THE WOMAN FROM THE EAST

BY

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Freeditorial

The Woman from the East

I. — THE WOMAN FROM THE EAST

PROLOGUE. THE MATCH MAKER

"OVERTURE and beginners, please!"

The shrill voice of the call-boy wailed through the bare corridors of the Frivolity Theatre, and No. 7 dressing-room emptied with a rush. The stone stairs leading down to the stage level were immediately crowded with chattering chorus girls, arrayed in the fantastic costumes of the opening number.

Belle Straker lagged a little behind the crowd, for she had neither the heart non the inclination to discuss the interminable nothings which were to fascinating to her sister artistes.

At the foot of the stairs a tired looking man in evening dress was waiting. Presently he saw the girl and raised his finger. She quickened her pace, for the stage manager was an irascible man and somewhat impatient.

"Miss Straker," he said, "you are excused tonight."

"Excused?" she replied in surprise. "I thought—"

The stage manager nodded.

"I didn't get your note saying you wanted to stay off," he said. "Now hurry up and change, my dear. You'll be in plenty of time."

In truth he had received a note asking permission to miss a performance, but he had not known then that the dinner engagement which Belle Straker was desirous of keeping was with the eminent Mr. Covent. And Mr. Covent was not only a name in the City, but he was also a director of the company owning the Frivolity Theatre.

The girl hesitated, one foot on the lower stair, and the stage manager eyed her curiously. He knew Mr. Covent slightly, and had been a little more than surprised that Mr. Covent was "that kind of man." One would hardly associate that white-haired and benevolent gentleman with dinner parties in which chorus girls figured.

As for the girl, some premonition of danger made her hesitate.

"I don't know whether I want to go," she said.

"Don't he silly," said the stage manager with a little smile. "Never miss a good dinner, Belle—how are those dancing lessons getting on?"

She knew what he meant, but it pleased her to pretend ignorance.

"Dancing lessons?" she said.

"Those you are giving to the Rajah of Butilata," said the stage manager. "What sort of a pupil does he make? It must be rather funny teaching a man to dance who cannot speak English."

She shrugged her shoulders in assumed indifference.

"He's not bad," she said, and turned quickly to run up the stairs.

The stage manager looked after her, and his smile broadened. Then, of a sudden, he became grave. It was no business of his, and he was hardened to queerer kinds of friendship than that which might exist between a chorus girl and an Eastern potentate, even though rumour had it that His Highness of Butilata was almost white.

Even friendships between young and pretty members of the chorus and staid and respectable City merchants were not outside the range of his experience. He too shrugged, and went back tor the stage, for the strains of the overture were coming faintly through the swinging doors.

Belle Straker changed swiftly, wiped the make-up from her face, and got into her neat street clothes. She stopped on her way out of the theatre to inquire at the stage doorkeeper's office whether there had been any letters.

"No, miss," said the man. "But those two men came back again this evening to ask if you were playing. I told them that you were off."

She nodded gratefully. Those two men were, as she knew, solicitors' clerks who had writs to serve upon her. She had large and artistic tastes which outstripped her slender income. She was in debt everywhere, and nobody knew better than she how serious was her position.

The theatres were filling up, so that there were plenty of empty taxicabs and with a glance at the jewelled watch upon her wrist and a little exclamation of dismay, she gave directions and jumped into the first cab she could attract.

Five minutes later she was greeting an elderly man, who rose from a corner table in Penniali's Restaurant.

"I am so sorry, Mr. Covent. That stupid stage manager did not get my note asking to stay off, and I went to the theatre thinking my request had been refused. I hope I haven't kept you waiting?"

Mr. Covent beamed through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"My dear child," he said pleasantly, "I have reached the age in life when a man is quite content to wait so long as he has an evening paper, and when time indeed runs too quickly."

He was a fine, handsome man of sixty-five, clean-shaven and rubicund. His white hair was brushed back from his forehead and fell in waves over his collar, and despite his years his frank blue eyes were as clear as a boy's.

"Sit down, sit down," he said. "I have ordered dinner, and I'm extremely grateful that I have not to eat it alone."

She found him, as she had found him before, a very pleasant companion, courteous, considerate and anecdotal. She knew very little about him, except that he had been introduced about two months before, and all that she knew was to his credit. He had invariably treated her with the deepest respect. He was by all accounts a very wealthy man—a millionaire, some said—and she knew, at any rate, that he was the senior partner of Covent Brothers, a firm of Indian bankers and merchants with extensive connections in the East.

They came at last to the stage when conversation was easier. And then it was that Mr. Covent opened up the subject which was nearer to his heart, perhaps, than to the girl's.

"Have you thought over my suggestion?" he asked. The girl made a little face.

"Oh yes, I've thought it over," she said. "I don't think I can do it, I really don't, Mr. Covent."

Mr. Covent smiled indulgently. In all the forty-five year in which he had been in business he had never approached so delicate or so vital a problem as this; but he was a man used to dealing with vital problems, and he was in no way dismayed by the first rebuff.

"I hope you will think this matter over well before you reject it," he said. "And I am afraid you will have to do your thinking tonight, because the Rajah is leaving for India next week."

"Next week!" she said in surprise, and with that sense of discomfort which comes to the opportunist who finds her chance slipping away before her eyes. "I thought he was staying for months yet."

John Covent shook his head.

"No, he's going back to his country almost immediately," he said. "Now, Miss Straker, I will speak plainly to you. I happen to know, through certain agencies with which I am associated, that you are heavily in debt, and that you have' tastes which are—just a little beyond your means, shall I say? You love the good things of life—luxury, comfort and all that sort of thing; you hate sordid surroundings—er—landladies, shall I say?"

Belle shivered at the thought of an interview she had had that morning with "Ma" Hetheridge, who had demanded with violence, the payment of two months' arrears.

"Here is a man," John Covent went on, ticking off the points on his fingers, "who is madly in love with you. It is true that he is an Indian, though he would pass for an European and is admitted to the very best of English society. But against his colour and his race there is the fact that he is enormously wealthy, that he can give you not a house but a palace, a retinue of servants, and the most luxurious surroundings that it is humanly possible to imagine. He can give you a position beyond your wildest dreams and make you famous."

The girl shook her head, half in doubt, but did not reply.

"I know the kingdom of Butilata very well," mused Mr. Covent reminiscently. "A gorgeous country, with the most lovely gardens. I particularly remember the Ranee's garden—that would be you, of course, and the garden would be your own property. A place of marble terraces, of fragrant heliotrope, of luxurious growths of the most exotic plants. And then the Ranee's Court! That, of course, would he yours, Miss Straker—a columned apartment, every pillar worth a fortune. A Wonderful bathing pool in the centre, lined with blue tiles. And then, of course, you would have riding, and a car of your own—the Prince has half a dozen cars in his garage, and has just bought another half a dozen...and all the best people in India would call upon you. You would be received by the Viceroy...and all that sort of thing."

The girl fixed her troubled eyes upon the man, who sketched this alluring picture.

"But isn't it true," she said, "that Rajahs have more than one wife? What would be my position supposing he got tired of me and—"

"Oh, tut, tut! Nonsense!" said Mr. Covent, smiling benignly. "Don't forget that you are an English girl, and you would have special claims! No, no, the Government of India would not allow that sort of thing to happen, believe me."

She twisted the serviette with her nervous fingers. "When would he want—"

"The marriage ceremony should be performed tonight," said Mr. Covent. "It is a very simple ceremony, but or course quite binding."

"Tonight?" she said, looking at him in consternation, and Mr. Covent nodded.

"But couldn't I go out to India and marry there?"

"No, no," said John Covent. "That is impossible. Here is your opportunity to marry a man who is worth millions, occupying one of the most wonderful positions in India, tremendously popular with all classes—a man who loves you—don't forget that, my child, he loves you."

The girl laughed—a short, bitter laugh.

"I'm not worrying about that," she said. "The only thing that concerns me—is me."

"That I can well understand," said that grave man. "It is of course a very serious step in a girl's life, but few, I think, have been faced at such a crisis of their career with so pleasant a prospect."

He took from his pocket a note-case and opened it.

"It is a very curious position," he said. "Here am I, a very respectable old gentleman who should be in bed, engaged in a West End restaurant negotiating the marriage of an Indian Rajah."

He laughed pleasantly as he took from the case a pad of folded notes. The girl looked at the money with hungry eyes, and saw they were notes of high denomination.

"There is two thousand pounds here," he said slowly, "much more really than I can afford, although the Rajah is a great client of mine."

"What is it?" she asked.

"This was the wedding present that I was giving you," he said. "I thought of many presents which might be acceptable, but decided that after all perhaps you would prefer the money. Two thousand pounds!"

The girl drew a deep breath. Two thousand pounds!...and Butilata was not more unpleasant than the average young man. He had already treated her decently, and—

"All right," she said recklessly, and jerked on the squirrel cape which lay over the back of her chair, "Produce your Rajah!"

They left the restaurant together and drove in Mr. Covent's handsome little electric brougham to a big house off Eaton Square, and were instantly admitted by an Indian servant. She had been there before, but never so late. She expected to find the big saloon blazing with light, for here the Rajah loved to sit. She was surprised, however, to find only a small reading lamp placed by the side of the big blue divan on which he lolled.

He rose unsteadily to his feet and came towards her, both hands outstretched.

"So you have come," he said. He spoke perfect English, but there was a thickness in his speech and a glaze to his eye which suggested that he too had dined well.

He took her by both hands and led her to the divan, then turned to the waiting Englishman. The girl looked across almost appealingly to John Covent. Strange it was that in that dim light the mask of benevolence should slip from his face, and there should be something menacing, sinister in his mien. It was a trick of the light perhaps, for his voice was as soft and as kindly as ever.

"I think you're doing very wisely, Miss Straker," he said, "very wisely indeed."

Yet she seemed to detect a hint of nervousness in the voice, and for a second became panic-stricken.

"I don't think I'll go on with this, Mr. Covent," she said unsteadily. "I don't think I want to—go on with this."

"My dear child,"—his voice had a soothing quality—"don't be foolish."

The Rajah was looking down at them, for John Covent had seated himself on the divan by the girl's side, and on the Rajah's brown face was a little smile. Presently he clapped his hands.

"There shall be a ceremony," he said. "It shall be a small ceremony, my beautiful child."

A man appeared at the far end of the room in answer to his summons, and he fired a volley of sharp, guttural words at the attendant.

Half an hour later John Covent was rolling smoothly westward, leaning back in his car alone. A long cigar was between his white teeth and there was a smile in his eyes.

"Very satisfactory, very satisfactory," said John Covent.

Thus, on the 14th day of May, 1909, was Isabelle Straker, who, had she been married in a prosaic registry office, would have described herself as 'Spinster, aged 17½, married to His Highness Dal Likar Bahadur, Rajah of Butilata, by the custom of his land. She was his eighth wife—but this she did not know.

CHAPTER ONE. THE PARTNERS

In the year of grace 1919 there were two partners to the firm of Covent Brothers. John Covent had died suddenly in India, and the business had passed into the hands of his son and his nephew, the latter of whom had inherited his mother's share in a business which had been in the same family for two hundred years.

Martin Covent was a tall, well-dressed man of twenty-seven. He had none of his late father's genial demeanour. The lips were harder, the brow straighter and the face longer than the expansive representative of the firm who had preceded him.

He sat at his great table, his elbows on the blotting-pad, and looked across towards his junior partner. And a greater contrast between himself and his cousin could not he imagined. Tom Camberley was two years his junior and looked younger. He had the complexion of a man who lived an open-door life, the eyes of one who found laughter easy. He was not laughing now. His forehead was creased into a little frown, and he was leaning back in his chair regarding Martin Covent through narrowed eyelids.

"I hate to say so, Martin," he said quietly, "but I must tell you that, in my judgment, your scheme is not quite straight."

Martin Covent laughed.

"My dear boy," he said, with a hint of patronage in his tone, "I am afraid the mysteries of the banking profession are still—mysteries to you."

"That may be so," returned Tom Camberley coolly. "But there are certain basic principles on which I can make no mistake. For example, I am never mystified in distinguishing between right and wrong."

Martin Covent rose.

"I have often thought," he said, with a hint of irritation in his voice, "that you're wasted on the Indian banking business, my dear Tom. You ought to be running the literary end of a Bible Mission. There's plenty of scope in India for you if your conscience will not permit you to soil your hands with sordid business affairs."

The other laughed quietly.

"You're always suggesting I should clear out of the firm, and I should love to oblige you. But, bad business man as I am, I know the advantage of holding a position which brings me in the greater part of ten thousand a year.

Anyway, there's no sense in getting angry about it, Martin. I merely offer you an opinion that to employ clients' money for speculative purposes without having secured the permission of those clients is dishonest. And really, I don't know why you should do it. The firm is on a very sound basis. We are making big profits, and the prospect is in every way healthy."

The other did not immediately reply. He paced the big private office with his hands in his pockets, whistling softly. Suddenly he stopped in his stride and turned.

"Let me tell you something, Tom Camberley," he said, "and stick this in your mind. You think you're on a good thing in holding shares in Covent Brothers. So you are. But ten years ago this firm was on the verge of bankruptcy, and your shares would have been worth about twopence nett."

Tons raised his eyebrows.

"You're joking," he said.

"I'm serious," said the other grimly. "We're talking as man to man and partner to partner, and I tell you that ten years ago we were as near bankruptcy as that." He snapped his fingers. "Fortunately the governor got hold or that fool Butilata. Butilata was rich; we were nearly broke. The governor took his finances in hand and rebuilt the firm."

"This is news to me," said Tom. "I was at school at the time."

"So was I, but the governor told me," said Martin. "It was touch and go whether Butilata put his affairs in the hands of Covent Brothers or not. Happily the governor was able to render him a service. Butilata was staying in this country, and when he wasn't drinking like a fish he was mad keen on dancing, and fell in love with a girl—an actress at one of the theatres here, who taught him a few steps. He married her—"

"Married?" said Tom incredulously. "Is the Ranee of Butilata an English girl?"

Martin nodded.

"It was the governor who brought it about. Clever old devil, God rest him! was the governor. Of course, he had his qualms about it. He often told me that he thought it wasn't playing the game. He knew the kind of life that she was going to; but after all, she was only a chorus girl, and probably she had a much better time than you or I."

Tom Camberley made a little face.

"That sounds rather horrible," he said. "What happened to the girl?"

Martin shrugged his shoulders.

"She survived it," he replied. "They were married and went out the next week to India. The governor never saw her again, though he frequently went to Butilata. When the rajah died she came to England. She doesn't suspect that we played the part we did, or we shouldn't have her account."

Tom shivered.

"It is not a nice story," he said. "I could wish that we had made our money in some other way."

"What do you mean?" asked Martin gruffly. "We didn't make it out of the girl. It is true that the governor put himself right with the Rajah over that business."

Tom laughed again, but this time there was a little note of hardness in his merriment.

"Butilata died a comparatively poor man though his wife seems to have plenty of money—probably she bagged the Butilata pearls—good luck to her, poor girl. But if the Rajah of Butilata became poor, the firm of Covent Brothers became correspondingly rich. Did your father oblige the Rajah in any other way?"

The other shot a suspicious glance at him.

"If you're being sarcastic you're wasting your breath. I merely want to point out to you that this business, which you regard as the safest investment you could find, was re-established by a fluke. Now be sensible, Tom." He came round the desk and sat on a corner, looking down at the other. "Here we have a prospect of making a million by the use of a little common sense. I tell you, Roumania is a country of the future, and these oil properties which have been offered to us will be worth a hundred per cent more than we can get them for today—and that in a year's time."

Still Tom Camberley shook his head.

"If you want to invest money, why not approach your clients?" he said. "We have no right whatever to touch their reserves or engage in any speculation which is not to the advantage of those who trust us with their balances. I notice too from the memo you sent me that you have earmarked the balance of this very woman—the Ranee. Surely you have done that woman sufficient injury!"

Martin Covent slipped down from the table with a snort.

"Anyone would think, to hear you speak," he said sarcastically, "that we were the Bank of England or one of the big Joint Stock concerns. Can't you get it in your head that we are bankers and merchants, and being bankers and merchants, we are necessarily speculators?"

"Speculate with your own money," said the other doggedly, and Martin Covent slammed out of the office.

His cousin sat deep in thought for five minutes, then he pushed a bell. A little while later the door opened and a girl came in. He noticed with surprise that she was wearing a coat and hat, and looked up at the clock.

"Gracious heavens!" he said in comical despair. "I hadn't the slightest idea it was so late, Miss Mead."

The girl laughed. Tom noticed that she had a pretty laugh, that her teeth were very white and very regular, and that when she laughed there were pleasant little wrinkles on each side of the big grey eyes. He had duly noted long before that her complexion was faultless, that her figure was slim, and that her carriage and walk were delightfully graceful. Now he noticed them all over again, and with a start realised that he had got into this habit of critical and appreciative examination.

The girl noticed, too, if the faint flush which came to her cheeks meant anything, and Tom Camberley rose awkwardly.

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss Mead," he said. "I won't keep you now that it is late."

"Is there anything I can do?" said the girl. "I have no particular engagement. Did you want me to type a letter?"

"Yes—no," said Tom, and cursed himself for his embarrassment. "The fact was, I wanted to see the Ranee of Butilata's account."

The girl smiled and shook her head.

"Miss Drew has the accounts, you know, Mr. Camberley. I only deal with the correspondence."

Tom Camberley did know. When he had pressed the bell he had had no plan in his mind, and was as far from any definite scheme now.

"Where does the Ranee live?" he asked.

"I can get that for you," said the girl, and disappeared, to return in a few minutes with a slip of paper.

"The Ranee of Butilata, Churley Grange, Newbury," she read.

"Do you know her?"

The girl shook her head.

"All her business is done by Miss Drew who goes down to see her," she said. "Miss Drew told me that she is always veiled—she thinks that there is some facial disfigurement. Isn't it rather dreadful an English girl marrying an Indian? Would you like to see Miss Drew in the morning?"

"No, no," he said hastily. He had no desire to discuss the matter with Miss Drew. Miss Drew had complete control of the accounts, and he suspected her of enjoying more of his partner's confidence than he did. To him she was a statuesque, cold-blooded plodder with a mathematical mind, who was never known to smile, and he was a little in awe of the admirable Miss Drew.

"Sit down," he said, and after a second's hesitation the girl obeyed.

Tom walked to the door and shut it—a proceeding which, if it aroused any apprehension in the girl's mind, did not provoke any objection.

"Miss Mead," he said, "I am going to take you into my confidence. In fact, I am going to ask you to do something just outside your duty, and I am relying upon you to keep the matter entirely to yourself."

She nodded, wondering what was coming next.

"The Ranee is not one of our richest clients," he said. "But she has a large deposit account with us, and she has frequently invested money on our advice in certain speculative propositions which have been put before her. My partner and I have a scheme for buying up a block of oil properties in Rumania, and he—Mr. Covent—has told me that her highness is willing to invest to any extent."

He was doing something which he knew was unpardonable. Not only was he suspecting his partner of a lie, but he was conveying his suspicion to an employee in the firm. In his doubt and uncertainty he had blundered into an act which had the appearance of being dishonourable; for he was now within an ace of revealing the secrets of partnership, which should not go outside.

He looked round apprehensively toward the door through which his partner had disappeared. He knew, however, that Martin was a creature of habit, and by now would be driving away in his car, and that there was no fear of interruption. The girl was waiting patiently. To say that she was not curious would be to mis-state her attitude. She had need of patience, for it was some time before he spoke; but when he did speak, his mind was made up.

"I want you to do me a favour," he said, "and undertake an unusual mission. Will you go down to Churley Grange to-night and see the Ranee?"

"To-night?" said the girl in surprise.

He nodded.

"I have told you that this business is confidential, and I don't think it is necessary to emphasize that fact. I want you to see her as from me, and ask her the amount she wishes to invest in Rumanian Oils. You can say we have mislaid her letters, and that I have sent you down before the office opens in the morning so that no mistake shall be made. If she expresses surprise, and cannot recollect having authorized us to invest money in Rumanian Oils, I want you to pretend that there is some mistake and that you were not quite certain whether she was the client concerned, and use your native wit to get out of the situation as well as you can. You quite understand?"

She nodded slowly.

"I understand a little," she smiled. "But wouldn't it be better to see Miss Drew in the morning? She deals with the Ranee."

Tom shook his head.

"No, no," he said. "I want you to get down, and I don't want Miss Drew to know anything about it, nor my partner."

He looked at his watch.

"The trains to Newbury are fairly frequent, I think," he said, "and at any rate we will look up the time-table."

There was a train down in an hour; the last train back reached Paddington at half past eleven.

"I will be waiting for you at the station with a car," he said. "Here is five pounds for expenses. Now will you do this for me?"

"Certainly, Mr. Camberley," said the girl, and then, with a smile in her eyes, "It sounds horribly mysterious, but I just love mystery."

"And I just hate it," said Tom Camberley.

CHAPTER TWO. THE RANEE

Churley Grange was five miles from Newbury Station—a piece of information which Dora Mead received with mixed feelings. Fortunately there were taxis at the station, and Tom Camberley had given her sufficient money to meet any contingency.

It was dark when she turned from the main London road into a side road which bore round in the direction of Reading. Churley Grange was a Georgian mansion which stood on the main London road. It was a big house with very little land attached, and that enclosed by a high brick wall which hid the house from the road. A pair of big green gates, flanked by a smaller wicket gate, gave admission to the grounds, and these were closed when the cab drew up. Dora Mead looked for a bell, and for some time failed to find one. Then she discovered a small knob by the side of the wicket gate, and painted the same colour so as to be almost indistinguishable, and pressed it. She had to wait a few minutes before the gate was opened by a dark-looking man, evidently an Indian.

He wore a blue uniform coat with small metal buttons bearing some sort of crest. This she noticed in the brief time he stood surveying her.

"Is this the Ranee of Butilata's house?" she asked. The man nodded.

"I have some important business with her," said Dora.

"Have you an appointment?" demanded the gatekeeper. He pronounced his words so carefully that she knew for certain that he was not English, even if his swarthy countenance had not already betrayed the fact.

The girl hesitated.

"Yes," she said boldly.

"Where are you from?" asked the man.

She was about to say "London" but changed her mind.

"Newbury," she replied.

"Come in," said the man curtly and locked the door behind her.

She found herself in a beautiful garden and was conducted across a well-kept lawn to a flight of steps leading to the main door of the building. Here she was handed over to another servant, also a man, and, like the first, an

Indian. The gateman said something to the other in a low voice, and the second servant led her through a wide hall into the drawing-room.

It might have been the drawing-room of a palace. It was certainly the home of one to whom money was no object. The room was illuminated by lights concealed in the cornices, the ceiling was beautifully carved in plaster in the Moorish style, and long blue silk curtains covered its three windows. The floor was of polished parquet, on which a number of costly rugs were spread, and one gorgeous screen of exquisite workmanship, which she judged to be Eastern, was so arranged that it hid a second door in one corner of the room.

She was admiring the taste and beauty of the furnishings, when she heard a rustle of garments behind her and half turned. Instantly there was a cry, a click and the room was in darkness.

The girl stepped back in alarm.

"Please don't be afraid," said a muffled voice. "The fuses have broken."

"I could believe that if I hadn't seen your hand turn the light out," said Dora, making an heroic attempt to keep her voice steady. "Are you the Ranee of—of Butilata?"

"That is my name," said the voice. "Wait, I will get candles."

The door opened and closed, and she heard voices in the hall. Then the mysterious hostess returned.

"Why have you come here and what do you want?" she asked.

"I will discuss my business in the light," said Dora. She was shaking from head to foot, for there was something about this house and its gloomy servants which had struck a chill of terror to her soul—something now in the strange conduct of the mistress of the house which filled her with blind panic. She heard the creak of the door opening, but this time she did not see the dim light in the hall, and she knew that it had been purposely extinguished.

The hair at the nape of her neck began, to rise, her scalp tingled with terror. Springing forward, she pushed the won aside and groped for the switch. Her fingers were on the lever, when a cloth was thrown over her head and she was jerked violently to the floor. She opened her mouth to scream, but a big hand covered it, and then she fainted.

Tom Camberley paced the arrival platform at Paddington in an uncomfortable frame of mind. He had cursed himself for sending the girl on such an errand and had consigned his partner, who had aroused these suspicions and doubts in his mind, to the devil and his habitation.

When the train drew in, a little of this discomfort vanished.

The girl was in a carriage at the rear of the train, and when he saw her at a distance, he quickened his step. It was not until he was half a dozen paces from her that he saw her face in the light of an overhead electric lamp.

"My God!" he said. "What has happened?"

She was as white as death and swayed when he took her arm so that she nearly fell.

"Take me home," she whispered.

His car was waiting in the station yard, and it was not until the girl was approaching her Bloomsbury lodgings that she could find her voice to tell him of the evening.

"When I recovered consciousness," she said, "I was in the cab. The driver told me that the gateman had brought me out and said that I had fainted, and that the lady thought I had better sit in the open air for a little while until I recovered."

"You don't remember what happened after you fainted?"

She shook her head.

"Oh, it was dreadful, dreadful! I never felt so afraid in my life," she whispered.

"Did you see the Ranee?"

"No, I did not see her. Please God, I will never see her again! She is a dreadful woman."

"But why, why?" asked the perplexed young man. "Why did she do this?" Then, remembering the girl's distress: "You don't know how sorry I am, Miss Mead, that I have exposed you to this outrage. I will see the Ranee myself and demand some explanation. I will—"

He remembered that he was not in a position to demand any explanation, and that it was more likely, if this matter was exposed, that he would be

called upon to furnish some account of Dora Mead's mission to the Anglo-Indian Princess.

"Please don't speak about it," said the girl, laying her hand on his arm. "I want to forget it. I was terrified to death, of course, but now it is all over I am inclined to see the humorous side of it."

Her obvious distress belied this cheerful view, but Tom Camberley was silent.

"I don't understand it," said the girl, returning to the subject herself. "It was so amazingly unreal that I feel as if I have had a very bad dream. Here we are," she said suddenly, pointing to a house, and Tom leaned forward and tapped the window, bringing the car to a standstill.

The sidewalks of the street were deserted, and the girl shivered a little as she descended from the car.

"Do you mind waiting a little while," she begged, "while I open the door? My nerves have been upset by this business."

"Isn't your landlady up?" he asked, and she shook her head.

"This is a block of tiny flats," she said. "Mine is on the second floor."

Her hand was shaking so that he had to take the key and open the door for her.'

"I insist upon coming up to your room at any rate." he said, "to see that you are all right. You can't imagine how sorry I am that you have had this unhappy experience."

She demurred at first to his suggestion that he should go upstairs with her, but presently agreed, and he followed her up two flights, until they came to the door of the little flat. Again he had to use the key for her.

"I'll wait here while you put your lights on," he said. "Lights are great comforters."

She went inside, and suddenly he heard an exclamation of surprise. Without waiting for an invitation he followed her in. She was in a small sitting-room and was staring helplessly from side to side, as well she might, because the room had evidently been ransacked. The floor was covered with a litter of papers which had evidently been thrown from a small pigeon-holed desk against the wall. The drawers were open and articles of attire were scattered

about; pictures were hanging awry as though somebody had been searching behind them.

They looked at one another in silence.

"Somebody's been here," said Tom unnecessarily, then stooped to pick something from the floor. It was a small brass button, bearing on its face an engraved design.

Tom Camberley turned it over and over in his hand. "This crest seems familiar," he said and the girl took the button from his hand.

She looked from the button to her employer.

"It is the crest of the Ranee of Butilata," she said.

CHAPTER THREE. TO DISSOLVE A PARTNERSHIP

Dora was early at the office the next morning but there was one before her, a slim pretty girl of 26 who looked up under her level black eyebrows as Tom Camberley's secretary came into the office. She noted the girl's tired eyes and white face but made no comment until she had hung up her coat and hat, then waiting until Dora was seated at her desk she it a cigarette and swung round in her swivel chair.

If Dora saw the movement she took no notice. Martin Covent's confidential stenographer could not by any stretch of imagination be described as her friend. At the same time she always felt that Grace Drew was not ill-disposed towards her and had she been in a less perturbed frame of mind she would have responded more quickly to this unaccustomed action on the part of her fellow worker.

"You went to the Ranee of Butilata's last night," said Grace quietly and Dora looked round startled.

"Yes," she confessed. "I did. How do you know?"

Miss Drew laughed, a quiet little laugh that might have meant anything or nothing.

"She's been through on the 'phone this morning apologising for her rudeness to you. Was she very rude by the way?"

Briefly the girl related what had happened to her on the previous night and Grace Drew listened with interest.

"She's a queer woman," she said when the other had finished. "A little mad, I think."

"Have you ever seen her?" asked Dora with interest.

Miss Drew shook her head.

"She is usually veiled or else speaks to me through a curtain," she said. "Mr. Martin thinks that there is some deformity of face."

Dora nodded.

"It was dreadful, wasn't it?" she said.

"What was dreadful?" asked Miss Drew puffing out a cloud of smoke and following its flight ceilingward.

"She was an English girl," said Dora, "and was trapped into a marriage with an Indian."

"Who told you that?" asked Miss Drew quickly, and Dora laughed.

"I don't know it for certain," she said. "I do know she married the Indian and somehow I have a feeling that she was trapped."

"I don't know that I should be sorry for her," said Miss Drew after a pause. "She has plenty of money."

"Money is not the only thing," said Dora quietly. "I think you've got rather a wrong view of things, Grace."

"Maybe I have," said the other turning to her work. "Anyway you'll have to explain to Mr. Covent why you went to Newbury last night. I shall have to tell him because it was a message to him."

Dora shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know that I shall tell him anything," she said. "I simply went—" she hesitated, "on instructions."

"On instructions from Mr. Camberley, I presume!" said Grace without raising her eyes.

The girl made no reply.

Miss Drew opened a little ledger on her desk and ran through the pages with deft touch. It impressed Dora that she was doing this more or less mechanically and that her object was to gain time.

"The Ranee is coming up today," she said.

"To the office?"

Miss Drew nodded.

"She generally comes up once a month," she said. "Oh no, she never comes actually into the office but poor I have to go out and interview her in her car. Would you like to meet her?"

Dora shuddered.

"No thank you," she said promptly and Grace Drew laughed.

Tom Camberley and his partner arrived at the office almost simultaneously and Tom went straight to his room with no more than a brief nod to his secretary. Through the glass partition she saw him come out again after a few minutes, and go into his partner's room. Grace Drew was also watching, it seemed, for a little smile was playing about the corner of her mouth.

"I don't think there will be any need for me to make my report," she said without stopping her work, and her surmise was justified.

Tom Camberley walked into Martin's room and closed the door behind him.

"Hello," said Covent, "what's the trouble?"

Tom drew up a chair to the big desk and sat down.

"Martin'," he said, "I'm going to be perfectly frank with you."

"That's a failing of yours," replied the other with the suggestion of sarcasm.

"Last night," Tom went on ignoring the interruption, "I was worried about this Roumanian Oil deal of yours and particularly in reference to your scheme for applying clients' money."

"Are we going to have that all over again?" demanded Martin Covent wearily.

"Wait," said the other, "I haven't finished. I wasn't quite satisfied that you were playing the game with the Ranee of Butilata and I sent Miss Mead to Newbury—"

"The devil you did!" said Martin flushing angrily. "That's a pretty low game to play, Camberley."

"If you come to a question of ethics," said Tom, "I think the balance of righteousness is on my side. I tell you I sent Miss Mead to Newbury to interview the Ranee and she was most disgracefully treated."

Martin was on his feet, red and lowering.

"I don't care a damn what happened to Miss Mead," he said. "What I want to know is what do you mean by sending a servant of the firm to spy on me and give me away. You must have taken the girl Mead into your confidence or she would not have known what inquiries to make. The most disgraceful thing I've ever heard!"

"I daresay you'll hear worse," replied Tom coolly. "But that also is beside the question. I want to see the Ranee's account."

Neither man heard the gentle tap at the door nor saw it open to admit Grace Drew.

"You want to see the Ranee's account do you?" snarled Martin, "Well, It's open to you any time you want. And I guess you'd better see all the accounts, Camberley, because I'm not going to carry on this business on the present basis much longer."

"In other words you would like to dissolve the partnership," said Tom quietly.

"I should," was the emphatic reply and Tom nodded. "Very well, then," he said. "We can't do much better than call in a chartered accountant to straighten things out and see where we stand. I am not going to be a party to these queer business methods of yours."

"What do you mean by queer business methods?"

"You told me yesterday," said Tom, "that the firm was built up on the suffering you brought to an innocent girt. You boasted of the fact that the firm of Covent Brothers took up slavery as a side-line."

"Innocent!" laughed the other harshly. "A chorus girl!"

"So far as you and I know, that girl was as straight and as pure as any," said Tom sternly, "but if she were the worst woman in the world I should still regard the transaction as beastly."

"Remember you are talking about my father," stormed Martin.

"I am talking about the firm of Covent Brothers," said Tom Camberley, "and I repeat that you have done enough harm to this unfortunate woman without risking her money in your wildcat schemes."

Martin Covent was pacing the room in a fury and now he turned suddenly and for the first time saw Miss Drew standing by the door. There were few secrets which he did not share with this girl and possibly her presence was an incentive to his fury.

"I tell you, Camberley," he said, "that you have gone far enough. This woman—this Ranee—was business. I don't care a curse whether she was happy or unhappy—she saved the firm from going to pot. And I tell you too that if the same opportunity occurred to me as occurred to my father and I could save the firm by sacrificing a thousand chorus girls I should do so!"

Tom Camberley shrugged his shoulders and amusement and disgust were blended in his face.

"That is your code, Covent," he said, "but it is not mine and the sooner you bring in your chartered accountants the better."

Turning he left the room. There was a silence which the girl broke.

"I don't think so," she said.

"Don't think what?" asked Covent in a surprisingly mild tone.

"I don't think we'll call in the chartered accountants," said the girl coolly and helped herself to a cigarette from the open silver box.

He stared gloomily through the window and followed the girl's example lighting his cigarette from the glowing end of hers.

"If this had only happened in three months' time," he said, "when Roumanian Oils—"

She laughed.

"Roumanian Oils will have to bounce to get you out of your trouble, Martin," she said.

He sat at his desk, looking up at her from under his lowered brows.

"You know a great deal about the business of this firm," he said.

"I know enough to make it extremely unpleasant for you if you do not keep your promise to me," said the girl. "I know that you have been raiding your clients' accounts and that the last person in the world you want to see in this office is a representative from a firm of chartered accountants."

"The firm is solvent," he growled.

She nodded.

"It may be solvent, and yet it would be very awkward if the accounts were examined."

She puffed a ring of smoke into the air, a trick of hers, and then asked:

"Why not offer Mr. Camberley a lump sum to get out?"

"What good would that do?" he asked.

"It would save an examination of the accounts," she repeated patiently, "and I rather fancy Mr. Camberley would accept if the sum were big enough. At any rate, you cannot push him off until the half-yearly audit."

"That's an idea," he said thoughtfully. "If the worst came to the worst, I know a pretty little villa in an Argentine town and a pretty little girl—" he reached out his hand for hers and caught it, but she made no response.

"I think there's an idea in what you say," he went on. "At any rate, I'll see Camberley and try to get him out for a fixed sum—I can raise the money."

"I wonder," said the girl.

"You wonder what?" he asked quickly.

"Oh I wasn't thinking about the money but I was wondering whether you meant what you said, that you would sacrifice any woman for the firm's interest?"

"Any woman but you, darling," he said and, rising, kissed her. "Now, be a good girl and help me all you can. Some day you shall be Mrs. Covent, and who knows, Lady Covent?"

"Some day," she repeated.

CHAPTER FOUR. THE HAND AT THE WINDOW

Tom Camberley went back to his office and rang for Dora Mead.

"I'm leaving the firm," he said.

"Have you quarrelled?" she asked anxiously.

"Yes, I've quarrelled all right," said Tom grimly.

"Did he say anything about—?"

He shook his head.

"No, I didn't go very deeply into the question of your unfortunate adventure at Newbury," he said, "and I am as much in the dark today as I was last night. Why on earth did the Ranee treat you so badly?"

He followed the new train of thought musingly.

"I've been wondering too," said the girl. "I was telling Grace Drew and she said that the Ranee was a little mad."

Tom nodded.

"There's something in that, but it isn't a nice thought that the firm has a lunatic for a client."

He laughed.

"However, I shan't be a member of the firm morn longer," he said.

He dictated some letters, but he was not in a good mood for business and the rest of the morning was idled away in speculation. Once he walked to the window and looking down into the busy street, saw a car drawn up before the main door. It was a beautiful car and from the angle at which he surveyed it, he saw that the windows were heavily curtained. He was wondering who the owner was when Dora came quickly into the office.

"The Ranee is here," she said, "I wonder if she has come to complain—"

"The Ranee," he repeated quickly, "I should tike to see that lady."

He put on his hat, walked out of his office and down the broad stairs to the main entrance. As he reached the pavement the car was moving away. Miss Drew, bare-headed was nodding her farewell to the occupant. Tom had a glimpse of a slight figure in black behind the curtain and then a hand came

out to pull up the window. It was a curious hand and Tom looking at it gasped.

He turned to Miss Drew.

"That was the Ranee, Mr. Camberley. Have you ever seen her?" said the girl pleasantly.

"The Ranee, eh?" said Tom. "No, I have never seen her. I thought she was a young woman?"

"I think she is," said Miss Drew. "She is rather a trying woman. But what makes you think she is not young?"

"I saw her hand," said Tom, "and if that was the hand of a young English woman then I am a Dutchman."

The girl raised her eyebrows.

"I've never noticed her hands," she said. "What was curious about it?"

Tom did not reply immediately.

"Have you ever seen a native's fingernails?" he asked.

"I don't remember," said the girl.

"Well, have a good look at the next native's you see. You will find a blue half-moon on each nail and there was a blue half-moon on the nails of the hand that came to the window. I know that the girl who married the Rajah of Butilata has lived in India for some years but I'll swear that she had not lived there long enough to display that characteristic of the native."

He left the girl standing in the street looking after the disappearing car.

Many things happened in the next six hours to make the day an eventful one for Tom Camberley. He received from his partner a formal offer of a very handsome sum on condition that the partnership was terminated then and there. At first he was for refusing this and then, acting on impulse he took a sheet of paper, wrote an acceptance and sent it by hand to Martin Covent's office. He was impatient to be done with the business. There was something unwholesome in it all. A formal audit of the books would take weeks and those would be weeks charged with impatience and annoyance. And the sum was a large one, larger in fact than he expected to get as his share. He walked into Dora office and found her alone.

"Miss Mead," he said, "I'm going to make a suggestion to you and I wonder if you'll be offended."

She laughed up at him.

"I shall be very much offended if you ask me to go to Newbury again," she said.

"Nothing so interesting as that." said he. "I was going to suggest that you came and dined with me tonight," and then at her quick glance of distrust (or was it merely embarrassment?) he added quickly "I should hate you to bring a chaperone but if you like you can. I want to tell you something of what has happened today. I am leaving the firm."

"Leaving the firm?" she said in such frank dismay that a pleasant little glow went through him. "Oh no, Mr. Camberley, you don't mean that!"

"I'll tell you all about it. Will you dine with me?"

She nodded.

They dined modestly and well at the Trocadero and Tom told all that had happened that day.

"Curiously enough," he said, "the dissolution of our partnership is less interesting to me than my discovery this morning."

"Your discovery?"

He nodded.

"You remember I went dawn to the street intending to have a word with the Ranee of Butilata. The car was just moving off as I arrived and I could only catch a glimpse of the lady inside. But just as the window came abreast of me I saw a hand come out to grip the strap which raised the window. And it was not the hand of a refined English woman or even of a woman who was not refined."

"What do you mean?" asked the girl.

"It was the hand of a native," said Tom emphatically, "and I should say a native of between 40 and 50. The hands were gnarled and veined and very distinctly I saw upon the finger-nails the little blue half-moon which betrays the Easterner."

"But I thought the Ranee was—"

"An English girl?" nodded Tom. "Yes. I thought so too. Now I've got an idea that there's some queer work going on and that the so-called Ranee of Butilata is not the Ranee at all."

"What is your theory?" she asked curiously.

"My theory," said Tom, "is that the Ranee of Butilata is not in England. She is probably dead, Somebody is impersonating her for his or her own purpose. This afternoon I got her account and it is a curious one. She arrived in England two years ago and opened an account with us for six thousand pounds. I have very carefully checked the incoming and out-going money and it is clear to me that six thousand pounds was expended on the house at Newbury and its furnishing. In fact, the lady only had a balance of a few pounds when, after the account had been opened some six months, the second payment was made to her credit. Since then, however, she has been receiving money from India pretty regularly and has now a very respectable balance."

"But it's impossible that she can be anything but English," said Dora shaking her head. "Miss Drew has often told me she has spoken to her and that her English is perfect."

"But she has never seen her face?"

"No," said the girl, after a moment's thought, "I believe the Ranee is always veiled."

"You are sure she always spoke good English," insisted Tom with a puzzled frown. "I wish I could speak to Miss Drew."

"Why not call on her?" asked the girl. "She has a little flat in Southampton Street."

Tom looked at his watch.

"Nine o'clock," he said. "I doubt whether she would be home."

"She always spends her evenings at home," said Dora. "She has often told me how dull she found time in London. I think she is studying, accountancy in her spare time."

Tom hesitated.

"Do you know the address?"

"Yes," said the girl. "Kings Croft Mansions, No. 123."

"We'll go," said Tom, and called the waiter.

They took a taxi to Kings Croft Mansions and found that they were a big block of very small flats obviously occupied by professional people. No. 123 was on the fifth floor but happily there was a lift. There were in fact two lifts as the lift-man explained when they asked if Miss Drew was in.

"I don't know sir," he replied. "Sometimes she comes up this way and sometimes through the other entrance, and it's very difficult to know whether she is in or out. She hasn't been up this way for a long time."

They rang the bell at 123 and there was no response. Tom knocked but there was no reply. Accidentally he pushed the flap of the letter-box and uttered an exclamation.

"Why, the box is full of letters!" he said. "She has either a big correspondence or else she hasn't been here for days."

The mat beneath his feet felt uneven and he pulled it up. There were three on four newspapers all the same but of different dates and he took them out.

"Five days' newspapers," he said thoughtfully. "That's queer."

He went along the passage to the other lift.

"No sir," said the liftman, "I haven't seen Miss Drew for several days. She hasn't been home and sometimes she's away for weeks at a time. In fact, sir," he said, "Miss Drew very seldom stays here."

Then, realizing that he was betraying the confidence of one of the tenants of the house, he added hastily:

"She's got a little cottage down in Kent, sir, and I suppose she spends her time there in the pleasant weather."

Tom parted from the girl and went home that night more puzzled than ever.

The night for him was a sleepless one. He was up at five in the morning working in his study and at seven o'clock was in the street. The mystery of Miss Drew was almost as great as the mystery of the Ranee of Butilata. The solution baffled him and he had thought of a dozen without finding one which was convincing. His feet strayed in the direction of Southampton Street and he was within sight of the building when a mud-stained motor-car passed him like a flash and pulled up before the flats. The door opened and a girl jumped out. There was no need to ask who she was. It was Grace

Drew. She wore a long black travelling cloak and her face was veiled but he knew her.

She turned to the driver of the car and said something. Without another word the car moved on.

"Excuse me."

Grace Drew was in the hall when Camberley's hand fell on her arm. She turned with a little cry.

"Mr. Camberley," she stammered.

"I'm sorry to bother you at this hour of the morning," said Tom good-humouredly, "but I called to see you last Eight."

"I wasn't in, of course," she said hurriedly. "I've got a little cottage down in Kent. One of my friends there was sending this car up to town and suggested that I should use it."

"You're a lucky girl to have such friends," said Tom. He could see through the veil that the girl's face was white.

"Perhaps I'd better postpone my inquiries," he said, "until later in the day."

"Thank you," she replied.

He was turning away, lifting his hat, when she came after him.

"Mr. Camberley," she said, "I've no doubt you think it is very extraordinary that I should drive to this place in a motor-car."

She spoke quickly and he could sense her agitation.

"I suppose you think also that this dress," she threw aside the beautiful cloak she was wearing and revealed a costume which even to his inexperienced eye must have cost more than a month's salary, "and all that sort of thing. But perhaps you know...I wanted to keep it a secret...Mr. Covent and I are going to be married."

"I'm awfully glad," said Tom awkwardly, and felt a fool. Though he had stumbled upon an affaire of his partner and the mystery, so far as Miss Drew was concerned, was a mystery no more.

"You won't say a word will you—not for a day or two," she said.

"I will not say a word even in a year or two," smiled Tom and held out his hand. "I congratulate you, or shall I say I congratulate Covent."

He heard her laugh, a queer little laugh he thought.

"Wait and see," she said mockingly and ran up the stairs towards the lift.

CHAPTER FIVE. MARTIN GOES AWAY

He had promised secrecy but there was one person that he had to tell and that for an excellent reason. If he had felt embarrassed at the interview in the morning, he felt more embarrassed that afternoon as he strolled with Dora Mead through Green Park. It was a glorious sunny Saturday and the park was filled with people, but for all he knew or saw there was only one other but himself, and that the flushed girl who walked by his side.

"You see," he was saying, "we have an excellent precedent. I am going to start another business. Covent has been very prompt and sent me his cheque today and I have finished with the firm—and I want somebody with me, to work with me, somebody who will put my interests first."

He felt he was growing incoherent, and the girl who was surprisingly cool, for all the fluttering at her heart, nodded gravely.

"So you see dear," said Tom more awkwardly than ever, "the least you can do is to marry me right away."

"Isn't this—" she faltered, "a little quick?"

"Sudden is the word you wanted," he murmured, and they both laughed.

If the next few days were dream days for the two people who had lately been members of the firm of Covent Brothers they were hectic days for Martin Covent. Something had happened to the market. A rumour of trouble in Persia had changed the government in Roumania, shares had wobbled and collapsed and even gilded securities had last some of their auriferous splendour.

One morning Martin Covent went the round of his bank, and methodically and carefully collected large sums or money, and these had been changed in an American bank in Lombard Street into even more realisable security. In the afternoon he called Miss Drew into his private office and locked the door.

"Agnes, my dear," the said flippantly though his voice shook, "you may pack your bag and get ready for a quick move to Italy."

"What has happened?" she asked.

"I am catching the Italian mail from Genoa to Valparaiso. All the passports are in order—"

"So it has come to that, has it?" she asked, biting her lips thoughtfully.

"It has come to that," he repeated.

"And we are to be married when?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders'

"My dear girl, we shall have to postpone the marriage for a little while, there is no time now."

"You expect me to go with you—unmarried?" she asked.

He took her by the shoulders and smiled down into her face.

"Can't you trust me?" he asked.

"Oh yes, I can trust you," she replied and there was no tremor in her voice. "What train do we catch?"

"The train leaving Waterloo and connecting with the Havre boat," said he. "Will you meet me on the platform at nine?"

She nodded.

"What of your clients?" she said.

He laughed.

"I'm afraid we'll have to take liberties with their accounts. The unfortunate Ranee of Butilata is going to suffer another injustice at the hands of the firm," he chuckled.

"But suppose it is found out that you have bolted," said the girl.

"How can it be? It is Friday today, I am never at the office on Saturday, by Sunday I shall be on the boat and it will be difficult for even the most skilful firm of accountants to discover that the firm has gone bust, for a week. No, my dear, I've thought it out very carefully. You will meet me tonight at nine o'clock?"

She nodded and went back to her work, as though the firm of Covent Brothers stood still high in the stable traditions of the City.

It was all so very simple. The plans went so smoothly that it was a very high-spirited Martin Covent who stepped into the boat-train as it was moving and sat down by the girl's side. They were the only occupants of the compartment.

"Well, darling," he said exuberantly, "we're off at last. You're looking pale."

"Am I?" she said indifferently. "If I am, is it extraordinary?"

He laughed and took out of his inside pocket a bulky black leather portfolio.

"Feel the weight of that," he said putting it into her hand. "There's happiness and comfort for all the days of our lives, Agnes."

She took the portfolio and put it down between them.

"And a great deal of unhappiness for other people," she said. "What about the Ranee of Butilata. She will be ruined."

"That doesn't worry me a great deal," smiled the man. "People of that kind can always get money."

She took a little silver cigarette-case from her bag, opened it and chose a cigarette.

"Give me one," he asked and she obeyed. She struck a match and held it for him, then lit her own, and slipping away from the arm which sought to hold her, she took a place facing him on the opposite seat.

"Now you're to be good for a little while," she said, "You've got to keep your head clear."

He puffed away at the cigarette and she watched him.

"After all," he said, "the firm is fairly solvent. We have a lot of outstanding debts and I suppose they'll call in Tom Camberley to straighten out the mess. I'm only taking my own money."

"That's a comforting way of looking at it," said the girl "It seems to me that you've taken some of your customers' money too."

"And that doesn't worry me either. Now, my dear, the object of life is to find as much happiness as one can and—"

He took the cigarette out of his mouth and looked at it.

"What weird stuff you smoke, Grace," he said.

"Get up!" Her voice was sharp and peremptory and in his surprise he attempted to obey her, but his legs would not support him and it seemed that no muscle of his body was under control.

"What the devil is this?" he asked stupidly.

"Dracena," she said coolly. "You have never heard of Dracena. That is because you have never been to India."

"Dracena?" he repeated.

"It is a very simple drug. It paralyses the muscles and renders its victim helpless. In a quarter of an hour you will sink into a condition of insensibility."

She spoke in such a matter of fact tone that he could hardly grasp the import of her words.

"This train will stop at a little wayside station," she went on. "You would not think it was possible to stop a boat express but I have fixed it. One of my servants, the one who used to masquerade as the Ranee of Butilata, has arranged to board the train at that station and I have arranged to get out. My car will be waiting and I hope to be back at Newbury in the early hours of the morning."

"At Newbury?" he gasped. "Then you—you—"

"I am the Ranee of Butilata," said the girl. "I am the woman your father sold into captivity, into a life which by every standard and by every test was hell! I was sold to a drunkard and a brute and an Indian at that, to save the firm of Covent Brothers and when my husband died I had to steal the money to bring me to England.

"I did not waste my time as the wife of Butilata." she went on quietly, but with a hardness in her voice which brought a twinge of terror to the paralysed man. "I learnt bookkeeping because I thought one day I would come back to the firm of Covent Brothers and worm my way into its confidences. Butilata made no secret of the part your people played."

"You are the Ranee of Butilata! You lived a double life!" he said slowly as though in order that he should hear and understand.

"I lived a double life," she said. "By day I was your clerk. In the evening I was the Ranee of Butilata who gave parties to the countryside. My car was always waiting round the corner for me and brought me back the next morning. Once I was nearly betrayed. Dora Mead came to Newbury unexpectedly and would have recognized me but I switched out the lights and had her removed from the house. By day I slaved for you for three pounds a week, using my position to rob your firm systematically and

consistently. Yes I robbed you," she went on. "All the thousands standing to the credit of my account were transferred from the profits of the firm. I came into your business to ruin you," she said, "and to ruin Tom Camberley too, but he was a decent man. And because he expressed his pity for the poor girl who had been sent out to Butilata, I persuaded you to buy him out and save his money from the wreck."

"You—you!" hissed Covent. He made an attempt to lurch forward, but fell backward and the girl rising to her feet lowered him to the seat. She covered hint with a travelling rug and presently the train began to slow down.

It was a dark and rainy night and when the train came a stop at the little platform she slipped out, closing the door behind her and disappeared into the gloom.

They found Martin Covent at Southampton and brought him back to town to face his outraged clients and the inexorable vengeance of the law. But the stout black wallet that carried the proceeds of his robbery was never recovered and the Ranee of Butilata vanished as though the earth had opened and swallowed her.

II. — THE CHOPHAM AFFAIR

No record of prior publication under this title found

LAWYERS who write books are not, as a rule, popular with their confreres, but Archibald Lenton, the most brilliant of prosecuting attorneys, was an exception. He kept a case book and published extracts from time to time. He has not published his theories on the Chopham affair, though I believe he formulated one. I present him with the facts of the ease and the truth about Alphonse or Alphonso Riebiera.

This was a man who had a way with women, especially women who had not graduated in the more worldly school of experience. He described himself as a Spaniard, though his passport was issued by a South American republic. Sometimes he presented visiting cards which were inscribed 'Le Marquis de Riebiera', but that was only on very special occasions.

He was young, with an olive complexion, faultless features, and showed his two rows of dazzling white teeth when he smiled. He found it convenient to change his appearance. For example: when he was a hired dancer attached to the personnel of an Egyptian hotel he wore little side whiskers, which, oddly enough, exaggerated his youthfulness; in the Casino at Enghien, where by some means he secured the position of croupier, he was decorated with a little black moustache. Staid, sober and unimaginative spectators of his many adventures were irritably amazed that women said anything to him, but then it is notoriously difficult for any man, even an unimaginative man, to discover attractive qualities in successful lovers.

And yet the most unlikely women came under his spell and had to regret it. There arrived a time when he became a patron of the gambling establishments where he had been the most humble and the least trusted of servants, when he lived royally in hotels, where he once was hired at so many piastre per dance. Diamonds came to his spotless shirt front, pretty manicurists tended his nails and received fees larger than his one time dancing partners had slipped shyly into his hand.

There were certain gross men who played interminable dominoes in the cheaper cafés that abound on the unfashionable side of the Seine, who are amazing news centres. They know how the oddest people live and they were very plain spoken when they discussed Alphonse. They could tell you, though heaven knows how the information came to them, of fat registered letters that came to him in his flat in the Boulevard Haussman, Registered letters stuffed with money, and despairing letters that said in effect (and in

various languages) "I can send you no more—this is the last." But they did send more.

Alphonse had developed a well organised business. He would leave for London, or Rome, or Amsterdam, or Vienna, or even Athens, arriving at his destination by sleeping car, drove to the best hotel, hired a luxurious suite—and telephoned. Usually the unhappy lady met him by appointment, tearful, hysterically furious, bitter, insulting, but always remunerative.

For when Alphonse read extracts from the letters they had sent to him in the day of the Great Glamour and told them what their husbands income was almost to a pound, lira, franc or guider, they reconsidered their decision to tell their husbands everything and Alphonse went back to Paris with his allowance.

This was his method with the bigger game; sometimes he announced his coming visit with a letter discreetly worded, which made personal application unnecessary. He was not very much afraid of husbands or brothers; the philosophy which had germinated from his experience made him contemptuous of human nature. He believed that most people were cowards and lived in fear of their lives, and greater fear of their regulations. He carried two silver-plated revolvers, one in each hip pocket. They had prettily damascened barrels and ivory handles carved in the likeness of nymphs. He bought them in Cairo from a man who smuggled cocaine from Vienna.

Alphonse had some twenty "clients" on his books and added to them as opportunity arose. Of the twenty, five were gold mines (he thought of them as such) the remainder were silver mines.

There was a silver mine living in England, a very lovely, rather sad-looking girl, who was happily married except when she thought of Alphonse. She loved her husband and hated herself and hated Alphonse intensely and impotently. Having a fortune of her own she could pay—therefore she paid. Then in a fit of desperate revolt she wrote saying: "This is the last, etc." Alphonse was amused. He waited until September when the next allowance was due, and it did not come. Nor in October, nor November. In December he wrote to her; he did not wish to go to England in December, for England is very gloomy and foggy, and it was so much nicer in Egypt; but business was business.

His letter reached its address when the woman to whom it was addressed was on a visit to her aunt in Long Island. She had been born an American.

Alphonse had not written in answer to her letter; she had sailed for New York feeling safe.

Her husband, whose initial was the same as his wife's, opened the letter by accident and read it through very carefully. He was no fool. He did not regard the wife he wooed as an outcast; what happened before his marriage was her business—what happened now was his.

And he understood these wild dreams of hers, and her wild uncontrollable weeping for no reason at all, and he knew what the future held for her.

He went to Paris and made inquiries: he sought the company of the gross men who play dominoes and heard much that was interesting.

Alphonse arrived in London and telephoned from a call box. Madam was not at home. A typewritten letter came to him, making an appointment for the Wednesday. It was the usual rendezvous, the hour specified, an injunction to secrecy. The affair ran normally.

He passed his time pleasantly in the days of waiting. Bought a new Spanza car of the latest model, arranged for its transportation to Paris and in the meantime amused himself by driving it.

At the appointed hour he arrived, knocked at the door of the house and was admitted...

Riebiera, green of face, shaking at the knees, surrendered his two ornamented pistols without a fight.. .

At eight o'clock on Christmas morning Superintendent Oakington was called from his warm bed by telephone and was told the news.

A milkman, driving across Chopham Common, had seen a car standing a little off the road. It was apparently a new car and must have been standing in its position all night. There were three inches of snow on its roof, beneath the body of the car the bracken was green.

An arresting sight even for a milkman, who at seven o'clock on a wintry morning had no other thought than to supply the needs of his customers as quickly as possible and return at the earliest moment to his own home and the festivities and feastings proper to the day.

He got out of the Ford he was driving and stamped through the snow. He saw a man lying, face downwards, and in his grey hand a silver-barrelled revolver. He was dead. And then the startled milkman saw the second man.

His lace was invisible; it lay under a thick mask of snow that made his pinched features grotesque and hideous.

The milkman ran back to his car and drove towards a Police station.

Mr. Oakington was on the spot within an hour of being called. There were a dozen policemen grouped around the car and the shapes in the snow; the reporters, thank God, had not arrived.

Late in the afternoon the superintendent put a call through to one man who might help in a moment of profound bewilderment.

Archibald Lenten was the most promising of Treasury Juniors that the Bar had known for years. The Common Law Bar lifts its delicate nose at lawyers who are interested in criminal cases to the exclusion of other practice. But Archie Lenten survived the unspoken disapproval of his brethren and concentrating on this unsavoury aspect of jurisprudence was both a successful advocate and an authority on certain types of crime, for he had written a text hook which was accepted as authoritative.

An hour later he was in the superintendent's room at Scotland Yard, listening to the story.

"We've identified both men. One is a foreigner, a man from the Argentine, so far as I can discover from his passport, named Alphonse or Alphonso Riebiera. He lives in Paris and has been in this country for about a week."

"Well off?"

"Very, I should say. We found about two hundred pounds in his pocket. He was staying at the Nederland Hotel and bought a car for twelve hundred pounds only last Friday, paying cash. That is the car we found near the body. I've been on the 'phone to Paris, and he is suspected there of being a blackmailer. The police have searched and sealed his flat, but found no documents of any kind. He is evidently the sort of man who keeps his business under his hat."

"He was shot you say? How many times?"

"Once, through the head. The other man was killed in exactly the same way. There was a trace of blood in the car, but nothing else."

Mr. Lenten jotted down a note on a pad of paper.

"Who was the other man?" he asked.

"That's the queerest thing of all—an old acquaintance of yours."

"Mine? Who on earth—?"

"Do you remember a fellow you defended on a murder charge—Joe Stackett?"

"At Exeter, good Lord, yes! Was that the man?"

"We've identified him from his finger prints. As a matter of fact, we were after Joe—he's an expert car thief who only came out of prison last week; he got away with a car yesterday morning, but abandoned it after a chase and slipped through the fingers of the Flying Squad. Last night he pinched an old car from a second-hand dealer and was spotted and chased. We found the car abandoned in Tooting. He was never seen again until he was picked up on the Chopham Common."

Archie Lenton leant back in his chair and stared thoughtfully at the ceiling.

"He stole the Spanza—the owner jumped on the running board and there was a fight—" he began, but the superintendent shook his head.

"Where did he get his gun? English criminals do not carry guns. And they weren't ordinary revolvers. Silver-plated, ivory butts carved with girls' figures—both identical, There was fifty pounds in Joe's pocket; they are consecutive numbers to those found in Riebiera's pocket book. If he'd stolen them he'd have taken the lot. Joe wouldn't stop at murder, you know that, Mr. Lenten. He killed that old woman in Exeter although he was acquitted. Riebiera must have given him the fifty—"

A telephone bell rang; the superintendent drew the instrument towards him and listened. After ten minutes of a conversation which was confined so far as Oakington was concerned to a dozen brief questions, he put down the receiver.

"One of my officers has traced the movements of the car, it was seen standing outside 'Greenlawns', a house in Tooting. It was there at 9.45 and was seen by a postman. If you feel like spending Christmas night doing a little bit of detective work, we'll go down and see the place."

They arrived half an hour later at a house in a very respectable neighbourhood. The two detectives who waited their coming had obtained the keys but had not gone inside. The house was for sale and was standing empty. It was the property of two old maiden ladies who had placed the premises in an agent's hands when they had moved into the country.

The appearance of the car before an empty house had aroused the interest of the postman. He had seen no lights in the windows and decided that the machine was owned by one of the guests at the next door house.

Oakington opened the door and switched on the light. Strangely enough, the old ladies had not had the current disconnected, though they were notoriously mean. The passage was bare, except for a pair of bead curtains which hung from an arched support to the ceiling.

The front room drew blank. It was in one of the back rooms on the ground floor that they found evidence of the crime. There was blood on the bare planks of the floor and in the grate a litter of ashes.

"Somebody has burnt papers—I smelt it when I came into the room," said Lenten.

He knelt before the grate and lifted a handful of fire ashes carefully.

"And these have been stirred up until there isn't an ash big enough to hold a word," he said.

He examined the blood prints and made a careful scrutiny of the walls. The window was covered with a shutter.

"That kept the light from getting in," he said, "and the sound of the shot getting out. There is nothing else here."

The detective sergeant who was inspecting the other rooms returned with the news that a kitchen window had been forced. There was one muddy print on the kitchen table which was under the window and a rough attempt had been made to obliterate this. Behind the house was a large garden and behind that an allotment. It would be easy to reach and enter the house without exciting attention.

"But if Stackett was being chased by the police why should he come here?" he asked.

"His car was found abandoned not more than two hundred yards from here," explained Oakington, "He may have entered the house in the hope of finding something valuable and have been surprised by Riebiera."

Archie Lenton laughed softly.

"I can give you a better theory than that," he said, and for the greater part of the night he wrote carefully and convincingly, reconstructing the crime, giving the most minute details.

That account is still preserved at Scotland Yard, and there are many highly placed officials who swear by it.

And yet, something altogether different happened on the night of that 24th of December...

The streets were greasy. The car lines abominably so. Stackett's mean little car slithered and skidded alarmingly. He had been in a bad temper when he started out on his hungry quest; he grew sour and savage with the evening passing on with nothing to show for his discomfort. The suburban high street was crowded too; street cars moved at a crawl, their bells clanging pathetically; street vendors had their stalls jammed end to end on either side of the thoroughfare; stalls green and red with holly wreaths and untidy bunches of mistletoe; there were butcher stalls, raucous auctioneers holding masses of raw beef and roaring their offers; vegetable stalls; stalls piled high with plates and cups and saucers and gaudy dishes and glassware, shining in the rays of the powerful acetylene lamps...The car skidded. There was a crash and a scream. Breaking crockery has an alarming sound...A yell from the stall owner; Stackett straightened his machine and darted between a tramcar and a trolley....

"Hi, you!"

He twisted his wheel, almost knocked down the policeman who came to intercept him and swung into a dark side street, his foot clamped on the accelerator. He turned to the right and the left, to the right again. Here was a long suburban road; houses monotonously alike on either side, terribly dreary brick blocks where men and women and children lived, were born, paid rent and died. A mile further on he passed the gateway of the cemetery where they found the rest which was their supreme reward for living at all. The police whistle had followed him for less than a quarter of a mile. He had passed a policeman running towards the sound—anyway, flatties never worried Stackett. Some of his ill-humour passed in the amusement which the sight of the running copper brought.

Bringing the noisy little car to a standstill by the side of the road, he got down and, relighting the cigarette he had so carefully extinguished, he gazed glumly at the stained and battered mudguard which was shivering and shaking under the pulsations of the engine.

Through that same greasy street came a motor-cyclist, muffled to the chin, his goggles dangling about his neck. He pulled up his shining wheel near the policeman on point duty and, supporting his balance with one foot in the muddy road, asked questions.

"Yes, sergeant," said the policeman. "I saw him. He went down there. As a matter of fact, I was going to pinch him for driving to the common danger, but he hopped it."

"That's Joe Stackett," nodded Sergeant Kenton of the C.I.D. "A thin-faced man with a pointed nose?"

The point duty policeman had not seen the face behind the windscreen, hut he had area the car, and that he described accurately.

"Stolen from Elmer's garage. At least, Elmer will say so, but he probably provided it. Dumped stuff. Which way did you say?"

The policeman indicated, and the sergeant kicked his engine to life and went chug-chugging down the dark street. He missed Mr. Stackett by a piece of bad luck, bad luck for everybody, including Mr. Stackett, who was at the beginning of his amazing adventure.

Switching off the engine, he had continued on foot. About fifty yards away was the wide opening of a road superior in class to any he had traversed. Even the dreariest suburb has its West End, and here were villas standing on their own acres; very sedate villas, with porches and porch lamps in wrought-iron and oddly coloured glass and shaven lawns, and rose gardens swathed in matting, and no two villas were alike. At the far end he saw a red light, and his heart leapt with joy: Christmas—it was to be Christmas after all, with good food and lashings of drink and other manifestations of happiness and comfort peculiarly attractive to Joe Stackett. It looked like a car worth knocking off, even in the darkness. He saw somebody near the machine and stopped. It was difficult to tell in the gloom whether the person near the car had got in or had come out. He listened. There came to him neither the slam of the driver's door nor the whine of the self-starter. He came a little closer, walked boldly on, his restless eyes moving left and right for danger. All the houses were occupied. Bright lights illuminated the casement cloth which covered the windows. He heard the sound of respectable revelry and two gramophones playing dance tunes. But his eyes always came back to the polished limousine at the door of the end house. There was no light there. It was completely dark, from the gabled attic to the ground floor.

He quickened his pace. It was a Spanza. His heart leapt at the recognition. For a Spanza is a car for which there is a ready sale. You can get as much as a hundred pounds for a new one. They are popular amongst Eurasians and wealthy Hindus. Binky Jones, who was the best car fence in London,

would pay him cash, not less than sixty. In a week's time that car would be crated and on its way to India, there to be resold at a handsome profit.

The driver's door was wide open. He heard the soft purr of the engine. He slid into the driver's seat, closed the door noiselessly and almost without as much as a whine the Spanza moved on.

It was a new one, brand new...A hundred at least. Gathering speed, he passed to the end of the road, came to a wide common and skirted it. Presently he was in another shopping street, but he knew too much to turn back towards London. He would take the open country for it, work round through Esher and come into London by the Portsmouth Road. The art of car stealing is to move as quickly as possible from the police division where the machine is stolen and may be instantly reported to a 'foreign' division, which will not knew of the theft until hours after.

There might be all sorts of extra pickings. There was a big luggage trunk behind' and possibly a few knick-knacks in the body of the car itself. At a suitable moment he would make a leisurely search. At the moment he headed for Epsom, turning back to hit the Kingston By-pass. Sleet fell—snow and rain together. He set the screen-wiper working and began to hum a little tune. The Kingston By-pass was deserted. It was too unpleasant a night for much traffic. Mr. Stackett was debating what would be the best place to make his search when he felt an unpleasant draught behind him. He had noticed there was a sliding window separating the interior of the car from the driver's seat, which had possibly worked loose. He put up his hand to push it close.

"Drive on, don't turn round or I'll blow your head off!"

Involuntarily he half-turned to see the gaping muzzle of an automatic and in his agitation put his foot on the brake. The car skidded from one side of the road to the other, half turned and recovered.

"Drive on, I am telling you," said a metallic voice. "When you reach the Portsmouth Road turn and bear towards Weybridge. If you attempt to stop I will shoot you. Is that clear?"

Joe Stackett's teeth were chattering. He could not articulate the 'yes'. All that he could do was to nod. He went on nodding for half a mile before he realised what he was doing.

No further word came from the interior of the car until they passed the racecourse; then unexpectedly the voice gave a new direction:

"Turn left towards Leatherhead."

The driver obeyed.

They came to a stretch of common. Stackett, who knew the country well, realised the complete isolation of the spot.

"Slow down, pull into the left...There is no dip there. You can switch on your lights."

The car slid and bumped over the uneven ground, the wheels crunched through beds of bracken...

"Stop."

The door behind him opened. The man got out. He jerked open the driver's door.

"Step down." he said. "Turn out your lights first. Have you got a gun?"

"Gun? Why the hell should I have a gun?" stammered the car thief.

He was focused all the time in a ring of light from a very bright electric torch which the passenger had turned upon him.

"You are an act of Providence."

Stackett could not see the face of the speaker. He saw only the gun in the hand, for the stranger kept this well in the light.

"Look inside the car."

Stackett looked and almost collapsed: there was a figure huddled in one corner of the seat—the figure of a man. He saw something else—a bicycle jammed into the car, one wheel touching the roof, the other on the floor. He saw the man's white face...Dead! A slim, rather short man, with dark hair and a dark moustache, a foreigner. There was a little red hole in his temple.

"Pull him out," commanded the voice sharply.

Stackett shrank back, but a powerful hand pushed him towards the car.

"Pull him out!"

With his face moist with cold perspiration, the car thief obeyed; put his hands under the armpits of the inanimate figure, dragged him out and laid him on the bracken.

"He's dead," he whimpered.

"Completely," said the other.

Suddenly he switched off his electric torch. Far away came a gleam of light on the road, coming swiftly towards them. It was a car moving towards Esher. It passed.

"I saw you coming just after I had got the body into the car. There wasn't time to get back to the house. I'd hoped you were just an ordinary pedestrian. When I saw van get into the car I guessed pretty well your vocation. What is your name?"

"Joseph Stackett."

"Stackett?" The light flashed on his face again. "How wonderful! Do you remember the Exeter Assizes? the woman you killed with a hammer? I defended you!"

Joe's eyes were wide open. He stared past the light at the dim grey thing that was a face.

"Mr. Lenten?" he said hoarsely. "Good God, sir!"

"You murdered her in cold blood for a few paltry shillings and you would have been dead now. Stackett, if I hadn't found a flaw in the evidence. You expected to die, didn't you? You remember how we used to talk in Exeter Gaol about the trap that would not work when they tried to hang a murderer and the ghoulish satisfaction you had that you would stand on the same trap?"

Joe Stackett grinned uncomfortably.

"And I meant it, sir," he said, "but you can't try a man twice—"

Then his eyes dropped to the figure at his feet, the dapper little man with a black moustache, with a red hole in his temple.

Lenton leant over the dead man, took out a pocket case from the inside of the jacket and at his leisure detached ten notes.

"Put these in your pocket."

He obeyed, wondering what service would be required him, wondered more why the pocket book with its precious notes was returned to the dead man's pocket.

Lenton looked back along the road. Snow was falling now, real snow. It came down in small particles falling so thickly that it seemed that a fog lay on the land.

"You fit into this perfectly...a man unfit to live. There is fate in this meeting."

"I don't know what you mean by fate."

Joe Stackett grew bold: he had to deal with a lawyer and a gentleman who, in a criminal sense was his inferior. The money obviously had been given to him to keep his mouth shut.

"What have you been doing, Mr. Lenton? That's bad, ain't it? This fellow's dead, and—"

He must have seen the pencil of flame that came from the other's hand. He could have felt nothing, for he was dead before he sprawled over the body on the ground.

Mr. Archibald Lenton examined the revolver by the light of his lamp, opened the breech and closed it again. Stooping, he laid it near the hand of the little man with the black moustache and, lifting the body of Joe Stackett, he dragged it towards the car and let it drop. Bending down, he clasped the still warm hands about the butt of another pistol. Then, at his leisure, he took the bicycle from the interior of the car and carried it back to the road. It was already white and fine snow was falling in sheets.

Mr. Lenton went on and reached his home two hours later, when the bells of the local Anglo-Catholic church were ringing musically.

There was a cable waiting for him from his wife:

"A Happy Christmas to you, darling."

He was ridiculously pleased that she had remembered to send the wire—he was very fond of his wife.

III. — THE HOPPER

No record of prior publication under this title found

NO.707, TRESSILLIAN ROAD is a house of mystery. It is a small house, dwarfed by its neighbours. The windows are grimy, the blinds seldom drawn. A patch of rank vegetation stood before the house and at the rear, visible over a high wall, was a most untidy garden, littered with old boxes and other rubbish through which in the summer time hollyhocks struggled aloft with great courage and perseverance.

Nobody knew anything about Professor Allicott except that he owned the house and lived alone—a bent old one with long, grey hair that overhung the collar of his faded frock-coat. He hired no servants, went marketing every morning, carrying a straw bag to contain his modest purchases, and sometimes went out at nights, a small black bag in his hand, returning in the small hours of the morning. A strange old man with a face that was lined and yellow, he had the habit of talking to himself, though nobody had ever heard the subject of his solitary discourse.

Sometimes strangers called upon him, rough, evil-looking men, and would remain with him for hours. In what science or art he held professorial rank none knew. He owed nobody, he paid everybody; he lived without offence. Such an epitaph, supported by truth, might well betoken the perfect man.

It was in the summer of 1924 that there began that series of "baffling mysteries" (to quote the novel description given to these events by the Kentish Times & Greenwich Observer) which was to excite and irritate Scotland Yard, and furnish material for printed columns of speculation.

There appeared in the south of London a burglar whose modus operandi was simple. He could climb like a monkey and leap dangerous chasms like a stag (the newspapers called him the "Hopper" in their bright, imaginative way, because he operated from Wimbledon to Blackheath, taking in the more palatial mansions of Brockley en route, and hopped from one district to another in the most bewildering and disconcerting way). Scarcely a week passed but some new exploit was recorded, the air was tremulous with the wail of some new victim. Picture diagrams illustrating the method by which he "gained ingress" to the bedrooms of the plutocracy were a constant feature of the Press. Dotted lines showed his progress from balcony to rain-pipe; black splodges showed where the policeman should have been but wasn't; a cross marked the window which the burglar had forced.

"It is no less than a scandal," said the Kentish Times & Greenwich Observer hotly, "that these crimes should go undetected. If the police cannot discover the miscreant who perpetrates these foul deeds, let them stand aside and allow eminent criminologists who are quite willing to help and have more brains in their little fingers than most people put together!"

This paragraph appeared under the heading "Local Chit Chat", which was contributed by Miss Elsie Bourne (her pen-name was "The Watcher") the favoured niece of the proprietor of the paper. Lower down in the column appeared the significant note:

"A very pleasant and instructive evening was spent last Thursday at St. Michael's Hall, when Mr. Ferdinand Fearliss, the famous criminologist of Tyrwhitt Road, gave a lecture on 'Finger Prints: their fallacy and usefulness in the detection of criminals'. Amongst those present was the Mayor of Deptford. Mr. Fearliss made many scathing remarks about the failure of the police in recent crimes which were loudly applauded."

Notwithstanding the ambiguity of the concluding sentence, the lecture was a great success; indeed, Mr. Fearliss never failed to arouse local enthusiasm, for he was admittedly the only man in Brockley to whom the secrets of the underworld were as an open book.

It is something of a handicap to be born with the name of Fearliss; and when to that generic and heroic title your godfathers M. or N. add the name of Ferdinand, the handicap is one under which the greatest and the most self-possessed might very well stagger. Or even dither.

Ferdie Fearliss lived at No. 405, Tyrwhitt Road. Brockley. He was a young gentleman of independent means, for he was an orphan, and his father had left him the accumulated savings of many years. He might have got married, as his aunt Agatha, an elderly lady who was at once his housekeeper and chaperone, often suggested timidly, or, as Elsie Bourne explained to him more boldly and at more frequent intervals. Elsie, in addition to her journalistic duties, was his principal assistant rather than his fiancée. She was pretty and slim and had large blue eyes and a mass of chestnut hair, but if Ferdie ever observed these outstanding attractions he never signified the same in the usual way.

He himself was inclined to shortness and thinness. He had black hair which rolled in a mane over his collar; he had the pale face of an intellectual and the roving eye of a lunatic. He was both immodest and mysterious. But it was generally agreed by his servants that he had a headpiece.

Elsie Bourne came to tea one day, and Aunt Agatha sat in a corner in her capacity as chaperone.

"Marriage, of course," said Ferdie, "may appeal to most people, but with my mission and my career—" he shrugged his thin shoulders, closed his eyes, put his finger-tips together as he lounged hack in the deep and dreamy armchair.

Elsie's hand stole towards the milk jug. There was in her eye for a second a hint of murderous assault. With an effort she recovered command of her homicidal tendencies.

"That's all right, Ferdie, dear," she said the last word with considerable emphasis. "I understand all about your mission and your career. But uncle is getting quite nasty, and asked me why I haven't an engagement ring. I'm not going to throw myself at the head of any man."

Ferdie made a weary gesture, his eyes still closed.

"But if you really are keen on me..." She waited expectantly.

"My dear Elsie," said Ferdie, in a tired voice, "fame is knocking at my door: shall I turn aside for the giddy festivities of matrimony? The Mackenzie's house was robbed last night by the Hopper. A tall man with a sandy moustache and dark glasses was seen in the vicinity of the premises by a patrolling constable at half past ten. He was afterwards seen riding a bicycle down Loampit Hill at a quarter past eleven. These facts I have established beyond any doubt—"

"It was in this morning's paper," said Elsie cruelly.

"I had already established them," responded Ferdie Fearliss, in a quiet tone of reproach. "The matter is engrossing my attention for the moment, and although the thickheaded police have refused my assistance, I think I shall he able to spring a few surprises upon these gross and unimaginative men. Aunt Agatha, will you give me my moustache book?"

Aunt Agatha sat up with a start.

"I'll get it," said Elsie recklessly, and went to a shelf at the corner of the room where a number of exercise books were placed side by side.

"Thank you, dear." said Ferdie.

He opened the book she threw at him, and turned leaf after leaf. They were decorated with pictures of criminals, cut from a Sunday newspaper—a wonderful collection which had occupied four years of his life.

"Obviously this is the man." He pointed to a villainous-looking creature with long, sweeping moustaches. "Albert Henry Jones. I have already notified the police, and they will naturally take all the credit."

"What did they say?" asked Elsie, fascinated.

Mr. Fearliss sighed.

"They say that Albert Henry Jones has been dead for two years, but that of course is the merest camouflage. If it is not Albert Henry Jones"—he turned the leaves rapidly and pointed to another newspaper monstrosity—"It is Charles James Smith. I have already advanced that theory to the police."

"Anti what did they say?" asked Elsie, breathlessly.

"They said that Charles James Smith has been in Dartmoor for three years and was not likely to be out again for nine. The merest subterfuge. Yet in a sense they are right. The Hopper is none of these. I could lay my hand upon the master criminal at this moment."

Elsie said nothing.

"At this moment," he repeated.

"I heard you," said Elsie.

"Now, as to matrimony..."

Again he relapsed into his semiconscious state, and again his finger-tips danced against one another.

"I have yet to pull off my first big case. I have had, of course, minor successes—the affair of the market basket you will remember?"

Elsie remembered.

"The strange case of the man with the eye-glasses you will recall?"

Elsie recalled.

"The mystery of the four orange pips you will recollect?"

Elsie recollected impatiently.

"They are the merest trifles. What I have to get at is the Big Thing. When that is done"—he smiled faintly—"your dearest hopes will be realised."

Elsie did not hit him on the head with the milk jug nor did she box his ears or commit any other assault upon him. She liked Ferdie too much to kill him. She was too fond of him to push him under a train. But there was no doubt at all that he was a very trying young man.

For Ferdie was the greatest criminologist in Brockley. He had taken up the problem of criminal investigation where another great man had put it down. He had a laboratory in the conservatory at the back of the house, which was a riot of test-tubes, microscopes, porcelain dishes and delicate scales. Those who saw the laboratory for the first time thought that Ferdie was an amateur photographer, but this was not the truth.

He sipped his tea, put down the cup and rose, threw back the tails of his frock-coat—for he wore a frock-coat—and, strolling to the window, stared out.

"Tonight I shall get the Hopper," he said unexpectedly, and added: "Allicott."

"Who?"

Even Elsie was startled.

"Professor Allicott—the most sinister figure in Brockley," said Ferdie, a thrill in his voice.

"That poor old man?"

Ferdie smiled.

"He has been under my observation for some time. I have watched his comings and goings. Tonight is Thursday—every Thursday he goes out. The house is empty. Tonight I am going to unbare the mystery of 707, Tressillian Road."

Elsie gasped.

"Do you mean," slid asked hollowly, "that you are going to—break into the house?"

Ferdie nodded, and from his complacency it might have been gathered that burglary was a commonplace incident of his everyday life.

"I shall want some assistance—can I count on you?"

She stared at him in dismay.

"On me? To help you burgle, Ferdie?"

"In the interests of justice," he murmured.

She drew a breath quickly.

"Yes. When are you going to start?"

"At about eleven," said Ferdie, reaching for a cigarette. "I shall keep the house under observation, and as soon as the old man's out of the way you will hear a low, soft whistle. Upon hearing that, you will join me at once in the front garden. I will have a kit of tools, and in a few seconds we shall be inside."

"Where shall I be?" she asked.

"You wilt come in too," said Ferdie. "I shall have a revolver: you have nothing to fear."

"I mean, when I hear the low, soft whistle?" she asked practically. "Why not let me be with you before the whistling starts?"

He shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"As you will," he said. "But you may be sure I have some reason for my caution."

At eleven o'clock that night two damp, cold persons stood in the garden of a house opposite No. 707, watching the retreating figure of Professor Allicott. It was raining gently, as it had been raining all the afternoon, and Ferdie's teeth were chattering, though possibly this was due to the cold. "Keep calm," he whispered in a sepulchral tone. "Now for the deed!"

They tiptoed across the deserted road together, passed through the gate, the creak of which sent a nervous shiver of excitement down Ferdie's spine, and came to the large front window. The blinds were drawn, he saw, when cautiously he flashed his lamp upon it. From his pocket he produced what had once been a shaver's carry-all, and from this he extracted a thin instrument, which looked like a glazier's diamond, and in fact was. He took from his pocket a fly-paper, carefully doubled in two, though not so carefully that it had not dribbled into his pocket, to his annoyance; and, placing the business face of the fly-paper upon the window, he manipulated the cutter.

It should have been the work of a second to have made a hole in the glass, but unfortunately Ferdie was no glazier, and it was not until Elsie took a hand that the aperture was made, the piece of glass taken out, and Ferdie's hand went in and groped for the catch of the window.

"Mind you don't cut yourself," warned Elsie, but Ferdie sneered in the dark.

The sash rose noisily.

"I ought to have oiled it," he muttered, and climbed on to the sill.

Elsie followed, without his assistance, as she reminded him rather tartly, but Ferdie was too tense to notice her reproach.

In the rays of his lamp there was revealed a shabby little dining-room; a table covered with papers and a crazy bookshelf.

"The papers can wait," said Ferdie darkly.

He opened the door and went into the uncarpeted passage. All the rooms in the house save one were unlocked, and revealed nothing incriminating.

"Stand back," said Ferdie, and flung himself against the locked door.

The door flung him hack again.

"Did it hurt?" she whispered.

"Don't ask questions," was his snarling reply. "I've forgotten to bring my instruments—what a fool I was!"

She had taken possession of the lamp when he dropped it, and now she was examining the door.

"There's a key in the lock," said Elsie, and turned it. They passed into a small room, which was remarkable in that a bench ran round three sides, and on each bench was a number of small glass cases, apparently empty.

"There is something sinister here," said Ferdie breathlessly, and, turning the knob of one of the cases, he opened it, sending the light of his lamp inside.

For a second there was a tiny gleam of light midway between the top and bottom of the case, and then it disappeared.

"What was it?" asked the girl.

"I don't know. The reflected gleam of diamonds," suggested Ferdie, and lifted up the cottonwool which covered the bottom.

But there were no diamonds here; nor, when he examined the next case. was there no much as the scintillation of jewellery beneath the cottonwool.

Seven, eight, nine cases they opened—and found nothing. "I am baffled—I admit it," said Ferdie bitterly. "The case deepens in mystery every second."

"Perhaps there's nothing to find?" suggested the sensible girl. "And won't there be an awful bother about this window being broken?"

"Tush!" said Ferdie.

He closed the cases, went out and locked the door carefully behind him, and made his exit by the window through which he had come in. And then, as he dropped into the garden, he had a shock. A man was standing halfway up the garden path, and at the sight of Ferdie in the dim light of a street-tamp he started.

"Hullo! Who are you?" he asked.

Ferdie Fearliss did not lose his presence of mind.

"I thought I heard a burglar there and went in to see," he said. "Er—my friend and I," he added, for Elsie was now standing by his side.

"The dickens you did!" said the stranger. "I thought I heard a burglar too. It is extraordinary how jumpy everyone has got about this infernal Hopper."

He was a very pleasant young man and they walked down Tyrwhitt Road together, and parted almost friends at the door of Ferdie's house.

"Fortunately," said Ferdie, when they were safe inside, "he is a stranger hereabouts and he will give no evidence against us, though I think I have an answer to the police if they push their unimaginative noses into this business."

He took from his pocket a bundle of letters and laid them on the table. Aunt Agatha was sleeping peacefully in a corner of the room, oblivious to their presence.

"I brought these documents away: they may throw some light upon the old man's movements," said Ferdie, rubbing first his arm and then his leg.

Curiously enough, at that moment Aunt Agatha rubbed her arm and then her ankle. It was something more than a coincidence that at that instant Elsie was scratching her elbow furtively.

"We may have brought more away from that place than we imagine," said Ferdie, thoughtfully, as he scratched his leg.

He opened one of the letters. It was written in an illiterate hand. It was headed "Doncaster Show Ground" and began:

"Dear Perfesser, I'm very sorry to say that your performing fleas are not taking as they used to—"

"Performing fleas?" he said, in a deep bass voice.

The girl was reading over his shoulder.

"I admit you train 'em better than any other perfessor in the country, but they won't attract the public they used to, and the public don't have any interest in them owing to the pictures..."

Elsie stared at her chief.

"We have brought away more than we thought!" she said mechanically. "Much, much more!"

The next morning was published the first authentic portrait of the Hopper. Elsie called the criminologist to the 'phone.

"It was the man we met after we burgled the flea-shop," she said coarsely. "I hope he has his share of the swag, Ferdie."

Ferdie shrugged his shoulders—he had been shrugging he shoulders all night, but for quite another reason.

IV. — THE LOVE OF DEVIL HAMPTON

No record of prior publication under this title found

DEVIL HAMPTON went out of France by the back door, and with good reason. He and Dandy Lew had dynamited the best steel vault in France, the concrete bedded vault of the Credit Doulonaise at Lyons, and had lifted two million francs in negotiable money. This came on top of the smashing at Biarritz, where two men had scientifically administered ether, by the open method, to the night-watchman of the Bank of Dax and had retired in good order with something equivalent to £30,000.

Devil Hampton knew when he had enough. His shrewd brain summed the chances and weighed all possible contingencies. Six months' work in France and Belgium had netted him close on two hundred thousand profit. And to this the capital that stood to his credit in the Bank of Paraguay, the value of his real estate in the Argentine, his beautiful house outside Rio, his investments in South African mines—he was a very rich man.

Also he had been so often to the well that there had arisen in his mind a superstitious fear of the shattering which is inevitable to the pitcher which is too frequently handled. He did not class among his possessions or give any capital value to the "Star of the Zenith" though she was the fastest yacht in the world and was fitted and furnished as few millionaires' yachts are fitted.

Invaluable asset as she was, and would be, she was scrap iron so far as saleable value was concerned.

Sitting before the café of the Coq d'Or in the big sun-bathed square of Montpellier, he put the situation clearly to Dandy Lew.

"Lew, it's the wide sea for ours," he said. He went on in faultless French, because it impressed the waiters less than the use of an alien tongue. "De Boissy suspects me over the Biarritz affair, he publicly announced that I had planned the smashing at Lille, he'll be after me now."

"Have you seen the Journal du Midi?" asked Lew.

The man with the strong clean-shaven face nodded.

"They think it was the work of Poullet." said Lew. He was a little man with a carefully trimmed moustache and a certain daintiness of dress which earned him the sobriquet.

"They'll be chasing Poullet all up and down France, we've got the goods on board the yacht by now—what's the hurry?"

Hampton drew thoughtfully at his fragrant Havana.

"All that about Poullet is a fake," he said calmly; "it is intended to put us off our guard. Say, I've seen the Lyons papers this morning. They've got the same dope—only in smaller type! Do you know what that means? The police think we are hiding in the Midi. It is a bigger story for Lyons than for Montpellier, isn't it? And yet they feature it here. Why? So that it will catch our eye and put us to sleep."

Dandy Lew stroked his little moustache doubtingly.

"I'm going to do up that bank at Toulouse," he said, "on the fourth of the month they send down the pay for the troops. You go along—this is my round."

Hampton looked at him with pursed lips and shook his head.

"Go along!" urged Lew earnestly, "get away as soon as you like: leave me to cut out—I'll get away with all that's goin'."

"I'd rather you didn't, but if your mind is set on it, why just do as you think best."

He clapped his hand to call the waiter, paid the score and the two men arose.

Hampton was head and shoulders taller than his companion. Square shouldered, slim waisted, there was no mistaking the athlete under the well-fitting clothes. For a man of his build his hands and feet were absurdly small. The former were long and delicate, as white as a woman's and as beautifully shaped. The face, for all the hardness about the eyes when in repose, was good to look upon, though the jaw was too square.

His history does not matter: very few people knew it exactly. The police history was erroneous and confused because this diabolically clever man had three distinct identities, none of which were associated in the police annals.

He had a fourth which never found its way into the rogues' gallery; that was the identity of Senor Gilvesto de Coberts, that blameless Spanish gentleman who lived in semi-seclusion outside Rio and took his vacations in Europe.

Devil Hampton was known as the most expert of bank robbers, a daring and resourceful man. He it was who chartered Lord Carridale's steam yacht in a vain attempt to rescue Gilly Cleak, the English bank robber, from Devil's Island. The attempt cost him £40,000, and ended in a failure. More than that, it ruined him financially, but such was his extraordinary code that he regarded the monetary loss as nothing compared with his failure to succour the little cockney who had once befriended him.

Some thought his expensive attempt was in his mind when he said good-bye to Lew.

"Now don't you make a mess of this," were his final instructions; "if you think there's any danger, break for Vigo. I'll he there waiting for you."

"You trust me," said the little man confidently. "I'll put ten per cent on the dividends between now and Sunday."

Dandy Lew went across country without mishap and reached the naval port. He was always inclined to impetuosity and rushed the job without adequate preparation.

He was shot dead by a concealed watchman and the news was in the Journal du Midi on the Sunday morning.

"This is where I travel," said Devil Hampton, "poor little Lew!"

He left Montpellier with five cabin trunks innocently charged for he believed that the best disguise was ostentation. Also luggage gives a man excuse for leaving railway stations by exits which are not usually employed by passengers.

He crossed the Spanish border and reached Barcelona. Here he rested for a week watching the French papers carefully.

He had other interests besides the purely selfish desire to keep himself out of the hands of the police. There were passengers and hotel lists published in the Paris Herald, and these he searched with diligence.

He found that which he sought on the second day.

Mrs. and Miss Van Houten of St. Paul, Minn. had been amongst the visitors staying at the Bristol. Another paragraph informed him that Mrs. and Miss Van Houten were amongst the passengers by the Sud-express. A little smile softened his face; it was with such a smile that he had read of Lew's death—a smile which was a little tragic and wholly pitiful.

The Sud-express might mean Biarritz, it might mean Spain. Then he discovered that the paper was three days old.

He folded it away and addressed himself to the pressing question of his own well-being.

The Spanish papers were a thought too urgent in this affair of "El diablo Hampson", as they called him. The Heraldo published a portrait of him, with a heavy moustache, and so re-touched for publication that it would have taken an expert guess worker to connect the retiring and commonplace tourist who promenaded Barcelona's Galles and Palaces Baedeker in hand, with the ruffian whose cut was prominently displayed in the Press.

He moved west, taking a fast train to Madrid. A douro, judiciously offered, secured him a carriage to himself, and with his feet resting on the opposite seat he had time to think...and he thought of a good many things.

Of Lew...he would welcome that death, so quick and so merciful...of the 'Star of the Zenith', built for the Russian Government at the time of the Russo-Japanese war, a spurious 'yacht' with destroyer engines, destroyer accommodation, and destroyer speed. The English Government had seen through the ruse and had placed an embargo upon the vessel, forbidding, in the terms of a neutrality proclamation, the departure of what was virtually a ship of war...Devil Hampton had bought her through his Belgian agent, and it was entered in Lloyd's list as being the property of Mr. Vandersteon of Antwerp...and he thought of a girl and stifled a sigh...she was too young, too sweet, too good...yet if he could put back the clock...if he could roll up the life he had lived and begin anew...if he could wipe the slate clean—if...if...if, ah! to the devil with 'ifs'!

He sank into an uneasy slumber as the train jog-trotted through Taragona. The whirr of the wheels, the monotony of the 'D'r—d'r' as they caught the rail ends, the drone and sameness of the noises set his head nodding.

He half awoke when the lamps were lit but fell asleep again...if...if...if...

Then he awoke...wide awake. Somebody was bending over him. He simulated drowsiness and thrust his hand lazily into his pocket. Gripping the butt of his Browning and slipping down the safety catch with his thumb, he opened his eyes suddenly.

Two laughing eyes were watching him, two eyes, dark and deep. Two slim hands were flung impetuously out to him and he grasped them, his heart throbbing painfully.

"Why, Mr. Franks!" The girl's voice was a ripple of laughter. "Fancy meeting you here in Spain!"

It was no dream then. She was no spirit lady evolved from the hum of wheels and the drone of travel. The hands that lay momentarily in his were warm and quick, the face flushed with excitement was dearest reality.

"Miss Van Houten!" he stammered and sat up.

Her mother was there, amusement visible on her fine face.

"Ethel caught sight of you on the platform at Saragossa," she said, "and though the conductor did not want us to come in she insisted—and I'm afraid we've spoilt your sleep."

He shook his head, still looking at the girl.

"It is the very disturbance that I desired most," he said. They were on their way back to Madrid en route for Cherbourg and home.

"We hoped to do Spain thoroughly," said Mrs. Van Houten, "but poppa's getting lonesome, I guess, for he has cabled us to come back."

They were sailing on the Tympania from Southampton on the following Saturday.

Soon Mrs. Van Houten was dozing and the girl and he were left to their own devices.

She was full of her trip, of the coming voyage, of the school friends she would meet, of her purchases, her sight-seeing. He let her talk, content to watch the pretty face, the quick nervous gestures, to listen to the bubbling effervescence of her low laughter.

"And do you know, Mr. Franks"—this was his 'respectable' name—"after you left us in Brussels there was a terrible bank robbery—on the Rue de Leopold...and they say it was an American. My, the police interviewed Mother about you, so of course we told them that you were a Californian gentleman on your vacation. And they wanted to know whether there were any peculiarities about you..." she laughed gleefully at the recollection; "and do you know what I told them?"

He shook his head.

"Well, I just told them—" she stopped and her face went pink in the smokey light of the car, "no, I won't tell you;" her laughing eyes challenged him to

press her. "It will make you so conceited…I told them that you had beautiful white hands, but oh, so strong!"

He threw up his head with a little chuckle. So that was how De Boissy knew—it was amusing.

"Did I do wrong?"

She was serious now. There was a note of hardness in that laugh.

"You couldn't do wrong if you tried," he said softly. He held out both his hands and took hers.

"You couldn't do wrong," he went on. "Please God, you will never do anything in your life which will cause you a moment's unhappiness."

He hung his head over the hands he held.

"Bright little life," he said, and his voice was husky, and the lips she could not see in the shadow trembled; "never let there come a cloud to darken it, or a sorrow to chill it."

It was the nearest thing to a prayer that had passed his lips for many years.

The girl's eyes filled with tears. There was a strange solemnity in his act, reverence in his words.

Then his head went up and he met her troubled look with a quizzical smile.

"Well?" he said.

"Were you ever at Harvard?" she asked.

"No."

The answer was blunt, uncompromising, his face in an instant had become a mask of almost wooden stolidity. "Nor at Yule, nor Princeton, nor any of those funny old colleges?"

"Why do you ask?"

She shook her head.

"Sometimes you talk like—like my brother. There's a sort of Harvard manner about you."

"You're dreaming," he said banteringly. "I think you ought to go to sleep—we reach Madrid in four hours."

She protested that sleep was the least of her requirements, but he insisted. From the rack above he took down a soft mohair rug and a rubber cushion.

She snuggled down to her mother who woke to settle herself, and, tucked away in his rug, she slept.

He took a cigarette from a golden case and lit it furtively. He slept no more that night.

At four o'clock in the morning the train pulled into Madrid, and he roused them, and descending from the train, helped with their luggage.

"We are staying at the 'Paris'," said Mrs. Van Houten, "we shall be in Madrid for one day—won't you come and dine tonight?"

He shook his head smilingly.

"I'm afraid I shan't be able to come," he said.

The girl's undisguised disappointment hurt him but he was firm.

"I am going on to Vigo," he explained, "and I have to see some people here tonight."

"Shan't we see you again?" asked the girl, almost in tragic dismay.

"In America—perhaps," he said.

"But we must see you," she insisted. "Why I was just counting on seeing you today."

He hesitated.

"Perhaps," he said, "I could call for you and take you to the Prado. You would like to see the pictures?"

She clapped her hands.

"Oh, that would be fine...come to lunch...no? Then come after lunch, will you? Oh, thank you, Mr. Franks!" She was cheerful to a point of exhilaration as she drove away from the terminus and over the back of the victoria waved him a gay farewell.

He took himself to the Hotel de la Pais, and enjoyed the little drive, for this was Madrid at it best, when the east was grey and the air was fragrant with the scent of roasting coffee. At two o'clock he called for her, and she came to meet him radiantly beautiful, he thought, in spotless white.

For two delicious hours they strolled through the galleries of the Prado. He had more than an amateur's appreciation of pictures, and the half hour they spent in the Valesquez room was a memory which never departed from Ethel Van Houten.

All Madrid was driving in the Passeo de Tecoletas when they left the Prado, and he conveyed her along the tree-shaded avenue which at this hour of the day was crowded.

The tiring journey of the previous night, the reaction from the excitement of a morning's shopping and an afternoon spent in the company of one who was more to her than any being in the world, had brought a fit of depression.

She was paler than usual and looked very frail and delicate. He found a table under the trees at one of the open air cafes and ordered iced coffee.

"It was lovely," she said with a sigh.

"You look tired," he said anxiously, eyeing her.

Her answer was an unconscious one. She put her hand across the table and he pressed it.

"Little girl," he said, dropping his voice till it hardly rose above a whisper, "I want to say something to you."

Her eyes met his, for one moment they looked and dropped, she with heightened colour, he white and worn.

"Ethel," he murmured, "I want you—I want you to forget me, I shall not see you again, Don't look like that, for God's sake! Dear, I want you to take what I say as if it were God's own truth. I love you, dear, I love you, as I have never loved any human being in my wicked life."

She sat there, trembling from head to foot, her big dark eyes fixed on him, her lips parted; no need for him to ask how big a place he filled in her heart.

"You are only a child—a sweet innocent child," he went on, "and I am not so great a villain..."

He shook his head helplessly, a sob rose in his throat. He ground his teeth in contempt at his weakness.

"In years to come," he said, "when you are a woman—you will know what I am doing—what I am losing—what a sacrifice I am making."

She found her voice.

"Why?" she breathed.

"That you will know also," he said. "I tell you of this—I didn't intend to at first—because I want you to help me."

She nodded, wide-eyed, dazed, with a dull heavy pain at her heart.

"Make it easy for me—to go," he said. He was speaking quickly now for time was precious. "I am leaving Madrid this evening...think of me...no, no, no! Forget me, dear!"

"I will pray for you," she whispered. "Will you—will you sometimes—pray for me. I shall want...so much help, darling," her hand gripped his in the passion of her sorrow. "I—I don't know why this must be—but you are so much wiser than I shall ever be...will you pray?"

He bent his head.

"I'm not a praying man, honey," he said huskily, "but I'll try."

He rose stiffly like a man cramped and signalled a fiacre. He handed the girl in before he was reminded by a breathless waiter that he had not paid his bill.

As he paid, he was conscious of the fact that he was being watched. Sitting in the shadow of the trees was a military-looking man whose eyes were following his every movement.

The creepy sense of being the subject of this espionage Came to Hampton. His instinct, as keen as that of a wild animal's, warned him of his danger.

He jumped in after the girl and directed the driver.

As they turned into the broad thoroughfare which leads to the Puerta del Sol he drew a round and shining object from his pocket and examined it.

The girl smiled faintly.

"Why, that is a mirror," she said, lifting her wet eyes to his.

"Cute, isn't it?" he said cheerily, "that just shows the vanity of the man."

He replaced the tiny convex glass in his pocket. He was being followed. Over his shoulder the mirror had shown the military watcher hail a cab.

He parted from the girl in the hall of the hotel.

"I shan't see your mother," he said.

He avoided her eyes, and strode rapidly through the thronged vestibule out of the side entrance of the hotel. He called a cab.

"The North Station," he said.

There was a mixed train on the point of departure. He had to take the risk.

It was fortunate for him that the detective had only the vaguest suspicion as to his identity, more fortunate that at the moment when he was about to open up inquiries which would inevitably have led to Hampton's arrest, his attention should be distracted by a very commonplace stabbing in the Plaza.

Devil Hampton was well on his way to Vigo, had, indeed, passed Valladolid before the Madrid police received a wire from Barcelona describing the wanted man as being "suspected of residence" in Madrid.

By this time a concerned Mrs. Van Houten and a girl who cried herself to sleep on the wagon-lit had also left the capital.

The police picked up the thread at Hampton's hotel. An unceremonious examination of his luggage proved nothing, save that here was a traveller fastidious in the matter of underwear.

But in his hurry Hampton had left behind a small leather case containing three beautifully fashioned tools. There was a steel and diamond bore which is valued at £300 by the curator of the police museum where it now reposes, a steel saw tempered by the Japanese brothers Okuri, and a key difficult to describe, since it was in itself a complicated little machine.

The wires hummed north, south, east and west, Bilboa, Malaga, Cadiz, Algeciras, Irun, Lisbon, Vigo—wherever ship touched or frontier was crossed men searched diligently for Frank Devril Hampton alias Loumaix, alias Goedhoep, alias Devil Hampton.

The chief of the police at Vigo galvanized to sudden energy by the reward which seemed as likely as not to come his way, made a systematic search of the town. Then he boarded every ship in the bay, except the high masts.

Senor Don Antonio Valencia was the captain and a most openhanded man. At ten o'clock the night following Hampton's flight from Madrid, the police of the capital dispatched a wire to the chief at Vigo.

At a quarter to ten that same night Hampton's train was held up by a washaway—there had been torrential rains in the afternoon.

In the course of his journey he had observed that the lowest of the telegraph wires bore, every kilometre or so, a little enamel tag and on inquiring in the idle way which passengers have, he was informed at one of the stations where he had stopped for dinner that the tagged line was the 'Madrid direct'. He was a patient man elsewise with a little luck he could have shot the line through. But that would have aroused the sleeping devils of officialism which slumbers beneath every uniformed jacket.

When the train had pulled up in the night, he had first learnt the nature of the trouble and the reason for the stoppage. Then he descended swiftly in the drizzling rain and climbing the slippery side of the cutting vanished in the darkness.

He came back in a few minutes, his gloves scratched and the knees of his trousers frayed where he had gripped the humming pole.

The police message from Madrid got as far as Valladolid where the operator reported "Line down 20 kilometres east of Vigo."

The Spanish authorities moved with surprising alacrity. There was a cruiser off Bilboa, an admiralty wireless sent it at full speed to head off the 'Star of the Zenith'—but the grey hull was under the horizon before the Spaniard came up and only a trail of dun coloured smoke on the rim of the sea showed where the yacht had crossed the cruiser's track at dawn.

But the French fleet was manoeuvring in the Atlantic and the French desired the body of Devil Hampton very badly.

The French Government sent a message flicking out over the large seas and Hampton picked it up with his own wireless and profited, for the message was not in code.

He changed his course, heading due north, struck the bay in a pleasant mood and circled gradually westward. He burnt oil fuel and had sufficient to last him for the voyage.

His dago crew he could trust up to a point, his skipper—a South American—was a man bound to him by self interest.

Greatly daring, he ran into the English Channel picked up the Start light and swerved round due west again. Three days of manoeuvring brought him to the South of Ireland. He tapped the wireless from Brow Head, but learnt little, then he set a course for the North American coast, intending to travel thus for five hundred miles before he changed his direction to south west.

On the third night he was steaming abreast of a great liner—she lay five miles to the north. He went into his little cabin and examined his chart; there, neatly marked in various coloured pencils, were the positions of the North American ferryboats. He compared them with a list and then his lips twitched. He came out to the buckling deck of the little steamer and with his glasses looked long and earnestly at the liner. It was the Tympania and carried, as he knew, all that was dearest to him in the world.

A dramatic meeting this, with five short miles of water-way between them. A turn of the wheel, an acceleration of speed, and he could be alongside—a plausible explanation and he could put his foot upon her decks—a step or two and she would he in his arms, her dark hair blowing in his face.

He put his glasses down and stood with clenched hands and tense face looking at the great steamer. There was none to see him for his meagre crew was below; none to see him as he gripped at his chest as though he could tear out the roots of his anguish. He came back to his cabin and caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror about the washstand. It was the face of an old man.

Pitching the glasses on to the bunk, he pressed a bell. A negro servant answered.

"Tell Captain Valencia to come."

The door opened a little later and the small South American who commanded the Zenith came in. Hampton motioned him to a seat and pulling open a drawer took out a box of cigars.

"Tony," he said, "the old way has got to be given the go-by, this journey we shan't be able to take theZenith into Rio, or to Uruguay; when we reach within striking distance of Rio harbour you hoist out that motor boat, fully provisioned and I'll be the nature lover cruising lonely."

"What you do wiz the sheep?" asked Antonio without any show of emotion.

"Sink her or sell her—you can work her over to the Islands—take in oil from one of the depots: there's a ton of it buried on the Uruguay coast; either pay off the crew and put 'em ashore." he continued, his head on his hands. "Yes,

that's it—pay 'em off, then take her out into deep water, you and Osborne, Marky and Concordo—get the other motor boat out and join me at Rio."

The captain nodded. He was going out when he turned with a slip of paper in his hand.

"You reads that?" he asked. "Marky* picka him upa."

[* Marky is the name for the Marconi operator.]

Hampton read:

"Cleveland Queen to Tympania. Passed waterlogged derelict at 6 p.m. (here followed the exact position) Drifting southward. Repeat to everybody."

"Keep your eyes open for that, Tony," said Hampton; "a dispute with a derelict wouldn't be of any use to us."

"I watcha heem." said Tony confidentially.

Left to himself Hampton flung himself down on the broad settee under the porthole. His cigar, tilled up to the level of his eyes, glowed and deadened in the gathering darkness.

Once he rose and went out on deck and scanned the distant liner now represented by a few tiny twinkling points of light. It gave him a sense of comfort to know that she was so near. Back in his cabin, with his rug flung over his legs, he analysed this tragic situation of his. Was it love? Yes, it was that. What was love...? Sacrifice? He had sacrificed something of his happiness, if needs be he would give his life. The sea darkened as he lay there, thinking, planning, dreaming. He was a rich man: there was happiness of a kind ahead of him. He made a wry face at the thought of it. He found himself dozing as he had on a railway journey through Zaragoza—then he remembered something and went red.

He slipped from his bunk and with clasped hands and bent head knelt by its side.

"Whatever force it be," he prayed, "that rules the destinies and the lives of men and women, take to your especial protection this child and keep her innocent and pure through the years."

He stayed thus, his hands on his arms, till a knock at the door aroused him.

He got up quickly and switched on the light.

"What is it?" he asked harshly.

"Marky gotta this."

Hampton snatched the paper from the man's hand. His face blanched as he read it.

"S.O.S. Tympania struck derelict sinking, send help Lat. 40. 3 Long—"

"Great God!" he swore between his teeth.

The South American looked at him with an expressionless face. Hampton brushed past him and slipped out on to the deck.

"Whata you do?"

Still Hampton did not speak.

"No sheep near I think only us."

Hampton came stumbling back into the cabin like a drunken man. His shaking fingers brushed the chart, and compared.

"There's nothing with wireless within a hundred miles," he said.

He brought his clenched fist down on to the table.

"Go up to your bridge, Tony, I'll be with you in a minute." He picked up the half-smoked cigar that lay on the table by the bunk and lit it, drew on his overcoat and made his way to the bridge.

"She senta up the rocket just now," said Tony.

Hampton nodded.

"Send the Zenith to her," he said.

His voice was steady, the glow of his cigar in the darkness even and regular.

"What!"

The Italian's voice was a scream.

"You wanta go to Devil's Islan'—yes?"

"Put the helm over, Tony."

"I be—!"

"Put the helm over, Tony."

The black muzzle of Hampton's Browning pressed against the ribs of the other.

"I'll send you to Hell quicker than by limited express," said the calm man with the pistol, "if you don't jump."

The wheel spun and the Zenith heeled over.

"You are mad," said the skipper, speaking in Italian, "we cannot carry a thousand passengers."

"We can carry the women and children," mid Hampton, "and tow the boats with the men."

"Oh, you're mad, you're mad!" sobbed the other.

"I guess so," said the other.

Leaning against the bulwark, the stub of a cigar in the corner of his mouth, his hands thrust into his overcoat pockets, he drew nearer and nearer to the sinking steamer.

It carried twelve hundred souls, and one that was more precious to him than all the rest put together.

It carried also His Royal Highness, the Duke of Canterbury, on his way to take up the Governor Generalship of Canada. To which fact would you imagine Devil Hampton owed the free pardon which followed the rescue?

Not to the salvation of Ethel Van Houten, I should imagine. Governments are unimaginative, but there might be a human man in the chancellories of Europe, who, reading the story, foresaw the day when the dark-eyed child of St. Paul, Minn gave him a separate and lovely reward.

V. — THE SILVER CHARM

First published in The Story Teller (Cassells), June 1910

ANGEL, ESQUIRE, has a little office at Scotland Yard, which is partly fitted as a laboratory and partly as a tiny museum; here he keeps strange drugs and, in glass-stoppered vessels, curious withered-looking plants with uncanny properties. There is a faint spicy odour everlastingly present in Angel's office, which is something between the fragrance of freshly cut cedar wood and cloves.

When the King of Kantee came to England on his ceremonial visit he was lionized by London society, and being a man of some European education, speaking English with a peculiar intonation, be became remarkably popular. The popularity of King O'fwa had the natural result of making lam rather insufferable. One day the officials at the Colonial Office, showing him the sights of London, brought him to Scotland Yard, and in due course he swaggered into the Colonial Department and favoured Angel with a patronizing nod.

"Ah, varry nace," said the King amiably.

"King," said Angel, speaking the peculiar drawl of the Kantee people, "there is that here which is not so pleasant."

The native's insolent eyes met Angel's, and he dropped them before the calm gaze of the white man.

"Shall I show you," said Angel, still speaking in the vernacular, "something that the Kings of the Kantee people see but seldom?"

He stretched out his hand and reached down a bottle; he carefully removed the stopper and drew forth a tiny pencil of cotton-wool, which he as carefully unrolled. Inside was what looked like a dried twig, and the King smiled contemptuously.

"Is it magic?" he asked, and held out his hand.

The dry twig lay on the King's palm, and he smiled again.

"This is wood—a twig," he said. Then he sprang back with a scream, his eyes wide with terror, and the little twig fluttered to the ground. Angel picked it up tenderly and wrapped it about with cotton-wool, the King all the while, with his back against the wall, shaking in abject fear.

"Is it good magic?" asked Angel carelessly; and the King's voice was hoarse when he answered:

"It is good—master!"

Later came a fussy official, sorely puzzled and inclined to be querulous.

"Look here!" he said—he was a Permanent Under-Secretary—"Mr.—er—Angel: about this nonsensical thing you showed his Majesty—we are inclined to think that you overstepped the mark, sir—overstepped the mark." He was a little pompous and a little ruffled, and wholly disagreeable.

Angel inclined his head respectfully, but said nothing.

"Mr. Secretary begs one to say," said the official impressively, "that it is against all our conception of the—er—system for a great department like Scotland Yard, or or for any of its officers, however important or unimportant they may be, to practise—er—trickery and chicanery of the kind you introduced to his Majesty, and—er—in fact, we think it extremely reprehensible, sir!" And he looked his disapproval.

"Mr. Masser," said Angel quietly, "you and I do not view 'his Majesty' with a common eye. The last time I met the King he was dining off a relative who had displeased him; the last time I addressed the King was through the twisty rifling of a point three-naught-three. The little twig I showed him was a gentle reminder of an obligation."

The official was still more puzzled.

"One of these fine days," Angel went on calmly, "there will come a man to the King carrying such a stick as I showed. It may be Meta, the Congo man, or it may be Abiboo, the Kano man, or it may be the boy, Jack Fish, from the Monrovian coast; but, whosoever it is, you may be sure that when they meet the King will surely die."

How Angel, Esquire, came to know of the blood brotherhood that was sworn on the Oil River in '84 I do not pretend to know, nor do I know how he came to possess the fetish-stick—which answered the purpose of the broken sixpence so dear to the lads and lassies of civilization who plight their troth. But the circumstances of the passing of the King of the Kantees is well known, and forms the subject of Blue Book (Africa—Kantee Protectorate) 7432-07. They found the King's body in the royal hut one morning; the knife was an N'Gombi knife, and the rope about his neck was Kano made, but the method of the killing was distinctly Monrovian, so the chances are that all three survivors of the blood-pact of '84 took part in the assassination.

The part the fetish-stick played in the fortunes of at least three unimaginative City men is now well known; they were three stout, comfortable underwriters, as far removed from mysticism as is Clapham Common from Bassam.

They do not come into this story. The outward and visible sign of their connection with the blind witch-doctor is the service of plate that adorns Angel's sideboard, but there were days when the man of Basaka held their suburban fortunes in the hollow of his hand.

In response to communications from Sir Peter Saintsbury, Angel travelled to Liverpool to see the millionaire controller of the Lagos Coastwise Line.

There is no need to describe Sir Peter. The story of his meteoric career is common property. A short, swarthy man, With closely-cropped grey hair and black, piercing eyes, the years he lived on the Coast have tinted his face a dusky brown. There are people less charitable who ascribe another cause for his copper-coloured skin, people who point to his thick lips and the curious bluish tint of his fingernails.

Sir Peter plunged straight into the matter in hand.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Angel, because my board has decided that there is some other influence at work beside that which may be vaguely termed 'bad luck'."

Angel duly noticed the thickness of the voice, and went over to the side of the uncharitable.

"You are referring to the wreck of the Kinsassa?" said Angel.

"Yes; and the Noki and the Bolobo," said the great ship owner impatiently; "three ships in one year, three new ships, captained by some of my best men, and every one of them gone ashore in exactly the same spot."

The detective nodded gravely.

"The last was under the command of Ryatt, the most competent skipper in the mercantile marine—a young man who knows his business from A to Z. It was he who discovered the shoal passage into Sierra Leone that cuts off fifty miles of sea travel on the homeward voyage."

"The weather?" asked Angel.

"Here's the log," said Sir Peter. He took from a table a discoloured volume, and opened it. "Here you are: 'nine-fifteen—course W. by W.N.W.—sea smooth—wind light S.W.—no Fog'."

"Was that the correct course?" asked Angel.

"Yes. I have compared all logs and questioned the commodore, and, of course, the Board of Trade has verified it."

"And she went ashore at nine-thirty?"

"Yes; and, apparently, if you will look at the log again, there was no sign of the shore."

"H'm." said the detective. "You couldn't very easily miss it—high, upstanding cliffs and mountains, so far as I remember. Who was at the wheel?"

"A reliable quartermaster; the chief officer was on the bridge, and the captain himself was in his cabin, which is practically on the bridge. He had left word to be called at eleven o'clock, at which hour he intended changing the course a point or so west."

"And then?" questioned Angel.

"And then," said Sir Peter, with a despairing gesture, "before anybody seemed to realize the fact, the ship was close inshore—from what the chief officer said the mountains appeared as if by magic from the sea. The officer rang the engines astern, and put the helm over hard to port, but before the 'way' could get off the steamer, she was piled up. The captain was on the bridge in an instant and stopped the engines—in fact, put them ahead again, for he was afraid of backing off into deep water and foundering."

"And she is a total wreck?" queried Angel.

"Absolutely; hard and fast on the teeth of a bad reef, with a hole in her you could drive a coach through." The ship owner walked to his desk and took from one of the drawers an oblong box.

"This is the peculiar feature of all the wrecks," he said with a frown, and opened the box. What he took from it were three little crosses made of untrimmed wood and lashed across in their shapes by native grass string.

Angel's eyes lit as he saw them, and he stretched out his hand eagerly to take them.

"Whew!" he whistled, and handled them gingerly.

"On every wreck," said Sir Peter impressively, "we found one of these things roughly nailed to the foredeck."

Angel's face was grave as he carried the little emblem to the window; then:

"You had better let me investigate this matter on the spot," he said. "When does the next Coast boat leave Liverpool?"

"One left yesterday," said the ship owner; "another leaves In a fortnight."

"That will be too late," said the detective decisively. "I can get a Union-Castle boat to Teneriffe, and pick up your ship there; to make sure, cable your people to hold the boat for my arrival."

He stopped at the door.

"You know the Coast?" he asked.

The great ship owner frowned.

"Yes," he said slowly; "as a young man I lived on the Coast—I was not always a wealthy man."

Angel nodded.

"Have you offended any of these people in any way?"

Sir Peter shrugged his shoulders.

"There in no need to bring me personally into the matter," he said gruffly.

"I see," said Angel, Esquire.

A fortnight later he landed at Sierra Leone and transhipped to a coasting vessel en route for Bassam.

Going into Cabinda to land sixteen barrels of raw spirit for the civilization of Portuguese West Africa, the "second" of the Imagi found time to express his disgust at inquisitive passengers. The second officer was an excellent seaman, but had spent the greater part of his life "tramping", and the occasional passenger was a source of intense annoyance. The solitary passenger of the Imagi had come aboard at S. Paul de Loanda, and had worked a slow and inquisitorial way up the coast. He was a man desirous of acquiring information on every conceivable subject, but mostly his eternal note of interrogation was set against the question of curious watch charms.

He had buttonholed the entire mess-room, from the skipper to the fourth engineer, buttonholed them at inconvenient moments, held them helpless against bulkheads and immovable cabin doors, whilst he threshed out the question of "curios".

He caught the purser, unaccustomed to a passenger list and in awe of his solitary charge, and reduced him to a condition of incoherence bordering on imbecility; led him—he protesting feebly—to the tiny purser's office-cabin, domineered him into opening his desk and displaying his interesting collection of native table mats and crudely carved ivory napkin rings, and left him limp and perspiring.

It is also on record that on the transparent pretence of inspecting the chief engineer's domestic photographs—at his own artful suggestion—he insinuated himself into the chief's most private domains, and, leading the conversation to native customs (by way of patent medicines and native doctors), he caused the stout chief, at great personal inconvenience to uncord a box which had lain snug for at least two voyages.

On the ninth day of the voyage up from Loanda the steamer stood inshore.

A strip of yellow beach, with the inevitable fringe of palm trees, showed up over the horizon, and a patch of white stood for a white man's house—and civilization.

The inquisitive passenger standing by the third officer set up his monotonous interrogation.

"Basaka," said the third brusquely; "we always put in here. If you are keen on curios, this is the place to get 'em."

"What kind?"

"Oh, any kind. There is an old chap who lives a couple of miles in the bush who's the biggest medicine man on the Coast. Wait till the Kroo boys get ashore—you'll see nothing of 'em for a couple of hours. They always make a point of a palaver with the old man. They get medicine and charms."

"Basaka!" mused Angel aloud. "Isn't that where Sir Peter lived?"

The mate grinned.

"The governor! Yes." He looked around for the presence of his superiors. "He lived here for ten years, did the old man, and a pretty tough nut he was, from all accounts. Made all his money in oil and rubber—as thick as thieves with old Chingo, the Basaka king." He shook his head wisely.

"Oh," said Angel; and when the ship had anchored he went ashore.

Paterson, the tired-looking man at the factory, gave him a chair in the deep veranda, mixed him a cocktail, and furnished him with some information.

"Going into the bush!" he said in astonishment. "Man, you're mad. We're a British Protectorate, and all that sort of thing, we've got a company of Haussas along at Little Basaka—but it's not safe."

He whistled a native, and the man came running.

"Hi, Jim," he said in the villainous lingo of the Coast, "dem massa, he like go for bush, you savvy? For O'saka by them ju-ju man. You fit for take 'um?"

The man looked at Angel sullenly.

"I no be fit," he said in a low voice: "them ju-ju be bad for white man."

"You hear?" said the host.

Angel smiled.

"I hear," he said calmly, and addressed the man, speaking quickly and easily in the native tongue.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"Kosongo, master," replied the man.

"Why will you not take me into the bush?"

"Because of the Blind Man's Magic," answered the other readily. "I am afraid.

"Yet you shall show me the way. When the sun sets I will be by the big palm at the edge of the bush."

"I cannot come," said the man sulkily.

"By the dried heart of the goat you shall come," said Angel quietly; and the man shrank down until his hands were fumbling in the dust.

"I will come," he whispered.

Paterson looked on in amazement.

"What have you said to the chap?" he asked wonderingly, "and how the deuce did you pick up the lingo?"

Angel's reply was plausible, but not exactly true. Angel dined ashore, first sending a runner to Little Basaka, carrying a few words scribbled on the torn leaf of a notebook.

The hut was set away from the village. It stood in a clearing of its own by a little lagoon. Behind it, on the land side, a semi-circular screen of tall palms, all hubbly with the ball-like nests of weaver birds.

The great throng that squatted in a circle about the hut kept a respectful distance. The sun had gone down—one by one they had stolen in from the shadows of the bush, sinking into their places silently, and as silently remained. No man approached the door of the hut, they waited patiently as though some appointed hour had been fixed, seemingly unconscious of one another's presence, neither greeting the constantly arriving newcomer nor receiving greeting. Kroo men in tattered sailor dress, raw natives from the bush, here and there one who bore the fez or cowl that spoke of his faith in Islam. More than one was of the educated native class, and squatted gingerly in his immaculate white ducks. All of them were men—young men and old men.

The moon came up over the still lagoon and lit the silent congregation with its yellow light. One wearing a turban about his head and a white jellab about his shoulders stole from the forest and made his way to the front rank. Suddenly from the hut came a noise like a pattering rain—practised ear would have detected it as the sound of little sticks played rapidly on the tightly stretched skin of a tom-tom. Then a deep voice from the crowd asked:

"Who sits in the darkness?"

The throng answered with one voice:

"He who sees."

Again the deep voice:

"Who sits in the silence?"

And the whole congregation replied:

"He who hears."

There was a pause, and someone within fumbled at the coarse native cloth that screened the doorway.

Then from the dark interior of the hut a cracked old voice croaked:

"Who hath the seeds of Death in his hand and the water of Life in his gourd?"

With one accord the whole concourse led by one deep voice shouted, swaying their bodies as they sang:

"Make as strong, oh Ju-ju-ba. Make us rich, oh Ju-ju, We are weak, we are poor, Give us of thy great surplus."

As they spoke a man came from the hut.

He was old and tall and he came into the flood of yellow moonlight, staring with sightless eyes toward the lagoon. Medicine-man as he was, the streaked face and the mask and wig of his office were absent. A great scar ran down his withered cheeks as though from the blow of a knife, and yet another parted the white of his head. A staff was in his hand, and as the chant finished he struck the ground, and a silence fell upon the throng.

Sightless he was, but by some extraordinary instinct he singled out men by name, and they came to him, blundering through the worshippers—for such they were—and breathing heavily like men who had run a distance. These fell at the feet of the blind old men, and so waited his pleasure. Supplicants as they were, he did not ask their business.

"Nogi, of Emfeeta," croaked the old man.

"Master,"

"What charm can make the mealies grow when the fire has been. What you ask is folly."

The man at his feet slunk away, and another took his place.

"Who is this? Obero, the Kroo man, who has an enemy?"

"Yes, master."

The man spoke in a strangled tone, for his mouth touched the dust. The old man loosened a charm from a string that hung over his bare shoulder.

"Take this. He will die of the sickness, wasting away slowly."

One by one they crawled to his feet—bush man, Mohammedan, and Kroo boy; slave and slave owner, chief and subject—and, according to their needs, he served them. Hour after hour the play went on: the naming of men

he could not see, the uprisings of the summoned man, the prostrations and the pleadings.

Then it came to an end, and from the crowd he called two men. Unlike the rest, they rose and stood before him. He spoke to them by name.

"N'Saka and Igobi—children of the stars."

"Master." they murmured in unison.

"Who gave you power of hand and eye?"

"You, O master," they said in a low voice.

"Who gave you the magic of the silver charm?"

"Master, it was you!"

"Who taught you to gather sleep from the air—so!"—he waved his thin hands quickly—"who taught you the great magic that brings death to the living—death that is not death?"

"Master, you taught us!"

The old man bowed his head before he spoke again.

"Go quickly," he said, "as you went before. Show the white man the silver charm—the white man who stands in the palaver house of the great ship. Show him the charm so that the moonlight falls upon it, and when his heart is full of the little charm, wave your hands—so! Then you shall say to him three times in your own tongue: 'The Nogi Rock is the open sea.' Three times shall you say this; and you shall stay with the ship till the end, and leave the mark of the Ju-ju."

"It shall be so, master," said the men, and they came back to the throng and sank silently in their places.

The old man waited a moment, leaning on his stick, his blind eyes fixed on the glittering waters.

Then he turned to go.

Two paces he look towards the hut, then turned back swiftly.

"What does he want?" he asked hoarsely. "What does he want—the white man who sits in the garb of an Arab?"

A dead silence followed the question, then a man who sat on the inner edge of the circle rose to his feet.

"I am he," he said quietly; and a shiver ran through the people.

The old man took a step towards him and craned his neck forward as though he would see the face of the man who had courted the terrible death.

"I am he," the stranger went on. "I have come—to learn."

The blind doctor of Basaka curled his lips like an old dog in his anger.

"You shall learn," he said, and raised his hand. "Strike!" he cried, and a hundred men rose to his bidding in silence.

Quick as a flash, Angel sprang past the old man and gained the door of the hut. "The dried heart of the goat," that symbol of Fantee mysticism, would avail him little here. This much he realized as he reached the dark interior of the hut. He would gain a little time by his action. He knew enough of the Coast to know the superstitious natives would not follow him to the medicine-man's sanctuary. As he reached the middle of the hut and turned, revolver in hand, he heard the old man's voice.

"White man," he wheezed mockingly, "come back to the quick death, lest death come all too slowly."

"In time," Angel answered coolly.

"Come, white man," said the voice again; "come, eater of goats' hearts! Ah, I know you!"

Angel mentally consigned his unwilling guide to an early grave.

"Come," said the voice, "seeker of charms, who hath sipped the wisdom of the Blind Man of Basaka—the hour is at hand. Yet be sure I will send to him who sent you a sign that you have learnt what you have learnt—for I will send him your heart."

Angex set his teeth and softly pulled back the steel envelope of his Browning pistol.

"Come for me," he answered; "come, oh wise man, or will you send one whose life you hold lightly? Oh, people of Basaka, bushmen, and sons of mad mothers, who will lay his hand on the white man?"

He heard a whispered order and a patter of bare feet, and the shadows of two men fell across the threshold.

The first fell dead at the doorway, the second squirmed into the hut with a bullet through his brain, and the little hut was filled with the smell of powder.

Angel waited for the inevitable rush.

If they came by twos he could keep them at bay.

He had slipped off the clinging Arab robe and turban. If the worst came to the worst, he could run.

Again he heard the voice of the blind seer. It was hoarse with rage, and broken.

He heard the order that meant his death, the hustle of the closed rank, and the rattle of spear shafts; and then a loud crack, and another and another, and over all the shrill call of a bugle and a great rush of feet.

Through the doorway he saw the line of charging Haussas and heard the fresh voice of the young Englishman in command; then, as the throng of natives about the hut scattered, he leapt the bodies of the men in the doorway and caught the arm of the old man.

The witch-doctor turned with a snarl, and, raising his iron-shod stick, struck at the detective with surprising force. Twice he struck, and twice Angel dodged the blow, then he slipped, and the old man was on him.

For a moment Angel thought his last hour had come. Lean and old as the witch-doctor was, he was possessed of the strength of a maniac. He loosened one hand to fumble in the rags about his middle, and Angel, making a last despairing effort, threw himself over to where his fallen pistol lay.

"Dead?" said the Haussa captain, looking down at the fallen man.

"I think not," said Angel. "Phew!" He wiped the streaming perspiration from his forehead.

"H'm," said the officer looking at the prostrate witch-doctor. "So the Blind Wizard is finished. There will be an awful palaver over this."

Angel nodded.

"He's not blind," he said quietly. "I found that out an hour ago. Some dreadful thing must have happened to his eyes—but he can see."

The old man groaned and looked up. He saw Angel and smiled. Then, to the detective's amazement, he spoke in perfect English.

"So now you know all about it—eh?"

He spoke painfully.

"Yes," said Angel in English. "I know all about it."

The old man inclined his head.

"The trick of mesmerism that I taught my men—it is simple to mesmerise a man who is looking at some bright object."

Angel nodded.

"And as simple to suggest to the subject that the course that brings up at the Nogi Rock is the open sea," he said.

"I wanted to ruin Peter," said the old native, "and when I had ruined him, I wanted to kill him. He is my brother."

He made the monstrous statement calmly and Angel believed him.

The old medicine-man was silent for a while, then he resumed.

"My younger brother—born of the same black mother—inheriting the same fortune. I was at Christ's College, Cambridge," he said inconsequently.

"Peter took the money and the stores. He sent me to trade in the bush. Then he sent men after me to put out my eyes—because he was ambitious and looked down upon his blacker brother."

He was silent so long that they thought he was dead, but after a while he spoke again.

"Christ's College, Cambridge," he murmured. Then in the native tongue he uttered the proverb of the Kantee people: "The river overflows but runs back to its bed." Then he died.

As for Sir Peter Saintsbury, the swarthy ship owner, he too died within the year, and I'saka, the Kroo boy who was with him when he died, was hanged at Liverpool a few months later.

VI. — UNCLE FARAWAY

First published in Story Teller (Cassells), July 1913

IT was thirty years since the man who called himself Coggs had been to Great Wibley.

He had promised himself the visit often, and at inconvenient last moments had changed his plans, for this tiny village with broad greens and incoherent plan of construction had a wince for him in every tree, a sharp stab of sorrow in every woodland path—and years had not entirely dulled the sting of memory.

Once there came a young American lady on a holiday. She had been ordered quiet by a doctor to help out her convalescence. Here, too, in the 'seventies a young man, reading for the Bar, had arrived to fish...

The American lady went back with her people to Virginia; the student followed her, for he loved her...he loved her so much that when she told him, as she did, gently and sweetly, that she did not love him...that way, he felt he would die, and in truth nearly did.

But such casualties are rare in life; the young man returned to England and plunged into his studies with feverish energy. But he did not forget the fragrant lady of Virginia—not success, nor parliamentary honours, nor the patronage of a grateful Government dulled the freshness of her picture.

And there came a time when he felt he could go again to Great Wibley-by-the-Hill without arousing painful memories. Once he had got so far as the railway station—he had turned back.

Year followed year, each began with a plan for spending the vacation—a plan which underwent change at the last moment.

Time after time his work had brought him within a dozen miles of the village, but he had resisted the temptation.

And here he was at last—with the first shock of reacquaintance past, a gruff man who hid the magic of love and its dear memory behind a mask and a manner.

To him, as he sat upon the bench before the "Lion Inn" came Pipper, a carpenter and a gossip.

"There's an American lady down at Horrockses," said the diffident little carpenter.

"Hey?" He felt a sudden lightening of heart at the association of the two words. It was at Horrocks, from time immemorial a boarding-house for visitors, that another American lady had sojourned.

"There's an American lady down at Horrockses," repeated Pipper with a sort of nervous triumph. "They other fellers thought she wor French owin' to her veil, but I know 'urn to be 'Merican cause of the way she do talk."

The stranger eyed him severely yet with the ghost of a smile.

"You know a great deal," he said, offensive to the last degree. "If I knew as much as you I'd hire myself out to—to something or other. You gossiping little beggar, why don't you mind your own business?"

Thus he rid himself in irritation of a tiny wave of sorrow which came surging over his own soul.

It was a point of view which had been urged upon Mr. Pipper before, so that he had grown callous and was, moreover, prepared with a stereotyped answer.

"Anybody's business is everybody's business in a small village like this," he said glibly. "Thart you'd like to know, you bein' a stranger, sir—she'm got lodgin's at old Mrs. Horrocks, up top o' village, fine young wench she be by all accounts—widder woman likely, vor her's in proper black an' all."

Mr. John Coggs growled into the earthenware pot he was raising to his lips at that moment.

The little carpenter stood for a moment awaiting the invitation which came not, then he turned sorrowfully and walked back in the direction of his ramshackle "shop".

Coggs looked at him, a twinkle in his eye, but a dull little ache in his heart. He watched him till he disappeared round the elbow of the straggling village street, then he walked into the "Lion" and demanded his rods.

"I hope you have better luck to-day, sir," said the landlord as he handed the fishing gear across the bar; "there is usually some nice fish in the river round about now. I can't understand why they're so shy. Pollock the blacksmith was telling me he caught—"

"Oh I'll catch a fish before I leave," grumbled the unpleasant Mr. Coggs. "I take very little interest in the sport—but next to smoking it is the finest justification for doing nothing that I know."

It was observable that the tone he had adopted to the landlord was more kindly than that which he had used to the carpenter.

He carried his rods beneath his arm across the parsonage field, through Brakes Copse, and over the gentle crest of Brakes Hill. The wind was keen with the nip of early spring, the trees and hedgerows were vivid with the fresh green of the season. Far away to the south, under great white clouds that moved majestically like aerial galleons with all sails set across an ocean of infinite blue, were the red hills of Devon.

Coggs went stumbling down the steep path on the other side of Brakes to the chattering little river that fought its way through many troublesome miles to the broad Tamar.

He sat down on the bank, pulled out a polished briar and filled it with the deliberation of the habitual smoker; mechanically he filled it, never taking his eyes from the serene view of valley and hill before him.

He smoked calmly, majestically, contemptuously, as only a man smokes who loves the fragrance of a mixture burning truly and evenly in a wooden bowl.

He did not fix his rods; he was content to lower his eyes occasionally to the busy little stream, to the shadowy places by the bending rushes, to the sunlit centre where a shallow bed of shingle set the surface a-bubbling.

It was a great thinking place, this hollow. A man had space and silence, for the noises of Nature are the very rainbows of sound. They blend, tone to tone, and harmonize in one soft octave.

He thought of many things, including the American lady he had never seen. His thoughts were, in the main, prospective, and in an idle way speculative. He took a passionless interest in that destiny whose instrument he was, and even that interest was extremely respectful.

He sat for two hours charging and recharging his pipe, never attempting to unwind his line or fit his rods, then he looked at his watch and was on the point of rising when he heard a footfall on the little hill path.

He looked up. A girl was descending the steep declivity. She was young and, as he judged women, beautiful. Her face was thinner than that of most women of her age—he placed her about twenty-nine or thirty. Her eyes, big and sad, he thought, must be grey, her lips, firm and full, drooped never so little. She put up a gloved hand to push back a stray strand of hair that had blown across her face.

In the tilt of her delicate chin he read resolution and a certain character; in the brief calm scrutiny with which she favoured him he diagnosed an independence which for many years had been unfamiliar to him.

He knew it in the governing classes for insolence; in the eyes of a woman of the people for boldness.

Here it was tempered by an indefinable honesty, such as Leonardo da Vinci gave to the eyes of Lucretia Cavilla, the mistress of Il Moro.

It was that glance, sidelong, all absorbing, which recalled the most wonderful portrait in the world to him…and something else…

She hesitated, looking at him for the space of three seconds. She saw a man, tall, broad, grey. His face was strong and masterful. His jaw grim enough to make you forget the lines about the mouth and eyes which told so plainly of laughter and a love of life. He might be forty, or fifty, or sixty for the matter of that. His eyes were deep-set and clear blue. They shone steadily under two ragged and bushy eyebrows that were neither brown nor grey.

She went on her way with the vague sense of satisfaction which every woman experiences who meets a man in a lonely spot and finds him approvable.

She had been told that there was a tiny bridge across the stream, and beyond this a path which led through the fields to the village of Weyton, where a wonderful old Norman church rewarded the tourist. But she had come the wrong way and there was no bridge.

She looked round with a gentle helplessness which was eloquent to the man, watching the graceful figure on the bank, of her difficulty and error. He walked softly toward her, and she turned as his cap came off.

"Forgive me," he said (Pipper would not have recognised the soft, musical voice), "I think you are looking for Brakes Bridge."

She smiled.

"Yes—I'm afraid I have mistaken the path—I do not know the country very well."

He had known from the first that she was the American lady—it did not need the soft accent, which makes even the most educated of Americans distinctive to the English ear. There was nothing of the stiffness which such an introduction would have engendered were she English and he younger.

She saw that he was older than she thought—he had a courtly, almost an old-world, grace in his attitude toward her. Once he put out his arm to help her as they stumbled back to the place where he had left his rods, and when she laid her hand on the extended forearm to steady herself, she felt a triceps that was like the stone arm of a statue.

"Do you mind if I rest here a little?" she asked. "I shan't be disturbing you."

She had a quick smile that came suddenly and departed without warning, leaving the face a little drawn.

"You will not disturb me," he said, "and I shall not disturb the fishes—indeed," he confessed with a little chuckle, "I'm rather a fraud. I harrow the feelings of that poor man, the landlord of the "Lion", by the slight I put upon the river. But I have not as yet taken my rod from its case."

She nodded quickly.

"You like to be alone, and you want an excuse," she said. "I know that feeling—sometimes I feel when people, well meaning and kindly, come around I could just scream."

She saw the open tobacco-pouch that lay on the bank. "Won't you smoke?" she asked. "Please do; I like to see men smoking."

"I am a great believer in old men smoking," he said as he filled his pipe; "it keeps their thoughts diffused. It is only to the young that tobacco gives concentration."

He said this simply, using the words "old men" with an assurance which neither invited nor rejected comment.

She saw the hands that were clasped about his knees were big and veined, and knew that he spoke without illusions.

"I owe something to your lovely country," he said, "I smoked my first pipe in Virginia," he chuckled again. "It was like eating one's first oyster in Whitstable."

"Do you know Virginia?" she asked eagerly.

He nodded slowly, thoughtfully, and with each nod he momentarily blotted out the landscape with a big cloud of white smoke.

"Yes—I know Virginia," he said, "or, rather, I knew it—Virginia is the home of romance to me."

Across his face flitted a wistful, hungry little expression. It was gone in an instant. It did not strike him at the moment as curious that he should be discussing a matter which he had never spoken about to a living soul.

"I come from Virginia," she said.

"So I learnt from your voice," he smiled. "But I have not been in Virginia for nearly thirty years—think of that! I loved the country; I was young and impressionable in those days...and there are association which make Virginia almost a sacred soil to me."

His strong voice dropped to little more than a whisper as he gazed fixedly at the hills on the far horizon. She did not speak. Whatever her own sorrow was, here was one as poignant. She read in his voice something of that wistfulness she had seen.

"You will scent a love affair," he said, with that little smile of his, "and the love affairs of older generations are very fascinating to the young. Yes, it was a love romance. I loved an American lady—and she married—an American gentleman...a better man than I; and that is all."

He knocked the ashes from his pipe and looked slyly at the serious face of the girl.

"When a man reaches his anecdotage," he said with mock exasperation, "it takes little to induce his confidences—and that pretty Southern voice of yours, young lady, opened secret drawers in my mind and set all the machinery of garrulity into creaking and squeaking motion."

"And did you never see her again?" she asked softly. He shook his head.

"And you came home and married...?"

He laughed.

"No," he said, "I found no consolation. I was like one of your advertising gentlemen—I rejected substitutes. There was nobody just—as good."

She sighed.

The story he had told, the little glimpse he had given her of a life which was even remotely associated with her own beloved Virginia was enough to interest her deeply, sufficient almost to overshadow the throb—throb—throb of a sorrow which did not leave her day or night.

"I wish,"—she hesitated—"I wish you would tell me some more. Isn't it forward of me? And yet...just love Virginia, and things that have happened then have a beauty all of their own...it isn't curiosity... and yet it is in a way—"

"There is so little to tell," he said between puffs; "she lived happy ever after...except,"—he stopped as though debating the loyalty of his next words—"except that they had a great deal of trouble a few years ago...and I wanted to go out and help them, but it seemed officious, so I didn't. They are very rich people and they had a daughter, a very beautiful girl, I am told. She married a rascal, an Italian count—however. I did not intrude myself."

The girl was on her feet, white and shaking.

"I must go now," she said, mastering the tremor in her voice with a supreme effort.

He jumped up and gathered his rods.

"You will want assistance up that path," he said, the practical man of the world in a second. She accompanied him without a word. If he felt the hand on his arm trembling he made no remark upon it.

The path was treacherous, for there had been rain overnight and the soft loamy earth was slippery.

He guided her safely to the hill-top, and here she paused as though to regain her breath. He stood waiting to bid her adieu. He knew she would take the same path as himself, but an instinct warned him that she wished to walk alone.

"Do you believe in God?" she asked him suddenly. He inclined his head.

"And the justice of God?"

He heard the passionate thrill in her voice and wondered.

"I believe in the justice of God," he said slowly. "I believe most implicitly in that; slow moving as it may seem to impatient eyes."

She was looking into his face earnestly. The straight line of her delicate brows were bent in a doubting frown.

"Sometimes I do too," she said, nodding her head. "And sometimes the justice of mankind, the law which is designed only as a channel in which the Divine justice may flow, seems a very shallow channel to carry so great a

stream. And when God's judgment does not overflow its narrow confines, I doubt...indeed I doubt."

She offered him a small hand abruptly, and he took it and returned the firm grip.

She smiled at parting, the hard lines melting from her face.

"I am staying here for a little holiday," she said. "I came here because"—she paused and looked at him sharply. "I know why I came now—I know why this place is so precious to—to people." She smiled again. "I hope you will allow me to fish with you."

He laughed like a boy detected in an illicit act, and stood cap in hand, a little puzzled by her disjointed words, till she had descended the slope and vanished in Brakes Copse. Then he followed. That evening he came down from his sitting-room where his solitary dinner had been eaten and into the parlour of the "Lion".

There was a good company present; they shuffled awkwardly to their feet as he entered, and somebody pushed forward a big windsor chair to the fireplace, for spring nights are chilly.

These evenings were a sheer joy to him. He took a malicious delight in leading the bucolic mind out of its depths.

The village oracles had offered a united and an assured front to him on the burning question of Church against Chapel. A churchman himself, he shattered their defences—though they were, for the nonce, combined in the protection of establishment.

To-night he was neither so eager to provoke controversy nor to be engaged in argument. He nodded to the landlord, and that cheerful soul brightened visibly.

"Now, gentlemen," he said briskly, "Mr. Coggs asks the company to drink with him—step up and order your refreshments."

There were uplifted mugs in his honour, and old Bill Hoggin who, by common acceptation, was the most powerful of the controversialists, having failed to lure the stranger into a discussion on the relative merits of the French and German soldier, grew reminiscent.

"You do remind me, Mr. Coggs, sir," he said ingratiatingly, "of owd Justice Grilby."

"Oh!" said the stranger briefly; "friend of yours?"

A rare joke this by the standard of the "Lion" parlour.

"Never seed um in my life," said old Bill, wiping the tears of merriment from his eyes, "and don't want to. But when he'm down to sessions at Devizes they say he thinks nothin' of goin' into village ale shops an' disputin' with folk—he'm a rare walker by accounts, not a village round he don't visit when fit's on urn."

Mr. Coggs looked at the elderly Hoggin from under his shaggy brows.

"A fine story that," he said disparagingly, "one of His Majesty's judges drinking in a bar."

"I've heard on't."

A husky farmer lent confirmation.

"He'm a rare study—er, Justice Grilby. Studies folk an' what they'm thinkin' about. If this here Radical Government only did likewise—"

He launched forth into a catalogue of the Government's iniquities and found a sympathetic audience, for your English agriculturalist is born Tory and continues in his sin to the end of his days.

Mr. Coggs listened with a flicker of amusement in his yes. Now and again out of sheer hospitality they demanded his confirmation of their view, but he declined to be drawn, barking a short and testy "go on—go on, don't bother me," to their appeal.

He went to bed at an early hour, but did not fall asleep as quickly as he was accustomed to. He thought of the American lady. How sweet a face she had. He understood why the people of the village had thought she was a widow—her dress was black but not funereal.

What was she doing in this little village, so far from the well-worn track of the tourist? And how curious a coincidence it was that twice in this village he had met a beautiful girl of that nationality. Great Wibley had neither tomb nor ruin to recommend it to the leisured sightseer.

He was awakened in the middle of the night by voices outside his door. The hushed tones of the landlord, conscious of his responsibilities to a sleeping guest, and the domineering voice of one who respected neither slumber of man nor scruple of host. It was a voice peculiarly shrill for a man, and had a snarl at the end which was not pleasant to hear.

Mr. Coggs turned in his bed patiently. He had no desire to overhear the newcomer's conversation, but his voice was penetrating.

"You shall go to Horrocks at early morning with a note—I have it here. You shall ask for Mrs..." he did not catch the name..."you understand?"

A mumble from the landlord.

"I do not care whether you take or send it so long as it goes," said the other; "it is sufficient that it goes."

The unwilling listener turned over again, this time less patiently. There was a little more conversation, and then the shutting of a door...Mr. Coggs fell asleep.

He learnt next morning that the new guest had arrived in the adjoining market town by the last train and had driven over to the village at two o'clock in the morning.

"A quarrelsome chap," muttered the landlord, "but then, he's a foreigner."

Mr. Coggs smiled.

"Give me my rod, Smith," he demanded. "If bream were gossips, I should come home with a full creel."

He made his way to his favourite hollow. He did not expect to see the girl that day. He was not curious as to the business which brought a querulous foreigner to visit the "American lady". Curiosity was a vice he had long since outgrown. To anticipate events by speculating upon their causes was to introduce prejudice to reason, and was, by all his canons, without justification.

He presumed without much thought that the business was urgent and vital, and he was surprised as he came down the little hill to see her standing by the water's edge, her back to him, and evidently waiting. She turned at the sound of his footsteps and walked slowly to meet him.

She wore a dress of dark-blue cloth, but the white broderie at her throat was no whiter than the face she turned to him.

He quickened his steps.

"Are you ill?" he asked anxiously.

She shook her head.

"No—but I want to see you," she replied.

She glanced nervously past him up the hill as though she expected to see somebody.

"I want to tell you something," she said a little breathlessly. "You spoke yesterday of somebody you loved—in Virginia—long ago."

"Yes," he said quietly, and waited.

"It was—Margret Bray, was it not?"

He was not surprised, yet his heart beat faster and for a moment the landscape swam a little. Commanding his emotion with a superhuman effort, he said in the even tone he had employed before:

"Yes—it was Margret Bray."

Her eyes were filled with tears, there was a look of infinite tenderness in them as she stretched both her hands to him.

He caught them.

"Oh, Uncle Faraway—Uncle Faraway," she sobbed, and fell upon his breast.

She looked up almost at once, smiling through her tears.

"You don't know that name," she whispered, "it is the one dear mother always taught us to think of you by—she never told us anything, but we guessed there was somebody who had loved her—and we used to pray for you as children—for Uncle Faraway, the Englishman."

She burst into a passion of weeping.

"I want you now," she sobbed, "I want you now!"

"You have me, dear," he said huskily; "you are in trouble?"

He felt rather than saw her nod, and in a flash he realized the cause. This midnight arrival, a foreigner..."Your husband has come to the village?" he asked.

She nodded again.

"Now dry your eyes," he said, trying to be practical, though he felt shaky enough. "Sit down here and tell me."

It was some time before he could calm her and she told her story with a face half averted. It is the story which is written in black letters on many an otherwise stainless record. The story of a good and tender father who had shielded and protected her through her life, and who in the madness of ambition had handed her body and soul to a man of whose existence he had been unaware a year before.

Count Festine, handsome in his showy way, reputedly rich, the owner of a palace in Rome...she would be the Countess Festine...she would rather have been back at school. A bad bargain was concluded, that a little care and a little enquiry would have obviated. He was a Count Festine in a land where Conde means little more than plain "Mr."—the Roman palace was a myth, the castle was a veritablechâteau en Espagne. He was arrested almost at the church door. In point of fact, at the wedding reception. The publicity which the wedding had given him had been his undoing. He was extradited to France. The girl, sick with shame, came to Europe to escape the gibes and sneers which she knew the charitable reserved for the innocent. Her mother had died of the shock—her father, good, weak man, had taken the line of least resistance, and had left her to win out as best she could.

"I came here," she said, "because—mother had so often spoken of Webley...she loved this little village." He nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"I sent him money when I knew he was to be released," she said. "I came here because I feared he would find me—he got my address from a woman I trusted."

"What does he want?"

Her gesture told him.

"Money?"

"That and—"

A voice sharp and imperious hailed her.

The subject of their thoughts was picking a finicky way down the hill. He was dapper and perfectly dressed, from the soft Homburg hat on his close black curls to the tips of his polished shoes. Mr. Coggs comprehended him in one quick glance. The man was thirty-five, or in its neighbourhood, his face was effeminate and weak, the swaggering little moustachios curled fiercely upward. His mouth was big and red like a pouting child's, and his eyes the soft brown of the South.

He flourished a gold-headed cane to attract the girl's attention.

"Hi, Cicele," he called, "you come up here quickly, please—I wish you urgently."

She would have gone, but the man at her side laid his hand upon her arm.

"Come down, Count," he said. His voice had a penetrating quality which made it unnecessary to shout.

Against his inclination, yet obeying some force stronger than his own will, the dapper man descended, alert, suspicious, and angry.

This latter condition of mind he made no attempt to disguise.

He ignored the presence of the elder man and addressed himself to the girl.

"I call for you," he said furiously. "When I call, you come."

"It is not customary to speak to a lady as though she were a groom," said Mr. Coggs in a dry, level voice. "They did not teach you very good manners in France, Count."

The other turned on him, showing his teeth.

"I make no-a business with you," he almost hissed. "I have my wife to talk with."

"You may talk before Mr.—before my uncle," she said quietly. She had stopped at his name, for she did not know it.

"Your uncle!"

His tone changed...an uncle...an American, of course...and possibly rich.

He favoured the other with an elaborate bow.

"M'sieur—" He stopped, eyeing the grey-haired man with a frown. "I have seen you somewhere," he said slowly. "I do not know where—M'sieur—?"

"Faraway," said the other. He gave a swift, sidelong smile at the girl and pressed her hand, and sense of comfort and sanctuary came to her.

"M'sieur Faraway," said the Count, "there is this matter urgent—before relations we can have no secret—therefore I confess I am in great duresse." He shrugged his shoulders. "A man has indiscretion, is it not? I have myself

done foolishly—often. Now in France all matters are all right. I have expiated according to law certain follies, but now!"

He paused dramatically.

"It is necessary that I leave England—very quick. Some old matter has been remember, there is—what is the word—ah! 'warrant', that is it—a warrant for—"

He shrugged his shoulders again.

"I am desolate—I thought that matter was finish, for I did not call myself Festine, you comprehend?"

"What is the charge?"

The question was put in so matter-of-fact a tone that a weight rolled from Festine's mind. Here was a man of affairs—of the world. Not horrified as ninety-nine out of every hundred bourgeois would be by the gravity of the situation, but seeing the thing with the eye of a well-balanced mind.

"The charge?" repeated the Latin airily, "it is nothing."

"Murder?"

The indulgent smile of the count was sufficient answer.

"Forgery—robbery of any kind?"

Admirable, clear-visioned man, he might have been discussing the facade of St. Peters—so thought Festine. "No—it is nothing."

"Fraud?"

"The crime is of no moment," said the Count impatiently. "It is of moment that I should receive five thousand dollars."

"What is the crime?"

He was inexorable, patience personified.

The Count snapped at him angrily.

"It is of no account. Look here, Mr. Faraway, you pay up or my wife pay up quick! You are still my wife"—he thrust his face into hers, his narrowed and evil eyes menaced her. "You wanta keep out of court—you pay up—I will

depart instantly, I do not trouble you—you can divorce with facility. But if I am arrest you go into court—how you like that?"

The girl shrank back.

"And how you like this?" He dropped his voice till it was, with its soft sibilants, as silky as the hiss of a snake. "Suppose I am arrest—you cannot divorce me, and I can make everything like hell for you—when I return." She clung to Coggs, trembling.

"If there is a warrant for you, you will be arrested," said lie, comforting the girl with his strong hand. There was no trace of emotion; he might have been a professor elucidating a pet thesis. "No man who is known to the police can hope to escape. And if you are arrested you will be sent to prison."

Again a vague fear of a danger he could not foresee thrilled the Italian. This man spoke with such assurance. He spoke like one so certain of the outcome of this adventure that he could afford to play with the other.

"You desire to escape from England?" Mr. Coggs looked down at the girl meditatively. "My dear," he said, "would you face a court of law to rid yourself of this man for ever?"

"I would face anything," she said in a low voice.

"If it meant a certain humiliation—though, thank God, no shame?"

She nodded.

He turned to the man.

"Go," he said.

"But—" spluttered Festine.

"Go—you will not escape—do you not remember me?"

Festine scrutinized the man before him with narrowed eyes—then he stepped back quickly, his face livid. "Yes—my lord!" he breathed.

The other nodded.

"I never forget a bigamist I have sentenced," said Lord Justice Bigly quietly. "I think you had better go."

And Festine walked up the hill into the arms of two Scotland Yard men who had arrived that morning.

The girl sat in the little drawing-room of her house in Mayfair. In an agony of apprehension she had searched the columns of the evening papers for her evidence, but the London reporters had shown considerable reticence, or perhaps it was that very frank letter which a judge of the Appeal Court had addressed to the editors which had had the effect of turning what might easily have been a sensational story into a commonplace item of news.

A maid brought a card; she read it and flew down the stairs to meet a gruff man who had just emerged triumphantly from a passage-at-arms with a cabman, and was still chuckling to himself, though he had paid more than his fare in the end.

"Well?"

He put his two hands on her shoulders and looked into her face.

"You aren't ill?"

She shook her head with a smile.

She led him back to the drawing-room.

"I've kept it out of the London papers," he said, "but I cannot influence the American Press—now sit down, I have a plan."

She seated herself on a settee and he drew up a chair to face her.

"Cicele," he said, "I am an old man—oh yes! I am—if you doubt me I will tell you that I am three years older than your dear mother. Yet—"

She waited, holding her breath.

"Yet I am going to ask you to marry me—wait—in ten years' time you will still be little more than a girl—in ten years' time I shall have gone the way of all flesh—"

"Oh no!" she protested.

"Well, in twenty years' time," he admitted grudgingly. "I want you—to bear my name; that the sneers of people—and there must have been people who sneered at your marriage and will be jubilant now—may be strangled at their birth. I ask"—his voice sank—"nothing more than that—that you share my name."

She had risen at his first words and walked to the fireplace. She kept her face averted from him; he saw only the curve of her neck as she rested her head against the hand that clasped the carved mantelboard.

"I cannot accept the sacrifice," she said. "If you loved me—"

He laughed a little bitterly.

"Love you!" he said. "My dear, I love you—all that is your mother in you—all that you are yourself. I dare not love you any more."

His voice trembled, but his eyes, fixed upon her, were steadfast.

She hung her head.

"I cannot accept the sacrifice," she said, in so low a voice that he could scarcely hear her. "It would be unfair to bear your name, to take all and to give nothing—unfair to you...and to me."

She came to him and put her arms about his neck, and in that moment it seemed that thirty years of life fell away from him.

"I love you enough to make sacrifices for you," she said, her lips quivering, "but...but it will be no sacrifice."

And the girl who was destined to be the wife of a Lord Chief Justice of England kissed him.

VII. — THE MAN OF THE NIGHT

First published as "The Stranger of the Night" in The Weekly Tale Teller, October 15, 1910

THE little instrument on the table by the inspector's desk went "tick tock". Then it stopped as though considering how it should word the message it had to give.

It was very still in the charge room, so still that the big clock above the fireplace was audible. That, and the squeaky scratching of the inspector's quill pen as it moved slowly over the yellow paper on the desk before him, were the only sounds in the room.

Outside, it was raining softly, the streets were deserted and the lines of lamps stretching east and west emphasized the loneliness.

"Tick tock." said the instrument on the table, excitedly, "tick tock, tick tock!"

The inspector's high stool creaked, as he sat up listening. There was a constable at the door, and he too heard the frantic call.

"What's that, Gill?" demanded the inspector, testily. The constable came into the charge room with heavy footsteps.

"Ticketty—ticketty—tick tock," babbled the instrument... and the constable wrote the message.

"All stations. Arrest and detain George Thomas on ticket of leave, aged 35, height 5 ft. 8 ins., complexion and hair dark, eyes brown, of gentlemanly appearance. Suspected of being concerned in warehouse robbery. Walthamstow and Canning Town especially note this and acknowledge. S.Y."

"In the middle of the night!" exclaimed the inspector, despairingly. "They call me up to tell me what I've told them hours and hours ago! What a system!"

He nodded his head hopelessly.

Outside, in the thin rain, a man was coming along the street, his hands deep in his pockets, his coat collar turned up, his head on his breast. He shuffled along, his boots squelching in the rain, and slackened his pace as he came up to the station. The policeman he expected to find at the door was absent.

The man stood uneasily at the foot of the steps, set his teeth and mounted slowly.

He halted again in the passage out of which the charge room opened...

"It's a rum thing about Thomas." said the inspector's voice, "I thought he was trying to go straight."

"It's his wife, sir," said the constable, and there was a long silence, broken by the loud ticking of the clock.

"Then why did his wife give him away?" asked the Inspector.

"Did she, sir?"

There was surprise in the constable's voice, but the man in the passage did not hear that. He was leaning against the painted wall, his hand at his throat, his thin unshaven face a dirty white, his lips trembling.

"She gave him away," said the inspector. He spoke with the deliberation of a man enjoying the sensation of dispensing exclusive news. "Know her?"

"Slightly, sir," said the policeman's voice.

"Handsome woman—she might have done better than Thomas."

"I think she has," said the constable, dryly, and they both laughed.

"That's the reason, is it? Wants to put him under screw—well, I've heard of such cases..."

The man in the passage crept quietly out. He was shaking in every limb, he almost fell at the last step and clutched the railings that bordered the station house, to keep himself erect.

The rain was pouring down but he did not notice it: he was shocked, paralysed by his knowledge. He had broken into a warehouse because she had laughed to scorn his attempt at reformation. He had tried to go straight and she had made him go crooked...and then, when the job was done, with all the old cleverness so that he left no trace of his identity, she had gone straight away to the police and put him away. But that was nothing. Women had done such things before, out of jealousy, in a fit of insane anger at some slight, real or fancied, but she had done it deliberately, wickedly, because she loved some man better than she loved him.

He was cool now, seeing things very clearly, and quickened his walk until he was stepping out briskly and lightly, holding his head erect as he had in the days when he was a junior in a broker's office, and she had been a novel reading miss of Balham.

The rain streamed down his face, the cuffs of his thin jacket clung to his wrists, his trousers were soaked from thigh to ankle. He knew a little shop off the Commercial Road, where they sold cheese and butter and wood. He had purchased for a penny a morsel of bread and cheese: he remembered that the woman behind the counter had cut the cheese with a heavy knife, newly whetted, and pointed...he thought the matter out as he turned in the direction of the shop. Such knives are usually kept in a drawer, next to the till, with the bacon saw, and the milk tester, and the little rubber stamp which is used for branding margerine in accordance with the law.

He knew the shop would be shuttered, the door locked, and he had no instrument to force an entrance. The "kit" was in the hands of the police—he had wondered how the splits* had found them—now he knew.

[* Detectives]

He gulped down a sob.

Still there must be a way. The knife was necessary. He was still weak from his last term of penal servitude, he could not kill her with his hands, she was so strong and beautiful, oh, so beautiful!

Thinking disconnectedly, he came to the shop.

It stood in a little side street. There was one street lamp giving light to the thoroughfare. There was no sound but the dismal drip of rain, nobody in sight...There was a skylight above the shuttered door, it was the only way, he saw that at once. Sometimes these are left unfastened. He stood on tiptoe and felt gingerly along the lower part of the sash. His fingers encountered something that lay on the ledge, and his heart leapt. It was a key...He had guessed this to be a "lock up" shop; he knew enough of the casual character of these little shop keepers not to be surprised at the ease with which an entry might be effected. He slipped the key into the lock, turned it, and stepped in, closing the door behind him, softly.

The air of the shop was hot and stuffy, full of the pungent scent of food stuffs...cheese and ham, and the resinous odour of firewood. He had matches in his pocket, but they were soddened and would not strike. He fumbled round the shelves and came upon a packet. He struck a light, guarding the flame with his hand. The shop had been swept and made tidy for the night. The weights were neatly arranged on either side of the scales, there was a piece of muslin laid over the butter on the slate slab. On the counter, conspicuously displayed, was a note. It contained instructions, written in pencil in a large uneducated hand, to "Fred". He was to light the fire, put the kettle on, take in the milk, and serve "Mrs. Smith."

Fred was the boy, the early comer in the morning, for whom the key had been placed. It was remarkable that he settled all these particulars to his own satisfaction, as, lighting match after match, he sought the heavy knife with the sharp point and the newly whetted edge. He even felt a certain exaltation in the ease with which he had gained admission to the shop, and had an insane desire to whistle and talk. He found the knife. It was under the counter with a greatly scarred cutting board and a steel. He wrapped it up carefully in a sheet of newspaper, then remembered he was hungry. He broke off a wedge of cheese. There was no bread, but an open tin of children's biscuits was handy. With the food in his hand, with the knife in his pocket, he continued his exploration. Behind the shop was a little parlour. The door was unlocked and he entered.

He struck match after match, hesitated a moment, then lit the gas. It was a tiny room, cheaply but neatly furnished. There were china ornaments on the mantle-shelf, a few cheap lithographs on the wall, and a loudly ticking clock. There was a clock at the police station...he made a grimace as though he were in pain, felt with his hand for the knife, and smiled.

He sat at a little table in the middle of the room, and ate the food mechanically, staring hard at the wall ahead of him.

He had done everything for her: his first crime...the few sovereigns extracted from the cash box...She had inspired that. Her little follies, her little extravagances, her vanities, these had been at the bottom of every step he had taken...staring blankly at the wall with wide opened eyes, he traced his descent.

There was a text on the wall, he had been staring at it all this time, an ill-printed text, black and gold, green and vivid crimson, sadly out of register, and bearing in the bottom left hand corner the conspicuous confession that it was "Printed in Saxony."

His thoughts were elaborate thoughts, but inclined to dive sideways, into inconsequent bye-paths; insensibly he had fixed his eyes on the text, in a subconscious attempt to concentrate his thoughts. One half of his brain pursued the deadly course of retrospection, the other half grappled half heartedly with the words on the wall. He read only those that were in capital letters.

"Behold...Lamb...God...Taketh Away...Sins...World"

Three years penal servitude for burglary, two terms of six months for breaking and entering...She had been at his elbow...years ago he was a member of a church, sang in the choir, and religious matters had some

significance to him. It is strange how such things drop away from a grown man, how the sweet bloom of faith is rubbed off...He married her at a registry office in Marylebone, and they went to Brighton for their honeymoon. She knew well enough that he could not afford to live as they were living, he had never dreamt that she guessed that he was robbing his employer, and when coolly, and with some amusement, she revealed her knowledge, he was shocked, stunned.

"Behold...Lamb..."

Might religion have helped him had he kept closer to its teachings? He wondered, slowly munching his biscuit and cheese, with his eyes on the garish text.

He found some milk and rank it, then he rose. Where he had sat, were two little pools of water, one on the floor, the other on the table where his arms had rested. He turned out the light, walked softly through the shop, listened and opened the door gently. There was nobody in sight, and he stepped out, closing and locking the door behind him. He put the key on the ledge where he had found it, and went quickly to the main road, the heavy knife, newly whetted and with a sharp point, bumping against his thigh with every step he took. He had an uneasy feeling and strove to analyse it down to a first cause. He decided it was the text and smiled, then of a sudden the smile froze on his lips. He was not alone. A man had come from the night, swiftly, silently, and walked with him, step for step.

He stopped dead, his hand wandered down to the pocket where the knife lay.

"What do you want?" he asked, harshly.

The other made no reply: his face was in the shadow. What clothes he wore, what manner of man he was, Thomas could not say, only that, standing there, he was tall, gracefully proportioned, easy of movement.

There was a silence, then—

"Come," said the man from the night, and the burglar accompanied him without question.

They walked in silence, and Thomas observed that the stranger moved in the direction he himself would have taken.

"I shall give myself up—afterwards," he said, speaking feverishly fast. "I will end all this—and it—end it!"

It did not strike him as curious that he should plunge into most secret depths, revealing the innermost thoughts of his heart: he accepted without wonder the conviction that the stranger knew all.

"She led me down from step to step, down, down!" sobbed Thomas, as they walked side by side through the narrow streets that lead to the river. "It used to worry me at first, but she strangled my conscience—she laughed at my fears. She is a devil, I tell you."

"Other men have said 'The woman tempted me'" said the stranger, gently. "Yet a man has thought and will of his own."

Thomas shook his head, doggedly.

"I had no will where she was," he said. "When I have killed her, I shall be a man again." He tapped his pocket, the knife was still there. "If we had children, it might have made a difference, but she hated children."

"If you were free of her, you might be a man," said the stranger. His voice was sweet and deep and sad.

"Yes, yes!" The other turned on him eagerly. "That is what mean: she is in my way. If I kill her, I can start all over again, can't I? I could go back and face the world and say Eve killed the bad part of me, give me another chance—look!" He fumbled in his pocket and brought forth the knife. The rain came pitter, patter on the wrapping, and his hand trembled in his excited eagerness to display the strong blade, with the silvery edge and the needle like point.

"I could not kill her with my hands," he said, breathing quickly, "so I got this knife. I feel I've got to do it, though I hate killing things. I once killed a rabbit when I was a kid, and it haunted me for days."

"If you were free of her, you might be a man," said the stranger again.

"Yes, yes." The thief nodded. "That is what I say—I could go back—back to the old people," his voice broke.

They turned corner after corner, crossing main thoroughfares, diving through alleys where costers' barrows were stacked, chained wheel to wheel, into mean streets, and across patches of waste ground.

Once, through a little passage they came in sight of the river, saw three barges moored side by side, rising and falling slowly with the tide. Out in mid river a steamer lay, three lights glimmering feebly.

"I shall go into the house from the back," Thomas said. "There's nobody else in the house but an old woman—or there oughtn't to be. My wife sleeps in the front room..."

"If you were free of her, you might be a man," said the stranger.

"Yes, yes, yes!" The convict was impatient. "I know that—when I am free..." He laughed happily.

"She dragged you down to the deeps," said the man of the night, softly. "Every step you took for good, she slogged and hindered—"

"That's right—that is the truth," said the other.

"Yet you could never escape her: you were loyal and faithful and kind."

"God knows that is true," said the man, and wept.

"For better or worse, for richer or poorer." he said, and it seemed to him that the stranger was saying these words at the same time.

At last they reached a street that was more dark, more wretched than any of its neighbours.

The man' stopped at a narrow passage which led to the back of the houses.

"I am going in now," he said simply. "You wait for me here, and when I come back we will start our new life all over again. I shall kill her quickly."

The man of the night made no reply, and Thomas went through the passage, turned at right angles along a narrower strip of path between wooden fences, and so came to a ricketty back gate.

He opened it and went in. He was in a dirty little yard, littered with the jettison of a poor household. There was a tumble down fowl run, and as he walked stealthily to the house, a cock crew loudly.

The back room was empty, as he knew. He pushed up the window. It squeaked a little. He waited for the cock to crow again and mask the sound. Then he swung himself up to the window sill and entered the room.

The point of the knife cut through the thin clothing he wore and he felt a sharp pain in his leg.

He took the knife from his pocket and felt the edge—then he became conscious of the fact that there was somebody in the room.

He gripped the knife tightly and peered through the darkness.

"Who's there?" he whispered.

"It is I," said a voice he knew, the voice of the man of the night.

"How—how did you get in?"

He was amazed and bewildered.

"I came with you," said the voice. "Let us free ourselves of this woman—she dragged you down, she is the weed that chokes your soul."

"Yes—yes," Thomas whispered, and reaching out, found the stranger's hand.

Hand in hand they came to the woman's room.

A cheap night-light was burning on the matleshelf. She lay with one bare arm thrown out of bed, her breast rose and fell regularly. (He had seen something else that had risen and fallen monotonously; what was it? Yes, barges on the river.)

She was handsome in a coarse way, and as she slept she smiled. Some movement of the man disturbed her, for she stirred and murmured a name—it was not the name of him who stood above her, a knife in his shaking hand.

"Do you love her?"

The stranger's voice was very soft.

The husband shook his head.

"Once—I thought so—now..." He shook his head again.

"Do you 'hate her?"

The thief was looking at the sleeping woman earnestly.

"I do not hate her," he said, simply. "I served her because it was my duty..."

"Come," said the stranger, and they left the room together.

Thomas unfastened the street door and they passed again into the dreary night.

"I do not love her: I do not hate her," he said again half to himself. "I went to her because it was my duty—I worked and stole, and she betrayed me—so I thought I would kill her."

The knife was still in his hand.

In silence they traversed the way they came, until they reached a little passage that led to the river.

They turned into this.

At the end of the passage was a flight of stone steps, and they heard the "clug clug" of water as it washed them.

Thomas raised his hand and sent the knife spinning into the river, and a voice hailed him from the foot of the steps.

"That you, Cole?"

His heart almost stopped beating. The voice was hard and metallic. He blinked as though awakened from a sleep.

"Is that you, Cole—who is it?"

Thomas saw a boat at the bottom of the steps. There were four men in it, and one was holding fast with a boat-hook, to an iron ring let into the stone.

"Me," said the thief.

"It ain't Cole," said another voice, disgustedly. "Cole won't turn up—he's drunk."

There was whispering in the boat, then an authoritative voice demanded.

"Want a job, my lad?"

Thomas went down two steps and bent forward.

"Yes—I want a job," he said.

A querulous voice said something about missing the tide. "Can you cook?"

"Yes—I can cook."

He had been employed in this capacity in prison.

"Jump in—sign you on tomorrow—we are going to Valparaiso—steam—how does that suit you?"

Thomas was silent.

"I don't want to come back—here," he said.

"We'll get a better man for the return voyage—jump in."

He got into the boat awkwardly, and the officer at the stern gave an order.

The boat pushed off and then the thief remembered the man of the night.

He could see him plainer than ever he had seen him before. He was a radiant figure standing on the dark edge of the water, his hands outstretched in farewell.

Thomas saw the face, beautiful and benevolent: he saw the faint light that seemed to surround him.

"Behold..." muttered the man in the boat. "It's strange how that text... Good-bye, good-bye, sir..."

"Who are you talking to, mate?" asked the sailor who was rowing.

"The—the man who was with me," said Thomas.

"There was no man with you," said the sailor, scornfully. "You were by yourself."

VIII. — PATRIOTS

A re-write, with different names, of the Carfew story published under the same title in The Windsor Magazine, Jun-Nov 1913 (see The Admirable Carfew)

WHEN William Moss Haggs, the eminent English author, went out from London with the object of introducing to the President and citizens of the United States of America English humour as it really is, he never expected to return to England as soon as he did.

He came back under his contract time because the citizens (the President being unavoidably detained in Washington) listened in stony silence to "Dogeared", that scintillating comedy, and applauded only—and with unmistakable heartiness—when the curtain finally fell.

On the morning he had arrived, William Moss Haggs was interviewed by the reporters and said he liked New York, and loved America with a deep, a true and a passionate love, that he was seriously thinking of buying a house on Fifth Avenue, and that he thought American women were peachlike. He referred, being a humorist, to the sleepiness of Pennsylvania, the culture of Boston, the sinfulness of Portland, Or.* All of which facts he had gathered from a systematic perusal of the Sunday supplements and the book of a Gibson Gir! Musical Comedy.

[* Oregon.]

Just hold down William Moss Haggs whilst I run along and fetch Gertrude Maisie Ellis. Look at her. She is a pretty girl, but oh so angry! Those soft cheeks of hers, that even two years of nightly make-up (to say nothing of two matinees weekly) have not spoilt, are red with wrath.

Two big grey eyes shadowed by long dark lashes, a great mop of goldy-brown hair, immensely unruly, lips generous and delicate of line, chin firm and rounded to perfection, the trimmest figure in cloth that ever delighted the eye of man, and all this under a hat which—well, it was just a hat. The shape was...it was trimmed and ornamented with soft billowy feathers...it was a hat.

She stood upon the deck of the Kaiserin Catherin (she had intended sailing by the Cunarder), but would she sail under the red ensign of an effete and decadent nationality? Would she—!

She went by the German line because the English hated Germany. She hoped the English people noticed the fact that she was returning to God's country under the execrable red, white and black.

Oh, how she hated England—how she hated the English, how she loathed London! It had not always been thus. When she landed she told a solitary and woebegone reporter that she just loved England. That it was like coming home, that the sight of the green lanes and the flowering hedges, the cute little primroses all in bloom, the poppies glowing in the dear cornfields, brought tears to her eyes.

The reporter, who knew enough of botany, horticulture and natural science to realize that Gertrude Maisie Ellis had arrived three months too late for primroses and three months too soon for the poppies, substituted "violets coyly hiding beneath sturdy oaks", and wired a column to London, which was cut down to a stick and tucked away between an inquest and a write-up par about the Gold Dust Twins.

She opened at the Marigold Theatre, Kingsway, with "Helpalong Jane".

A play (I quote from her press agent's unbiassed report) which has placed Gertrude Maisie Ellis in the front rank of the world's great artistes and has earned for her throughout the hemispheres the title of the American Bernhardt, not to say the Californian Dusè.

"Helpalong Jane" was a humorous play. It said so on the programmes. It was full of slang—good East Side slang as a Pittsburg author conceived it. Some of the lines were excruciatingly funny, but a stolid, thick-headed London audience did not laugh. No, it did not laugh, except in the wrong places. The London critics were gentle. They said the dresses were fine, the scenery was fine, the acting was fine, and the play was fine. If it had been much finer they would not have noticed it.

Now if Gertrude Maisie Ellis had been a normal leading woman, a conventional actress, or even just an ordinary sensible girl, she would have blamed the author. Every well-balanced leading woman blames the author if anything goes wrong, and calls a rehearsal where the leading comedian says, "Say, if I came on with my trousers wrong side front I'd get a laugh all right, all right," and the leading man says, "Suppose I come down stage and seize you, Miss Ellis, and say, 'Let the stars be blotted from the velvet vault of heaven before I yield you to any man'?"

No, Gertrude Maisie Ellis did not blame the author... he wasn't there, anyway.

She just blamed London. She blamed the decadent (I've used the word before, but it is a nice word) aristocracy; she blamed the servile and too-old-at-forty Press, she blamed the manager (the English manager), and she attached no small amount of blame to the Court, which had inconveniently chosen that moment to be absent in India.

"You don't want real comedy," she said to an unemotional reporter, "you don't want thoughtful interpretations—you want legs!"

"That's right," said the blushing reporter encouragingly; "just tell me how you like London and what is your impression of the House of Lords."

He also asked her for a farewell message to the people of the metropolis, and she gave it him—good. The City editor, reading it over, reluctantly admired and as reluctantly turned it down.

"I don't think we can print this," he said, "not in the present state of public tension."

Gertrude Maisie Ellis expressed herself freely to the conductor on the boat train, to the chief steward of the Kaiserin Catherin, to such of her fellow passengers who were not too seasick to be interested in the enormities of the British nation, to the neat little stewardess who tidied her cabin and brought her dried toast and weak tea in the morning, to the doctor—oh, to everybody!

She did not express her views so freely about England as did William Moss Haggs, who was at that identical moment confiding his views on the American people to the skipper of the tramp steamerGolden Dawn, that was fighting its way through the broad Atlantic rollers with a westerly gale on its quarter.

William Moss Haggs chose this method of making his exit from the infernal apathy of New York because he was a friend of the owner of this small steamer. The Golden Dawn was two thousand five hundred tons register, and though no passenger-carrying steamer, the accommodation was comfortable enough, the company more agreeable than the company he had quitted, so he told himself. William Moss Haggs was a talkative young man and a good-looking young man, if the truth be told. He was also a friend of the owner's. Not only the captain, but the mate, the second officer, the chief engineer and the second engineer listened with polite interest to all that he had to say, though—let truth prevail—as uncomprehendingly as did the New York audience.

William orated at length on humour. He orated mostly to the captain because he seemed to have most time. William discussed humour from many standpoints: he went back to the comic plays of Aristophanes.

A gleam of interest shone in the eye of Captain Bigger when William Moss Haggs mentioned Aristophanes.

"Oh, I know him!" he said, with a sigh of relief such as a man utters who feels the shelving beach beneath his feet after a long swim in deep water; "keeps a little bar up at Hartlepool—rare joker he is—"

"The Aristophanes I refer to," said William coldly, "was a Greek gentleman and died thousands of years ago." There was an embarrassing silence.

"Then it can't be my Harry," said Captain Bigger uncomfortably, "the Harry Stockness I knew..."

William wrote the word on a piece of paper, and leaning across the saloon table, the captain read it.

"Ah, to be sure!" he said, "the Arry-stopeens! She is in the Black Sea trade, a regular tub of a boat; they took her into dock on the Tyne an' put a couple of rolling chocks on her—comic! I should say she was comic! I've seen her crossin' the Bay, with a twenty-five list on her—"

"You don't quite—" began William Moss Haggs.

"All her starb'd boats awash," continued the enthusiastic skipper, "starb'd dead-lights fast all the voyage—like livin' in a submarine havin' starb'd quarters, only comfortable place in the saloon was to sit on the skylight with your back restin' against the ceilin'..."

William gave him up.

He tried the chief engineer on the subject of America's artistic soul, and spoke eloquently and without contradiction, at the end of which time the chief protested that he had been awake all the time, and offered to repeat the last words that William Moss Haggs had said.

More than this, he took the American side of the controversy.

"I don't agree with you, Mr. Haggs," he said stoutly; "my opinion is that there is a sight more art in the United States than in any other part of the world. Look at their ads.—get any magazine you like and read the advertisements. Do you ever see anything like it in England? An' take the Sunday papers.

There was a bit I read about an ancient Babylonian Temple havin' been dug up in Texas that was better illustrated than..."

William groaned and gave up.

He spent his time now on the unsteady deck of the Golden Dawn, revising the notes of his great work,America as I Saw It, which was to make eighty millions of people feel exceedingly small.

The sea was lumpy though the wind had dropped, but five days out of New York, in somewhere about 45° west and 40° north, they made dead calm with light mists, and in the middle watch the Golden Dawn struck a fog patch which was so thick that the man on the bridge could not see his masthead light.

Captain Bigger slowed her down, though it seemed to William that the boat could not go any slower without going backwards.

"How long will this last?" he asked the captain. Captain Bigger was drinking a cup of strong coffee in the chart-house, and made a rough calculation.

"We ought to get through it in six hours," he said, "if we went full speed."

"What?" retorted William incredulously; "is it twenty miles thick?"

"It..." began the captain, then the gross reflection upon his engine's capacity dawned upon him, and he relapsed into a silence which was at once a rebuke and an act of self-preservation. Every minute the siren of the Golden Dawn screeched fearful defiance at the elements, and every minute William Moss Haggs found himself listening tensely for the elements to answer back. He did not go to bed that night, having an absurd objection to being drowned in his pyjamas. This may be ascribed to the fact that William was a Wesleyan till he found art.

Consequently he was fully clothed when out of the fog, which had thinned somewhat, the Kaiserin Catherin leapt at the little Golden Dawn.

The captain and the chief officer had heard the styrene of the oncoming German boat and had worked out her position. By these calculations the Kaiserin Catherin lay four points off the port bow and should pass two miles to port. Instead of which she did not.

The skipper saw her coming, tiers of blurred lights breaking out of the fog ahead, and snatching the wheel from the quartermaster's hand, put the head of the Golden Dawn hard a-starboard.

But a ship going dead slow is a lazy ship, and the Golden Dawn loafed to starboard hesitatingly, as though for two cents she'd have gone a-port.

William Moss Haggs was sitting in the officers' little saloon reading when the opposite wall of the saloon rushed across and hit him. He staggered up to the deck and found the Golden Dawn settling down by the head, and far away—it seemed—an immense steamer blazing with lights circling round in a big sweep as though so proud of her accomplishment that she was loth to leave the scene of her exploit.

"Muster all hands!"

He heard the captain's voice and the quick pattering of feet on iron alleyways.

"Lower all the boats, Mr. Carter...where's that damn' dude?...oh, there you are, sir. Get into that boat—"

"I have some manuscripts below," began William Moss Haggs.

"Get into the boat," said the obtuse chief officer, who had defective hearing; "there's plenty to eat without troublin' your head about macaroons—besides, this cow of a Dutchman will pick you up...ready below?...down you get."

It was an awkward situation, and one which William had never contemplated. The ocean was beastly unsteady and it was cold, and there were boatloads of coarse men in his vicinity who celebrated their rescue from an untimely end by the employment of violent language. He came to the gangway of theKaiserin Catherin with one cause for satisfaction...he was not in his pyjamas. The decks were crowded with people, some of whom were not at all suitably dressed.

William Moss Haggs found himself in the ornamental smoke-room surrounded by a crowd of eager enquirers. People he had never met before offered him hot and pungent drinks under the impression that they were rendering first-aid. He learnt from them more than they discovered from him, namely that all the boats had been picked up and the Golden Dawn had gone down; that the Kaiserin Catherinwas undamaged, save for a buckled plate or two, and that everybody had been scared most to death. There were a number of ladies in the throng about him, and one of these was indubitably pretty.

Moreover, she had offered him smelling-salts on his arrival in the smoke-room, and accordingly was entitled to also offer him consolation and comfort.

"Well, anyhow," she smiled, after he had concluded an exciting narrative of his adventures..."I heard the crash and immediately sprang to the deck...I took charge of one of the boats...No, I assure you I wasn't a bit nervous...I lost a great many valuable manuscripts..."

"Well, anyway, you're going back to God's country, the only place for an artist."

"I beg your pardon?" gasped William.

"You're going back to America," said the girl with animation.

"That," said William Moss Haggs deliberately, "is the greatest sorrow I have—the sorrow which transcends all others—the fly in the ointment. I am wondering," he said, "whether it wouldn't have been better to die..."

She was speechless with indignation. This was gratitude! She had saved his life—she and the ship and the sailors. She had assisted him aboard—at least, a Hamburg quartermaster had, and it was all charged for in the passage money.

"Why—you—you Englishman!" she cried fiercely.

The next morning they met again. She would have passed him in dignified silence if she had followed her line of thought to a logical conclusion. But she was not logical—she was a woman. (Wait a moment before you condemn the cheap sneer.)

He would have answered her salutation coldly and resumed reading his book with significant earnestness if he had been consistent. But he was not consistent—he was a man. (Now you may criticize my conclusions, for I have shown that neither were perfect, except in the perfection of type.)

Both obeyed the instincts of pugnacity.

ROUND I

"How are you feeling this morning, Mr. Haggs?"

"Thank you, very well, though rather depressed."

"Ah well, little old New York will put you right." Groan and a look of patience-in-suffering.

"You're the author of the play 'Dogeared', aren't you?"

"I am—they tell me you have had a London season?"

"London season!"

Oh, the contempt of it!

ROUND II

"Your play didn't seem to fit, Mr. Haggs!"

"The play was all right, Miss Ellis—the audience was wrong." A sigh.

"Dear old New York! It is particular."

"Did you find the London playgoer—er—enthusiastic?" A snort.

He glanced sideways at her. She was pretty indeed. There was the dearest stray curl over the rine forehead, the lips were red with the red of health...William Moss Haggs unconsciously adjusted his tie.

ROUND III

"Did you see the National Gallery when you were in Town?"

"Town?"

"London" (firmly). "There's only one town, Miss Ellis."

"Pouf! Yes—I think I did. It is that funny little shack on Waterloo Square—"

"Trafalgar Square, Miss Ellis."

"Oh, I know it was named after one of your defeats."

Knock-out.

The fighting progressed in spasms for the rest of the day.

The Kaiserin Catherin's damaged bow knocked a hundred miles a day off the usual run, and passengers who had carefully allocated their work or their play on the basis of a quick run found themselves with time on their hands. William Moss Haggs was the candle which attracted Moth Gertrude Maisie.

She simply could not leave the young man in peace.

On the first day she exhausted every possibility of the Monarchy, the English aristocracy and their predilection for American heiresses, Bunkers

Hill, the "Alabama incident", the Cockney accent, the funereal character of English humour, the Boer War, and the servility of English servants.

He had retorted with the Panama Canal Bill, the vulgarity of Pittsburg millionaires, college football, the corruption of politics, the police scandal (a safe ground, for there is always a police scandal in New York: either the police are too strict or too lax), and the graft of corporations.

The conversation invariably swung round to audiences and their stupidity.

One morning—it was thirty-six hours distant from Sandy Hook—Gertrude Maisie came on deck in a pleasant frame of mind. The day was bright and sunny, the sea was smooth, she had eaten a good breakfast, and New York lay under the western horizon.

William was reading "Dogeared", a printed copy which was in his jacket pocket on the night of his rescue.

He would have thrust it out of sight, but the girl had already seen it, therefore William Moss stuck to his guns valiantly and was reading with evident enjoyment when the girl came upon the scene.

"Reading?" she asked.

She had the right motherly and domineering air due to the shipwrecked.

"I am."

"May I see it—please?"

She was very charming this morning, and really, beyond the ridiculous prejudice she had in favour of New York and the inflated value he placed upon the intelligence of Londoners, they were excellently disposed one to the other. He passed the book to her without a word. It was curious that he should know that whatever might be her mental attitude toward his great work, she would not hurt him.

She read the first act through in silence.

He for his part gazed abstractedly at the green waters rushing past in a simulation of disinterestedness in her perusal.

She turned to the second act, read it; then the third act—he saw this out of the corner of his eye.

Then she closed the little book and looked at him very seriously.

"And was this a failure?" she asked.

"In New York, yes," he replied carelessly.

"Has it been produced in London?"

He shook his head.

"Not yet," he said.

She turned the leaves of the play absentmindedly. "Your leading woman—was she English?"

William Moss Haggs nodded.

Only a sense of loyalty to a countrywoman prevented him from expressing his view that the leading lady had been responsible for much of its failure, for whilst the New York audience had no great appreciation of English humour, the leading woman in "Dogeared" had no sense of humour at all.

She nodded.

"I know where this play went wrong," she said, her eyes kindling, "I know just what's wrong in it—Mr. Haggs"—she leant across to him from the deck-chair where she had seated herself, and laid her hand on his knee with the frank friendliness of a sister artist—"I'll revive this in New York—I've got pull enough, if you'll rewrite where I suggest."

He looked at her dubiously.

"My dear girl," he said, shaking his head, "you'd ruin your reputation—it's no use—"

"I'll revive it—will you allow me?"

He thought a moment.

"On one condition," he said slowly, "and it is that you play the lead when I produce it in London."

"Yes," said Gertrude Maisie Ellis, to the representative of the London Times-Herald, "I love England; the sight of those cute little primroses just brings tears to my eyes. I can't tell you anything more about 'Dogeared' than you already know. It played to big houses in New York and it has won for me my European reputation."

"What are your future plans, Miss Ellis?"

The girl hesitated and flushed pink.

"Well, I'm going over now with my husband, William Moss Haggs, to our home in New Jersey, and I guess I—well, I shall be engaged for a few months to come…you see"—she was a little incoherent—"my husband loves America so much that he's anxious…Good-bye."

The reporter, who was a wise old married man of twenty-four, smiled inside, though outwardly he was very solemn.

IX. — THE FUTURE LADY SHELHOLME

No record of prior publication under this title found

I MET George Callifer at the Club, a little nervous, a little hectic, but I was not alarmed. The hectoids of 55, notoriously bon vivant, lovers of old brandy and the like, never ditresses me.

He was chewing a clove reflectively and I wondered which member of our set had done old George in the eye.

He was dressed with unusual care, his plaid trousers irreproachably creased, his patent boots glistening like the pictures which advertise somebody's boot polish, his morning coat speckless. I did not see his hat which was in the hands of the Club attendant.

George is a white haired reprobate, too red of face to be lovable, too ready with his three-months-after-date-I-promise-to-pay-ness.

Not that he borrows money—he is a lender rather, and the head of an anonymous syndicate which helps the impecunious, but optimistic legatees of tomorrow. He helps them and helps himself and there are notes of hand in his steel safe (he has an office in Curzon Street) which would redeem for a quarter of a million.

At this early hour of the morning George is usually sleeping the sound sleep which nature bestows upon children and usurers, so it was surprising to see him in all his gorgeous raiment. He looked up at me, his usually trim, grey moustache abristle, his rather small eyes gleaming anxiously, and came over to me without preliminary.

"You're the chap I want to see," he said fussily. "Come'n sit down—come'n sit down."

George suspects me because I never borrow money from him: he respects me because I once threatened to expose him as an unregistered money lender; he admires me, because I once threatened to kick him out of the club.

"Would you strike a man with grey hairs?" he had demanded, seemingly shocked.

"I'd kick you if you were bald," said I.

"Good boy," said George, "you have the right spirit."

I don't know what he meant, but I do know that he was scared.

I did not want to sit down on this present occasion, but I was in a yielding mood, because it was Monday and there was no racing and there was nothing before dinner.

"D'ye know Shelholme?" he asked suddenly as we sat. I nodded.

"Good—personally?"

I nodded again and George looked relieved.

"I left him in Paris three days ago," I said, "is he back in town?"

George said, "Yes, he was indeed back in town, at least he's at Shelholme," he said, "and I want to see him, Jimmy," he went on earnestly, "and I want a little moral support."

I was too languid to be angry.

"My dear George," said I, "you don't get me on any dunning expeditions—if you lend money to young Harwood his nephew, you do so with your eyes open—"

"No, no, no!" he laid his hand—a shaky, old hand it was this morning—on my arm. "It isn't money, Jimmy—I wouldn't dire you into such a damnable expedition—it's something important. I've got to break the news, old boy—"

"Don't call me 'old boy'," I snarled.

"I've got to put Lord Shelhome in possession of certain information—now listen."

I listened and laughed. Poor Shelholme! An admirable recluse!

"The devil of it is," said George, "that the girl, for some reason, objects to Shelholme's secretary—you have heard of Miss Gee?"

I nodded. "I know the excellent Miss Gee—a pretty woman of a girl, old enough to smile at folly, young enough to be fondly foolish if she was well partnered."

"So come along," urged George, "there's a train from Charing Cross at 12.40. I've promised Harwood I'd go down and tell the tale—he's motoring down himself to receive the avuncular forgiveness."

I accepted the invitation with alacrity—I could have desired no better way of passing the day.

So to Shelholme Abbey.

I should not have gone but for several circumstances—I despise Harwood most intensely, and I dislike Florrie as much as any human being can dislike another, without temptation to homicide.

All the way down in the train George explained the purity of his motives and the singleness of his purpose. George (according to George) is one of those red-faced angels who combine a passion for old cognac with a benevolent and disinterested desire to make smooth the path of the virtuous.

"One word," said I, before the train drew up at Budcome Junction, "does young Harwood owe you any money?"

"Certainly not!" said George with righteous indignation.

"Does Florrie owe you money?" I persisted.

George hesitated.

"I have advanced her a little upon her contracts," he said airily, "but nothing—dear boy—nothing to make a song about."

"But suppose," I pressed, "suppose you were engaged in writing a lyric—what would rhyme to I.0.U.?"

"A thousand or two," said George, not without poetical feeling.

I whistled but understood.

The fly driver who drove us up to the Abbey, volunteered the information that the Earl had returned.

"We don't see much of his lordship," said the loquacious flyman shouting his confidences across his left shoulder, "what with him spendin' all his time on the Continent an' all, the Abbey's shut up nine munse in the year."

I gently suggested that he should follow the Abbey's example, and we heard no more. It was rude of me, but I didn't know how much the flyman knew and I didn't want him to spoil the fun.

Fat Burton, the butler, received us in the library, fat Burton, all shirt-front and face. He looked coldly on George, from which I gathered that this was not the first visit our friend had paid to Shelholme. Me, he regarded with

greater friendship, him going so far as to remark, very differentially, that it was a fine morning for this time of the year.

I agreed with heartiness and George took up the dialogue. Where was Lord Shelholme, and could he be seen?

"His lordship is changing, Sir George," said Burton.

George drew a sigh of relief—anyway it was a respite.

"Good," he said. "How long will he be?"

"Half an hour, Sir George—I'll tell him you are here."

He made for the door with majestic and butler-like step.

"Burton—just a moment."

Burton came back.

"Burton," said George, "I want a word with you on a delicate matter—a very delicate matter, Burton."

He waggled his hairy head and I saw a gleam of interest in the butler's eyes.

"You can trust me, Sir George—I'm a family man," he said.

George was taken aback.

"Thanks," he said hastily, "but it's not that kind of delicate matter. Now—how shall I put it? Have you noticed in his lordship's behaviour anything—what shall I say—that would suggest that he has heard bad news?"

Picture George, legs outstretched, hands clasped behind his back, his head on one side.

"Bad news, Sir George?" repeated Burton, scenting death With the morbid eagerness of the lower classes.

"Well, not exactly bad news, but—er—uncomfortable news."

Burton shook his head—eager for details, but unable to supply as much as a hat band to the general mourning.

"No, Sir George, he seems happy enough," he said, reluctantly.

"He hasn't spoken about Mr. Harwood?"

So this is the late departed, said Burton's eyes.

"No, Sir George," he said, and was ready to be respectfully tearful.

"Of course you know that Mr. Harwood is a great friend of mine," said George—somewhat unnecessarily, "and all that sort of thing—and that he is also the heir to the title and to the fortune of his lordship."

"Yes, Sir," said Burton, encouraged by my friend's' diffusion. "I read something about it in Reynolds—there was a rare article on our decadent aristocracy—begging your pardon—of course that don't apply to you, Sir."

He addressed George, who is a baronet of the United Kingdom and half an aristocrat, at any rate. I think George was ruffled.

"Don't be impertinent Burton," he said warningly, "don't be so damned personal, Burton—if his lordship knew you read that kind of paper!" he shook his head. Burton protested his innocence and George went on impressively. "Now look here, Burton, I've got some unpleasant news to tell his lordship—Mr. Harwood is married."

Burton was not shocked, I'll swear, but he felt some emotion was due.

"Good Lord, Sir George!" he said reverently.

George nodded. He approved of the profanity, for undoubtedly the occasion demanded it.

"Yes—he's married, and he's married a very nice young lady—a very nice young lady," said George, and challenged me with his eyes to contradict him, "whether his lordship will he as enthusiastic about the match as I am, and as Mr. Harwood is, and as—" he looked at me for encouragement, but I gave him none, and he went on—"remains to be seen. Now, I want you to help me—isn't that Miss Gee?" he asked suddenly.

I had seen Miss Gee through the French windows, long before George spotted her.

"That's Miss Greyborough, Sir George," said Burton, correctly, and George whistled.

"Greyborough!" he said. "That explains everything—I thought her name was Gee?"

"That's one of his lordship's—" Burton was at a loss for a respectful word.

"Fads?" suggested George.

Burton would not make so bold as to say "fad"—"It was Lord Shelholme's way," he said—"gentlemen's fads are always 'ways.'"

Dorothy Greyborough came in just then, and very beautiful she looked, I thought. She smiled at me wisely and smiled at George—blankly. As for George, he was all middle-aged grace and gallantry.

"Good afternoon, Miss Greyborough," said he pleasantly.

"Good afternoon, Sir George."

She took his hand and smiled at me again.

If I looked blank, it was because I did not wish to wink in front of Burton.

George was conversational and waggish, a sure sign of nervousness.

"Had a pleasant holiday?"

"Very pleasant."

He shook his head waggishly indeed. "Gallivanting all over the continent with a bachelor Earl—you'll be getting your name into the papers!"

This, though he knew that Shelhome provided her with a chaperone. That she was necessary to him in his work, and that really what did it matter, since private secretaries are.

The toss of her head told George all this.

"I agree," he said, "what does it matter? Do you know I never knew your name was Greyborough before today?" he turned the conversation deftly, but to some purpose.

"Really?" she said. She was arranging some flowers and was not greatly interested.

"I wonder if you have any relations?" mused George. It was a joy to watch him slipping into the pit. I said nothing, but inside me I was a wrinkle of laughter.

"I wonder," she repeated coolly, and George was nonplussed for the moment. She put him on his mettle with her pretty.

"But have you?"

"Everybody has," she replied.

"You haven't got a sister by any chance?" George can be devilish sly.

"I have a half sister," she said quietly.

"She isn't—of course it's absurd—" George showed how absurd it was by an absurdly artificial laugh—"she isn't Florrie Greyborough of the Jollity?"

She remarked that it was a fine morning. I looked round for Burton, but he had gone.

"Oh, come Miss Greyborough," George protested playfully.

She was leaning over a desk, arranging the flowers, now she straightened herself and wiped her hands.

"Sir George," she said without heat, "you know me as Lord Shelhome's secretary, for the moment I prefer to let my domestic affairs rest."

Check for George. Nothing upsets these downy birds like a little honesty of speech.

"Believe me, I am not asking from any motive of idle curiosity," he said in a flurry, "but if Florrie—if Miss Greyborough is your sister—well, it is a remarkable coincidence," he paused. "She is married," he said, dropping his bomb-shell.

The girl was startled. "Married?"

"Married to Lord Shelholme's heir—Mr. Harold Harwood," said George theatrically.

"Florrie—married!" She was speaking half to herself.

George had disagreeable business to perform, and I allowed him to do it. I felt a malicious delight in watching the scene.

"I'll tell you something else," he said, speaking with emphasis, "she is not particularly pleased to know you are here in Lord Shelholme's confidence. Of course, I had no idea you were her sister, but she spoke rather—well, rather—"

"Unpleasantly?" the girl supplied the word without any evidence of resentment.

"No-no," said George, "you understand that I don't want to make mischief, but I hardly think that you were very good friends!"

Miss Dorothy Gee or whatever her name was, laughed quietly.

"She is my half sister," she said, "neither she nor my stepmother were exactly my friends. I was the Cinderella of the family—did the housework when Florrie was being prepared for the Stage—there the analogy ends, for she was not ugly and—"

She stopped and George finished the sentence.

"And there was no fairy prince, eh? Well, you ought to know that she is coming here and in your own interest you should know that she isn't too well disposed towards you."

He was intent on doing his job of work, was old George. I sometimes think that he was not closely related to the Galahads.

"Now take my advice," he pursued, "however much Lord Shelhome may resent the marriage, they are bound be become good friends, for Harold is a dear boy, though somewhat of a slacker: you clear out and give your sister a chance of making good with his lordship, because—"

This is where Shelholme came in. He looked at me and winked.

Shelholme was George's age, but had acquired no taste for the...He was, what I might term the Forbes Robertson type in those days, if you can picture Forbes Robertson with a smiling eye. He was cordial enough to George.

"Ah, George," he said, "what do you want so early in the day? I thought you never got out of bed before sunset."

My friend was amused.

"Somebody has libelled me, Shelholme."

Shelholme walked to the window briskly and looked out—a trick of his when he is happy.

"Well, what brings you down," he asked in his jerky fashion, "has that precious nephew of mine been borrowing money from you?"

"My dear Shelholme!" said the injured George.

Tippy Shelholme chuckled.

"Oh, I know that you're his friend and all that sort of thing and he's the dearest boy in the world, and boys will be boys," he rattled on, "but the last time you came it cost me twelve hundred pounds!"

"I didn't press for it," responded George, reproachfully.

"No, but you got it," said my dry lord, "between men of the world George, there need be no humbugging, you're a good cent per cent friend of that young and reckless aristocracy—but just now I know that Harold has plenty of money. Oh, by the way, Dorothy—" he turned to the girl.

Dorothy! I saw the snap in George's bilious eyes.

"You might write a letter to Harwood."

"If I may interrupt," George intervened.

"Yes?"

"He's coming to see you today."

"Oh, indeed!" said the polite Shelholme.

"He has something to tell you," said George mysteriously and Shelholme's lips twitched.

"You seem to have something to tell me also, you are simply busting with intelligence—now what is it?"

George cleared his throat.

"Shelhome," he said with all solemnity, "you and I have been friends for many years."

"I wouldn't go so far as that," said Shelhome, "let us say we have known one another for a long time."

George ignored the offensive pleasantry.

"You know that I am fond of Harold," he said.

"I know that you lend him money on note of hand," said Shelholme.

"That is unworthy of you." You would have imagined that George was wounded. "You hurt me damnably Shelhome—you treat me as though I were an infernal money-lender."

"I think all money-lenders are infernal," smiled my lord, "but go on with your sad story, what is the dreadful news you are trying to break?"

"I wouldn't call it dreadful," demurred George, "well, not to put too fine a point on it—Harold is married!"

Here was the real bombshell, delivered as per label.

"Married?"

Shelholme was indeed surprised.

"Married," repeated George profoundly.

"You don't mean to say," protested Shelholme, "that that young cub has found a woman so lost to a sense of—is she blind or something?" he asked with a jerk of his head.

"No, Shelholme, she is not blind."

"Harold married! Good God! Did you hear that, Dorothy?" He turned sharply to the girl, an interested listener.

"I heard it—before," she said. "He has married my—half sister."

Shelholme gasped.

"Not the actress person?"

Dorothy nodded.

"How very droll!"

"He ought to have asked your consent, I told him—" broke in George, but Shelholme cut him short.

"Nonsense," he said, "I don't mind. What the devil has it got to do with me—I'm not marrying her."

Sir George Callifer drew a long breath.

"I'm relieved to find you take the matter in so good a spirit, I must say, Shelholme, you're a good sportsman—Isn't he Jimmy?"

But I mid nothing. I caught Shelholme's eye, but still I said nothing.

"Don't be offensive, George," he said. "I'm not a good sportsman—I'm a good judge of pictures and if you'll come along I'll show you a Ribeira Espanalito

which I picked up in Ronda last month, that will make your mouth water. Harold married—well that's a joke."

He grabbed George by the arm and led him from the room. I heard his loud laugh echoing down the corridor, and found myself grinning in sympathy.

Dorothy looked at me.

"I wonder," she began, but I stopped her.

"Don't make me talk," I pleaded, "I am enjoying myself so much."

"But—" she began again just as Burton came in.

"Would his lordship see Mr. Harwood and—Mrs. Harwood, miss?"

I nodded my head behind Burton.

"In here Miss, or in the drawing-room?"

I signalled "in here."

"Here I think," said Dorothy, wonderfully meek and obedient, considering all things.

I knew Harwood, of course, a weed of a stick—sucking boy, somewhat chinless. I knew Florrie by sight. I had seen her dancing at the Jollity and had been introduced to her at a night club.

Harold stared at me—I have been rude to him on one occasion. Florrie coyed me, then remembered my rudeness to her husband and froze. She was pretty in a picture postcard way, but somewhat over-Paquined.

"Where's Uncle, Burton," croaked Harold—I'll bet he had the devil of a thirst.

"He's in the gallery, Sir," said Burton.

"Anyone with him?"

"Sir George Callifer," said Burton.

"Phew!" said Harold relieved. "Thank the Lord for that, get me a whisky and soda, Burton."

"Yes, Sir."

The new Mrs. Harwood fixed her new lorgnettes and surveyed the library.

"Not a bad place, Hal," she said in her 'Now I'm in Society' voice, "reminds me rather of the Trocadero."

Harold scowled at me, but I'll swear I didn't laugh. I've had to cough for weeks.

Mrs. Harwood saw Dorothy, and walked over to her.

"Well, Dorothy?" she said, and there was something in the "well, Dorothy" that was very threatening.

"Well?" asked Dorothy, looking up.

"Here I am you see," said Mrs. Harwood, "and here are you."

She was immensely obvious was Mrs. Harwood.

"I see," said Dorothy and went on with her work.

"Rather a change from the old days," insisted the future Lady Shelholme. "I always said I'd get there—didn't I?"

Burton came in with a whisky, and showed signs of wanting to stay, but I looked at him very hard.

"Yes, you were always going to get somewhere," confessed Dorothy.

There was something in Dorothy's manner which irritated our new Mrs. Harwood.

"Just drop your work for a minute and listen to me," she, said with asperity, and the obedient Dorothy leant back. "I don't want any of your airs, my dear—I never could stand 'em and I'm not going to stand 'em now."

This, I think, was for my benefit. You see I am the Honourable James Coltsen and she was the Honourable Mrs. Harold Harwood, and between Honourables there should be no family secrets.

"I'm very sorry," said Dorothy.

"You understand the position," said Mrs. Harwood. "I am the future Countess of Shelholme and you're a two pound a week secretary."

"Oh, I say, Florrie," this feebly from Harold, who after all was a gentleman.

"You shut up when a lady's speaking," said his wife coldly, "as I was saying, you're a two pound a week typist..."

Dorothy smiled.

"You're not exactly right—three pounds is the sum,"

"Don't make me a liar for a pound," said Mrs. Harwood hotly. "I might as well tell you that I'm coming backward and forward here, and I don't want to see you. If you've got any sense of decency, you'll clear out."

Again Dorothy smiled—at me, I imagined.

"Then I'm afraid I haven't a sense of decency—for I shall not clear out," she said.

Mrs. Harwood was clearly shocked.

"What!" she said. "Do you think I'm going to have you here—to have the servants say, 'Oh, yes, the typist is her ladyship's sister'—"

"You're rather premature," said the girl, "Lord Shelholme is by no means dead."

She had come round to Mrs. Harwood's side of the desk—now she went back to her chair and sat down.

"You haven't altered a bit," she said, en route. Mrs. Harwood—may I call her Florrie—went very red.

"I want no impudence. What do you mean by that?" she demanded.

"I mean that you are the same, that is all," said the girl.

"Don't you know a lady when you see one?" asked Florrie.

Dorothy offered no information on the subject. As for Harwood, he was apprehensive.

"Oh, I say," in his agitation he bleated to me, "ring the bell, will you?"

"Are you going to stand by and see me insulted in my own house, so to speak," demanded a trembling, but Honourable Mrs. Harwood. "You can take a month's notice, Miss!"

"I'm afraid you can't give use notice," said our Dorothy demurely, "you see I'm employed by Lord Shelholme."

Mrs. Harwood was aroused.

"You can take your notice from the future Lady Shelholme," she said dramatically.

Shelholme was standing in the doorway alone. Whether he had poisoned George, or dropped George out of the window, I cannot say.

He had caught the last words and came into the middle of the room.

"So she can," he said, "but who is the future Lady Shelholme?"

He asked eagerly, as one anxious to be informed.

Harold greeted his relative with a feeble smile:

"Hello, Uncle," he squeaked. "My wife."

Shelholme bowed.

"Your wife, really?" he was all politeness. "How do you do?"

As for Mrs. Harwood, she was at her musical comedy best, in an instant.

"I'm sure I'm glad to see you Lord Shelholme, Harold is always talking about you—you look much younger than I expected," she added archly. (Alas! my Florrie, Shelholme has been flattered by experts!).

"That's rather disappointing, isn't it?" he grunted.

"Why, whatever do you mean?"

He did not enlighten her, for a calm Harold blundered into the conversation.

"Uncle," he blushed, "I'm awfully sorry to get married without writing and all that sort of thing."

Shelholme waved apologies aside.

"Oh, nonsense," he said easily, "what does it matter?"

"You're not wild?" asked Harold anxiously.

"Not a bit."

And Shelholme so far forgot himself to pat his nephew's shoulder.

Mrs. Harwood murmured aloud that he was an old dear.

"But not so old, eh?"

You see Shelholme is not very well known in England. He is not a politician and he hasn't run away with anybody's wife—two accomplishments which ensure fame.

"I spend a great deal of my time abroad," he said conversationally, "picking up unconsidered masterpieces—I and my admirable secretary, whom you have just sacked."

There was malice is this and Florrie shifted awkwardly.

"I—I—of course."

But Shelholme raised his hand.

"I don't mind," he said, "not a bit, as a matter of fact I was thinking of getting another secretary—you agree Dorothy?"

The girl nodded.

"I quite agree," she said and Mrs. Harwood felt, I do not doubt, that she had been admitted to the family circle.

"I think you're right, I do upon me word," she said. "You know what servants are, Lord Shelholme, how they talk, and of course as the future Lady Shelhome..."

She was rather keen on that phrase.

"There is no future Lady Shelholme," my lord interrupted her gently, "at least none known to me, I hope."

"No future Lady Shelholme!" gasped Florrie.

"Not as matters stand," said Shelholme. "You see I'm not an old man, but I have been a very lonely one—so I got married in Paris a month ago."

Bombshell for bombshell.

"But—but," Mrs. Harwood wailed, "where's your wife?"

Shelholme rose and extended his hand to Dorothy.

"Permit me—Mrs. Harold Harwood—the Countess of Shelholme. Harold, you may kiss the hand of your aunt."

He smiled at me, did the Earl of Shelholme—you see, I had been his best man.

X. — THE XMAS GIFT

No record of prior publication under this title found

NO doubt but that Mr. Grewley Carey was a kind man. When slum tenants talk of their landlord as "kind" they usually mean that he is imbecile, but Mr. G. Carey was a very sane gentleman. He was a merchant of sorts, had a house in the region of St. John's Wood, possessed his own motor-car, and added to his attractions, for he was stout and wheezy and rather bibulous of face, a handful of diamonds which sparkled on every finger. His activities were numerous. He lent money in one name and sold and bought land in another. He had a warehouse in the East End (under another name altogether), where he bought cloth and soft goods generally. Most of the big manufacturers had the name of Kern on their books, but he bought little from them, preferring to deal with mysterious little firms that did all the buying from the same manufacturers but made no payments whatever.

In other words, he was a receiver of property, acquired by a nest of long-firm swindlers, though this fact was never brought home to him. Only once was Mr. Carey nearly caught with the goods...

The night after the arrest of Mr. Joe Bains, Inspector Malling, the cleverest man at Scotland Yard, called on him at his house in Averbury Road. Mr. Carey listened, pained and astonished.

"Why, the man's mail!" he said. "I've never spoken to him in my life, except once when I went to collect the rent," he added hastily, when he saw a gleam of scepticism in the detective's eyes.

Malling was not impressed.

"An hour before we made the raid," he said carefully, "two large tin boxes containing a million francs in forged Swiss currency were removed front Bains' house by a man who drove a car. The car was chased by a detective on a motor-bicycle and was overtaken on the Chelmsford Road. You were the driver."

Mr. Carey smiled.

"And did you find two or one or ten tin boxes?" he asked sardonically. "I admit I was pulled up by the police, but they made a mistake in the West Ham traffic and followed the wrong car."

"There were no boxes in the car," agreed Malling. "My own theory is that they were unshipped on the road."

"Have you found 'em?" asked the triumphant Carey.

He could afford to ask this question, for he had dropped the boxes in a little pond by the side of the road.

Afterwards, when the affair blew over, he made many furtive excursions in the dark to locate that pond—but in those days there were many water holes by the roadside, and he was too conscious of the fact that he was under observation to continue the search. After all, it was bad money, not worth the paper it was printed on, and he gave up the search.

But he never met Inspector Malling in the street without a sardonic smile, and Malling found that evidence of his failure. He did a more foolish thing than this: he boasted of having "put one over" on the inspector, and Inspector John Malling sat up and took notice.

Soon after, a man named Mr. Kerritt came to live at 43 Barnet Road, Tidal Basin. Whether he was Tom Kerritt or Augustus Kerritt nobody knew. Exactly how he spelt his name nobody bothered, for the excellent reason that nobody ever had the slightest desire to spell his name. He was an alleged American, which excused many of his eccentricities. Against the American theory was the testing standard of loquacity and the unhappy habit of not speaking the truth.

In the East End of London, when a man begins a story, "Have you heard what the American said to the Scotsman?" you know that it will depend for its laugh upon the unveracity of the one and the meanness of the other. This is very lamentable, but, as the communiques used to say, it is the truth.

Mr. Kerritt's taciturnity and his failure to tell stories, tall or low, somewhat shook the faith of the American party but gave no considerable advantage to those who decided that he was a Swede.

The untidy women of Barnet Street who used to stand at their doorways from morning till night, their large arms wrapped in their aprons, discussing their husband's, son's or brother's laziness with other ladies of leisure, were agreed upon one point, namely that Mr. Kerritt was seafaring. This was obvious because he wore a blue jersey which had been embroidered with the name of a ship until he had picked out the scarlet wool which branded him with his last address, and because he was a man who was tanned and a little weather-beaten.

But why he went to live with them Bains at 43, none could imagine. Them Bains consisted of a bedridden aunt—she was always referred to as "the aunt" and was removed to the infirmary the week before Mr. Kerritt came—

and a slip of a girl of 20. Uncle was in gaol and had been so for three years—and would be so for another twelve years, for he was a lifer, being concerned in an attempt to increase the evidence of Switzerland's national wealth. As a side line he did some very pretty designs in French and Spanish banknotes, so lifelike that quite a number of people, including the President of the Bank of Spain, were deceived thereby.

To the scandal of the neighbourhood, which was honest and dirty, law-abiding but thriftless, three busies came down from the Yard one night—three unknown "busyfellows"—they call them "busies" for short—and took Bains out of his bed and removed a whole trunk load of copper plates, engraving tools, and Barnet Road knew him no more. Barnet Road was sympathetic, but them Bains, now reduced to a rather pale and tired-eyed girl, rejected sympathy and metaphorically and literally closed the door in the outraged face of their slatternly but virtuous neighbours. Mr. Kerritt came home one bitter November evening, his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets, his worn peaked hat on the back of his head. There was a month's growth of beard on his face, which did not add to his personal beauty, though his features were regular and his eyes rather fine.

At the corner of the street he was arrested by a wheedling and apologetic smile, supported by the detention of a hand which was not over-clean.

He glared down at the little woman in the shawl and the golf cap.

"Excuse me, Mister Kerritt," she said, with the humility with which the poor white always faces the unknown factors of life, "it's a liberty I'm taking, though I hope you won't regard it as such, but me havin' sons of my own—"

She came after long preliminary to the facts. Did he know the kind of house he was in? (God forgive her if she did anybody any harm, she prayed piously); and did he know that Bains was doing time? (It was not for her to run down anybody, but dooty's dooty.) And did he know that the neighbours thought he ought to know?

He looked down at her with an expressionless face.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said, and walked on. Not altogether a satisfactory answer to her informative inquiries. Kerritt opened the door of No. 43 and passed through. He closed the door behind him gently and mounted the short flight of stairs that led to his room.

If the house was scrupulously clean and the passage and stairway a model of patched and mended neatness, his room, poorly furnished as it was, was speckless.

A square of threadbare carpet was in the centre of the floor. A small bed was in one corner and a big table was near the window. There was a chair near the bright fire, and in this he sat, exchanging his boots for a pair of old slippers.

He had hardly completed this operation before there came a knock at the door and the girl came in with a cap of tea. She put it down on the table in silence and turned to go. She reached the door and hesitated—then came back.

"Mr. Kerritt," she said quietly, and he looked up from the business of filling his pipe, "I was cleaning the windows downstairs and I saw Mrs. Hopkins stop you—did she tell you anything about us?"

He nodded.

"Did she tell you that my poor uncle declared he was innocent?"

"No." said the other laconically; "she didn't get as far as that."

Again she hesitated, and he did not give her any encouragement to go on, stooping to poke the fire.

"My uncle was a very clever engraver, and quite believed that he was working for a government," she said. "He had been in the Bank of England engraving department and had been discharged for drinking. When Mr.—when somebody offered him the work, my uncle believed there was nothing wrong in it."

The sailor looked up with a smile.

"I shouldn't let it worry you. You were going to say Mr. Carey? But Mr. Carey swore at the trial that he had never spoken to your uncle?"

The girl drew a long breath.

"I know," she said.

"And he's your landlord too," said Mr. Kerritt suggestively. "Your neighbours put forward that fact as a proof of his forgiving nature."

She did not answer this.

He was looking at her thoughtfully. Her pale beauty, her helplessness, made a strong appeal to him. He had found himself thinking about her in his daily rambles—wondering what she would do now that her aunt had been moved

to the infirmary—and how he could approach her with his great plan. Evidently she was thinking of her aunt too.

"Mr. Kerritt," she said, with a certain desperation as though she were engaged in a disagreeable task, "I'm afraid I shall have to ask you to go. You see, now that Aunt is away...I can't have you in this house alone—and I'm thinking of going into lodgings."

He nodded. His opportunity had come.

"I intended talking to you about that," he said. "In fact, I was going to make a suggestion. A—er—friend of mine has sold me a little cottage on the Epping road. If you could get a girl friend to stay with you, I could offer you the use of this place at a pound a week salary—on one condition."

She looked at him quickly.

"I don't like conditions," she said, and he laughed, and for the first time she saw that he was rather good-looking.

"The first condition, is that, if you're asked who is the owner of the cottage, you tell them it is your property. The second condition is that, if you sell it, I get a half of the proceeds."

She was bewildered.

"I don't understand."

"Let me put it plainly to you," he said good-humouredly. "I believe I'm going to give you the handsomest Christmas present that you're likely to receive."

It took her a long time to make up her mind, but that evening came a note from the infirmary authorities saying that her aunt could no longer be kept in that institution (it was a doctor who wrote) and suggesting that, if she were taken into the country, her health might be considerably improved. That settled the matter for Grace Bains. She saw Mr. Kerritt in the morning, and one afternoon a fortnight later he took her and her aunt to the little bungalow that stood by the side of the Epping road.

It was a tiny jerry-built affair, and she wondered why he had bought it. But both the situation, lonely as it was, and the accommodation, were ideal for her purpose. A week later Barnet Road knew them no more.

Mr. Kerritt came down to see them a few days after they were installed.

"There's only one thing I want to tell you, and impress upon you," he said. "This bungalow is built on the site of little pond, which is well-drained and filled with gravel, so you've nothing to worry about from the point of view of health."

"Why do you tell me that?" she smiled.

Already the colour had come to her cheeks, and her eyes had a new brightness.

"Because I want to give you a Christmas present," he said solemnly. "You'll remember that, won't you—that this bungalow was built on the site of a water hole?"

With this injunction, Mr. Kerritt, whose other name was Inspector Malling, went back to London and interviewed a detective-sergeant who was unknown to Mr. Carey.

It was Mr. Carey's practice to interview his working-class clients who required small loans at his office in the Finchley Road from seven till nine in the evening. Here were unfolded the pitiful little tragedies of the poor artisans and the small shopkeepers; here he lent them, grudgingly enough, small sums at exorbitant interest, or received their weekly payments. This branch of activity was one he had developed recently. The police were more than watchful; there had been inquiries at the East End warehouse that had scared him, and a hint that Bains, in Dartmoor, had made another statement to the police. But he was safe so long as those tin boxes were not found; for they contained, in addition to the forged banknotes, evidence that could not fail to identify him with the forgery.

It was ten minutes to nine when a rough-looking man was ushered into his office. Evidently he was a workman—a navvy Mr. Carey guessed, by his thick, mud-stained boots and his corduroy trousers hooked up at the knees. This was the type of client to be disposed of immediately.

"Well, my friend, what do you want?" asked Carey, leaning back in his chair and scrutinising his visitor unfavourably.

"I want to borrow a hundred and fifty quid," said the man roughly.

"On what security?" asked Mr. Carey, a faint smile on his thick lips.

The workman scratched his head.

"Well, I dunno about security, guv'nor. The fact is, I want to buy a house—a little bungalow that I've seen round about Epping."

Mr. Carey frowned. This was an unusual request. Ordinarily, working-class people needed money to supply their immediate necessities. And just now, on the very eve of Christmas, there was every excuse.

"What the devil do you want to buy a house for?" he asked. "What sort of a house is it for a hundred and fifty pounds?"

The man looked round at the door.

"I might as well tell you," he said, in a low and confidential tone, dragging his chair nearer to the table. "About three months ago I was on a job, putting up this bungalow—at least, I was helping to clear out the foundations. It was one of these cheap jobs, and it was done in a hurry."

Again he looked round, and nearer he drew his chair to the table.

"There used to be a bit of a pond where the bungalow was built, and I was clearing out the bottom and I saw two big tin boxes. They were pretty heavy, but before I could see what was in them the ganger shouted to me to get away and a load of gravel ballast was tipped into the hole. They covered these boxes, and there wasn't a chance after then to look at them."

Mr. Carey had gone pale.

"What kind of boxes?"

"They were sort of dark green boxes with a red band on 'em," said the man, add the moneylender nearly jumped from his chair.

"What's the name of this bungalow?"

"I was going to tell you," said the workman. "As I said, before I could do anything the hole was full of ballast and they were laying down the timber baulks for the foundations. It's called 'Little Nest'..." He gave a very exact description of where the bungalow was situated, and went on: "So my idea was to buy the house, dig down to the foundations—it'll be easy work—get out the boxes—"

"Yes, yes," said Carey impatiently. "I can't discuss that with you. Come and see me in a week's time. It's an extraordinary story."

"I've told you where it is now," said the man suspiciously.

"You don't suppose that I shall want to buy this infernal bungalow for the sake of digging down to the foundations, do you?" snapped Carey.

Early the next morning he had his car out and drove eastwards. "Little Nest" was not difficult to discover. He knocked at the door and Grace answered him.

She had never met Mr. Carey, nor had he ever seen her; but that morning she had had a letter from "Mr. Kerritt," and she knew the part she had to play.

"The bungalow is not for sale." she said. "Although we have had a very good offer from a man who wishes to build a bigger house here."

"I can give you a hundred and fifty cash down for it," said Mr. Carey eagerly.

When he called again that night his offer had risen to five hundred, but still the girl refused. He put up at the local hotel that night, a panic-stricken man, for the first person he met as he came into dinner was Malling, debonair and suspicious as usual.

"What are you doing down here?"

"I'm buying a bit of property," said Carey. "I want to give a friend of mine a Christmas present."

Malling said nothing.

During the next day Grace Bains seemed to do nothing but answer the door to the panic-stricken man. At seven o'clock that night she received from his hands £3,000 in banknotes and signed the transfer of the property which had been made over to her earlier in the day.

"Bains?" said Mr. Carey, aghast, as he read the name on the document. "But I thought your name was Smith?"

"We call ourselves Smith here because one of our relations is in great trouble," said the girl quietly, as she folded up the banknotes and put them in her bag.

He walked back to the hotel, puzzled, and met Malling on the doorstep.

"I want you, Carey," said Malling, in a tone of authority, and there was triumph in his voice. "We've pulled off a double today—found those two boxes of yours a mile from 'Little Nest'."

He put his prisoner into the local lock-up and went to see the girl.

"I can't believe my fortune," said the girl. "Of course, I can't possibly take half of this money. It belongs to you."

"It doesn't matter who has it," said Inspector Malling, as be patted her hand. "I have a suggestion to make to you that will enable us both to have the use of our little nest-egg!"

XI. — THE MAN WHOM NOBODY LOVED

No record of prior publication under this title found

THERE were two ways into Bettinilli's Restaurant in Stellerson Avenue: there is the main entrance, where a giant porter stands with a large and impressive umbrella, to cover the heads of clients in their short passage from car to door; and this is the entrance best known. It gives to a lobby, panelled in rosewood and lit with soft, shaded lights, and from thence, through glass doors, expensively bevelled, to the rosy comfort of the restaurant.

From here you may reach another saloon upstairs, by way of an elevator which does not go beyond the second floor, where the kitchens are, and where Bettinilli's establishment ends—officially.

There is another entrance, which has no visible keeper. It has a door like that of an ordinary private house, and a man without uniform sits in the hallway and answers every tinkle of an electric bell which announces the arrival of a client. You may reach the third floor either by means of the narrow and well-carpeted stairway, or by a very small automatic elevator. On the floor at which this elevator stops, and it stops at none other, there are quite a large number of private dining-rooms, and here respectable people meet other respectable people privately, and by the very privacy of their meeting maintain the respect of their fellows. The man in plain dress, who sat on a hard, wooden chair in the hall from six o'clock at night until two o'clock in the morning, was chiefly remarkable, or would have been, had his eccentricities been more widely known, from the fact that he, of all the world, loved Stafford Harding. Perhaps Molly Bennett (or Millingham, as she was now) was another; though how could she love a man who had been content to watch her swept off her feet without so much as a word of protest, and had stood with his normally stony face, watching a marriage which, from the "Wilt Thou" to the Benediction, had been a period of accumulating panic, it is difficult to understand.

At any rate, Hood, at the door, loved Harding, for he had been his servant in France. No, Harding had not saved his life—had been no more than civil and just—but when Private Hood had gone down with typhus, Harding, who was on leave, had cut short his holiday and had come back, rescuing his servant from the cold misery of a temporary hospital, and had brought him in comfort, driving the motor-ambulance himself, to a very comfortable hospital near Boulogre. Perhaps he had saved Hood's life after all, but likely enough he had done nothing of the kind, because there was some disagreement between the surgeons as to whether it was a case of typhus or

something less dangerous. Wherefore did Hood stiffen to attention and gape a little with surprise when he opened the private door of Bettinilli's and Harding came in, a lean-faced man with a tiny, black moustache in which a few grey hairs showed.

"I—I beg your pardon, sir," said Hood, apologising for nothing in particular save his presence in that questionable office.

In this he reflected upon the taste and discretion of the major, but Harding did not resent this.

"Hullo, Hood!" he said. "This is a queer sort of job for you. I thought—"

Ex-Private Hood was in some dilemma. Loyalty to himself and to his employers struggled a little, and self died.

"Have you engaged a room, sir?"

Harding nodded.

"Number twelve, I think," he said carelessly, and the man consulted a list.

"Mr. Smith?" he said, politely.

"In that name it was booked, yes," said Harding, and Hood was not surprised, because it was quite a usual circumstance for half-a-dozen "Smiths" to have booked rooms on one night, this being a popular name with the clients of Bettinilli's snuggery.

"Will you take the elevator?"

"I'll walk," said Harding, and went leisurely up the stairs. Mr. Hood scratched his chin, and reflected that the major was human. Indeed, on reflection, he found in this respective adventure something praiseworthy to be added to the catalogue of Major Harding's virtues.

If the visitor knew Bettinilli's, as apparently he did, he need not have come in the side entrance at all. There was a very secure fire escape at the back of the building, easily reached, and leading to a third-floor room. But the clients of Bettinilli's very seldom used this—for going in. There had been occasions when they had used it for going out. Presently the bell rang again, and a lady came. She was a pretty, fluffy kind of lady, with dazzling, golden hair and symmetrically rosy cheeks. And her lips were as red as her eyebrows were black—thoroughly.

She seemed in no wise uncomfortable, and probably she knew Bettinilli's too.

"Number twelve, Madam?...Yes, Mr. Smith is here. Shall I show you—"

"I'll take the elevator," she said, so apparently she had been there before.

They came down in the elevator together about eleven o'clock. The woman seemed to have been crying, and Stafford Harding's face was grimmer than ever. Mr. Hood closed the door upon them thoughtfully.

Outside Stafford Harding turned.

"Good night," he said curtly, but did not hold out his hand.

"Good night, Mr. Harding," she said, "I'm sure you will see—"

"I see everything, only too clearly." said Harding, and it was unfortunate that at that moment she laid her hand on his arm with a gesture of pleading, which had seldom failed, Margaret Hempstead and Jack Mason should have passed, they having taken a short cut froth the theatre where they had been, to the railway station.

"Good Lord!" gasped Jack. "Did you see—Harding?"

Margaret Hempstead said nothing, but her lips were very tight, and they were tight enough naturally.

"Old Harding! Good Lord!" said Jack in the train, and chuckled softly.

Nobody loved Stafford Harding, and that was the truth. They did not love him in the office of Harding and Harding, where he sat in a stony cold room, sparsely furnished, and that with angular and business-like book-cases, and fired his instructions across a great old leather-covered table at subordinates, who shook at their knees whenever they entered his office. They certainly did not love him in his club, where he would sit for hours at night before the fire, none inviting him to the mild convivialities which constitute club life. And in his set—

He had an engagement to a tennis party the following afternoon, and Gervase Bennett, who liked him without loving him, stood on the porch of his house watching the trim figure cross the lawn, and noting with a little frown the somewhat marked way in which the flannel-clad ladies and gentlemen melted away from him and found pressing and absorbing interests elsewhere.

"Hullo, Stafford!" said Bennett. "Come into my den, will you?"

He was a spare, hard-featured man, who had won his way to fortune by the exercise of those ruthless qualities which were also ascribed to Harding. He bore on his face the evidence of suffering, for Gervase Bennett was slowly dying from an incurable disease.

"Look here, Stafford," he said, when he had closed the door of his library, "what is this yarn they're telling about you having been seen coming out of Bettinilli's last night? Mind you." he went on, "I don't say that it's a criminal offence to go to Bettinilli, because I have been there many times—some of my practice has been associated with people who did not particularly wish to be seen in the light of day."

Gervase Bennett was a successful lawyer, who had deserted the courts for the more lucrative calling of finance.

"So they saw me coming out, did they?" said Stafford Harding slowly. "Margot Hempstead and Jack Mason, of course?"

He nodded slowly.

"Why do you do these things?" asked the other with frowning curiosity. "You're not that kind of man, Stafford."

"What kind of man?" asked the other, helping himself to a cigarette.

"Why—" Gervase hesitated. "You're not the kind of man who takes out all sorts of beauteous people to dinner."

"No," admitted the other. "I am not."

Bennett paced his library, his hands in his pockets.

"I don't want Molly to hear of this," he said. "I'm perfectly sure you're a decent man, Stafford; but women are funny, and Molly was very fond of you—is still, I think." He turned suddenly. "Why didn't you marry Molly?"

Stafford laughed—a quiet laugh without bitterness.

"I never dreamt for one moment that she would have me," he said. "I always looked upon myself as an old man: I'm ten years her senior."

"Rubbish!" said the other.

"I know it's rubbish, now," said Stafford. "Anyway, she has a paragon in Frank Millingham."

The other looked at him closely.

"Yes," he said shortly. "I thought it was a good match."

"Everybody loves Frank, and nobody loves me," laughed Stafford.

He sat down on one of the big library chairs.

"While we're on the subject of Frank," he said, "I'd like to ask you something, Gervase. When I saw that Molly was keen on Frank, I never troubled very much about his antecedents. I know, of course, that he is a very brilliant young financier. What part of the country did he come from?"

"He was a South African." said Gervase. "He was in Johannesburg for many years. That is where he laid the foundation of his—er—"

"Fortune?" finished Stafford.

The other hesitated.

"Well, yes," he said. "As as matter of fact, I want to talk to you on the matter of Frank's position and I trust you to honour my confidence: he has been a little hit by the big strike in Western Australia—he has very large interests in mines there. Of course, the difficulty is only temporary, but I've had to advance him a considerable sum of money lately. But, Stafford, it worries me, for I am a very sick man."

Stafford did not reply. He sat with his elbows on the arm of the chair, his chin resting on his clasped hands and his eyes were studying the pattern of the carpet.

"Is Molly happy?" he asked.

"Why do you ask that?" said the other quickly. "I think so. She's not, of course, as bright as she was. A young girl starting on a career of matrimony, wakes up to the responsibilities of life, and that takes a little of frivolity out of her."

He opened the long, French windows that led on to the lawn, stepped out and beckoned, and a girl walked across to him, a slight, pretty girl, with grave, grey eyes, who surveyed Stafford Harding, as he stepped out to meet her, with wonder and doubt. It was the first time he had met Molly Millingham since their long honeymoon trip, and he felt a curious and unnatural diffidence. Their greeting was awkward; on his side he was conscious of many emotions that she could not suspect; she came to him with the well-disseminated gossip of Margaret Hempstead fresh in her mind.

"You're not looking as well as I should have hoped," he said, and knew that that was the wrong thing to say.

"I'm all right," she said indifferently. "What have you been doing with yourself all this time, Major Harding?"

His grimace was involuntary, Then the old Stafford days were over!

"Loafing around," he said, "making myself popular," he added with a little smile.

"So I have heard," she said, and he flushed.

"Do you think that sort of thing is—playing the game? I know, of course, it's considered quite permissible amongst our people to take chorus girls to supper and that sort of thing, though, personally, I think it's a little horrid. But I somehow didn't think you'd—of course," she added hastily, "I've no right to censure you, or to sit in judgment upon you."

"And that is exactly what you're doing," he laughed, and her eyes opened.

"Do you know, that is the first time I've heard you laugh?" she said.

Somebody was crossing the lawn to join them—a tall, good-looking man, who walked with the easy swing of an athlete and held out his hand to Stafford. Those of the party who watched him from the lawn agreed that there was something fine about Frank Millingham, and that it was just the sort of thing they would have expected him to do, though for their part—

"Hullo, Stafford, old man!" he said. "Glad to see you. What is all the news in town? I only came back yesterday."

Stafford looked at him, then past him to the party who sat with heads together before the big summer-house.

"If you haven't heard all the news that's worth hearing," he said, "you've gone a little deaf, or Margot Hempstead is suffering from clergyman's sore throat."

Millingham threw back his head and roared his delight. Presently, tucking his wife's arm in his, he led her back to the game, and Stafford watched them with a face like a mask.

"I was afraid Molly would hear this," Gervase Bennett had been a silent spectator.

"What does it matter?" shrugged Stafford.

What mattered more to him was the look he had seen in Molly Millingham's eyes, the glint of fear which came when Frank Millingham arrived; the diffidence, the almost humility of her attitude.

He went back to his chambers that night and found a note waiting for him, written in an extravagant hand, all flourishes and underscoring; and as he turned the page, he gasped. He dropped the letter, took up the 'phone and gave a number. It was some time before the porter of the little boarding-house, which he had called, could find the person he wished to speak to, and when she came she was shrill with annoyance.

"Listen," said Stafford. "You are not to do this, do you hear? I will find you all the money you want."

He paused while she rapped back at him.

"I know, I know," he snapped; "but I promise you tomorrow I will find you the money. What?" he almost shouted, as she told him what she had done. "You're mad—stark, raving mad! I forbid you—"

He heard the click of the receiver as it was hung up, and put down the telephone slowly.

So there was the situation. He sat with his head in his hands, thinking it over, and then he dressed.

At ten o'clock that night Hood, the doorkeeper at Bettinilli's private restaurant, opened the door to find Stafford Harding in evening dress, cool, neatly groomed, and his old, hard self.

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Hood, "but I didn't know you were dining here tonight. There's three Smiths, but they've come in—at least, all but one of the ladies."

"That's all right, Hood. I am—er—an honoured guest." He walked up the stairs slowly.

In Room No. 15, on the third floor, was one of the Mr. Smiths, and apparently it was he who was expecting a visitor, for he sat at a table laid for two, and from time to time he examined his watch with every evidence of impatience.

He was Mr. Smith to Hood and to the discreet Signor Bettinilli, but in the great street where men run bare-headed from building to building, and men

stand on the kerb jotting down the fluctuations of stocks, he was known as Frank Millingham, of the Millingham Finance Corporation.

He waited impatiently. Once he walked to the window and shot up the blind, looking out into the street. Presently he heard a soft footstep in the hall outside, and the handle of the door turned slowly. Then the door itself opened.

"Come in," said Frank sharply.

The visitor was a man, and at the sight of him, Frank Millingham leapt to his feet, his mouth open in surprise. For the lower portion of the newcomer's face was hidden behind a blue, silk handkerchief, tied to the back of his head, and in his hand was a long-barrelled automatic pistol.

"What—" demanded Frank, and then the stranger shot twice and Frank Millingham pitched across the table, dead.

It happened that at that moment a waiter, attending another party, had dropped a tray laden with china ware, and Hood in the hall below heard only the crash of smashing plates and grinned.

The man at the door of No. 15 walked softly into the room, took a brief survey of the stricken figure, and then backed out. Three minutes later, Major Stafford strolled down the stairs, his hands in his pockets.

"I am not waiting, Hood. And, by the way, if anybody asks whether I have been here, I would like you to say that you haven't seen or—or recognised me, at any rate. I'm putting rather a strain upon your friendship for me, Hood, and maybe it will break. But do the best you can for me."

"Why, certainly, sir," said Hood, overcome by this appeal. "There isn't anything I wouldn't do for you, Major."

"I wonder," said the Major with a smile, and went out, closing the door behind him.

Harding turned to the left, traversed that short cut which his gossiping acquaintances had taken when they had seen him with a woman, and came to the main thoroughfare. It was only a short walk to the park, and buttoning his overcoat to the chin, he stepped out briskly, keeping to the little streets and even avoiding the well-lit sections of those. He plunged into the gloom of one of the park paths making his way to a place where he knew a little bridge crossed an arm of the lake. There was nobody about, and when he stopped in the middle of the bridge, he looked from left to right.

Then he took from his right hand pocket a long-barrelled, automatic pistol, pulled out the magazine and threw it into the water on one side of the bridge, and dropped the pistol into the lake on the other. Then he left the park by another exit and drove home.

It was a month before the echoes of the Millingham murder had died down. It was the sort of crime that held its own amongst competitive news, and refused to be ousted from its chief position on the most important page of every newspaper, even though earthquakes shook Italy and small states prepared for war, and strikes and rumours of strikes filled industrialists with dismay.

For this murder had all the elements of mystery which the public love. Here was a man, well known in town, a millionaire, they had claimed at first, though later, when auditors and accountants examined his books. they discovered his insolvency—who had gone to a dubious restaurant to meet a woman. That it was a lady he expected, the hall porter, Hood, testified on oath. He had gone up to Room 15. No other person (swore Hood) had entered after him, and he had been found shot dead, and he had died a beggar—the newspapers advertised that fact loudly. Not too loud for Stafford Harding's purpose. He had had some business association with the dead man and was known to be, if not a friend, then a close acquaintance, and the journalists came to him, indeed he invited their questions. And this he emphasized, that Frank Millingham was a ruined man, that his estate was heavily involved, that there was not a penny for the widow...he insisted upon this; it seemed to the murdered man's friends that he gloated over the matter, and they loved him less.

"But, Major," said one reporter, "hadn't he a very large holding in Sheba Silver?"

Stafford agreed—but the mine was worked out. The stock could be bought at a penny a hundred, he said.

"But isn't there a rumour in the street that new veins have been discovered?" asked the persistent reporter.

Major Harding smiled contemptuously.

"Street rumours!" he scoffed.

But the miracle happened, the miracle he dreaded. Sheba Silver stock leapt in a night from nothing to 20. The new veins had been proved and brokers were fighting for the stock.

He read the news with a haggard face and calling for his car, drove to Bennett's house. It was the first call he had made since the tragedy.

First he saw Gervase Bennett and interviewed him in a sick room, the nurses protesting, for Bennett was a dying man.

Then he went down to Molly.

She was in her old "den." She had come back to her father's house after the tragedy, and her cosy room, untouched except for the pictures she herself had taken, gave her welcome in the warm, happy way which rooms have. And her Harding found, and stood awkwardly at the door, hat in hand, uncertain, panic-stricken, speechless, until she rose and came to meet him with both hands out, and the faintest of pinks in her pale cheeks.

"It is good of you to come—at last," she said, and took his arm, leading him to the big, striped chair which was his in the old days.

He did not sit down, but stood uncomfortably, fussing with his hat.

And then he jerked out his secret.

"Molly," he said in a husky voice, "will you marry me?"

She stared at him, first in astonishment, and then in doubt, and with the doubt was a hint of pain.

"Stafford—you—?..." she faltered, her mind all confusion. "My dear friend...no it is impossible—perhaps in a year—"

The indelicacy of the crude proposal hurt her and she wanted to cry. But he could not know—she wanted to find any excuse for him, to put him right in her own eyes. His gaucherie she understood and attached it to his admirable qualities. He was not a woman's man, she had always seen something shy and wistful in him, where others had seen only a certain polished hardness, against which such etceteras as love and tenderness and human sympathy rebounded.

"My dear," she said in so low a voice that he could hardly hear her, and as she spoke she looked down at the carpet, "There is—a reason—why I cannot marry you."

He drew his breath sharply.

"I know," he was harsh and hard in his quiet way. "I know—all about that...I want you to marry me, now, immediately. I know people will—say things,

Molly. That will hurt me like hell, because you'll be the target of their malice. But I want you to marry me...please—please, for God's sake don't let anything stop you!"

"I can't—it is horrible," she shuddered, "you can't know what—what I was hinting at."

"I know!" he was eager now, had lost all his embarrassment. "I just want you to marry me and go away with your father—he is going to the Bermudas, he tells me."

She was looking at him again and this lime her astounded eyes held more curiosity.

"But why not wait...I owe poor Frank something...it wouldn't be decent—"

His groan stopped her. His distress was evident and pitiable.

"I want you to marry me—now," he said with a sort of helpless doggedness. "Now, now, now!"

She shook her head.

"I can't," she said simply, and then she saw his face go white, and when he spoke he showed no trace of emotion.

"You can and you will," he said in that flinty tone of his. "Your father has agreed, Molly—and you will marry me tomorrow."

"Are you mad?" she gasped, as white as he, for she thought she detected a menace in his words.

"I ant very sane. I want you to marry me and if you don't there's going to be trouble for you, for everybody."

She winced at the brutality of the threat scarcely disguised.

"It's about Frank, I suppose, and his company," she said slowly.

He nodded.

"And you make my marriage the price of your silence or forebearance?"

He hesitated, then nodded and of a sudden a new fury possessed her.

"You fool!" she breathed, "you blind fool! To threaten me! If you had had patience, you could have had me, Stafford, for I—I loved you! I always have loved you and now I hate you!"

He winced, but did not reply, watching her with unfaltering eyes as she stood, her head bent in thought, her bosom rising and falling.

Then she looked up.

"I will marry you tomorrow," she said. "I know that you are not lying and that you know something that would disgrace the—the father of my child. But, Stafford, I despise you—I do not love you."

"Very few people do," he said with a mirthless smile.

Such a small matter as her contempt did not trouble him unduly. He wanted to marry her, instantly, before the news of the Sheba and its amazing resurrection was too far spread abroad. Before the other woman could hear or understand.

"I think you had better go now," she said quietly, and this time he did not look at her white face, but with a nod, turned, and was in the hall before he realized that she had followed him.

"You know best what you would describe your conduct in another," she was stung to say as he opened the door, "you have bullied a sick man into agreeing to your infamous scheme—"

And then the thing happened which he had dreaded. He opened the door upon a woman whose hand was on the bell-push. One glance he gave and would have closed the door again, but her foot was in the opening.

An overdressed woman with dyed hair and rouged cheeks, whose pale blue eyes were hard with fury. Clenched in one trembling hand was a newspaper, and this she flourished in the man's face.

"You dirty imposter!" she almost screamed. "I've found you out, have I?"

He tried to check her, to avert the coming disaster, and Molly Millingham looked from one to the other in a wonder, which for the moment swamped her own indignation.

"You'll make me an allowance, will you!" sneered the woman who had pushed her way into the hall. "You'll pay my fare to Johannesburg, eh? Damn you!"

For a moment his nervous hands thrust forward as if to grip her by the throat, and then dropped heavily. It was out—there was no way of stopping her now.

"What does this mean?"

It was Molly who asked the question, and the painted woman who answered.

"I'll tell you what it means," she said between her teeth, "this swine lied to me and said Frank left nothing—he tried to get me out of the country—"

"Frank?"

"Yes, Frank Horlle or Millingham, as he called himself," screamed the woman, "my husband!"

Molly felt her knees giving way, but Harding's arm was round her.

"Married me in Johannesburg eight years ago," the woman went on rapidly, "and I've got the certificate to prove it. I was the best pal he ever had and he deserted me. And I'm his legal heir too—every penny that comes out and his Sheba stock is mine—d'you hear, mine!"

Molly was sobbing quietly on the man's shoulder.

"You've done your worst, now get out," said Harding harshly.

"Get out, eh?"

There was a malicious little grin on Mrs. Horlle's face.

"I'm not finished yet—you haven't got rid of me, Harding, not by a long sight! I'm going straight to the police, and tell them what I saw the night Frank was murdered! I'll tell 'em you stopped me outside of Bettinilli's when I was going to see Frank and went in yourself. I'll tell 'em I watched you come out and where you threw the gun. Ah ha! You didn't know I followed you, Mister Harding."

Molly was staring up at Stafford's face.

"You—you didn't...do this?" she asked in a terrified whisper, but Stafford made no answer.

The woman had opened the door and some of her rage was spent.

"I'm not saying that Frank didn't deserve it," she said, "he was a crook from weaning. I.G.B.—that's Illicit Gold Buying—was his line in Johannesburg before he took up floating fake companies—but you'll get yours, Harding."

She slammed the door on these words.

There was a third person in the hall now, a distracted nurse.

"Mr. Bennett," she gasped, "he insisted upon coming out...we can't get him back to bed..."

Before she had finished, Harding was racing up the stairs. On the landing lay a huddled figure in pyjamas.

"He heard the noise and came out," the nurse who had followed at Stafford's heels was talking. "We tried—"

Stafford stooped and picked up the elder man as if he were a child, carried him out of the bedroom and laid him down.

Gervase Bennett lay like a dead man and Molly threw herself on her knees by the side of the bed.

"Daddy—daddy!" she cried wildly and then Harding gently drew her away.

But the end had not come.

Gervase Bennett opened his eyes and looked round. They rested for a moment on Stafford's face and then a smile broke the grimness of the sick man's face.

"That's bluff—Stafford," he said laboriously, "She knew I killed Frank Millingham...she saw me come down the fire escape...she was watching the house from the entry and I passed her...she knows that she is...accomplice...liquidate Millingham's estate Stafford...pay her..."

He did not speak again.

In twelve months Molly Harding mourned a dead husband who had been no husband, a father, and a tiny atom of mortality who had lived a few hours after his birth—and no word spoke her husband, either to confirm or deny Gervaise Bennett's confession, until one warm evening when they sat together in a garden of San Remo, and then she asked him for the story.

He had had a letter that morning from Africa and she guessed it was from the woman who was Frank Horlle's widow.

"Yes," he said, "your father was right about her. She gave no trouble and was glad, I think, to quit the country with the very handsome cash balance we realized."

"Did you know that she was..."

Molly did not finish the sentence and Harding nodded.

"I discovered it by accident. She came to me with her story knowing that I was a friend of yours—I don't know how she discovered that, but she did. I arranged to meet her at Bettinilli's, it was her suggestion, and talked the thing over. Then she got into touch with your father, who would not believe her story until she offered to supply proofs. Apparently she got Frank on the 'phone and arranged to meet him at the restaurant and your father was to come and surprise them. He knew Bettinilli's very well as he once told me, and agreed to the woman's plan. He must have been pretty well convinced without confronting the pair and I think he must have gone mad with rage. He made his way into the place by the fire escape and most have gone," he hesitated, "with the intention of killing the man. I was waiting on the landing below, having intercepted Mrs. Horlle outside, when I heard two shots and ran up the stairs. I saw your father on the third landing and recognized him in spite of his mask. He was half mad then, but I took the gun from him and pushed him into the room from which the fire escape led. The window was open, I noticed, and guessed he had come that way. I saw him on his way and waited a minute before I went down. Luckily the man on duty below had been a soldier in my old regiment, and he was faithful."

She drew a long breath.

"And when you found that—that Frank's shares were rising?"

"I knew she would make a claim for his property," he said, "as long as she thought he had died insolvent she was satisfied with the money I allowed her."

She was silent for a very long time.

"And then you made me promise to marry you because—because—"

"Oh because!" he laughed. "Because I loved you, I think, you see the man whom nobody loves had to get a wife somehow!"

"Nobody?" she murmured, her cheek against his.

XII. — THE STRANGENESS OF JOAB LASHMERE

No record of prior publication under this title found

IT is a tradition amongst such humorists as are left to us (and was assuredly a faith with those who have left behind them the jest called "Life"), that the landlady of a select boarding-house should have seen better days. It is equally a tradition that the landlady should be blessed with a pretty daughter, possessed of a voice or the power of producing music of a superior brand and quality.

Jack Stackford used to sit in the drawing-room of Mrs. Lashmere's boarding-house and wonder what Fate ordered matters so. He had lived in other select boardinghouses and had found that these adjuncts of lodgerdom were inevitable. And the favourite boarder falls in love with the beautiful daughter, and—they go to live in somebody else's boarding-house.

That was the tradition. It irritated Captain Stackford to think that he had so faithfully realized a part of the story.

Mary Lashmere's voice was both sweet and trained. And Mrs. Lashmere never spoke of her misfortunes or referred pathetically to her rich relations. The furniture, scratched as it was, faded as were the tapestries and leather of chairs and couches, was of the most expensive character. It was not the kind of furniture which one could or would buy nowadays, but in its time it must have cost a small fortune.

"No, I'm not singing to-night, Captain Stackford. I'm rather tired—and worried."

Jack murmured his regrets.

He had come in late; it was the serving maid's night out and Mary had brought him his dinner, so that they were alone in the big ugly dining-room.

"Is Mrs. Lashmere worse?"

She shook her head. Mrs. Lashmere was a chronic invalid; and she saw few a guests from time to time in her room, but she took no active part in running the house. That fell to Mary, and it is creditable to her that nobody knew how she hated it. Women are better able to hide their dislikes than men.

"And how are the clients coming in?" she asked, and he pulled a wry face.

"There are too many detective agencies in London already," he said.

"What made you hit upon that way of losing money?" She was interested, and stood at the other side of the table, resting her hands on the edge. He hated to see her stand when he was sitting. She had a peculiar pleasure in knowing that he hated it. He was the one man with whom confidences had been possible.

"Oh...well," he hesitated. "I was in the Intelligence during the War...divisional and corps intelligence, and I have a sort of—flair for that kind of work—if it comes."

"If it comes," she repeated, deep in thought. "Let us pretend it is coming—I think I will be your first client," her lips twitched, but she was savagely serious. "I commission you to shadow Uncle Joab and discover what has happened to his head. I think his head went years ago."

"Joab?" he repeated amused, and then sat bolt upright. "Joab Lashmere, not the Lashmere?"

"I am glad you are impressed," she said calmly. "At least he serves a purpose. Joab Lashmere is my uncle, dear father's brother. He is the rich relation which all self-respecting keepers of boarding-houses maintain for their glory. And he is worth—oh, I don't know how many millions," she added.

If he was not impressed, he was at least astounded.

"Of course I know all about him—he's a national figure. People say that he is mad."

She lifted a warning finger and she was very serious now.

"Please don't say that—or, if you say it, don't say it so that he can learn of it."

He thought that she was protesting against his applying the taint of madness to anybody of her blood. But here he was mistaken.

Her father, the late Charles Lashmere, once went to court to ask for a ruling as to the sanity of his brother Joab. In his application he was supported by Porter Jackson, a banker of note, and a certain Frank B. Teddington, a broker.

The case created considerable attention in the 'eighties, for all the parties were men of great wealth, the two Lashmeres having inherited several millions from their father. The grounds for the action were Joab's queer secretiveness; his practice of sleeping through the day behind locked doors

and working all night. To this end the hours of his office staff were from eleven p.m. to eight a.m. In the daytime the sole occupants of the office were an aged manager who carried out the scrawled instructions of his chief, and a few clerks.

Another practice which was put forward in proof of the deponent's madness was his avoidance of his kind. His servants, even his valet, never saw him come or go. His houses, which he built himself (he never lived in any other kind), had a private stairway for his own use.

There were other eccentricities quoted, but the long and short of the story is that Joab won his action without coming into court—a providential attack of scarlet fever (a sceptical doctor, commissioned by Charles to see him, came away infected and all but died)—saving him this appearance especially after two doctors, the family physician and a famous alienist, had given their evidence.

Whether Charles and his associates were actuated by the purest of motives is open to question. The administration of his brother's millions would have been a happy circumstance for Charles, who had been hard hit in the Baltic. But he lost, and, to prove his sanity, Joab ruined first his brother, then Frank B. Teddington (he shot himself in a seaside hotel), and last, Porter Jackson, whose bankruptcy was followed by a police prosecution and a seven years' sentence.

Later, in the 'nineties, a discharged valet had made certain affidavits before a master in lunacy or some such official. Dennis, the valet, was a nasty fellow and a vindictive fellow. Incidentally he had forged Joab's name to three cheques, counting first upon his excellent penmanship to avoid detection; secondly, upon his sure knowledge that Joab would never go into court to prosecute him if the forgeries were discovered—as of course they were. In the latter respect, he was right. Joab persecuted his servant for exactly one year. And the very evidence of persecution was invisible. You could not trace the hand of Joab farther than the refusal of gentlemen to employ the thieving ex-servant. There Joab was within the law and his rights. Even Dennis accepted the justice of his former master's action. But Dennis knew who was behind the pin-prick prosecutions that followed. These drove him to the streets and to people who whispered of a golden road to affluence. It was not exactly golden, but it had that appearance.

He passed nineteen counterfeit coins, supplied by his new friends, and was arrested when he was passing the twentieth. Twenty was his fatal quantity—just those number of years of servitude did the judge award him. He was carried from the dock howling insensate maledictions at the head of the real

prosecutor, and the man who sat in his new castle in Trondjem read the account of the trial and sentence with insane glee. Joab liked Norway, especially in the winter, when it was never quite light.

The skeleton of the story Mary told. She knew nothing of Dennis.

"The old devil!" said Jack. "Of course he's mad."

"Is he—just wait."

She was gone from the room a very little time and came back with a letter in her hand. The paper was thick and the edges were gilded. In the top left-hand corner was a coloured crest

Storm Castle,
Trondjem,
March 12.

We have received your letter telling us of your mother's illness and requesting that we should, being in the position as we are to do so, make provision for your mother and relieve her from the anxiety of her low lodging-house—"

"That is his description," the girl interrupted her reading to explain. She went on:

In reply we have to state...

"He says 'we'; is he married?" asked Jack.

"To himself—'we' is his royal way. It was one of the peculiarities which came out in the action poor daddy brought," she said and continued:

...beg to state that we thank you for the reminder of your continued existence. We are journeying to London next week and shall rectify our omission to prepare a will. For the brood of Charles, not a cent, not a groat, not a crumb from a green-moulded loaf.

"You can almost hear him shrieking that," she said with a little smile.

"I haven't told mother. She does not even know that I have written."

"A curious man, and obviously mad," said Jack thoughtfully. "What is he like—in appearance I mean?" She shook her head.

"I have never seen him, neither has mother. The only person I know who has talked to him face to face is Doctor Bennett—mother's doctor, you know. He was one of the physicians who testified to Uncle Joab's sanity. I wonder—"

She bit her lips in thought.

"Doctor Bennett is coming to see mother. I should like you to have a talk with him about Uncle Joab? Perhaps I haven't given a very fair account of him, and his view will help you to strike a balance."

"Will he mind talking?"

"No, dear no," said the girl, shaking her head. "Uncle Joab is a favourite topic of his. I think he is secretly proud that his evidence was accepted in the courts."

Dr. Bennett proved to be a rosy-faced, white-haired man, whose professional manner was tempered by a boisterous good-humour.

"Mad? Bless you, no!" he said. "If furtiveness and money-grabbing and an abnormal conceit are to be accepted as evidences of insanity, you'd have to build insane asylums at the corner of every block! He is a mean fellow. By the way, I received a paltry fee for the services I rendered him in court and he never consulted me again. But Joab isn't really a bad fellow at heart. I am convinced of that. One of these days you will see a tremendous change in his attitude, not only to life, but to his relations. Mark my words!"

Three days later a small steamer came staggering through the North Sea. It was pitch dark and a heavy rain was falling when it made fast alongside the quay at Hull. The captain clumped across the bridge in his heavy sea-boots and looked down upon the pier.

"There he goes," he said, pointing to a dark figure that moved furtively down the gangway on to the wharf. "Any other man who ordered a special boat to bring him across from Bergen would have come up to the skipper and at least said: 'How d'ye do?' Not that I expected it."

He shook the moisture from his oilskins and followed the first mate into the chart-house.

"I suppose he'll have a special train to London?"

"He used to have, ten, twenty years ago," said the other. "Didn't you see his car waiting for him by the side of the quay? Lord, if I had his millions!"

"I don't suppose he's any happier than you or me," said the first mate. "A man who wants to travel alone and who mustn't be looked at—lord, what a life!"

"I wish I had it for about forty-eight hours," said the skipper grimly, and proceeded to the writing-up of his log.

The man who left the ship paused only to say a word to a chilled Customs official.

"I have no baggage," he said shortly, and dropped his suitcase at the other's feet. "If you want to examine that you can."

"No, Mr. Lashmere," said the official, "if you have nothing to declare—"

"If I had anything to declare, I should have declared it," snarled Joab Lashmere, and walked toward the waiting limousine.

He was muffled in a long fur-lined coat, the collar of which was turned up so that only the tip of his nose was visible.

"Don't get out," he growled at the chauffeur. That individual, with some experience of his master, had no intention of getting out. A door slammed and the car moved noiselessly through the silent streets of Hull, and into the country. Only once did the microphone at the driver's ear bellow a request.

"Faster, faster! Remember, I must be at Saint Albans before daybreak or you lose your job!"

"Yes, sir," muttered the chauffeur, and accelerated.

The man in the car curled himself into a corner and fell asleep. The night was a wild one. A south-westerly gale was blowing, driving the stinging rain into the driver's face. The glass screen was blurred, and for all purposes of observation opaque. Yet the chauffeur dare not stop the car to put up the screen. He craned sideways from his seat, watching the road which the big headlamps revealed. Villages came out of the darkness, showed for a moment and vanished as the car sped southward. They flew through the streets of a cathedral city at such a speed that an indignant town policeman had no time to take the number of the car, and so came on the Great North Road and to Rodley Bridge. Rodley Bridge was under repair, and a red lamp boldly labelled "storm-proof" had been attached overnight to a barrier which blocked one half of the road. The cord on which the lamp was attached was

a trifle long, and early in the night the swaying lamp had smashed against an iron tressle...

When dawn broke, a farm labourer on his way to work came round the bend of the lane which gave him a view of the bridge.

What he saw quickened his footsteps. The wreckage of a car smashed and twisted almost beyond recognition half hung over the ruined parapet, and beneath he saw a pair of gaitered legs. They were very still. And then he saw an elderly, careworn man with a thin, lined face sitting on a milestone, his fur-lined overcoat drawn round his shrunken figure, the hand upon which his head rested was heavily bandaged.

He looked up as the man approached.

"Get some people to move this car," he said. "I am afraid my chauffeur is dead. Is there a telephone near?"

"Not nearer than Jawney," said the rustic. "Are you hurt, sir?"

"Not much," growled the other. His face was deadly white and his hands were shaking.

"It happened about two hours ago," he said, and said no more.

At that moment there came upon the scene the first of the men who were engaged in repairing the bridge. It took half an hour to get the car lifted off, and they found the chauffeur was killed and was beyond recognition.

"My name is Lashmere," explained the man in the long coat to a police constable. "I don't know how the accident happened. There ought to have been a red light on this bridge."

"There was, last night, sir," said one of the workmen, and examined the lamp.

Being a discreet employee he said nothing more.

They got the injured man into Jawney in the farmer's cart, a hired car was secured and, against all traditions, he arrived at his unlovely house at St. Albans in broad daylight. Nevertheless he went up his private stairway to his room, telephoned his orders to his household, and was not seen again for the rest of the day. Whatever desire for obscurity he had, he could not escape publicity now.

Mary Lashmere read the account of the accident.

"Uncle Joab will be furious," she said. "He will not worry much about the chauffeur, poor soul, but being dragged to an inquest will be a hateful experience for him."

Yet it appeared at the inquest that Joab Lashmere conducted himself without any of his characteristic outbursts of irritation, and even received the commendation of the coroner for the attempt he had made to rescue his chauffeur.

Old Dr. Bennett called on her mother on the morning the account of the inquest was published.

"I tell you, Joab has got a lot in him," he insisted. "He has pluck at any rate."

"It is surprising if it is true," said the girl sceptically.

At first she had been sorry that she had written again to her uncle, for she had not minced her words.

Jack was away on his first job, an enquiry in the Midlands, and lie returned the day after the inquest to confirm much that had been said of Joab Lashmere's heroic attempt to save the chauffeur.

"I read an account of the accident, and as I was within five or six miles of Rodley Bridge I went over to look at the damage. The car was still there when I arrived, and it was in a ghastly mess, exactly like one of those cars one saw in France that had been hit by a Naval shell. The old man can't be as bad as you think, Mary," he said, for they had reached the "Mary" and "Jack" stage in their friendship. "I had a talk with the foreman. There were about fifty men there repairing the bridge, and he told me that Mr. Lashmere must have broken open the big tool chest probably searching for a crowbar, though the only tool that was missing from the box was a spade."

"A spade?" she repeated in surprise. "Perhaps he tried to dig him out?"

"That, I think, is possible, but the ground was so torn up near where the accident occurred that it was impossible to discover what he tried. Probably he lost his head, and certainly the foreman lost his spade. He gave this fact almost the importance of the accident."

It was at this moment that the maid came into Mary's little sanctum, which was half office and half rest-room.

"A letter?" said the girl. "A bill I suppose."

She stared at the big square envelope in her hand. "From Uncle Joab," she said, and pulled a little grimace," and it is certain to be unpleasant."

"Get it over," said Jack with a smile, as she hesitated. She tore open the flap and pulled out the contents, and a slip of paper fell to the floor. She stooped and, picking it up, gasped.

"A cheque for one thousand pounds!" she gasped in wonder.

They looked at each other, and then she unfolded the letter.

Joab Lashmere wrote all his own letters on a portable typewriter, and they began without any polite prefix.

Perhaps what you say is right (the letter ran). We have thought this matter over and we have decided to allow you £1000 per annum on condition that you do not come to see us or molest us in any way.

She was silent.

"A queer devil," said Jack. "You'll take the money, of course."

"If there were only myself concerned I should send it back to him," she said, "but I must consider mother." She read the letter again.

"Doctor Bennett said a change would come over him."

"Perhaps it has come," suggested Jack, and then, quickly, "Will this mean you give up the boarding-house?"

She nodded, and put out her hand with a smile.

"It will not mean I shall not see you, Jack," she said quietly.

Nearly an hour passed before the maid knocked at the door again with a prosaic question about potatoes, and the hair of Mary Lashmere appeared, to the critical and knowledgeable eye of the girl, to be considerably ruffled.

One man received the news of Jaob Lashmere's munificence with an elation which he did not attempt to conceal.

"What did I tell you?" said Dr. Bennett triumphantly, his rosy face shining. "There's a lot in old Joab! I tell you the devil isn't as black as he is painted. Mark my words!"—he wagged his finger solemnly—"when Joab goes to heaven he'll leave you a cool million." And Mary laughed, for she was happy, but her happiness had nothing to do either with the possible acquirement of wealth or Uncle Joab's translation to a heavenly sphere.

The doctor spent the evening with them. They were a select party in Mary's room. Mrs. Lashmere, a grey, faded woman, was wheeled in her chair to partake in the festivities. A week ago such a party would not have been possible. The indignation of the other boarders at such favour shown to a guest would have been overwhelming, but now Mary could afford to ignore the acidulated maiden sisters who occupied the two best rooms in the house and never ceased to hint that they paid for the advantage, and she could smile at the sneers of the motherly matron and her flaxen-haired daughter, could even endure the scowls and the sulks of the young motor engineer (with socialistic views) who had three times invited her to go with him to a theatre and had three times been refused.

Dr. Bennett, despite his many years or because of them, was the gayest of that party. He left them with a mysterious suggestion of some great project he had in his mind, left them full of good spirits and bubbling humour, and was found the next night by a platelayer dead on the embankment of the Great Northern Railway.

On the afternoon following the discovery, Jack Stackford came into the girl's little room and closed the door behind him.

"I am afraid it is a case of murder, Mary," he said gently.

She stared at him.

"Murder? Impossible! The dear old doctor hadn't an enemy in the world."

He shook his head.

"There's no doubt about it. I've just come from the doctor who examined him. He was struck down from behind and savagely battered to death. I've been making enquiries at his flat. The servants say that he paid his afternoon calls and came home to tea. He told his housekeeper that he was going out as he had an appointment, and from that time he was not seen again until he was found on the railway."

"But how did he get there?"

"That is the mystery which the police are trying to fathom. The first impression was that he had been thrown out of a train, but the platelayers were working on the line up till midnight, when they left off for an hour for supper. And between midnight and one o'clock, when he was discovered, no train had passed along that particular set of rails. My theory is that he was killed somewhere on the road running parallel with the railway embankment, which can be reached through a gate. In fact, the railway

carriage murder theory has been dissipated by the discovery of the doctor's little two-seater a hundred yards from the scene of the murder."

Jack spent the whole of that night fitting theory to fact. He was weary, with a throbbing head, and he was preparing for bed when the great inspiration came to him, an explanation flashed upon him. In a moment he was awake. The missing spade!

It was a fantastic theory, one which would be rejected by ninety-nine police officials out of a hundred.

By ten o'clock he was awaiting impatiently in the room of the inspector who was investigating the Bennett murder, and no sooner had that official arrived than, without preamble, Jack Stackford put his theory into words. And in Inspector Ridley he met the hundredth man.

"It is feasible. Of course, there are lots of holes in your hypothesis. But it is worth trying."

He got on to Jawney by telephone and put through an enquiry.

"We'll have to wait whilst the constable gets to Rodley Bridge, and it will probably be an hour before we get any answer. If your theory is correct—but it is farfetched, you will admit that, Mr. Stackford."

"We shall see," said Jack grimly. In fifty minutes the reply came through from Jawney.

"Yes, sir, the spade has been found. It was brought up by a boy who was fishing at the bottom of the stream about fifty yards away from the scene of the accident."

The inspector whistled.

"I'll be in your neighbourhood very shortly," he said, and hung up the receiver. "We'll have a look at Rodley Bridge," he said.

It was two and a half hours' run by car, but they stopped at Jawney to snatch a hasty lunch and consult the local authorities.

Early in the afternoon they came to the bridge, the repairs to which were nearly completed. The foreman was waiting for them and recognized Jack.

"The spade was found just about there." He pointed up the stream. "And that's the curious thing. It might have fallen over the bridge and been washed downstream, but how it got upstream is a mystery to me."

"We'll try to solve it," said the inspector; "and now will you show me exactly where the spade was found?—and, by the way, I want you to lend me a couple of men. They had better bring their spades."

The little river which the bridge crossed was bordered by meadowlands, with here and there a plantation that broke the flatness of the view.

"This is the spot," said the foreman, and pointed. Jack looked round. A dozen yards away was a small copse, and after a careful scrutiny of the meadow: "If I'm not mistaken those trees are our objective," he said.

The river made a bend round the copse and in so doing created a tiny peninsula which, for some reason, was relatively well-wooded.

They pushed their way through a tangle of undergrowth and came to a clear space.

Jack pointed to a heap of twigs.

"That looks as though a bush has been uprooted and laid there," he said.

The men with the shovels cleared away the brushwood and revealed a slight depression of earth.

"We'll try here," said Jack quietly.

In silence the men went about their work, but they had not far to dig.

Mr. Joab Lashmere had certainly undergone a considerable change, and the first to recognize the effect of the motor-car accident were his servants. He ceased to hide himself, was waited on at table by a serving-maid, with whom he condescended to exchange pleasantries.

He went abroad in daylight too, strolled round his estate and was amiable to his gate-keepers, to whom hitherto Joab Lashmere had been almost a mythical personage, a voice in the dark that barked orders, that dismissed men without hesitation or pity, and evicted their wives from their homes on his estate the instant their husbands' services were dispensed with. On one night, unbelievable though it seemed, he drank too much wine and was assisted to his bed by the butler, who never before had seen him, drunk or sober. Two days after Dr. Bennett's body was discovered, Joab Lashmere sat in his curiously bare library and stared absentmindedly at the cheque-book before him. From a drawer he took a box of cigars, pried it open and made his choice.

Then he extracted a letter from his pocket-book and read it.

Dear Lashmere (it ran).

I want to see you particularly. I haven't seen you for nearly thirty years. I know you will receive an old friend. I am driving out to meet you and shall arrive (punctuality is a vice of mine) at about six o'clock to-night.

Yours faithfully,
Walter Bennett.

There was no reason why he should have kept that letter, but there was at the back of his mind a thought that it might possibly be useful.

He lit a match and, putting it to the corner of the note, walked with it to the fireplace and watched it consume. Then he lit the cigar and resumed his seat in his chair. The butler came in.

"Captain Stackford wishes to see you."

"Eh?" He looked up, snarling. "Captain Stackford? I don't want to see Captain Stackford. Damn you, don't you know that I never receive...?"

But here, to the consternation of the servant, the door was opened and two men came in.

Jack Stackford he did not know, but the man behind him he recognized immediately and dropped his hand to his pocket. Before he could pull the automatic the inspector had flung himself upon him and the two went to the ground together.

"All right, Ridley, it's a cop. What do you want me for?"

"I want you for the wilful murder of Doctor Walter Bennett on the night of the sixteenth," said Inspector Ridley. "Your name is Dennis, formerly in the employment of Mr. Joab Lashmere, and you are an ex-convict."

"You know a lot for a copper," sneered the prisoner.

His statement, for some reason, was not published till long after he had walked the stone-paved corridor to the scaffold. This was probably due to the fact that the English law does not admit a plea of guilty in a murder case, or, if it does, admits it under protest.

Jack and the rich Mrs. Stackford, nee Lashmere (for Mary was the old man's heir-at-law), were honeymooning at Como when the newspapers containing the confession reached them. Jack read it with interest, though the story had been told at the trial.

My name is Ferdinand Dennis, and I was for some time in the employ of Mr. Joab Lashmere, from which service I was dismissed for forgery. I could always imitate the old man's writing, and I was certain that he would never prosecute me because he hated going into court. Though he did not charge me with any offence, he worked against me, and, I subsequently discovered, employed a chap named Hould to get me into a counterfeit coining charge on which I was sentenced to twenty years' penal servitude.

When I was in prison I determined to get even with Joab Lashmere. Owing to breaches of the prison rules I served the full term of my imprisonment, and I was released a week before Mr. Lashmere came from Norway. I had made up my mind when I was in prison that I would kill him, and the first step I took was to discover his whereabouts. I learnt from a paragraph in the newspapers that he was expected in England, and I went to Hull. I knew his habits of travelling by night, and I had very little difficulty in finding that a specially chartered boat was bringing him across.

My plan was to conceal myself on the special train which I knew he would order, because that was his practice. Since I had been in prison, however, motor-cars had come into general use and I discovered that his car was waiting for him. It seemed as though all my plans had come undone, but after thinking the matter over I hit upon the following scheme. I saw the car. It was garaged at Parkers in the High Street, and behind was a luggage carrier. I had a talk with the chauffeur, who told me that Mr. Lashmere never carried luggage and the carrier was usually fastened up.

I managed to loosen the carrier, which was broad and would make a comfortable seat. On the night Mr. Lashmere arrived, I fastened it temporarily so that the chauffeur would not detect anything wrong. I knew it was impossible to get on to the carrier in the docks because the policeman on the gate would see me, but approaching the docks are a number of narrow streets through which the car would have to pass very slowly, and it was in one of these that I determined to board it.

It was raining heavily, and I had no exact plan as to what I intended doing after the car reached St. Albans. I think my scheme was to follow him up the private stairway which I knew he used, because it was at St. Albans that I was in service. The plan worked out as I had made it, except that I had some difficulty in pulling the carrier down and struggling on board for the car was moving at a faster rate than I had anticipated. But I managed to scramble

on board and fasten myself up, and although a policeman saw me in the outskirts of Hull he could not draw the driver's attention to my presence.

It was a most uncomfortable ride, for the car went at a terrible pace. It was raining heavily, a high wind was blowing and I was nearly frozen, I remember nothing of the accident. I must have been dozing. The first thing I remember was striking water. I had been tossed over the parapet of the bridge into the river, and I was for a moment stunned. My hands were bleeding when I reached the bank and I was wet through from head to foot. I cursed Lashmere, believing that the accident had happened to myself and not to the car, but when I got up on to the bridge the first thing I discovered lying in the roadway was the old man. He was quite dead. I did not see him, I stumbled over him. One of the oil lamps on the car was still burning, and I took it from its socket and made an examination. I saw there was no hope of getting the driver out, he must have been killed immediately, and I sat down and considered what I should do. I knew Lashmere and his habits of avoiding company, and I guessed there wouldn't be half a dozen people in the country who would recognize him.

I took the body in my arms and carried it along the river bank, stripped it of its clothing and put them on myself. Then it occurred to me that if I left him there he would be discovered in the morning and enquiries would be made.

I went back to the bridge, which was under repair, and I looked for the tool-box which I knew would be there. It took me some time to break it open, and I had to search the tool-chest of the motor-car before I found a hammer strong enough to wrench off the bolt and staple. Taking out a shovel I went back to where I had left Mr. Lashmere's body, dug a hole and buried him, together with my old clothes. The ground was earthy and muddy, and I did not think that I should be detected, but to make sure I cut down two bushes and laid them over the place where the body was buried, and after throwing the spade into the river, went back to the road to wait until somebody came along.

In all probability I should never have been detected, only Dr. Bennett, who knew Mr. Lashmere, came out to see me. I was in a funk, because I knew the moment he saw me he would know that I was not Mr. Lashmere. I waited for him on the road outside the grounds and stopped his car, telling him that I wanted to talk to him away from the house. I thought that by this means, as it was dark, he would not suspect me. I asked him to drive me a little way along the road and we would talk. His manner, however, was short and suspicious.

By and by he said, "Why do you call yourself Lashmere? You are not Mr. Lashmere." And then suddenly he struck a match.

I was not prepared for this, and I had no time to cover my face.

"You're Dennis!" he said. "Dennis, the man who was discharged for forgery."

I knew I was up against it. Before he could utter another word I had struck him with the life preserver which I had brought with me, which I thought might come in handy, though I hoped it wouldn't...

After he was dead I put his body on the embankment, took the car a long way down the road and walked back to the house. Nobody saw me come or go, for I used the secret staircase...

It was easy to deceive the servants, who had never seen Mr. Lashmere, and I could write the old man's signature perfectly. Every cheque I sent was honoured...

Jack folded up the paper and sighed. A reasonably good detective had been lost to the world when he married Mary Lashmere and took over the direction of Joab's multifarious interests.

XIII. — JIMMY AND THE DOUGHNUTS

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Jimmy confessed to a large range of experiences, mental, emotional and physical, but she could not recall being asked to trail the frenzies of a Young Poet of Means, and she flatly refused the commission.

Glazebury. Secretary and Manager of the C.C. Bureau (the 'C.C.' stood for 'Confidential Clerical') murmured something conventionally soothing, for he was in awe of Jimmy and shrank from anything partaking of an encounter. Once, when Jimmy was a newcomer to the Bureau he had ventured to remonstrate with her, and that severely, upon her cigarette habit and she had swung back at him with a short, incisive speech which left him gasping.

And yet there was nothing terrible about her. She was tall and slim; her face given to freckles, was attractive, even pretty, though her nose was short and inclined to retrousse. Her appeal was in her eyes, that at the slightest provocation puckered up in joyous laughter. They were wicked eyes, eyes that led young men to foolishness and snapped them back to sanity.

She sat now on a high stool swinging her legs, and lit a fresh cigarette from the glowing end of another as she spoke.

"I've felt like a maiden aunt, and a policeman and an ingenue," she confessed, "but this walking round behind a society poet and taking a note of his undeveloped views on life is strangely unreal. I hate poets anyway; they're not respectable. I'd sooner be a Queen Bee just hatched. I was once!"

"Good God, Jimmy!" said the outraged Glazebury. "What do you mean?"

"It happened years ago," said Jimmy indifferently. "You know what a queen bee does as soon as she's born?"

Mr. Glazebury said something about eating honey and looking round.

"The first thing she does," said Jimmy impressively, "is to go round killing all the other Queen Bees that haven't quite made it. I remember that feeling well. I'd got appointed secretary to a hardware man and my first job was to write to the other poor Lizzies who were after the same billet and 'regret to inform' them."

"What happened to you in that job?" asked Glazebury curiously. He was always trying to get a line on Jimmy which would reduce her to human proportions, and no information was too trivial which would help him to that end.

"He proposed to me," said Jimmy complacently. "So I up and went, as Miss Brown says."

"Wanted to marry you?"

"No," said Jimmy carelessly, "nothing so unlawful. He had a home of his own."

Glazebury drew a long breath. Jimmy always forced that sigh from him.

"Where is he now?" he asked.

"In hell," said Jimmy reverently.

She slipped down to the floor, took up her handbag and pitched her cigarette into the old-fashioned fireplace.

"Anyway, I couldn't take the poet—I've an appointment with Carden."

"There's nothing to that," said Glazebury in disgust. "He's so mean he'd charge you for listening."

"He pays me," said Jimmy with a ghost of a smile. "I had to fight him, but I won. And now he saves up all his important work for me—I only go once a week—and I don't have to see his face. It's weird taking down letters from a man in the dark."

"He's mean," said Glazebury again. "I've never sent him a bill that he hasn't disputed. He's better since the accident, I admit. Maybe he's got religion. A man with his money ought to get a regular secretary too."

"What have secretaries done to you?" demanded Jimmy. "And whilst we are on the sordid subject of money, I would like to break a lance with you over a mere trifle of expenses, Let us haggle."

She haggled to such purpose that she left Mr. Glazebury with a horrible sense of loss.

Jane Ida Meagh was prepared to brain the first misguided person who addressed her by either of her given names, and had accepted with gratitude at a very early age the appellation suggested by the combination of her initials and her born name. In the census return Jimmy described herself as a 'stenographer'. So might Edison have marked himself 'electrician' or Napoleon 'soldier'. For there was no stenographer like Jimmy. She might, had she wished, have started at the bottom of the ladder as secretary to Bolfort Jackson, that pillar of high finance, and have soared to giddy

heights, winning for herself recognition in the best magazines as The-Girl-Who-Handles-Millions. She might have been private secretary to a High One and have passed into the miasma of politics. Instead she free-lanced here and there and was booked ahead like a film star or a fashionable physician, in tremendous crises—as when Andrew Solter made his broken confession to his fellow directors before the police came on to the scene—she was summoned hurriedly to take statements. To her was entrusted the typing of the Metallurgical Report which brought Toopah Silver stock from 17 to something less than I—she could have made a fortune and didn't. She had been tested and tried and found dependable. Detectives had watched her, little traps had been set for her again and again to discover whether, under any manner of influence, she would divulge her employer's secret, and she had emerged from these above suspicion.

The people who sought her services, either through the C.C. Bureau or directly, paid big money and she was worth it. She admitted it.

To watch her at work was a revelation. There was never a speaker who could go too fast for her. When John Merling dictated his famous review of the world's tariff system, there were times when he spoke 200 words to the minute and kept that speed for the best part of half-an-hour. Jimmy never faltered, and Merling it was who stopped exhausted. The typewriter under her hands was a machine-gun, one letter snapped behind the other as if by the repercussion of its predecessor.

Everyday stenographers ceased to resent her superiority, recognising her abnormal qualities as removing her above comparison, though this fact did not save her from innumerable challenges, delivered by speed-fiends acting on behalf of various typewriter companies. Jimmy never accepted challenges and once she wrote to an aspirant:

"Dear Mr. Costins, You say you are 'the fastest tipist' in the world. Your wife must be a proud woman.

Yours, J. L Meagh.

P.S. We spell it 'typist' around here."

Jimmy had no girl friends. The mothers of her acquaintances thought she was not nice, and Jimmy never gave them the opportunity of discovering their error. She smoked: she used, at times, strong language, though her expletives, being novel, escaped the charge of vulgarity; but, worst vice of all, she was frank. You had to treat her as an equal or suffer discomfort. And, being human, she had a weakness—though nobody guessed it.

She came out on to the street from the C.C. Bureau, her blue velvet Tam at a rakish angle, and was puckering her red lips to whistle a cab when Jack Manworth leant out of his car window and yelled her name. His machine skidded to the edge of the sidewalk and he jumped out.

"I want to see you, Jimmy. Are you going up to call on the old man?"

He was a good-looking youth, queerly serious for one of his years, and Jimmy regarded him with interest.

"If you're referring to your respected uncle—yes," she said.

"Well, I want you to speak to him about my allowance, Jimmy. I knew this was your day, and I was coming down to the Bureau to catch you. The old devil's starving me."

"Poor soul!" said the sympathetic Jimmy. "Come into Keillers and nibble a biscuit with me."

She grabbed him by the arm and led him into the cafe, but apparently he was starving only in a figurative sense.

"I didn't think you were," said Jimmy, "but I am. No, thank you, none of those wretched confections."

"I can't understand you," said the puzzled Jack. "You used to be a regular pig about pastries."

"Pastry-making," said Jimmy as she waved away a tray of tempting patisserie, "pastry-making has deteriorated in this country," said Jimmy loftily. "Now we're along, young fellow, I want to tell you that I'm not accepting your commission. My job is to be spoken to and not to speak. I play Silent Sarah in life's drama, and I can't improve on the part. Besides, you ought not to be broke—you've plenty of money."

"I'd have had plenty of money if Mr. Walter Carden had been killed in the motor-car accident," mid Jack savagely, "I don't wish the old chap any harm; but do you realise that every penny he possesses belongs to me?"

Jimmy looked at him in astonishment.

"I didn't know that," she said in a changed voice. "Is he a Wicked Uncle?"

Jack's mouth was too full of doughnut to answer immediately.

"You oughtn't to eat those things," she said. "If you really like doughnuts I'll ask a friend of mine who is one of the most brilliant cooks—in the world," she hesitated. "She makes delicious doughnuts. She'll be glad to make some for you today."

"Thanks," said Jack, who was less interested in the promised treat than he was in his own affairs. "No, he's not a Wicked Uncle. My poor mother had the utmost faith in Uncle Walter's business acumen. When she died, she left all her money and all my father's money to Walter, stipulating in the will that he should make adequate provision for me. Poor dear mother told me about this will in her lifetime, but of course I didn't protest. I would sooner have her back than all the money the city could raise in twenty-four hours," he said gently.

"And dear uncle doesn't make you an adequate allowance, eh?" said Jimmy.

The other bared his teeth in a snarl.

"He gives me what he thinks is adequate. The old devil seems to have gone wrong since he married that woman. Who ever thought that Walter would marry? Do you like Mrs. Carden?" he asked suddenly.

"Do I like measles?" said the scornful Jimmy. "Of course, I don't like her. It's against all the best traditions of business to like the wife of your boss, even your temporary boss."

Jack Manworth was silent, sipping his chocolate with a faraway look, and Jimmy did not interrupt his thoughts. Presently he said:

"I really didn't mean what I said about wishing the old chap dead, Jimmy, only I get savage at times. I wish he'd never left his pots and his pans—I suppose he looks terrible now."

"I never see him," said Jimmy, snatching the bill that the waitress had brought. "I'll pay this, Jack."

"You never see him?" said the other incredulously.

Jimmy shook her head.

"I never have seen him. I didn't take this job until after his accident. You know, his face was so badly cut about that he lives in a darkened room and dictates all his letters through a screen. When I have finished them I read them back to him and sign 'per pro'. That's the only talk I have with him. What was Mrs. Carden before she married your uncle?"

"A nurse in a hospital or something," said the other indifferently. "They say, or rather she says, she saved his life when the motor turned over, but she gets no medals for that. Do you know the old—my foolish uncle gave her his power of attorney years ago and that she signs cheques on his behalf. If you get a chance, Jimmy—" he said when they were in the street again, "talk to Walt! Or to his wife. It may be more useful to talk to her."

"There won't be any chance, my son," said Jimmy, shaking her head. "And if he does consult me about your future and finance, I will gently urge your claims."

Her appointment was not due for more than two hours, and she drove to her flat, let herself in and began to change hurriedly. She kept no servant, for she took her meals abroad. A woman came in every morning to tidy up, and was generally gone before Jimmy came home.

Doughnuts! The word was a challenge which she accepted with deep-souled joy.

She was a changed being. There was a light in her eye, an eagerness in her movements, a general air of suppressed excitement, which transformed her. Doughnuts! Woe to the unconscious pounders of doughnut dough who held diplomas for the excellence of their creations!

She took off her dress and buttoned herself into a long white overall; then she unlocked the door of her mystery house.

Here then was Jimmy's secret and her weakness. A kitchenette, elaborate and costly and got together through the years in the spirit of proud acquisitiveness which thrills the collector of stamps, the purblind gatherer of rare china. Not her dearest friend knew of her vice. When she disappeared from view people thought she had gone into the country. Her grocer suspected her of literary tastes.

"She buys enough flour to keep a big family supplied with bread. I suppose these writing people use a lot of paste." The walls of the secret kitchen were varnished white; the floor was of black and white tiles; the dresser and the various apparatus it contained were speckless.

Jimmy went to a shelf, and, taking down a book, opened it and sat for five minutes studying one of the pages carefully. Presently she got up and turned on the switch of her electric stove, took down a bowl, opened a big cupboard, and from this brought forth several packages, a large earthenware jar of flour, eggs, and other mysterious etceteras. She left the tiny kitchen—for such it was—and went to the official kitchen of the flat—

that in which an unsuspecting servant prepared her breakfast. She looked for and discovered the milk, went back into her mystery room and closed the door. Then she sat down again to ponder the volume. Her eyes glittered strangely, her voice as she muttered through the formula, was fierce.

"Make the milk warm...dissolve the yeast in it...stir in about a quarter of a pound of flour. Cover over and stand the mixture in a warm place, and leave it to rise and drop..."

She looked up with a grimace of dismay.

"I wonder how long it ought to stand before it rises and drops," she said to herself. "If I put in a little more yeast, perhaps..."

Two hours later she emerged from her kitchenette, hot but happy. Very carefully she packed in her attache case six large—not so large as she could have wished—blobs of brown, or nearly brown, pastry. She tidied the little room, put out the electric oven, and replaced the book upon the shelf.

It was part of a respectable library on the culinary art. She surveyed the volumes with a certain amount of pride, and took down one, on the back of which was the inscription 'French Cookery', turning the leaves with loving fingers. It was unlikely that there would be anything about doughnuts, but she sought the index, and to her surprise there was a note. She sought the place indicated, and found only three lines, but those lines left her gasping.

"For the Carden doughnut, the pastry should be prepared in the usual way, but instead of preserves, whipped cream..."

Carden? It was an unusual name...surely? She put down the book and stared. And then she remembered Jack's reference to his uncle. If he had kept amongst his pots and pans...' She thought that this reference had some connection with a hardware business.

She took up her telephone and gave a number. She had innumerable friends in the city, and to one of these she addressed her inquiry.

"Walter Carden? Oh yes, he used to be a chef before his sister married Manworth the millionaire."

She drew a long breath, and Mr. Carden became very respectable in her eyes. A chef! It seemed impossible that so commonplace a man had once worn a crown of white linen and stirred amazing sauces with an air of nonchalance as though he were doing nothing unusual.

Then she remembered her appointment with a start, and, slipping into her coat, and grabbing her attache case, she set forth, a flushed and unusually dishevelled figure.

The house at which she descended was large and for those to whom architecture was unplumbed mystery, imposing. It could not impose upon those who knew where the Romanesque and the Gothic meet. Such would shudder at the battlemented tower overtopping a garage in the rustic style.

The occupants of this house were obviously rich. The hall, when Jimmy was ushered therein, always seemed to be filled with second footmen. She met a new one every time she came.

"Are you the young lady madame is expecting?" asked a functionary in a striped waistcoat. He talked in a whisper, the whisper permitted of sidesmen when they pass the plate.

This was an unusual greeting. It was customary for Jimmy to be shown straight to Mr. Carden's room. She had seen the wife of the millionaire but had not spoken with her, nor hitherto had that lady displayed any desire to meet her.

"My name is Meagh," said Jimmy.

"Madame wishes to see you." said the man.

"Lead me to your madame," replied Jimmy.

The footman was taken aback for a second and then, with a whispered: "Will you please follow me?" walked up a broad stairway, along as broad a corridor and knocked softly on a door. He conveyed the impression that he was holding his breath.

Then he opened the door and stood aside.

"The young lady, madame," he said gently, and Jimmy walked into the room.

It was known as the 'White Saloon' that it might readily he distinguished from the 'Blue Saloon' and the 'Red Drawing room'.

Mrs. Carden was thin and temperamental, and she moved from room to room as her moods dictated. She was not only thin, she was bony, and all the best art of Luville and the Maison Ruth could not conceal that fact. Moreover, she had a bony mind.

She did not look at Jimmy through lorgnettes. She wore glasses permanently and by years of practice had imparted to her stare an offensiveness which made the lorgnette an instrument of benignity.

"You're Miss Meagh, aren't you—well, just sit down, please. I heard of you from Mr. Carden and he said you were extraordinary. And I think you need to be extraordinary, Miss Meagh," she added unsmilingly, "to justify your fee! I never heard of anything like it!"

"Evidently you don't mix with the right people," said Jimmy gently.

"I don't...! Good gracious, girl—not the right people? I never heard of such a thing!"

To Jimmy's sensitive ear, Mrs. Carden seemed to rattle in her indignation.

"Not the people who employ folks like me," said Jimmy. "You've met footman employers and cook hirers and your views on salary and fees are naturally uneducated."

Mrs. Carden blinked rapidly.

"Anyway," said Jimmy, "I'm not prepared to discuss the question of salary. If your husband doesn't care to pay, I do not care to come. You can get another elegant young lady to stenog."

She turned on her heel and was walking out, but Mrs. Carden ran after her, and there was a look of alarm in her face.

"My dear young woman," she said, all a flutter, "I have not the slightest desire to offend you, and I am sure my husband would never forgive me if I allowed you to go away. I have a request to make of you, that is all."

Jimmy turned slowly back.

"Produce your request madam," she said.

"I never thought people of your class—" began Mrs. Carden.

"My dear woman," said Jimmy wearily, "there isn't such a devil of a difference," (Mrs. Carden did not swoon) "between my class and the nurse class, so please forget that you were ever anything but a lady."

The woman's face flushed, and she found a difficulty in regaining her voice. When she did, her tone was milder than it had been.

"It is a very simple request," she said. "The last time you were here, you sorted my husband's—er—papers and hunted up a number of unpaid accounts."

Jimmy nodded and wondered.

"You found a bag of lawn seed when you were searching for a bill in my husband's study," said Mrs. Carden.

"Yes," said Jimmy wearily, "I did. I told Mr. Carden I had knocked it over and spilt some. Have you counted the seeds and found a few missing? Deduct 'em from my cheque."

Mrs. Carden's eyes were homicidal but her smile was sweet.

"How amusing you are! Only I want to explain to you that we—I bought that seed for our lawn in the country. We have a house on the coast you know."

"You surprise me," said Jimmy who was neither polite nor desirous of being polite. For she had decided that she hated bony women, even bony women who preserved the skeleton of their youthful prettiness.

"I thought you might wonder..." suggested Mrs. Carden. Her voice was eager, her whole attitude curiously tense.

"I did," replied the secretary untruthfully, "I sat up half the night turning the matter over and over in my mind. And now I think I'll do my job of work."

Jimmy went upstairs to the sickroom, a very thoughtful girl. The room as usual was in darkness; the curtains were drawn; and the bandaged figure on the bed greeted her with his usually curt: "Sit down." She took her place on the other side of the screen, and he began to dictate, and all the time the girl's mind alternated between a split sack of lawn seed and the six doughnuts in her attache case.

Once, during a long pause, she furtively opened the case and examined her creations. To her dismay and horror their puffiness had gone out of them and they were lamentably flat. She touched them with her finger gingerly.

"I think that's all," said the voice on the other side of the screen. But Jimmy was not thinking of her letter. For once in her business life her mind was occupied beyond her employer's business, at the moment when she should have had no other thought.

"Mr. Carden," she was surprised into stammering, "how long ought you to let the dough stand—I mean for doughnuts? Does it make any difference if you double the amount of yeast?"

There was another pause.

"What the devil are you talking about?" said the voice of the sick man.

"I made some doughnuts today," faltered Jimmy, betraying her dearest secret, "and they ought to be all puffed up and they're not!"

She thought she heard a chuckle, then the voice became savagely grim again.

"Ask the cook. I don't know anything about doughnuts. I've never been inside a kitchen in my life!"

Though her extravagance lay in the direction of taxicabs, Jimmy walked home, and on her way she had to pass the boarding-house where Mr. Jack Manworth had his apartments. She hesitated before she ascended the steps and the second of hesitation relieved her of a certain amount of responsibility, for at that moment Jack came out.

"Why, Jimmy," he said in surprise, "what is this—an afternoon call?"

"I want a little talk with you, my bright lad," said Jimmy seriously, and he took her back to the drawing-room of the house, which was deserted at this hour.

"Who is Mrs. Carden's best friend?" she asked unexpectedly.

"I can't tell you," replied Jack in surprise. "I don't know her friends. Of course, her most intimate friend is her brother, Dr. Grain."

"What sort of a fellow is he?" she asked. "I've never met him."

"Oh, he's a third-rater," Jack shrugged the doctor out of existence. But Jimmy was particularly anxious to retain him. "He hasn't a very good name," said Jack. "But surely you've met him? He lives in the house."

"Oh, does he?" said Jimmy softly. "Was he with your uncle when they had their motor-car accident?"

"I believe he was," replied Jack Manworth wrinkling his forehead. "Yes, of course, he was; he was driving."

"They hadn't a chauffeur?" said Jimmy and the young man shook his head.

"Uncle is rather mean. I think he tolerated Dr. Grain living with them because he could handle a car."

"Was the car smashed?" asked Jimmy.

"No—as a matter of fact, they brought uncle back in it."

"And the doctor attended him, of course." nodded Jimmy. "Do you know where the accident occurred?"

The other looked at her in frowning wonder.

"Now what the dickens are you getting at, Jimmy?"

"I want to know if you can point out the spot where the accident occurred?"

"Surely I can but—"

"Do you know Inspector Farrell?"

"Ferdinand Farrell? Rather!" said Jack, and sat down, staring at her in hopeless bewilderment. "Are you writing a story or something, Jimmy? And have I got to guess who stole the bishop's suspenders?"

"Something like that," said Jimmy. "If your expensive car is in the vicinity, I want you to take me for a drive, and on the way call on Farrell."

Fortunately, Inspector Farrell was in his office at Police Headquarters when they called, and Jimmy, who had the entree to most of the holy of holies, was instantly admitted.

"Jimmy's got a scheme in her nut," said Jack inelegantly, "and she's being as mysterious as a serial story."

To Jimmy's proposal Inspector Ferdinand Farrell demurred, for he was a busy man, but she was very insistent and reluctantly he accompanied them to the car.

"We don't know anything about Dr. Grain officially," he said as the car sped through the outskirts of the town. "What is the idea, Jimmy? Do you think he manoeuvred the accident?"

"I don't think he manoeuvred the accident, because apparently he was in some danger himself," said Jimmy. "But I've got Big Ideas about Things."

An hour's drive brought them to a stretch of open wasteland, a common dotted at rare intervals with clumps of trees, and apparently with no human

habitation in sight. The white road went straight across the waste and disappeared over the brow of a low hill.

"Here's the place where the accident occurred," said Jack, pointing to a small copse at the side of the road. "I passed there the other day and noticed the scar which was made when the car collided with the tree, and it's still visible."

Jimmy descended and examined the wedge-shaped dent which the skidding car had hammered into the trunk. Then she looked round as though searching for something.

"Now give us the idea," said Inspector Farrell. "You've brought me away from my work, Jimmy, and being a policeman. I naturally loathe mysteries."

"Come along," said Jimmy, and led the way through the copse.

The wood was a very small one, and the trees were few and far apart. And all the time as she slowly walked forward, her eyes were searching the ground. Presently she stopped and pointed to a space between four trees where the grass was thick and surprisingly luxuriant.

"That is lawn grass," she said. "Somebody has sown that."

"What do you mean?" asked Jack.

She turned round and looked at him and her face was very serious.

"I am guessing, and perhaps I am guessing wildly," she said, "but I think your uncle is buried there."

Later when workmen came with tools to make a practical investigation, her guess proved to be well founded.

Two days later Jimmy was called to a large prison cell and from a somewhat incoherent dictation reduced to writing the confessions of Mrs. Carden. Her ne'er-do-well brother, the doctor, stoutly refused to make any statement incriminating himself. If Jimmy showed a flicker of interest in Mrs. Carden's statement, it was in that portion which dealt with the motor-car accident.

"My late husband was a very careful and economical man, mean in small details of household management and he insisted, when my brother came to stay with us, that he should either pay his share of expenses or should offer some service in exchange for his keep. My brother agreed to act as chauffeur and the regular chauffeur was dismissed. My brother was in the habit of taking drugs and this weakness had lost him his practice, though he was a

very skilful surgeon. As we had few visitors to the house the state of affairs was not known to outsiders. We did not keep as many servants its those days as we had after Mr. Carden's death.

"It was our practice to drive into the country every Tuesday and Friday and whatever were the weather conditions Mr. Carden insisted upon taking these trips and insisted too that I should accompany him. It was on a Friday drive that his death occurred. It had been a wet gusty morning but the rain had ceased to fall when we left the house. I think the doctor had been taking some sort of drug for he seemed stupid and dull and my husband, who did not know of his practice, remarked upon the fact.

"I cannot remember exactly how the accident happened. We were going at a good speed along the road which crosses the plain when, before I could realise what had happened, the car had skidded across the road, smashed into a tree and I was flung out. When I recovered my senses I saw the car, which had turned on its side, and my husband was pinned underneath. There was no help in sight and my brother with the aid of a 'jack' succeeded in raising and turning the car back on its wheels and we dragged Mr. Carden out. He was quite dead. My brother looked at the body for some time, then he said:

"'This is a pretty bad thing for you and I. That young devil Manworth will come and take possession of the house and it will be the street for us unless Carden has made a will.'

"I told him that Mr. Carden had made no will, although I had urged him to do so. Night was coming on and it had begun to rain. Nobody had passed along the road and all the circumstances were favourable to the plan which my brother suggested. When he found the car was in working order he took up my husband's body in his arms and carried it into the wood.

"We had a short consultation and I agreed to his scheme which was to bury the body in the wood after telephoning to the house that we should not be back to dinner. He said it would be easy to get back to the house when the servants were at their evening meal, go in by the library window which opens on to a little lawn, and pretend that we'd taken my husband upstairs and that he had met with an accident. My brother being a doctor there would be no need to call in further medical assistance and the deception could be more easily maintained because I had a Power of Attorney which had been granted me by Mr. Carden which was intended of course as a temporary expedient whilst he was away from town, but had never been revoked.

"I cannot describe to you the horror of that scene in the wood. My brother went to a farm which was four miles away and which was owned by a friend of his, and breaking into the tool-house brought back the necessary spades and together we worked for nearly an hour. At last the dreadful task was finished and, more dead than alive, I was driven back to the house. Everything went as my brother predicted. The servants were in the kitchen and we made our way up to the room without any difficulty. My brother sent an account of the accident to the newspapers and issued reassuring bulletins from time to time.

"Our principal difficulty was to deal with Mr. Carden's correspondence as it came in. It was my brother who thought of Miss Meagh, who had a reputation for integrity and discretion. One day a week he used to lie in bed with his face bandaged and dictate to this stenographer the letters which it was absolutely necessary he should answer. I might say that the day after we buried Mr. Carden, he went out to the wood and planted lawn seed upon the grave. He was afraid that somebody would stumble upon the place and draw their conclusions from the disordered state of the earth as we had left it."

"It was half guess work," said Jimmy, sitting on the commissioner's desk an hour later and smoking powerfully, "and it all began when I asked the doctor—I guessed afterwards it was the doctor who used to pose as Mr. Carden, and his nurse sister who did the pretty bandaging—when I asked him a question about—about pastry," she said carelessly. "It was then I started thinking pretty fast. And my mind ran to lawn-seed and from lawn-seed to the country. Considering all things, it is curious that Mrs. Carden did not tell her brother that the man he was impersonating was once a pastry-cook and had a—a doughnut named after him! I guess she was too proud. You get that way if you're rich and bony.

"Of course, Mrs. Carden's game was clear. When her husband died, her income went pop! and her brother's income too. I am going to say this," said Jimmy, blowing out a ring of smoke, "that only because I was his secretary, and because letters went out signed with my initials was the deception possible. My initials 0.K.d him. I hate boasting—it is contrary to my general practice and habit, but I owe a duty to Jane Ida Meagh."

"You were talking to the doctor about pastry," said Jack, "What kind of pastry?"

She opened her attache case with an air of carelessness. "I thought you might ask that so I brought along a few of the very—er—delicacies," she said

and he took from her hand one of the brown objects and regarded it curiously.

"A new kind of biscuit, eh, Jimmy?" he said. "By gosh, it's hard!"

Jimmy swallowed something and took the doughnut from his hand. Her face was white and her eyes glittered.

"It is not a biscuit," she said coldly, "and never was a biscuit! And I hope that when you get your estate, you find that Mrs. Carden has robbed you of every penny you own, you brute!"

And she slammed out of the office.

XIV. — CONTROL NO. 2

No record of prior publication under this title found

I

"SHOEY" GRINDLE came plunging through the bushes, not consciously avoiding the path, and presently burst into the open on a slope of the hill, where he stopped to recover his breath.

Ordinarily Shoey was not unpersonable in appearance, but now his face was drawn and haggard, and he showed his discoloured teeth in an ugly grin.

He stared back the way he had come, and listened, all his senses exaggerated. He heard nothing. His trembling hands went up to his collar. This he fastened, ran his fingers through his long, greying hair and made it roughly smooth. From his pocket he took a cap, pulled it down over his ears and made a quick examination of himself. There was a spot or two on his left coat sleeve. Then he saw a smear on his right hand, and wondered if it had been transferred to his collar. He pulled a tuft of grass and wiped his hand clean. Again he turned and listened; there was no sound but the twittering of the birds. His breath was no longer coming in long wheezes. With a conscious effort he straightened out the taut lines of his face and walked slowly down the slope towards the road.

Two troopers of the State Police reined in their horses in the cool of a little grove. Trooper Scanlan saw the figure coming down the slope.

"There's somebody," he said.

Trooper Burke sniffed.

"Going to ask him if he heard somebody scream?" he said sarcastically.

"I heard it." Scanlan was emphatic. "I've got pretty good hearing, Joe."

"You'll get yourself in the detective department one of these days unless you're damned careful," said Burke. "These horror murders are getting on your mind."

"Five," said Scanlan, "and all within twenty miles of the town."

Burke moved in his saddle uneasily. He felt the reproach to the force which the newspapers had not hesitated to express.

"That guy who escaped from the insane asylum—" he began.

"He was picked up last week," said Scanlan shortly. "A poor little rat who hadn't got the strength to kill a rabbit. One of these girls was seventeen and pretty strong, and she made a fight for it—where has he gone?"

Shoey had disappeared from view in a fold of the hills.

"Aw, nuts!" said Burke contemptuously.

"I'm going to look," said Scanlan, and put his horse at the slope.

He rode till he came to a little wood and threaded a way between young trees and tangled bushes. Burke followed at a more leisurely pace.

There was no reason why Trooper Scanlan should have been curious, except that every murder had been committed in a little wood, or in picnic places where young people might go for seclusion and the pleasantries of friendship. He was young and desperately keen, believed in miracles that brought promotion.

The path twisted round to the right. He decided to take a short cut. Burke heard him shout and put his horse to a gallop. Presently he came up with him.

"Hi, what's the idea—" he began, and stopped when he saw what there was to be seen. "Mother of God!" he breathed.

"Stay here," commanded Scanlan.

He turned his horse and went flying along the path, down the steep hill slope, and came at last to the road. There was nobody in sight. He turned right and went at a sweating gallop past the dip where Shoey had disappeared. Then, right ahead of him, he saw the dust of a little car.

Shoey had been fortunate, but the luck had gone. The car stalled on a hill. He heard the gallop of hooves behind him, leaped out and tried to escape down a steeper slope—a fatal move; confession in every yard he covered. Scanlan was up to him, gun out, livid with rage. Shoey stumbled back on foot, handcuffed to a stirrup iron, almost the hangman's rope about his neck.

That was the end of the Sunnyglen murder mysteries. Shoey Grindle. respectable artisan, a mild man, who wore gold-rimmed spectacles, an elder of his little church, a man deeply sympathised with because of his drunken wife.

People used to wonder what had happened to that baby of theirs, newly born within a month of the last horror. There was not much hope for its future now, with Shoey (the making and repairing of shoes was his trade) lying in the death house. He was fortunate to escape lynching, for all his victims had been young girls, some of them members of good-class families.

His apathetic wife was in a psychopathic ward, and the puling baby in the care of a slatternly sister.

Dr. Tarva Nischkin heard about the baby and was interested. He heard about it that day he operated at the Uplands Hospital, when three students fainted, and even the hardened nurses came ashen-faced from the theatre.

He was in his room when Professor Errington called on a very unpleasant errand.

"That was an interesting case," said Nischkin, pulling off his rubber gloves.

"Very." said the other dryly.

At the age of thirty-five Professor Errington had achieved international fame. A brilliant pathologist, the author of a standard work on mental diseases, he was regarded as one of the greatest intellects in the United States and a man to whose future there could be no limit. He was the most popular member of the staff of Uplands University. His popularity was enhanced when he married Mary Danebury, a brilliant leader in every sphere of social activity.

"Very," he said again. "Was it necessary?"

Nischkin fixed his monocle and smiled slowly.

"The operation? All human investigation is necessary," he said. "By the way, I have asked for the body of the man Grindle after his execution. I have one or two theories—"

"You have too many theories, Nischkin," said Errington bluntly, "and that's the trouble. You've been trying a few of them out lately."

Nischkin drew a cup of water, sipped it and dropped the paper into the basin.

"They have all made good recoveries," he said.

"They were all more or less unnecessary. In fact, the faculty has asked me to speak about it. You never made an operation but half a dozen men are

carried out. I saw your work today and I most confess it turned my stomach."

Again Nischkin smiled.

"If you introduce sentiment into surgery," he said, "you might as well turn the cases over to the Christian Scientists."

It was hardly an opportunity, but Errington made it so.

"There will be no more operations," he said bluntly.

Nischkin raised his eyebrows.

"What does that mean—that I am dismissed?"

"That is an unpleasant way of putting it," said the other; "but we're scared of the papers getting hold of one of these operations. A medical correspondent might be present in the theatre, and we can't afford anything like a scandal. You're a rich man, Nischkin; why don't you give up active work and devote yourself to research?"

Nischkin shrugged his shoulders.

"You can't make research on human bodies unless you're supplied with human bodies."

"Not living bodies," said the other.

"I should prefer them that way," said Nischkin. "I have theories; they must be explored."

"Not on tiny children," said Errington sternly, "little babies that can't tell the world just what you've done."

Nischkin did not reply. He stripped off his long white gown, folded it carefully and laid it over the back of a chair.

"So I'm dismissed—do I understand that?"

"We don't want it to go out that you're dismissed. We'd like you just to drop out. If you do that we shan't object to it, Nischkin, you're clever enough—one of the best surgeons in the country. Why not drop all your ridiculous theories? Some of them have got into print, you know," he said significantly. "The faculty had a meeting about your lectures in town. The idea that human beings are just animals without souls is revolting."

Nischkin laughed softly.

"Not to me."

"When you say that little babies are beasts——"

"They are," interrupted Nischkin coolly. "Take any baby, let him grow up in the woods, and he'll be an animal, predatory, murderous, with an animal's cunning for hiding up its tracks, with an instinct instead of an intelligence. There is no love, no spirituality, nothing that is not material and for which there is no glandular cause. What is the soul? Purely glands. With environment and training you can make any baby just what you wish."

Dr. Errington drew a long breath. His own baby was three weeks old; it was something divine, ultra-human.

"That is a theory to which I cannot subscribe," he said.

Nischkin paced up and down the room, his hands thrust into his pockets.

"A beautiful little creature," he said. "And you think, doctor, that even without your sentimental care and that of your excellent wife, your little child will grow up with all the intellect, all the humanity, all whatever are the qualities which have made you so deservedly popular"—he bowed slightly—"because in him is the seed that will blossom and flower to your intellectual colour and shape?"

He shook his head, took down his hat from a peg, opened the drawer of his desk and removed a small leather case, which he slipped into his pocket.

"Happily I have never regarded the Uplands clinic as a home." His lean face puckered again into a smile. "I carry my baggage in my pocket."

He walked to the door, opened it and turned.

"It is a great pity," he said. "Sentiment in business is deplorable; in the practice of medicine it is monstrous."

There were half a dozen students on the steps of the hospital as he came out. They were talking together very earnestly; he knew the subject they were discussing. They watched him pass without any evidence of friendliness. He was slightly amused.

He drove to his apartment, collected his case books, and, waiting only to give the janitor instructions as to the disposal of his mail, he got into his

long-bonneted car and drove out to the big, isolated house that he had bought on the Rackamy Hills.

His peons and a dozen Japanese gardeners were working in the grounds as he flew up the mile-long drive to the beautiful white house that had started as a bungalow and had spread south and north to his added requirements.

Rose Hu Song was waiting on the patio, a slim figure in white, meek, silent, obedient; a girl of nineteen who had reason to feel a hundred at times.

"Is the child here?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. Her voice was very low and sweet. "I brought him myself. I gave the woman fifty dollars."

"Did she want to know where he was going?"

"No, master."

Dr. Nischkin nodded.

"Good! His father will be hanged tomorrow. The mother will probably die; I saw her in the psychopathic ward two days ago. Did you get the photographs?"

"They are on your desk," said the Chinese girl, and followed him into the house to the big, panelled study.

Two dingy photographs lay on the table. One was that of a fairly good-looking man, the other of an attractive woman. He looked at them with satisfaction.

"The woman wanted ten dollars for them. She said she had to go around and get them from relations," said Rose. He ignored this.

"So that is what they were, and what the child would be. It will be a great advantage if he is of a good appearance, but even that could be arranged. Where is he?"

"In my room," she said.

"Bring him here."

She came, carrying the wasted little baby, and the doctor fixed his glass and examined the child thoughtfully.

"We will make him an American gentleman," he said. "The most perfect specimen of his kind, the human embodiment of noblesse oblige. He shall have the education of a savant, and in time to come he shall marry a beautiful, American girl, one of the type his father murdered so readily. The treatment of a gland here and a gland there, my dear Rose, makes all the difference. We will give him a soul! He shall have noble and beautiful thoughts. That will be a triumph."

He looked at the girl thoughtfully, though his mind was obviously far away.

"You wish me to look after him?"

He came out of his reverie.

"You?" His lips curled. "No, my good child, brilliant as you are he must have a normal upbringing—nurses, tutors, all the refinement that money can buy. I am successful with these cases, eh? Did I not buy you from a river boat on the Yangtse, a brat of a Chinese child, that the father was ready to throw overboard and the mother hated? And are you not a product of my magic?"

He saw her lips droop. It was unlike Rose Hu Song to display emotion.

"For you I will find another who will require treatment of a less scientific kind."

There was a gentle tap at the door. A Chinese boy came in, wheeling a little tea table. Dr. Nischkin poured the hot amber liquor on three slices of lemon precisely placed. The girl watched him.

"I wish I had a child," she said suddenly.

It was the first time she had ever put that thought into words, and he was amused.

"That, happily, is impossible," he said coolly.

If he had been looking at her he would have seen those brown eyes harden.

"You should be very grateful to me, Rose. Some time I will let you spend a week at a maternity hospital, and you will be even more grateful. I want No. 2 Control made ready."

She stared at him.

"For the child?" she faltered, and he snarled at her. "Some day you will learn not to ask questions."

He pointed to the door and she went quickly, carrying the baby. From a small box in her own simple apartment she took a key, and, leaving the baby in the small cot by her bed, passed down the long passage and turned at right angles into a stone-paved corridor. There was only one door in this, and that was at the end. She put the key in the lock, turned it and pulled the door open. It was of steel, the inside heavily padded.

The room she entered was one of two, a large sitting-room, comfortable-looking in spite of its heavy furniture. Out of this opened a plain bedroom, and beyond an unusually large bathroom, in the ceiling of which were a number of powerful lights. There was a small steel operating table, and, set in the walls, a number of glass-doored cupboards, each containing three glass shelves, on which a variety of shining instruments were laid.

There was no evidence of tragedy here, nothing to betray the character of the last occupant of the apartment. Windows there were none; the light was entirely artificial, and air was supplied by a perfect system of ventilation.

When she came back to the library the doctor had changed his coat and was smoking a long, thin cigar, his feet on his walnut writing desk. She reported briefly.

"Good!" he said. "Do you remember the last case, Rose?" He was faintly jocular. "Do you know you could walk out of this house into Uplands, see the chief of police and tell him a story that he would not believe, and which, if he believed, he could not prove—for what is the word of the child of a river boat compared with mine? And you do not even know what happened to the body, eh. Rose? Come here."

He caught her by a silken arm and drew her to his knees.

"You are a slave, Rose. You were born to be a slave. But what would happen? They would come and investigate and it is pleasant, eh? If you ever went to the police do you know shrug their shoulders and say: 'This is the lie of a Chinese girl', and you would go away, and I should find you, because I am very patient, and I should have you here under my control. And you would tell me many things I want to know, but which I have never tried to find out because I am fond of you, Rose, and it hurt me once to cut your lovely flesh." She did not answer, but sat meekly, her hands folded in her lap, looking straight ahead.

"Tonight I am bringing another baby. He goes into control. His father"—he stopped and chuckled—"is a splendid gentleman; a man of genius. One day he will be Dean of Uplands University. A man without a blemish, Rose, mental, physical or spiritual. His mother the daughter of an American revolutionary, a leader of the Four Hundred; a beautiful character, Rose. Not like you, born in God knows what dark hole on the Yangtse river of obscure parents, but of a great family, whose great-grandfather fought with Washington—you have heard of Washington?"

He pushed her away from him and got up, leaned on the desk and looked down at her.

"A gland here and a gland there, my friend, and what is this child? A murderer, an attacker of girls, a beast. His excellent father does not agree, but you and I will know better..."

There were two children of exactly the same age in the Errington household, a girl and a boy. That the baby girl was there was an accident. The mother was a dear friend of Mrs. Errington's. A month after the child was born she and her husband were killed in a motor-car accident; there were no other relations, and Mrs. Errington had taken the child. She and her baby boy should glow up together.

It was on a dark, gusty September night that the children's nurse came back to the room where she had left the sleeping babies, and found the door locked on the inside. The household was alarmed. Dr. Errington raced out, to discover that the French windows leading from the nursery had been forced and the cot wherein his child had laid was empty. Nobody had seen the kidnapper arrive or depart. A railwayman who lived in a cabin near a Santa Fe crossing had seen a car driven at top speed flying along the main road; but he had seen a dozen cars that night.

The story of Errington's lost child filled front pages. The detective forces of three states concentrated on finding the missing baby. That same night the second baby passed into control, and Dr. Nischkin spent half an hour with a bowl of Indian ink, a brush and an assortment of instruments, tattooing "No. 2" upon the baby's arm. He was a very methodical man.

II

Dr. Nischkin made several interesting experiments, none of a drastic nature. To the outer world he was testing the Mendelian theory on mice and plants. But the most fascinating of his pursuits was watching the development of No. 2, a half-naked, lank boy, tow-headed, expressionless, that could be

taught to climb trees by signs. It was fascinating to watch him. He never spoke or uttered a sound. Rose Hu Song earned the praise of her master.

"You have done well, Rose," he told her once. "If you had taught him human speech I would have beaten you. Just one word would have been sufficient."

"I have done as you told me," she said sullenly. "Everything by signs. When he made noises I put my finger to my lips and he came to know that that meant silence."

Dr. Nischkin was not wholly satisfied. He had sent No. 2 after a hare. The boy had overtaken it, but he did not kill. "He must be taught to kill, to tear, and to taste blood. I will try him again tomorrow. If he does not kill I will whip him."

"That is not necessary." she said, and he was tickled.

"It is necessary with all animals that they should be punished: there is no other way," he said.

Tomorrow's experiment did not cone. Dr. Nischkin was called east. Ralph Nischkin had contracted measles. The son of Shoey was at a fashionable school. Reports highly satisfactory to the doctor had come back, praising his intelligence and his grip of facts. He was a model boy, courteous, charming, and was in the college football team; yet modest withal.

The doctor went east in a fret. Shoey's son was very precious to him. Not a day passed that he did not supply material for that gigantic book with which Nischkin would one day startle the world. There were 700 written pages of it in the safe behind one of the panels of his library.

Ralph came home. At 18 he was tall, broad-shouldered, frank of face, polite. He met for the first time the adopted daughter of Dr. Errington. The old feud between the two men had subsided, but they seldom met. Nischkin seemed a reformed character, was enthusiastic about his mice and his plants. Mary Errington, who instinctively disliked him, invited him to dinner and found him amusing, and, when the great and inevitable subject was broached, intensely sympathetic.

Eighteen years had not dimmed the memory of that rosy child that had vanished from its cot. There had been no other children. Mary was a little greyer than she had been, and found, if not the fullest, a full measure of compensation in her adopted daughter, Virginia West, who was no Virginia Errington by common acceptation.

"Sure, bring the boy over. A nephew, is he? I didn't know you had any relations, Nischkin."

"My brother's son," said the doctor glibly.

So Ralph came and was approved. He might have made good headway with Virginia if her mind had not been at that moment completely occupied elsewhere. She had a romance that had begun in the art class at Uplands University. The young man, who bore the unromantic name of John Smith, was an occasional pupil. He was working, he told her, at a town some miles away, and could only come occasionally to the classes. He had an aptitude for drawing, made extraordinary progress, and would, if his studies had not been so erratically carried on, have won distinction. She met him one day in a near-by town and went to see a picture with him. Half way through he had gone out and had not come back. She told her foster-mother, and Mary Errington was a little shocked and indignant. Virginia was all the more ready to respond to the courtesies which Ralph Nischkin showed.

Control No. 2 was making progress. Dr. Nischkin used to take him out at night with a light chain on his arm. There came a time when he could be left off the chain and would obey a whistle instantly. Then came a time when he was released by daylight.

It was the day of the big picnic in the woods. Some fifty young people went out under the chaperonage of Mary. There was a girl, a friend of Virginia's, light, hearted, vivacious, just a little too sarcastic for the young men of the party. Somebody saw her wandering off alone, picking flowers. When the party was ready to return she was missing. Headed by Ralph, half a dozen men went in search of her. None of those who saw her when she was found ever forgot the sight. It was a nightmare which remained with them.

Dr. Nischkin was in his study when the news was telephoned to him.

"Did anybody see the man who did it?" he asked quickly. Nobody had seen the ghoul.

He hurried into Rose's room.

"Has Two come back?" he asked.

"Yes, ten minutes ago."

"Did you see him?"

Nischkin was rubbing his hands; his eyes were bright.

"Yes, I saw him. He came in at the back door."

There was a second door to the control, which opened into a thick plantation, and was skilfully concealed by a bush.

"Yes, I saw him."

"You saw nothing on his hands?"

She shook her head. Nischkin chuckled.

A brook ran down the hillside a hundred yards away. He had taught No. 2 certain habits of cleanliness. Taking a key from his pocket, he went down the corridor and opened the control door. No. 2 lay on his pallet bed, his back to the doctor, and he did not move. The doctor leaned over him, examined his frayed shirt sleeves. There was no sign of blood there. No. 2 was a credit to him. He went back to his study, glowing with satisfaction, and added another page to his great book.

He had written the last line when Rose came in, her face tense with horror.

"You've heard?" she breathed, and he glowered up at her.

"There has been a deplorable accident—yes."

"A girl—" she began.

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently. "It was a girl. But there is nothing more precious in a girl's life than in a man's. Remember that, little Rose, and go and get a book and read. I have spent a vast fortune putting a brain into your head. Use it."

She was quivering with something which was neither anger nor fear but a little of both.

"You have spent a great fortune dehumanising me," she said, "and you have not succeeded, doctor. You may beat me, but I tell you this: the police will come, they will search, they will inquire—"

"The police will not come here," said the doctor calmly. "Go, my little friend, to your study. You cannot know too much. Here is a little book on the human soul." He picked up a book from the table. "It is written by a German, and Germans know so much about souls; but they have not reduced it, as I have, to its chemical components."

To his amazement she struck the book from his hand.

"Some day you will know what you are doing," she said breathlessly.

He was not listening to her.

"The police win come, eh?" he said softly. "But none of the police will see what I saw—No. 2 lying out there in the grass, watching Virginia Errington being kissed by our boy. Perhaps he did not like it; perhaps it put thoughts in his head, hein? We shall make a grand match for Virginia, a magnificent wedding. I would like to have their first baby for control—an amazing possibility."

When he looked up she was gone.

The countryside was dazed by the murder. The big tennis club dance was postponed; it would have been cancelled but that Dr. Nischkin interfered.

"You must give these young people something else to think about, Errington," he said. "Postpone, yes, but do not cancel. Don't let their minds rest on unpleasant subjects."

He was dining with Errington that night.

"Unpleasant subjects!" said Mary, and shivered.

She did not like the doctor. His very presence gave her a queer, creepy feeling. In a way he fascinated her, and she had no doubt as to his brilliant mind, and when one day he had suggested that he should take up the search for her missing son her heart leapt within her.

She came to the subject of her great sorrow now.

"I have had inquiries made." His soul rocked with laughter, but he was preternaturally grave to all appearance. "Yes, I know so many of the underworld. Sometimes they call me in. They are not so particular as the faculty."

"Forget it!" growled Errington.

Mary Errington sighed.

"I suppose it's madness to have any hope," she said.

"I wonder?" Dr. Nischkin looked at her thoughtfully.

For some reason he hated her. His scientific mind had tried to find a reason for this antagonism, but he had not succeeded.

"The county is full of detectives," he said. "Why don't you talk to them? Captain Scanlan, the chief of the detectives, is here. He was the man, by the way, who arrested Grindle eighteen years ago."

"How old are detectives?"

It was Virginia who asked the startling question, and, when astonished eyes were turned to her, she flushed.

"I know that's a silly question, but I'm wondering...are they very young?"

Dr. Nischkin was amused.

"Yes, I suppose they are, Boys seem to be in almost every profession nowadays. Why do you ask?"

She did not reply. That afternoon she had met John Smith, and would have passed him but he stopped her. It was the first time she had seen him since he had left her so unceremoniously, and his stammered excuse was worse than his original offence.

"I'm sorry, but I remembered I had to see a lady."

"A relation of yours?" she asked coldly.

"Not exactly; she's—well, she's a friend."

"How very interesting!"

He tried to put matters right, but made them worse.

He puzzled her. His fugitive attendance at the art class, his unexpected arrivals and departures...and now here was an explanation. She knew there had been detectives in the county. There had been an outbreak of minor crime in the district: valuable cattle had been maimed, property wantonly destroyed. She had heard that one of the doctor's experimental gardens had been ruthlessly uprooted. But he had told her he worked on a farm. That might be a lie.

The night of the dance came, a week after the funeral. There were people who indignantly refused to come. There was a big gathering in the Pioneer Hall. None who came that night could have dreamed of its almost tragic end.

It was a quarter before eleven; the last dance before the supper. Virginia had her foster-father as partner. They were half way through when, without

warning, the lights went out. There was a loud and piercing scream, and Errington's voice demanded silence. It was not the moment for hysteria.

He made his way through the throng to the little lobby, where he knew the main switch was situated. As he expected, the switch was out. The door leading to the back of the hall was wide open. He had particularly instructed the janitor that this should not be unbolted.

It was when he put the lights on, and his hand was on the door to close it, that he heard the second scream. It came from outside and, leaping out into the darkness, he stumbled through the grounds in the direction of the sound.

It was repeated a third time. He heard the rush of feet and stumbled over the figure of a swooning girl. It was half an hour before she told her story.

As the lights went out she had been dancing with a partner near to the entrance to the lobby. Somebody had put his arm round her waist, put a hand over her mouth, and had lifted her bodily. She had struggled and fought with panic despair. She had screamed as she was caught. Simulating faintness, his hand had been taken from her mouth and she had screamed again, and that cry probably saved her life.

The town was now in a state of panic. Extra police were drafted for duty: houses were bolted and locked at sunset.

"I can't understand what it's all about," said Ralph Nischkin to his 'uncle'. "There must be a lunatic at large."

"'Lunatic' is a word I dislike intensely," said the doctor sharply. "It embodies a vulgar superstition which is both unscientific and inaccurate."

The young man murmured his apologies.

He was reading in the big study, and evidently had something to say. He waited till Rose left the room, and then:

"Uncle Tarva, why do you have that Chinese woman about the place?"

Nischkin smiled.

"My boy, you're very young. Rose is useful. She's intelligent and she is obedient."

"I don't understand it at all," went on Ralph. "What does she do in that little building at the other end of the house—the place you call the control? She's always going in and out there."

Nischkin smiled again.

"My dear boy, I am conducting a very interesting experiment, and Rose is an efficient agent."

"What kind of experiment? And how can she be of help? Couldn't I be of greater help than she?"

"You would be of no assistance at all, my friend," said Nischkin. "You can help me best by continuing in your brilliant career. By the way, I am sending you to the university next term. Have you any particular profession that you would like to follow?"

Ralph shook his head.

"No, sir," he said. "You've been too good to me as it is. I wondered if it was necessary to go to the university, whether I couldn't go into business? There's a fellow I know whose father runs a chain of shoe stores."

Tarva Nischkin sat up.

"Shoe stores?" he said sharply, "Get that idea out of your head." The voice was harsh. "You are worrying me, my boy, upsetting my theories. You shouldn't know there are such things as shoes, except when you put them on your feet. How are affairs progressing between yourself and Virginia?"

The young man sighed.

"I don't know. I'm terribly fond of her, but she's always so absent-minded when I'm with her. I think there must be another man."

Nischkin laughed.

"There is no other man. I particularly asked that complacent gentleman, her foster-father, and I think she would have told him."

There was another long silence, and after half an hour Ralph looked up from his book.

"Uncle Tarva, you're pretty clever. Have you any theory as to who tried to murder this girl?"

"I am so clever," said Nischkin suavely, "that I would not venture an opinion."

The week that followed was a week of terror for Virginia Errington. Once she woke in the night and sat up in bed, listening. Somebody was trying to open the wire shade of her window. At first she thought she had been dreaming, and listened, her heart beating wildly. There was no mistaking the sound. She sat for a moment paralysed, and then, slipping from the bed, she pulled back the curtains and screamed.

There was a man there: she could see the shape of him.

At the sound of her scream he disappeared.

Once, walking in the garden in the evening, she could have sworn she saw the figure of a man flitting like a shadow through a patch of firs that lay on the northern side of the grounds. She was not mistaken: Errington himself was in the garden, unknown to her, and as she ran in her fright he suddenly appeared.

"What is it?" he asked. "Did you see anybody?"

"I saw a man," she gasped. "He's there."

Errington nodded.

"I saw him too. Go back to the house, darling."

He pulled a gun from his pocket. Every man in that neighbourhood had been carrying one for the past fortnight. But though he searched the little wood carefully he saw no sign of the intruder.

Somebody was paying particular attention to the house. Virginia had an uncanny feeling that she was being watched all the time. She heard strange creakings; even in the broad daylight she had a sense of being overlooked.

Errington forbade her going out alone. He too felt that she was the objective of the unknown beast. But that anything could happen to her in the daytime he could not believe.

He saw Dr. Nischkin almost daily. He was more cheerful, more vivacious than ever he had been before. It was as though something was happening which added zest to life. These visits were an embarrassment to Errington, because at last one of Nischkin's experiments had ended disastrously. There was a section of medical opinion that was distinctly opposed to him, and when he performed an operation upon a poor man's child, an operation

which was fantastic in its character and fatal in its termination, the inevitable happened: he was called before the medical council.

Errington could not avoid his responsibilities, and the day came when Nischkin faced his judges. Again he offered his old defence, that all investigation was justifiable.

"Sentiment has distorted your views," he said. "What is one life in the interests of science? If I had been successful I could have made that child a brilliant orator, a great statesman and a leader of men. It would have been equally possible to have degraded him below what you in your ignorance would describe as brute level."

Errington was moved to anger.

"That claim is not only inhuman, it is absurd," he said. "The qualities a child has inherited, those he will develop. If my poor child had lived he would, under God, have followed me in my profession. He would have had my code of honour, fulfilled my standard of behaviour. You have offended against the etiquette and the practice of our profession, Dr. Nischkin, and your name will be struck from the register of surgeons qualified to operate in this state." Nischkin was staggered. He was enraged. All that night he paced his study in a blind paroxysm of fury. He sent for Ralph.

"Take a car and drive over to Professor Errington. Ask him and his wife to come and see me. I have something to tell them about their lost boy."

Rose Hu Song heard this with growing alarm. She begged him not to send for the parents, but he threw her off.

Ralph drove away, came to the doctor's house and delivered his message. Thunderstruck, unbelieving, Errington heard.

"I'll not go. It's some trick of his."

But his wife, grasping at straws, insisted.

"Stay with Virginia till we return. I can't risk leaving her alone, even with servants in the house," said Errington. They came to Nischkin's house. He was waiting for them before the open door, arid led them into the study.

"I can't believe, Nischkin, that although you and I are bad friends you would be so cruel as to raise our hopes. Have you any new information?"

Nischkin shook his head.

"New to you perhaps. Your son is alive."

Mary swayed and would have fallen, but her husband caught her.

"Are you sure of this?" he asked huskily.

"Absolutely sure. You were dogmatic today, professor. You told me that all I had said was a lie, that it is not possible to change the hereditary characteristics of a child. I am going to show you something."

He took a key from a drawer.

"Will you please follow me," he said.

They followed him in silence, bewildered, in Mary Errington's heart a growing sense of dread. They passed down the corridor and came to the steel door.

"I am going to introduce you to your son," said Nischkin. "I am going to prove to you all that you said was impossible. I took your boy from his cot." He almost spat the words. "He is there." He pointed to the door. "He has no name, no identity. He is Control No 2, a brute, beast, a murderer."

Errington stared at him.

"You're mad," he said.

"I brought him up," Nischkin went on, "I and this woman."

Rose Hu Song stood silently in the background.

"Brought him up without speech, without any human accomplishment. Reverted him to an animal. They're going to arrest me tonight for second degree murder. You and your damned faculty have been waiting for your chance, and now I'll give them something to talk about."

He thrust the key in the door and, flinging it open, clapped his hands, and there walked into the light a tall young man.

"Not exactly an animal." he said.

It was the voice of an educated man. If Virginia had been there she would have recognised him instantly as John Smith. Nischkin glared at him, his jaw working, and then he looked round at Rose.

"You did this!" he screamed.

"Yes, I did it," she breathed. "I taught him everything—to speak, to write, to read, to think, and when you were East I let him out and sent him to classes. He had to get back before you returned. He was my baby—the baby God gave me. Now kill me!"

Nischkin was dazed, for the moment speechless. Then he turned to the boy.

"He's a murderer," he said unsteadily. "He killed the girl—"

"He killed nobody," said Rose passionately. "Ralph did that. He's the son of his father. That's the end of your theories, Tarva. Let the police take Ralph before he murders another woman."

Errington stepped back. Suddenly the dreadful truth flashed on him.

"We've left Virginia alone with him," he said, and raced up the corridor.

Ralph, left alone with the girl, was pleasantly conversational.

"I wonder what Uncle Tarva has to tell?"

"Do you think he really knows anything?" asked Virginia anxiously.

Ralph shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't know. He's a curious bird."

He walked aimlessly about the big drawing-room, picked up a book and put it down again.

"Have you got a lot of servants in the house?" he asked.

"Only two tonight, the chauffeur and the cook. Daddy let the rest go into town to see a picture."

Ralph thought for a moment.

"I wonder if I could see your chauffeur?"

"I'll ring for him."

"No, I'll go and find him."

He went out of the room, down into the kitchen, and found that the chauffeur was the solitary occupant.

"You've got a spare car, haven't you? Take it over to my uncle's place, will you? I've a message I forgot to give him. Will you tell him that I've bought the horse and that it will be delivered tomorrow."

The chauffeur was uncertain.

"I can't very well go out, sir. I promised the professor wouldn't leave the house—"

"Nonsense! I'm here, and I'm a match for anybody who's likely to come tonight."

The chauffeur grinned.

"Well, I could have matched 'em," he said. "I won the revolver championship three years in succession when I was in the army." He patted his side pocket. "Do you want this gun?"

"No, I shan't want it," said Ralph.

He returned to the drawing-room.

"What did you want with him?" asked Virginia.

"I've just remembered a message I wanted to send to my uncle. You don't mind his going over, do you?"

For some reason she felt a little uncomfortable.

"No, I don't really. Is it necessary?"

"It's not exactly necessary," he laughed. "If you'd rather he didn't—"

"No, of course not. I don't mind at all. But you'll stay till they come back?"

"Oh, I'll stay all right."

There was an awkward little pause. She tried to make conversation but failed. She was trembling. Then she heard the whirr of the car as it went away from the house.

"Are you going to marry me, Virginia?"

She looked at him quickly. There was something in his tone which was strange, something that made her breath come quickly.

"Why, you haven't asked me, Ralph," she temporised.

It came to her at that moment with shattering force that she could never marry him, that there were qualities in this admirable young man which made such a thing impossible.

"I haven't asked you," he said slowly, "because I don't want to marry you. I didn't want to marry Elsa Fardon, and I didn't want to marry Janet Greythorne."

As he mentioned the name of the murdered girl she grew stiff with terror. He was staring at her, a queer, unearthly look in his eyes, his lips parted, his long face drawn and tense. Then suddenly he leapt at her, a wild beast of a man, tore at her clothes, clawed at her, She struggled desperately. At school they had taught her the elements of ju-jitsu; she tried vainly to remember any one movement, and, more by instinct than knowledge, flung him off.

She flew through the open door and up the stairs. He was at her heels. Her hand was on the door of her room when she remembered that there was no escape that way. She raced along the passage. At the end was the entrance to an observatory that the professor had had built the previous summer. Her strength was leaving her. With the courage of desperation she leapt up the steep stairs, the man close behind her. Once he gripped at her flimsy dress, but she wrenched herself free. She came at last to the top, a flat platform under the stars. She slammed tight the door at the head of the stairs, but the key was on the inside. Exerting all her strength, she resisted his first efforts to open it. There was nothing at hand that she could use as a lever. Suddenly he hurled his weight at the door and it flew open, throwing her to the edge of the parapet. She screamed, and then he was at her.

He saw the lights of two cars coming up the drive. He must work quickly. But she was strong—stronger than he had ever thought. He raised his hand to strike her, but missed. Suddenly a blinding ray of light struck him. The chauffeur was out of his car and had jerked up the headlamps till they covered the top of the tower. For a second Ralph glared down at the darkness, and in that second of time he was a target that no pistol shot could miss.

Virginia felt the strong hands around her throat relax, and crumpled down into a heap by the side of the dead man.

One light burnt in the study of Dr. Tarva Nischkin. He sat at his desk, and before him the sheets of the monumental work on which his fame was to be founded.

He was broken, desolated. He who could without remorse slay and torture, had no thought of the lives he had wrecked, the hearts he had broken. He was wrong; his theories under the acid test had dissipated. There was tragedy in his face as slowly he tore the pages one by one and dropped them to the ground.

And Rose Hu Song watched him without pity and without fear, and did not move until she heard the door bell ring, and went out to admit the police.

THE END