingenious workman.

"I can say honestly that I had not the slightest idea of Miss Revelstoke's identity, even after I had heard of the ring, until one night I went out to post a letter and a taxi passed me, containing an old gentleman. The 'old gentleman's' hand was resting on the window ledge. As the car passed, I caught a glimpse of the face. For a second, the dark eyes rested on mine, and I nearly dropped. Not all these years could efface the memory of Alicia Ostrander, and instinctively I knew that Alicia Ostrander and Miss Revelstoke were one and the same person. There was no reason why I should associate them, but I did.

"My cab followed the other until it reached Colville Gardens, where it turned into a back mews, and now I was certain. I had a little talk with the cabman, and asked him if he was game to follow her machine that night if it came out again. He had a new car, and when I told him who I was, he said he was not only willing, but curious. I rather fancy that he suspected me of being something of a gay dog! Though I did not anticipate that she would appear again, whilst I was talking, her car came out of the mews, and passed me so closely that I saw the face of the driver.

"And now I was absolutely sure. It was raining, and that helped a lot to make my pursuit possible, for otherwise we should never have been able to keep up with the machine. It was easier outside of town, because the roads were slippery and both cars had to move with caution. I induced the driver, after considerable persuasion, to dim his lamps, but I might have saved myself the trouble, for she did not expect the pursuit, and I doubt very much if she once looked back. We came at last to a place which I guessed was the Heartsease of which I had heard so much. The car passed through the gate, and here I left the cabman and continued my journey on foot.

"The rain was heavy now, and I took up my position under a cedar which gave me some sort of protection. The woman had disappeared into the hotel, and then I saw a man come out and take the car away, presumably to the garage. I waited and waited feeling rather a fool, and wondering what my cabman was thinking of me, and at last decided that I'd be a sensible man if I went home to my alarmed household. I was walking down the drive when two brilliant lights appeared ahead of me, and I had just time to conceal myself when a big motor-ambulance flashed past and stopped, not in front of the portico, but at the side door where Miss Revelstoke had gone in.

"I walked back, keeping well to cover, and I saw them lift out a stretcher, and one of the men, who was, I think, Cravel, lift a figure in his arms and take it into the hotel. Almost at once the ambulance wheeled round and went back the way it had come. My curiosity was piqued, and though I am no longer young, a certain amount of athletic prowess remains with me. The

front door of the hotel was dosed, but there was a portico, and on top a small balcony. Here I narrowly escaped an accident which might have proved serious. Workmen had been digging in the grounds, and I all but stumbled into a deep hole. As it was, I took a bad fall on the grass, losing my glasses and ruining irretrievably my dress suit—which, of course, I was still wearing. Five minutes' strenuous work brought me to the top of the portico and to a window which I had no difficulty in forcing.

"I realized that my curiosity could be construed as being unpardonable, and that I might possibly find myself in a very embarrassing position. But in spite of this, I opened the window and stepped into what proved to be the corridor of the first floor. I heard voices somewhere, but the place was in darkness, and I felt my way along the wall, trying every door. They were all locked. I climbed to the second floor, and then I heard somebody speaking, and at the first sound of Miss Revelstoke's voice, my mind went back nearly thirty years, and I remembered the day when she had expressed her frank opinion of me on that dancing little packet-boat! But what she was saying interested me most; so cold- blooded, so horrible was her scheme that I felt my scanty hair rising. I decided I must find a hiding place, and tried the doors on that floor, but they were all locked. Making my way downstairs, I came to the hall which opens into the lounge, as you know, Arnold. The first thing I saw, by the faint light of a night lamp which was burning on a table, was the open door of the office. I went in, dared to switch on the light, knowing that generally in the manager's office some sort of key was found, and then, by great good luck, I saw the pass- key hanging on a small hook inside the roll-top desk. I took this and went up the stairs as fast as I could. I had reached the first landing when I saw a light above, and opening the nearest door, I slipped in and stood waiting until they had gone."

Sir Godley smiled ruefully.

"My narrative might very easily have ended there. Putting out my foot, I touched nothing. I had a box of matches in my pocket, and one of these I struck, and for the first time saw the hole in the floor and in the roof above— the cavity above being covered by what looked to be the underside of a carpet. It was not very hard to guess that some structural alterations were in progress. The scaffold poles, the builders' tools which were lying in the room, all pointed to a very simple explanation.

"I had locked the door on the inside when I went in, and now I waited for a very considerable time, hoping that the three people who were in the hotel would go away. But throughout the night either one or the other seemed to be on the stairs or within listening distance. I could only speculate as to who was the unfortunate creature that had been brought in the ambulance, but I know now my speculations were exact. Hour after hour passed, and then, to my astonishment and joy, I heard Betcher's voice. As he went up the stairs, he passed within a few yards of me, and I waited, wondering exactly what would happen.

"After a long and bewildering silence, I heard steps in the room above, and his voice came clear. The hole in the ceiling of the room was, as you know, covered with carpet, and, strangely enough, the first thought I had, when I heard Arnold upstairs, was whether he would make a slip. I heard Arnold speak and Cravel answer, and then he moved toward the carpet, and I had opened my mouth to warn him, but the carpet doubled, something shot down in the dark, bounced off a piece of scaffolding, and knocked me flying. I just caught hold of him and pulled him to safety and for that reason he was not seen when Cravel looked down.

"I began to realize now that both I and my boy were in a peculiarly tight corner, and I was particularly grateful at the thought that in my hip pocket was a little automatic that I have been carrying for some considerable time Fortunately, Betcher was unconscious and could not betray his presence, and after half an hour of shuffling and walking and talking above the stairs, there was silence.

"There was no water; I could not dress his wound, but I could feel that he was not very badly hurt. I think he was more winded than wounded," Sir Godley chuckled, "and I'm rather glad he was, for by the time he had breath to speak, the people upstairs had gone. I told him who I was and what had happened, and told him about the pass-key.

"There was a window in the room, and through this I saw the car, which evidently held Miss Revelstoke and her son Henry, leave the place. Arnold's first thought was of you, Nora, and when, after a little wait, I saw Cravel driving my son's car away, we began a search of the house, starting at the bottom and gradually working up. It was a long business, and I had expected, for some reason, that you were in one of the rooms on the ground floor. I suppose it was, seeing you carried in unconscious, I imagined that it would be too much of a business to carry you upstairs.

"We had reached the first floor when he heard Cravel return, and again hid in No. 3. There was a long wait. Once Arnold thought he heard your voice, Nora, but that passed, and then Cravel went downstairs.

"'We'll risk it,' said Arnold, and up we went, and the first door we opened was that of Cravel's apartments.

"We wrapped you in a blanket and carried you downstairs, to No. 3. We could, of course, have confronted the man, but Betcher thought there was some danger, and that, in his desperation, Cravel might shoot. And then, most providentially, the Berkshire police arrived, in response to Rouch's telephone message, and it was when they came to No. 3 and Cravel had gone down to get his pass-key that Arnold unlocked the door from the inside, showing himself to the inspector and persuading him to hold this diabolical villain in conversation whilst we got you, Nora, my dear, to safety. And that's the story."

"And a darned good story, too," said Betcher. "If it has a fault, it is that it does not quite throw the high lights upon my acumen and valour, but I shall have plenty of time to impress those qualities upon you."

Nora smiled into his eyes.

Under her own hand, she had already instructed her lawyers not to ask for probate of the forged will. And really, as it proved, there was no necessity. On the day before her marriage, Sir Godley Long made a settlement upon her which startled even his son. And it took a whole lot to startle Betcher Long.

THE END