

Thrills





# THRILLS



*“ Our inn stood a good two miles out of town.” (See page 64.)*

# THRILLS

TWENTY SPECIALLY SELECTED  
NEW STORIES OF  
CRIME, MYSTERY AND HORROR

Twelve Illustrations by  
NORMAN KEENE

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THE MYSTERIOUS FLUID

I

DR. CURRIE is the most extraordinary man I know. Those of his friends who are mystical call him an adept—that is, a man with psychic powers beyond the norm; the more material of his friends are content to call him a scholar; and a few esoteric members of the police force know him as a brilliant amateur solver of mysteries. It was, of course, to Dr. Currie that I went with my problem; an unusual puzzle, calling for a solution of great discretion.

When I had the doctor planted in a chair facing me, I began my story and was relentless to the end:—

“About a year ago I got into the train at Thornton, —(You know my mother lives there?) But I can't tell you how surprised I was to see Manning in the carriage. He must have taken the train higher up the line, somewhere in the moor country. Moors and Manning don't go together. He's the sort of fellow who, when drunk, thinks it rather smart in the middle of Piccadilly Circus to kick the policeman.

“‘Fancy,’ I overheard him saying once, ‘I hacked the shins of the jolly old policeman in the centre of the world. Some distinction, what?’

“Personally, I loathe the brute and all his ilk. Women fall for what they call his flashing, hypnotic eyes—the fools! And there he was in a carriage of one of the smallest branch-line trains still running. When he saw me, he got red a little in the face.

“‘Hullo!’ he said.

“‘Hullo!’ I managed.

“He sat surveying my disapproval, and I knew what the blighter was thinking. He made up such yarns himself on the slenderest pretext, that he was

wondering what kind of scandal I would concoct about his presence in the train, unless he offered me an explanation.

“ ‘ You’ll never guess what I’ve done,’ he suddenly blurted out. ‘ I’ve bought a cottage near St. Bride’s. I’ve been thinking that the wife needs country air, and no traffic to get on her nerves.’ ”

“ ‘ St. Bride’s!’ I expostulated, ‘ that’s the deadest hamlet in the universe! Besides, Manning, I thought Nora was superstitious; those moors are queer company for anyone who isn’t quite . . . who hasn’t got a full grip on herself.’ ”

“ There was a forlorn cleric in one corner, who, at this point, pushed his face forward, and spoke in a tremulous voice, ‘ Pardon me, sir, it wouldn’t be MacWithers’ old cottage that you’ve bought?’ ”

“ Manning nodded.

“ ‘ In that case, sir, I must warn you.’ ”

“ Manning glared, and asked, ‘ What the hell do you mean?’ ”

“ ‘ Well, sir,’ rejoined the parson, ‘ none of the the owners have allowed me to exorcise that property. You know, in the days of the old church there was an excellent law which made it imperative for a man to determine whether the estate he was buying was contaminated. If a proprietor imagines that he has exclusive right to his estate, he may reckon without a host of devils who also exercise an exclusive title to the property.’ ”

“ ‘ Fiddlesticks!’ Manning exploded.

“ The priest rubbed his hands together, and said, mildly, ‘ Naturally, it’s very hard to ascertain whether the infernal powers have a claim on a piece of land. But it is possible for knowledge to be derived indirectly from inquiries into the characters of the owners for many centuries. I admit that it is presumptive rather than positive evidence; yet I should say that every man who has lived in that cottage has become cruel, and every woman has moped to death.’ ”

“ This time Manning lost his temper. He struck his knee and cried, ‘ Damn it all, gentlemen! it seems that everyone knows my business better than I do! ’ He turned to the parson, ‘ My friend here may have given you the impression that my wife is scared of goblins. She isn’t. There is only one thing about which she is obsessed. Once she fell off my yacht and was nearly drowned; now she has nightmares about suffocating under water. Apart from that, and the fact that she has to be wheeled about in a bath-chair, she is quite balanced, thank you. I must say, gentlemen, I went to a lot of trouble to find the cottage at St. Bride’s; because I know of no country for miles with so little open water around. Lakes, rivers, the sea—those are the things that frighten my wife.’

“ The priest sighed. I thought of whispers that I had heard. Everybody knew that Nora was a drag on her husband after the accident, and the uncharitable said that he would welcome a chance to be able to marry again.

“ Well, that train meeting was months ago. Timothy was the only man who knew Nora well enough to be able to invite himself down to St. Bride’s. Each time he went, he reported that her resistance was ebbing; she seemed to be moving unconsciously, appeared an automaton.

“ The end of it all—was in the papers, yesterday. You saw it, maybe? How Manning decided to take his wife back to a London nursing-home. How she died on the branch-line, between two stations. She died—with every symptom of having been drowned. Her face was dry, and her clothes were dry. There are no lavatories on those little branch trains. The luggage was in the guard’s-van. Manning wasn’t even wearing an overcoat. It was the first journey of the day, and the carriage had just been swept out. You see, no place in which to conceal enough water to drown anyone! The guard, a kindly soul, had put

his head into the carriage, at the stop before the one at which she was found dead. He swears that she was peacefully sleeping. Manning didn't pull the communication cord. He says there wasn't time. The fit came on so suddenly, and his first thought was to help her himself. Therefore, anything thrown down the bank, out of the window of the moving train, could not have buried itself in a hole. Superintendent Deering, who happened to be taking a holiday in the district, intelligently set off at once to search the short length of line. Why he should have been suspicious I don't know, unless he took the same immediate dislike to Manning that I did. At any rate, how could Manning have introduced a pan of water into the compartment?"

Dr. Currie looked at me, blankly. "Is that all?" he questioned.

"Isn't it enough?"

"Enough for suspicion, but no evidence."

"Hell," I grunted, "you *are* letting me down. I thought with your black magic plus your rational mind you'd easily be able to suggest a way that the crime could have been executed?"

"I could, easily. But what I can't be certain about is whether a crime has been committed—at least one that is more than a moral crime. Again, you, my friend, I am sure have a theory of your own. Before you lure me on, it's your turn to theorise."

I demurred for an instant, and then I plunged: "It just crossed my mind that hypnotism might have been behind the tragedy. I mentioned Manning's hypnotic eyes. It seems to me that he might have taken her to that cottage so that he could break her will, away from her friends. When the guard saw her sleeping, she might have been in a trance. When the train moved out of the station, he might have willed her to experience the sensations of a drowning woman?"

Dr. Currie beamed at me. "Not bad," he said, "not at all bad. But I, myself, don't believe it was hypnotism, because a man or a woman hypnotises his or herself by inhibiting the mental processes of certain centres of the brain. I have yet to be convinced that you can hypnotise against the patient's will; especially if you wanted to keep the patient in a trance while the spirit fought for survival. The instinct for self-preservation is stronger than any hypnotic command. Still, if there has been a crime, you are very, very near the truth. Now listen while I read you a passage from this *Life of Mesmer*." He crossed to the book-shelf, and lifted down a volume from which he began to read:—

"He used mesmeric *baquets* or troughs filled with bottles of water and iron filings, around which stood rows of patients holding iron rods issuing from the troughs, the subjects being tied to each other by cords or by joining hands. Perfect silence was maintained, soft music was heard, and remarkable effects were obtained. Some patients were convulsed, and had to be taken away to a padded room, against the walls of which they might knock their heads without injury. Some patients became affectionate and embraced each other, others fell into fits of immoderate laughter, shrieking, or tears. The convulsive agitation frequently lasted for hours, and according to the account of an eye-witness, these symptoms were preceded or followed by a state of languor or dreaminess, by a species of depression and even by stupor.

"Mesmer, wearing a coat of lilac silk, walked up and down amid this agitated crowd in company with Deslon and his associates, whom he chose for their youth and comeliness. Mesmer carried a long iron wand, with which he touched the bodies of the patients, and especially the diseased parts. Often laying aside the wand, he magnetised the

patients with his eyes, fixing his on theirs and applying his hands to the hypochondriac region and to the lower part of the abdomen."

"Why!" I protested, when Dr. Currie had finished, "all that sounds very like hypnotism to me."

"My dear boy!" he corrected, "mesmerism is not hypnotism. Hypnotism deals with a state of passivity on the part of the subject; mesmerism deals with an actual force. The force has been granted by such chemists as Boyle and Homberg, and by the master, Newton. Masseurs and osteopaths carry on the old 'manual work' without being aware of its profounder significance. I see what you are thinking, my boy: this is only talk and confusing talk. Very well, I'll give you a demonstration."

He stretched out his hand, and rang the bell. I admit to having been somewhat scared.

I asked, awkwardly, "You don't want to use me as a subject?"

He replied, "I want you to watch."

Martha, the doctor's housekeeper, shuffled into the room.

"Martha," he suggested, "I would like to repeat that little experiment we tried two years ago?"

She answered grudgingly, "I guess I lived through it last time, so I might as well make a fool of myself again."

"Good!" said the doctor.

He placed Martha in a chair, and sat opposite her, foot against foot, knee against knee. He raised his hands above his head. Holding his fingers in pyramidal formation, he passed his hands from the woman's head, over her shoulders, down to her feet. He performed this five times, and he had every appearance of exerting the utmost concentration. After the completion of the fifth movement, the housekeeper's eyes closed. The doctor withdrew the contact of his



hands, and made several long and slow passes in the air in front of his subject, always moving his hands in a downward direction.

He said, "She is now completely mesmerised!"

He got to his feet and made for the door, beckoning me to follow him. He led me to his laboratory, where he picked up a couple of test-tubes. Without uttering a syllable, he handed them to me. Next, he took two bottles from the shelves. He let me read the labels: one contained alcohol, the other a sulphate of spartein. He poured the alcohol into the tube in my left hand, and the spartein solution into the tube in my right hand. Still without a word of explanation, he conducted me back to the sitting-room, where the house-keeper remained motionless in her chair. He took the tube of alcohol, and placed it on the woman's neck. The effect was rapid and marked. Martha swallowed hard. She tried to rise from her chair, but fell back into it. Then she seemed to be on the point of vomiting. Dr. Currie removed the tube, and handed it back to me. After waiting a few seconds (I imagined to allow the patient to recover from the first phase), he took the tube from my right hand and placed it against her neck. The veins of Martha's neck started to swell, her face purpled, the eyes became dull, her respiration laboured. The doctor removed the tube and handed it to me.

"Take these back to the laboratory, and throw the contents down the sink."

When I rejoined him in the sitting-room, he was making passes over Martha in the reverse direction—from her feet up to her head. Soon she opened her eyes.

Dr. Currie spoke to her quietly and courteously, "Thank you very much; you have been very helpful. Are you all right, now?"

She said, "Yes, thank you," smiled a little vacantly, and went out of the room with a suspicion of a wobble.

“No,” intimated the doctor, answering my thoughts, “she won’t experience any deleterious after-effects. I gave her the command to feel refreshed and rested by her mesmeric sleep. It’s only the novelty of the business that puts her off her balance for a bit. Now you see what a profound effect you can exercise over the system of a person who is mesmerised. The higher senses come into play, and they react through an intensified perception unknown to us in our ordinary lives.”

“Stop!” I almost shouted; “if water had been in one of those tubes?”

“Exactly. I spared Martha water, because drowning is particularly unpleasant. But, you saw the alcohol make her drunk and the spartein solution poison her; can you doubt that water would produce the symptoms of drowning? And a test-tube of water could be slipped into the vest pocket. And mesmerism brings into play a real force which can be directed against someone, whatever his will.”

I interrupted, “If the tube were held long enough against the flesh, death would follow?”

“Assuredly.”

“But,” I panted, “what can we do about it?”

“Nothing, my dear boy, nothing. It is not for us to judge; but you may be sure that if a man has sinned he will pay bitterly for his transgression, in this life or another.”

## 2

It was not till six months later, when Manning announced his engagement to Julia Preston, that I determined that the business of Nora’s death could not be allowed to rest. Julia was such a lovely, simple girl, that I could not bear to think of her married to the

man, if he was what I feared he was. I rang up Dr. Currie. At first he refused to interfere. Afterwards, sensing the genuineness of my anxiety, he asked me if it would be possible for me to invite Manning to his place. I said I thought not, but I also declared that I was ready to "bring" him.

So it happened that, the next afternoon, when Manning walked down his front-door steps and turned into a side-street, he was abruptly surrounded by three hefty lads. A closed car, with drawn blinds, was waiting by the kerb. It all happened so quickly that Manning had not time to struggle before he found himself inside the saloon: and by then Pat (a trusted friend of mine) already had a handkerchief, dipped in chloroform, beneath his nostrils; while Rodney (another friend) and I had achieved a firm purchase on his arms and legs. We kept him under till we got to the house. I must, in justice to all parties, mention that Pat is a medical student. We half-carried him into Dr. Currie's parlour. Nobody was in the road; and if they had been they would not have thought it strange to see a man being assisted into a doctor's house.

Dr. Currie had made all preparations. Martha had already been mesmerised. We arranged Manning in a chair, with the assistance of some stout straps. The doctor gave him a draught to clear his head; then we adjusted a gag.

"Manning," I said, when I saw that he was conscious enough to follow me, "no harm will come to you directly through what we are doing. All we want is to show you a little experiment, which we think may interest you. As it is an experiment in mesmerism, the doctor is anxious that we should all hold a small stone in our mouths. I confess I don't completely comprehend this, but I suppose it is something to do with the generating of mesmeric force. Now will you be good and not bite when I put the pebble in your mouth? You must realise

that we could retaliate pretty effectively. There, I'll just push it up, under the bandage, so. Don't swallow it, for your own sake. Ready, doctor."

Dr. Currie looked slightly embarrassed, and he addressed himself to all of us rather than to Manning. He indicated Martha.

"This lady I have put into a mesmeric slumber. She is now *en rapport* with me."

Dr. Currie then repeated the experiments he had previously shown me.

During his curious performance, I had been studying Manning's face. He wasn't betraying himself. Certainly, he appeared furious; but that might be a very natural fury. Dr. Currie suddenly announced, "Gentlemen, may I have your stones? The experiments are over."

We each handed him the pebble we had held in our mouths.

I secured the stone from Manning by saying, "Come on, it's all over now. We'll soon let you go home." Really, I was considerably disappointed. As I passed Manning's pebble to Dr. Currie, I whispered, "Aren't you going to tax him with his crime?"

He moved the stones in his hand, and replied, "It won't be necessary. The pebbles have told me that he is guilty. If you gentlemen will wait in the hall and leave Mr. Manning with me, I will be with you in under half an hour."

In twenty minutes the doctor came from his sitting-room.

"Here you are," he said to me, "this is his written confession. It'll be ample to show it to your friend, Miss Preston. He's had his lesson at last."

I whistled. "How on earth did you get it?"

Dr. Currie actually winked. "I told you that mesmerism, unlike hypnotism, is a force, and can be used as such."

I grinned, "That's swell! you see . . . you see, if things had gone wrong I was hoping you could suggest a way to make him forget the whole incident."

"As things are," the doctor replied, "it is better that he does not forget his lesson. You boys had better take him home, now; you'll find him quite docile."

"I say," Pat suddenly expostulated, "is all this absolutely the game? I mean to say, when the chap is in a trance, might he not have said something just because it was your will?"

The doctor became serious. "It wouldn't have been fair," he allowed, promptly, "if I hadn't known that he was guilty. The stones told me that."

Rodney demanded, superciliously, "More magic?"

"Not magic, young man—but *the mysterious fluid!*" replied Dr. Currie, brightly. "A guilty man, at the moment of test, inhibits his salivary glands. In spite of his outward composure, Manning didn't feel any too easy when I started to talk about mesmerism. The stones you young men held in your mouths were all moist; Manning's was quite dry!"

---

*Thomas Burke*

## THE GOLDEN GONG

THE friends of Tommy Frang, if asked what sort of fellow he is, will tell you that—oh, he's just an ordinary, likeable, middle-aged fellow; no nonsense about him. But if you press them for any distinguishing characteristic, they will admit that there

is just one thing about him that puzzles them; that is, that he can never pass a gong in a hotel or private house without furtively striking it and listening to its note with an air of awaiting a revelation. As an adult and a man of orderly and sensible habits, he has confessed that the act is futile and that he expects nothing from it; it has become a perfunctory habit, like Samuel Johnson's habit of touching all the posts in Fleet Street. But it is a habit which some inner and regrettably capricious force will not allow him to break; its roots are set too deep in reality and significance. They are set in the only essential reality—the reality of childhood. As we grow, we learn; but the things we truly know, the things that are the core of our being, are the things we have never learnt—the things we knew when we scarcely knew that we were alive. We do not believe these things. We *know* them. Here is what Tommy once knew about a gong.

When he was ten years old, Tommy was living in Limehouse, in one of those streets which housed an overflow of the Chinese from their two main streets—Pennyfields and the Causeway. These Chinese, as a sprinkling of foreigners in a street of Londoners, stood out and caught his young attention and held it. He fell into a way of shadowing them, and following them into their own streets. He was by circumstances solitary and by nature shy. He could not readily get on with his schoolmates; he was so much quieter and older of character. It was therefore natural that he should turn from those of his own age to grown-ups; natural, too, that after a time his shyness should drive him from the grown-ups of his own people to those of another race. From following the Chinese into their own streets he came to be noticed by them, and he found that among them he could be at ease. He found that his shyness passed without comment or was accepted as characteristic of the English boy.

He found that he was not judged or compared or put at a loss by them. In these streets he felt free from the demands of inhibitions and contemporary standards. He was accepted as himself, with the result that among them he was not shy. And there were no nagging or harassed or exasperated people here—no complaining voices or harsh gestures. All was cool and suave and imperturbable.

So he came to spend all his spare hours among them. He wandered along their streets, and hovered about their shops, and soon made friends with them, and was given the entry to their rooms. As a small child, regarded casually as an adopted mascot, he was allowed to go where he would, in and out, upstairs and downstairs, and to sit among them without rebuke.

In a short time he knew more of the Chinese and their ways than he knew of the ways of the people of his own streets. He liked their ways. He liked their faces, and he liked their high voices, and liked to hear them talk in their bubbling Cantonese. It sounded to him more like comic songs than serious talk. He became wise in the affairs of the colony. His real life became identified with it, and the daily life of his own home was no more than a background to it. He knew the names of a score of them and their characters. He knew who were generous and who were mean; who were prosperous and who were poor. He knew who liked whom, and who hated whom. He knew where they came from and where, at some fortunate time, they planned to go. And he heard stories—casual stories of business and trouble, of death and revenge, and strange happenings in far-away hills— anecdotes of everyday; but to him they were more wonderful and terrible than anything in the Arabian Nights or Gulliver. Before he was nine he knew much more about China than his school-teacher had even read. He could not relate or compare this knowledge. It was pure and barren

knowledge, akin to the cramming of a dull student, without utility or significance. But he enjoyed possessing it and enjoyed adding to it.

At half a dozen shops and two or three lodging-houses he was admitted with smiles, and of all these places his favourite was a little store in the Causeway. He grew to love this narrow street. It is a bitter-smelling street. Its air holds the true smack of Asia; the spirit that lives in it is radiant, gracious, delicate and utterly unhuman. But to the boy it was a street of human delights. It was so different from the streets of his regular life that he could not perceive its grotesquerie and its chill; he could see it only as a street that he would like all streets to be. Very little ever happens in this street, but it is a street where anything, however fantastic, *might* happen. It is the right setting for the odd and the peculiar, and if it be approached in the right temper the odd and the peculiar will sometimes emerge from it. It was something of this sort that Tommy's temper struck from it; something so odd and peculiar that it coloured the whole of his life.

Every evening after school he would wander into it and make for the little store, and there he would prowl about a more enchanting and bewildering Wonderland than any Christmas Bazaar he had ever seen. It was so enchanting that it became a worry to him. His mind was agitated by the thought that he might have to go away, or the shop might be shut up, before he had made full exploration of all its massed delights. It was an Ali Baba Cave. There were ginger jars of all colours, and banners with precepts inscribed in gold. There were curious foods and exciting sweets. There were tea-pots in scarlet cradles. There were boats and towers and houses in ivory and coral and soapstone and crystal. There were exquisite trifles in jade. There were paper lanterns with green dragons and yellow lions and purple serpents. There were gay vases and fearful



masks and brilliant boxes. There were coloured tea-chests. There were red papers bearing queer drawings and signs which the boy studied stroke by stroke. There were mis-shapen musical instruments, of one and of twelve strings. There were idols and dolls and love-amulets, and fly-whisks of blue and yellow. There were little tobacco pipes and gorgeous water-pipes, and the tiniest tea-cups. All the exhibition junk that white visitors might be expected to buy.

But its chief glory was hidden upstairs.

Its chief glory was a huge golden gong.

Tommy had made many visits to the store before he discovered the gong, but once he had discovered it, he could not keep away from it. Against its glory all the assorted treasures of the shop shrivelled into the ordinary. It was a more desirable toy than any of the things he had ever coveted—bicycles, kites, trains, pistols, magic-lanterns, humming-tops, boats. It was more gorgeous, more exceptional, inexhaustibly interesting, more—or so it seemed—more alive and responsive.

It hung in a frame of red wood in old Foo's private room, and it was the king of the room. Indeed, it *was* the room. It claimed all the light and seemed to claim all the space. There were other things in the room, but under the august gleam of the gong they did not dare to assert themselves. All that the visitor saw was the gong. It was of a rich autumn gold, and its face was damascened with dragons and lilies and peacocks. In that small room it appeared three times larger than it was; it seemed to be trying to burst out of the room in fierce resentment at the confinement in an attic of such blaze and power. But when it was made to speak there was nothing of anger or resentment in its tones. In its tones, which circled the room like visible rays of liquid gold, rang a memory of all sweet things. They held honey and cream and wine. They held the dark reek of laudanum. They held plaintive song. They held

porcelain and amber, velvet and silk and pomegranates. They held figs and lotus seeds; purple rugs and pearls and roses. They held ambrosial herbs. They had the roundness of ripe plums. In the moment of percussion its golden throat opened in a plush roar that evoked images of the opulent and the sumptuous, of the Violet Town and the Forbidden City and the Temple of Heaven. As this plangent tone rippled and declined, it evoked the suave and the perfumed, until its last tremblings dissolved into whispers of fleeting and fantastic forms so fragile that nothing palpable could illustrate them.

But behind all these ideas, and perceptible only when its last vibrations had perished, hung a hint of the uneasy; an image of something desiccated and austere and terrible. Not of anger, but something colder than anger, a disembodied potency as abstract in its action as the sea.

Something of this Tommy perceived, because he often told old Foo that it wasn't an ordinary gong; it was a magic gong. Each time he played upon it, which he sometimes did for an hour—old Foo was serenely tolerant of noise—he was aware of indulging in a secret delight; a delight which he not only could never bring himself to share with another, but could not even mention to another. It was *his* gong and *his* delight. Nobody must know about it. He hugged it as closely to himself as a sin. He did not know why he should have this feeling, and being ten years old he was not concerned to question it. At that age, feelings are feelings and experience is experience, to be taken as literally as food. But he did know that often, when the gong had trembled into silence after the mightiest blow he could give it, he too was trembling. He did know that the sonorous waves of its voice awoke in him strange emotions which until then had been sleeping unknown to him. They stirred in him ideas of cruelty which were as

instinctive as his personal horror of cruelty. Its veiled utterance of the spectral and the forbidden fascinated his essential human side while it repelled his healthy animal side. In its reverberations hovered the spirit that hovers in the Causeway—radiant, gracious, delicate and utterly unhuman. They held echoes of all the stories he had heard in the quarter, and they put into his mind all manner of ideas. Some of them he felt were *wrong* and some of them he did not understand; but all of them, as they touched his mind, left a thrill. Sometimes these ideas were warm and pleasant; often they were cold and demoniac.

It was because of this that the word "magic" came to him when talking to Foo. Not only were there magical things in its music; it *looked* magical. In the evenings, as he entered the room, it hung in the dusk like a great yellow face on which the fall of light and shadow made the features. It looked to him as the Face of God might look. He amused himself with the fancy that it *was* a god—his god. Very soon he became its devotee. Often, when he had wished that something pleasant might happen, or something unpleasant not happen, he had added to his nightly prayers a promise to God that he would do something specially pleasing to God if God would look after this little matter for him. If God would grant his prayer, he would go to church three times every Sunday, and stop using bad words, and give all his foreign stamps to the boy next door. But he had never noticed any response to these generous offers of his, and now that he had the gong he ceased to add his personal pleas to his formal parrot-prayers. He took them to the gong. He made it the repository of his secrets and his hopes. If he did not actually pray to it, he told it what he wanted, and as it was a heathen god he felt relieved from any necessity of making it rash promises. Without talking to it he told it all about himself. He would sit before its great

gold face and commune with it. He told it things that he would never have whispered to a living person. He told it all the things that itself had evoked in his mind. All his imaginings, commonplace and queer, he poured into the rippling waves of its music. He invented little mad stories for himself and the dragon and the peacock which decorated its face; stories that delighted him and, at the thought of their becoming known to others, gave him a hot sense of shame.

Now, on a certain night, after he had played many times upon the gong, he sat before it and begged it to grant him his dearest wish. He begged it to use its power to let him find a friend. A real friend. Somebody he could trust and who would trust him; somebody he would like and who would like him; somebody who would understand him and whom he would understand; somebody he could send little presents to, which would be treasured; somebody who would mean Everything to him. He did not firmly believe that the gong could give him what he wanted, and he did not disbelieve. His attitude was as open as that of the people in Sunday-morning church reciting the Lord's Prayer. His praying to the gong was something he liked doing; a thrilling ritual; and he did it with fervour.

Well, he had made this prayer for a real and perfect friend nine times when, on a certain marvellous night, the gong answered him. He was playing with the gong as usual, and was standing as it were in a shower of golden sound, when he became aware, through the greater sound, of a tiny rustling and of an instant warmth in the room. He looked round and there, on the bottom step of the stairs leading to the second floor, stood a young woman—a young Chinese woman not much taller than himself. Her face was round and of the hue of apricots. Her eyes were long. Her lips were red and smiling. She wore a long, full-sleeved jacket of bright green silk, sprigged

with pink flowers, a black silk skirt, and an amber scarf. Her flat black hair was dressed with a green comb.

Tommy stared. His first look was enough to fill him with a dumb sense that he was in the presence of beauty; and thereafter he stared. He had never known that anybody so lovely as this lady lived in that house. He knew the two men-lodgers, but he had heard no word from Foo of a lovely lady. He concluded that she must be the wife of one of the lodgers, and that she seldom went out, or perhaps had arrived that day on one of the boats. But her clothes. He had never anywhere, even in this queer street, seen such gorgeous and fantastic clothes. The men wore English lounge suits or jackets and trousers of canvas or dungaree, and the only two old women of the quarter he had seen wore black English costumes. Perhaps this was the special indoor costume of a very well-off lady, or perhaps she was giving a party, and this was evening dress or fancy dress. He did not know, and it was only a tiny corner of his mind that was debating the matter. The main part of his dazed being was absorbed in looking at her and in returning her smile. He did not find her grotesque, as other boys might have done; he found her lovely, and he found himself tingling with a warm-cold thrill at sight of her.

For some throbbing seconds they stood thus while the last ripples of the gong's voice died on the air; then she left the stairs and came into the room. She pushed the door behind her and came towards him and looked down at him. From out of her long sleeve came a slim hand. She put it gently on his head, and moved his head backward, so that he stood looking straight up at her. With the touch of her hand a new thrill went through him—a thrill of contentment and warmth and intimacy. From the moment when he heard the rustling of her skirt the little incident had taken but a few seconds; yet he felt that he had

been a long time with this strange lady; that he knew her and that she knew him.

So they stood, each looking at the other, and to Tommy this looking was as though they were talking. One or two words were, indeed, spoken, but after that they lived in silence, since neither knew the other's tongue. She touched herself with a gesture that seemed to him as sweet as her smiles, and said: "Sung Sing." She pointed to him and questioned with her face. He said: "I'm Tommy." She said: "Toh-me," and he smiled. He said: "Sung Sing," and she smiled. In a corner, at right angles to the gong, was a shabby old divan. She put an arm about him, and led him to it, and sat down, and held him before her so that his face was level with hers. She looked at him with gentle, rapt eyes. She seemed to be worshipping him. Then, from the folds of her jacket she brought out a little box of soft Chinese sweetmeat. She broke a piece and put it in his mouth. It was a luscious sweet, rich with flavours new to him. This little touch having made them familiar, he reached out to the box, broke off another piece, and did as she had done—put it in Sung Sing's mouth. She laughed as she took it, and he laughed, and from the moment of their mutual laughter all that he did was impulsive. He was no more self-conscious or shy than the rowdiest of his schoolmates. He existed in a kind of electric daze. When she took one of his hands and stroked it, with an air of benediction, he moved close to her knees and put up his other hand and stroked her face. He did not know why he did this; he did not even know that he was doing it. He only knew that bliss had come to him, and that the touch of this lovely lady's face to his hand went through him like—like—he could think of nothing then to liken it to, but later he found the word music.

And then he was no longer aware of time. It was only when he noted that the room was growing darker that he found himself in her arms and sitting on her

lap. She was crooning to him and caressing him and smiling to him, and his face was resting on her shoulder in such content as he had never known. Not until the room was quite dark was he recalled to his other life, and then he knew that he must have spent four hours there, that he would be late home, that there would be questions and nagging. He moved reluctantly from her arms. Nothing now was less inviting than his home and his other life, but that life had fixed its peremptory demands upon him, and his obedience to them was automatic. He would have liked to stay with her for ever, but he knew that he dare not.

He got up and pointed sadly to the window and the door, and Sung Sing nodded. She bent to him and softly kissed his cheek and pressed her face to his, and he returned the kiss many times, fervently and innocently. She stood back from him for a moment or so, holding both his hands. Then with a little laugh she opened the door, and he went out. On the landing he turned and smiled. He made some clumsy signs by which he tried to convey that he would return next evening. She seemed to take his meaning; she nodded and smiled and waved a little hand. He reached his home in a mood of sadness, bewilderment and ecstasy. He answered the challenges of his doings by involved lies about having gone for a walk and got lost. He did not know that he was speaking the truth.

That evening was the opening for him of the richest and most beautiful experience of his life. Nothing of it can be recaptured by words or by hints of words. Its essence was the poetry behind the poem; the unsayable. He knew then what he has never known since—complete harmony with life. His hours with Sung Sing were a realisation of all that we attempt to convey in the worn word *paradise*; our *selves* being nothing but ourselves. Every little act in that room,

every tiny movement of her hands, every little thing that they did together, he remembers clearly today. Each act and movement seemed to be charged with a separate life and significance. He can recall today every evening of the many evenings he spent with her, and can recall everything that was done, minute by minute, in each evening. It was like a recital of music in which each little motion was an instrument, each minute a stave, and each evening a sonata.

There was the melting silk of her jacket and the warmth of her body. There were her liquid endearments—her whisperings in Chinese answering his whisperings in English. There was the touch of her hand on his, and their communications by hands and smiles. And there were her long eyes looking right into his. This was their closest communion. They would sit in this manner by the half-hour, until his whole being was resolved into his two eyes, and those two eyes were living their life in the lake of Sung Sing's eyes. He never troubled to wonder whether any of the queer things done in that room were right or wrong. It was all so blissful and perfect, and seemed so natural, that so dull a question never entered his mind. Years later he viewed the matter with his adult and informed mind, and judged it, and having judged it was moved to wonder why and for whom ethical standards were introduced to the world.

Throughout that winter this secret and bizarre love affair persisted. He cherished it as a fearful joy. He lived only for the evenings. During the dull day he cheered himself by anticipation, and the moment school was over he would race to the Causeway. If, by some family circumstance or enforced duty, such as running errands, he could not go there after school, he would make a furtive bolt from the house in the evening. On three occasions, when affairs prevented a visit, and he had no chance of slipping out unseen,



he climbed at his eight-o'clock bedtime out of his bedroom window, regardless of reprimand or punishment. And as soon as he was in old Foo's room, he would bang on the gong, and bang and bang, until Sung Sing came down from upstairs and they resumed their strange communion.

But beauty cannot live with us for ever. Beauty visits us, but, lest we forget its wonder in its familiar presence, it will not stay. It comes like the rose and passes like the rose, and we are fortunate if it leaves us the dry perfume of pot pourri.

It did not stay long with Tommy. Before he was eleven it was gone, and it went as instantly as it had come.

He was passing through Foo's shop one evening and about to slip upstairs, when Foo spoke to him.

"You like very much my gong—hee?"

"Yes. I love the gong. But I love the Chinese lady better."

"The Chinese lady?"

"M. Sung Sing."

"Sung Sing? Oh." Foo turned to look at a friend who was sitting in a corner, drinking tea, and the friend returned the look with a screwing of the eyes.

"Yes—the Chinese lady that lodges upstairs. She's lovely."

Foo looked at the friend again. "Sung Sing. Oh, yes." He turned to the counter and re-arranged some of the boxes. "Oh, yes. You have been playing in Sung Sing's room?"

"No. I haven't been to her room. She's upstairs on the second floor. I haven't been there. She comes down to see me in the room where the gong is."

"Oh, yes. I see. I understand. Yes. . . . Are you going up to talk to her now?"

"Yes. She always comes down when she hears me."

"Ah. Yes. I will come with you. I have a message for her."

"Oh. . . . Alright."

Tommy had not anticipated this. He did not want old Foo pottering about while they were together. Sung Sing meant nothing to him unless he could be alone with her. He hoped old Foo wouldn't stay long over his message.

As they reached the first floor, he turned to Foo. "You going up to her?"

"No. I will wait here until she comes down."

"Oh. . . . Alright. She'll be down when she hears me play the gong." He went into the little room, took up the gong-stick, and gave the gong a valiant bang. "She'll be down in a minute, I expect."

Foo moved to the middle of the room, and stood with his face towards the door. Tommy attacked the gong and set the room ringing. Between each stroke he turned to the door. But Sung Sing was not so prompt that evening.

"Funny. She always does come at the first sound." He stopped banging and turned to Foo. "She isn't afraid of you, is she? You said you'd got a message for her. What sort of message? You haven't had words, have you?"

"Words," in Tommy's world, were the euphemism for quarrel or row, and "words" were weekly happenings in every house that entertained a lodger.

"No. We have had no words."

*Boom! Boom! Boom!* "She doesn't owe you for rent, does she?"

"No. She does not owe me for rent."

"Funny, then. Wonder why she doesn't come. Perhaps she don't know it's you. Perhaps she heard you come up, and thinks it's someone else. A stranger." (*Boom! Boom! Boom!*) "Which is her room upstairs?"

Foo made no answer; he was still looking at the door.

“ Shall I go up and see if she’s in? ”

“ No. I do not think you should go up. If she does not wish to come it would not be po-lite to dis-turb her.”

*Boom! Boom! Boom!* The room was filled with such crashing roars of golden music that the air seemed alive with them. The vibrations were like powerful personalities in too small a space; they seemed, by their impact, to be trying to annihilate the old man and the boy.

“ Perhaps she’s ill? ”

“ No, I do not think she is ill. Indeed, I know she is not.”

“ Then I wonder what’s keeping her. She always has come down other times. Perhaps she won’t come while you’re here. Perhaps if you go away she’ll come. Then I can tell her you’ve got a message for her.”

Old Foo stood immovable. “ No. It is important that I should see her as soon as she comes.”

“ Then why don’t you go up and see what’s keeping her? ”

Foo did not answer. Instead, he moved to the divan and sat down. Then he beckoned to the boy. “ Come here.”

Tommy went to him.

“ Tell me—how long have you been meeting Sung Sing? ”

“ Ooo, some munce now. A long time.”

“ Ah. Yes. And you like her? ”

“ Oo, I do.”

“ She was very nice to you? ”

“ Oo, lovely.”

“ She used to tell you Chinese fairy-tales, did she? ”

“ No. She couldn’t speak English. She used to——” And then Tommy, who knew that he

could speak freely to old Foo without being laughed at, told him all about the loveliness of Sung Sing, and her wonderful clothes, and all—or not quite all—about their meetings and what they did, and about her sweet ways with him.

Foo listened with gravity, and when the tale was ended he sat for a space in meditation. Then he put his hands on Tommy's shoulders and looked at the boy. Then he spoke.

"Listen, boy. I will tell you why the Chinese lady has not come this evening. You were quite right. She has not come because I am here. And because—because there is no Chinese lady."

"But that's silly. I——"

"There is no Chinese lady here. There is no Sung Sing here. There is no Chinese lady living here at all. There has not been ever a Chinese lady living here. There is no person named Sung Sing in the whole of this quarter. There are four Chinese ladies in this quarter—all very old. There is no Sung Sing. There never was a Sung Sing."

"Don't talk silly. I *know* she lives here. I've seen her dozens and dozens and thousands of times."

"I do not disbelieve that you have seen her. But she is not here. She is not at all. She does not—does not exist."

Tommy stared and frowned, and debated this statement. Old Foo was off his nut. He was talking nonsense. He admitted that Tommy had seen her; yet said she didn't exist. He must be cracked. Or else he was using the wrong words, and didn't know. Or perhaps he had private reasons for saying that she didn't exist. Perhaps she'd run away from somewhere, and he was keeping her hidden.

"You can't say she doesn't exist. Because she does. I know. She *is* here. She *is*."

Foo ignored the passionate assertion. Very quietly he said: "She is *not* here. She never was here."



“ ‘She is here. She is.’ ”



For a long time Tommy would not have it, and he battered old Foo with a monotonous, "She is. She is. She is. She is. She is."

But when, hopeless of convincing the old stupid, he studied the old stupid's face, he had to acquit him of private designs or of misunderstanding. He knew that old Foo was not really stupid, and he knew that he did not lie; when he wished to avoid lying answers to questions, he kept silence. So at last, dimly, and without full comprehension, he began to realise that it might be as Foo said; that she was not really there; that she was there only for him. He was not alarmed or dismayed by this idea; living so much alone and in imagination, the unusual was not so disquieting to him as it might have been to others. Indeed, Foo's explanation only made the affair more thrilling, more personal. If she really didn't live in that house, and if nobody else had ever seen her, then she must be something to do with the marvellous gong. He didn't know what or why or how, and was too bemused by the adventure to inquire. It was enough that she was real to him, and that she belonged only to him and would come only to him. He had only to call her by the gong, and whenever he was alone she would come.

With that decision fixed in his mind, he stopped arguing with old Foo, and left him sitting by the gong, and went home.

He never saw Sung Sing again.

Having missed Sung Sing that one evening, by Foo's intervention, he could not go fast enough next evening to the shop. He raced to it, and without so much as a greeting to old Foo he slipped through the shop and upstairs.

A few seconds later he came down. His eyes were wide. "Where's the gong?"

Foo said tonelessly: "I have sold the gong."

"Sold it?" It was a squeak.

"Yes. I sold it this morning."

“Who to? Where’s it gone? Why——”

“I do not know. I sold it to a merchant at the other end of the town. He bought it for a customer.”

“But why did you sell it, Mister Foo? Why did you? *Why?*”

“I was tired of it. It was not a good gong.”

The boy stood like a statue, staring at nothing, hands limp. Somewhere, deep within himself, he was realising his first grief—a grief more poignant than any he knew in later life. He had seen paradise, and was being turned back to an earth without light. The gong was gone, and with it, he knew, was gone Sung Sing and all the loveliness of the past months. Blood and breath had been taken from him in one sudden stroke. He might continue in this other world; he might grow up and be a man; but he felt that without his gong he would no longer be alive in it. The gong and Sung Sing were his bread and his wine; wanting them, he would have no place and no life in either world.

He leaned his arms on the counter, and stared at a Chinese tea-chest. He had no will to leave the shop or to stay; he could only stand and stare in dumb misery, and he stood like this until, on an entrance of customers, old Foo gently edged him out. Out in the street he hovered restlessly for some minutes, nursing a wild fancy that Sung Sing might appear in the street or be seen in one of the houses. But he knew that she wouldn’t, and at last he crawled home and hoped that he would die.

That is why, to-day, in middle-age, he can never pass a gong without furtively striking it and listening to its note with an air of awaiting a revelation. How many hundreds of gongs he has heard, he does not know; but none of them has had the note of the golden gong or anything of its properties. At least, he says not. But it may be that one of them *has* had the note. It may be that one of them was that very



golden gong itself, and that it wasn't a magical gong at all. It may be that it was just an ordinary gong, and that the magic was in Tommy. It may be that he is today so deaf with the world's talk, so enclosed in the house of civilisation and tuned only to that house's vibrations, that there is no open window, no key-hole even, through which its golden notes can reach him, or the face of Sung Sing reveal itself.

The young days of every man are marked by a time when he is really born, when the thread that links him with elsewhere is irrevocably snapped and he is left with a sense of loss which is healed only in random dreams. Some are fully born on their first day; some in their first year; others not for many years; and until that time they are children of the invisible. Tommy was born when he lost his gong, so, even if he did at last find it, it would now have nothing for him.

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*Charles Duff*

## THE HAUNTED BUNGALOW

“It's all very well for you folks to talk of ghosts and haunted houses,” said John Coppard testily to his friends seated round the fire, “but I've never yet met a person who actually *saw* a ghost. All the yarns one hears are without solid basis—mere hearsay.”

There was a moment's silence.

For, when the words “ghosts and haunted houses” were spoken, Joseph Martin winced. He was a comparative stranger to those present. Only the day before he had arrived from the Gold Coast, bringing a letter of introduction from Coppard's brother. The hospitable Mrs. Coppard soon discovered that he was a wanderer, a man without fixed abode; and she had invited him to spend Christmas and the New Year

with the family and their friends. Seeing him now almost blench at the mere mention of ghosts, she sensed a story.

"I'm sure Mr. Martin has something to say on the subject," she said. And then in her most cajoling manner: "*Do* tell us, Mr. Martin; have *you* ever been in a haunted house, or seen a ghost?"

The others looked at him expectantly.

The request from his hostess and the unexpressed wish of the others caused him to hesitate. It was obvious that he disliked the subject. But a guest must do many things he would otherwise shun, and so, like a man who faces a rather unpleasant but unavoidable task, he began:

"It's not a subject I like talking about even now. But eight years have elapsed since it happened, and perhaps I don't feel so deeply about it as I used to. Coppard here says he never met a person who actually saw a ghost, and he pooh-poohs the idea of haunted houses. I don't know what the THING was I saw, if it wasn't a ghost. And if the Bungalow on the Norfolk Broads which I took just after the war wasn't haunted—well, I'll eat my hat! I wondered when I took it why the estate agent offered it for a few shillings a week rent. Now I know.

"We had scarcely been settled in it two days when the inexplicable occurrences took place. There were three of us in the bungalow at the time—two old pals of Army days and myself—and we were playing a game of cards one night at a little table in the dining-room when suddenly there was a sharp *rat-tat-tat* at the front door, followed by the loud wailing of a cat outside. Now, I want you to understand where we were—on an island, at least a mile from the nearest road. It was in October, when the Broads are deserted. We dropped our cards in surprise and looked at one another; it must have been the space of a minute, before Major Bickley, D.S.O., said:

“ ‘ Who on earth can it be, coming to this ungodly spot, and at this hour? Why, it must be midnight! I’ll go and see.’

“ A few moments later he returned, a scared look on his face. If you had known old Bickley’s feats of courage in the trenches, you’d appreciate how we felt.

“ ‘ Who was it?’ I asked.

“ ‘ Nobody. There’s not a soul outside,’ he answered. But the words were hardly out of his mouth when again came the *rat-tat-tat-tat-tat-tat* on the bungalow door, this time in rapid, impatient knocks.

“ ‘ Hang it!’ said Bickley, pulling himself together. ‘ Come, let’s see what it’s all about. And, by George! if it is a ghost, we’ll lay it!’

“ He laughed; but it was not sincere laughter.

“ Before we could move two more strange things happened.

“ My second companion was a tall, braw Scot of the practical type, the sort of man who always thinks clearly in the midst of a panic,—a man who has since made a great name and a fortune at the Bar, thanks to his cool head and unruffled manner.

“ As we were getting ready to go to the front door, he turned sharply to me and said, ‘ What’s the matter with you? Don’t do that again, you b—— fool.’

“ ‘ Do what?’ I asked.

“ ‘ Why, hit my ear, as you did just now,’ he replied indignantly.

“ Hurt by the accusation, which I coldly denied, I pointed out that I was standing five feet away from him and had not moved. Bickley was at the time standing by the window, at the other side of the room. As we looked at one another in silence, in that very room, almost beside us, we heard the tread of a heavy man’s footsteps, accompanied by deep breathing.

“ ‘ This place is haunted,’ said Bickley. ‘ Let’s do something quickly—I can’t stand inaction.’

“ Now, I had often heard and read of all sorts of psychic phenomena—strange noises, writings by invisible hands, objects moving for no apparent reason, and what not, and—well—I had just smiled at such stuff. I always considered myself one of those intensely practical men who live in a world of reality, not of illusions. For ghosts and fays, hobgoblins and sprites, haunted castles and houses and so forth I had no use whatever. As for the mere idea that a bungalow—and a modern one at that—could be haunted! Preposterous! It simply could not be.

“ With these reassuring thoughts I joined my friends as they made towards the front door. The passage leading from the dining-room to that part of the bungalow was dark, and as we walked down it, our Scottish friend tried several times without success to light a little oil lamp. I began—I think for the first time in my life—to feel some fear, real fear; because, as we progressed, I heard distinctly the pattering of feet behind me, and once or twice small noises like confidential whispers close to my ears. When we were within a yard or so of the door there was another knock: this time a soft, measured knock, as if the person outside realised that we were in the passage. The Scotsman—I’ll call him Wilson, for I’m not at liberty to disclose his real name—opened the door and we looked out. Don’t think I’m romancing when I tell you what we saw. Remember there were three of us. Since then we’ve gone over the incidents carefully, and we’re all prepared to swear affidavits.

“ Before us on the doorstep stood a man clad in early seventeenth-century garb—ruffles, lace, buckles and sword complete. He held in his hand an elaborately plumed hat. As we stood in amazement he bowed politely. Looking first at one and then at another of us, his lips moved as if he were speaking, but no sound issued; at the same time his arms moved in slow, courtly gesticulation. We were unable to speak, spellbound. A minute later he had vanished into

thin air and we heard a loud clatter of horsehoofs on a cobbled road, although *there was no road within a mile of that deserted spot.*

“When the clatter had faded away, all we saw was the waving of the tall Norfolk reeds and the glitter of moonlight on the rippling water of the open Broad. Cold shivers affected all three of us.

“We returned to the dining-room to think out and discuss the position. Needless to say, we were now thoroughly perturbed—speaking for myself I was very frightened indeed. We sat down by the fire and Bickley began to pour out stiff pegs of brandy. He had scarcely poured out the first, when he changed colour.

“‘I don’t know what to make of this at all,’ he said, ‘I could swear that something interposed between me and these glasses, holding back my hand. I’m becoming unnerved. We must keep the light burning in our bedroom to-night.’

“We agreed wholeheartedly.

“I don’t wish to go over all the details of what followed during that night of terror. The account would take longer than the time actually occupied by the occurrences. From the moment we left the little dining-room one eerie event followed another. First, when we were about half-way down the passage leading to our sleeping quarters some unseen being pushed past us, throwing us, one after the other, roughly against the wall. Twice I was touched by clammy, invisible hands. From the dining-room which we had just left came noises indicating the presence of several people, including at least one old woman who spoke in a queer, high-pitched wail. There would be a moment of dead silence, followed by a man’s hoarse, drunken laugh—a cynical, sarcastic and indescribably unpleasant laugh, which made my spine creep. By this time we were all scared stiff, and could do nothing but start and tremble, even at our own movements and the shadows that flitted

hither and thither as we undressed. The bungalow, like many on the Norfolk Broads, was provided with bunks, not beds.

“It was in the sleeping-room where the bunks were that the worst happened.

“There we saw the dread THING—the real ghost of the haunted bungalow.

“I unpacked my service revolver—an old friend—and, having placed it under my pillow, settled down, wondering if I could sleep after our hair-raising experiences. If it had not been for the presence of Wilson and Bickley I think I should have gone mad. We could still hear movements in the dining-room (the partitions in the place were made of mere cardboard)—chairs moved about; now a heavy thud; and then a peal of laughter.

“I said to Wilson, ‘Don’t you think we might take turns at keeping watch?’ for I really felt tired, and would gladly have eased my fears in sleep.

“As I spoke there was a noise in the passage outside. Bickley jumped from his bunk, snatched my revolver out from under my pillow and rushed towards the door. He grasped the knob, turning and pulling it with all his might.

“The door had been locked—locked from the other side!

“Just at that moment we felt rather than heard a bird fluttering about in our little room. For the fortieth time we looked at one another in dismay. What could we do? Then the light went out suddenly. (We are all three agreed that we saw a hand hover over the lamp.) No sooner was the light extinguished than a soft click told us that the window catch had been turned. A blast of cold October air needed no explaining. The window had opened—of itself, for we saw the moonlight shining through it on the floor. A few seconds later the invisible hand closed it down.

“We felt a dread presence.

“ I don't know how the others took it, but to me it seemed that some unearthly power weighed upon me from all sides: it even rose from the floor. I heard Wilson cursing, ‘ The matches are gone,’ and Bickley, ‘ Where the deuce is that revolver?’ A bright light came and illuminated the room for the space of half a minute and then—utter darkness. Although the moon continued to shine outside it appeared to give no light whatever to the room. A malign influence moved upon us: the whole room—in fact, the whole bungalow—seemed to grow bigger. Two faint specks no bigger than pin-heads appeared between me and the window. They swayed from side to side and, after a moment's hesitation, moved towards me. They blinked—yes, blinked—like the eyes of a cat in the darkness. Soon I realised that those two spots *were* eyes. I tried hard to drive away fear, or to imagine that the whole thing was a nightmare. But the firm grasp I had of both sides of the bunk assured me that this was no mere fantasy. Besides, I could hear the quick breathing of Wilson and Bickley.

“ Gradually a vague form took shape, indefinite and undistinguishable. It grew before me. My nerves were by this time thoroughly unstrung and I was helpless. We three men were held dumb in a state of stupefied horror.

“ I tried to shriek aloud, but my efforts were futile. I heard a suppressed cry from Wilson and—that is all I remember—I must have swooned.

“ I awoke at daylight to find the sun shining brightly and the bedroom empty. Wilson and Bickley were in the little kitchen, and the appetising odour of frying bacon brought back my reassurance. I rose and went out to help them. We hardly spoke to each other.

“ After breakfast we left that haunted bungalow, and I have never gone near the place since. We handed the keys to the house agent, who didn't seem in the least astonished at our short stay.

“ ‘ See anything there last night?’ he asked.

“ We told him—not all I’ve told you, but enough to justify our sudden departure.

“ ‘ I can’t get anybody to stay in that bungalow,’ he commented. ‘ But it doesn’t much matter—the place is to be demolished next spring. It belonged to a Hungarian doctor, now dead, and his next of kin has recently written to say that it must be razed to the ground. That’s all the instructions I received. I made an offer to buy it, and the reply I got was abrupt and definite. The doctor’s son says that it is *unsafe for anybody to live in a place that has ever been used for his father’s evil experiments in the supernatural*, and, therefore, to save trouble, down that bungalow must come! That’s all I know, and if I’d had the letter before I let the place to you, I’d have told you about it.’

“ We thanked him and caught the next train to London. Since then each of us has gone his own way.

“ Well, I can’t expect you to believe my story; but I have stated the facts fairly, and I leave you to draw your own conclusions. As for ghosts and haunted houses,” Joseph Martin shook his pipe to give emphasis, “ let nobody tell *me* they don’t exist! I know better.”

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*John Gawsworth*

## HOW IT HAPPENED

*THE unhappy madman, Stanley Barton, is dead. Perhaps the reader remembers his trial; perhaps, for such things are but nine days’ wonders, he does not.*

*All day long the wretched man would glare through the window of his cell, and it was noticed that his eyes always sought a small plantation of fir trees that grew within their narrow horizon. Sometimes, especially on very hot days, he became extremely violent, and the usual steps had to be taken to prevent him from doing himself or his attendants an injury.*

*He died at length in the course of such a fit, leaving behind*



*him the following account of his crime, which appears to offer sufficient interest to the student of lunacy and criminology to deserve publication.*

Are you weak, man? No! I should like to ask you how the devil you know. Have you ever been put to the test? Have you ever had all the nerves and fibres in your body strained and twisted to see if they would snap? Are you sure of that little cell on the left? Are you confident of that tiny clot over the right eyebrow? I think there may be a weakness there. I try you. G-r-r-u-p. Snap. Ah! I thought so. Take him away to the asylum. He is a weak man. Mind you, that was not how I went! No. For I was strong, oh! so strong, all round. I had gone over them all from the top of my skull to the soles of my feet, testing them one by one, and I found them all taut and true. And presently I wrestled with Them, and They broke them all at once, every one, all the big ones and the little ones that didn't seem to matter until they were broken. And then They put me in here, where I ought to be King, because mine are broken every one, while the others have only lost one or two. Sometimes theirs mend and then they go away, but the edges of mine grate together and hurt me dreadfully and they cannot join.

Besides, I remember, and that would break them all again anyhow.

It was my brother who did it, you know. He was the real cause. You see I hated him right from the first. He was a few years older than I was, and they called him "Handsome." He was tall and fair, and the girls liked him. There was one girl who liked him especially, a girl whom I *loved*. Her name was Margery and she was very pretty. But I didn't mind her liking him. You see, I could afford to wait; for, though I was small and dark, I knew that I was the better man. Once, when Margery was there, I told my brother so.

“Damn it,” he roared, “he ought to have more pride than to hang about when he’s not wanted; oughn’t he, Margery?” and they both laughed. “Clear off,” he added, and they turned and walked away from me.

We lived then in the depths of Surrey, and every night at half-past eight my brother crossed the fields at the end of our garden, and met Margery in the plantation of fir trees that topped the horizon close by. I know he went every night because I used to follow him and watch them at their games from a hiding-place up a tree. I was agile, I tell you; as nimble as a cat.

Well, one night shortly after my brother’s rebuff I went there ahead of him. I had decided I didn’t love Margery any more, she had laughed so unkindly at me. In the dusk she could not see who was coming, and hearing my footsteps she ran forward from the depths of the clump to greet me, mistaking me for my brother. She was a fool, and I didn’t waste time. I stabbed her with the carving-knife I had brought from the dining-room sideboard and on my walk had hidden under my coat. She was really frightfully comic. She reminded me of the little pigs I used to see on Market Days. She squealed, sobbed quickly, and then toppled forward and lay still. I threw the knife into the bushes. “My! Margery, how funny you look!” I said as I dragged her by the hair into the shadows and with a staple and hammer I had provided myself with—anticipating events—nailed her fast through the breast to my tree. And then I pulled her short jacket over her reddening blouse, so that the hooked-end of the iron could not be seen. I was enjoying myself. “You won’t laugh at me again, Margery?” I giggled, and I kicked her, and she was soft to my boot.

There wasn’t very much time to lose because my brother would soon be coming, so I clambered up my tree to my cross-branch and tied a length of rope I

had brought strongly to it. Then I made a large running noose at the end and a small loop higher up and hammered another staple into the trunk some three feet above the place where I had tied the rope to the branch. You see, I was quite sure that I was the better man and I knew what to do. I stayed up in the tree with the rope coiled in my hand and waited.

Soon my brother came along.

“Margery!” he called, “Margery!”

I wanted to laugh—it was so funny. And then he must have seen her dress, for he cried out gladly and with relief in his voice, “Why, there you are!” and stepped right under me. You wouldn’t believe how simple it was! It was like throwing quoits at a fair. Plop! The noose fell over his head—a bull’s eye! The running knot slid down tight on to his nape. I rose to my feet and, bracing my back against the trunk, with a heave pulled the small loop in the rope up to, and over, the staple. My brother below, kicked like billyho; his hands clutching at his neck, his legs beating the air. But the rope was strong and it held him. Oh, it was lovely! I was never so happy before. I slid down the tree and surveyed the pair. Margery was silent, her head had fallen forward and her arms hung limply; but my brother kicked and kicked. His eyes seemed to protrude. He grew purple and noises came from his throat.

“*He ought to have more pride than to hang about when he’s not wanted; oughtn’t he, Margery?*” I said.

But Margery did not seem to understand. The jerkings gave way to stillness, a lovely stillness. The burden on the rope swayed gently; its weight alone moving it. I looked at the rough footpath three feet beneath my brother’s dangling feet.

“*Clear off!*” I said and whistled.

Then I turned and went away.

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THE UNNECESSARY UNDOING  
OF MR. PURGLE

*BANG! Bang! Bang!*

Mr. Purgle sat in his shirt-sleeves, and hammered away lustily. He was a tall man and stout, although the curves of his figure gave no suggestion of geniality. His step-daughter, Miriam, was, in fact, looking cordially forward to her approaching marriage.

*"Bang! Bang! Tap-a-tap. Bang!"*

Mr. Purgle laid down his mallet with a sigh of relief. A satisfied smile spread over his sallow face as he regarded his handiwork. The object before him resembled a wooden boot-sole of ample proportions. A wooden handle projected from one side of it like the funnel of a rakish steamer. He pulled a similar object from underneath a sheet of tracing-paper and placed them side by side. Then he chuckled softly, replaced his carpentering tools in the cupboard, relit his cigar and threw it into the grate, picked up the wooden objects, and let himself quietly out into the garden.

He then stole silently down the full length of the gravel path without his boots, which fact, considering his usual fluency of expression, reflected greatly to his credit. Arrived at the end wall he proceeded to press the wooden boot-soles firmly into a flower-bed. The toes pointed towards the house. Having carefully extracted them he walked some thirty yards further, and made a third impression in the soft earth. This last was not so deep as the first two, and the toe-end which pointed towards the wall was lower than the heel. He also pulled down a portion of the ivy which covered the brickwork in his immediate vicinity.

When he arrived at the house he was almost exhausted. He was, as I have said, a stout man, and he had about a hundred and fifty excellent footmarks to his credit. As each of these had to be carefully imprinted at least a yard to one side of where he

stood, he must not be judged too harshly for tossing off a stiff brandy-and-soda while he watched the "boot-soles" blazing in the fire.

Mr. Purgle was something in the City—which incidentally, is not the same thing as being somebody in the City. He was a man of many grievances. Firstly, the world had refused to recognise that the hall-mark of Napoleonic genius is a series of Napoleonic failures. Secondly, his wife had left all her money to her daughter Miriam. This base ingratitude wounded him the more in that under her marriage settlement it should all have gone to himself. He had drawn up that marriage settlement with loving care and still regarded it as a work of art. Counsel had quite agreed on this point but had advised him not to bring it into Court. English judges are not always impressed by Art for Art's sake.

Thirdly, and lastly, he was frankly disappointed in Miriam. He provided a home for her and expected in return absolute and unlimited gratitude. It was true, of course, that so far as sordid bricks and mortar, furniture and household expenses went, it was her banking account which bore the strain—but a "home" in its larger broader sense he, her sole relative, ungrudgingly provided. He had, moreover, put her on to one or two soft things in the City in which he was interested. It was not his fault that these had all come to grief. Anyhow, she had not put anything into them, whereas he had lost every penny he possessed. She had, and this was yet another grievance, always insisted on taking her fiancé's advice rather than his own. No self-respecting man likes to have his future stepson-in-law preferred to himself.

Then had come the great chance of his life. What can even a Napoleon of Finance do without capital! He had begged Miriam, with tears in his eyes, to lend him a paltry five thousand pounds. He had painted the scheme in the glowing colours of an enthusiastic artist in speculation. Miriam's fiancé was not an

artist and Purgle borrowed a large sum elsewhere. The great chance had now shifted its emphasis from the first word to the second. The whole scheme showed a decided reluctance to making his fortune within the next fortnight and, in a fortnight's time, his employers would discover that he had borrowed the money from *them*. To such depth may the ingratitude of step-daughters thrust a deserving man. She was responsible for this—and she should help him out of the difficulty. He had no doubt that, if he were to tell her frankly of the ruin which faced him, she would give him the money to refund—but a curiously warped honesty kept him from so doing. He was cheerfully willing to swindle other people out of the requisite sum—but he did not see why Miriam should lose the money while there were wealthy concerns in the land which would hardly feel the loss. Besides, the idea of pitting his Napoleonic Genius against a City Business pleased him.

“Hullo! Still sitting up for me? That’s awfully nice of you.”

Purgle rolled his head sideways without rising. “Didn’t hear you come in, Miriam. Had a good dance?”

“Lovely,” replied his step-daughter, taking off her gloves and throwing them down on to the table. “Jack drove back with me of course. He wouldn’t come in.”

“Why not?” asked Purgle, with a touch of indignation in his voice.

“Oh, he was silly. He declares he saw a man lurking in the bushes by the drive as we came up.”

Purgle rose to his feet. The gods were playing right into his hands. Of all the luck! “Well?” he said.

“And he went back to look for him. Of course he wouldn’t find him even if there were a man there. Anyway, it would only be some wretched tramp looking for a bush to sleep under.”

Purgle took up his position on the hearthrug. "I have just been reading the paper," he remarked ponderously.

"Splendid!" said Miriam, pushing him gently to one side in order that she might put the kettle on the fire. "I say—look at those two funny bits of coal! They're like two red-hot footprints!"

Purgle jumped. "The devil!" he muttered.

"No—not hoof-marks!" laughed the girl as she scrunched the kettle down into the glowing coals. "I said 'Footprints'!"

"They're omens. I've been reading the paper."

"So I gathered. Well, what is it? A decided rise in the temperature of water is expected and hot tea will go down some way. Biscuits are favourably thought of. The approaching boom in breakfast gongs will probably be regarded with sleepy indifference and——"

"*Not* the financial news this time. I was reading a leading article about that series of burglaries that have been recently perpetrated in this neighbourhood."

"That's why Jack went back."

"It is now believed that they are the work of a single London cracksman and not that of a gang as is popularly supposed."

"Major Richards was at the dance. He told me all about the burglary at his place. He saw the man. He says he was an awful looking scoundrel with a black mask and a Newgate fringe."

"That's right! That's the man the paper describes!"

"A little man with enormous feet—judging by his footprints."

"No, no—a big man, the papers say."

"I'm sure he was little. Do let me see the paper."

"Certainly not," said Purgle hastily. "I'm not going to have you filling your little head with horrors just before going to bed—especially after seeing that man in the drive."

“Jack saw him. I didn’t. Besides, why should anyone want to burgle this house?”

Purgle sighed heavily. “I’ve spoken to you so often about the idiocy of your keeping all that jewellery in the house. Your mother, acting on my advice, always kept it locked up in the bank.”

“Well, so do I, acting on Jack’s advice. I only got it out to-night because of this dance,” said the girl, touching her necklace. “Isn’t this lovely? Look how the stones catch the light.”

“You needn’t have had the whole box sent down because you wanted to select one necklace,” growled Purgle.

Miriam blushed. “I didn’t know what coloured flowers Jack was going to send—and I wanted everything to match them.”

“Very nice for *him*,” sneered her step-father, “and I have to be responsible for the custody of thousands of pounds’ worth of gew-gaws just to please your whim. Supposing they’re stolen—do you expect me to make good the loss?”

“Certainly not,” said the girl with a touch of fire. “Nothing could replace them—but they are insured for their full value. Jack insisted on it.”

“Oh, hang Jack,” he exclaimed with well simulated anger. “It’s a lot of compensation to me if burglars break in, isn’t it! You’d better let me have the box in my room. I can make a fight for it—and you can’t.”

“Yes—and get hit over the head like the butler at New Hall. No thanks, I’ll keep them. It’s my fault for having them here. I’ll hide them in a hat-box on the top of my cupboard. I’ll go and do it now. Good night.”

“Good night. By the way, Miriam, if anyone *should* come—pretend to be sound asleep. Then he’ll leave you alone. I don’t want to have you knocked about. Just lie quite still and let him get clear before you raise the alarm.”



The girl, surprised and grateful, took a step towards him. Then she checked herself, smiled her thanks, and left the room.

An hour later Mr. Purgle went to bed. That is to say he lay down, pulled the bedclothes over him, threw them back again and got up. He then tip-toed down to his study and locked the door behind him.

Having arrayed himself in an old overcoat and a red muffler, he proceeded to don a black mask and fix a black Newgate fringe to his chin with spirit gum. A bowler hat, well bashed in, completed his outfit. Mr. Purgle, at no time attractive in appearance, regarded his repulsive reflection with extreme satisfaction.

“By Jove!” he exclaimed suddenly, as he crept upstairs again. “These might have given me away!” He slid his rings off his fingers and put them into the pocket of his pyjamas.

Miriam’s door was unlocked. He opened it gently, and turned on the electric light. Miriam opened her eyes, stared at him dully for a second, and then, with a muffled scream, dived beneath the bed-clothes and pretended to be fast asleep.

Mr. Purgle was careful to throw everything in the room into a state of chaos before taking the jewel-case out of the hat-box. He had already attended to the appearance of the sitting-rooms and had placed the more portable valuables in a neat and recent excavation behind the sideboard. He then ran lightly down the stairs, tearing off his disguise as he went.

While the Newgate fringe, the mask and the muffler were burning in the grate, he restored his bowler to its normal shape and hung it up, with the coat, on its usual peg. The jewel-case was then safely hidden away in the hole, and the sideboard, with enormous labour, pushed back against the wall. A couple of tiny wedges knocked in with the poker rendered it practically immovable.

There was only one thing left to do and that was

to doctor the door leading to the garden. It would have been wiser to do so before. If Miriam had raised the alarm it might have proved awkward. However, as everything had gone splendidly, it didn't matter. Hullo!—he had left the door unlocked. That was very careless of him. His mind must have been too busy to notice it. He must break one of the glass panels from the outside of course. Yes, this one near the key.

As he cautiously opened the door he heard the sound of feet creeping stealthily towards him. Good Heavens! if the man with the Newgate fringe were outside! With a supreme effort he kept control of himself—closed the door and locked it. A moment later the handle was turned vigorously from without. A vision of the murdered butler at New Hall flashed into his mind. With a gasp of terror he turned and fled down the passage.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Heavens! He was breaking his way in! No! Someone was beating and thundering upon the front door. He could still hear the man with the Newgate fringe rattling at the garden door. A sudden crash of splintered glass sounded behind him. With frantic haste Mr. Purgle undid the bolts of the front door. A wave of cold air swept past him as Jack and a police sergeant entered.

“Thank Heaven you've come!” said Purgle devoutly.

“Got him?” asked Jack.

“No—he's gone!”

“Where? When?”

“Out by the garden door. I tried to stop him.”

“By Jove!” said Jack. “I didn't know you had it in you. I'm awfully sorry for lots of things I've said.”

“When did he go?” It was the sergeant who spoke.

“Just before you came in,” replied Purgle, thanking the gods for having played into his hands.

“Then Jenkins has got him. That's all right.

What!" he roared suddenly, as a constable appeared on the scene. "You've let him escape, you bungling fool! He's just bolted by the garden door. I'll have you broken for this you—you—you idiot!"

"No one left by that door, sir. I saw someone open it from the inside, and I went for him—but he got it shut and locked. I've just broken it open myself. He's somewhere in the house, sir. He can't have got out."

The sergeant turned to Mr. Purgle. "I thought you saw him leave by that door," he said sharply.

"I—I thought I did," stammered Mr. Purgle, somewhat unnerved by the gods allowing the man outside the door to be a policeman. "It was before the constable arrived. Look for his footmarks in the flower-beds—that'll show you."

"You said he had just left," remarked the sergeant severely. "How do you expect me to catch the man if you aren't accurate. Jenkins has been watching that door for the last hour. He can't have gone that way."

"I saw a man in the drive," explained Jack, "and they sent this bobby from the police station to keep an eye on the back of the house while the sergeant and I hid in the shrubs; and then Miriam opened her window and told us there was a man in the house. The rest you know."

"An awful looking man!" said Miriam, who had now arrived on the scene fully dressed. "With a black mask and a horrid beard under his chin." She turned to Purgle. "You were quite right, he is a big man and just about your size."

"A little man, miss, with large feet," corrected the sergeant.

"Ugh! No, he's not. Really. He's just about Mr. Purgle's size."

"Well, if he's as big as an elephant, we shan't find him by talking," said the sergeant. "You stop by the back door there, Jenkins. I'll lock the front door

again and stop his getting out that way, and then we'll search the house."

The search, curiously enough, was unsuccessful. It seemed to Mr. Purgle that the sergeant regarded him with suspicion. For example, he kept muttering to himself, "A big man about your size." On entering Mr. Purgle's room he at once looked at the bed. The discovery of a pair of damp socks in the corner of the room interested him immensely. Mr. Purgle cursed himself inwardly and lied glibly about a cure for hot feet.

When they returned to the hall the sergeant requested a word with him in the dining-room. Mr. Purgle had no course but to assent. Somehow, the way in which the sergeant closed the door made him uneasy.

"Now look here," said the sergeant. "There is something about all this I don't understand. You say you saw this man leave by the garden door—and I know he couldn't have. Therefore the man who took Miss Grayling's jewels is in the house. We've searched the house and there's no-one here. The man with the Newgate fringe is a small man and Miss Grayling says the man she saw was just about your size. When we arrived we found you in the hall, and you don't look the type of man who hunts desperate burglars single-handed. Against that is the fact that we haven't found the swag anywhere, and *you* couldn't have left the house without being seen, either."

"What do you mean!" blustered Mr. Purgle. "The man got out, I tell you. He's probably left tracks in the garden if he did. I'll abide by that."

"Very well," said the sergeant. "I've said all I have to say. You're keeping something back and you'll have to explain it all later. I shall give all the facts to the reporters just as I've given them to you, and people will draw their own conclusions. I shall have the house watched, and whoever has the jewels won't get them away from here. Hullo! What's up!"

A stronger man—or a weaker man—would have blustered the matter out—but Mr. Purgle had collapsed. The evening papers would contain the whole story and his employers would at once go into his accounts. He was ruined—disgraced—a thief already! What did this extra charge matter? The examination of his accounts would be the last link in the damning chain. How had the chain been forged? He had taken every precaution. The insurance money had been as good as in his hands—and *now!*—it was incredible!

Sobbing with misery and disappointment he told his tale. Fate had been too strong for him. He was a despicable object as he blurted out his story—but the sergeant was actually moved to respect.

“Well!” he exclaimed, “if you’d bluffed it out we couldn’t have *proved* anything—especially with the footmarks in the garden—in fact I’m not sure I wouldn’t have had Jenkins sacked for letting his man past him! Lucky thing he went round to the back to watch, though—else we’d never have landed you. Of course it was him being there and us finding no one *in* the house that made it look fishy.”

The door burst open and Jack rushed in. “We’ve got him!” he shouted. “Jenkins has him handcuffed. I found the beggar in the coal-cellar. He’d burrowed right in under the coal. A little chap with a Newgate fringe and as strong as a horse.”

“Good Lord!” said Mr. Purgle. Then he lurched up from the table. “I was joking,” he screamed harshly. “I didn’t take them. I was only fooling you! It was a joke, man—it was a joke! You’ve got the real man now!”

But the sergeant was already heaving and straining at the sideboard.

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TWOPENCE FOR THE TOLL

“SOME say that every old inn could tell a story if it could speak, but I never heard of anything happening at the ‘Old Toll House.’”

The speaker is a woman of late middle age. She is fat. She is garrulous. She has not the knack of the raconteur, for her narrative is characterised by endless repetitions.

“Nothing interesting ever happened at the ‘Old Toll House,’ where Ethel and I were born.”

There she is, you see, at her repetitions already. And she begins telling her story with the twice repeated assurance that she has no story to tell. “Nothing interesting,”—I presume she intends to “bestow all her tediousness” upon me, as the constable proposed doing with the Duke in “*Much Ado*.” Perhaps today she will be less tedious than usual. I will risk it. But I must not look as though I enjoy the prospect of her conversation, or she will say, “It won’t do for me to stand talking here all day now, will it? I must go and get my sewing. Or, “I shall take a turn or two in the garden while the sun is out. The weather doesn’t look any too sure.”

If, however, I look as though I dreaded the prospect of a talk with her she will be delighted with the idea of securing a victim. I am beginning to know her, you see, and arrive at an understanding of her tactics. I pretend to conceal a yawn. I shift the weight of my body, as though uneasily, from one foot to another. I assume a look of unutterable boredom. So! my ruse is completely successful. She thinks she is buttonholing me against my will, and under that impression will hold me in conversation until lunch-time. Excellent! I have no letters to write, and nothing can well be worse than the books in this hotel whose backs I have been studying once again. *Lord Paddington as I*

*Knew Him, Cricketing Personalities, Sunday Echoes in Weekday Hours, and A Jade of Spain*, by Maria Howlett. And I have no desire to walk, for I am acquainted with almost all the rustic sights and sounds of this neighbourhood, at least over the week-end. The sights our beechwoods afford at this season are the thousands upon thousands of pallid but assertive industrialists which touring car and motor-coach deposit in every mossy dingle. There they lie, prostrate grubs in unsightly cocoons of greasy paper, mineral-water bottles, and empty sardine tins. The rustic sounds contend with their gramophones and wireless portables. The rills may laugh, thrush or linnet sing, the "sweet wind" may "gently kiss the trees," but the voice of the amorous American negro will drown them all. But what our visitors like best is to read the newspaper to jazz accompaniment. In this fashion concentration upon harmony is diversified by an intelligent interest in politics, while the brain-fag induced by the study of our social and democratic conditions is alleviated by the strains of music. But I declare the old fat lady has been talking to me all this time, and I haven't heard a syllable!

"Things might have been livelier for us girls, if my parents had not been what is called a 'devoted couple,' which was pleasant for them, no doubt, but pretty tame for us, so absorbed and wrapped up in one another as they always were. There were only two children, Alice and I, and we two, if only from the loneliness of the place and want of other company, were the best of friends as well as sisters.

"The inn where Father was landlord and where we were both born was a toll-house, and from that it took its name of 'The Old Toll Inn.' The road across which our toll-gate stretched was raised a goodish bit above the meadows on either side, for these were low-lying and marshy, and in the winter proper fens where men and cattle might drown. Very lonely it was, I can tell you, in winter.

“Our inn stood a good two miles out of town, though to be sure we were all good walkers, and thought nothing of that. It was ‘Town’ to *us*, but you aren’t to understand it as being much larger than a decentish-sized village; just the houses a bit larger perhaps.

“There was a church, of course, and the usual number of chapels for people who had peculiar views about God. We were always orthodox Church ourselves. There was a Town Hall where they had the police-court trials in those days and men were fined for over-driving oxen, or for drunkenness, or for forgetting to hang out rear lights on hay-waggons and such-like. There was no theatre or anything like that, but in the larger of the two public-houses, which was very assertive and called itself ‘Hotel,’ there was a ramshackle dance hall, where the Christmas decorations used to remain up and grow dustier and dustier till far gone into the New Year. There were the usual sort of shops—bakers, butchers, a vegetable shop—and you could get your hair cut at a room that was rented above an ironmongery. And there were two street musicians who used to come to entertain us on market days, the one with a harp and the other with a harmonium. Still, it was less lonely than the ‘Old Toll,’ and Mother used to blame us when we were in our teens, for always gallivanting into Town instead of being happy when we were sewing, and minding the gate, and working in the vegetable garden.”

The fat lady sighed, a voluminous and whale-like sigh, and I sighed for sympathy. It was not, after all, a rosy picture.

“The toll was farmed out to us. We paid the Government a fixed rent every quarter. And there was a regulated series of charges—so much for a foot passenger, so much for a rider, and so much for a horse and cart. We couldn’t put up the charges, much as we should have liked to, but whatever





*“The burden on the rope swayed gently.” (See page 51.)*



remained over after paying the quarter's rent was our profit. And little enough it often was for the work it gave us, opening and shutting the gate all the day through in the rain and wind. Alice and I took it in turn to mind the gate, and the one off duty at the gate used to help the girl in the bar. Mother kept the books and really ran the inn. Father would take the trap into Town and make the purchases. He didn't do much in the inn himself, because he found that he could make more by his playing the violin. He was twelve years older than Mother—did I tell you that?—and he was a marvellous musician. Nobody never got to know just how good he was, living as retired as he did. Thursday was 'Farmers' Day' when the market was held in Town and we got the overflow that they couldn't take in. Then the 'Old Toll' would fill up, and we ran a great midday dinner. But none of those farmers was likely to know good music from bad. It stands to reason. It wasn't their job. So Father never got his opportunity to be known by those who could be a help to him. And I must say he never seemed to us to seek it. He played, of course, at weddings and balls and entertainments of all sorts, and one way and another he turned a pretty penny by it, but that was only hack work which he did to 'boil the pot.' He was a real master, if you understand me, and wonderful at a solo, but he liked best, when he was playing serious music, to do so in the evening at home, and a few gentlemen of the county who appreciated that sort of thing, and were real music-lovers, would ride or drive long distances to hear him. At first he refused to take money for his playing, because his nature was to be hospitable. But after a time they insisted, and Mother throwing in her vote on their side of the argument, a considerable sum was put down, the gentlemen called for wine, and these evening concerts began to be a regular institution with us. A strange man to find at a

wayside ale house, for whatever the 'Old Toll' may have been in the past, I can't pretend it was much more than that then.

"Sometimes he would look in at the nursery when we were children and play us nursery rhyme tunes to dance to. Then he would hug us and call us his 'little monkeys' or 'lambs.' I never married (though Alice did), so at sixty-five I'm nobody's monkey or lamb, and no one will inquire after me when I die except the income tax or the rates!" Though the information that the fat lady was nobody's monkey distressed me, the consolatory word I was seeking refused to come.

"*Nobody's* monkey, Madame?"—with well-simulated incredulity—"that surely is impossible!"

This had a prettyish, taking, ruffles-and-rapier air about it, but it appeared to me also to convey a suggestion of irony which wouldn't do at all, and before I could hit upon the way to shape the matter differently, the golden moment had passed, and the uncoveted plump one was proceeding with her narrative.

"I think I told you my father was much older than my mother?"

"'It's a comfort to me, lass,' he said to her one day, 'that when I'm gone you'll be well provided for. This inn will keep you, that's my comfort. Even should the girls not marry, you'll be a long way above poverty, all the three of you. If my personal gains have not been much, yet I've not been extravagant which artists often have the reputation of being. The "Old Toll" has been a good friend to us, all our days.'

"'My dear, don't talk so,' cried my mother, and as she spoke the tears started into her eyes.

"Sometimes men came to the toll late at night, or very early in the morning, so either Alice or I always slept fully clothed upon a sofa, boots off only, ready to run down on the instant at the cry of

‘House!’ or ‘Gate, here!’ We took turns regularly, Sundays included, one night on, one night off.

“One night—it was Alice’s turn for duty, I remember—we stole off to our bedroom after saying good night to our parents.

“‘Good night, girls.’

“They were absorbed in one another as usual. I think they said ‘good night’ almost by routine, and not as though they meant anything, or noticed us going. Now that our nursery days were things of the long past, we meant less to Mother. I think, in a way, she was jealous of the attention our father gave us, that does happen sometimes you know, in families. But she need not have been, for she was everything to Father that was not his music, if you take my meaning.

“So Alice loosened the laces of her boots, wrapped herself in a rug, and stretched herself out on the couch, ‘on sentry’ for the tolls. I turned in to sleep.

“‘Father’s beginning to look very old these days,’ said Alice.

“‘Well he’s *getting* old,’ I answered. ‘Its strange really how fond Mother keeps of him seeing how much younger she is than he. It’s lovely it should be so, of course.

“‘It is,’ said Alice; ‘there’s no accounting for how these things happen. Sometimes you get couples that seem to be ever so much better assorted than you would think they would be, and all they do is to nag one another all to pieces and then divorce.

“‘We’re grown up too, you know,’ I said thoughtfully, ‘almost before we’re aware of what’s been happening. And where we’re to find anyone to marry at the ‘Old Toll Gate,’ is more than I know.’

“‘Or I, unless we go to Town and get into talk with the two street musicians. Then you can marry

the one with the harp and I can take the one with the harmonium.

“ ‘No harps for me—it’s too like Heaven, and I’m too young, thank you, to be thinking of that just yet. This *is* a lonely hole for a girl to get married from and no mistake.’

“ ‘Throw that piece of orange peel over your left shoulder with your right hand, and it ought to come down in the first letter of your future husband’s name. Let’s see! Oh, that might be anything!’

“ ‘In the middle of the night I was awakened with a sudden start, terrified. I’d heard something fall, something heavy that went thud; not like a piece of furniture or anything.’

“ ‘What’s that, Alice?’

“ ‘Whatever it was it had wakened me with a start, and it takes something to do that, for I’m a very sound sleeper.’

“ ‘What’s happened?’

“ ‘*Something* must have—oh, I don’t know! I’m frightened,’ cried Alice.

“ ‘She leaped up from her sofa and flung her arms round me. She was slighter in build than I and more nervous. I never was nervous—or nothing to speak of. Always collected and calm. Then through the darkness I heard a most fearful cry. A cry to freeze your blood. And Alice gasped, with her arms about my body, and made as though she was trying to hide her head under the bedclothes. I suppose we both thought at the moment that thieves had broken in and that a murder had been committed.’

“ ‘I’ll go down whatever it is,’ said I.

“ ‘Stay here with me.’

“ ‘Alice was quite unnerved, poor child! I flung myself into some clothes and went downstairs on tiptoe. Mother and Father’s bedroom door was wide open, and there I saw what I shall never forget to my dying day. Mother was lying on her back in her nightdress with eyes looking like dead glass and her mouth all

twisted askew. My father was kneeling over her, examining her by the light of their bedroom candle. With the sudden shock of that sight I thought that my heart had stopped beating. Father looked absolutely distracted.

“ ‘Run for the doctor, child. I daren’t leave your mother. She’s had a stroke.’

“ ‘Don’t come in, Alice,’ I told her. ‘It’ll only upset you. Run and harness up, while I put my boots on. I’ll drive into Town and bring the doctor back with me. You keep the gate.’

“For the road must run on in spite of births, and deaths, and disasters, and toll must be taken. For the highway is neither mine nor yours, but the King’s. Yes——”—and the fat old lady repeating herself, and thereby spoiling her effect, continues, “it’s neither mine nor your’s the highway; it’s the King’s.”

“Alice got the horse and trap out, that we used for getting in provisions, and had the gate fixed back for me. I started the poor horse with the whip, and away we went like the wind. For in those days I was nimble and active so as you would hardly believe. Through pools and puddles we went at the gallop, splashing and slashing through the driving rain that was coming down in sheets, as though the trap at Bobbie’s heels was but so much thistledown.

“A long road it was through waste waters, for the floods were out, and the way before me looked like a thin, stretching ribbon of mud across a lake. Outside the doctor’s house I hooked the reins on in front, called to the horse to wait, leaped down, and knocked on the door with the heavy knocker as though I were mad.

“ ‘Don’t wake the whole street, girl,’ he cried from his bedroom window, ‘I’m coming down!’

“But when he saw the pickle I was in, he softened a bit.

“ ‘Come out of the rain, young woman, and tell me what’s happened in as few words as you can.’

“ ‘ I can’t come in. Mother’s had a stroke. She may be dead, if you aren’t quick, before I can drive you back. Oh, please, please, come at once! ’ ”

“ ‘ I’ll join you immediately. Turn the horse round and I’ll be with you! ’ ”

“ He collected his instruments, flung his coat about him, crammed his hat on, and jumped in alongside me. ”

“ Alice was on the alert for us and had the gate open. I lighted the doctor upstairs. ”

“ A glance at Mother told him all he wanted to know. To Father he said :

“ ‘ You must pull yourself together, Mr. Holloway. We must look facts in the face, my dear sir. I can do nothing here. ”

“ ‘ Is it——? ’ ”

“ ‘ It is. It might have been a long business. There’s mercy in that. ’ ”

“ From that night my father refused ever to sleep again at the ‘ Old Toll. ’ ”

“ ‘ I couldn’t bear the idea, ’ said he, ‘ never again could I sleep under that roof. ’ ”

“ Next day I found him a single lodging in the Town. He would visit us and be with us during the day, but always after supper he would leave. Alice and I did the whole work of the inn, and things went down, for there was more than the two of us only could manage. Father could do nothing but sit with his head sunk between his hands. ”

“ ‘ When she wants me, ’ said he, ‘ she’ll come for me. ’ ”

“ I was so frightened at this way of looking at things that I brought the doctor to him. ”

“ ‘ You must get him out of this state, ’ he told me, ‘ or I won’t answer for the consequences. He’s fast sinking into melancholia. If you want help with the inn, I daresay I can find you a stout lad who can turn his hand to most things, and if you like, I’ll send him along for you to see if you think he’ll suit. ”



But you must keep an eye on your father. Don't leave him alone, that's the great point. The less he sees of his own company the better: Try to draw him out of himself. Distract him. See if you can't rouse up in him some of his old interests. Wasn't he a great violinist or something of that sort? Oh, he *was*. I thought somebody had told me so. Then that should make things pretty simple. You have a plan of campaign all ready and waiting for you to adopt. Make him play to you. Tell him you and your sister miss his playing. Tell him you want distraction. Appeal at one and the same time to his paternal instinct and the artist in him. His is a case rather for the psychologist than the physician. And let me know in two or three days' time what success you are having. Now don't forget.'

" 'Daddy,' I told him, that same afternoon, 'you have no idea how Alice and I miss your playing in the evenings. And we feel the want of it more than ever now. You know,' and then I kissed him and sat on his knee like we used to do as children, 'you mustn't neglect your daughters, you're all we've got now.'

" I didn't tell him that the young fellow the doctor had sent round to give us a helping hand was no mere stable-boy, as we'd been supposing he would be, but a tight young fellow who was studying medicine in the hopes of being a doctor himself one day. No, it wouldn't have done then to tell Dad that Alice had a crush on him. Nor would it have done altogether if I'd told Dad that neither Alice nor I had any more ear for music than two cats on the tiles, and that we only knew he was wonderful because his gentlemen friends were always telling us he was. Then Alice came and joined him, and she kissed him too, and bit by bit we roused him from his stupor and made him play. Then, in the middle of his playing, a strange and terrible thing happened.

" 'She's come for me,' he said, and staring gravely straight ahead, he laid down his fiddle on the table.

He walked to the door, opened it without once lowering his eyes, placed his hand upon the handrail and began walking downstairs.

“ ‘Where are you going, Father?’ we both cried in a breath, and almost sick with terror.

“ ‘She’s come for me,’ he said simply.

“ Innkeeping, and particularly when you combine it with toll-keeping, is a distracting business. Just when it was most essential that we girls should keep our heads, and above all not let our father out of our sights, there was a cry of ‘House!’ from some visitors calling for drink below in the bar, and another of ‘Gate! Wake up, somebody! Gate!’ from the road.

“ I promised myself that I should soon come up with Father upon the road, and either keep him company to Town, or persuade him, for once, to return home again, and at least spend the night under his own roof at the ‘Old Toll.’

“ But Alice, opening the gate to passengers, allowed our father to pass through on his way back along the road to his lodgings. He had insisted. She had not known how to refuse, and following him with her eyes, she had seen him still moving like a sleep-walker, and still, as she guessed, with that strange rapt look in his eyes.

“ The company in the bar were inclined to be convivial. They asked to adjourn to the glass room, and kept the talk, and laughter, and singing up till midnight. Even if it had been policy, we could hardly have asked them to leave. And we had no pretext to either, for, though jolly, they were orderly and decent, and one has to consider the credit of one’s inn. One must *be* hospitable, if one is to appear hospitable, and one would soon get a bad name and lose custom, if one began by doing churlish things. No, that wouldn’t do at all.

“ When at last they did go, twelve had struck, rain had set in again for the night, and Alice and I

both felt too sleepy and exhausted to do the journey. And what good would it do, anyway? If Father was in bed at his lodgings what good would there be in waking him? And if he were not, who could we find to assist us in looking for him? In our part of the world in winter-time the tradesmen and inhabitants are usually in bed by ten o'clock—that sleepy it all is, or was—I haven't seen that part of the world for years now. Besides, Alice was in a fair way to being knocked up, with overwork and her worry about Father's being taken so queer, and one of us had to be on duty for the gate.

“‘Go to sleep now,’ I told her, ‘or, Alice, you'll be taken sick, and that'll be no manner of use either to yourself or anybody else. First thing to-morrow we'll decide which of us shall go. Depend upon it, we've merely had a scare. He had a good supper, did Dad: two eggs and two rashers and his pint of porter. Not much harm is going to happen to a man that has a good meal in him, you mark my words.’

“I said all this to comfort Alice, though really I could have done with a deal of comforting myself, for I didn't know what to make or what to think of it. And the more I did think of it, the less I liked it, I can tell you. ‘She's come for me’—fancy hearing your father say a thing like that! And then that look that came into his eyes, and him walking out of the house in the pouring rain without another word to a living soul! Talk of the creeps, and dreams! I never had such a horrible night as that before, and I sincerely hope I never shall again. I couldn't so much as close my eyes without seeing him—there! I don't like even to think of it now, his carrying on like that. It was so queer—enough to unnerve you. I was dressed, of course, as I was on duty for the gate, just the laces of my boots loosed, no more. It might be four or it might be five of the morning—my watch was not going and the rain was still pouring down—when I was awakened by the usual hail of ‘Gate,

here!' from the road below. I tumbled up and tied my boots.

" ' Gate! ' "

" ' I'm coming! ' said I. ' Now, don't you rouse yourself, Alice. It's my night for gate, isn't it? ' "

" ' By the light of the candle I could see that she had been crying. "

" ' I've been thinking of him, ' said she. ' I'll be getting up now, and I'll go in to Town. Somebody's sure to be up by now, and I'll ask at the lodgings if— ' "

" ' Gate! ' "

" ' Alright, alright! I hear you. Give one a minute, can't you? I'm coming! ' "

" ' From the window I could see a party of men in the rain, but only dimly because of the darkness. They were carrying what I took to be a longish log of wood, which puzzled me. If they were just clearing the road of it to avoid accidents, why didn't they pitch it into the ditch at the side? One of them was carrying a hurricane lamp, which cast an odd mixture of shine and shadows. I had the house key at my waist-belt, and soon fitted it to the lock. As I opened the hall door, and stood for one moment pulling my shawl close about me, I heard one of the party say. "

" ' Now, lads, someone must tell her. Who's that to be? ' "

" ' Twopence to pay, please. ' "

" ' But no one answered. "

" ' Twopence is the toll, ' said I. "

" ' And then the fellow with the hurricane lamp raised it, and I saw the rain splash—splashing down on the—what it was they were carrying. "

" ' Dead men pay no tolls, ' said he, ' Wench, let us in. ' "

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THE MURDER AT THE  
FOSSICKER'S CLUB

THE barbarous members of the Fossicker's Club have erected for the convenience of ladies who call to take them to entertainments, or their homes, a commodious cupboard in the front of the hall. The ladies wait in it.

When I came into the club that night I did not look to see whether there was anyone in the cupboard; I walked straight to the porter's hutch. Hopkins, the waiter on duty, looked through the letters and told me there was none for me. I hung up my hat and cane and walked up the stairs.

I had not gone up five stairs when I heard a woman laugh—and a beastly laugh it was, snarling and jeering and common. There *was* a lady in the cupboard.

When I came into the card-room there was a vacant seat at the poker-table. I settled down in it to play the cast-iron game the members of the Fossicker's play, the game most of them have learnt by playing with hard cases at those ends of the world where gold and diamonds grow.

At once I found that the game was not as friendly as it might have been: Richard de Courcy Murgatroyd was badly peevd.

That was nothing new: he was a greasy fellow with a nasty temper, who whined when he lost and gloated when he won, a loose-lipped, foul-mouthed fellow with a pasty face and snappy black eyes with very large whites to them. I did not like him.

I don't know how he got into the club for he had no qualifications for membership that I could hear of, except the capacity to sign a cheque. He said he was a Scotchman; but Miserable Jones said that he was a half-bred, but illegitimate, Armenian from the Borough, and the farthest he had ever gone prospecting was to Poplar, E., and that for fag-ends. But Miserable Jones is the only white man who does not go down with rotten fever when the ground is broken

on the upper reaches of the Essequibo, where the gold grows so thickly, and the warmth there has soured him. Besides, he did not like Richard de Courcy Murgatroyd.

I suppose Murgatroyd had lent some influential member of the committee money. He had quite a little following, because every now and then he grew very bluff and hearty and stood a good many drinks. That was when he wanted to get into something in the way of a nice piece of ground, with diamonds or gold in it, which some member had found and come home to get financed. He had made most, if not all, of his money by getting in on these ground-floors, and he had made a packet—much more than the finders. But we had to get someone to finance our finds.

I found that he was peeved because Miserable Jones had beaten him on three good hands running and then spoken of him as "our Cœur de Lion," and he wanted to go on playing to get back his losses, but he had a date with a lady, and the lady was in the cupboard waiting for him. It was, of course, the lady I had heard laugh that beastly laugh.

He had never concealed from us the fact that he was a devil of a fellow with women, and that was the kind of woman he was a devil of a fellow with.

No one was showing him sympathy, and I pointed out that he could hardly expect to be lucky in love and at cards the same evening.

Then Miserable Jones beat his three aces with a small straight.

It was the last straw, but it did not break his back; it only infuriated him to a rage that is really rare. In the middle of his cursing, Hopkins came into the room. We were laughing, and there was a good deal of noise; Hopkins came to the table and murmured something in his ear.

Murgatroyd stopped short and gasped. His pasty face went purple and the large whites of his black eyes a bit red.

He threw in his hand and said in a thick, choking voice: "Impatient, is she? I'll give her something to be impatient about!"

He jumped up, knocking over his chair, and waddled to the door.

As he went out of the room I said to him: "Try to behave like a little gentleman, de Courcy!"

He slammed the door.

Two or three men said unkind things about him and any lady who would make a friend of him, and, since Hopkins was there, we ordered drinks. I could see from Hopkins' face that the lady had shown her impatience in some unpleasant way, and he was pretty sick about it.

He was one of those pale, rabbity-looking fellows who take things hard, but a very good waiter.

We settled down to our game. Murgatroyd did not come back, and Hopkins seemed to be a long while bringing the drinks. At last he came, and Miserable Jones asked him if he had had to wait while the whisky was being distilled.

"It wasn't that, sir," said Hopkins in a shaky voice. "But there's bin a murder in the club, sir."

"Ah, I suppose Murgatroyd has at last got what was coming to him. How did the lady murder him?" said Miserable Jones pleasantly.

"It wasn't the lady that murdered him, sir. It was him that murdered the lady," said Hopkins.

"Oh, did he?" said I.

"Well, leastways that's how it looks, sir," said Hopkins. "Mr. Rayner says he came into the club and found Mr. Murgatroyd standing in the doorway of the cupb—the waiting-room sir, with one of those clubs off the wall in his hand, and the lady was lying on the floor of it, and there's blood on the club—on the knobby end of it, sir, and Dr. Staines is examining the injury to the lady's head."

We were all looking at him.

"Good God! If somebody had to be murdered

in the club, why couldn't it be our Cœur de Lion?" said Miserable Jones irritably.

"Well, it sounds as if he'll be hanged, so you've nothing to worry about," said I.

It was not callousness, of course; but all of us had seen too many men come to violent ends during the war or at the outposts of the Empire, and beyond, to get much excited about an ordinary murder or hanging. Besides, we did not like Murgatroyd. I fancy we had a feeling that a man of his disposition and peculiar brand of cleverness would be "none the waur o' a hanging," as the old Scotch judge said to a fellow-countryman in the dock.

Then Vincent rose and said: "Come on, Hawkins. We're on the committee. We'd better go down and look to things. Warner's out."

Warner was the secretary.

We took our drinks and trooped downstairs into the hall.

Staines had not bothered about what the police would say, but carried the body out of the cupboard and laid it down on the hearthrug in the hall. He rose from his examination as we trooped in.

"Quite dead. Died instantly," he said. "Ring up Scotland Yard."

The steward went into the telephone box. I looked at the dead woman's face. Somehow death had taken the cheapness out of the prettiness. But it was a hard face, and death had not taken out the hardness—ingrained, I thought.

Then Miserable Jones stepped forward beside me and looked at it, and I felt him start. I looked at him and saw that he was looking surprised—devilishly surprised. And then he looked doubtful, uncertain what to do. He knew something—certainly he knew something. What was it?

I looked round the hall, and I saw Murgatroyd sitting huddled up on a chair by the cupboard door. His mouth was half open and he looked perfectly



stupid, dazed. And the club—it was an ordinary knobkerrie that the Australian blacks use—was still in his hand, its knob resting on the floor.

I turned to look at Miserable Jones again. He was looking at Murgatroyd, queerly, and his face had gone hard, even stubborn. I guessed, quite easily, that whatever he knew, he was not going to tell. He did not like Murgatroyd.

Then he looked round the hall as if he was looking for someone. Whoever it was, he was not there.

A kind of hush fell. People stopped talking, and some one—a waiter, I think—was shuffling his feet, and some of us were looking at Murgatroyd and some at the corpse, and in came two detective-inspectors and eased the strain.

They took things over at once. They questioned Rayner; they questioned Staines. Then they cleared the hall, but refused to allow anyone to leave the club.

As we were clearing out of the hall Murgatroyd made a bit of a scene. He suddenly stood up and said that he had had nothing to do with it, that the lady had called for him and he had gone down to tell her that he could not come with her, and he just stepped into the cupboard and there she was lying on the floor, with the knobkerrie at her feet, and he had picked it up, and Rayner had come in when he was standing there.

There was no need for him to make any statement at all till he was asked for it, and he made this one in a noisy, excited way that made a bad impression.

We went into the bar; we could not under the circumstances very well go on with our game, and for a little while no one seemed to want to say much, from which I gathered that the general feeling was that Murgatroyd had done it. It certainly looked very like it; but then it was such a queer thing for him to do.

Miserable Jones rather crystallised our feeling when

he said: "If Murgatroyd must croak his lady friends, I wish he wouldn't croak them in the club."

It certainly did seem unclubbable.

One by one we were summoned into the hall and asked if we could throw any light on the matter. Of course we were not going to say that Murgatroyd had gone down in a devil of a rage to interview the lady. After all, the lady was dead, and all the botheration in the world would not bring her to life again, and though Murgatroyd was not a member of the club to be proud of, he was a member.

But I found that Hopkins, though a waiter of his experience should have known better, had given it away. He had told the Inspector that Murgatroyd had been in a furious rage when he rose from the poker table, and that he had said he was going to give the lady something to be impatient about. Of course when I was asked if that was actually so, I had to admit that it was; but I added quite distinctly that Murgatroyd was not peeved about the lady, but about his losses at poker and the row he had had with Miserable Jones.

Then the bearing on the matter of that beastly laugh I had heard as I went upstairs struck me, and I added: "Besides, there was somebody with the lady when I came into the club about a quarter of an hour before the thing happened, for I heard her laugh."

This seemed material to me and it seemed material to the Inspector, for he questioned me closely about it, and I could tell him the time she laughed to about a minute, for, as I came into the club, I had looked at the hall clock.

Then he sent for Hopkins and questioned him again. Hopkins was looking badly shaken up by the business; he said that my statement had reminded him that he had heard the lady laugh. But she had come into the club alone, and no one had come in, that he saw, and joined her. It was, however, possible that someone might have come in and joined her without his

seeing him, for he had gone into the smoking-room and emptied the ash-trays and set the papers straight.

"And how long were you away from your desk in the hall?" the Inspector asked.

"It might have been four or five minutes, sir," said Hopkins.

"And how long had the lady been waiting before Mr. Murgatroyd came down?"

"The best part of twenty minutes, I should think. I told you I didn't notice exactly at what time she came in."

"Well, you heard this laugh. Didn't you hear any sound of talking before that?"

"No, sir: the door of the waiting-room was shut till she opened it, just before she laughed, to ask how much longer Mr. Murgatroyd was going to be."

"Well, when you heard her laugh, you must have known that someone was with her. Why didn't you tell me about it when I first questioned you?"

"Because you never asked me, sir. Besides, it didn't occur to me that anybody was with her. She might have laughed at something she'd thought of."

It almost seemed to me as if Hopkins was trying to make things worse for Murgatroyd. Of course he did not like him.

"Now about that door," said the Inspector. "Was it open after the lady laughed? Did it stay open till you went up to the card-room?"

"I don't know, sir. I wasn't in the hall all the time. I went back to the smoking-room to put back the books the gentlemen had been reading in the shelves."

"Well, when the lady finally came out and told you that she didn't believe you'd let Mr. Murgatroyd know that she was in the club, and that, if you had, you were to go and tell him that she was sick of waiting for him and she'd jolly well come and fetch him if he didn't come at once, did you think that there was someone else in the waiting-room with her, or didn't you?"

“ I didn’t think anything at all about it, sir. You see, the lady was worrying me. I was afraid I should have to stop her going upstairs and there would be an unpleasant fraykass.”

That was as far as the police could get that night, and they let us go: but not Murgatroyd; they took him away with them and kept him.

As we came out of the club Miserable Jones said to me: “ The police seem to have a pretty good case against Murgatroyd. But of course he didn’t do it.”

“ Why are you so sure ? ” I asked.

“ He hasn’t the guts.”

“ Of course. You’re absolutely right,” said I.

“ And those mongrel Dagos use knives, not clubs. They don’t belong to the bashing races.”

“ Right again,” I said. “ There must have been someone in the cupboard with the girl.”

But that was where the police fell down: they could not find anyone who could have been in the cupboard with Rose Hilton, as she called herself. For a wonder, they could find out very little about her. She had appeared in a second-rate night-club about a year before her unfortunate visit to the Fossicker’s Club. There she had met Murgatroyd, and they had foregathered. The police made quite certain that during the last ten months, at any rate, she had had no boy friends except Murgatroyd, and it was not very likely that a woman had murdered her, for women do not use clubs for murdering people. Also it looked as if the murderer had known which of the clubs hanging on the wall of the hall was the best to use. It was also difficult to see how she had let him hit her without making a fuss about it and screaming—unless he had come into the waiting-room holding the knobkerrie out of sight behind him till he struck.

There were no finger-marks on its handle except Murgatroyd’s. But since he had had it in his moist and flabby hand for about a quarter of an hour, he might have obliterated a couple of dozen.

Of course the police like to hang somebody in a case like this. It is their business. And the obvious person to hang was Murgatroyd. They set about it.

They certainly had a good case: when a lady is found with a fractured skull and a man is standing over her with a blood-stained knobkerrie in his hand, it is, as a rule, unnecessary to look farther for the man who fractured it. Then there was the motive: Murgatroyd had gone downstairs in a state of immense exasperation, probably to be exasperated yet more. Also the lady who lived in the flat next to Rose Hilton had heard them quarrelling more than once before. Of course, to me, it was in Murgatroyd's favour that scrapping was one of their habits; but with a jury it would certainly tell against him. Also he had had every opportunity of examining the clubs on the walls and learning that the knobkerrie was much the handiest for a European to use.

It would tell against him, too, that he had made no statement till that stupid outburst after the detectives had come. He had seemed too dazed, and the jury would think that it was by the enormity of the crime. I did not; I thought his essential stupidity had come well to the top and left him just flabbergasted.

So it certainly seemed odds on the police. But it was not a thing we could very well bet about, because Murgatroyd was a member of the club. Miserable Jones did suggest that because he was a member of the club we ought to have a club sweepstake on the result, but no one took the suggestion up.

Murgatroyd had plenty of money to spend on his defence, and he was spending it. But his detectives could not find, any more than the police could, any one who could have been in the cupboard with Rose Hilton. For the last year her life was an open book; before that it was a blank. The papers tried to help by publishing her photograph; but it was not strikingly recognisable, and nobody recognised it. Unfortunately, they also published Murgatroyd's photograph,

and we agreed that any man or woman who was going to sit on the jury that tried him would come into court with a strong impression that they were going to try a born murderer. But perhaps it was as well that they should be a bit used to his face before they saw it.

It was pretty clear that everything depended on the way the jury was handled, and Murgatroyd had in Watkin Wills as good a man with a jury as you could find.

As Miserable Jones pointed out, the real difficulty would be to prevent that jury from hanging Murgatroyd for leading an irregular life rather than for murdering Rose Hilton.

A good many members of the club attended the trial, and of course all of us who had been playing poker with Murgatroyd that night had been subpoenaed to give evidence about the state of his temper when he left the card-table.

Hopkins was the awkward witness, and he looked worried to death by the business. Nobody tampered with him of course. But the defence did everything they could to convince him that there must have been someone in the cupboard with Rose Hilton when he went upstairs to fetch Murgatroyd. They really tried various methods of suggestion on him; but they could not get it into his head that there certainly had been someone in the cupboard with her. He would go on saying that he thought she had laughed at something she had thought of. Not even two or three members of the committee could get that impression out of his head. Of course what he thought would not have been evidence; but had he been induced to think otherwise it would have made a good deal of difference to the way he gave his evidence. It was the same with the matter of Murgatroyd's exasperation. A good many people suggested to him—I did myself—that he exaggerated it; but he would not admit it. He would go on saying that if ever a man meant murder, Mr. Murgatroyd did when he left the poker-table.

Of course he stuck to his opinions quite respectfully. And that did not make it any better. In the box he was a very good witness—for the prosecution. Watkin Wills handled him admirably; but he did not shake him. In his quiet way Hopkins produced the impression—and a strong impression, too—on the minds of the Bar and the spectators, and doubtless on the minds of the jury, too, that Murgatroyd had been in a murderous temper, and that it was uncommonly doubtful that anyone but he had been in the cupboard.

The poker players went into the box one after the other, and we rather weakened the evidence about Murgatroyd's murderousness. Certainly Miserable Jones and I were quite convinced that however murderous a temper Murgatroyd might be in, he had not got the guts to commit a murder. My evidence about Rose Hilton's laugh was, of course, uncommonly important, and I had no doubt whatever in my mind that Rose Hilton had laughed at somebody and not at anything she had thought of. I made it clear.

Murgatroyd went into the box, and he made a much better show than might have been expected. It was plain enough to me that he was telling the truth. But I could hardly expect it to be plain to the jury.

Watkins Wills had skated over the irregular life part of the business in that tactful, man-of-the-world kind of way, which gives a jury a pleasing feeling about its man of the worldliness. But Paviour, one of the saintliest of our judges, had to rub it in a bit in his summing-up, and it is always dangerous to the man in the dock.

Well, it was touch and go. The jury took two hours and forty minutes to arrive at their verdict, and then it was: "Not Guilty."

That laugh of Rose Hilton's I had heard just saved Murgatroyd's bacon.

It was a relief in a way; but I came out of the court, with Miserable Jones, wondering who had been in the cupboard with Rose Hilton.

Then Miserable said: "And once more you see that it's a man's follies that bring him to grief, and not his crimes."

"Yes. Did you ever have a grandmother?" said I.

"Of course I had a grandmother—two, but they both died before I was born, and I never saw them."

"That's just as well, for if you had, you'd certainly have taught them to suck eggs," said I.

"But I'm perfectly right," he protested. "It's a first-class example. If Murgatroyd hadn't been such a fool as to take up with a woman like Rose Hopkins, he wouldn't have got done in as he has done."

"Rose *who*?" I said, rather loudly.

"Hopkins. I came across her two years ago when I was last in England. She hadn't dropped the name of Hopkins then, for she had only gone off with a man I knew (Arbuthnot) about six months—after giving that unfortunate beggar, Hopkins, three years' married hell."

"Then it was Hopkins she laughed that beastly laugh at?"

"Sure."

"And it was Hopkins?—"

"Sure."

"But hang it all, man! It would have been beastly awkward for you if the jury had found Murgatroyd guilty."

"Oh, well, I suppose I should have had to go and see the Home Secretary about it."

"And a hell of a row he'd have made about your not coming forward sooner."

"I dare say; but I wasn't going to interfere unless I had to. I don't like our Cœur de Lion, and Hopkins is a very good waiter, the best we have in the club. I didn't see why we should lose a good waiter to save Cœur de Lion's feelings, and on account of a baggage like Rose."

I thought for a moment and said: "I fancy you didn't like her either."



"Everyone who had anything to do with her seems to have found her rather a mistake. Arbuthnot did."

I did not say anything for a while; I was getting the bearings accurately; then I said: "Well, I suppose that all's well that ends well."

He looked at me and said a bit coldly: "I think you must have had a bromide nurse."

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*Edgar Jepson*

### AN ACCIDENT

THESE international marriages are stupid things from the point of view of marriage. At least that is my experience of them. Of course the contracting parties, as the lawyers who draw up the settlements call them, get what they chiefly want: the man gets the money, and the woman gets the title. But nearly always they get a poor thing in the way of marriage.

It is only natural. They have different tastes and different prejudices. They do not understand one another at all. They are always getting on one another's nerves; and often they positively shock one another by things they say, or do—quite small, trivial things, but very grating. And there is very little chance of their ever coming to understand one another and make allowances. They are nearly always young; and the man at least is foolish. You do not expect much sense in a Peer—at any rate in an English Peer.

Possibly if they gave themselves time and fell in love with one another, it would be different: they would not grate on one another so. But they so seldom do. The man goes for the money, the girl for the title, hell for leather.

Certainly Drexham and Virginia got a very poor thing in the way of marriage; at least Virginia did. Drexham got what he wanted. Virginia's money

restored the Court, so that it is now quite the finest and most comfortable place in west Sussex, replete with every modern convenience, as the prospectuses say. Also her money kept it up and left Drexham free to spend all his own (he had twenty thousand a year—pounds, not dollars) on his racing-stable and other amusements. But beyond the title Virginia got nothing that I could see; and really a title is not very filling.

I was uncommonly sorry for Virginia. I should have been sorry for any woman who married Drexham, for, not to put too fine a point on it, he was always a perfect little blighter, one of those small-mouthed men with neat features and small, empty eyes, too close together. He was always very neat and dapper; and he had a little neat moustache he was always pulling. I don't quite know why he always reminded me of a shop-walker; but he did. Perhaps it was his voice: it was always so soapy when he wanted you to do something for him, and so fretful when he didn't.

Goodness knows it wasn't my fault that he was such a little blighter. As his cousin and his heir, I had tried with boot and hand and stick to put the fear of God into him all the years we were boys together. The earliest thing I remember is smacking Drexham's head. But somehow I never succeeded with him, though I got many a licking from our tutor for doing my best. Nevertheless it is a comfort to think that I was the one good influence in his life, the kind he could really feel.

I was a good deal sorrier for Virginia than I should have been for most women, not only because she was such a delicate, pretty creature, but also because she was such a little innocent. Her father had made his millions out of real estate on the Pacific Slope; and she had lived most of her life there. Of course she had travelled in Europe; but I think they must have kept her packed in cotton-wool during the journey.

I happened to be in the Rockies, shooting, so that when I got Drexham's letter asking me to come to

Monterey and see him through his marriage, I could not very well refuse, though Drexham's marriage was the very last thing in the world I wanted to be mixed up in. When I reached Monterey I found everything in full swing, settlements being signed and the trousseau on its way from Paris.

When I saw Virginia and got to know her a little, I wanted badly to stop the marriage. She was so delicate and charming, and yet so full of life that it seemed an infernal shame that a mean and selfish little hound like Drexham should spoil and ruin her life. But I saw that I could do nothing. If her father had been alive, I might have managed it—you can say things to a man. But it was clear that there was no doing anything with her mother. At all times she would be as stupid as a boiled owl; and now she was quite off her head at her daughter's wiping the eyes of the daughters of all her friends by making such a splendid social success, as she called it, and carrying off an English Marquess.

Besides, she told me cheerfully that Virginia was putting my nose out of joint by marrying Drexham and removing all chance of my coming into the title and estates. What good would my telling her why Drexham had lost every chance of marrying decently in England have been in the face of that? Of course he had put her up to it, in case I should interfere. Whatever you might say against Drexham's intelligence, you could say nothing against his cunning.

He was using his soapy voice all the time; and as for Virginia, how could a girl of twenty, sheltered as she had been, judge a man? I believe she thought him a Marquess in a novel—romantic. I thought it best to sit tight and make friends with her. That way I might be able to be more useful later on.

Well, the marriage came off; and I went back to the Rockies. It was six months before I returned to England and went down to the Court. I found, as I had feared, that Virginia was changed, not in the

way that marriage changes most women, but in a worse way. Her big brown eyes were bigger than ever in her thinner face; and they were duller. The sparkle had gone out of them; and the life had gone out of her. She did not often smile; and in two days I did not hear her laugh once.

Of course whoever Drexham had married it would have been the same; he was a born little bully of the cruel kind. But I was uncommonly sorry for Virginia. I was pretty sick too at being able to find no way of mending matters. If I interfered, Drexham would only make it worse for her when I was not there; and I am quite sure that Virginia would have made at any rate a show of being furious with me. She was a loyal little soul.

So I did my best to cheer her up; and I did get her a lot more cheerful when she was out of Drexham's sight. I think she even put on a little flesh; and certainly her eyes grew a little brighter.

I stayed at the Court as long as I could—certainly longer than Drexham wanted me to stay; but I never did stand any nonsense from Drexham. Then I had to go to Uganda with a man, shooting.

On the last night Virginia and I were rather glum. I was glum at leaving her to undiluted Drexham; and she was glum that there would be no one to cheer her up.

Then I said: "Look here, Little Owl"—I called her Little Owl because her eyes were so big—"you mustn't take things so hard. They're not worth it. They're not really."

"I'll try not to," she said, not very hopefully.

"You'll have to put your back into trying not to. It's no good letting your life be made a mess of for nothing; and it is nothing."

She knew well enough that I was speaking of Drexham.

"I *will* try," she said more firmly.

"If it does get too much for you, just make an effort and bolt to Monterey—promise."



*"She did not often smile"*



She promised; indeed we shook hands on it; and I started for Uganda with an easier mind. Either Virginia would get hardened to Drexham's sneering and jibing, and not feel it, or she would leave him.

I was away for nearly a year. Sometimes I got a budget of letters—three or four mails in a lump; and in one of them came the news that the Drexham baby had been born, and it was a girl. I knew that that would not make things any better, for Drexham had been very keen on its being a boy and an heir. He would make himself more unpleasant than ever.

When I did return to England, I learnt that Virginia was still with Drexham; and I went straight off to the Court, for I was anxious to see how things were going.

The sight of Virginia gave me a shock of the worst. Her eyes were bigger than ever, and quite dull. She did not only look spiritless; she looked frightened. She was as thin as a rail; her face was haggard; and she walked feebly—she who had been so full of life. It was pathetic.

Fortunately she was alone in the blue drawing-room when I first saw her; and there was no one to hear me burst out, for I don't think I could have stopped myself. I wanted to know why she had not kept her promise to me and bolted to Monterey.

She looked frightened out of her life, and said quickly: "Hush! You mustn't say such things! If I ran away, he—he'd take baby away from me."

So that was it: Drexham had been getting at her through the child. I pulled myself up short. I saw that I had to be very careful. I asked to be shown the baby at once. I couldn't have done anything better. It put a little life into Virginia; and her eyes actually shone a little as she showed the baby to me. It was like her—brown-eyed.

"He can't bear to set eyes on her," she said.

"Lucky for her," said I.

"Perhaps it is," said Virginia after a pause, as if she had never thought of that.

But when we left the baby, she turned quite spiritless again. She asked me some polite questions about my travels and my shooting; but I don't think she heard my answers.

I found that they were entertaining a house-party; and at tea I met it. It was a party! Drexham had never been able to make a decent friend (decent people never got beyond acquaintanceship with him; and they did not get very far in that), and he had collected an extraordinary gang of sporting and other riff-raff—wealthy riff-raff. Solly Bernstein, the owner of Blanket, the St. Leger favourite, was one of them; a wealthy racing man from Hamburg was another; and there were their women, and the Egerton-Lidgetts, who run the private gambling-house at Albert Gate, and friends of the sportsmen and friends of the Egerton-Lidgetts. But the cream of the gathering perhaps was Mrs. Cawsley-Carruthers, the heroine of the Longstrand and other divorce cases. They *were* a crew to find at Drexham Court!

Drexham was pleased to see me for once, because I had done a little exploring during my shooting-trip, and my name was in the papers. He liked that kind of thing. And I was quite civil to him, for I had made up my mind to sit as tight as wax till I saw my way to do something definite. It wasn't by any means easy to sit tight, for twice during tea he turned on Virginia with a snarling sneer, positively vicious. It was quite wanton too; she had not opened her mouth. The worst sign was that none of his guests took the slightest notice of it. It was evidently the usual thing.

Virginia and I got away from them till it was time to dress for dinner. It was not a pleasant meal. The party was by way of being smart; and its way of showing its smartness was to brag of what it had paid for things and to indulge in broad jokes and talk which would hardly be allowed in a decent tap-room. I expected to find that Virginia had grown used to it,



for it was clear that she must have had plenty of it. But I saw that she had not. More than once I saw her wince and flush at the things they said. It did not mend matters that Drexham was making open love to Mrs. Cawsley-Carruthers all the time.

I had made up my mind, as I say, to sit tight till I saw my way; and I stuck to that intention. I had first of all to get Virginia's complete confidence—get a kind of control over her, if I could, so that she would do as I told her. Therefore I spent all the time I could with her. She was in the habit of spending most of her time with the baby in the peach-garden, for no one ever came into it; and if they did, she could bolt, since a little door in her wing opened into it. It was a kitchen garden, of course, full of vegetables; but there was a little lawn in the middle of it with a sun-dial, and the baby used to crawl about the grass. It seemed a lively child for five months old. It was a jolly enough place after Africa, if only Virginia had not looked so ill and miserable. After the second day she did begin to grow a little more cheerful, for I tried to keep her mind on cheerful things, but only a very little more. I noticed that she never once spoke Drexham's name. She never called him "Herbert" or "Drexham"—she always spoke of him as "he." "He" did this, or said that.

It was a week before I first suggested carrying her and the baby off to her mother at Monterey. I did not press it; Drexham had so worked on her that she was in a state of abject terror at the thought of it. It would take weeks to make her see that, after the way he had treated her, the Californian Courts would never let him take her baby from her. And I doubted that I had the weeks to do it in. A woman can't go on being as thin and terrified as that, with Drexham still at her all the time, without a breakdown; and it was clear that if she did collapse, it would be for good. I was sure enough, too, that Drexham knew it. I was up against it hard. I could not see a way.

Then one afternoon I was in the smoking-room with Drexham when Virginia came in with a telegram in her hand. She looked frightened to death.

"A—a cousin of mine—Gamaliel Meredith—has wired to say that he's on his way to see me. He—he'll be here this afternoon—and he'll expect to stay," she said to him in a breathless kind of way.

"He will—will he?" said Drexham slowly, in his worst sneering tone. "Well, he just won't do anything of the kind. It's quite enough for me to have one of your measly Californian breed in the house; I won't have another. So you can just stop him setting foot in it any way you like. But stop it!" he snarled.

I stood up rather quickly; and Drexham never guessed how near he was to being thrown through the shut window.

"This won't do!" I said angrily. "Meredith's a friend of mine. I met him in the Rockies. And I'm not going to have him insulted."

It was not true; I had never set eyes on any Meredith in the Rockies. But it had flashed on me that a cousin of Virginia's might prove useful. Also I spoke loudly, for it always rattled Drexham when I raised my voice; I had so often raised my foot along with it.

"I don't care! I won't have him here!" snarled Drexham; but there was less power to his snarl.

"I'm sure *I* don't want him," said Virginia.

That was the very thing I wanted. It took Virginia clean out of the matter.

"It isn't that at all!" I shouted at Drexham. "The man's a friend of mine! He was very civil to me in the States; and I'm damned if you're going to insult him! The fact is you're getting too bucked, Drexham! You want taking down a peg! A little swine like you insult a friend of mine! Damn it! I'll jolly well put you out of the way of insulting anyone

at all for the next six weeks!" And I made for him.

He thought that he had really stirred me up to one of my rages (he knew all about them), and he backed away, white about the gills, with his arms out.

"Who—who wants to insult him! Have it your own way! All this fuss about a damned American!" he squealed, and fairly bolted.

"I'm going to fetch him myself! And you be devilishly careful how you treat him!" I bellowed after him.

Virginia had dropped into an easy-chair, and was lying back panting. I had given her a fright; but that couldn't be helped.

I took the wire from her, patted her shoulder, and said: "There, there: there's nothing for you to be frightened of—it's not you I'm going to eat, little owl."

"You're dreadful! Perfectly dreadful! I'd no idea you could behave like that," she gasped.

"How do you suppose I get about Africa?" I said. "Besides, Drexham shouldn't annoy me."

She began to breathe more easily; then she sat up and said: "And so you actually know Game."

"Not from Adam," I said cheerfully. "But I thought it might cheer you up a bit to have a cousin here."

"So you were deceitful too—as well as savage," she said severely; but from her tone I did not think that she minded much.

"I was diplomatic," I said. "But I must be off, if I'm to meet your cousin at the station."

"If you think I want him to see me—looking like this!" she said miserably.

"Oh, he'll cheer you up," I said, hurrying off.

My car was soon ready; and I drove to the station and reached it as the train came in. I had no difficulty in recognising Meredith, for he was wearing those queer American clothes, with the broad, square,

padded shoulders, and trousers that flop about the legs; and I introduced myself to him. I liked the look of him; he was a tall, slim, loosely built young fellow of about eight and twenty, clean-shaven of course, with a lean, tanned, boyish face, long, thin lips, and keen, cheerful blue eyes. But I was a little disappointed; he did not look the kind of man to handle this awkward business.

As we drove to the Court he seemed enormously impressed by everything. It was just ordinary quiet English scenery, meadows and fields and woods; but he could not stop talking about it. He said it was so beautiful and civilised and restful.

As I expected, he was awfully shocked by the sight of Virginia, so thin and haggard and pale, though she was looking a little better than usual in the excitement of seeing him again. I left them together, and later I found him with Virginia and the baby in the Peach Garden. She was talking to him in American; and she did look a little brighter. She called him "Game," and he called her "Virgie."

At tea she introduced him to Drexham; and Drexham treated him quite civilly. I watched Meredith, and saw that he seemed very much interested in the other guests; he listened to them and watched them, looking a good deal surprised. Drexham was fairly quiet; he always was after we had had a row. Only once did he snarl at Virginia; and I saw Meredith frown. A queer, deep line running down between his eyebrows went with the frown.

After tea Drexham and most of the others settled down to bridge; and Virginia offered to show Meredith over the house. She asked me to go with them; and I went. I made a discovery: Virginia was not only very proud of the Court, but very fond of it. I am very fond of the Court myself; but it surprised me that she should be fond of it after the life Drexham had led her in it.

Meredith was as keen on it as he had been on the

scenery. He said that it was just wonderful to him to be in a house where Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth and Charles II and William of Orange had stayed; and he was not humbugging; he was no end bucked at staying in the same house.

At dinner the talk was rather worse than usual. I think that the house-party was bent on showing the unsophisticated young Westerner how smart it could be. Meredith looked puzzled and uncomfortable at times; and he looked once or twice at Virginia inquiringly. But, naturally, Virginia was not looking his way. What is more, she was not wincing or flushing as usual; she kept her face expressionless.

Once or twice, for no mortal reason of any kind, Drexham was nasty to her (I expect he thought that she would feel it more with her cousin present), and I saw that deep line between Meredith's eyebrows.

After dinner the party settled down to baccarat. I went out into the garden, and presently Meredith came to me. He observed to me that Drexham's friends were "dead-sure sports."

"You're dead sure to be done in the eye if you play with them," I said.

"Is that so?" he said quickly. Then after a pause he added: "But isn't it mighty odd that they should be here—at a Marquess's?"

"You won't find anything odd in it when you come to know Drexham a bit," I said frankly, for I had made up my mind that the sooner his eyes were opened the better.

He looked at me sharply; but before he could say anything Virginia joined us.

I learnt that they had seen a good deal more of one another at one time than most cousins. For two years, when Virginia was sixteen, she and her mother had lived on the ranch of Meredith's father. Naturally he had been quite alive to the change in her.

He was very quiet next day, looking cheerful and boyish all the time; but I don't think he missed much.

Once or twice I saw him looking hard at Drexham, as if he were trying to make him out. His being at the Court made no difference to the way Drexham treated Virginia; he was always going out of his way to sneer or snarl at her. Meredith did not seem to pay much attention to it; but once I saw his nostrils twitching oddly; and I was pretty sure he was paying a good deal more attention to it than he seemed to be. I was glad he was going slow: he would be more useful if he had himself well in hand.

In the afternoon I offered to drive him round the neighbourhood in my car; and he seemed very pleased to come. He brought a thick red guide-book with him; and instead of my showing him the neighbourhood, he showed it to me. He found in his book two Roman camps, some Saxon barrows, a battlefield of the Wars of the Roses, a Holy well, a house in which a poet of the name of Cowper lived, a churchyard in which a poet, whose name I have forgotten, is buried, and an inn which is mentioned in one of Dickens's novels. He seemed so surprised that I had never heard of any of these places.

He was full of them at dinner; and his excitement amused the others a good deal. Egerton-Lidgett started to chaff him about them in a supercilious and offensive way; and I had to make myself a bit disagreeable and shut him up. Virginia looked pleased with me.

Things went quite quietly for about a week. I saw more of Meredith than anyone else did, for he seemed to have taken a fancy to me; and I liked him. We talked about a good many things in England and America; but we did not talk about Virginia. I felt all the time that she was just at the back of all our conversation, waiting to be talked about when the right time came; and I guessed that he felt the same. Drexham went on sneering and snarling at her and making love to Mrs. Cawsley-Carruthers. I think that the lady was leading him a dance, for he was

uncommonly peevish and unpleasant. Several of his guests learnt that friendship with a Marquess was not all smooth going. Then one night at dinner he burst out at Virginia more furiously than ever. I had to check him.

The next afternoon I came on Virginia and Meredith in the Peach Garden a bit suddenly; and I saw that Virginia had been crying, and that Meredith was not looking at all boyish and cheerful. His lips were set very thin; and his eyes were sparkling, and the line between his eyebrows was very deep. I saw that he had been having it out with Virginia; and I was glad of it. We might now be able to get on a bit. But they said nothing about it; and we talked as if Virginia had not been crying.

That night Meredith was strolling up and down the terrace with me. He was looking uncommonly gloomy; and I wasn't feeling inclined to talk. At last he burst out about the business; and the nicest thing he said about Drexham was that he was a mean skunk. He ended by saying that he was killing Virginia.

"Yes: he is. And I believe he knows it," I said.

"What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," he said rather helplessly. "That's what I've come to you to hear. You know the ropes in this country. I tried to persuade Virgie to come back with me to Monterey. But she won't."

"No: she won't. I've done all I know to persuade her. But I can't stir her. Drexham has got her frightened to death; and you can't get it into her head that he couldn't get the baby away from her if she left him. Yet it's the only thing for her to do."

"She won't do it," he said very glumly.

"No. And you can understand her terror. If he treats her like this before people, it's any odds that he treats her worse still when they're alone."

I heard him grind his teeth.

"If I had thought it would stop him, I'd have given

him the thrashing of a lifetime," I went on. "But I'm sure he'd be worse as soon as my back was turned. I can't for the life of me think what to do."

We looked at one another quite helplessly; then he said:

"Oh, this is a mighty nice country—just as romantic and civilised as can be—and folks are vurry polite. But what it wants is some unwritten law. It's just yelling for it—yes—sir: yelling."

"Good Lord, no! You can't try that kind of thing on here! If you did knock Drexham on the head—it wouldn't matter how much he deserved it—they'd hang you as sure as a gun!"

"Well, what *is* to be done? We can't get her away from him—you say yourself he's got her plumb scared. The thing to do is to get him away from her."

"If he'd only go off with Mrs. Cawsley-Carruthers. But they're both too cunning for that. No: the thing to do is to work away at it till we *do* get it into her head that she can leave him safely," I said.

"I don't believe we've got the time," he said.

That was the trouble. But yet I think that that was how he would have tried to work it, if it hadn't been for Virginia's arm.

The next afternoon we went to the Peach Garden; and the nurse brought out the baby. Of a sudden she set up a furious howling; and Virginia came rushing out of the door in the wing, straight from her bedroom. She was wearing a loose kind of wrap of the kimono kind with big sleeves; and as she handled the baby her arms were bare to the elbow.

On her right arm—the thinnest, frailest little right arm you ever saw—there were three broadish blue bruises, evidently made by savagely gripping fingers. I looked at Meredith. His tan wasn't much darker than cream-colour; and his nostrils were twitching in their odd way. I was feeling pretty sick myself.

The baby hushed quickly; and then Virginia remembered her bare arms. She pulled the sleeve



over the bruises with a look of fright and glanced at us, and stammered:

“ I—I—b-b-bumped it against the b-b-bannisters.”

It was a loyal little lie, but quite transparent.

She hurried back into the house.

Meredith and I stared at one another; and I said:

“ I—I didn’t think he’d dare.”

The words came stiffly; my tongue seemed to be sticking.

Meredith took hold of my arm and drew me across the lawn out of sight and hearing of the nurse. I suppose I was looking a bit upset. It was enough to upset anyone; and Meredith certainly looked pretty queer. He was talking queerly too, telling me that I was to leave Drexham to him; that I was his heir, and it wouldn’t do for me to do anything. He said it three or four times. It looked almost as if he thought I was going to give Drexham a dose of the unwritten law—knock him on the head, or something. Perhaps I looked like it; certainly Meredith did.

I should think it was a good quarter of an hour before we were quite ready to go back and be cheerful with Virginia and the baby. She looked at us anxiously as we came up. But of course we said nothing about the bruises.

I found it very hard work trying to be cheerful. In fact, I wasn’t: I was still upset and glum. But Meredith was cheerful for both of us. I felt somehow that he had made up his mind what he was going to do, and it made it fairly easy for him to be cheerful. I couldn’t see my way. Of course I was going to give Drexham the thrashing of his life; but that would not do any lasting good.

I noticed that though Meredith was cheerful and smiled a good deal, that line between his eyebrows was deep and stayed deep.

After tea Drexham’s guests did not get to their bridge at once; there was some shooting at clay pigeons. Egerton-Lidget had challenged Drexham

to a match; and Drexham just beat him. Meredith was tremendously interested in it, though he wanted to call a gun a "fowling-piece"; and he pleased Drexham by backing him for a tenner. I wondered how he could manage to be civil to him. I was not being civil to him.

There was not much shooting after their match; and the others went off to their cards. But Meredith and I stayed on practising; and I spent nearly an hour trying to teach him to hit the flying discs without success. But I did succeed in getting into his head that guns are very tricky things, that a jar will discharge them, and that they need very careful handling. By the end of the hour I had got him quite careful; and he was handling his gun properly.

When the dressing bell rang we went back to the house and took our guns to the gun-room. I saw to it that he unloaded his gun; and then I left him there examining a rabbit-rifle.

As I dressed for dinner I made up my mind that it would be best to deal with Drexham that night, after his friends had finished their gambling and gone to bed. I would teach him never to bruise Virginia's arm again. I was sure I could teach him that, though I should never be able to teach him to keep his rasping tongue quiet: no one could.

Dinner was rather quieter than usual. Mrs. Cawley-Carruthers was too busy talking quietly to Drexham to keep the general talk as smart as usual; and Drexham only sneered at Virginia once. Meredith talked more than usual, and made American jokes and laughed at them pretty loudly.

After the women had left us, a discussion arose between him and Drexham (I don't know which of them started it) about the mechanism of a hammerless gun. It grew rather hot. At least Drexham and Egerton-Lidgett, who joined in, both lost their tempers. Meredith was calm enough, but annoying; and I thought it rather cheek on his part since he could not

possibly know anything about guns. Both of the others said as much. When we rose to join the ladies the three of them went off to the gun-room, still wrangling. I followed them. I felt that Meredith was up to something; but I could not make out what.

He went into the gun-room first, and Drexham came just behind him. As I came to the door I saw Meredith catch a gun rather quickly from the rack; and he turned and said:

“I’ll show you what I mean.”

As he said it the gun slipped from his hands and its butt jarred on the tiled floor. There was an ear-splitting bang—the gun-room was not large—and though of course the powder was smokeless, the place was full of a mist.

“Sakes alive! It was loaded!” Meredith cried.

His voice was all wrong; there wasn’t enough surprise in it.

Then I saw that Drexham was down on his face.

I pushed forward, past Egerton-Lidgett, stooped and turned Drexham over. There was no need to send for a doctor. Both barrels must have been loaded; and they had blown a hole in him I could have put my fist into. I doubt if he ever knew that the gun had been put away loaded. He must have been dead before he could feel a single pellet.

“Well, I’m damned!” said Egerton-Lidgett softly; and he sat down on the table.

I looked up at Meredith; he had turned away and was groping at the window fastening. The side of his face I could see was white enough.

Then Virginia’s voice cried in the passage: “What has happened? Is anyone hurt?”

I made one jump for the doorway and filled it. I didn’t want her to see Drexham like that.

“You can’t come in! There’s been an accident and Drexham’s hurt!” I said.

She tried to push past me; but I caught hold of her and drew her up the passage, saying:

“ You mustn’t see him now. Wait till the doctor’s been. You’d better go up to your room.”

She came quietly, sobbing softly.

At the end of the passage she said in a breathless, frightened voice: “ It—it wasn’t you? ”

“ No. It was an accident—a gun slipped out of Meredith’s hands, hit the floor, and went off.”

“ Is he killed? ” she said.

“ It’s very serious,” said I.

She sobbed again; and I helped her up the stairs to her bedroom, and waited till her maid came. When I came downstairs the house was in an uproar. A lady—I did not go to see which—was in a fit of hysterics in the drawing-room. The women servants, very white, and most of them crying, were clustered in the little hall at the end of the passage to the gun-room. I sent them off to the kitchen.

In the gun-room were the butler and two footmen. They had laid Drexham on a table and covered him with a sheet. The butler told me that Meredith had been very sick, and Egerton-Lidgett had taken him up to his bedroom. A car had gone for the doctor.

I picked up the gun which had done the mischief. It was Drexham’s own gun, the pigeon gun he had been using in the afternoon. That did surprise me. Drexham was the last man in the world to leave the cartridges in his gun; he was always so fearful of accidents. Certainly I had not seen him take the cartridges out; but I had an idea that he had not loaded it after his last two shots.

The next two days were trying, though I was pretty busy making arrangements. Virginia sat with the baby in the Peach Garden most of the day, very quiet. You could almost see the scared look lifting from her face. I spent a good deal of my spare time with her (she seemed to like it), but we hardly talked at all.

Meredith wandered about the Court and the gardens restlessly, looking very shaky. He did not seem to care to talk; and he said nothing to me at any

rate, about the accident. It was queer, but everybody was saying, "Poor Mr. Meredith!" nobody said, "Poor Drexham!"—not even Egerton-Lidgett who had to stay on, of course, for the inquest.

The inquest did not throw any light on the question of how Drexham's gun came to be loaded. Everybody seemed to take it for granted that he had left it loaded himself. Meredith looked very shaky; but he gave his evidence all right. Everybody seemed sorry for him; the coroner made things as easy as he could for him; and when the jury brought in a verdict of death by misadventure, they added a rider saying that he was not to blame.

Naturally he was eager to get away from Drexham Court; and in the afternoon after the inquest I drove him to the station. We did not talk much on the way to it.

The train came in; he got into a carriage and leant out of the window; and we shook hands and said good-bye. But, as usual, the train stuck in the station.

Then he said: "I think Virgie will be all right now; but you'll look after her."

"Oh, yes," I said.

He was still looking rather shaky; and I wanted to buck him up a bit; so I said: "Look here: I hope you—you aren't going to worry about Drexham."

"Not on your life!" he said. "It was a dandy shot, wasn't it? I never loosed off a gun quicker since I stopped a grizzly in a surprise rush," And he looked almost as boyish and cheerful as on the day he came.

All the same it was not quite nice of him to mention it, I thought.

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ACT OF GOD

STRETCHING out her arm in the darkness, Jenny felt the unglassed face of the clock, and was amazed to discover that the hands stood at twenty-five past six.

Six in the morning, and still dark! During this time of the year, May, the sun usually rose at about six in the West Indies, and this morning it was pitch-black! She had promised to be at the waterside by dawn; Harry would be waiting for her, watching with his men for a glimpse of her through the pale Tropic dawn.

Yet the dawn had not come.

But she must be up now, Harry would be waiting. . . .

Gingerly she crawled out of bed, taking care not to wake up her husband, and began swiftly to dress. She knew, however, that it was very unlikely that Tom would wake, he threw himself into sleep, every night, his brain and body sodden with rum, and nothing short of a hurricane could bring him to life till long after dawn.

Dark as it was, she did not light the lamp, for she found little difficulty in dressing: she had laid her clothes out carefully before going to bed in preparation for just such an emergency.

Hooking the heavy stays of the period, with infinite trouble pulling the laces tight, and hitching up thick petticoats, Jenny was happy at having something to do to keep her mind from troubling over the dangerous step she was about to take. For Jenny was no light-o'-love. Years of torture, of living with a drunkard she had learned to loathe, had been needed to screw her courage to this step. She was only capable of taking that step by not thinking about it, by trusting purely to action.

Once she started to think she knew that she would withdraw, and she did not want to withdraw; it was safest to trust to her emotions, to her love for Harry, her hatred of Tom, and to the desire to see once more

the misty outline of old England after years in this sun-baked island.

Her clothes were packed in the bags in the kitchen; she groped for them through a house made strangely unfamiliar by the darkness. She had never known such a morning. Perhaps her clock was fast? It must be fast! Dawn should have come long ago. Yet she noticed a light in the house next door, and heard outside the hushed voices of men and women, the sound of the pig and goat being untethered. That meant it must really be six o'clock. Yet this darkness, this pall of impenetrable blackness that seemed like a slide of metal over her eyeballs—it wasn't right! Perhaps she was blind! No, no! In sudden agony, she opened her large eyes very wide, and blinked them; then with enormous relief, she knew that she could not be blind because the lighted window next door shone murkily at her as if through fog.

Fog! Of course, it must be some new kind of fog! But she had never known a fog to be so black as this, and there was no feeling of mist in the air. The air, as a matter of fact, was peculiarly dry.

But Jenny was no coward. She had worked up all her courage for this one moment, and now she would not draw back. If it was midnight, she would sit at the water-side until dawn rather than go back. It seemed to her that this would be her last chance to escape, to draw back now would mean to be tied for ever to this drunken devil of a husband.

The blackness did not lessen: no sun rose over the plains. Very steadily she walked along the street that was no longer a street but was something hidden. To each side of her the lighted windows were opaque, were dim glass shields seen under water at night. She could hear the hum of many voices, the speakers unseen. Then something solid brushed against her skirt, sending a gush of horror to her heart. The thing clawed with hands up to her waist, and she heard a negress mumbling a prayer.

“What is it?” asked Jenny, peering down. She spoke in a whisper, as if afraid to raise her voice. “What’s happened?”

“De Lahd hab taken de revenge on he’s chillun,” moaned the darkness. “Dere will be no mo’ earth . . .” and the soft voice wailed into a hymn.

Angrily, Jenny shook the woman off and strode on, breaking suddenly into a run, but the bags weighed her down. They were frightfully heavy. Why had she packed so much? So many unnecessary things? She wouldn’t need them all. In London she would buy thousands better . . . in London . . . London . . .

She ran quickly, and the bags swung round and struck at her legs, like dogs trying to hold her back. She raced on, gasping. This, surely, was the bay? The beach was there, and the wharves—where were the wharves?

Ahead, she saw a quivering blur of colour, a man’s voice halloed, it was Harry’s voice . . . thank God . . .

She was in his arms. She could not see him, but she knew that it was his mouth on hers, that these were his hands fondling her shoulders under the cape.

“Harry!” she cried. “What has happened to the world?” She was amazed to find herself sobbing, her nerves were so on edge. And she had dreamed of this dawn; now that it had come God had coated the world in darkness. “Why this darkness?” she cried.

“I don’t know,” he whispered. “I can’t understand it. I’ve never known such a thing.”

“Let’s go now, at once, for heaven’s sake!” she cried. “This place is accursed!”

“We can’t go yet. I couldn’t find my ship in this—this fog.”

“Fog? Do you think it’s fog?”

“What else can it be?” But there was no certainty, no reassurance in his voice. “I’ve never known such a thing,” he repeated, puzzled.

On all sides, darkness—darkness that gave no hint



of things hidden, that seemed an end in itself, as if they were enclosed in a velvet cylinder. But through the darkness, sounds were growing.

People were starting to shout from house to house, all asking the inevitable question—What, in God's name, had happened? They lit spare lamps and candles, eyes wide with terror, with unanswered questions, as they gazed blankly at a sky that was no longer infinite, miles above them, but had lowered its heavy, starless night to an inch before their faces.

"My God!" screamed Jenny suddenly. "What's on my cheek?"

Something delicate, feathery, was running on her cheek; like dry rain, it was; something smarted her lips, hurt her open eyes. The heavens were melting! She brushed the stuff away, but it fell again as swiftly as she brushed it off; gently it fell, in one continuous slow downpour. She put her shaking hand on Harry's face, and felt a scum of this strange, dust-like substance there too.

"What is it?" she cried.

No answer, but she felt the strong arms about her shoulders holding her tightly; she heard his breath coming in slow, long gasps like the breathing of a man tensed up for the leap of an enemy, of a man gathering together all his strength, physical and mental, in fearful waiting.

A negro nearby kept up a monotonous chant:

"We're all gonna die, gonna die,  
And go on high, to de sky,  
For de Day ob Judgment's nigh. . . ."

Others took it up, and the soft, crooning negro voices swelled up to God, without fear, with a stately fatalism.

"Is it the last day?" murmured Jenny fearfully.

"Nonsense," snapped Harry. "Last day indeed! It'll clear up any minute."

But it did not clear up. It remained the same impenetrable blackness that was darker than any night could be—and this was morning! a Tropic morning!

“ De Lahd am coming ! ” shouted a negro suddenly. “ On yo’ knees, all ob yo’, and pray to de Lahd, yo’ sinners, on yo’ knees and meet de Lahd wid weeping and wid wailing a’ de gnashing ob teeth. Dis island are bustin’ wid a passel ob wickednesses. On yo’ knees, all ob yo’, all ob yo’, coloured man, white man, all ob yo’ . . . ”

The voice came eerily through the blackness like the voice of a prophet. The fact that it was a negro’s voice gave to it, somehow, a deeper feeling of horror.

Jenny clutched at her lover, twisting in a spasm of fear.

“ I can’t bear it ! ” she screamed suddenly. “ It’s God’s judgment, Harry, on this very morning it must happen ! It’s more than accident ! I can’t go with you now ! ”

“ You fool ! ” He gripped her firmly. “ It’s nothing, I tell you ! It’ll pass ; it’s some mere natural phenomenon. ”

“ It won’t pass ! ”

All the strain of the last few weeks, the courage it had taken for her to desert her home, the constant fear of detection, and the feeling of shame at the thought that she, a married woman, was flying from her husband with another man—all these things that had lived under the calm of her consciousness now burst forth into unreasoning terror, a terror that took as its form the vague phantoms of a childhood’s god, an omnipotent and infinitely revengeful being.

“ It’s sent on us for our sins, ” she sobbed. “ It is the end. How can I face the Lord with this sin on my hands ? I should pray to thank Him that it went no further, that I’ve time yet to repent before the whole world passes. ”

“ You mustn’t, Jenny . . . ”

“ Let go ! ”

She squirmed out of his grasp. She was breathing heavily, the perspiration mixing with the strange substance on her face and itching there.

“Don’t touch me!” she cried.

As he stretched out an arm to hold her back, she swung so suddenly aside that she almost fell, but righted herself in a moment and, stumbling a few steps, lurched off sobbing into the darkness.

Harry took a few steps after her, then stopped; he dared not leave his men lest he might not find them again until the sun rose. He stood and gazed up at the cloudless, the starless sky, that seemed an inch before his face, and he felt a gentle touch as of half-ghostly fingers flecking on his skin stealthily; and suddenly there was fear in his heart. He was well-nigh glad now that the woman was gone, love her though he did more than aught else in the world; soundlessly, he whispered a prayer; his manliness, as yet, forbade him to utter it aloud.

Through the darkness Jenny blundered towards home. There was no difficulty in getting there, no risk of her losing her way. It was a straight path. But she did not keep to the path; she blundered into fences and against trees, tearing her skirt on thorns. People stumbled blindly against her; a drunkard caught her around the waist.

Somehow she struggled from him, knocking into other unseen people. A man with a torch rushed towards her. He was stark naked, and his long red beard seemed like a splash of blood in the dim light; his nakedness was scummed with a grey dust as if he were an Indian painted for the warpath. He screamed in a reedy voice for the people to follow him to God.

The town had gone mad in the blackness. Some negroes crawled to the graveyard to stay with their dead kindred and to rise with them when the Last Trump roared the sky asunder. There was a terrific bonfire in a clearing, and around it drunkards lay and drank in atheistical defiance of God, a defiance that was half-terror, drinking at God; and, worse . . . men and women, white and black, rolled around the

fire, mad with the ecstasy of fear. They had raided a nearby public-house, and had smashed open a large cask of rum, feeding the flames as well as their bodies with the spirit.

Like devils they seemed to Jenny as she staggered by. The church was lit up with a gentle radiance, and she heard from within the organ playing a hymn of supplication while the voices of devout men and women were raised in exultant song.

But she did not stop. Past shops and houses she went, until at last she reached her own front gate. She did not know how she recognised it. Instinctively she went to it, wrenched it open.

No light shone from the house. She flung open the front door and rushed through the passage into the sitting-room; there she tripped and fell to the floor: something was clutching at her feet.

"My God! my God! my God! who's there?" wailed a man's voice from beside her on the floor.

She lay back, gasping.

"It's me, Tom: it's me—Jenny," she moaned. "Where's the lamp?"

"The lamp? What lamp? What do you want a lamp for? Soon we'll be blind with light. O, God, take pity on me, pity on me! I didn't know. . . . O Christ! . . ."

He was sobbing, still half-crazed from last night's drink. It shocked her to hear him cry like that. It sounded like a sick animal, not a man.

"Don't, Tom," she whispered, stretching out her hand in the darkness until it reached his and her fingers closed about his wrist.

"Tom," she whispered, and a feeling of religious exultation arose within her. She felt afire with holy dread and excitement. "Tom, I've got something to tell you."

He was silent a moment, then he burst out:

"What haven't I to tell you! I'm a swine! I've treated you rottenly, filthily. I should be shot. Ah,

God, let me confess, I can't face You with this vileness in my heart. Just time's all I want, time to tell. A minute, God! Jenny, Jenny, listen!"

With sudden desperation, sobbing, he dragged himself along the floor towards her, gripping her hand.

"Jenny," he cried eagerly, breathlessly, "I've drunk and I've blasphemed in God's sight. I've been the rottenest husband to you."

He came closer, like one maimed, dragging his limbs after him, moaning until he rested his face, oily with sweat, against her breasts.

"A rotten husband, unfaithful . . . your best friend too, Mary Coward . . ."

"Mary Coward!"

This was new. She had never suspected that!

"Yes. O God, Jenny, tell me you forgive me. If only I could start again! I daren't face God like this!"

He whimpered and pressed his hot wet face tighter against her corsage. Gently she raised her hand and stroked his unshaven cheek. She felt enormously magnanimous and, Oh! so good!

"We are in God's sight now, Tom," she whispered, "and I, too, have not been guiltless . . ."

"But . . ."

"To-night I was planning to run away—I mean this morning, at the dawn that God withheld. With your best friend, with Harry Grace."

She spoke quietly, and thanked God in her heart that she had been rescued in time from sin.

Tom recoiled suddenly as if her body had scalded him. She felt his hand shaking in hers. Through the darkness he leaned forward and tried to see her, but she was like an ebon statue against a black velvet pall.

"You?" he muttered, scarcely believing her. "You, my Jenny?"

"Yes, Tom; this morning; we had planned everything; I was going to run off with him in the *Shamrock* for England."

“ My God! ”

She waited a moment, then as he did not speak, she murmured, coaxingly:

“ Say that you forgive me. Please, Tom.”

Still, he did not speak, and she groped for his face with her free hand and pleadingly whispered to him:

“ Forgive me. I cannot bear it if you don't forgive me! I can't face God with this sin tugging at my heart. Together, both of us sinners, let us face Him! ”

“ I—I cannot cast a stone,” he moaned, and his head came forward to rest again on her body.

“ We are a wretched family! ” he cried. “ Ah, God, what sinners we are! ”

“ If we had only another chance . . . ”

“ I swear I'd never drink again, not a drop, and I'd be as true as true to you, Jenny! ”

“ And I to you . . . always! ”

She felt his fingers at her throat, then his wet mouth on hers in that unearthly darkness that was not the darkness of night nor of fog; while outside the people ran and shouted crazily at each other, men and women screaming prayers and blasphemies.

In that quietness they lay together, waiting with aching hearts yet placid minds for the Last Trump that would summon them to God's great Judgment Throne. Somehow, now that they had confessed to each other, they felt glorified, as if already God's hand had touched them in forgiveness.

They waited, waited, while outside the noises grew fiercer: tins were being clashed together, voices rose wailing in song and inarticulate cries.

. . . The voices stilled . . . There was a strange hush over everything . . .

Jenny moved, raised herself on one elbow, and listened. What had quietened them? Was there some vision in the sky? Had God folded back a little of His heaven and given them a sign?

Then suddenly a woman cried hysterically:

“The dawn! I tell you—it’s the dawn!”

Jenny felt Tom’s hand stiffen in hers. He whispered:

“Did you hear that, Jenny? It’s coming now . . . One last kiss, quickly!”

They kissed; then sighing, in fearful expectation, he laid his head, childlike, upon her breast, and waited.

The singing had stopped outside, they too waited in the darkness, in silence.

The suspense was unbearable, it made Jenny feel ill; she shut her eyes, opened them again; nothing had happened.

“I can’t bear it,” she said suddenly, and staggered to her feet.

“Where are you going?”

She felt his hand gripping her ankle.

“Don’t leave me,” he moaned. “Let’s stay together to the last.”

“I’m going out,” she said, “to see.”

“I’ll go with you.”

He dragged himself up and, still clinging to her hand, followed her out through the door, into the hall, and down the steps to the garden; there they stood, amazed. Before them, in the east, there was a milky radiance in the sky, dawn shouldering its way through dark mists. This was no last summons; it was the everyday sun itself battling with earthly darkness; and in the thin light they could see a soft fall of delicate dust coming down upon them. The ground was thick to above their ankles. Jenny’s face was plastered as if she had rolled in mud.

Wonderingly, they gazed at each other, and hand in hand, strolled to the gate.

People in the street were all looking upwards, watching the dawn, their faces tense with a mixture of fear and hope. Black and white men and women were there, their faces and clothes were heavy with a greyish film. Slowly they grew out of the gloom,

every second becoming more and more distinct, as if they were being moulded by invisible fingers.

"What—what's happened?" asked Jenny to a man nearby.

By great good fortune the man she asked was Captain Grinsby, an amateur scientist and about the only man present who could have told her. He turned with a contemptuous leer.

"What the devil do you think?" he snapped, bad-tempered at seeing these religious converts who, a few minutes since, had howled him down as a heretic. "I've been trying to tell these fools all morning. A volcano probably, perhaps at Trinidad. Didn't you hear it rumbling away all last night? This dust is some of the ashes, blown heaven knows how many miles on this wind and blocking out the sun. A pack of fools, they'd make a man mad."

Jenny could not tell if it was relief or disappointment that gushed from her heart and brought hot tears into her eyes. She dared not look at Tom. She leaned on the gate, breathing heavily.

"A volcano?" she muttered.

"Yes, volcanic dust. What did you think it was?"

She felt Tom stir beside her; he turned and started to make his way back to the house.

As she stood undecided what to do next, a violent trembling affected the earth at her feet. She turned to look at Tom. He was slouching up the path, then suddenly, incredibly, he was not there. Where he had walked was a gash in the earth. In the thunder of the falling house, Jenny did not hear him scream. Her own shriek was enough to dull all other sounds in her ears, for beyond the shuddering trees, the crashing houses, the ocean moved, seeming to lift as if a giant was stirring in his bed. The ocean raised a great arm, fingered with foam; raised the arm, then brought it down, and the masts of the shipping cracked, the shrouds like a huge cobweb floating on the water.





*“ He screamed in a reedy voice for the people to follow him to God.”  
(See page 115.)*



That was the last thing that Jenny saw. The earth widened as if to gulp her in, and she felt it crumble, slide under her feet.

Before her, darkness and immeasurable emptiness; in her ears, the echo of her own scream! The choice was taken from her. The ocean must have captured Harry, but the earth had opened for her, had taken her into its heart, down to where the smashed body of Tom waited.

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*John Lindsey*

## BLACKMAIL

### I

CAREW stood behind the curtain, watching Hall as he turned the corner. The house was quite still. Hall had been the last of the servants to leave, protestingly, because he wished to stay and see his master on to the train. Carew had laughed at him.

"If you do," he had said, "you'll lose your own connection. I can manage all right. It isn't as though I want dinner."

Hall had smiled. And Carew, watching him, had thought how lucky he was, how others would envy him the possession of so good a servant.

Now Carew walked across to the cabinet by the fireplace, taking out glasses and a decanter. He mixed himself a stiff whisky. As he lifted the glass, he noticed that his hands trembled slightly. He was angry with himself. Half aloud he said:

"You musn't do that. You've got to keep calm, or you'll bungle the whole thing."

Drinking the whisky, he sat down. Suddenly he felt immensely elated. In two hours, an hour perhaps, he would be quite free. He would have finished with Jagger for ever, never seeing him again, knowing

that nothing could ever bring him back to life. It had been, he reflected, comparatively easy after Jagger had consented to come to the house. At first he had been suspicious. Carew remembered how, on the first visit of all, he had walked round the room, examining the doors and the windows, peeping behind the furniture, desperately afraid lest someone might be hidden. At length he had finished. Turning to Carew, he had laughed:

“Always as well to make sure. And now, as they say in the Law, how about my Refresher?”

After that he had come every month. He had lost his hesitation. Hall had got to know him, smiling at him when he let him in, regarding him as an old friend, until even Jagger—that most suspicious of people—had begun to forget to look round the room and sometimes, when the business was done, had stayed to talk and have a drink.

Carew picked up his whisky now and took another sip.

He looked at the clock. The minutes were passing very slowly. Lighting a cigarette, he began to go over his plan, wondering in what points it could conceivably fail. But there were none! The plan seemed perfect. It was flawless. When it was executed, he would be free for the first time for six years. He would be free as were the people he met in the street. The morning's mail would hold no more terrors for him. Every time the telephone rang he would not start to his feet, half dreading to answer it, and at the same time afraid that someone else might.

In the beginning, he remembered he had offered to buy the letters. He had suggested an enormous sum. But Jagger had only laughed at him:

“Don't be a fool. Do you think I don't know the value of these things? Do you think I don't know my own weakness? If I had a lump sum I'd spend it at once and be no better off. No, no. You'll keep paying. I prefer my monthly Refresher.”

"But . . ." Carew had protested.

Jagger had stopped him. "Not another word," he said. "You've got your remedy. You can go to Law. But I'm not open to argument."

And then, Carew remembered again, he had got up from his seat in the park and had walked away. He had not waited for Carew to speak again. He had not bothered. He had been so sure of his own power. So for six years, he, Carew, had paid him. For six years he had been afraid of what Jagger might do, of whom he might tell.

He moved in his chair. Outside it was growing dark. There were lights in the window of the house opposite. Carew, looking up, was able to see into the room. For a moment he watched a nursemaid as she hurried about her business. Then he rose and, switching on only one small standard lamp, drew the curtains. Immediately the room became still and private. He did not want much light for the evening's work. He stood listening, afraid that there might be a sound. But the house was perfectly still.

He smiled. Moving across to his desk, he opened it and unlocked the top drawer.

For a moment he paused, still nervous, as though he were waiting for something. Then from the back of the drawer he took the small bottle. He carried it over to the side-table and, removing his own glass, he allowed one drop of the liquid to fall into the other. It was quite colourless. It lay like a tiny drop of water in the bottom of the glass. Carew carried the bottle back to the desk and replaced it in the drawer.

Chuckling, he remembered that in six hours the poison would have completely disappeared. There would be no trace left in the body. When Jagger was found, far away in the country, on the Common to which Carew would take him, there would be nothing to show, nothing to make people believe that his death had been other than an accident or exhaustion.

He chuckled again. The car was in the yard. The trunk which Hall had packed so carefully could soon be emptied and the body of Jagger placed inside. Everything was perfect! he would at last, after so long, be absolutely free. For the first time for all these years there would be no blackmail in his life, nothing to remind him of that ghastly mistake, nothing to take half his income away from him.

He went out into his bedroom and began unpacking the trunk.

## 2

When the bell rang, Carew went to the door. He stood listening to the sound of a taxi as it went away. He felt his heart beating with wild excitement. He turned the latch.

"Come in," he said, holding the door open.

Jagger stepped past him into the hall. The other man waited for a moment on the steps, staring at the houses opposite. They were so orderly, so solid in their appearance. He wondered vaguely what was happening behind those closed doors.

Then he came into the house. He shut the door quickly, and turned to face Jagger. The visitor was leaning forward, examining the writing on an envelope which lay on the hall table. Carew felt a great wave of hate pass through him. He wanted to rush forward and seize Jagger, seize him by the throat and press and press. He stepped forward. His fingers worked along the seams of his trousers. He felt himself shaking. His mouth was parched. Jagger looked up.

"Punctual as usual?" he asked, laughing in Carew's face.

Carew nodded. He could not speak. He did not dare trust himself to open his mouth. At last he said, "Shall we go into my study?"

Jagger did not move at once. He turned back to

the table and looked again at the writing on the envelope.

“A woman, eh?” He sniggered.

Carew did not answer him. He saw Jagger’s hand go forward.

“I wonder,” Jagger said, “if I should know the lady? She might be useful. I might know things she would like to know.”

He looked up into Carew’s face. He laughed quietly, his eyes mocking the other man. Suddenly he noticed Carew’s clenched fists.

Jagger stepped back. He was afraid he had gone too far.

“All right,” he muttered, “I was only joking.”

He came away from the table, still watching Carew, half afraid that the other man might attack him. He smiled, slightly, as he thought of it. Carew would not hurt him. He was a coward. He had been afraid to fight over the letters. He, Jagger, had nothing to fear from him.

He turned. “The study?” he asked.

Carew nodded. He was smiling now, master of himself. He led the way. In the study, Jagger walked across to the fireplace and held his hands out to the blaze. Abruptly, as Carew watched his visitor, he felt a great scorn for himself. He should have done all this long ago, freeing himself.

Carew sat down at his desk. His whisky was beside him. The glass was still three parts full. When Jagger looked up, Carew had the glass in his hand, and was sipping the whisky. He moved his tongue across his lips, enjoying the taste of the stuff.

Jagger sat down in an armchair.

“Well?” he asked, facing Carew.

His voice was harsh and threatening. He hated the other man and he despised him. He had the great contempt for him that all blackmailers have for their victims.

“You’ve got the necessary?” he asked.

"Yes," Carew said, "I've got it."

He gulped a little more whisky, still watching Jagger, still hoping that the other would notice that he had not been offered a drink.

Jagger said, "Well, let's have it."

Carew leaned forward over the desk and unlocked the drawer. He took out a pile of notes. They were ordinary one-pound notes. He laid the bundle on the table near Jagger.

The other man picked up the notes. He did not trouble to count them, but put them in his pocket. "I'll have to have more next time," he said. "I need more. I'm worth more to you."

Carew did not look at him. He felt himself shaking with interior excitement. "How much?" he asked. His voice sounded strange, not like his own at all. He wondered if Jagger would notice it.

Jagger seemed to be thinking. He did not name a figure at once. He said instead, "You're very comfortable here." Looking round enviously at the dimly lit room, he added, "You don't give me much of a welcome, either."

"What do you mean?" Carew asked.

Jagger grinned. "You don't exactly regard me as a lost brother, do you?" he said. He stretched out his feet towards the fire, sinking more deeply into his chair. His eyes wandered in the direction of the whisky bottle. He smiled at Carew.

Carew got up. The room seemed to float before him. He felt as though he were breathing something other than air. "A drink?" he asked.

Jagger grunted. Now that he had the money in his pocket, his contempt for Carew was greater than ever. The fellow was a coward, only fit to work for a man like himself, a man with brains.

"I think a drink would do nicely," he said. Then he took a cigarette from the box at his side. He struck a match and lit it.

Carew walked over to the table where the drinks



stood. He picked up Jagger's glass. A tiny spot of liquid lay at the bottom of the glass. To Carew, it seemed immense, taking up all the room, filling it until it was impossible for Jagger not to notice it! How grateful he was for the dim light! Carew's hand shook a little. Beside him he saw the curtain move slightly. He felt a sudden terror. What if someone saw? But that could not be possible. The servants were out. There was no one in the house. He poured some whisky into the glass, and carried it over to Jagger.

Then, he fetched the syphon. "Say when," he said.

After Carew had replaced the syphon on the table, he sat down again by the desk. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply, finding immense comfort in it.

Jagger sat still, watching the bubbles as they rose in his glass. The wind stirred the curtains again. For a moment Carew's heart stood still. Jagger looked across at Carew.

"To the goose that lays the golden eggs," he said. He put the glass to his lips and drank.

## 3

As soon as the body of Jagger was quite still in the chair, Carew stood up. He did not look at the body as he set about his work. Now that Jagger was dead, he wanted to forget him, to lose all knowledge of his features, as though the man had never entered his life. He took the glass which had held Jagger's drink and carried it into the bathroom. Holding it under the tap, he washed it thoroughly. Then he dried it and returned to his study and placed it on the shelf. There must be no evidence that he had had a guest. Everything must be cleared away. He worked quickly and methodically. The clock on the mantel-piece ticked on. From his bedroom Carew fetched the clothes in which he would dress Jagger. Slowly, with immense

care, he changed the other suit, removing it from the body and dressing Jagger in the suit he had bought for him. When he had finished, he took his guest's clothes downstairs to the kitchen and put them on the fire.

The cloth gave off a keen smell as it burnt. Carew wondered, "What if Hall smells something when he returns?" Perhaps he should open the window? He hesitated. After all, the danger was not so great. Hall would not be back for a week. The smell would have gone long before then. There would be no evidence to connect the discovery of the body of an unknown man on a Surrey Common with his (Carew's) visit to Torquay. He had carried the whole thing out splendidly. Now he had only to put the body in the trunk and lift it into his car. After all, there would be no danger. Everything would be so simple as to be fool-proof.

He went into his bedroom. The clock in the hall struck eight. Carew started. He was getting nervous: he was letting little things like that upset him. He hurried back into his study. Jagger still lay in the chair. Carew felt a ghastly repulsion. He *could* not touch the dead man again. He did not want to touch him. He shook himself. Almost physically he thrust the thought from him. Then he went over to the table and mixed himself another drink. He sat down in his chair. Behind him the curtains moved, as though the wind continued to stir them.

Carew drank his whisky. He put down the glass. Then, quickly, not looking at the dead face, he stooped and picked up the body and carried it into his bedroom. The trunk was already open. Carew doubled up the body inside and locked the lid.

## 4

The clock in a nearby church steeple struck ten as Carew drove into his garage. He stopped the car and got out. Everything had worked for his success. The car had run smoothly. The Common, where

he had chosen to leave the body, had been quite deserted. No one had seen him leave and no one had seen him return. And, if they had, what business was it of their's that he had chosen to make a slight alteration in his holiday plans?

He had no feeling of guilt that Jagger was dead, only a vast liberation of spirit, a great gladness that, at last, it was all over. He was free now. No one but Jagger had known of his mistake. The letters which Jagger had possessed would be worthless to anyone else. They were only dangerous if they were used as corroboration to a certain story.

Carew lifted the trunk off the grid and carried it through the backyard into the kitchen. Presently he would pack it again as Hall had packed it. There would be no clue.

He sniffed the air. Already the smell of the burnt clothes had gone.

But he needed another drink before he repacked the trunk and restarted on his journey. He pushed open the door of his study and went inside. He sat down in his chair. Without warning, he suddenly felt nervous. It was so easy to take a false step, to do the one thing that would show people he had failed.

His depression did not last. He had done the deed. He had done it perfectly. There was no need to worry. He stretched out his hand and poured whisky into a glass.

Behind him the door slowly opened.

Carew did not see the opening door. He did not see Hall, the butler, as he stood, watching him.

He lifted his glass.

Hall came into the room. For a moment he stood quite still, eyeing his master.

Then he raised his hand and coughed. And suddenly the glass dropped from Carew's hand. It fell on to the floor. With his face ashen white, Carew turned and saw Hall. He did not speak. He could not speak. He seemed quite paralysed.

"I missed my train, sir, because I was foolish enough to leave my ticket at home. I thought it would be wiser to spend the night in town, sir. The later train is deplorably slow."

Carew's temples throbbed. Perhaps all was not lost. Perhaps Hall knew nothing. Maybe, after he had missed his train he had spent some time at a public-house, and only returned when the smell of burning clothes had vanished from the air. But how was he, Carew, to explain his presence? Or the empty trunk? But, however lame his excuses might be, surely Hall would not be able to deduce the truth?

As Carew's brain wildly searched for something to say, Hall moved forward. His feet in the carpet made no noise. And Carew, paralysed, motionless, watched him as, with ghastly precision, he walked over to the desk.

"When I returned, sir," Hall continued, tonelessly, "I naturally thought that you had departed, sir. I was relieved to see that you had left the study window open. You see, sir, the blinds were pulled and you had very little light in the room. I stepped over the sill . . ."

Hall paused. He opened the drawer in the desk where the little bottle lay. He held it up to the dim light. Some of the liquid remained. There were beads of sweat on Carew's brow.

Hall slipped the little bottle into his pocket. His face was still suave, that of the perfect servant. He said: "This will be very useful. Is there anything more you will be wanting to-night, sir? To-morrow I would be grateful if you could spare me a few minutes' private conversation. There are one or two things I wish to purchase, sir. And I would like to consult you about them."

With a terrible calm Hall left the room. Carew lay writhing in his chair. So it was to go on? Jagger was dead, but Hall had stepped into the dead man's shoes. And this time the secret was far grimmer and the torturer for ever at his elbow!

A M O D E R N D E L I L A H

STRANGERS always believed Louise and Marcelle Rameau were mother and daughter. It seemed incredible that two such passionate faces could be found side by side, under one roof, in one village—aye, even in one world—unless they were blood-relations. Each woman was the epitome of female exuberance. Could there be any way of accounting for her duplication, therefore, except by hereditary influence?

Both had the same disquieting intensity. Both could be irresistibly charming and ferocious in turn. And both displayed that air of deep concern about their own affairs which chilled the superficial observer, and caused their friends to moralise about the need of altruism in the modern world.

Louise Rameau was really Marcelle's mother-in-law.

This relationship, which is difficult to a proverb, was more acutely vexatious with them, because, in addition to the fierce heat of their passions, circumstances compelled them to live under the same roof. But there were compensations. Each knew herself to be a superior woman. Each looked down upon the rest of womankind with contempt and pity; and each knew where she must look if she wished for a woman worthy of her steel. Year in, year out, this constituted one of the deepest bonds between them. Their common object of worship—Louise's son, Marcelle's husband—involved them more often than either dared to acknowledge in mutual hate, in longings for mutual annihilation; but here too the source of bitterness was also the best check to its expression; for was not Fernand's peace of mind, Fernand's happiness, the supreme object of both their lives?

Louise had reared Fernand at the breast. In this respect she was the true peasant woman of France. His bones were her bones, his skin was her skin. If he cut a finger, it was her blood that flowed, if he

wept it was her heart that ached. Marcelle, on the other hand, had won Fernand in open battle, amid scores of other aspirants, and had borne him a son.

"They are not all bad people that look like that," said the village priest to Mlle. Gavé, when the two were discussing the peculiarly piercing eyes of the Rameau women, soon after the family had come to the village from the south.

"No, Father, I don't say they are," Mlle. Gavé replied, still only half convinced that such dark liquid eyes and such piercing looks could ever be good. "I was only asking your opinion."

Mlle. Gavé was one of the magnates of the village of Douville-la-Rivière. Her father had been a coal merchant of Dieppe and had left her a comfortable fortune, which, while it enabled her to live in luxury, also provided a sufficient surplus for the performance of many "good works".

The Rameaus had only recently come from the region of Marseilles. Fernand, an able mechanic, having found remunerative work at a local automobile factory, it had been worth their while to abandon their old home on the Mediterranean. But the straw-coloured hair of the surrounding population, the cider-pots, and the marking of the cows still seemed distressingly unfamiliar—as unfamiliar as the Rameaus' southern accent, swarthy skin, and keen black eyes seemed to the cautious, reticent peasants of Douville.

"They will eat each other's noses off one of these days," observed Madame Varin, the Rameaus' right-hand neighbour to her other neighbour, Madame Ledoux. "I can hear them quarrelling when he is gone. They never stop."

Madame Ledoux laughed and revealed the bad, discoloured teeth of the habitual cider-drinker.

Father Depresle, a more than usually human and intelligent rustic divine, had found it an exceptionally oporose task to defend the new additions to his flock

against its older members. Their exotic looks would have passed, for who had not met a meridional in his life? But it was their peculiar intensity, their unmistakable fire, against which the fingers of his Norman parishioners burned.

A confessor, moreover, may be scrupulously faithful to the seal of the confessional, and yet be unable to stifle secret misgivings when he recalls certain things. Such misgivings would infest Father Depresle's mind when he passed the Rameaus' cottage; for, although he may not have dreaded any particular act, the whole tenour of their spirits, as revealed in their confessions, made him vaguely apprehensive. Deep human passions pointing now to love almost super-human, and anon to loathing that could cool itself only in blood—this was ground that the sober Norman priest trod with the infirm footing of a child.

"Le gars,"—that is how Marcelle and Louise referred to Fernand. They never mentioned him by name.

On a certain Friday, late in July 1914, Marcelle Rameau poured out a long confession to the curé, in which she admitted having quarrelled bitterly with her mother-in-law about "le gars", having secretly wished to kill the woman, and having even thought of means whereby to achieve this nefarious end.

A little later, on the same day, Louise Rameau confessed that she had gone to the outhouse the day before, after a quarrel with Marcelle about "le gars", with the object of finding the mallet with which to kill her daughter-in-law, but that on the way back she had relented.

It is not difficult to see that with two such members in his flock, Father Depresle was entitled to question whether he was any longer truly a shepherd. It seemed to him that, through no fault of his own, he had become a bear leader.

Throughout the Saturday and Sunday following these confessions Marcelle was aghast at the length

of her mother-in-law's prayers, while Louise was equally confounded by the length of Marcelle's. In a small cottage it is difficult to conceal penitential orisons, and as each woman knew the reason of her own "Aves", it was with trepidation that both speculated upon what they overheard.

On the Monday, however, their speculations on this head were brought to a sudden and tragic end when there spread through the village what was to the two women the blackest, most blood-curdling news that could possibly be heard: Germany had declared war upon France; France was already mobilising.

"Well, what?" Marcelle demanded hoarsely, her lips a little pale, and her fingers playing nervously with her child's locks. "Le gars will not have to go."

Louise Rameau drew back the curtain and gazed out into the village street, where children with coloured favours were parading and singing, and where adults were rushing to and fro with pointless feverish haste. She too was very pale, but endeavoured to master her emotion.

"I wonder whether he will be late to-day," she said, and then added, with more hope than conviction, "No, he won't have to go."

Madame Varin came in. She was excited, hilarious. "All the men are going," she cried. "They will want some beating, those Germans! Isn't it terrible? Mlle. Gavé is serving wine and brioches in her garden to the boys who are presenting themselves."

Suddenly a loud cheer drew all the women to the window. It was Monsieur le Curé going from the Presbytery to the Square to bless the first batch of *mobilisés*.

"Good-bye; I must go!" exclaimed Madame Varin, and she joined the throng outside.

"Fools!" cried Marcelle as she watched the crowds. "Soon they will be shouting on another note!"



At last "le gars" returned.

The two women were speechless with fear. One bent down as if to adjust her child's dress, the other reached frantically for a tin on the lofty kitchen mantel-piece. Both wished to delay enlightenment.

"Well?" Fernand exclaimed, "what do you think of it?"

"But, you miserable creature," Marcelle cried, horrified that he should have had the cynicism to postpone his news to a second breath, "do you go too?"

"*Mais non!*" he replied. "My class is not yet called up. And M. Labourdette says that when it is called up he will have to make representations to the authorities, as he cannot spare me, and his is a key industry."

Both women fell on his neck and sobbed with joy.

"Ah, it is too good, too good!" they exclaimed in unison, while the child, looking on at this exhibition of adult tears and laughter, made curious composite grimaces sufficiently non-committal to allow him to adopt any mood his seniors settled upon.

Madame Varin was not so completely vicious as to feel disappointment at the good fortune of the Rameaus, but that the news was, to her, a setback, she could not deny. Ever since the Rameaus had become her neighbours, the women's concentration upon Fernand to the exclusion of all other interests had exasperated her. They seemed to be too happy in their obsession, too richly endowed in love. Madame Ledoux, on the other hand, who heard nothing of the quarrels between Louise and Marcelle, and saw only their bliss at a distance, as it manifested itself to a neighbour once-removed, regarded the immunity of Fernand Rameau as a national scandal.

"What is the good of that great bear," she would ask Madame Varin, "if he cannot defend his Patrie?"

Mlle. Gavé, who had not the faintest idea of Fernand's real age, and who took him to be much

younger than he really was, agreed entirely with Madame Ledoux; while the old curé, unwilling to embroil himself with his most influential parishioners—the wealthy spinster, and M. Labourdette, Fernand's rich employer—maintained a neutral attitude, which he expressed by shrugging his shoulders and saying:

“What do you want? Surely the State must know what it is about! When it needs Rameau it will take him.”

Meanwhile the peril that had suddenly entered the lives of Louise and Marcelle strangely modified their relationship. As Madame Varin exclaimed to Madame Ledoux, “They no longer crimp each other's mops now.”

Truth to tell, they felt themselves suddenly united by a bond that their previous life could never have forged. They were fighting side by side against the whole village for what they held most precious, for the meaning of their joint existence. Ever more impudently week by week, hour by hour, the finger of envy and scorn, reproach and malice, was pointed at their cottage, in at their window,—aye, even at their man. The old men, the neighbours, the women who had lost their husbands, everyone had become their common enemy.

“They are monsters!” hissed Marcelle.

“They call their envy patriotism, and their cruelty their sense of justice,” observed the elder woman.

“Sacrifice!” cried Marcelle, “how can she, that withered apple, that extinct volcano—the Gavé—dare to speak of young healthy men immolating themselves for *her*? Why, to kill even a toad in order to prolong her existence for one minute would be an outrage against humanity!”

“Don't upset yourself, Marcelle,” her elder exclaimed, choking with rage herself. “They will not get him. M. Labourdette will see to that.”

Meanwhile the war went on and on. More and

more men were called for, more and more boys dropped their ploughs, their lathes, and their spanners, and joined the *poilus*.

"I think," remarked Mlle. Gavé to Father Depresle one autumn day in 1915, "you ought really to get your spiritual influence to bear both on Rameau and his chief. It is a disgrace that he should be skulking in those automobile works while others are making the supreme sacrifice."

"What do you want?" exclaimed the unfortunate curé. "The State surely knows what it is about! It will get him when it needs him."

Meanwhile rumours spread through the village that the Rameau women were practising special devotions in order to preserve their man. As a counterblast to this, all the woman responsible for this rumour repeated special prayers in which, though Rameau's name was not actually mentioned, it was made sufficiently plain to the meanest intelligence who precisely was meant. The Almighty was implored to arrange that all *ambusqués* in the village, even those who were doing useful engineering work, might go to defend their Patrie at the front.

Children began to tax the Rameau child with having an *ambusqué* for a father. This was too much.

"Tell me who said that! What was his name?" cried Marcelle.

So many had said it that the poor child was non-plussed. Very soon after this fruitless inquiry a neighbour's child received a sounding smack from Marcelle, just outside the Rameau's gate, and went away howling.

"They *want* him to stay at home," protested Mlle. Gavé to Father Depresle in July 1916, just before the great Somme offensive. "They show no sign of wishing him to go to the front!"

"But I ask you," exclaimed the harassed curé, "is that not quite natural? Since when have women liked to see their husbands and sons sacrificed?"

Mlle. Gavé, in whom, owing to the unattached existence she led, the flame of patriotism burned more furiously than in most people, looked at the curé with a shade of rancour.

“ You defend them ! ” she cried.

“ No, I explain them,” replied the cautious priest.

Occasionally, over their evening meal, Fernand would hint darkly that he was meditating giving notice at the factory, M. Labourdette or no M. Labourdette. The last time he ventured to do this he created a distressing scene.

“ What ? ” exclaimed his mother, “ you ungrateful creature ! this is how you propose to reward your master after he has been unscrewing his arms to retain you ! ”

“ My class has been called up long ago,” Fernand protested feebly.

“ Oh, be quiet ! ” cried Marcelle, rising from the table and putting a hand on her chest. “ Can’t you see that you stop my swallowing when you speak like that ? ”

“ It’s all very well,” Fernand growled. “ I don’t care what people say. I pay no heed to the voices in the village. But if a man hears in himself a voice—what then ? ”

Marcelle walked into the kitchen and slammed the door.

“ You see, you only upset her,” said his mother, also on the verge of tears herself. “ What is the good of it ? ”

A moment later Marcelle’s head appeared round the corner of the kitchen door.

“ Are you going to be quiet about that ? ” she asked, looking at her husband through eyes slightly bedimmed.

“ Well, yes,” Fernand grunted reluctantly. “ Come and sit down and finish your dinner.”

The Somme battles had long ago come to an end. The Allied losses had been severe. Fernand asked for a private interview with M. Labourdette.

"Well, my friend, what is it?" inquired the chief, glancing up from his newspaper in the kindly, familiar way of French employers with their head workmen.

"Would monsieur understand," Fernand began, "if I asked monsieur to release me for the army?"

M. Labourdette dropped his paper, buried his face in his hands and thought for a moment.

"And what about the cars for Syria, the engines for Russia, my dear sir?" he asked in that grumbling, half-hearted tone by which a man betrays that he has already conceded the point at issue. For M. Labourdette had had previous interviews of the same kind with Fernand, and each time the resistance of the chief had weakened.

Fernand shrugged his shoulders. "The others will have to do a little more work," he replied.

"When do you want to go?"

"To-day."

"To-day!" M. Labourdette repeated in alarm.

"To-night?"

"No, now."

M. Labourdette rose from his chair and rang a bell. A boy entered.

"Tell Mariette," he said, "to bring me two glasses and a bottle of the Château Margaux."

That day was the blackest perhaps in all Marcelle's existence. Fernand did not come back to lunch. When she called at the works to discover what had happened, she was told the truth, and by five o'clock a telegram arrived from Dieppe.

"I have enlisted am going to camp near Rouen will get leave soon. Love. Fernand."

"But I tell you they do not feel it," sobbed Marcelle and Louise Rameau together, as Father Depresle, trying to console them that night, pointed to the bravery of the other women in the village. "You say they show fortitude, resignation. We say it is

indifference. Are all of them better, braver and stronger women than we are? ”

“ I can't say that,” rejoined the unhappy divine.

“ Well, then, if they are not all better and braver than we are, some of them at least must be indifferent; otherwise how could they be so calm, so temperate, so cheerful? ”

Father Depresle turned to go. He felt he had better not try further arguments.

“ Good-bye, my children,” he said. “ I am very, very sorry for you.”

“ St. Anthony to the wall! ” exclaimed the mother-in-law as soon as he had gone, turning the saint's face in disgrace to the wall as she spoke. “ That's the first thing! ”

“ St. Michael as well to the wall! ” added the daughter-in-law, copying Louise's treatment of St. Anthony. “ Ah, yes, he deserves it too! ”

“ The Virgin also to the wall! ” cried Louise, in an access of uncontrollable grief. “ Yes, even the Holy Virgin! ”

Marcelle suddenly stood stock still, her hand on the crucifix; then, dropping her arm, glanced guiltily at Louise.

“ Yes, yes,” assented the frantic woman. “ Him too! ” And she added, as she looked round her sitting-room with an air of great satisfaction, “ After all, they are only in disgrace.”

“ You must not be too clever,” urged Marcelle, as she walked across the fields with Fernand a month later. “ Can't you be a fool and show yourself incapable of learning? ”

He was in uniform. He had been allowed three days leave in the middle of his training.

“ The worst of it is I forget myself. Besides, they know I have done my service,” Fernand objected.

“ Surely they can't remember what you were like when you did your service! And certainly it would

be dangerous to send an absolute idiot into the firing line, because he might, by committing a howler, endanger the whole sector. If you behave like an absolute idiot they'll never dare to send you."

"It is difficult," Fernand protested.

"Oh, well, if you're so keen about being killed it can't be helped," Marcelle exclaimed angrily, her eyes flooding with tears.

A few days later, when Fernand had returned to camp, Madame Varin called to get a lungful of her neighbours' misery.

"Ah, well, it is war, it is war," she cried, hugging her elbows smugly.

"Unfortunately," said the elder Madame Rameau bitterly, not troubling to look up, "the sort of people our young men are dying for scarcely justify the sacrifice."

"It is not the people, it is the country they are dying for," Madame Varin snapped.

"And pray what good would the country be without the people?" cried Marcelle, turning to her neighbour as if she were going to bite her. "Do you suppose it is for the map of France our Fernand will fight? That is a stupid thing to say!"

Madame Varin retreated. Her underhand Norman strategy in war was for the moment defeated by these women's demoniacal frankness.

"Of course," observed Marcelle, two or three days before Fernand was to come home on his final leave, "it is his health that ought ultimately to prevent the authorities, if they are rational, from keeping him in the line."

Both women knew perfectly well in their heart of hearts that it was precisely Fernand's perfect, fragrant health that constituted his most fascinating charm; but this did not deter them from wagging their heads gravely over this alarming aspect of the question.

"Nobody knows better than I do," said Louise very solemnly, "how delicate he is. When he was a

child I had to be tremendously careful. A little draught and it was all over. He had a dangerous catarrh!"

"And the trenches are of course very cold," added Marcelle, with the air of one reluctantly finding objections to something otherwise eminently desirable.

At last the day came. Owing to an alteration in his orders, Fernand was allowed only twenty-four hours in which to bid good-bye to his mother, his wife and child. Both the women were wonderfully calm—unpleasantly so—as the hour of his arrival approached. All the saints, the Holy Virgin and the Crucifix were made to face round the proper way.

"After all," said Louise, "they may have the best intentions. There is yet time for them to redeem their character."

Fernand arrived. It was a dull day. He fancied that his welcome was a cold one. M. Labourdette, feeling that he could not deprive the women of one minute of Fernand's time, came to wish him good-bye at the cottage. Father Depresle also came, as did the neighbours and Mlle. Gavé. The latter brought a silver charm, a fountain pen, and a collapsible mug.

Fernand's health was drunk.

"When do you leave?" asked his chief, looking a little anxiously at the pale fierce faces of the Rameau women.

"To-morrow morning at seven," replied Fernand.

"Where from?"

"The station here at Douville."

"I shall be there," said Labourdette.

"So shall I," said Father Depresle.

Mlle. Gavé and the neighbours also promised to be there, and the party of visitors left the cottage.

"She cannot feel it as much as I do," said Louise to herself, as she observed her daughter-in-law's calm demeanour throughout the day. "After all, mothers, I suppose, must suffer more than wives at such times."

"I should have thought," was Marcelle's secret comment that evening, "that she, being his mother,



would have felt it even more than I do. How can she be so indifferent! But then wives have passion as well as love!"

They all went to bed. The day had been excruciatingly calm. Fernand slept as only tired soldiers sleep. The women did not sleep at all. The time went too quickly for that. The church clock seemed to be having fits, it chimed the hours so rapidly. At last, about five o'clock, half an hour before Fernand was to be called, Marcelle, unable to bear the suspense any longer, stole gently out of bed. It was all right. Fernand was sleeping like an ox, and she crept lightly downstairs to the kitchen. She could not bear it a minute longer. The thought of his going was driving her mad. Minute by minute she felt her craziness increasing. Something must be done. This man she adored, this flesh and blood, this precious skin that she worshipped, she must now injure. It was a maddening duty, a cruel ordeal to impose upon herself, but there was no other alternative. It could not be helped! She would know how to injure him. She would know where to strike. But could she trust a German bullet or bayonet to exercise the same prudent discrimination?

With feverish haste she searched the outhouse. The instrument she sought had been mislaid. She returned to the kitchen. Oh, it was terrible! But could she help it? Something must be done. She stole upstairs, a hammer in her hand. Would he still be asleep?

She reached the top of the stairs. She gently pushed open her bedroom door. At the same moment a deafening roar rent the air, and petrified with astonishment and horror, she beheld her mother-in-law upright beside Fernand's bed. Her hands clutched a mallet, which she brought down again and again with all her weight upon his legs.

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THE VICAR'S CRIME

I

"You wish to see me, sir?" said Ego.

"I do," said the Assistant Commissioner. "I am expecting a neighbour of yours and I thought it might be as well for you to be present—your local knowledge might be valuable."

"I see, sir. May I ask which particular neighbour it is?"

"There is no occasion for nervousness, Inspector. So far as I know, the gentleman is not coming to lay any complaint against you—mind you, I don't know yet. But I should think it is unlikely, though I know little of the life you lead in that suburb of yours. However, it is Sir Cudworth Bumperby, of The Towers, Hamperton, whom I expect. What his business is I have no notion. I understand that he rang up and asked for an appointment."

"Now, what has old Bumperby been up to?" asked Ego, of the ceiling. "I suppose you want to know all about him. Chairman of our Council, prospective Conservative candidate, takes an active part in the public life of the neighbourhood, is a leather merchant in the city. Lives in one of our few remaining mansions, The Towers, which is a delightfully situated and commodious residence standing in its own park-like grounds of some twenty acres and yet within six miles of Charing Cross, thus providing an ideal retreat for the business man, as the estate agents put it. He's a pompous old boy with no harm in him, I should say."

"You know of nothing in the way of rumours or gossip about him?"

"He wears the white flower of a blameless life in his buttonhole, if any man ever did, sir."

Before the Assistant Commissioner could make any comment there was a knock at the door and a young constable appeared.

"Sir Cudworth Bumperby to see you, sir."

A stout and florid gentleman, attired in morning coat, striped trousers and white spats, followed on the announcement, removing as he entered the room a glossy silk hat from his silver hair. The Assistant Commissioner rose and waved him to a chair.

"What can I do for you, Sir Cudworth?" he asked, with official geniality, a kind that was apt to damp the enthusiasm of troublesome visitors. The official eye had taken Sir Cudworth's measure and had communicated to the official brain that this old boy was probably one of the world's nuisances.

"I trust that I am not interrupting an important conference," said Sir Cudworth, as he sat down on the chair which Ego had held for him. "Why, it is my old friend Inspector Ego! This couldn't be better, sir," he continued, turning to the Assistant Commissioner. "It was in my mind to ask you whether it would be possible to put the Inspector on this case!"

"Indeed?" commented the Assistant Commissioner dryly.

"His local knowledge would be invaluable," declared Sir Cudworth.

"May I suggest, sir, that before we go further into that you should tell us what it is all about?"

"Of course, of course!" said Sir Cudworth hastily. "Well, the fact is, there have been one or two attempts to burgle my house, which, as you know, is at Hamperton."

"Yes?" said the Assistant Commissioner patiently, wondering whether this old fellow thought the burgling of his absurd house a matter for Scotland Yard.

"The third attempt was made last night," continued Sir Cudworth, "and I thought it time something was done about it."

"So far, Sir Cudworth," said the Assistant Commissioner, in what Ego recognized as dangerously

smooth tones, "I have failed to gather why you have thought fit to consult us here. You have a very efficient police force in Hamperton. Is it not a matter rather within their province than mine?"

"Oh, I've had them in, of course," said Sir Cudworth. "They've done nothing practical—never expected they would! But I dare say you think I've come here to complain about them. Nothing of the sort. I know their difficulties well enough—no clues, nothing to go upon. No—the reason I came to headquarters was this." Here he leaned forward impressively. "The third attempt took place last night, as I've said. Well—I saw the burglar!"

"Well, Sir Cudworth," said the Assistant Commissioner, "what of it? Was it the Prime Minister?"

"No," snapped Sir Cudworth triumphantly. "Funny you should say that! It wasn't the Prime Minister—but it was his cousin, the Vicar of Hamperton!"

He leaned back in his chair and surveyed the two officers, confident of the devastating effect of this announcement.

"I thought his hobby was collecting stamps," said Ego, with a puzzled air.

"You can't take me in, Mr. Ego," said Sir Cudworth, with a chuckle. "You're as surprised as I was, I know! I was sitting up late in the library with all the windows heavily curtained, when I heard a sound as if someone was trying to force one of them. I jumped up and pulled the curtains aside but I made some noise, I suppose, and he heard me. I saw him just disappearing out of the shaft of light from the window and, believe me or not, it was the Vicar. He had a thing like a jemmy in one hand and there was the mark on the window where he began to force it."

The Assistant Commissioner sat up.

"You telephoned to the local police, I suppose, and some sort of search was made."

"No, sir! I did nothing of the kind. I'll admit I



*“ He had a thing like a jemmy in one hand ”*



had my hand on the telephone, when the thought came to me that perhaps I'd better say nothing locally. I thought to myself what a scandal it would make for the Church and for the dear old Vicar himself—a man we all love and respect. If he's gone wrong in his head, I thought, there must be some way of arranging matters quietly. And, above all, he's a cousin of the Prime Minister. Yes, I thought that perhaps I'd better be a bit diplomatic. As a candidate, I don't want my name mixed up with anything that would be unpleasant to him. It's a thing that should be hushed up, if possible, so I came to you, thinking you'd know best what should be done."

"You acted very prudently and very wisely, Sir Cudworth, if you will allow me to say so. I am very much obliged to you for coming here," said the Assistant Commissioner gravely. "It would certainly lead to an unpleasant scandal both for the Church and for the Prime Minister if this thing got into the papers. Proceeding on the assumption that the reverend gentleman has lost his reason, the kindest thing to do would be to communicate with his family and to inform his Bishop of the circumstances. But we mustn't jump to conclusions. For example, are you certain that the person you saw wasn't somebody disguised as the vicar?"

"Absolutely. Ask Inspector Ego whether I could be mistaken."

"I'm inclined to agree with Sir Cudworth," said Ego. "If he saw our vicar, he saw him. You couldn't make a mistake and no amount of disguise could give anyone the face of a saint, which is what the face of the vicar is. He's the most extraordinarily guileless old gentleman I've ever met—won't believe evil of anyone because he doesn't know what it is himself. And his appearance is too striking for a mistake to be made."

"You mean to say that he had attempted no disguise?" asked the Assistant Commissioner.

“ Oh, yes, he had! He was wearing an old cloth cap and a long dark coat of some kind. But it was no good—it was just the sort of footling disguise he would think of! ”

“ Do you know of any reason why he should try to break into your house? ”

“ There you have me beaten, sir. Why, if he wanted anything of mine I'd have given it to him gladly. No, sir, the only explanation is that he's mad! ”

The Assistant Commissioner considered for a moment.

“ Well, Sir Cudworth, I think the best thing I can do at present is to adopt the suggestion you made a few moments back. I shall ask Inspector Ego, who knows the man and the neighbourhood, to look into it. Meantime, I shall be glad if you will continue to preserve silence about the affair. ”

Sir Cudworth rose.

“ That's all I want, ” he said. “ I'm much obliged to you. I wouldn't have any harm or scandal come to the old man for anything. If Mr. Ego wants any help from me I'll be only too glad to give it. Now, I must be off to the city—business won't wait, you know. ”

“ There's just one thing, Sir Cudworth, ” said Ego, as he opened the door for the visitor. “ Will you telephone down to your house when you get to the office and tell your servants that I may want to see the library? ”

“ I'll tell them to give you the run of the place, Inspector, ” said Sir Cudworth and took his departure.

When the door had closed upon his rotund figure the Assistant Commissioner groaned.

“ Who would be a policeman? ” he asked. “ Upon my word, Ego, I've had to do a good many queer things, but it's the first time I've had to take care of a mad vicar. However, we must be careful if the P.M.'s family is concerned. ”

“ Quite, sir, ” agreed Ego. “ We don't want a



scandal that would shake the very foundations of society, as the reporters say. But I'm not at all sure that the old gentleman's mad. In fact, I'm pretty sure he isn't."

"How do you know?"

"I know the vicar, sir."

"Well, perhaps you will descend from the heights of your superior knowledge and tell me what you propose to do."

"A detective's job is a good deal like a game of chess, sir. It all depends upon your opponent's moves, doesn't it? I don't know what I shall do till I've seen him to-night. I propose to lie in wait with Sir Cudworth and watch him. That's the orthodox proceeding, I believe."

"He may not come again."

"I think he will. He's been three times without getting what he wanted, whatever it is, and he must want it pretty badly. He'll come again and I think he'll come to-night, because I shall take care that he is told that the house will be empty."

"I see. But the local force must have an eye on the place now and they may catch him, which is just what we don't want."

"They've missed him three times, sir, already. I don't want to say anything to them unless it's necessary. They're all married men."

"Have it your own way!"

"Thank you, sir, I will."

"Only let me warn you, Inspector," said his superior with some acerbity, "that if the Press gets hold of the fact that the Prime Minister has a cousin who is vicar by day and burglar by night, you may look for trouble from high quarters. The P.M. is rather ruthless when he is annoyed and the Home Secretary is hoping for a peerage—so is his wife. The Home Office people would get the first kick, they would pass it on to the Yard and, believe me, it would have lost none of its force by the time it reached you."

“In that case,” said Ego with dignity, “I should retaliate.”

“How?”

“By voting against the fellow! And I’d tell him so too!”

## 2

The Towers, Hamperton, was one of the few remaining country houses in that suburb, noted not so many years ago as a rural retreat. It had no great claims to antiquity, however. It was built by the present owner’s grandfather and the family had clung to it while the proprietors of similar establishments had gone farther afield and the red-brick villas of suburbia had swallowed up the old parks and gardens one by one. Its fate, Ego reflected, as he made his way up the drive, was to be sold by order of the executors and either pulled down or turned into a school. No one who could afford such a house would choose it in Hamperton nor would modern taste incline to such a perfect example of Victorian architecture.

It was, however, a fine place and, once you were well within its twenty acres, its immediate surroundings were deceptively rural, affording plenty of cover for burglars, amateur or professional. The carriage sweep in front was flanked by dense shrubberies; the servants’ quarters were at the back of the left wing; and the dining-room and library windows opened on to a lawn on the right of the house. But it was possible, Ego noted, to approach the library by way of the shrubbery practically under cover till one had reached the window.

In fact, the place seemed an ideal one for the practice of the burglar’s art. The windows themselves were of the Victorian wooden-frame, up-and-down kind, easy to force if not protected by some burglar-proof device.

Ego was received by the butler, who at once invited him to enter.

“You know me, Johnson,” he said as he handed

over his hat and stick. "Have you had some instructions from Sir Cudworth?"

"Yes, sir," said Johnson, "I was expecting you and was to show you the library. As Sir Cudworth impressed upon me it was a matter of secrecy, I have not mentioned your visit to the other servants."

"Very wise of you," approved Ego, as they crossed the hall. "Have you seen anything of this burglar who's been about, by the way?"

"Nobody's seen him, actually, sir, you might say. I seem to have disturbed the intruder myself, on the first occasion. Sir Cudworth was away and I was late in locking up. I heard a scuffling at one of the dining-room windows and rushed out at the front door with the idea of tackling the man. All I saw, sir, was a dark figure disappearing over the lawn. It was too dark to see clearly. I returned to the house and telephoned to the police."

"You acted very pluckily and sensibly," said Ego, to the butler's manifest delight. "What happened the second time?"

"On the second occasion, sir, he was seen by Constable Tomson, who was keeping an eye on the place. The officer blew his whistle and gave chase. We all joined in searching the park and gardens but we found no trace of him. He was outside this side of the house again. My theory, sir, is that he was after the silver."

"Very likely, Johnson. But he won't come again, at least not till the alarm has died down. I know these fellows. If they get a scare, they give the place a wide berth. Seeing a policeman in the park would be enough to keep him away for another six months. However, your master is naturally a little nervous and he asked me to have a look at his windows. Are there any burglar locks on them?"

"I'm afraid not, sir," said the butler as they entered the library. "Just the usual catch, a very easy thing to force."

"I expected that," said Ego, as he ran his eyes round the room. It was a long, rather narrow apartment, with two windows at one end, a heavy, old-fashioned fireplace on the left and a glazed door at the other end. In the centre of the room, near the fire, stood a large flat-topped writing-table. There were several comfortable armchairs and most of the wall space was lined with bookshelves.

"Where does that door lead to?" asked Ego.

"It opens into what we call the lounge, sir. It was once a conservatory but Sir Cudworth had it converted into a sort of smoking-room. And, as this room was rather dark, he had that glazed door put in. He can draw those curtains across it, if he wishes."

Ego went to the window and looked out.

"What's the nearest house?"

"The Vicarage, sir. That's it you can see just through the trees."

"There's a wall round the park, isn't there?"

"Yes, sir—only, of course, there's a door from the Vicarage garden. Sir Cudworth's father, sir, was a very religious man and he and the vicar were great friends, so the door was made for convenience of visiting."

"I see. Where is Sir Cudworth's safe—do you know?"

"Here, sir." He pointed to a handsome Persian rug that hung on the wall where there was a gap in the bookshelves. "It works like a blind," continued the butler; "the catch is behind here."

He pressed something behind the rug and it ran up like a blind, revealing a built-in safe.

Ego examined the safe.

"H'm—fairly modern, I see, but not burglar-proof, by any means," was his comment. "Well, I must advise Sir Cudworth to get new catches put on these windows."

He pushed one of them up. On the wooden sill were marks of a jemmy, very clumsily used. He

closed the window again without calling Johnson's attention to them.

"Is the gate to the Vicarage kept locked?" he asked, as he was leaving. "I want to see the vicar himself, this morning, about this hospital fête of his. It would save me a walk if I could get in that way."

"I don't know, sir," said the butler, "but it would save you a bit. Do you think, sir—it's just occurred to me—that the burglar might have used that gate?"

"That's an idea, Johnson!" said Ego appreciatively. "I'll have a look at it, anyhow."

The original proprietor of The Towers had surrounded his domain with a high brick wall, topped with broken glass as a discouragement to wandering democracy. In this wall, which at one point bordered the extensive grounds of the Vicarage, Ego found the door described by the butler. It looked as if it had long been disused, but a closer examination showed that the lock had been oiled recently and that a key was in it on the other side.

"Poor old chap!" mused Ego as he made his way to the main gates of the park. "Poor old chap! Why didn't he write his name on the windows of the library and be done with it."

Ten minutes later he was being ushered into the Vicarage study. A tall, stooping man with a fine-cut face in which asceticism seemed to struggle with benevolence, achieving a result that was singularly moving and attractive, rose from a desk littered with papers and books and held out his hand with a gentle smile.

"Mr. Ego!" he said as they shook hands. "We don't often have the pleasure of seeing you in daylight hours! Sit down, sit down."

"Well, sir," said Ego with a laugh, "if you will insist on pushing me on to your committee! It was about the hospital fête and the police band that I wanted to see you."

For some time they discussed business, Ego watching

his companion closely all the time. He saw that there were heavy lines of care on the vicar's face and that sometimes he relapsed into absent-mindedness and had to be recalled to the matter in hand. He looked older and had an air of apprehensiveness that was something quite foreign to him. There was a tragic look in his fine eyes.

That man has something on his mind, thought Ego. He is afraid of something and he's all strung up. As he rose to go, the detective allowed himself to pause a moment at the window.

"You have a lovely garden, sir," he said, but his interest was not in the garden but in the figures of a young man and a girl on the tennis court. The vicar followed his gaze.

"I am very fortunate in that," he said with a sigh. "You see I have some young people with me to-day—my nephew and his fiancée, the daughter of General Strivens."

"Indeed!" said Ego. "A fine young man, if I may say so, sir, and a good tennis player."

"His happiness is very dear to me," said the vicar gently. "A fine young fellow, indeed—and a very charming girl. It does an old man good," he added more brightly, "to have young folk about the place."

"I agree with you there," said Ego cordially. "I am a bachelor, like you, sir."

"Yes, yes," said the vicar gently. His eyes strayed to his desk and Ego felt that he was in the way and that his host did not wish to discuss the state of bachelordom. The vicar accompanied him to the door with old-fashioned politeness and, as they reached the hall, the two young people were entering the house. They met face to face. Ego stared a little at the youth, a tall, fine-looking boy, in whom the family features were clearly distinguishable.

"This is my friend, Mr. Ego," he heard the vicar saying. "Miss Strivens—my nephew, Captain Ardley."

A few polite words were exchanged and the young people vanished.

"Your nephew is in the army?" Ego asked.

"Yes," said the vicar absently as he held out his hand, with his crooked smile—one side of his mouth always goes up higher than the other, thought Ego—a distinctive feature very awkward for criminals.

"By the way, sir," he said, as if he had remembered it at the last moment, "I shan't be able to discuss the fête business with Sir Cudworth till to-morrow. He is away for the night."

The vicar nodded vaguely.

"Indeed, indeed!" he said. "You are quite sure?"

As Ego walked down the drive, thinking of the vicar and his nephew, he paused suddenly, staring at the ground.

"By Jove!" he said aloud. "By Jove! This gets interesting."

### 3

"I think," said Ego, as he and Sir Cudworth stood in the library at ten o'clock that night, "that we might leave a window open for him. He's an old gentleman and we ought to save him any unnecessary exertion."

"Good idea," said the knight. "He's got a weak heart, so they say. Funny job for you, Ego, to be smoothing the way for a burglar!"

"It's not the first time, I'm sorry to say," responded Ego. "Would you switch the lights off for a minute, sir, while I do it?"

The room was plunged in darkness. Ego drew one of the heavy curtains and opened the window a couple of inches. As he did so he saw across the tree-tops that a light burned in an upper window of the distant Vicarage. The night was dark and windy, with fitful gleams of moonlight. The park and gardens stretched mysteriously, it might have been into infinity but for the distant glow of light that marked the High Street of Hamperton. There was

no sound save the wind and now and then the noise of a lumbering tramway in the distance.

"It's an ideal night for a burglary," he remarked, as he rearranged the heavy curtain to prevent any ray of light from escaping. Sir Cudworth switched on the lights again. He walked over to the fire and stood with his back to it, a fine, imposing figure in his dinner suit. His face wore a puzzled frown.

"D'ye think he'll come, then?"

"I think so—otherwise I've spoiled your nice glass door for nothing, Sir Cudworth."

"Oh, that!" said Sir Cudworth, glancing at the door from the lounge, from which Ego had dexterously removed one of the square panes of glass, so that, hidden on the other side of it, they could hear as well as see what went on in the library. "That's of no account—soon have that put right. This thing's getting on my nerves, Ego. I hope he does come. Well, are we all ready?"

"Yes," said Ego, looking round. "As I've got the curtain arranged on the glass door he won't notice the missing panel and he won't see us behind it, if we keep fairly well away from it. We might as well get into hiding, sir—the clergy keep early hours as a rule."

"One moment," said Sir Cudworth. "I've just thought of something. Why not find out whether it's money he's after? He may have got into some devil of a mess that's half-turned his brain."

As he spoke, Sir Cudworth went to the safe and took from it a small jewel-case and a little bundle of notes. The jewel-case he placed in a conspicuous position on a side table, the notes he placed on his writing-desk.

"See the idea?" he asked, as he surveyed his work. "That case contains a necklace that belonged to my poor sister. We'll see whether he pockets that and the notes."

"A good idea, sir," Ego agreed.

"Well, that's all fixed then. What's he want,



Ego?" Sir Cudworth fidgetted nervously. "What do you make of it, really?"

"We shall probably know when we see what he does, sir. I'm as much in the dark as you are."

Sir Cudworth switched the lights off and they passed through the glass door into the dark lounge, where they found two comfortable chairs. Through the glass walls of the conservatory a dim light filtered. It was just possible to distinguish the dark bulk of the nearest trees. Sir Cudworth pointed to them.

"If he comes along the Vicarage path," he said, "he'll have to pass there and probably we'll see him. I wish I could smoke."

They waited for a long time, conversing in low tones. Presently the church clock chimed eleven. Nothing happened. The quarter and the half-hour struck, and Sir Cudworth grew impatient.

"Don't believe he's coming at all!" he said, after a long silence. "He's smelled a rat. People are cunning when they're mad, and perhaps your going there and telling him I was away roused his suspicion."

Ego's answer was to put a hand on his arm.

"Steady, sir—here he is!"

He pointed and Sir Cudworth saw a dark shape like a shadow passing outside the conservatory. It disappeared, going towards the front of the house. The two men rose and stole silently to the door leading to the library.

For a moment all was silent. Then there came a distinct sound from the window. It was being cautiously pushed up. The heavy curtain bellowed out in the draught. They could hear someone climbing very quietly into the room. The curtain moved again and a hand appeared on the edge of it. It was a very white hand.

Presently a little pencil of light began to move about the room and the intruder, growing bolder, stepped from behind the curtain. In the darkness it was difficult to distinguish anything but those parts of

the figure occasionally illuminated by the moving torch as he swayed it from side to side.

Then a strange thing happened. The torch was put down upon a chair, without taking the precaution of extinguishing it. There was a slight shuffling sound and suddenly, right in the beam of light, appeared a pair of clasped hands and the fine-cut face of the Vicar of Hamperton. The two watchers drew their breath sharply; they realised that the man before them was kneeling in prayer. They could see his lips moving in some whispered petition.

Sir Cudworth gripped Ego's shoulder fiercely.

"I can't bear this," he whispered. But Ego motioned him to silence.

Presently the vicar got on his feet again. They had seen that he wore a dark cloak of some kind and had a cap pulled down over his eyes. But the disguise was ludicrously inefficient. He began to move about the room, examining every article of furniture. He shone his torch on the jewel case, picked it up and opened it. Sir Cudworth pressed Ego's arm. The vicar had opened the case and taken from it a small necklace of pearls. He ran the string through his fingers, examining it intently. Then he sighed deeply, pressed the pearls to his lips and replaced them in the case again. He put it back on the table and turned away.

"Mad as a hatter," whispered Sir Cudworth.

The vicar came to the desk and the light fell full on the bundle of notes. He did not touch them. He opened the drawers, examined the contents and replaced them. Then he came to the safe.

"Ah!" They heard the stifled exclamation.

In a moment he was on his knees in front of the safe. He tried the handle, but it would not move. Then he took from a pocket one of those iron case-openers which are as often used as jemmies as for their professed purpose. With this he began to make ludicrous attempts to force the door of the safe. Had there not

been something tragic about the spectacle, Ego would have laughed aloud. The only result was a few scratches on the paintwork.

Something at that moment made Ego turn his head—an almost inaudible sound in the conservatory. But it came from outside. Against the glass wall he saw the dark shadow of a man creeping slowly and quietly along, flattening himself against the glass. The shadow wore a policeman's helmet.

Ego tugged at his companion, who swung round and saw what was happening. With a presence of mind that astonished his companion, the worthy leather merchant began marking time with his feet on the tiled floor. The occupant of the library sprang to his feet, extinguished the torch and disappeared. They saw a gleam of faint grey light where the curtains parted and a dark figure climbing out of the window. The policeman was still stealing along the glass wall.

Sir Cudworth groaned aloud.

"I'm getting too old for this sort of thing," he said. "Come along to the dining-room and have a drink. That's Tomson, the constable on the beat, and we can't disguise the fact that there's been someone in, can we?"

"No," said Ego. "We'd better let him have the credit of the discovery."

They made their way to the dining-room from the conservatory and helped themselves to whisky and soda, while they waited for developments.

"I hope he doesn't catch the poor old boy," said Sir Cudworth, with genuine concern, as the minutes passed.

"Touch and go," said Ego. "But I hope not."

Presently there was a loud knocking at the hall door. They went into the hall, switching the lights on, and Sir Cudworth undid the bolts which it was the butler's custom to secure before retiring. On the wide steps stood Constable Tomson and, to the intense relief of both men, he was alone. But from one hand, suspended by a piece of string, hung an electric torch.

"Sorry to trouble you, sir," said Tomson, "but there's been another attempt to break in."

"Lord bless my soul!" exclaimed Sir Cudworth. "And Inspector Ego with me in the dining-room for the last hour! Are you sure, officer?"

"I saw him, sir," said Tomson, "but I had to make a detour myself not to run the risk of being seen crossing the grass. I thought that in any case I was sure to get him once he got inside and, just as I got round the end of the conservatory, sir, he jumped from the window and made off. Too quick for me, he was."

"You mean to say he's been in the library?" demanded Sir Cudworth, with well-feigned astonishment.

"He was, sir, I'm afraid. Didn't either of you gentlemen hear nothing?"

"Not a sound," said Ego. "It's one against me, constable, I'm afraid. Sir Cudworth and I were in the dining-room, discussing the very man and you say he broke in while we were there! What's that you've got on the string?"

"The burglar, I hope, sir," said Tomson, with some pride. "Dropped it in his flight, he did. You'll observe, sir, that I didn't pick it up in my fingers—tied a bit of string on it—and if that rubberoid handle doesn't show a crop of finger-prints, I'll be very much surprised."

"That was smart of you, constable," said Ego. "Look here, I'll take it up to the Yard myself, shall I?"

"That would be the best, sir, no doubt," said the constable, handing it over, very well pleased to have earned the approval of the great Ego. "And now, sir, shall we have a look at the library?"

Constable Tomson surveyed the scene with satisfaction.

"Looks as if I had just come in time, gentlemen," he said, pointing to the notes on the table.

Sir Cudworth thanked him and explained that he

had been working at his desk till the arrival of Inspector Ego and had left the money there to be put away later. Tomson then made his examination of the room and the window for his report, missing, in his excitement, the curtained glass door from which Ego had removed a pane, after which there was an adjournment to the dining-room. In time he departed, assuring Sir Cudworth that a special patrol would be put on and that he might sleep in peace.

When he returned from seeing the constable out, Sir Cudworth found Ego polishing the electric torch with a silk handkerchief. He nodded approvingly.

"Thought you'd do that, maybe," he said.

"After all," said Ego, "most burglars wear gloves," and there will be nothing surprising in the fact that this torch won't yield any finger-prints."

"I suppose you realise what you are doing?" asked Sir Cudworth laughing. "Aiding and abetting a burglar to rob me and escape."

"I'm afraid it is so, sir," Ego said, "but I don't expect you will give me away. Now, sir," he added, laying the torch aside, "I wonder if you'd have any objection to telling me just what is in that safe of yours? You saw how he left everything and settled down to that. It's something in the safe he wants."

"Well, I've no secrets concealed there, Inspector," said Sir Cudworth. "What he could want out of my safe, I don't know—but let's open it and see. Take everything out yourself and look at them as much as you like."

The contents of the safe were just what Ego would have expected. There was a certain amount of money—but that was ruled out. There was some cases of jewellery, there were books of accounts, which he could hardly want, some share certificates and one or two oddments. Amongst these was a sealed envelope marked, "Ardley."

Ego stared at it for a moment and then held it out to Sir Cudworth.

"This is it," he said simply.

The knight gaped at him.

"That?" he exclaimed. "Impossible."

"Do you mind if I ask what it contains?" asked Ego gravely. "I am certain that is what he was after."

Sir Cudworth sank into a chair; his face was troubled and he passed a hand over his forehead.

"I suppose I must," he said at last, "though I'd rather not dig that up."

"You don't see how it is in any way connected with the vicar?" asked Ego.

"No," said Sir Cudworth slowly, "I don't. But I'll tell you. My sister ran away with a man of that name. I thought him a scoundrel—to her he was a hero. He was married, but the shock of the affair killed his wife. Anyhow, she died afterwards. Well, I did what I thought was my duty. I traced them and stood over Ardley with a horsewhip in my sleeve while he married her. I never saw either of them again. That packet contains a copy of the marriage certificate—that's all."

"Well," said Ego thoughtfully, "there is at present staying at the Vicarage a rather fine young fellow, whom the vicar describes as his nephew. His name is Ardley, and he is engaged to General Strivens' daughter."

Sir Cudworth stared at him in astonishment.

"Did your sister have a child?" asked Ego.

"Not that I ever heard of," said Sir Cudworth. "She and her husband died years ago."

"Then, if this boy were the son of these two, he might or might not have been born after the marriage?"

"I suppose so. I never heard of him. They had been living together for eighteen months before the marriage. But she said nothing about a child."

"She might have concealed that from you, might she not?"

"Yes—things were bad enough, as it was—and she was very sensitive and unhappy. She might have been afraid to tell me. She might have wanted to conceal from me how completely the fellow had wrecked her life."

"The vicar, I suppose, knew your sister?"

"Of course."

"And was in love with her?"

"I never heard of it."

"It's the things we don't hear of, Sir Cudworth, that hold the key to most of the mysteries of life. I mean to say, obvious things under our noses, that we ought to see but don't, just because they do happen to be under our noses. But it's getting very late. Suppose we sleep on this mystery?"

"The best thing we could do, perhaps."

"And in the morning, if you can spare an hour or two from business, will you come with me to the Vicarage? I think I shall be able to explain it all then."

Sir Cudworth agreed to this suggestion.

"But it's going to be awkward," he said, "raking up all that. I still think the old man's off his head. If he wanted that certificate for any purpose, why couldn't he have asked me? And how could he know it was there?"

"We shall see in the morning," said Ego as he rose to go. But, instead of going home, he journeyed by a late tram to Westminster Bridge and spent some hours poring over records at the Yard under the letter A.

## 4

Next morning, when the two men presented themselves at the Vicarage, they were shown into the drawing-room and asked to wait, as the vicar was engaged with a caller. From the study, which joined, they heard through the open windows an occasional murmur of voices, one of them a little raised. And presently, they heard the voices passing the drawing-

room door and they caught quite distinctly the words: "I am sorry, sir, but this matter must be cleared up before there is any question of an engagement!"

Both men recognized the accents of General Strivens, a retired martinet, whose voice was only too well known in Hamperton.

Presently the vicar came into the room and apologized with his customary charm for having kept them. But he looked old and worn, as if he had not slept. The hand he gave them was trembling.

"Is it something about the fête, Sir Cudworth?" he asked when they were seated again. His eyes were anxious and his voice not quite under control. Sir Cudworth glanced perplexedly at Ego.

"Sir," said Ego gravely, "it isn't about the fête this time. I want to tell you a story and I want you to listen to it—and to forgive me for anything that may seem like an impertinent intrusion on your affairs."

The blood drained from the clergyman's face. He sat back, grasping the arms of his chair. At last he nodded his head.

"I see," he said in a whisper. "Go on, please. I have done wrong and must suffer for it."

"The story, as I have pieced it together, sir," said Ego, disregarding the vicar's words, "is a simple enough one and a sad one, but it all comes right in the end. Years ago there was a clergyman who was very much in love with the daughter of a rich parishioner. His affection was not returned. The lady preferred someone else and someone not very worthy of her. She ran away with this man and was disowned by her family, except that, when it was possible, her brother compelled the man to marry her. But to the clergyman she remained the ideal of his life. For her sake he never married and, as time went on, he cherished her image more and more. At last—I think when she was dying, perhaps—she turned to him for assistance and implored him to look after her son, for whom there was no hope in the circumstances of poverty



and misery in which she lived. He took charge of the boy and educated him. The father offered no opposition—in fact, he was in prison and not long afterwards he died.

“The boy was sent to a good school and the clergyman grew very fond of him. He turned out well and, when he grew up, went into the army. It was there that the clergyman made his first mistake. He entered the boy at Sandhurst as his nephew and as the legitimate child of his parents, when he did not know whether he was legitimate or not. The deception, once begun, had to continue. The real difficulty came when the lad fell in love with the daughter of a general who was a stickler for what he called principles and attached great importance to rank and descent. He wanted to know all about his proposed son-in-law and the evasive replies he received made him suspicious. He threatened to put inquiries on foot. The clergyman thought of the possibly false declarations he had made to enter the boy for Sandhurst and began to fear that not only would the boy's love affair go wrong but his whole career might be threatened.

“He knew that the boy's mother had been married, but he also knew that she had lived with her lover for some time before the marriage. In their last brief interview she had told him that her brother had the proof of the marriage but she died without telling him where it had taken place. Now, he could have set inquiries on foot himself, but he feared to do so in case other people, hearing of it, looked into the matter themselves. He knew from the mother's papers the date of her son's birth but where it had taken place or been registered he did not know.

“But he knew her brother's house intimately and, in his distraction, he formed the idea of going there and recovering the marriage certificate which would tell him what he wanted to know, that is, whether the boy was born before or after the date of the

marriage. Why did he not go to the brother and explain things? Well, because the exalted conception he cherished of the lady to whom he had been so devoted made that unthinkable to him. To reveal anything that others might think derogatory to her seemed to him like putting a slur on the precious image in his mind and like a treachery to her. So he formed this mad scheme, risking his own name and reputation to ascertain the truth that might enable him to establish his nephew's legitimacy."

"But," stammered Sir Cudworth, "how could the boy be his nephew?"

"Because," answered Ego quickly, "the boy's father was this clergyman's brother. And that was another secret. The man was a criminal with many names. He had good reasons for dropping the name he had disgraced."

The vicar leaned forward in his chair.

"I suppose that I have put myself within reach of the law," he said, "and that you have come to arrest me, Inspector Ego. But tell me first—how did you know all this? It is all true, almost in every detail."

"Sir," said Ego, "a detective without a good imagination ought to look for another job. We have only come to give you that which you might have had for the asking."

"But I understand now why you didn't ask," said Sir Cudworth gruffly. "It was a mad scheme, Vicar, all the same."

The vicar tore the envelope open and extracted the certificate. He read it and gave a cry of happiness.

"The boy was born after the marriage!" he exclaimed, beaming on them. "He was legitimate. He is my legal heir, and his entry to Sandhurst was perfectly correct."

"It's the first burglary I've ever heard of to correct an entry to Sandhurst!" said Ego with a smile. But the vicar's face clouded.

"I have done wrong," he said gravely. "I have

committed a crime in the eyes of the law. I have risked bringing a scandal on the cloth I wear. I have deceived the police and given you, Sir Cudworth, great anxiety. I ought to be punished for it."

"Punish my grandmother!" exclaimed Sir Cudworth, walking over to the window. "Take me out into your garden and introduce me to my nephew, if you please!"

When Sir Cudworth and Ego returned to The Towers, they found Constable Tomson in the library. Furthermore, Tomson was so intent upon the task of polishing an electric torch with a duster that he did not hear them till they were upon him. He started guiltily.

"Just having a look round, gentlemen," he stammered. "I see you didn't take that torch to the Yard last night, sir."

"And why," asked Ego severely, "are you polishing it with that duster?"

Tomson, red-faced and confused, hesitated for a moment, then he burst out.

"Sir—it's wrong, I know—but I know who did the burglary because I saw him after I left you last night. And whoever done it," he added inconsequently, "done it for some reason that was right, because I know 'im. I wouldn't see him in trouble if I was broke for it!"

"As a matter of fact, Constable," said Ego pleasantly, "you have been wasting your time. I removed all traces of finger-prints from the handle of that torch myself last night. None of us would see him in trouble. I can't tell you any family secrets, but I know I can rely upon your discretion. All I can say is that the burglar came here to search for something that Sir Cudworth would have handed him at once had he known that he wanted it. But being, as you know, a rather unworldly and simple-minded old burglar, he simply didn't think of asking for it. Will that do?"

“That’s enough for me, sir,” said Tomson with conviction.

5

“Hi! Ego!” shouted the Assistant Commissioner that evening as he saw Ego vanishing along a corridor at headquarters. “What about that parson?”

“Oh, that’s all right, sir,” said Ego carelessly. “You’ll hear nothing more about that; the Prime Minister can sleep in peace.”

“He did burgle the place, then?”

“Yes, sir, in a way, so to speak—but he bungled it.”

“What?” said the Assistant Commissioner with an unkind smile. “An amateur criminal who was a bungler? What was he after?”

“Well, sir,” said Ego, “he was a little eccentric. He wanted to check the correctness of his nephew’s entry to Sandhurst. That was all, sir.”

And Ego vanished into his room. After a moment in which annoyance almost triumphed, the Assistant Commissioner vanished into his, where he made a large black cross on a calendar.

“I owe him one for that,” he muttered, as he turned to the papers before him.

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*Francis Marsden*

## MADRILENE

SHE was a marvellous girl. But I think I liked her best at a distance, many a mile and some few years away. She had me scared and really on the jump; small and fragile as she was, you can take my word that what she said went; I could see that amongst the people who knew her. I suppose I got away safe because we couldn’t talk the same language; it put her out of her

stride a little; and then, too, I lived away in England—a cold, cold country always wrapped in a dense wet fog: that, I gathered, was her notion of it.

This alarming little lady I'm talking about was a Spanish girl I met in Madrid, about as big as three-penn'orth of coppers, tiny, clicking her high heels as she walked along, and letting fly all round with her eyes. They were the only big things about her.

She was a sort of jewel of devilment, big eyes and tiny feet—feet that were small even in proportion to her size; and her eyes—well! And quick! Believe me, swift was the word for her: she jumped to anything with a flash, and either threw it down with a smack or went hell hard after it. She wasn't greedy—just interested in anything new. I was it, once. But don't think that I admire her sort of type; even if I had done so I do believe she'd have scared me off for good after a few jumps.

No, I have always fallen to the big and blonde and bright-blue-eyed. You know, those with a flash of blue heaven in their eyes. Not that I have been lucky with these; she had the opposite, that girl Paquita, her's were dark. Yes, they looked as if they had a kind of fire behind them—nothing sombre: it was a bright glow, happy, passionate, vivid with life and joy; and all that, and all the devilment in the world, too. You can see that I have not forgotten her by any manner of means; she bedevilled me enough to make that certain.

But I ought to explain how I met this girl. I had just got back from Seville, driven out by the rains and cold winds which had come on early that October. Consequent on which, a chill had laid me up for a day or two in a tiny hotel bedroom like a cell—whitewash and all—so I found the pension in Madrid comfortable and homely again. They were glad to see me, too, even for those few days on my return, as the place was empty of visitors except for a typical travelling Englishman. There was something almost

oppressive in his painstaking civility and his fantastic lack of faculty for any language save his own, or any other habit in thought or taste save his native one.

They generally have something rugged and strong in their homely faces, these middle-aged voyagers who set out all alone to complete their education in traversing the Latin countries. What they have in kindness and honesty is, no doubt, sterling; but their affability has a tight bumpiness, and their genial grins work so heavily as to intimidate as much as conciliate.

This one considered himself a bibliophile. Somehow he had chanced on a few—one or two—signed novels by esteemed writers, and, thus encouraged, went on to buy some illustrated books in most ornate ill taste. These he had bought for their beauty, save us! And so, to deliver me from what she suspected was the boring insistence of his conversation, the daughter of the house, who was manageress of affairs, linguist and all that, introduced me to a soldier cousin, in Madrid on leave. He was a young fellow about my own age, and following her suggestion, took me to make, as they put it, some of my beautiful drawings at the dancing-school kept by some other family connection—an uncle, I gathered, of both. I spoke little Spanish, but we both talked French well enough to carry on a rough-and-ready conversation, and we set off gaily next morning for the school. I found it was situated in a large room over one of those peculiarly dark and dismal-looking little cafés. They all seem to be painted in that same brown which soon gets grimy, with an air of miserable poverty much affected by southern people, an alternative, no doubt, to the those gorgeously rococo places of resort which they use to display their more expansive occasions. As is their habit in most things, they show up either dishevelled and down at heel or are overwhelming in the flashiest fine clothes.

Certainly the room upstairs was as commonplace as could be imagined. Half a dozen girls were sitting and standing about in reasonably scanty garb, a small, pale boy ran about with a busy air, doing errands and small jobs for the old man. I looked on him as a mere hanger-on until I saw him dance later; the ill-set-up lad made a very different figure when the lights and the company and the twang of the guitars set his blood and pride burning. The girls lounged in blouse and short pants, on broken-down chairs and a long wooden bench. I am sure that boy ran about doing things just to be different and appear separate from the girls. I was, of course, introduced to the teacher as soon as we got inside, and he sat me down on the soundest chair, where I could look on and make my sketches. He was a stout-bodied, paunchy man with the indurated skin of the southerner. He lamented that the time of my visit to Madrid deprived him of the pleasure of presenting his eldest son to me. There would have been pride and joy and great privilege to him in revealing for me the dance through his beautiful boy. A younger brother came in later, and showed me what it was that the old man really meant. I could see it as something that he, too, had had once on a day and had handed on to them. And it touched him closely to have an artist there to be shown and to appreciate, as an eternal marvellous thing, that smooth, terrible beauty of supple glory in the body which now was theirs. He himself now had grown past it, thickened, coarsened. Yet his eyes, strangely enough, seemed younger, kinder, more genial and friendly. It is not uncommon in the South, I fancy, this change, as life progresses, from the purely animal and hostile to a more genial humanity. How different he must be now from what he had been I felt, when once in a while he cried out in affected despair to the girls who were rehearsing to the rhythm of foot-taps or finger-clicks at the most, stopping them in the middle of some figure to show the exact move-

ment, with a lightness which was astounding in that fat, cumbrous-looking elder in street clothes.

Shortly after I had arrived and had settled in the staggered chair to scrawl and scribble my sketches, two girls began to rehearse an apache dance. The taller one, who took the man's part, a grey-eyed girl with mouse-coloured hair and wide, high cheeks, had a coldly mischievous look, but the little one, a tiny-looking creature with black hair that curled and twisted and moved like a bunch of snakes, and immense eyes, was plainly full of obvious hot devilment. She is the girl I started to tell you about.

The apache dance was not then as commonplace as it has since become. It made a good number on the stage, and these two were quite the pair for it. The taller girl, with her hard, ruthless eyes and white toothed wolf-look, had something wickedly steely and trenchant about her when she danced. You saw nothing of it otherwise except in a lazy sort of aplomb, faintly insolent and idly defiant. She contrasted perversely with the tiny dark creature, who simply intensified her normal ways as she danced, intensified them to a furious degree. There was something almost monstrous about it when her dark eyes suddenly shot with red fire, and, with gleaming teeth and clawing little hands, she simulated fury for an instant during their rehearsal. But they went on, most of the time, in a simple mechanical sequence of steps, passing whispered remarks, and glancing now and again over a shoulder at me as I worked scribbling at my sketches.

Suddenly Esther, the taller, having gone through all the motions of the bully, almost like an automaton, with an evil yet languid grace, just at the finish, as they swung along the floor towards me, with a quick double stamp shot her tiny partner across the little space bang into my lap. Over we went, chair and all, in a kicking heap against the wall. The bigger girl simply stood in her final pose, hands on hip, smiling;





*“ She simulated fury for an instant during their rehearsal ”*



whilst the little one, shrieking with laughter, disentangled herself from me and the chair and helped to pick up my book and pencils, handing them over with a killing flash from her eye-corners.

Next day I went there again, and made some more drawings. It was my last day in Madrid, and I was to leave early the following morning for Paris. When we descended for a drink in the bar below, the old teacher very impressively and genially asked my soldier translator to tell me that they hoped I would spend the evening at the little theatre-café for which he provided the dancers: a farewell party. He regretted that the best of his troupe were in South America, but they would do what was possible to show me the dances of Spain. Again he lamented the absence of his eldest son, his idol. But when I returned to Madrid, of course, he would be back again. I was grieved at the shortness of my time, for I should have liked to do some really careful drawings of his company, particularly when I heard of all the costumes of the different provinces they had got for the evening's performance. It was exasperating to be going off—not that I wanted to chase that girl: it was not my sort of pastime.

After dinner the soldier lad and I set out for the little theatre-café, driving across Madrid from the Puerto del Sol in the customary hack carriage of that time, with a tremendous clatter of horse-hooves. They clattered because the animal was so loose in the joints that each leg was flung almost at hazard, and its feet struck the ground with little semblance of rhyme or reason. [Of course, Spain is the country of superbly splendid horses and astoundingly bad ones. One of the good memories of my sickly stay in Seville was the heartening sight of a young man in a black hat, a braided, short coat-jacket (like an Eton jacket), who rode straight-backed down a street on a thundering stallion. They were chockfull of pride and life, both of them, man and horse. Now I think of it,

that horse had an eye just like Paquita, liquid dark and burning red, a fiery black.]

That evening, then, they gave the dances of all the provinces of Spain, as they told me, in my honour as a distinguished English artist. That was their polite little joke on my youth, no doubt, and I sat in the stage box—the one box the tiny theatre possessed. There, flanked by the grey-headed dancing-master and the young conscript, I received and complimented in turn each of the dancers at the end of their performances. With each I asked the honour to drink, and we ran the gamut of the bottles in the bar that faced us across the serried tables and chairs of the audience beneath us. As a guest, of course, I had nothing to pay for admission, and the whole bill for my reciprocal entertainment of the dance director and my interpreter friend, and including the company's drinks also, amounted to a very modest sum—perhaps thirty *pesetas*. It was my *fiesta*, and I was the friend of all the family.

At the end of the performance, when the crowd of spectators had filtered out from the tables and the bar at the side, elated by my distinguished and inexpensive situation, I demanded and paid for some bottles of *rioja*, exploding a little of my scant Spanish in getting it. I mounted the kind of step-ladder beside the stage and went round the thread-bare red curtain. All the company were half in and half out of their costumes, but a table or two and chairs were promptly brought, and the bottles were opened. Everybody was jolly and amiable, but one of the youths of the troupe began to scowl a good deal at the pranks and horse-play that Esther and Paquita started. This ended again and again in the smaller girl, after a simulated scuffle with the other, taking refuge in my arms and upsetting my drink.

When I was trying to make a portrait of one or the other—I was drawing sketches now to entertain the the company—she stood behind me and deliberately

blew down the back of my neck. Then when I jumped up and tried to catch her, she dodged behind the dark, sullen boy, pushing him against me sharply. Whether by intention or not, he gave me an obvious shove, which I, intending to catch the giggling girl, returned solidly. At that he got deliberately in my way and spluttered his rage—he was too angry to speak—right into my face, so I gave him a slap to get on with.

Everybody said “Hah!” all of a sudden, in a kind of awful silence, as he jumped away, backing off to pull something out of his pocket with a click; and I saw that he had a knife, which he had opened with one neat motion of his hand as he got it out. I remarked that with painful clearness as they all jumped at him and crowded round, saying things in rapid hoarse voices. Whilst this went on, the little soldier pulled me by the shoulder, arousing me from my fit of stupefied staring, saying in the same excited voice:

“What have you done? *Mauvais, mauvais*. He will kill you as you go home.”

He astonished me, and I felt annoyed at his accusations: as if I had not been hustled and spat upon by the oaf first! But I felt very much alarmed and very sick about the muddle I had got us all into. I didn't like that knife-business at all, but I stood stiff and nervous, and angry too. Then, as I made no reply, he went back to the old man, and they talked seriously to two lean grey-heads, with black jaws and hard faces, from the guitar orchestra. The soldier came back with his old Uncle and said suddenly:

“Yes, yes, it is better that you take the knife, and then it will be over quick; it will all arrange itself so well then. He will hold his honour, you see!”

I am hanged if I saw what he was driving at then. Now I imagine that they had fixed something to help me out.

Diving into his army trousers, he performed the same blood-curdling trick as the other, taking out a big

clasp-knife from his pocket with one hand, so that it flew open in the motion of drawing it out:

“Keep your thumb on the blade,” he said as he pushed it into my right hand, stepping from between the bad tempered scowling youth and myself.

I looked at him, and he stared back with eyes like pieces of slate. He was one of these thick-set, broad-faced, hard-cheek-boned fellows absolutely the opposite to me in appearance. I called him a boy, but I suppose I, too, was little more, and looked it. His slaving lower lip stuck out, and it gave me a turn of disgust and keen dislike. By this time I felt as cold as ice inside, but as I had drunk plenty of wine, there was, at the same moment, a sort of warmth in my head, and I thought, sillily, that this affair would be short and sharp anyhow, and again that I was well and truly in for it, just as I saw him slide a foot towards me. At that I put on the best side-step I knew how, thinking that, as I dodged, I could give him a shove with my left hand and then poke him in the ribs with my right. But my hope of pulling it off felt faint, and I felt as faint as my hope.

Perhaps my movement was not in the books, or maybe he didn't expect me to shift so quickly, but he tried to spin round on his toes and reached with his left hand for my knife-hand. Something made me act. I felt as if warm confidence came into my legs, and they carried me into doing what my thoughts doubted dreadfully: perhaps past boxing lessons, maybe just irritation, or the drink heartened me—anyhow, I stepped in towards his left side and hit him on that silly, slobbering mouth with my left hand and banged my right hand at his ribs for all I was worth. Honestly I had clean forgot the knife. The slap on his mouth put him off his balance, and over he went like a shot hare, and all the room let off a queer “Ah-h” that rose to a sort of squeal from the women. That is all I remember. Maybe other things happened. Then I saw that my right hand

was covered with blood, for I had cut my fingers severely on the blade. Now, I don't believe I stabbed him—mine was the only blood that was shed, I am sure. But I never knew, for at that moment the blood-thirsty little cat Paquita jumped at me, laughing and fairly squealing with delight, and began to kiss me, banging her face against mine recklessly and clutching me round the neck. I kept pushing her off and trying to tie up my hand with my handkerchief.

The others stood in a heap all round the lad I had bowled over. Whether I had winded him or killed him I do not know. I never did; for the soldier cousin came up, absolutely incoherent, to haul me off, with Paquita clinging to me, and dumped us in the carriage. I believe it was the same one, which had waited all that time in the rain. And so off we went. All I remember of the ride was the soldier saying: "You go to-morrow morning seven o'clock? Yes?" time after time; and Paquita repeatedly clutching me round the neck. Well, that matter of the journey had been settled earlier, and I had packed, and I felt I should be glad to be out of the racket.

Immediately I had got inside my room, after the soldier and Paquita had put me down at the door and driven off in great haste, I felt absolutely exhausted, collapsed and drunk. I dragged the bed-clothes round me without undressing, and just fell asleep with the lights on. But two or three hours later I was wide awake, stone sober and wondering—wondering what had happened, and how and why. And had I knifed the bloke? And was he dead or only hurt? And could it be murder? And then I considered the garrot, and Goya's etching of an execution by it. I thought a good deal about the device used in the Spanish garroting machine, and felt it was so nauseatingly like a copying press as to be beastly unpleasant: hanging seemed actually romantic beside it and far, far less vulgar. I fancy I dosed into a dream about my head being squashed in an office press; anyhow, it

felt that way when I got up. Oh, Oh! that morning I had a head!

Only the old dancing-teacher came to the train. He came at the last moment, serious, preoccupied, and all I could understand was that he said "Good, good," when he saw me, and saluted me politely, and hurried away just as the train started. That may have meant anything, and my head was in poor shape for thinking any more. All day I travelled with it beating and aching as if it had been cracked right across from end to end. Late at night we reached the frontier, and at Hendaye worn out by miseries of mind that increased as my head mended, I wondered if the police would be waiting for me. I wondered what had happened; I wondered whether it had all been a joke or all in earnest. I was sure that I had not really stabbed the fellow, and my cut finger throbbed in corroboration of my assurance. But for all that, I was glad to get to the French side without question when we changed from the Spanish to the French train.

Breathing more freely, I walked up and down the platform, and then, to my fearful astonishment, a small creature who had a bundle under one arm threw back the shawl from her face, and there, smiling her devastating smile, standing on her high heels, right in front of me, as pleased as punch, setting one hand on her hip, was that girl! I must have given a dreadful groan as I stood stock still. That smile: I knew it would cause trouble everywhere—trouble and trouble. It was as fascinating as it was disastrous. It seemed heartless to me then, and my blood ran cold. She always just smiled, any time, anywhere. I don't think she ever knew or bothered what would happen, or knew quite all it suggested—or cared. She just let it go at everybody. She loved to see it work on men. Yet it didn't work at all as she may have hoped at that moment. I just looked. I am sure my jaw fell and my face paled to green. I felt all my insides



drop, and I wondered where the police were; that was how it took me. But she was alone, quite alone.

When I looked so sick at the sight of her, that marvellous bright smile died away gradually—just slowly, I saw it fade. She couldn't believe her eyes at once. Then her mouth turned down, and then more down, and enormous shining tears blobbed over from her eyes, streams of them came and fell over the edge as I stared. Suddenly, from heaving faint sobs she burst into real howls and lamentable cries. I couldn't stand all that, for she dropped everything, lifted up both her hands on a level with her face, and stood like a babe, opening and shutting her fingers while tears ran in a stream off her cheeks and chin. She sobbed more quietly when I took her arm and patted her shoulders and, at last, subsiding on to my waistcoat, wept there silently. I had to take her into the train. She had settled down quite happily as the horn tooted and we set off with nobody else in our carriage. There she had another small surprise for me—her ticket was third-class, for on the night of the drama she had taken a slower train to await me at the frontier. When the controller came round, I had to pay the difference.

You can hardly imagine how she sparkled with joy and life then, just because I had paid for something for her. It was a typical trait of hers to be overwhelmingly pleased with a gift—really happily surprised. She showed it plainly, enthusiastically and transparently. Everything she did had the same directness and was as straightforward. Her dodges tricked you by surprise and unexpectedness, but were never real deceptions, never deceitful. Of course, she had never looked ahead. What was she going to do in Paris? I couldn't find out. Such few words as we had in common she seemed to think should be used for petting. Immediately she got settled and at ease she set about teaching me all the amorous terms in the Spanish language with appropriate motions, treating

me as if I were an over-sized doll. In her hands I was helpless and speechless, whilst she (under the curious glances of passengers who promenaded the corridor to catch a glimpse of our oddly different types), was more and more enchanted with her sport, until we both fell asleep from sheer weariness. We slept the day through after we had eaten in the restaurant car, where, naturally, she had fun.

When we reached Paris it was quite unnecessary for me to trouble to discover what she proposed to do. She knew: and for both of us. As we entered within the suburbs and came where the big buildings start, her excitement got tremendous, then, once in the station, she bounded out, caught a porter, pointed out our baggage—ours, mind you—and when he said "Taxi," nodded affirmation, with all those snaky curls of hers bobbing and jumping and her eyes snapping threat, injunction and invitation to the porter and to everybody who came our way. As soon as the taxi came, she produced a card, which she stuck in the driver's hand. He grinned at her very friendly. All in dumb show she directed the porter about stowing the bags and packages, and in the same way she directed me to tip him and jump in quick. This was signalled by a skirt-tail and a flash of two heels as she hopped in like a running rabbit.

We drove across the river and up the hill, looking like a honeymoon couple, and stopped in one of those tiny squares right up the slope below Sacré Cœur, in a district of steep streets and walled gardens. As the door of the house opened, she leaped into the arms of the fattest, squattest and most powdered dame I have ever seen. Behind her stood a small, meagre husband who, however, alongside his spouse, looked quite surprisingly reasonably small.

Once on a time that dame had been a dancer herself, and had had success, she told me—for she, at any rate, could talk French. But, said she, with an inhumanly coquettish up-glance, her failing was food—a fondness

for good cheer—so she became too fat for the job. And then there was love, she went on, with a sort of explanatory flourish of all her person towards the old gentleman who, more and more, seemed to resemble a dried bean. Anyhow, I gathered at last that this, their house in Paris, was wholly occupied by Spanish people.

When, after a meagre, very southern, supper, I went to my room, the door had no key. I suspect that that girl had stolen it. I turned into bed very tired and very surprised at my situation; indeed, very muddled in the head from the fantastic succession of my adventures, all ridiculous, and yet all hovering on the verge of something dangerous. Now, tomorrow I must escape this girl, Paquita, I thought drowsily, dozing off and giving a sigh or a kind of sleepy groan, and I heard a cooing voice just beside my ear in response. As I turned myself, little claws patted my head, leaned on my shoulders and held me down, whilst she kissed me softly. Against the moonlight from the long window she seemed a shadowy, tiny, pathetic figure when, drawing away from me, she stepped back with her inimitable pace. She walked away like a deer, long lift of foot and click of hoof in the descent as it came forward and down on the toe. All that ease in movement, throwing forward of ankle and instep, how describe it? And the crisp, light click of each step had something perfect about it. In that silent figure between me and the moonshiny window I suddenly realised a tremendous mystery of poise in body, a sheer grace and force.

As she stepped into the band of moonlight, she lifted her hands, and a faint, dry almost hissing of snapping fingers began, punctuated by the occasional, only slightly harder sound of her heel. It got more and more rapid as her body swayed. There was no stepping about, but all of her was moving, her body sliding within her clothes harmoniously, but truly separate. It was most of all a dance of hands, arms, fingers,

snapping fingers and shoulders sliding with that terrible feline sense of power that is so like the great oiled swing and return of a machine. Then, all that passed out of mind, for it became all dance, all wonder, all glory and moonshine, tied up with silver threads by a tiny madcap girl whose skirt danced on her body, whose hands danced, whose eyes danced, all in the cold moonlight.

Her dance finished with a sort of dying tremor and a faint rattle of heels, so quick and light that it had a chattering chuckle in its sound. As she moved to pass me, I jumped out of bed and caught hold of her, and on a sudden she fought and scratched and yelled and kicked altogether. I let go, appalled at the din, and a voice called out far off, echoing in the bare stair and outer passage as we stood panting and glaring at one another, silent in the half dark. Paquita stuck out her tongue in a child's ridiculous grimace, backing through the open door. She vanished down the stair, calling out some reply amid a deliberate loud clatter of heels. Next morning my coffee and bread were handed in to me by the grubby youth, with tousled head, who saw to boots and did the odd jobs.

Yet she must have been lying in wait, for, as I went downstairs to go out and arrange to continue my journey, anxious and disturbed now more deeply than ever, suddenly she stepped out to my encounter, making a slight, most dignified curtsy. Once again I suffered the shock of finding in her a quite new transfiguration, and once more I gaped at her like a fool. She had spent some time on her dress and adornment. The dress she wore was of the deepest red, and over it was a black shawl with a silver fringe. Beyond that, however, for the first time in our acquaintance, she had used the toilet table to enhance her natural good looks. The result simply took my breath away. Her face had that astonishing oval which made one feel as if it had been drawn in one

amazing sweep with a dexterous brush, filled with a pigment of the purest and most translucent kind. Mouth, eyes, each with a fresh and perfect colour, were drawn in the same astounding caligraphy. A divine hand seemed to have moulded or traced it. It seemed all so fragile as almost to have no solidity or depth. Her face floated in the air. About it was that kind of perfection which is found in Chinese porcelain—and oh, those enormous, liquid, living eyes! I babbled something to her, and she answered in a grave Spanish sentence or two, formal-sounding and dignified. Bowing her head as I saluted her painstakingly and awkwardly, she moved away. I halted at the door and looked back. She was walking along the passage with an immense ease of carriage and noble poise, but turned as I stopped, looked over her shoulder and gave me a dreadful, and what at that moment, to my shocked mind, was a perfectly obscene wink. A flash of the shawl and she was gone.

I went away thoroughly sickened, but, in a curious way, aroused, for she had set up a monstrous conflict in my mind. Never before had I properly realised that she was anything more than a pretty and comical child, with some alarming but really harmless tricks; something like a pet animal, one might say. And now I had been forced to realise, quite suddenly, that there was immensely more. There was a woman too—a dangerous woman perhaps. And what was I to do? All that grace and exquisite charm were bound up with the inconsequent wildness of a mischievous schoolgirl. Until that moment I had simply desired to see the affair finished and to be as amused as might be at her pranks. But this put a different face on the matter. Now I was torn between two opposed emotions, juggled by the two opposite sorts of women she had shown herself to be. Two women did I say?—the one woman—and my heart absolutely stabbed in a feeling like pain, as it contracted in my breast to the thought of her.

How I got through that day, wandering about Paris, I hardly remember, but I forced myself to go and buy my ticket to London following my deliberated intention. That act took all that was left of my own will in me. Fear and desire haunted me, desire such as cannot be described readily. No pure and holy flame had she set alight, nor, I thought, did she intend to. I feared it was the beginning of a frightful conflagration of passion.

I got back late and absolutely exhausted, having walked many miles. I had sat down at a café here and there for rest, and then, spurred onward by my furious thoughts and the frantic images that rose in my mind, I strode off again. The house was quiet, and I stole to my room and undressed quickly, falling into the sleep of absolute weariness so soon as, stretching myself flat, I was wrapped in the sheer pleasure of the cool sheets.

At what time I was wakened in the night I don't know, but suddenly I came to, with a light showing on my face as a hand pulled the bedclothes right off me from neck to heel with one sweep. Dazzled, I sat up half in a daze, but as I caught sight of the laughing face of my tormentor, in a gust of boy-like rage I flung the pillow at her. It hit her full in the face, and the candle flew out of her hand. I heard it roll on the floor. And then, from the darkness, came the sound of sobs. I sat with my moment's wild ill-temper subsiding, listening; I heard no faintest movement: just the sound of heartrending gasps from the shadowy figure.

My heart hardened at the thought that here was another trick. But I could not bear it for long, and got out of bed and made a light. There she stood, drooping face and hands on bosom, sob, sob, sob; hardly a tear. I lifted her head, and she looked with swimming, desolate eyes at me, the image of meek sorrow. What could I do but comfort her, putting my arms about her? She caught my shoulders and

clung like a child forlorn. Clinging and snuggling, I lifted her up and put her into the bed, patted her and stroked her hair. At last she quieted her trembling and sobbing and, lifting her head, caught my face to hers—whispering—murmuring. And then as it seemed with one turn and stretch of her body, as if she were making herself comfortable by my side, she stripped away every garment she had on, and squeezed her naked self closer against me, muttering drowsy endearments. Some time in the night during my sleep she disappeared.

The next day my decision to leave for London seemed ridiculous, but during the morning there was a sound of voices at my door, and both girls—Esther as well as Paquita—walked in. Here again was the same unexpectedness as ever, but there was no maliciousness in Esther's eyes. Instead was a good deal of roughish sparkle and amusement. She was excited, pleased, glad, thrilled as she took both my hands and gave me a kiss, and then pushed forward the trembling, shamefaced Paquita. We were both sheepish, and Esther protective. But a little later the *patronne* explained that the pair were engaged to dance in Germany and must leave that afternoon. I said something, I don't know what, in a loud voice, and the old dame replied with a simper that they had an engagement in London later. I felt myself wracked in pieces inside, things tearing themselves against one another. Yet when I saw the two girls a little later I realised, from their wet-eyed but quite resigned and settled attitude, that no change could take place in the fated order of things as they saw it. Esther in halting words explained. Work for them lay in Germany; for me in London. Work, the watchword. Later in London, what might happen when we met?—and she spread her hands at the thought with resigned, smiling, antique resignation, so unhesitating, so Latin.

It was not soon that they arrived in London; it

was many months, and even it became years, ere I saw them again. Occasional cards from North and Central and East Europe came from them. It was difficult, that matter of communication. Neither of them could write at all readily, Paquita hardly at all. What could they do but get some colleague or acquaintance in theatre or hotel to write out a post-card once in a while? Then at last, unexpectedly, a ticket for a stall in a music-hall. They were a turn, I discovered, not part of a troupe. Honestly I can't remember what they danced that evening. I simply watched one of them with a frozen intentness. Too long a time had passed, the break had been too sudden—was it that, or what was the trouble? Somehow she seemed far off, unreal, intangible. Even in the dressing-room, where I found them afterwards, I felt lost. Really I suppose I felt frightened. When I entered the dressing-room she bounded across, full of endearments, hugs, pirouettes and every sort of demonstration, and now, too, she could talk French. But they had only a few minutes. Esther ran out to see about the cab to take them to the next theatre, for they were on at a couple of halls in different parts of the town. That was her news. My mind went back to the little theatre in Madrid, and I asked her what had happened to the boy with whom I had had the scuffle with knives.

“I do not know. I do not care. He was a fool,” said she.

“But did I hurt him? Is he alive?”

“What does it matter? Tell me,” she asked, absolutely seriously. “Are you a great artist yet? Be quick, make a great deal of money. Then you can buy me.”

I squirmed up at this and asked: “What—what——?” unable to say any more.

She went on: “Yes, oh, yes! You see, now I belong to my family, and I must work for them. They need a lot of money. They are very many.



So if you want me like I want you, you must pay money for me and take me. Be quick or I shall be old!"

I stood tongue-tied.

And then there walked in the very fellow I'd just asked about. He was in evening dress, studs and cuff-links—and scented handkerchief—and he was fatter too, with stiff, affected manners. Paquita shrieked with laughter and rolled on the settee, kicking her legs in the air. She'd nothing much on to begin with, and in that attitude, what she had didn't count at all.

"Ha—ha—ha—ha!" she shrilled. "There he is. You asked for him. He is well fed. *Hien? Not managere.* Too fat now for a dancer. Ugh! Fatty! fatty!"

He seemed quite used to this greeting, and beamed at her. His broad, olive-tinted face, crossed with shining teeth, smiled, but his eyes still had the same slaty blackness. We shook hands and bowed stiffly to one another, and turned in quick unison towards her. She laughed luxuriously again, shrill repeated cachinations.

"*Mes deux prétendants, honnêtes et préférés.* My two leetle lovers," she shouted through the bursts of mirth. "Look! I keep the knife you fight with about me for a keep-sake."

There it was with a ribbon tied to it.

Then Esther came in again, suddenly, and caught her a couple of vigorous, stinging slaps on her kicking legs. She sat upright with tears in her eyes and spat out her rage in the worst kind of Spanish, I should guess. The other laughed, and spreading her arms, we men were being pushed towards the door, when Paquita caught at me and gave me half a dozen wet kisses with the angry tears still brimming in her beautiful eyes.

"Be queeck to come for me—dar-r-rling!" she whispered.

I felt my eyes blur, and turned to look again as

she sat down at the dressing-table. It was one step from the door to the back of her chair. Her fat manager was leaning over her. Looking in the mirror I saw her eyes turn up to look into his. I felt a queer horrible feeling in my insides at the expression of passion and desire in those eyes. Looking again to be sure, to make my pain more absolute, I saw the knife. They both stared into my eyes in the mirror as it clicked open. This time it went clean through his short ribs down to his kidneys, and I saw blood, and not my own, on my hand. I got out of the door—off—away as he collapsed at their feet.

She's a marvellous girl. But what can I do about it all now?

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*E. H. W. Meyerstein*

## THE DIVORCE

“ARE you going up there?”

“Yes; are you?”

“No; I went to the last one.”

The legginged lad walked down under the bridge, whistling, and Ilsa Grendon marched on bravely to join the little crowd gathered in the roadway in front of the bootshop. She was twenty-one, and had had a shock. A fortnight ago she was present at the divorce of her sister, with whom she lived. They were orphans, and Marcia had married a heavy drinker in the Air Force. Drink had bifurcated into infidelity and cruelty. Marcia stood it as long as she could. No other man had come into her life, but it seemed to Ilsa that the Judge was not going to let her sister off so easily, though the decree nisi was a foregone conclusion. Ilsa had left the court during his final questions to Marcia, and slipped into the strangers' gallery of the Lord Chief Justice's court,

where she was just in time to hear a young murderer's appeal dismissed. He had shot a policeman, and his young, fearless figure, with the hands twining pathetically round the second rail of the appellants' dock, somehow reminded her of her sister. She stayed on in a sort of dream through the other appeals, all dismissed. When she returned to Court No. III, Marcia's case was over. She had rejoined Marcia at the flat, and they had gone to the pictures. She had done her best to console her for the rest of that day, and they had read aloud to one another out of one of Jaliana Horatia Ewing's books, which their dead aunt used to read to them in the nursery. But Ilsa could not keep that young man's face out of her head, neither could she bring herself to mention it to Marcia when the latter asked her where she had gone during the last part of the hearing; she had answered shortly:

"Only into one of the other courts. Nothing interesting."

Marcia had got back to the routine of hat-trimming, and in a day or two seemed her cheerful self.

"I shall not think about men," she said, "till the decree is made absolute. I wish you weren't so sad. I suppose it is the reaction from *my* business. You were so wonderful all the time it was going on."

Then the fatal sentence slipped out: "I don't know what it is, unless I am thinking subconsciously of Bimbo."

"But *you* never cared for Bimbo. He's perfectly happy with that vulgar vamp."

"Quite true."

"Be logical!"

"It doesn't admit of logic. You've won through, my dear. You haven't found the right man yet; but he's coming. There's no man in my life, and no sort of success, either. I won't say I'm unhappy with you." She looked in the fire as she spoke.

“There *is* someone. This is not like you. Who is he?”

All Ilsa would say was, “I am disgusted with the machinery of the law.”

She had, on Sunday, bought a *News of the World*, and learnt that the young appellant, all hopes of a reprieve having failed, would be hanged at Pentonville at 9 a.m. on Tuesday. After a hasty early breakfast that morning—she often went for early walks—she had slipped out of the Mecklenburgh Square flat, and made her way to the trams. She had boarded one, got out on the South side of the bridge, and walked up with a quick girlish step. It was not a morbid act, but one of respect to an unknown. The lad’s salute to her just now was a sort of justification. Logical? She did not know; she did not care.

She was now outside the prison gateway, with the small crowd. One or two people, in shirt-sleeves and loose blouses, were sitting at their windows over the shops, to see—what? A notice fastened on a double door. She would not wait for that. She would pray while the clock struck, and go back to her sister. Only just in time! The clock was striking, men and boys were removing their hats and caps. Ilsa prayed for the young man, his people, for the dead policeman, for Marcia, for herself, for Bimbo, a huddled mass of silent petitions. She was prepared for a hymn; but crowds don’t sing hymns for adolescents who shoot down constables, when interrupted in their sixth or seventh burglary. She walked hastily away without looking back. Someone touched her arm. It was Bimbo.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Same as you, I suppose.”

“You weren’t interested” (jerking his head backwards) “in that case.”

“I heard the appeal dismissed.”

“So did I.”

“I didn’t see you.”

"I only stood by the door for a minute. I couldn't sit out Marcia's evidence. I am glad our business was undefended. Connie's left me."

"Oh. That doesn't interest us now."

"No. I suppose it doesn't. I say! Odd our both going up there to wait while that poor fellow died. I don't do that sort of thing as a rule, nor, I take it, do you."

"I've never done it before."

"Nor have I. I felt it was somehow due to an utter stranger. Queer the way drink-sodden humanity is taken sometimes!"

"I'm not drink-sodden."

"I know that. I respect you."

"You should have respected Marcia."

"Good-bye!"

He swerved into Copenhagen Street.

Ilsa took a tram and returned to her sister. She said nothing about the morning adventure when Marcia asked if she went into St. Pancras Churchyard for her exercise, but merely replied "More Northwards." She was wondering all the day whether there was a warning in her meeting Bimbo, and their having heard that appeal together. Ought she to follow it up? She had always felt that, badly as he had behaved, there was something in Bimbo her sister did not understand, a childish simplicity. The right woman might have made a man of him. Was it too late? When the evening paper was delivered at their flat, she read that, by a not unprecedented act of clemency, the young shooter of the policeman had been reprieved, after a reprieve had been officially refused.

"Anything in the stop-press?" asked her sister, thinking of the starters for the Derby.

"I haven't looked," said Ilsa dreamily. "Oh, Marcia!"

"What is it, dear? You're quite white."

"Look! Bimbo's dead. He's shot himself."

FIFTY THOUSAND POUNDS

I

HERBERT BLENKINSOP blinked at the golden wedge of light the setting April sun thrust through the slit of a window so high up in the wall of his cell, and thought of the sunshine of July. In July he would be free.

Pleasing thoughts followed one another in a not infrequent and agreeable procession through his mind: a free man of thirty-eight with fifty thousand pounds. . . . What a time he would have! . . . No work—no ties—nothing to do but enjoy himself in any sunshiny place in the world that took his fancy. . . . To think of being awakened on a sunny morning on a spring mattress—he glanced at his plank bed—by a waiter of a first-class French hotel! . . . No stuffy old England for him! . . . With coffee and rolls. . . . It would be coffee! And such rolls! . . . And all the sunny day before him with nothing to do but enjoy himself—not even a letter to write. . . . He'd look through a paper or two in bed, and then a hot bath. . . . Porcelain, of course. . . . And a shave by the hotel valet—he rubbed his bristling chin. . . . They all had them nowadays—the first-class hotels. . . . Then dress. . . . The clothes he'd have!—he glanced down at his convict's suit. . . . Then a stroll and perhaps a bathe. . . . Then *déjeuner*—the *déjeuner* of a first-class French hotel. . . . *Hors d'œuvres*. . . . A sole *meunière*. . . . An *entrée*. . . . Gorgonzola—no: Roquefort. . . . A small bottle of first-class wine. . . . Coffee, black, and a cigar. . . . It would be a cigar! . . . In the lounge of course. . . . Look at the women.

Then a flutter at the Casino. . . . Always stop when he was a fiver out. . . . Strict about that. . . . Lots of fun out of a fiver if you go slow. . . . And sure to be square at the end of the year, or a bit in. . . . And half a dozen dances in between. . . .

He'd learn to dance all right, never knew what you might pick up, dancing. . . . Besides, there was the exercise. . . . Must keep fit to enjoy yourself. . . . Then dinner—the dinner of a first-class French hotel. . . . A small bottle of first-class wine with it. . . . Never more. . . . No cocktails, no spirits, no liqueurs. . . . The best of everything and not too much of it. . . . That was the motto. . . . No digging your grave with your teeth, no boozing. . . . He might go on for forty years.

His eyes had turned to the floor as he mused, but they saw only the gilded future. He raised them to the golden wedge. Already it was half as thick as it had been. But the sunshine of July—not in wedges. His eyes turned to the future again.

No ties. . . . Clare? . . . Oh, no! . . . She had been all right once. . . . Ten years ago—or close on it, since they were married. That honeymoon at Dymchurch had been all right. . . . Nice place Dymchurch—and useful—very useful. . . . Yes, Clare would now be thirty—thirty in July. . . . Old for her age, too, worrying about him. . . . She was given that way. . . . No, something younger for him. . . . Always plenty of girls ready for a little fun about. . . . Nice girls too, not making good at the films or on the stage. . . . Do you credit. . . . But no ties. . . . And certainly not Clare. . . . Much too old and tame for him. . . . He didn't want tameness after this—he looked round his cell. . . . He wanted life—go. . . . How Clare had loved Dymchurch! . . . always talking of their having a bungalow of their own there. . . . Dymchurch was about her limit. . . . No, she was no use to him now. . . . Well, she would give him no trouble. . . . He had never answered a letter, not one. . . . None had come for him to answer for the last six months.

Fifty thousand pounds—fifty thousand pounds in bearer bonds and foreign notes. . . . Untraceable. . . . Scotland Yard would be after it, of course—for

the creditors. Scotland Yard had never believed he'd spent the money. . . . They were right about that; he hadn't spent it. . . . Well, he was ready for them. . . . He had had plenty of time to make his plans. . . . Fifty thousand pounds. . . . And he would have earned it. . . . Nine hundred and fourteen days of this.

The good, old Anglo-Andaman Syndicate! . . . A callous fraud, old Amory had called it. . . . Callous nothing! . . . Did a couple of thousand greedy mugs think they were going to use his brains to get rich quick? . . . Not much. . . . It would take him nine hundred and fourteen days here, besides twenty years in the City, to earn fifty thousand pounds. . . . Nothing quick about that. . . . Nine hundred and fourteen days here.

The last of the golden wedge disappeared; the cell was suddenly murky and chill. In the murk Herbert Blenkinsop got to his exercises. He was bent on coming out of prison limber: you need to be limber to cope with Scotland Yard; he was bent on coming out of prison fit: you cannot enjoy the best of everything and not too much of it unless you are fit.

## 2

The July sun blazed in through the slit of a window and the cell was warm when, on the morning of the nine hundred and fourteenth day, the warder opened its door to conduct Herbert Blenkinsop out of the prison. He took him to a room in which the clothes in which he had come to the prison lay folded on a bench, and the suit-case he had brought with him stood beside it, and left him to dress. Herbert examined the clothes with an eager and jealous eye: they had been kept well; he went through his belongings in the suit-case: nothing was missing. It was a pleasure to feel again silk underclothing against his skin; it was a pleasure to find that his suit still



fitted him. It was a new suit, the suit he had worn at his trial, an eighteen-guinea suit from his tailor in Savile Row, the tailor of the prosperous days of the Anglo-Andaman Syndicate. He was proud to have worked off the superfluous fat that had filled it out and replaced it with hard muscle. His hair had been allowed to grow to the conventional length; that morning he had been shaved by the prison barber; he was proud to feel that, after his roughened hands had had a week or two's care and manicuring, he would look a gentleman to his finger-tips.

The warder came back and conducted him to the office of the Governor. The Governor was writing a letter.

He nodded to Herbert and said: "Good morning. Count that, please," nodded towards the notes with some silver on them on the corner of the desk, the money Herbert had brought with him.

Herbert counted it—twenty-nine pounds, sixteen. Correct. He had thought out the right sum to have on him—a little under thirty pounds. But in the lining of the coat he was wearing were two fifty-pound notes, soaked in oil that they might not crackle when it was folded up. A precaution—Herbert neglected no precaution: fifty thousand pounds was a lot of money. He put the notes in his note-case, the silver into his trouser pocket.

"Quite correct, sir," he said.

The Governor stopped writing and looked at Herbert's smug and crafty face and dull, slate-coloured eyes without pleasure. Blenkinsop had been a model prisoner: he had seemed to like prison rules, for he had never broken one of them; he had earned all the alleviations of his lot that good conduct could earn; there had never been a complaint of him, or from him; the Chaplain thought highly of him. But the Governor had no great liking for model prisoners: they gave no trouble, but they so often came back—more often than prisoners who were not quite models.

Looking at Herbert Blenkinsop, he thought that he would come back; it might not be for years, but he would come—or deserve to.

Nevertheless he spoke to him sympathetically enough, praised him for his good behaviour, and asked him what he proposed to do. Herbert assumed a sincere and manly air, and said that he proposed to find work and was determined to make good. The Governor was not impressed: he believed neither in the sincerity nor the manliness; but he wished him good luck.

The warder conducted Herbert through the prison door and the prison gates. Herbert approached the gates with some misgiving. Clare might be waiting for him. She was not.

He came away from the prison very well satisfied; the warder accompanied him to buy a ticket to London for him at the railway station. On the way Herbert went into a tobacconist's shop and bought two eighteen-penny cigars—Henry Clays—and lit one. It was a disappointment; he did not derive from it the pleasure he had expected; to his palate, clean after so many months abstinence, its flavour was coarse and rank. Before he had gone fifty yards he threw it away.

The warder chuckled: "I've seen that happen before," he said. "If you'd stuck to it, you'd have been sick. Better start on something milder—just after a meal."

Herbert decided, ruefully, that he must begin with cigarettes; he had never cared for cigarettes.

They came to the railway station, and the warder bought him a third-class ticket to London and stood by him on the platform, waiting to see him off. Herbert understood: Scotland Yard was keeping an eye on him—fifty thousand pounds was a lot of money. He easily discerned the eye: there were only three other men waiting for the train, and two of them were not of the height that qualifies a man

for the police. The third, a tall, thick man with a square face, hard eyes, and a strong moustache, wore the boots. Herbert was careful not to look at him.

The train came; saying, "Good morning," to the warder, Herbert stepped into a smoking compartment; the warder touched his cap—a tribute.

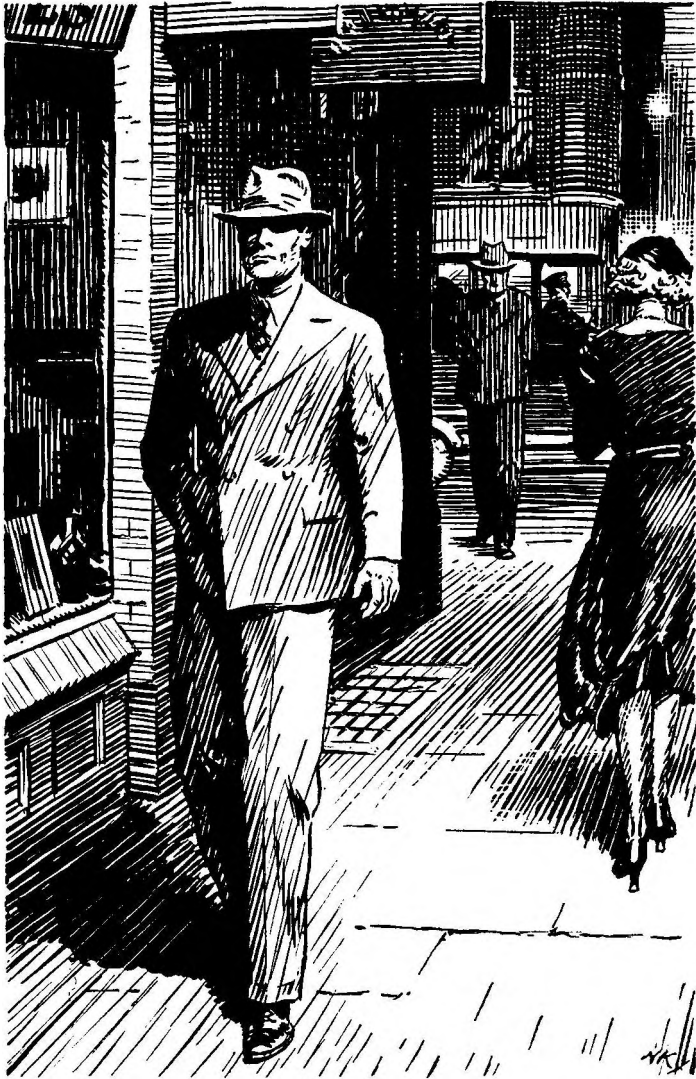
Herbert lunched on the train. It was not a lunch of the quality of the *déjeuners* he proposed to enjoy at first-class French hotels, but it was an agreeable change from the monotonous and meagre prison fare. The flavour of the cabinet pudding was too rich and cloying, the coffee was too bitter for his clean palate. He realised that he must give it time to appreciate properly the fuller flavours of the luxurious life; that proper appreciation would come. When he had finished he bought a packet of the most expensive cigarettes in the restaurant car and smoked one. Its flavour was better than that of the Henry Clay, but he told himself that it was nothing to write home about. However, time would tell.

When the train ran into Paddington he made no effort to lose his shadow, and when he came out of the station, that burly shadow was talking to a burly friend with much the same moustache, and boots from the same shelf, who, to all seeming, had met the train to welcome him to London. Herbert's eyes wandered carelessly over them, and he did not lower his voice that they might not hear him tell the taxi-driver to drive him to the Granville Hotel (bed and breakfast 6s.) in Bedford Street. He had intended to take a bus to it; but the bustle and noise were too much for his nerves after the prison quiet.

On arriving at the hotel he wrote his name in the visitors' book. His suit-case was taken up to a comfortable bedroom at the back of the hotel, in which the noise of the traffic came only as a dull roar. He felt the mattress anxiously: it was springy enough. Then he had a hot bath. That was a pleasure unalloyed. Then he strolled down to Piccadilly and

along it. The noise and bustle were distressing at first, and his steps were halting, and he waited at every crossing for the red lights to stop the traffic. In less thronged Piccadilly the distress was less, but it was a relief to turn into the Park. He had been no lover of Nature, but he found the stretches of green turf and the green trees uncommonly agreeable. He sat, relaxed, for a long while on a chair in the shade, enjoying them and feasting his eyes on the variety of his fellow-creatures who moved along the path near him; now that his eyes were at leisure, he perceived that the women wore more hair and longer skirts than they had worn when he went to prison.

Soon after seven his healthy appetite assured him that it was time to dine. He walked back along Piccadilly to the Circus, paused at the Salmon and Gluckstein shop at the corner to buy the mildest cigar it sold, then crossed the road carefully to the Trocadero. Mindful of his lunch, he ate a grilled sole, a fruit salad, some Cheddar cheese, and thoroughly enjoyed them. He did not enjoy the small bottle of first-class wine; he drank only one glass of it. He took the edge off his coffee with cream and lit the mild cigar. He smoked only an inch of it; his palate was still too clean. After some thought he chose a film rather than a theatre; it would be less noisy. He went to the Empire. The film was American, and he was surprised to learn how much life had changed during his three years, or rather nine hundred and fourteen days, severance from it. After it he walked to his hotel, not troubling to try to learn whether Scotland Yard was dogging him, for he was sure that it was, and went to bed. The spring mattress was all that he had dreamed; but the clocks had struck three before he fell asleep—the coffee and the cigar.



*“ Not troubling to try to learn whether Scotland Yard was dogging him ”*



## 3

The next morning he set about carrying out his plan, the fruit of so many hours' hard thinking, for recovering safely the fifty thousand pounds. When he had formed the design, more than five years earlier, of making that sum by a swindle which would mean penal servitude, he had perceived that safe deposits were no hiding-place for it: Scotland Yard must keep a watch on them, so that a man might shake off a shadow and yet be caught when he took his loot from one. He had buried his loot in a corner of Dymchurch churchyard, from which Clare and he had once watched the sun set over Romney Marsh. It was a quite safe corner, for there was barely room for one more grave in it, and that would be right under the hedge and cramped, but plenty of room in other parts of the churchyard.

After a pleasing breakfast he looked through the advertisements in the *Daily Telegraph*, and found what he wanted, a bed-sitting-room (with gas-ring), rent twenty-five shillings a week with breakfast, in Anstruther Road, Bedford Park. He packed his suit-case and paid his bill, walked to Oxford Street, and took an omnibus to Bedford Park. Anstruther Road was wide and green, with a row of trees on either side of it; the bed-sitting-room was of fair size, and there was a spring mattress on the bed; he paid the first week's rent in advance and unpacked. Scotland Yard would find the situation and the rent suited to a man who wished to live cheaply while he looked for work.

Having unpacked, he read the advertisements in the *Daily Telegraph* of firms needing book-keepers, and made a list of them, returned to Piccadilly and lunched simply at the Trocadero. After lunch he walked to the City and applied for the post of book-keeper at the offices of five firms. His lack of references pre-

vented him from obtaining a post, but his getting to the search for work without a day's delay must help to assure Scotland Yard that his desire for it was genuine. When the offices closed he walked to the Regent Palace and sat in the lounge reading an evening paper over a mixed vermouth and a cigarette till it was time to dine at the Trocadero. After dinner, owing to his habit of going to bed early in prison, he turned very drowsy and went home. It was raining hard when he reached it, and it was a pleasure to him to know that his shadow would be out in the rain, watching the house till midnight at the earliest. It might be, indeed, that Scotland Yard was having him shadowed day and night—fifty thousand pounds was a lot of money. At any rate, he was sure that his shadows would find it irksome to have to come all that way from the Yard to pick him up, and he would the sooner have them bored and careless.

The next day was the pattern of the days that followed. He left his lodging at half-past ten and took an omnibus to Notting Hill Gate, walked along the Bayswater Road the length of Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, then took another omnibus to the City, where he visited offices in need of book-keepers till lunch-time. Then he walked down Holborn to Soho, and there lunched, each day at a different restaurant, till he found the Golden Cock, at which the cooking was French and good. After lunch he walked back to the City and visited more offices, came back to Piccadilly when business hours were over, sat in the lounge of the Regent Palace till dinner-time, dined at the Golden Cock, went to a film or a play, then home to bed; on fine nights he walked home.

At the end of ten days he was sure that Scotland Yard must be beginning to think that he was truly a conscientious seeker after work, in his mind the fixed idea of getting it and no other design of moment.



Also he knew his changing shadows; there were three of them, and they shadowed him in turn. Also he was even fitter and more limber than he had been when he left prison, for he had more room for his morning and evening exercises, and every day the pace at which he walked grew faster. The pleasant thought that a robust shadow was sweating after him helped to quicken it.

But for the fact that he had to spend so many hours in the often sweltering City, he was leading a pleasant life: he ate his meals in a leisurely fashion, and never stirred after them till he had smoked the best part of an excellent cigar. His palate had become attuned to the richest flavours, and, thanks to his walking so far and so fast, his appetite was admirable. A newspaper was still a joy to him; the films and the plays kept his mind full. He was no reader of books. Nevertheless his impatience to be out of London in an airy, sunny, first-class French hotel by the sea was keen, and growing keener. But, even so, he did not hurry.

He was living well, but living carefully, never spending a penny for which he did not get full value. It was his way. His shadows did not know how well he was living: they did not enter a tobacconist's with him; they did not take a meal at the Golden Cock, for it would never do for him to come to know their faces; they never dreamt that his furtive eyes were so keen. But on the morning of the eleventh day he unpicked two inches of the lining of his coat and drew out one of the fifty-pound notes that did not crackle. He went to the City in his wonted manner and called at two offices, and came out looking depressed. He entered the third block slowly—he had been in it before, and grasped its convenience—dashed through it quickly, came out of its other entrance into a side street and walked to the Bank of England. He handed the note to a clerk and asked for ten fives; the clerk looked at the note curiously

and examined it carefully, then slipped the band off a packet of five-pound notes.

"Got a bit greasy," said Herbert chattily.

The clerk glanced at Herbert; he knew how and why the note had got a bit greasy; he had seen notes like that before.

"They get like that sometimes," he said in a non-committal tone, looking at Herbert with understanding eyes, as he passed the ten fives across the counter.

Herbert wished he had not been chatty; but he was comforted by the thought that, if he found reason to delay, he had enough money to lead his pleasant life for another six weeks, while Scotland Yard must believe that he was still living frugally on the twenty-nine pounds sixteen. He walked quickly back to the block of offices and, entering it from the side street, came out of the main entrance to see his shadow thirty yards down the street, on the opposite side, looking into the window of a shop with a listless air. Herbert went into another office; then they walked to Soho.

During the next three days Herbert resumed the old round. On the fourth morning he found the same shadow behind him, and led him to the same convenient block of offices, entered them briskly with a hopeful air, then slipped out into the side street and took a taxi to Gamage's. There he bought an entrenching tool—he would not be able to sneak a spade again—a brownish sport's coat and cloth hat, and saw with pleasure that in them he looked unlike the Herbert Blenkinsop, dressed by Savile Row, and quite unlike a gentleman to his finger-tips. He bought also a light suit-case and packed his purchases in it, then drove to Waterloo Station and left it in the cloak-room, took the Underground to Piccadilly, and was picked up by his worried shadow, who had learnt too late how convenient that block of offices was, lurching leisurely at the Golden Cock.

## 4

Everything was ready, but Herbert did not hurry, though his shadows' reports of his quiet life and conscientious search for work must be of a sameness that had already lulled the distrust of the official to whom they were handed in, for he had little doubt that the man who had lost him for more than an hour that morning had seen no reason to report that gap in his shadowed life. It was not till the seventeenth day of his stay in London that he set about the great exploit for which he had trained. During the sunny morning he sought work, then lunched, and again sought work during the cloudy afternoon. As he came out of the last office he looked up at the lowering clouds and walked to Gamage's and bought a raincoat. He came out with it wrapped in brown paper and had tea, with two poached eggs, at a tea-shop opposite, then walked slowly, lest his shadow should lose him, to Paddington Station.

At a quarter to six he took a ticket to Salisbury, and went on to the platform where the six o'clock express to Exeter was already filling. He saw his shadow come on to the platform nonchalantly. He bought an evening paper and a magazine and walked up the train till he came to an empty compartment. He opened the door, tossed his brown-paper parcel on the seat, and stood and looked about him. In the middle of the second carriage lower down his shadow was standing at the door of a compartment, talking, or pretending to talk, to some one inside it, as if he were seeing a friend off. The guard blew his whistle. Herbert stood where he was; so did the detective.

The guard blew his whistle the second time and waved his flag. Herbert stepped into his compartment as the train started, snapped the door to, tossed an empty note-case through the open window of the door on the farther side of the corridor, caught up

his parcel, dashed to that corridor door, opened it, stepped down on to the footboard, and jumped on to the empty line.

He walked down the line, picked up his note-case, and scrambled on to the farther platform before the last carriage of the express had passed him.

As he put the note-case into his pocket he said to an interested ticket-collector: "Jerked out of my hand somehow as the train started. Didn't want to get to Salisbury without a bean in my pocket. What time's the next train?"

"You were quick, sir—quick as a cat," said the ticket-collector respectfully. "Next train's at eight; gets to Salisbury at ten fifty-nine."

"A bit late," said Herbert. "But I expect I shall manage all right."

He walked slowly down the platform, pleased with himself. The trick had worked; his shadow had not seen him leave the train, he believed him safe in it till Salisbury, eighty-three miles away; he would be sure that he did not leave it at Salisbury or any other station before Exeter. It was any odds that he would believe that he lost him at Exeter station, and with the help of the Exeter Police search the town—two days unshadowed at least, and eighteen hours were all he needed to be safe in France with fifty thousand pounds.

He took his new suit-case from the cloak-room and, going down to the Underground, took a ticket to the Elephant and Castle. He did not go by the first train that came in, because there was a chance that his shadow might have asked one of the detectives at the main station to make sure that he left by the six o'clock express. Everyone on the Underground platform went by the first train; it looked as if no one was on his trail. He took the second train and, leaving it at the next station, made yet surer. He went by the next train to the next station, and walked half-way up the stairs to the street. No one was on

the staircase but himself. He changed into the sport's coat and cloth hat and put the rain-coat into the suit-case, then went, no longer a gentleman to his finger-tips, down the stairs and to the Elephant and Castle by the next train. There he bought a packet of ham sandwiches and set out to walk back to Charing Cross. It was hot walking; there was no wind; the still clouds were low and heavy; he thought that a thunderstorm was coming. All the better; the worse the night, the safer.

He entered Charing Cross Station at twenty-five minutes past seven, and left it in the Folkestone train at half-past. In a tingle of excitement that his plan to shake off Scotland Yard had worked so smoothly, the words in his evening paper danced unreadable before his eyes, and when they stopped dancing he could find in it nothing a tenth part as interesting as his own adventure. He laid it aside. In his craving to be getting on with his enterprise he found that the train was crawling. To talk to either the parson or the hobbledehoy, his travelling companions, would certainly not quicken the slow minutes. He fell back on his gilded dream: with any luck he would be in a first-class French hotel at Wimereux this time to-morrow night.

At half-past eight he ate his sandwiches. The train was already among the hills round Folkestone when there came a flash of lightning and the thunder crashed and rolled along them.

That was what he wanted! . . . Keep people indoors! . . . If he'd known this was coming he'd have risked an electric torch. . . . Ought to have brought one on the chance. . . . No matter: he'd all the night to do the job in.

He came out of Folkestone Station in his rain-coat into a drenching rain. He paid no heed to it, but walked briskly down the town to the Sandgate Road and turned up it. The lightning and the thunder, that hardly ceased crashing and rumbling, were

truly cheering. He had nearly reached Sandgate when the last omnibus to Dymchurch overtook him; he boarded it.

When the omnibus came out of Hythe into Romney Marsh the noise of the thunder was growing fainter as the storm moved along the hills Dover way. That did not please him; he would rather have had it rage over Dymchurch while he was digging up the fifty thousand pounds. But the rain was falling heavily, and that should keep people indoors and send them to bed. There was plenty of lightning—sheet lightning, not the forked lightning of the storm itself. At the first Martello tower he left the omnibus, let it go on, crossed the sea wall, and walked along the sands, only able to see the groins when he came right on to them, for the flashes of lightning came less often, and only lit up the sands to leave them in a blacker darkness. There were but few lights in the scattered houses along that part of the sea-front. He found the steps, not easily, and went up on to the sea wall and walked along it till a fortunate flash of lightning showed him the gate of the path to the Ship Hotel. He walked down it, and came into the village street a few yards from the churchyard gate.

He stood still, looking and listening. Here and there a lit-up bedroom window glimmered through the veil of rain; no one was abroad. The first stroke of the church clock striking eleven jerked his heart into his mouth; he scuttled across the road and through the gate into the churchyard, and stopped with his heart hammering against his ribs.

It was pitch dark under the elms; he saw dimly the bulk of the church looming before him; he walked up the path to it and touched its wall, and waited for a flash to give him his bearings. A sudden flood of exultation at having come unseen to his goal surged through him: the first-class hotel at Wimereux was a certainty now.

The flash came, hanging a little in a flicker, after

the manner of sheet lightning, and gave him his bearings. He moved slowly, but firmly, in the deeper darkness ten yards along the path to the left, and stepped off it among the graves. Once he bumped against a tombstone; he barked his right shin against the arm of a little cross at the head of a child's grave and did not feel it. The darkness lifted a little where the trees ended along the edge of the Marsh, but he walked right into the hedge. He was in the corner all right, not four feet from fifty thousand pounds!

He turned and took a step forward; his foot caught the end of a grave; it nearly tripped him. He had not come straight; he was off the line: there was no grave in the corner right under the hedge. No: he *had* come straight: he was *not* off the line; he *was* in the corner. A sense of disaster sent a chill through him; he waited for the flash with his mouth turning dry. It came and lit up a new tombstone; it hung and he read:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY  
OF

CLARE BLENKINSOP

Obit June 3rd, 1934

In The Twenty-Ninth Year Of Her Age

R.I.P.

Clare! Dymchurch had indeed been her limit. She had come there to die and chosen the spot from which they had watched that sunset, for her grave. The sexton had dug up the fifty thousand pounds.

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THE KIDNAPPED COLLECTOR

I

"AND she said, 'Primrose Armada,' and that was all she would say," said Tuffin, and he pulled fiercely at his scrubby little toothbrush of a moustache.

"Let's get this exact," said I. "You asked her her address, and all she would say was 'Primrose Armada'?" Did you tell her you were Tuffin's Egg-Whisks?"

"Of course I told her I was *the* Tuffin," he said sharply. "I always do. You always tell a girl who doesn't know you that you're the Earl of Barradine and Sarples, don't you?"

"Always," said I, and I don't think I even blinked. "Your strange story grows stranger. Wearing a diamond tie-pin, you go to explore London's underworld. In Pennyfields about midnight a thief snatches it; as he bolts, a lady sticks a cane between his legs, and he comes a cropper that jolts the pin out of his hand, and she gives it back to you. You thank her, and after you've told her that you're *the* Tuffin, the only address she gives you is Primrose Armada. A wonder girl!" I looked at him a bit harder, not that I liked looking at the little skug: "Did that pin grow on you or did you buy it?"

"I bought it, of course!" he snapped. Then his hard and empty black eyes came a little farther out of his head, and he said: "You're pulling my leg."

I looked at his spindly shanks carefully till he had to shuffle his feet, and said kindly: "Your leg is safe from me. But why have you come to *me* with this story?"

"Well, everybody at the Feb. says that you're one of the cutest men about town, and I thought you might be able to help me find out where Primrose Armada is. I know lots of the best business brains in London; but they wouldn't be any use for a simple thing like this. The fact is, I've fallen for that girl,



and she's the first I've really fallen for since I was a lad; not that there haven't been plenty ready to help me fall for them."

He pulled at the toothbrush with a fatal air.

"Millionaires are always irresistible," I said, and then I snapped: "Are your intentions honourable?"

The little skug wriggled and said uncomfortably: "I fancy they'd have to be. She's a lady as well as a peach."

I smiled at him kindly and said: "Well, since you're not out to snare a Pennyfields maiden's heart with the lure of gold, I'll tell you where she lives." His face grew bright. "She lives at Primrose Castle, Court, Grange, Manor, House, Villa, Chambers, or Cottage in Armada Park, Road, Lane, Square, Vale, Hill, Avenue, Place, Terrace, Crescent, or Mews in some city, town, village, or hamlet, in the United Kingdom or Ireland." His face was not so bright. "Or she lives at Armada something in Primrose something in the same district."

He had grown quite glum and said: "Yes. But——"

"The rest is easy for the man of millions," I broke in. "It's merely a matter of an expert in directories. He'll find a Primrose something in an Armada something, or an Armada something in a Primrose something in five minutes, or five years. Go to the British Museum, find an expert, and once aboard the Armada, the girl is yours."

My confidence gave him confidence, and he rose at once to go to the Museum, saying: "Thanks awfully, old chap. If at any time I can do anything for you, you've only to ask me."

"Thanks," I said gratefully. "A lion has often been very useful to a mouse."

He tried to shake my hand and missed, and went out, and I reflected on the drawbacks of belonging to an expensive, unobtrusive Club like the February, where you can get a really high game. Tuffins are the drawbacks.

But where on earth was Primrose Armada?

Possibly the girl had been testing the strength of *the* Tuffin's wish to see her again; more likely she had made up her mind that he was one of the things one sees once. I did not think that the solution of the problem would be found in directories: a girl who tripped up a thief in Pennyfields at midnight would hardly live in a Primrose house or an Armada villa—she would live nearer Piccadilly Circus. But, after all, it was *the* Tuffin's problem, not mine.

But where *was* Primrose Armada?

I had nothing to do till lunch-time, and I thought about it. The problem gripped my wits. By lunch-time I was at the end of them. I must have more data.

I went to lunch at White's, and as I came into the dining-room I saw the man who could give them to me, Dymchurch, a brother Peer of a sedentary habit, who devotes all the time he is not busy with games of chance, to historical research. I asked him what he could tell me about the Armada, for the catch was probably there.

"Not my period," he said pleasantly. "I can only tell you that it was sent by Philip the Second of Spain in 1588 to conquer England, but was scattered by the English Fleet, and tried to go home round Scotland and came to grief."

"Thanks," I said. "Is there any connection between the Armada and primroses?"

"I never heard of any, and I know Elizabethan literature pretty well. Besides, nobody noticed the Primrose before Wordsworth," he said.

That was that; but it left me battling with the problem at intervals in the games I played and at meals till one o'clock in the morning. I was still battling with it when I went to sleep, and I must have gone on battling with it in my dreams, for I awoke with the words, "Primrose 1588," ringing in my ears.

I said a few kind words about primroses and a few more about the Armada, and went to breakfast annoyed. In the middle of it I suddenly took a deep breath and laughed. But I had solved the problem! "Primrose 1588" was the telephone number of the lady of Pennyfields!

I went on with my breakfast with an easy mind and a better appetite, considering. The obvious thing to do was to tell *the* Tuffin; but I have never had any use for the obvious thing; in fact, I have often been known to shrink from it. I think that must be why so many half-wits say I am mad. Besides, my interest in the problem had awakened my interest in the lady who had set it. Perhaps she wasn't a lady; *the* Tuffin was hardly an expert in such matters. For his sake I ought surely to find out if she was really a lady and fit for a young millionaire—such a nice young millionaire—to fall for. Besides, there was Pennyfields—Pennyfields, London's Chinese quarter—at midnight, and a lovely lady. Primrose Armada might lead me to Pennyfields at midnight and the kind of doings I like—doings with a zip to them.

I rang up Primrose 1588. A pleasing voice, a girl's, asked who was speaking.

"Is that Primrose Armada?" said I.

"Oh!" said the pleasing voice in a startled tone. There was a pause and she added: "Is that Mr. Tuffin?"

"It is *not*," I said rather coldly. "It's the man who solved your problem."

"Oh?" she said and paused again, and then: "What is it you want?"

"Only the reward," said I.

"What reward?" she said quickly. "There isn't any reward."

"Oh, there must be a reward for solving a problem—surely," said I. "I thought the solver would be allowed to make your acquaintance. Mayn't I?"

She hesitated, then said cautiously: "What do you want to make it for?"

"I thought it might lead me to Pennyfields and doings—doings with a zip to them," said I.

There was quite a long pause, as if she were thinking it out; then she said: "But I don't even know your name."

"My name's Barradine."

She began: "Not the Lord Barradine who is——"

"—always getting into the papers. Yes. But wrongfully, mind you," I broke in.

There was another pause; then she said: "But where could we meet?"

"Thanks awfully," I said gratefully. "What about the Cecil at half-past four? We could dance if you felt like it. Dancing helps to make acquaintance."

"Very well," she said. "But how shall I know you?"

"Well, mine is a melancholy mug. A friend once told me that I was exactly like Charles the Second, only worse. But, in addition, I'll wear the white flower of a blameless life," said I.

"Right," she said and rang off.

I came away from the telephone quite pleased, lunched at White's, played a couple of rubbers, and was waiting in the hall of the Cecil at half-past four. At half-past four to the minute there came through the swing door the lady of Pennyfields. I knew that it was she before she smiled at me, a bit doubtfully, though she was not at all like any of the pictures of her I had imagined: she was much younger—not more than eighteen—and she was even prettier, with large dark eyes in a charming face of a clear warm paleness. Her figure was as charming as her face, and she walked with a swing that was almost a little swagger.

"I'm Barradine," said I.

"My name's Quainton—Seraphita Quainton," she said, and I knew at once who she was, the daughter

of that dare-devil Roger Quanton, a distant cousin by marriage of mine.

We smiled at one another seriously, and I took her to the Palm Court and chose a table and ordered tea. She was quite at her ease with me—already a woman of the world, in fact—as Roger Quanton's daughter would be. I told her how I had solved her problem, and then how I put *the* Tuffin on to the directories.

She did not show herself at all keen on his finding her address, for she said: "A few wild-goose chases won't do Mr. Tuffin any harm—a man who wears a diamond pin—in Pennyfields at night, too."

"Wild-goose chases harden Tuffins," I said.

Then we danced and talked about more important things. I learnt that she spent very little of her time in England, but travelled all about the world with her father. All the while I was sure that she had not come for the fun of the thing—she wasn't the kind; I felt that there was something in the background, something worrying her; there was an air of strain about her, and when we were not talking she was frowning and absent-minded.

At last I said bluntly: "What's the trouble?"

"What trouble?" she said in a startled voice.

"The trouble you're in—the trouble that took you to Pennyfields last night and brought you here this afternoon?"

She looked me over slowly with eyes that seemed to be measuring me; then she said, "It was what you said about being led to Pennyfields and doings with a zip to them that made me come this afternoon. If you really meant it—and I think you did—I could lead you to Pennyfields and doings, and you could help me."

"I meant it," said I firmly.

"Well, it's my father. He's lost. He's a collector of Chinese ivories and, like most collectors, he's rather mad. Have you ever heard of the ivory Lohans?"

“Never,” said I.

“Not many people have—in Europe. There were sixteen Lohans, very holy men and followers of the Buddha; and in the middle Ming period a great Chinese artist carved the sixteen of them, each out of a single tusk, figures three feet high or thereabouts. It’s not the best period, but this artist, whose name no one knows, was a primitive born out of his time, and his work is beautiful. Dad learnt about them, and set his heart on getting them, all sixteen. He has been after them for more than ten years, and took seven years to get the first nine, and often it was dangerous work. For the last three years, owing to the troubles in China, things have moved quicker—the owners of these Lohans, which were scattered about in the big cities or near them, were readier to sell them, and he got six more. Then the last Lohan gave him more trouble than all those six; it was more trouble to find and more trouble to buy, and when he’d bought it, it was stolen from him. But he learnt that it was coming to England, and we believe it came in the same steamer that we did.”

“So you were there,” said I.

She nodded and went on: “We could find no trace of the sixteenth Lohan when we landed, but Daddy got on its track in London. He learnt that a very rich English collector had found out, a bit late, about the Lohans, and made up his mind to have them, and was ready to go to thirty thousand pounds for them. His agents had been scouring China for them, without finding them, of course, but finding everywhere that Daddy had collected them. They think that he has only seven of them; for one of those agents, a London dealer in Oriental objects of art, came to Dad and offered him fourteen thousand pounds for the seven. Daddy refused the offer and offered him three thousand pounds for the sixteenth; but he swore he knew nothing about it. Three days ago Daddy, who was hot on the track of it, dis-

appeared, and I was getting worried about him. Then last night I was rung up on the telephone, and Daddy's voice said: 'A damned little fish-eyed collector——' and stopped short as if he'd been prevented saying any more. I saw that he was in trouble again, and I found out that the call came from a house in Lemon Street—it runs out of Pennyfields—the house of a man we know, a German called Fuchs, who knows more about what's going on in the East than the people on the spot—he put us on to three of the Lohans—so I took Daddy's malacca sword-stick and went straight down to see him. But the house was shut up and looked empty, and no one came to my knocking. Yet I'm sure that Daddy's in it, and I've got to get him out of it."

"But you don't mean to tell me that anyone would kidnap a well-known man like your father—in London—to-day," I said.

"You don't know Daddy," she said rather patiently. "Daddy wouldn't want any kidnapping; he'd go straight there if he thought that his Lohan was in the house, and start tearing it off Fuchs in such a way that he'd give him every excuse for holding him, if he had men enough, and that's what he's doing. Most likely he won't let him go till he hands over the seven Lohans he knows he's got. And that Daddy'll never do."

She spoke with a quiet and absolute certainty that convinced me, and I said: "No wonder you're worried. I suppose these gentry wouldn't stick at much."

"They'd stick at nothing," she said, and for a moment her eyes were bright with a glimmer of tears.

"Very well, we'll get him out of that house," I said quickly, though I had no notion whatever how it was to be done.

"Thanks awfully," she said, and she looked at me as if she expected me to out with a way of doing it then and there.

I lit a Sullivan and lay back in my chair. All I could think of was that collectors are mad, and that was no use. Then an odd idea came to me.

"Your father said a little fish-eyed collector, did he?" I said.

She nodded.

"It's odd, but I know a little fish-eyed collector, and so do you," said I. "And now I come to think of it, it struck me at the time that a diamond pin was a queer thing to wear when you're exploring London's underworld. I wonder."

"You wonder what?" she said quickly.

"Whether the wealthy collector who is set on getting the sixteen Lohans and probably had the sixteenth stolen, is our young friend *the* Tuffin. I know he's a collector, for a man at the February Club told me so, and he told me too that he was one of those collectors who not only collect but make money out of collecting—buying in Europe and selling in the States—thousands he said he made, though he stinks of money already."

"Yes?" she said.

"Well, you go to Pennyfields to look for your father, and there you meet *the* Tuffin wearing a diamond pin—a diamond pin in Pennyfields at midnight, mark you. Only an imbecile would explore the underworld in a diamond pin, and *the* Tuffin is not an imbecile. Suppose he wasn't exploring the underworld at all, but going to Fuchs house to worry those seven Lohans out of your father?"

"He was certainly close to Lemon Street and going towards it when we met," she said, frowning thoughtfully.

"Well, then, I wonder," said I.

She looked at me hard and earnestly, with her charming forehead still creased with that thoughtful frown, for a good minute, then suddenly she turned fierce and said fiercely: "I don't! I don't wonder at all! Not if that slimy little beast I met in Penny-



fields sells ivories in the States! Daddy told me that the complete set of the Lohans would be worth about two hundred and fifty thousand dollars there, and this little beast is trying to get them for about half that." She rose and added: "Where does he live? I'll go and talk to him!"

She *would* talk to him: her lips and chin were set, her eyes were blazing.

"Wait," I said quietly. "You've precious little to go on."

"I've got enough," she said with absolute certainty. "I feel in my bones that this slimy little beast had the sixteenth Lohan stolen and he's trying to worry those seven others out of Daddy."

I have quite a respect for a woman's intuition, and it came on the top of my hunch.

"Wait," I said quietly. "If you let the little skug know you've guessed that he and Fuchs have collared your father, you treble his danger."

She quieted down a little and sat down and said between her clenched teeth: "If I could have the little beast quite to myself for half an hour, I'd risk that!"

I went on considering. We had very little to go on: my hunch, her intuition, and a diamond pin. But I was ready to go on them, and she had given me an idea of how we could make a start.

"The first thing we have to do is to make sure that the little skug is at the bottom of the business. If we know that, we can get on," I said. "To do it we want him, as you say, to ourselves, and I can get him to ourselves for six hours. We ought to be able to put the fear of God into him in that time."

"Oh, we ought!" she said eagerly.

"Yes. And I shall be relying on you for just one thing—to tell me when he's lying," said I. "It's no use a man's trying to lie to a woman; she always knows."

"I'll tell you that," she said, with absolute certainty.

"Right," I said. "Can you lay your hand on any of the Lohans?"

"On fifteen," she said.

"Two will do. I just want to set the scene for our interview. Come to my house, 100a, Cadogan Square, at a quarter to ten to-night in your prettiest frock, with two of the Lohans your father collected, and you, Tuffin, and I will have a jolly little supper together."

"Oh," she said, and she laughed.

"I'll ring him up at once," I said, and went to the hotel telephone.

I knew that it was any odds that he was gambling at the February, rang him up, and in less than three minutes heard his grating voice.

"That you, Tuffin? If you're not engaged this evening, would you like to meet Primrose Armada?" I said.

"Primrose Armada? You don't mean to say you've found her already?" he said in an excited voice.

"Of course I've found her already. You don't suppose it takes me twenty-four hours to find a girl in a little place like London?"

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he said in a stupefied kind of voice.

"Of course—but probably not to-day," I said cheerfully. "Will you come to supper at Cadogan Square at ten o'clock?"

There was a pause; then he said in a very suspicious voice: "Look here: you haven't been stealing a march on me?"

"I'm not a marrying man. I'm a matrimonial agent," I said.

"Yes. I shall be delighted to come—charmed," he said quickly, in a tone of relief.

"Right," I said and rang off.

I went back to Miss Quainton.

“Is he coming?” she said eagerly.

“He’s coming,” I said. “And if once we’re sure that he’s at the bottom of the business, he’s put himself outside the law, and you can go pretty far with a man who is outside the law.”

## 2

At twenty to ten I went into my dining-room and found Harcombe, my butler, putting the finishing touches to the table. I live on the second floor, to be a bit above the fogs, and my rooms are *en suite*. There was little fear of the servants, so far below, hearing any objections the Tuffin might yell; but I made sure.

I said: “The gentleman who is having supper with us to-night is a merry soul, Harcombe. So if you hear any strange noises, you needn’t put yourselves about.”

“Yes, m’lord,” said Harcombe.

“See that he gets all he needs to drink,” I said.

“Yes, m’lord,” said Harcombe, and a shadow of a smile passed over his severe face.

I stepped back into my smoking-room, and, at a quarter to ten, he showed Miss Quainton, looking a dream in a soft, clinging frock of a delicate shade of lemon yellow, into it and laid two large parcels on the table. I welcomed her and told him to open them; he did so, and set the two ivory Lohans on the table. Brainy and benignant lads they looked to be; but beautiful? Well, perhaps they would grow on me. We carried them into the dining-room and set them on a cabinet to the left of the door, and went back into the smoking-room.

“I want you to go gently with the talk,” I said. “Don’t bother to lead up to the subject; the Lohans will do that all right, if *the* Tuffin is really after them.”

“I understand,” she said.

At five to ten *the* Tuffin was with us, quite Assyrian, with two pearls the size of filberts in his shirt front, four diamonds of the size of walnuts in his cuffs, and another in his ring—well, about that size; at any rate, they shone as large.

“You’ve met Miss Primrose Armada,” I said.

“My fair incognita,” he said, grabbing her hand with a gallant and languishing air, which made me itch to smack him.

We drank our cocktails and talked about the weather, and then went into the dining-room and sat down at a round table for three. *The* Tuffin was put facing the Lohans, but for the time being he had no eyes for anything but Miss Quainton. It was certainly a case of unrequited love at first sight. At first I kept the talk going, cheerfully, till he recovered enough to feel that he really must impress Miss Quainton and let her see what a fine rich fellow he was. He began to brag, and was well started when his eyes fell on the Lohans. I was watching him: he stopped short, and his eyes opened and then his mouth.

He recovered and went on, and it was fun watching him: his eyes were dragged now to Miss Quainton and now to the Lohans; they distracted him from Miss Quainton and she distracted him from them. He was like an unfortunate needle between two magnets, and on the top of it it was obvious that he wanted his supper badly. Probably with supper ahead he had eaten no dinner. So he would gaze into Miss Quainton’s eyes and tell her the huge price he had paid for something, wolf a mouthful, glare at the Lohans, return to Miss Quainton, and repeat the round. All the while Harcombe was seeing to it that he had all he needed to drink.

It was the wine that brought him through, and when we came to the coffee and Grand Marnier, and Harcombe left us, he was entirely his splendid young self. He smiled at Miss Quainton sultanesquely, rose

and walked with a lordly air across the room to the two Lohans, examined them, turned, took his cigar out of his mouth, blew out a large puff of smoke, and said:

"I like those two ivories, Barradine. Name your price. You shall have a cheque now."

He waved the hand that held the cigar in the lordly way Croesus was so fond of using when he was showing treasures to illustrious guests.

It was a bit sudden; but I said: "I couldn't put a price on those two Lohans. They're unique—at any rate in Europe."

He laughed a kind of snorting laugh and said loftily: "Unique in Europe? My dear chap, what *are* you talking about? I've *eight* of them."

"There aren't any eight to have," I said, obstinately.

"There are sixteen," he said. "And inside of two years I shall have the lot."

Seraphita was bent a little forward, looking tense, and I was afraid she might interrupt.

"Yes, yes; I know all about collectors' talk when they're set on getting a thing," I said quickly and laughed unpleasantly.

"Does your lordship doubt my word?" he said with tremendous loftiness.

"Not for a moment," I said. "But I'll bet you an even monkey that you can't show me eight ivory Lohans to match those two. We'll go round to your place now and take a look at them, and Miss Armada shall be the judge."

He was taken right aback; then he said: "No: I can't show them to you to-night. But they're virtually mine. My agent is concluding the deal, and I'll bet you a monkey that I'll show them to you within ten days." And then he turned as ugly-looking a thug as ever I saw and added: "My agent has instructions to let no consideration stand in the way of his getting them."

I rose and strolled to the door of the smoking-room, turned the key, took it out of the lock, turned to him, and said casually: "So you think it will take Fuchs ten days to starve those Lohans out of Mr. Quainton?"

Change? Change was hardly the word: it was an absolute dithering sag; the little skug gave at the knees as he stared at me with his mouth open.

Then he did the very thing I wished him to do; he dashed for the door on the other side of the room, rushed into my bedroom and across it to the door into the corridor. It was locked. That rush did away with any need for admissions or confession.

I brought him back by the scruff of the neck, shaking him a bit so that his teeth played at castanets, and dumped him down hard on a chair.

"Sit there," I said in my best savage voice. "I want Mr. Quainton and the ivory Lohan Fuchs stole for you, and I want them at once. How do I get them?"

He sat up and swallowed hard and said in a feeble, blustering way: "I don't know what you're talking about, Lord Barradine. I don't know anyone of the name of Fuchs or Quainton."

"I suppose that was why you bolted?" said I.

Then followed a heated parley, in which Miss Quainton took a withering part, and if an eloquent and indignant tongue could scarify, the little skug would have bled from head to foot. We heard a good deal from him about an outrage and his solicitors, and hand over Mr. Quainton and the Lohan he would not, though I told him I'd make him if I had to flay him with a blunt dessert knife.

Then Miss Quainton said in a brisk and business-like way: "The first thing to do is to tie him up."

I soon did that—with ties from my wardrobe. He looked pretty sickly, and was now hoarse with yelling murder. I dumped him down at full length on a couch so that he could see the fire and stuck a poker into it and laughed—a real bloodcurdler.

“ Shall I begin on the soles of his feet? ” I said to Miss Quainton and repeated the laugh.

His eyes had been sticking well out of their sockets for some time; at that I thought they'd come right out and roll down his cheeks. I saw that the hot iron would not have to enter into his sole very far. I also saw that if he stuck out, he had us beaten. You cannot, in England, burn the soles of one of Nature's gentlemen with a red-hot poker.

Then Seraphita made the suggestion of a life-time; she said: “ Yes: begin with his soles, and while the poker's getting red-hot, you might tickle them. It often sends people mad.”

I pulled off his left shoe, and in less than twenty seconds the trussed-up skug was jerking—I never saw such jerks—and as he jerked he yelled.

In less than forty seconds he was yelling: “ I give in! I give in! I'll do anything! Anything!”

I stopped, and sat him on a chair at the table, untied his right arm, cleared a space, and found paper and a fountain pen. He was snivelling.

Then I said: “ Just write a cheque for Fuchs for the amount he's asking for the Lohan he stole for you.”

He wrote a cheque for £3000 like a weeping lamb.

I took it and said: “ Now write: ‘ Dear F., The bearer, The Earl of Barradine and Sarples, will handle Q. all right for us. Do everything he wants. You'll get your commission. Yours truly, Cuthbert Tuffin.’ ”

He wrote it, and I said: “ How do you get into Fuchs's house? ”

“ Four single knocks, one after the other—slowly,” he moaned.

I sat down and wrote a note to one of the Deputy-Commissioners of Scotland Yard, a friend of mine, handed it to Miss Quainton and said: “ If I don't ring you up inside of two hours, bucket down to Scotland Yard and give them this. Tell them to open it at once, and take them to Fuchs's. And

have you and your father in the course of your adventures fixed up any password that will let him know I come from you?"

"Yes. Say to him: 'It's a far cry to the Oxus,' and he'll know at once," she said.

"Good," I said. "You can hold the little skug?" said I.

"I'll keep the poker red-hot," she said.

That was that. We were getting on.

## 3

In about twenty minutes I stepped out of my Sunbeam sports model and knocked four slow knocks on Fuchs's door. This should be the toughest part of the business; but I had two good appeals to Prussian mentality, my title and Tuffin's cheque. It was a good three minutes before the door was opened by a lanky, hatchet-faced ruffian.

I stepped quickly inside and slammed the door and said: "Take this letter to Fuchs at once."

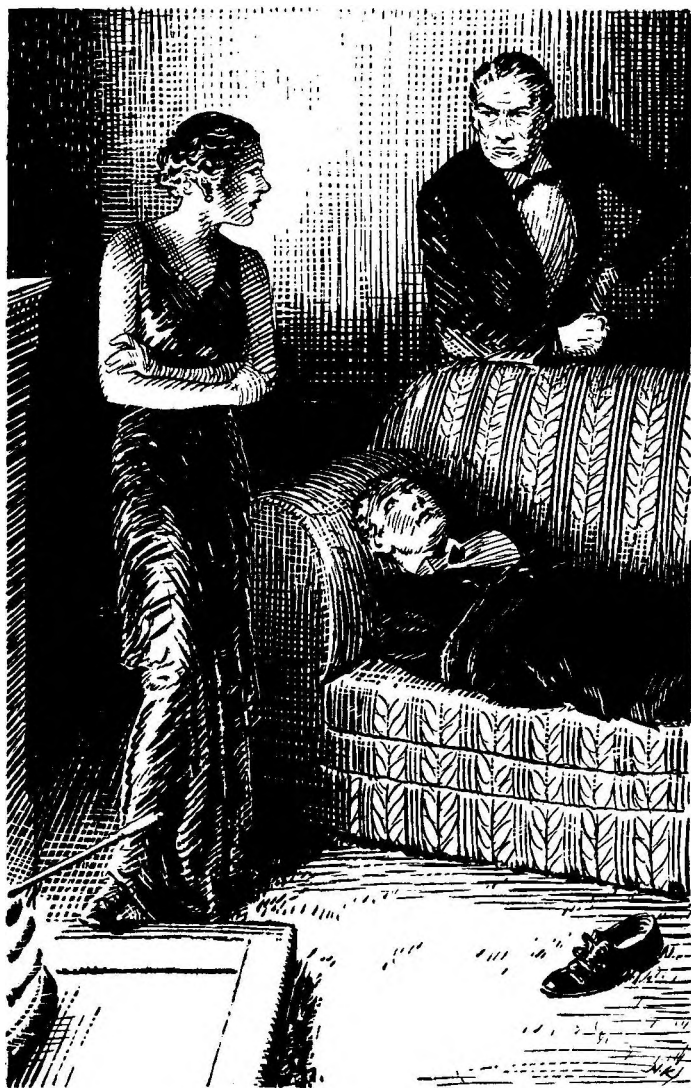
"'ere: 'oo are you ordering about?" he growled.

"You," said I. "Get on."

It worked. It does. He got on. I stood in the passage, sniffing the queer-smelling, spicy air, and listening. There seemed to be plenty of people in the house. I could hear murmuring voices in rooms on the ground-floor and on the floor above. Then the lanky ruffian appeared on the stairs and said: "Come along."

I went upstairs, and he showed me into a bedroom, luxuriously furnished and very frowsty. Sitting on the side of the bed was a stout, square-headed, respectable gentleman, wearing glasses and blue pyjamas with a purple stripe—kept in touch with the Fatherland, I thought—and frowning at *the* Tuffin's letter. As I came in he rose, brought his heels together and bowed respectfully—the title was working all right—gave me a very civil good evening





*“ ‘I’ll keep the poker red-hot,’ she said ”*



and looked at me hard. My face seemed to please him—Charles II does look a gentleman who would not be too particular—for his face cleared.

But he said, tapping the letter: "This is bad. It will not do. The young Tuffin had no right to tell you. Too many people know."

"I'm not the only one he's let into the secret," I said. "And why the devil did you let Quinton get at the phone?"

"He said nothing they can go to the police with," he snapped.

"At any rate they're going, if they haven't gone," said I.

"Hell!" he said. "What are you going to do? You can't handle that madman Quinton. No one can."

"I can," I said. "But first of all here's Tuffin's cheque for the Lohan you stole for him. I want it to take with me."

He took the cheque, and his face cleared wonderfully. It was a perfect guarantee of my *bona fides*. He hurried out of the room and came back with the ivory figure and handed it to me, and asked me what I was going to do.

"I'm going to take Quinton away for a conference with me and Tuffin. There's no time for a longish wrangle here, with the police coming. If he doesn't agree to our terms for the seven Lohans, I'm going to bring him back."

"Bring him back! How? how?" he howled.

"It's perfectly easy. Quinton's a man of honour. Take me to him, and I'll show you how it's done," I said in a confident tone.

Looking a trifle flabbergasted and devilishly uneasy, he took me up to a room at the top of the house, opened the door for me to enter, and switched on the light. It lit up a windowless room empty except for a single chair. On it was sitting a tall man, with a handsome, weatherbeaten face and wild eyes, chained by the ankle to a staple in the wall. He had been in

a severe scrap: there was a big, black bruise on his forehead, a long cut in his left cheek, and his clothes were torn.

He blinked at the sudden brightness, and I stepped briskly in and said: "Hullo, Quainton, old chap! It's a far cry to the Oxus. What? So you're in another devil of a mess, I find. Well, I've come to get you out of it, if you'll show a little sense."

Quainton tumbled to it like a knife; he had never set eyes on me before, but he said sulkily: "Oh, it's you, is it?"

"It's me," I said. "And I'm going to take you along for a quiet talk with Tuffin about this business. But you'll have to give me your word of honour to come quietly and that, if we don't come to terms, you'll come straight back here directly I ask you, and let Fuchs chain you up again."

Quainton gazed at me, scowling; then he said: "It won't be any use. But I may as well hear what you two swine have got to say. I'll give you my word of honour to come back here whenever you ask me to."

"That's all right," I said cheerfully. "Undo the shackle, Fuchs."

Fuchs looked from one to the other of us, scowling.

"Get on," I growled. "I don't want to be here when the police come, and I'm not going without Quainton."

That settled him. He took a key from his pyjama-jacket pocket and unlocked the shackle.

Quainton rose and stretched himself, and we went downstairs, followed by the uneasy Fuchs, out of the house, and into the car without exchanging a word. I did not say good-bye to Fuchs.

When the car was fairly started Quainton said: "I'm very much obliged to you—very much obliged. But who are you? And how did you come into it? And how on earth did you get on to Tuffin?"

"I'm Barradine," I said. "I came into it because

Miss Quainton was anxious, and that diamond pin that's always stuck on him put me on to Tuffin."

"Well, I'm thankful it did, for I was in a worse hole than it looked. Kidnapping isn't much in Fuchs' line—really I forced myself on him—and he was beginning to get frightened. You know what a frightened man is—he was beginning to plan how to dispose of the body, I fancy. How on earth did you get round him?"

I told him how my title plus the Tuffin's cheque had worked on a Prussian mentality, and he laughed and said: "Of course—quite good psychology to bluff on."

I took him to Cadogan Square, since Seraphita was there and supper was ready, and we were much of a size so that he could change after a bath, and gratify at once his desire to speak to *the* Tuffin.

We came into my smoking-room to find the scene unchanged: Tuffin still lay on the sofa, looking thoughtful and morose; Seraphita sat in an easy chair; the poker was still in the fire, still red-hot. She sprang up with a little cry and threw her arms round Quainton's neck and kissed him.

When he had finished telling her how sorry he was for having worried her, he turned to *the* Tuffin and said: "I'll give you twelve hours' law, you nasty thief and cur. If you're not out of the country by twelve to-morrow I'll thrash you till my arm gives out."

Tuffin looked at the arm, the right, in a sickly way, and seemed to have nothing to say. It did not look an arm that would give out quickly.

I untied him and rang for Harcombe, and Littlewood, my man, put Quainton in Littlewood's hands, and told Harcombe to show *the* Tuffin out of the house. He was looking more like a disgruntled rat than *the* anything, and left England next morning leaving no address.

They went, and I turned to Seraphita.

She held out both her hands to me to shake and said: "I knew you'd do it. You *are* a dear!"

A CASE FOR DEDUCTION

“SINCE you pride yourself on solving mysteries,” said my Uncle Quintus, puffing from a petty pipette the smoke of some preparation of *cannabis* which had followed him from the East, “I will give you some facts in the case of a young artist friend of mine, Aubrey Smith; enough, I should think, for you to elucidate and explain his troubles to me, without my telling you the successful conclusions arrived at by the detective in charge. That would interest you?”

“Indeed, yes,” I replied, and settled down into my fireside arm-chair to listen attentively and to make notes.

“Well,” pursued my Uncle Quintus: “that night when he was to rescue two lives from—death, may be, Aubrey Smith, as was his way on Wednesdays, spent the evening with his sweetheart, Hylda, at Rose Villa, her home in Clapham. But from the moment when she opened the door to Aubrey that evening, Hylda had a feeling that this Wednesday was in some way special and different from the rest.

“‘Quite a beauty,’ she said of the bouquet which Aubrey handed her, but with a touch of reproach she said it, since Aubrey could ill afford such displays. Every Wednesday, it was true, he brought a bouquet, but this was a mass that must have cost ten shillings.

“She wondered why, and he knew that she wondered, there was such a sympathy between their natures, yet he offered no explanation; and she wondered why he was in black, with a black tie. . . .

“Captain Hood himself—Hylda’s father—noticed it, as they sat to dinner, and made the remark, ‘Why, Aubrey, you look as if you were in mourning to-night.’

“‘But you know, Sir,’ said Aubrey, ‘that I am the last of the crew—I haven’t a relative now to mourn for.’

“But he said it with shy eyelids, and Hylda, to whose ken his soul was an open book, understood

that this evening Aubrey, for some reason, was concealing something or other from her.

“That startled her heart! There was the big bouquet, the black garb. . . . What, then, was in the wind? Her eyes, when he was looking at his plate, kept silently inquiring it of his face.

“Once when Captain Hood had limped his lamed leg to his ingle-nook to muse there over his cheroot as usual, Aubrey looked as if disposed to tell something; Hylda by this time had withdrawn her pampered Lupot fiddle from its silk covering, and had it at her chin, Aubrey was accompanying her on the piano, and all down Rosehill Road faces were looking out from the rows of oriels, as was usual on Wednesday evenings, to hear the music—for Hylda, the hope of the Royal College, could make her fiddle discourse strange sorrows. She and Aubrey had done the *Sonata in F*, and were about to give a *Lied*, when, in the interval, their hands met as they turned the leaves of the second book, their hands and their eyes, and Hylda smiled, and he smiled; and he began then to say, ‘Hylda, perhaps I had better tell you—’ when Captain Hood from his nook called out, ‘Aubrey, let me hear that last melody of the *Wallenstein* that I like’; and Aubrey called back: ‘Quite so, Sir,’ and started to render it.

“After which for hours they wearied out the ear with sweetness, and through it all Hylda waited to hear, but Aubrey said nothing.

“‘Dear heart,’ she whispered to him at the door near eleven when he was going, gazing up a moment on his breast into those girl-beguiling eyes of Aubrey, ‘God keep you.’

“He stooped to kiss her—a steepish stoop, he was so high up compared with her—saying, ‘We’ll meet for luncheon to-morrow at the Circus,’ and he went, she gazing after him, he in the falling snow waving his hat back at her—the most picturesque old hat on this planet, in such an egregious tone of green, turned

down over the nose, with *Art-Student* and *Latin-Quarter* written all over it—and he was gone from her.

“He took train at Clapham Junction for Victoria, and from Victoria was off afoot (to save ’bus-fare!) to his little flatlet in Maida Vale.

“It was during this tramp that he rescued the two lives.

“In an alley behind the Edgware Road it was. At that very spot, earlier in the night, a hungry man, who had desired to go to prison, had broken a street-lamp; and just there, as Aubrey passed, stood a cab and a barrow, blocking the way; at the same moment a motor-car came round a corner, and, its driver not apparently sighting the barrow under the cab’s shadow, dashed on. Out of Aubrey’s mouth a shout of warning broke; in the rashness of the moment he even ran out from the pavement, so that, although the driver at once had his brakes on, Aubrey was knocked staggering, as the car bumped softly upon the barrow.

“In a moment there stood with him an old man and a young lady from the car, the old man saying: ‘My dear Sir! are you hurt?’

“‘Not a bit!’ Aubrey cried.

“‘Papa, this is you in the rôle of chauffeur,’ the young lady remarked—in a queer species of whisper, husky, rapid, which, however (though the noise of the engine, running free, was in the ear), Aubrey could still hear.

“‘Now, Laura!’—the old man turned upon her to insist that he was an accomplished chauffeur, then requested that Aubrey must go home with him for a glass of whisky, rather confirming Aubrey’s surmise that he was talking to an Irishman.

“‘But, Sir, really——’ he began to say.

“‘Yes, come,’ Laura said to him in that same whispered way, and he gathered that her voice, owing to some affection of the vocal chords, was gone.

“‘Yes, come.’ There she stood, almost as tall as her tall father, draped in a pony-skin coat, its opening



framing her face. 'Yes, come.' And now he went.

"'An adventure!' he said, as the three passed into a house in Brook Street: 'on my birthday, too'—this fact not having been mentioned to his sweetheart, Hylda Hood; and although he and Hylda had been engaged since they were thirteen, Hylda still remained ignorant what day his birthday was.

"'Your birthday?' from the old man, whose name had now turned out to be Sir Phipps O'Dowdy O'Donogue: 'now, that's singular. I'll give you some whisky for it—come on!'

"Aubrey was brought into an apartment with silken walls and two brawling fires; and here, pointing to a picture, he said at once, 'Why, I saw that in last year's Academy.'

"'Ego pinxi,' Laura said with a curtsey.

"'Awfully well done,' he breathed under it.

"'Praise from Raphael.' She curtseyed again.

"'Who told you that I am an artist?' he asked.

"'I may be dumb,' she said, 'but I'm not blind.'

"'You dumb?' he cried: 'not quite, I think!'

"Her tongue flew as she sat stooped forward before him, her chin on her fists, flew in that breathy throat-whisper that went on as busily as a threshing-machine, or paddle-boxes threshing the sea; and he, listening with one ear to her and with the other to her father—for they fought against each other, speaking together in a race—thought that he had never lighted upon a pair of such live and brilliant beings. Father and daughter tossed rains of repartee at each other, jeered at each other, despaired of each other, yet were evidently chums. Neither could sit still six minutes. Sir Phipps jumped up to show the latest novel by Bourget, Laura jumped up, humming, to dash her hand over the piano-keys, to show a Welsh crowth, or a miniature of Coquelin. Before twenty minutes Aubrey was at home with them; and once—the whisky had then come, and Laura had run out

for a moment—Sir Phipps furtively took from out of his breast-pocket a photograph, and furtively gave Aubrey a glimpse of it—the photograph of a lady.

“ ‘ Well, the old sinner ! ’ was Aubrey’s first thought ; his second was : ‘ How perfect a beauty ! ’

“ ‘ La Rosa,’ whispered the old man, thinking apparently that Aubrey would know the name ; but Aubrey had no notion who La Rosa was.

“ He wanted to take the photograph to feast his eyes on it ; but now they could hear Laura’s steps, and Sir Phipps hurriedly hid it.

“ After this for hours Aubrey could hardly find a chance to say ‘ Now I must go ’ : if he did, it was at once drowned in talk, and he passed a merry night, which was only marred by one awkward moment, when, during another absence of Laura, Sir Phipps hurriedly drew a cheque, and held it out to Aubrey.

“ ‘ My good sir ! ’ Aubrey breathed with shy eyelids.

“ ‘ Tush ! ’ Sir Phipps said, ‘ you are only a boy, and I an old fellow whose life you have saved—your birthday, too.’

“ ‘ Yes, Sir,’—from Aubrey, with a breath of laughter, ‘ but, really—I am only sorry that these things can’t be done.’

“ ‘ Oh, well, we won’t quarrel over it ’—Sir Phipps tore the cheque in shreds.

“ Aubrey could hear Big Ben striking three, as he stepped out into streets now powdery with snow, over which a late and waning moon had moved up, revealing him to Laura, who at a window peered after him till he disappeared. Laura at that window then clasped her hands behind her neck, and stretched, and then, alone in the room, lay sideways on a sofa, and mused. What a tall, rough-clad fellow ! she thought ; his dash of dark moustache did not cover his rich lips ; he had a modest way of lowering his eyelids, which was both shy and disdainful ; he threw out odd breaths of laughter : and under the eyelids, eyes all beauty, like the Moonlight Sonata, drowsy, brown,

brown. She turned, and stretched, murmuring, 'Yes, charming,' with half a yawn, and half a laugh, and said 'Ah!'

"Aubrey, for his part, on getting home, sat up yet an hour smoking cigarettes, thinking it out, and soon came to the conclusion that he would go no more to the O'Donagues. Laura was a remarkable creature, he thought! So lively, vital—and pretty; even the loss of her voice somehow added to her: just as she was, she was—she, was 'just so.' His brain kept comparing Laura with Hylda: Hylda was little, Laura big; Hylda was fair, with a broad face, dimples in her smile, bright eyes that laughed; Laura was dark, and had gaudy eyes. Which was the prettier—Laura or Hylda? Certainly, Laura was as far prettier than Hylda as La Rosa was more lovely than Laura. But Hylda was good, born good to the heart—was Laura good? Laura was glitter, Hylda was gold; if Laura was a genius, Hylda was an angel. 'Well, the birthday has come, and the birthday has gone,' he murmured at last; and tossing off the mourning clothes, he turned in to bed.

"The next day at luncheon in their usual Piccadilly tea-shop, on his relating the adventure to Hylda, she overwhelmed him with questions as to Laura—Laura's looks, Laura's throat-whisper, Laura's touch, and was she really so very clever? 'And are you expected to go back?'—her eyes fastened on his face, for wherever she was with him, she could not help it, she could see nothing but him alone; she hung only upon him, her soul dancing in her gladdened glances: 'did they seem really to want you again?'

"'I think so,' Aubrey answered; 'but I'm not going, all the same.'

"'Why not?'

"'Hard to say quite why.' His eyes dropped from her face.

"But Aubrey was not to escape the baronet so easily, for only a week later that Rolls car which he

had saved from a shock drew up before his block of flats, the O'Donague mounted many stairs to him, and, glancing round Aubrey's cheap but chaste interior, remarked: 'Now, this is a charming den I find you in!' while Aubrey stood all shy eyes at the honour, and brought forth liqueurs. The fact was, that the old baronet had an absolute need of someone new to whom to give peeps of Salvadora Rosa's photograph and make a confidant of, and his fancy had fixed upon Aubrey: so that within a month or two now, Aubrey, without having ever set eyes on her, knew La Rosa by rote. She turned out to be a lady with something of a European fame, Spanish by birth, divorced wife of a Polish Count; and what mainly made her notorious, apart from some duels and suicides which had been due to her, was the fact that she had a little daughter whom her ex-husband had for years been seeking to sneak from her: for this child, on attaining her eighteenth year, would be as rich as Cræsus: so Salvadora Rosa, who seemed to have a keen sense of the good of money, stuck to the child, though its father was its lawful guardian. At that moment, Sir Phipps told Aubrey, though scores of secret emissaries in several countries were intriguing to get at the child, probably no soul but Salvadora Rosa and her own agents had any notion where the child was.

“ ‘ Must be a clever sort of lady,’ Aubrey remarked.

“ ‘ Clever as ten monkeys!’ Sir Phipps cried out.

“ ‘ Rich?’

“ ‘ She is like a bank or the Severn—sometimes full, sometimes empty,’ Sir Phipps O'Dowdy O'Donague answered: ‘ it comes and it goes, like a maid's flushes and the monthly moon. At present, it strikes me, she is rather hard up—*embarrassée*, her little tongue calls it, with a roll on the r.’

“ ‘ Take care she doesn't get what she wants from you, Sir.’

“ ‘ My dear fellow, you are talking of a lady.’

“ ‘ I beg pardon,’ Aubrey said.

“ But he seemed destined to have to hear of La Rosa: although he did not go to Brook Street (save once to a crush-reception, when he got only glimpses of Miss O’Donague) Brook Street came to him. One day, looking out of the window, down there in the street he saw a gig roll slowly past, the reins in a lady’s hand, and the lady was Laura O’Donague. He watched with interest to see if she glanced up at his windows, but she did not. However, one day some three months later he opened his door to a rap, and there, to his amazement, was the busy breath of Laura, whispering: ‘ I have to talk to you about Papa. It is serious.’

“ It was all about La Rosa—and—her—Papa that she had come!

“ ‘ You have a lot of influence over Papa, let me tell you,’ she said, seated within the nook made by the half-round seat that surrounded Aubrey’s fireplace: ‘ he never so took to anyone as to you; and you have to speak to him.’

“ Aubrey began to say: ‘ I’m rather afraid——’

“ But she said: ‘ No, really, you don’t know how serious it is: he is getting more and more entangled with this lady, and three days ago, just after getting home from her place, had a most strange illness. . . .’

“ ‘ Oh, I say, Miss O’Donague!’

“ ‘ You have no idea of this woman,’ Laura said—‘ she sticks at nothing. I have never seen her, but one night last week, at the Mansion House, Detective-Sergeant Barker—ever heard of Barker?—impressed upon me that she’s most dangerous, said that the woman’s hungers are like a tiger’s, and it is only because she is so much deeper than the European police that she can continue her career.’

“ Aubrey, with puckered brows, sat at a loss what to say, but in the end promised to use his ‘ influence with poor Papa,’ and after an hour’s wind-storm of whispering, Miss O’Donague at last accused herself

of being unconventional in coming alone, and left him.

“Two months later, in July, he spent a week-end with the O’Donagues at Clanning, their seat in Gloucestershire, and then, as they went to Italy, saw them no more for some months.

“It was autumn when the O’Donagues returned to England, passed a fortnight in Gloucestershire, and then were in London once more, La Rosa having also been abroad at the same time; and shortly after she was back, they were back.

“Aubrey was at work one afternoon in November on a *Kermesse*, when the O’Donague anew came breezily in, and, before the easel, broke out into, ‘My dear boy, this is your masterpiece—it really is a quatrocento; I’ll give you a hundred pounds down for it.’

“‘Your daughter would not let it enter her doors, Sir,’ Aubrey answered. ‘Still, I quite hope to sell it, and in that case——’

“‘Well?’

“‘There will be a wedding, Sir!’

“‘Then sell to me! Sell to me! I offer two hundred——’

“‘Not two hundred pence, Sir. It shall go off on its merits, or not at all. Let’s talk about yourself.’

“‘I am now straight from Regent’s Park (*Regent’s Park* meant *Salvadora Rosa*); got back from Italy three weeks ago, then went down to Clanning—beastly unpleasant thing happened down there—give me a glass of liqueur: I don’t feel well to-day, boy.’

“‘What unpleasant thing, Sir?’—Aubrey presented liqueur.

“‘Not seen it in the papers? Little girl of seven lost from the village—vanished—I knew her quite well; little thing named *Ada Price*—black-haired—Welsh—nice little thing—child of one of my under-keepers—the whole countryside searched, everybody very excited, and the burden of it all on me—Oh, I say, I feel bad, Aubrey.’

“ Even as he sipped the liqueur Sir Phipps became pale, and presently Aubrey had to accompany him below to his car, the baronet was so tottery. However, Sir Phipps did not look mortally ill, and it was profoundly shocking when at nine o'clock that night Aubrey got a telegram: ‘ Papa died in the car on the way home from you. I wish to see you. Laura O'Donague.’

“ So he was gone, the gay, the bountiful old fellow, with his grey imperial and regal brow. Aubrey's heart smote him at the thought of the daughter, who, he knew well, would be very deeply bereaved, and he hurried to her in Brook Street.

“ He found her in the baronet's bedroom, however, quite her average self, chatty, agile, showing no sign that anything out of the common had happened. Only once, when she thought that he was not looking, he saw her shake her head at her father's portrait, and smile sorrowfully at it, with the reproach of love. From the chauffeur she already knew all the old man's movements that afternoon: how he had passed from Regent's Park to Aubrey's; and now she wished to know from Aubrey how he had behaved at the flat, what the conversation had been about, if he had looked ill from the first, had had anything to drink . . . ?

“ ‘ He was hardly ten minutes with me,’ Aubrey told her. ‘ First he wanted to buy my *Kermesse*, then he spoke of his doings since his arrival from Italy, then of an unpleasant thing happening down at Clanning, and then, saying he felt bad, asked for a liqueur.’

“ ‘ He isn't lying there poisoned, is he? ’ asked Laura quite calmly over the baronet on his bed.

“ ‘ Oh, I say, don't— ’ Aubrey breathed, shrinking.

“ ‘ Aubrey, this world isn't done all in water-colours,’ she said to him.

“ Aubrey's eyes dropped. Laura had called him ‘ Aubrey ’! And even in the presence of that sternness on the bed, some nerve of him that ran down

from his crown to his feet thrilled throughout, his brow rushing into brown with a blush.

“That wild word ‘poison,’ however, was only that one time uttered, since there was nothing to suggest such a thing to any mind, and as Sir Phipps’ physician had long been aware that the baronet was suffering from ‘tobacco heart,’ liable to sudden dilatation, the death-certificate and verdict were in accordance.

“All during that funeral week Aubrey was so much with Laura, driving with her, acting the lackey, that actually on three days of it he did not see Hylda at all; moreover, an old gentleman, the executor in charge of the funeral arrangements, coolly made use of him as a clerk, as though he was of the family. He was one of the last whose gaze rested on the baronet’s face, and he followed the old man to the grave in the brougham that drove next after Laura’s.

“On returning from the grave-side, ‘Now for some Hylda!’ he sighed to himself with a certain hunger, like one yearning for fresh air and rest; but the first thing the next morning for him was yet a telegram from Laura in the words: ‘More death—I should like to see you.’

“When he went to her it was to learn that an old person, known as Davenport, a butler, for over thirty years in the service of Sir Phipps, had suddenly ceased to live on returning from the funeral—a new woe which had the effect of throwing Laura O’Donagie into an extraordinary passion of anguish. At her father’s death her self-control had been so complete as to appear even cold to everyone; but less careful, maybe, in this lesser case, at this second stroke she broke out into torrents of tears, terribly tantrums, hysterias, that astounded her household. Aubrey, however, found her in a condition of mere depression and ill-temper, like a child sullen after punishment. She would hardly speak to him, and when he touched her hand, saying, ‘Laura, I am sorry,’ she replied: ‘Oh, my back is broad. Why did you come?’



“ ‘ Did you not send for me? ’

“ ‘ And you were weak enough to come. . . . Take care I don’t write to warn Miss Hood that you are always pursuing me.’

“ ‘ My good Laura! She would only laugh.’

“ ‘ What! is she so absolutely sure of you?’

“ ‘ Quite absolutely.’

“ Laura’s lips tightened a little in a silence. She jumped up, humming, to a window, her right hand on her right hip in her habitual pose.

“ ‘ But what about this poor Davenport,’ said Aubrey: ‘ at what hour——?’

“ ‘ Oh, pray don’t mention to me the name of Davenport,’ said she: ‘ I am soaked with death.’

“ Aubrey wondered why he had been sent for, since she snapped at everything which he could find to say; and before long left her alone to her sorrows.

“ It was still too soon for him to go to the tea-shop to Hylda, so he went home once more, and it was as he now opened his flat-door that he saw on the floor the note which was to play nine-pins with his whole life.

“ It came from some attorneys, and it was a breathless Aubrey Smith whose eyes perused these lines:

“ ‘ . . . have the pleasure to inform you . . . by the last will of the late Sir Phipps O’Dowdy O’Donague . . . you become the life-legatee of the sum of £175 per annum . . . shall be pleased to see you at your convenience . . . Ife & Siemens. . . . ’

“ So good, so large, the old man! A good heart that wished one well! Aubrey’s eyes sprang water, and then—he ran. Outside, he found walking too slow now, a ’bus too slow, he sprang into a cab—for the tea-shop. But he was too soon, Hylda had not come, and now he paced impatiently about, counting the seconds, waiting for the appearance down Piccadilly of a neat figure with a winged toque on her head. Anyhow, all was well now, his way clear. Just that

little sum each year, the difference it would make! in three days' time he could be married. . . . For four years now, since she was seventeen, Hylda and he had been ever on the jump of being married, but always the same tiny trouble—no money to buy things with. The old captain on his half-pay had none, Aubrey's masterpieces had had no market. Now it was well.

" 'I haven't really worked, you know, Hylda,' he said to her in the teashop that day: 'I see it now. I seem to be the laziest beggar going, somehow. But won't I work *now*, by Jove!'

" 'Dear, you have worked hard,' she answered, 'and this is your well-earned reward. Are you glad now that you met the motor-car? Suppose you hadn't gone home on foot from Victoria that night. . . . How things come about! You were all in black that night, and they say that black is lucky.'

" 'But, Hylda, tell me frankly,' Aubrey said, 'is it not a fact that we can be married straight away?'

" 'Dear, there seems to be no reason why not,' Hylda answered: 'you know that I can usually win Papa.'

" 'Then, let's take a half-holiday and go now straight down to Clapham. . . .'

" 'Really so eager for me?' she asked gravely, her gaze fixed on his face.

" 'Hylda, won't it be like striking home after some vast tramp? I dreamt one night that I had no legs, and oh, the glory when I woke and had my legs! It'll be like that rather, don't you think?'

" 'Dear, it will, rather,' she agreed.

" 'Well, then, eager is hardly the word: I'm afraid I am a little off my nut.'

" 'All right, let's go, then. . . .'

" It was soon settled: for though Captain Hood, who was of an unmodern school, would not hear of the Registry Office, but must have a church-wedding, he agreed that the banns should be given in immediately.

And now came busy days for Aubrey Smith. His den was all too small to take Hylda into, so that had to be changed; and since they were an artist-pair, no ordinary purchases would do for the furnishing of that home: stern were Aubrey's exclusions of this and that, delicate his selections, not of the dearest, nor even of the best, but of the best for *his* idea and dream; and all this needed time. At night he would come home worn out, lacked the time to call on the attorneys, as he had been asked to, forgot Laura O'Donague's existence, and of the small sum in his bank spent every penny on the strength of his fresh wealth.

Once only—one forenoon—he saw Laura for a moment close to Hyde Park Corner, she all mourning black in her car; and she stopped to besiege Aubrey's ear with her busy breath-whispering, asking, 'Have you heard?'

" 'What?' he asked.

" 'About the woman.'

" 'Which woman?'

" 'Why, La Rosa.'

" 'No, not heard.'

" 'It was in the papers.'

" 'I never read papers.'

" 'Not one penny does she touch! Papa has left her thirty thousand pounds on a life-policy—that's why she poisoned him. . . .'

" 'Oh, Laura, really you are not to say such things even in fun.'

" 'Not one penny does she touch, though! I mean to fight it in every possible way—'undue influence'—When are you coming?'

" 'Soon.'

" 'I don't want you.'

" 'Then I won't come.'

" 'Yes, do. Good-bye——' She was away.

" It was on that same night, five days before his wedding-day, that Aubrey found awaiting him at home yet another letter from the lawyers, this one

stating that, as his legacy was, by the terms of the will, to be paid on his birthday, the firm would be glad if he would send them a certificate of birth.

“Having read it, Aubrey sat down, and with his brow on his hand stared there at the floor without a motion for an hour; and though no moan broke from him, his head hung low, like a man who has received a grievous blow, upon whom gloom and ruin have suddenly swooped.

“It would have been far better, he thought, then, if he had never met that motor-car that night of his birthday, and many times he asked himself with torture why he had ever mentioned to Sir Phipps that that was his birthday: for it was clear that the baronet’s idea in thus drawing the will was to remind him through life of the rescue he had effected that night: and Aubrey buried his head, shaking it from side to side, asking himself how he was to tell Hylda that they could not, after all, marry, how he was to make her understand that it was no mere delay that had arisen, but a permanent matter—unless he was to reveal to her now a thing, an old tale of sin and sorrow, a strange and ominous date, which he had so far very artfully contrived to hide from her ken. How tell her this now? How overthrow now all her hopes—for years perhaps? How pay for the ordered articles of furniture that were waiting for payment? A thousand ‘hows’ hounded him, to which he found never an answer, and he sat in this despair till near ten o’clock, enervated by it, craven, lacking the energy to raise his head.

“But on a sudden he started, he was up, with the cry, ‘*Smith*’!

“There was more than one Aubrey Smith in the world!

“However, he hesitated a little, scratched his forehead, with a puckered nose, asking himself ‘Would it be quite pretty?’ But the relief, the gaiety, revealed in his grimace, proved that his mind had really

decided, whatever scruples might come between; and suddenly he had snatched his hat, and was away with a rush.

“ In a cab he drove to a dreary by-street near Russell Square, to a boarding-house in it, where in answer to his query if Mr. Aubrey Smith was in, a girl answered him: ‘ I think he is—right at the top, the door facing the stairs ’; and with careful footsteps Aubrey climbed through a darkness that had a fusty odour, high up, till he saw light through a keyhole, tapped at the door, and now a man in a rather ragged dressing-gown appeared, peering, demanding, ‘ Who is it? ’

“ ‘ Your namesake, Smith.’

“ ‘ O-ho-o-o!’ cried the other Smith. ‘ My dear fellow, come in ’—he bent cordially over Aubrey’s hand; however, he suddenly added, ‘ Wait a moment,’ turned back inwards, was heard whispering to someone, and it was two minutes before he returned to let Aubrey in.

“ This Aubrey Smith the Second was a man of fifty, handsome, with the rather exaggerated manner which some judges call ‘ fascinating ’ (he had been schooled, and had lived, mainly abroad); a military moustache, a ducal carriage; and here was a man of contrasts—cousin of a nobleman, had hob-nobbed with princes, living now in a den with holes in the carpet and a broken teapot on the hob. What that head of his did not know of this world was not worth knowing; and who could converse of it more charmingly? yet there he was, ageing and a failure. He had had a career! Had been frozen out of the British-Indian army, had sung in Italian Opera at *La Scala*, had been forbidden evermore to show his nose in Monte Carlo. But though Aubrey had long known Smith, and had a sure impression that Smith was hardly a saint, he knew no details in particular.

“ ‘ My dear fellow!’ Smith cried, ‘ you are the very man, for I have now a scheme on hand that should bring us in the coolest five thousand each without fail.’

“Aubrey laughed, for many were Smith’s schemes, and now he was about to do something astounding in wines, now to sell a mine, to buy a public-house, or build flats: but nothing ever happened: so Aubrey said ‘I, too, have a scheme: that’s why I’m come.’

“Instantly Smith was gravity itself; a look of eagerness and business rushed to those old eyes that had seen so much: but at that moment, before Aubrey could say more, a girl of seven, running in from an inner room, was before them.

“At this Smith looked very put out, and was about to bundle her back out of sight, when Aubrey said, ‘This your little girl, Smith? I’m sure I didn’t know that you had a child.’

“‘A neighbour’s child’—from Smith shyly.

“‘Isn’t she a little beauty.’

“‘Come, come, young lady, into the next room!’ Smith now said in French.

“‘*Alors, tu es française, mademoiselle?*’ Aubrey asked.

“‘*Oui, monsieur,*’ the black-haired child replied, with quite a nice bow of the head, and, catching up a doll out of the fender, she ran away back in.

“‘Look here, it’s like this, Smith,’ Aubrey now said, sitting on a shaky chair before Smith on the bed, ‘I have just been left a legacy——’

“‘O-ho-o-o!’ Smith cried with pantomime eyes and a round mouth, ‘that’s talking! My dear fellow’—out went his congratulatory paw to grasp Aubrey’s hand, over which he bent in his affable way, shaking it with many shakes.

“‘Smith, when is your birthday?’ Aubrey asked suddenly.

“‘Birthday? Three days’ time—the twenty-fifth——’

“‘Good!’ Aubrey breathed: ‘I thought I remembered hearing you say that it is in November. Well, as this legacy of mine—it isn’t much, one hundred and seventy-five pounds a year—is to be paid on my birthdays, you have to get your birth-certificate, and go and take the money for me, as if you were I.’

“ ‘ I have to ? ’ Smith asked with half a laugh.

“ ‘ Yes, it is quite all right—you have my assurance—I know the testator’s intention——’

“ ‘ But stay—I don’t quite see what’s what,’ Smith said: ‘ why am I to assume your personality in this way? Is it because you are urgently hard up, and my birthday comes first? ’

“ ‘ No, of course,’ Aubrey shyly replied: ‘ it isn’t that: I wish it was merely that; it is something much deeper.’

“ ‘ Well, but, if I am to co-operate, you must make me *au fait*,’ Smith remarked.

“ Aubrey glanced nervously about, then with a sudden eagerness brought his mouth to Smith’s ear, and whispered some words.

“ ‘ O-ho-o-o!’ Smith cried aloud with a round mouth in his theatrical way: ‘ ha! ha! *that’s* how the land lies—I see!’

“ ‘ So, then, you will, Smith.’

“ ‘ H’m. Let’s see if it can be done,’ Smith said, and stood up to walk through the room, while Aubrey followed him with his eyes, heard him mutter, ‘ Let’s see, let’s see ’; till all at once Smith’s brows cleared of all doubt and thought, and with his charming cordiality, he remarked, ‘ My dear chap, I’m your man.’

“ ‘ Good! And, I say, Smith, I offer you ten per cent.——’

“ ‘ Not one little sou!’ Smith cried; ‘ it would be odd if I couldn’t do you a service of that sort without asking to be tipped. You need merely hand me say thirty shillings now for necessary expenses. . . .’

“ So it was settled. Aubrey gave Smith all the facts of the case, also his address, where they were to meet and dine together at seven on the third night thence, Smith undertaking to bring the hundred and seventy-five pounds with him; and Aubrey went away light of heart.

“ But at seven on the third night thence no Smith turned up; and after waiting till eight, till nine, a

terrible fright sprang up in Aubrey's heart; and he flew to Bloomsbury to see Smith.

"He was told at Smith's boarding-house that Smith had gone away; and no one was aware where Smith had gone to.

"The next morning—the morning before his wedding-day—Aubrey gathered from a clerk in the outer office at Ife and Siemens, the attorneys, that Mr. Aubrey Smith had duly presented himself and got the hundred and seventy-five pounds of Sir Phipps O'Dowdy O'Donague's legacy; and, feeling too unwell to face Hylda just then, longing only for a hole to hide himself in, Aubrey went home to his new flat.

"It was about two hours afterwards that a curious incident occurred to him there: on the landing outside his flat door was a man crouching with his ear at the key-hole, listening patiently, with a grimace of eagerness on his face, till suddenly he ran soft-footed down the three flights of stairs to the street door, where he whistled, and now another man ran to him from round a corner.

"'He has the child at this moment in his flat!' the first man, whose name was Barker, whispered to the second.

"'Sure?' the other asked.

"'Has *a* child, anyway, if not *the* child, for though I couldn't hear much distinctly, I distinctly heard a child say, *Now that I am seven years of age—*'

"'Let's pounce upon him sharp!' Upon which the two men, running up, pressed Aubrey's electric bell.

"Aubrey did not answer it at once, and Barker, his ear at the key-hole, could clearly hear a scurry and whispering within; fully two minutes passed, and then Aubrey appeared.

"'Your name, I think, is Mr. Aubrey Smith?' Barker asked.

"'Yes.'

"'We may mention that we are police-officers. Are you living alone in this flat, may I ask?'



“ ‘ Yes.’

“ ‘ You haven’t a child of seven now with you, for example?’

“ ‘ No, I’m not married.’

“ ‘ There are more ways of having a child of seven than by being married. We should like to look through the flat.’

“ ‘ My good sir, what is it all *about*? I am engaged . . .’

“ ‘ Listen, Sir,’ Barker said, ‘ we have with us no warrant to force a search; but, take my tip, it will be better for you to consent, whether you are innocent or guilty.’

“ ‘ Of what?’

“ ‘ You are believed to have in your custody the child Ada Price, abducted from the village of Clanning, Gloucestershire, on the 3rd instant. You were seen talking to the child on a road——’

“ ‘ I!’ Aubrey cried, with a breath of laughter.

“ ‘ You, Mr. Aubrey Smith. Do you deny that you were at Clanning in July?’

“ ‘ No, I don’t deny that, but——’

“ ‘ And you have now a child of seven in your flat: it is quite useless to deny it, for she was heard talking.’

“ ‘ Was she? My good Sir——’

“ ‘ Look here, quick, is it yes or no?’

“ ‘ Well, if you insist, you can search, since that will comfort you,’ Aubrey now said; ‘ but do get it over, officers.’

“ The men, now coming in, went first into the newly-furnished drawing-room, and were looking round it when Aubrey did what certainly appeared a suspicious thing—ran down the hall-passage, and turned the door-key of his new studio. The officers, peeping, of course saw what he did; and when, after looking through the other rooms, they came near to the studio-door, Aubrey made a halt.

“ ‘ Not in there,’ he whispered to them with shy eyes.

“ ‘ How is that ? ’ Barker wished to know.

“ ‘ Oh, I say, don’t raise your voice,’ he whispered, blushing: ‘ *there’s someone in there.*’

“ ‘ We are well aware of that: let’s have a look at her ’—now Barker pounded upon the door.

“ ‘ My good Sir, will you be so good as to go to the devil,’ Aubrey now said in an agonised low tone: ‘ come, go out of my flat.’

“ The detective scribbled something in his notebook, and without any other word the two turned, went away.

“ They did not, however, go far—one of them, at least—for when Aubrey went out afterwards to go down to Hylda’s, he saw that he was watched, and understood that he would soon hear from them anew. If that had been all his trouble in that hour! But the other cares on his back were like a mountain that day, for Smith did not turn up with the money, and Aubrey felt like one plunging down whirlpools of doubt and uncertainty, and dragging his poor girl down with him; and now, for the first time in his life, in his hatred against Smith, he greedily wished a fellow-creature ill.

“ Down there at Clapham the dining-room table was a-glitter with wedding-gifts, for many were the girl-friends of Hylda, many were coming to the wedding, and bright that day were Hylda’s eyes to the moment when she opened the door to Aubrey; but instantly now, though he put on his bravest looks, her face clouded.

“ ‘ All not well ? ’ she asked him presently, with a look.

“ He could not utterly kill his bride’s brightness, and replied: ‘ Why not ? ’

“ The next morning, his wedding-day, he discovered that all his wealth was seventeen-and-sixpence; and having with the sixpence sent a ‘ good-morning ’ telegram to Hylda, at a loss now how to spend the time till one o’clock, he took his gun and went down

to Grange House, a friend's place in Surrey, where there was some shooting, thinking that he would at least shoot his bride's dinner and borrow a five-pound note. He came back rather in a haste, a little late, with a hare and a rabbit, but without the five-pound note, since his friend was away from home, and three at a time he stormed up the flights of stairs to dress: for already it was a quarter to one. On the other hand, the church was hardly three hundred yards away up the street, so that he had no journey to make.

“At three minutes to one Hylda's bridesmaids were there, ready, waiting in the church porch for her; a knot of people, and a policeman, stood in the street to see; inside, the organist, a personal friend of Hylda's, was amusing his fingers with the tune of *O Perfect Love*; the clergyman stood ready dressed. As the church clock struck one, a carriage bearing the bride, all in heliotrope *voile* with white orchids, bearing also the bride's father, drove round a corner; and one minute afterwards Aubrey, a late and troubled bridegroom, flew down his stairs and out upon the pavement.

“It was just then that at a window above him a girl-child, looking out, cried gleefully aloud in French to some person behind her: ‘O, *monsieur*! look! a wedding!’ and upon this, the person popped his head out, to look.

Hylda, at the moment, was being handed out of her carriage, but her eyes were on Aubrey coming: and she stood hesitant, one foot on the carriage-step, in wonderment at what she saw.

“For, as the child cried ‘O, *monsieur*, look!’ Hylda saw that Aubrey heard and glanced up, and as the man above popped out his head, she saw that Aubrey saw him, although the man instantly pulled himself back; at which thing Aubrey seemed to become possessed, for, immediately stopping in his career toward the church, he darted back into the house:

and now that heart of Hylda, already fast-beating that day, beat faster still.

“ She was so amazed that there, with her slipper on the carriage-step, she remained, staring at the building into which Aubrey had vanished; the eyes of everyone, in fact, had turned from the bride, everyone awaiting in silence what the next instant would bring with it; till in about two minutes, or less, the sound of a gun-shot rang out of the house; from the window at which the child had cried out a cloud of smoke was seen to drift; and now the policeman in the crowd began running. . . .

“ He had not, however, run half-way to the house, when out of it darted a dark-haired child, howling, washed in blood, staring, staggering; ten yards from the building she dropped to the ground and lay silent; and as the policeman approached her, out of the door dashed two men, one in a dressing-gown, the other Aubrey, his coat bellying behind him—pelting, both of them, with white, wild faces, the man flying, Aubrey chasing—away from the church; and without delay, leaving the wounded girl on the ground, the policeman, too, blowing his whistle, was pursuing the two, and a fourth man, who had been watching the place on Detective-Sergeant Barker’s behalf, joined in the chase.

“ The two, however, in their agony of eagerness, easily distanced the two policemen—that much could be clearly seen from the church; and Hylda had an impression that the man staggered once, that Aubrey then caught him up, and grabbed him a moment; but then, miraculously loosing himself, the man started into renewed flight, Aubrey after him. Certain it was that at the moment when the flight flirted like a whirlwind round the first corner, it was the chase of a brace of distracted crackbrains dancing mad out of Bedlam. At the same moment, Hylda felt her senses almost fail her, and in a sort of vision saw her father prostrate, half on the carriage-



*“ A dark-haired child, howling ”*



step, half on the street, breathing hard in a rather queer way. . . .

“It was nearly two weeks after that distracted wedding-day of hers, when, one morning, Hylda Hood presented herself before Laura in Brook Street.

“‘Miss Hood?’ Laura asked hesitatingly, as she entered the drawing-room where Hylda waited.

“‘I do hope I don’t come too early——’ Hylda began.

“‘Not even a little. Sit down. I am glad—I am very glad—that you have come. Do you know, I know you quite well—for years, it seems—I could have drawn your face just from Aubrey’s chatter of you, and here you are exactly as I conceived you. Only—in black. Why in black?’

“Hylda, looking downwards, after a moment said: ‘My father was buried yesterday, Miss O’Donague.’

“‘Oh! poor——’ Laura breathed, shrinking, then in an impulse ran and knelt and kissed Hylda’s hands.

“‘You are very good,’ Hylda said hoarsely, ‘I knew before that you were.’

“‘And I that you were. So he is dead? And mine dead? And it is nothing but black, black, for us both?’

“‘He had not been strong for some time,’ Hylda remarked, ‘and what has happened was all too much for him. I should have come to you before, but have been ill myself, and could not leave him: now I feel called upon to make some sort of effort to confront all this mystery, though I’m afraid——’

“‘Oh, courage, we shall win to the surface yet,’ said Laura. ‘*Seek and you shall find*: I believe in that. I take it that you have not heard from poor Aubrey?’

“‘No,’—low in tone.

“‘Not a line?’

“‘Not one word.’

“‘Why? Why?’ Laura asked of herself, staring.

“‘There can be only two reasons,’ Hylda said:

‘either he is no longer alive, or he is in some situation in which he finds it impossible to write.’

“ ‘But what kind of situation can that be? Perhaps he is conscious of having done something wrong, and shrinks from writing——’

“ ‘He?’—from Hylda with raised eyebrows; then she smiled, saying, ‘Excuse me, I am always assuming that others know him with the same certainty as I do.’

“At this Laura jumped up, touched with jealousy, humming to herself; and she remarked to a window-pane, ‘We all do naughty things, or the world would turn into a heavyish sort of church-heaven. He may have shot the child by accident——’

“ ‘Not even by accident,’ Hylda said.

“ ‘But how can you say *not*, in that undoubting way, Miss Hood? Of the two guns found together in the other man’s flat one was Aubrey’s, and the gunshots found in the child’s throat fit Aubrey’s gun, not the other man’s: so Detective-Sergeant Barker was telling me——’

“ ‘How can he know which of the two is Aubrey’s gun?’ Hylda asked.

“ ‘Aubrey’s initials are on it!’

“ ‘Still, Aubrey would hardly have taken up a loaded gun for any reason. . . . It may be that the other man’s initials are the same as Aubrey’s——’

“ ‘It *may* be, of course.’

“ ‘And as to this other man,’ Hylda asked, ‘no trace of him yet?’

“ ‘None!’ Laura spun round with a laugh, ‘he has disappeared from the face of creation as completely as Aubrey has. It strikes me that the pair of them have been up to something, so both are in hiding.’

“ ‘Aubrey would not hide, I assure you, Miss O’Donague,’ replied Hylda.

“ ‘Saint Aubrey,’ murmured Laura, smiling.

“ ‘As you only mean it for teasing,’ said Hylda, ‘I forgive you.’



“ Laura, looking contemplatively at her, remarked: ‘ Do you know, I think we are going to be friends? ’

“ ‘ Do you? Why so? Friendship is rare, and—comes slow in the churn, like the best butter.’

“ ‘ Yes, but we provoke each other, we clash at some point and breed friction; and friction means warmth, and warmth is friendship—or enmity.’

“ ‘ We won’t be foes? ’ asked Hylda.

“ ‘ Let’s hope not. I am a ripping good hater.’

“ ‘ And I am a good lover—if I love. But will you tell me now everything that you know? ’

“ Laura, now sitting by Hylda’s side, told how ‘ the other man ’ who had vanished with Aubrey round that street-corner had taken the flat in Aubrey’s block of buildings only two days before the wedding-day, and had moved into it without waiting to have the flat re-papered. He had taken it in the name of ‘ Hamilton Jones,’ but it had been ascertained by the police that this was not really his name. ‘ Jones ’ had bought his furniture in Tottenham Court Road only the day before he moved into his new abode, an abode whose hall-door happened to face Aubrey’s; and whether this ‘ Jones ’ had taken that flat knowing that Aubrey was there, or just by chance, or what was the nature of the relation between him and Aubrey, remained all a mystery. As to the wounded child, she was a little maid of seven, of an extraordinary beauty—foreign, it was believed, since dark, and since she wore a diamond medallion of the Madonna about her throat, and as her costume was found to be luxurious in the extreme, it was doubted if she really belonged to this ‘ Hamilton Jones,’ whose furniture was cheap. There was no name on the child’s linen, only a bird in blue silk. She was then lying in St. George’s Hospital, had not yet spoken, but would recover; and Laura had thrice been to see her.

“ To all which Hylda listened with her eyes on the floor, and then a sigh rose from the depths of her;

her pretty, broad face looked rather drawn and pale; and Laura, sitting by her, whispered:

“ ‘ Don’t be too sad; wait, I’ll find him for you; it will be all right ’; and she took a hand of Hylda’s, saying, ‘ What lovable hands you have, Miss Hood—Hylda! These warm little mortal hands, imperfect and dear: I am going to kiss this left one near the heart ’—she kissed it, mourning, ‘ Don’t grieve, don’t grieve, my heart bleeds for you ’; and playing with the hand; while Hylda smiled at her, she asked, ‘ What are these dents in the flesh of the first and second fingers?—Funny. . . . ’

“ ‘ They are due to years of interval-stopping on the violin,’ Hylda told her.

“ ‘ Of course, that’s it. I have heard that you are a virtuoso, and I demand to hear you soon. Are you still at the College? ’

“ ‘ Nominally; but all that’s over for me now, I’m afraid.’

“ ‘ But why? ’

“ ‘ My father had no money to leave me, Miss O’Donague: I shall have to earn my living.’

“ ‘ Up started Laura at this, dancing, clapping her palms, crying, ‘ Oh, how jolly! ’

“ ‘ Hardly for *me*,’ said Hylda.

“ ‘ For *me*, yes,’ cried Laura. ‘ For that means you living with me! Do you know, I dreamt it? Yes, one night: and here it is, come to pass. Why, I want a companion! I have actually been inquiring——’

“ ‘ Miss O’Donague, you are very good——’

“ ‘ Call me Laura this instant! ’

“ ‘ Hylda looked at her with dimples in her smile, but said nothing.

“ ‘ Why, how jolly! ’ cried Laura; ‘ just think, always to be together now, and we’ll talk of Aubrey all day, and be good to each other, and bear with each other, and read each other’s letters, and go incognito on sprees to Venice on our own, and down to Clanning—did Aubrey tell you about Clanning? ’

“ ‘ He told me,’ said Hylde, ‘ and of that child lost down there. By the way, he had a most ludicrous story to tell me on the day before our wedding-day about two men going to his flat and as good as charging him with having stolen the child. Has she been found, do you know? ’

“ ‘ I think not.’

“ ‘ Aubrey said that the two men entered his flat and searched all through——’

“ ‘ Ah? ’ said Laura, smiling to herself with down-cast eyes.

“ ‘ Yes, and insisted that they had actually *heard* the child speaking in the flat.’

“ ‘ Oh? . . . Poor old Aubrey! he was in for it those few days, wasn’t he? ’

“ ‘ Hav’n’t you heard anything of this incident before? ’

“ ‘ Well, yes, I think I heard something of it from—Barker,’ and Laura jumped up anew from the sofa, opened a book on a table, looked at it, humming, cast it aside, and threw herself into a chair.

“ ‘ She doesn’t invariably utter everything that she is thinking,’ thought Hylde; and she added aloud: ‘ To what could such a delusion of these officers have been due? ’

“ ‘ Laura pouted, asking: ‘ How can you be sure that it was a delusion? ’

“ ‘ Because there was no one at all in Aubrey’s flat, so no one could have been heard in it! ’

“ ‘ Oh! Did Aubrey say that there was no one? ’

“ ‘ No, he did not *say* so; but as he did not mention to me that there was anyone, there was no one.’

“ ‘ I see. But since Detective-Sergeant Barker vows that he heard the child with his own ears in the flat, what answer can be made to that? Maybe Aubrey saw the child down at Clanning, fell in love with her, for she was very pretty, and—nicked her.’

“ ‘ How very funny! ’ cried Hylde.

“ ‘ What! has he never done anything naughty in his life, this precious Aubrey of yours? ’ asked Laura: ‘ I hate goody men.’ ”

“ ‘ He isn’t at all goody, really,’ Hylda said. ‘ Still, one hardly goes about catching up charming children without any object.’ ”

“ ‘ How can you know what object he might have had? We none of us know men through and through! They are devils, I can tell you.’ ”

“ ‘ That’s very funny.’ ”

“ ‘ So do you imagine for one moment, Miss Hood——?’ ”

“ ‘ It was *Hylda* just now.’ ”

“ ‘ Well, Hylda—Do you imagine for one moment that this preposterous Aubrey of yours told you everything, or half, or a quarter——?’ ”

“ ‘ I do, really, Miss O’Donague.’ ”

“ ‘ And why not *Laura*? You see, now, you see, it is you, not I.’ ”

“ ‘ Why, you yourself said *Miss Hood*!’ ”

“ ‘ Oh, Lord! I wonder if we are always going to nag like this: if so, you had better not come.’ ”

“ ‘ Maybe I had better not.’ ”

“ ‘ Sweet, yes, come, will you? come, come.’ Laura darted, with her sinuous grace, to Hylda’s hand again. ‘ Why, you mustn’t mind *me*—I am nothing if not irresponsible! Promise that you will never take me seriously! I shouldn’t dream of living now without these dear hands, those old-familiar eyes, for I love you a lot already. That’s me! in two ticks I see and adore, or see and detest—and I foresee that you and I have got to go henceforth together, willy-nilly. Only, don’t imagine that Aubrey——’ ”

“ ‘ Miss O’Donague,’ said Hylda very gravely, ‘ we seem to disagree on the subject of Aubrey; so perhaps we had better not talk much of him.’ ”

“ ‘ Meaning, of course, that I am in love.’ ”

“ ‘ Did I imply that?’ ”

“ ‘ You exhaled it. But when did Aubrey tell you

about his little legacy? When did he say he was going to draw it?’

“ ‘He told me on the fourth day before the wedding-day that he meant to draw it in two days’ time,’ answered Hylda.

“ ‘So his birthday was two days before the wedding-day?’

“ ‘Birthday? What has his birthday to do with it?’

“ ‘So you don’t know—*he never told you*—that the legacy was to be paid on his birthday?’

“ ‘I—no—you must be mistaken—he never—mentioned it.’

Hylda’s eyes were so large with scare and amazement, that Laura leapt up laughing and could not help saying, ‘What, are there things which Aubrey kept dark from you?’

“ ‘Hylda was dumb; spoke only with her eyes, which dwelt upon Laura with reproach.

“ ‘There, now I have wounded you,’ said Laura ruefully, darting suddenly anew to her, ‘because I am an ungenerous mean beast who kicks when one is down. . . . He forgot to mention it to you, that’s all. You are so sensitive, so finely strung, and to bruise you is like trampling brutally upon a lute that breathes music to every breeze. . . . But, dear, it *is* so: he was to be paid on his birthdays, it was papa’s whim. *When* is his birthday?’

“ ‘I—don’t happen to know,’ said Hylda in a maze: ‘it must have been two days before the wedding-day, since he said he was going to draw the legacy on that day.’

“ ‘No, it wasn’t, then,’ said Laura decisively: ‘for the wedding-day was in November, but it was not in November that he rescued Papa in the car: and that day was his birthday. It was, if I remember right, an evening in March.’

“ ‘He said that *that* night was his birthday?’

“ ‘Aye—told papa.’

“ ‘ Then, that was why he brought me that specially large bouquet *that* Wednesday night. But why, why was he in black? ’ Hylda wondered.

“ Laura, whirling a gold breloque about her forefinger, murmured, ‘ It is curious that he never told you, or that you never asked him, as to his birthday! ’

“ Hylda said, ‘ I have always had an instinct of anything which Aubrey did not wish to discuss, so never asked him that—not directly, that is; twice indirectly I have: but he never mentioned it.’

“ ‘ You said just now that he told you everything.’

“ ‘ Except that.’

“ ‘ Ah, Hylda, the exception disproves the rule.’

“ ‘ What, you begin that again? But you do not mean it’—with a look and a smile. ‘ At any rate, since it was on his birthday that he saved the motor-car, we now know his birthday. What was the exact date? ’

“ ‘ Can one remember after so long? ’ Laura wished to know.

“ ‘ Didn’t you tell me that you keep a diary? ’

“ ‘ Not much of a one ’—with a pout, and downcast eyes.

“ Hylda looked steadily at her, thinking. ‘ Can it be possible that she is not consistently frank? that she sometimes knows more than she tells? ’

“ But now, before she could say more, a footman, looking in, announced Detective-Sergeant Barker.

“ ‘ Don’t go,’ Laura said to Hylda, ‘ Barker and I are pals—he says the Force missed something when I was born a woman; if *he* had been born a man, and not a policeman, I believe he would be captivated.’

“ Barker came in—a man who, though his grade in the police was not high, would have received a telegram addressed to ‘ Barker, London ’—or to ‘ Rob Roy,’ his name among the cracksmen, others of the ‘ gentry ’ naming him ‘ Old Moore.’ Tallish, forty, agile, he had an agreeable smile beneath his moustache, and a wary gaze out of the tail of his eye. His teeth

seemed excellent, but three in front were false, to replace the three knocked forty degrees inward by the maulers of a 'Fred the Freak,' and that cheek-scar was from a stab by a Greek in a Soho club-raid. Since he had had occasion, some months before, to warn Laura with regard to her father's intimacy with the notorious Salvadora Rosa, or La Rosa, he had seen her several times in respect to various phases of the same matter; and she, fascinated by the extraordinary existence which this man lived, had sat chin on fist to hearken to histories of his hundred and one disguises as cab-minder, or street-artist, or weak-minded curate, of the clicking of the 'snips' on the wrists of the Dresden bank-robbers, the Frameley forgers, famous 'receivers,' crib-crackers, of kind deeds done among those beasts of society, and tiger-struggles on the stairs of benighted lairs. In he now came, bowing, hat in hand, and Laura in her frank way gave him her hand, saw him seated, saying:

" ' You already know Miss Hood of the vanished bridegroom, Sergeant Barker ? ' "

" ' I have that honour,' says Barker.

" ' We were just talking,' Laura remarked, hand on hip, with her saucy air, her dark hair parted at the side—' this lady derides the idea that you heard anyone in Mr. Aubrey Smith's flat that day when, as you affirm, you heard the child in it.' "

" ' A lady is invariably right,' the detective admitted.

" ' What did you hear the child say, if one may ask ? ' Hylda demanded, paying no attention to his politeness.

" ' Surely you may ask, Miss Hood. There was little to be heard, you understand, with a thick door between, but, with your permission, I distinctly heard a child utter the words: "*Now that I am seven years old.*" As to that, I give you my word.' "

" ' How miraculous this thing ! ' Hylda murmured. . . . ' There was no one in the flat ! ' "

" ' Mr. Aubrey Smith told you that, did he ? ' Barker asked.

“ ‘ He told me of the incident, and did not tell me that there was anyone.’

“ ‘ Negative evidence,’ Barker laughed. ‘ To me, now, he admitted that there *was* someone in the flat, implying that it was a lady; but then I heard the child, and knew who it was.’

“ ‘ *Lady,*’ Hylda breathed.

“ ‘ You see now, Hylda ’—from Laura: ‘ a detective, like a lady, is invariably right, except when a detective and a lady differ, and then both are sure to be wrong.’

“ ‘ Did he—actually say that there was a lady?’ Hylda asked.

“ ‘ No,’ said the detective, ‘ but he looked, or tried to look, shy when we came to the locked door——’

“ ‘ Locked door?’ Hylda’s eyes dropped.

“ ‘ Ah, the incident of the locked door was never told you, I see,’ said Barker: ‘ but it is about as well, Miss Hood, for us all to know what’s what: I was allowed to look all through the flat, you see; but when it came to that locked room—ah, that was another affair; and it was “*there’s someone in there*” in a whisper, with shy looks.’

“ Laura, standing against a cabinet with her arms spread out like one crucified, and her head thrown back, looked down upon Hylda, contemplating her suffering; while Hylda, now quite gaunt, looked at the carpet.

“ ‘ Never mind, dear,’ said Laura; ‘ there’s some explanation.’

“ Suddenly Hylda flushed, and looking up with a smile, her eyes bravely met Laura’s, as she said: ‘ I *know* that, Miss O’Donague ’; then, turning to Barker, she asked: ‘ And you seriously believe, Sergeant Barker, that it was the lost child from Clanning that Mr. Smith had in that locked room?’

“ ‘ I believe that it was, Miss Hood, and I know that it was *a* child.’

“ ‘ Then, what do you say has become of this child?’

“ ‘ Ah, there now you ask one of the most difficult



questions of all in all this extraordinary matter,' said Barker. 'The house, of course, was closely watched from that moment, and he never brought out the child—that we know; nor is the child now in the building: vanished is the word—unless the child whom I heard in his flat is the same child whom he shot; but, then, the shot child is foreign. . . . By the way, that's one of the questions I have to ask you now, Miss O'Donague: you know little Ada Price, and you have seen the wounded child in hospital: do you not see a likeness between the two?'

" 'It did not strike me,' Laura replied.

" 'Kindly look at little Ada's photo,' said Barker, producing it, and Laura, looking at it, now said: 'Yes, I do rather see it now: only the wounded child is much more beautiful.'

" 'Still, you notice that they are alike, and there may be more in that. . . . And now, Miss O'Donague, I must next say to you what will be greatly against the grain.'

" 'Oh?' said Laura: 'my grain or yours?'

" 'Both our grains.'

" 'Ah, they both run the same way. But I am dying to hear—'

" 'Well, the Home Office has issued an order for the exhumation of your father's body.'

" Laura stood pale, then darting three steps at him with a face of wrath, 'You wouldn't dare!' she breathed.

" 'Now, do not take it to heart,' Detective-Sergeant Barker said gently: 'if it could be avoided, it wouldn't be done. But in the circumstances—'

" 'What circumstances, pray, Sergeant?'

" 'Why, I have heard you hint yourself that he was poisoned!'

" 'I was not in the least serious,' Laura answered: 'a natural death! So why is this outrage perpetrated?'

" 'No, don't take it to heart—think of the cir-

cumstances: your father dies suddenly on the way home from Mr. Aubrey Smith's, where, as you yourself have told me, he had had something to drink; to Mr. Smith's he had gone from Madame Rosa's; to both Mr. Smith and to that lady, as we know, he has left sums of money, so that both stood to profit by his death; this Mr. Smith, we know, has since shot one child, and, with this lady's favour, perhaps stolen another; we may assert, with some certainty, that he is no saint; and as to Madame Rosa, or the Countess Poldoff, or whatever her name is, I give you my word, Miss O'Donogue, that that lady is no saint either: well, then——'

"'Oh, my poor Papa!' Laura mourned, falling into a sofa, her hands over her face.

"But neither anger nor grief could avail to change the process of the Government machine, and within some days, by the time Hylda's household effects had been sold, and Hylda herself was a part of Laura's household, the disinterred coffin of the old baronet lay open one Thursday morning in December under the eyes of the responsible persons.

"Never, maybe, did the eyes of men light on a wilder sight than those eyes that day, on a more woeful, on a more bewildering. They refused to believe their five wits! That sight seemed to be an evil dream that one feels to be a dream:—

"1. The baronet's throat was most brutally butchered right in to the inner carotids, with gashes jagged as by some blunt cutter.

"2. His mouth was crowded full of some substance resembling powdered glass.

"3. In his stomach was discovered enough prussic acid to kill thirty persons.

"There," concluded my Uncle Quintus, "I have now given you by my method of narration far more information than Detective-Sergeant Barker had to go

on at this point in the mystery. Indeed, I have provided you with sufficient clues to solve the problem, if you have the aptitude that you claim for such work. Tell me now, before we go up to bed, what do you make of these strange affairs? ”

It was a wild night, rags of gusts tormented the tapestries, the flicker only of the fire lighted us. My uncle bent forward and applied a match to a three-branched candelabra. I arranged my few half-illegible notes on my knee and prepared to answer this formidable query.

“ Uncle Quintus,” I said, “ as I see it, there are nine questions that need answering. If, in each instance I surmise right, I should reach the same conclusion—the successful conclusion—that you tell me Detective-Sergeant Barker arrived at. Let me, first of all, read you my questions. I will then attempt to answer them.

“ (1) What is the mystery of that ‘ strange and ominous date,’ Aubrey Smith the First’s birthday? ”

“ (2) Who stole the black-haired, seven-year-old, Welsh, Ada Price from Clanning? ”

“ (3) Was the O’Donague poisoned when he died in his car? ”

“ (4) Is any significance to be attached to the death of Davenport, the butler? ”

“ (5) Who is the black-haired, seven-year-old, French-speaking little girl found living with Aubrey Smith the Second in the squalid by-street near Russell Square? ”

“ (6) Who uttered the phrase ‘ Now that I am seven years of age ’ from behind locked doors in Aubrey Smith the First’s new flat? ”

“ (7) Which Aubrey Smith shot the black-haired, seven-year-old, French-speaking little girl? ”

“ (8) What happened to the two Aubrey Smiths subsequent to their chase on the young painter’s wedding-day? ”

“(9) What is the explanation of the atrocities revealed by the exhumation of the O’Donague?”

“Now, Uncle, if you will permit, I will expound. If it will not irritate you, I will tabulate my answers in just the same manner as I have tabulated my questions.

“These are my surmises. You can tell me, when I have done, exactly where I have gone astray.

“(1) Aubrey Smith the First was born on the 29th of February in Leap Year, and so only had a birthday every four years, which explains his despair over his legacy (since £175 every fourth year would not be sufficient to marry on) and his appeal that his namesake should collect his money annually for him. On that four-year birthday he wore mourning,—perhaps because his birth had cost his mother her life?”

“(2) Count Poldoff’s emissaries stole Ada Price, since they had reason to believe that she resembled the child they were searching for. Once the opportunity presented itself, they intended substituting their prisoner for the Count’s daughter.

“(3) The O’Donague was not poisoned when, to all appearance, he died in his car. He was neither poisoned nor dead!—was buried alive in a coma!

“(4) Davenport, the butler’s death was a natural one; but there was a significance, I suspect, attached to it, a significance which I will explain in answering my last question.

“(5) The black-haired, seven-year-old, French-speaking little girl living in squalor with Aubrey the Second was Count Poldoff’s daughter. Brought over by La Rosa from France, where for some years, no doubt, she had been educated and brought up as French in some obscure convent, she was entrusted by her mother to her agent, Aubrey Smith the Second. You will remember that La Rosa was abroad at the same time as the O’Donagues

were in Italy; it was then, I think, that the child came to England. The fact that her mother was financially *embarassée* explains the squalor, too, of her agent's circumstances.

“(6) Aubrey Smith the First uttered ‘Now that I am seven years of age’ in his new flat—uttered it to Laura, who, in her unconventional way, was visiting him. He had let her know that his birthday was the 29th of February, and he meant by ‘now that I am seven’ that he had had seven birthdays—or rather six.

“(7) Aubrey Smith the Second shot his little charge—unintentionally. Aubrey Smith the First's gun was unloaded when he dashed upstairs to take it, to intimidate his betrayer. The child, no doubt, got shot in some scuffle between the two. The initialled gun, of course, belonged to Aubrey Smith the Second, being probably a relic of his British-Indian Army days.

“(8) Aubrey Smith the Second flying before Aubrey Smith the First made for Regent's Park and La Rosa. Here he found sanctuary, and his pursuer, coming upon him, was seized and imprisoned by man-servants of La Rosa.

“(9) The atrocities on the body of the O'Donague were self-inflicted. Davenport the butler had placed in his master's coffin before interment a bottle of poison. The only significance of the butler's death is that when the exhumation took place he was not there to explain. Sir Phipps, I fancy, must once have been nearly buried alive in a coma, and so have made his old servant swear that whenever he was being buried, he, the butler, would put poison in the coffin. Sir Phipps must have waked in the grave, drank the poison. In his agony he ground the glass of the bottle in his teeth, and cut his throat with the broken glass. Barker may well have found a statement among the butler's papers to the effect that the butler placed the poison there.

“ I think, Uncle, that these are the facts which the police must have discovered. Hylda, I suppose, married her Aubrey the First when, on La Rosa’s mansion being searched, that young man was released. Count Poldoff recovered his daughter from the Hospital. Laura retired to Clanning and painting.”

My Uncle Quintus looked at me approvingly. “ My boy,” he said—and never before had he praised me so highly—“ you are right in nearly everything: I am pleased to note that you have the family brain. And now to bed. A cuneiform stele’s due from Khosabad to-morrow: you will give me your views on that.”

---

*Simon*

## THE COUNT

### I

IT happened some time ago, but I don’t suppose that Spanish trains have improved much. In Spain the difference between an express and an ordinary train is that you pay a supplement on the express.

Well, my express rattled to a halt at every wayside platform, and stayed as long as dirty children thought that they could sell travellers squashed fruit offered on large leaves, or nasty little cakes held out in sticky hands. Evening began to draw in, and I thought wearily how many hours late the train could be before they gave up expecting us at the other end of the journey. Suddenly a guard was walking up and down one more of the dim wayside platforms shouting, “ All change here, all change.” I made inquiries, then began arguments. But neither availed. It appeared that the express often did give up the ghost at this little station, and happily resumed its journey in the morning. It was never, the guard assured me solemnly, more than one day late. I couldn’t dis-

cover whether the engine-driver just got sleepy, or whether his best girl lived in the village. However, there was nothing else to do but to get out of the compartment and ask to be directed to the nearest hotel.

“Señor,” said the guard, “there is no hotel in here.”

I was too angry to be articulate, I merely said, “Then what?”

The guard shrugged his shoulders. “Most of the through-travellers will stay with friends in the village. If they have not friends, they have friends of friends; or they have made friends during the journey.”

“But,” I replied, “I am a stranger. What can I do?”

“Ah!” he said, “if you are a stranger, it is so easy. All you have to do is to send your card to the Count.”

Full of misgivings, I stumbled through the rubble which makes the approach from the railway station to most Spanish towns so forbidding. I found the café, ordered a sherry and declined a plate of mixed pieces of old sausage. Then I commenced to write my note to the Count, according to the guard’s suggestion. I procured an envelope from the waiter; and, marvelling at my own audacity, dispatched, via a small boy, my letter. Two sherries later the boy returned. He brought me back my card on which some words had been penned in a new hand: the Count sent me his greetings, and begged me to stop the night at his villa.

It was a striking villa. It was near to being some of the things which one hopes Spain to be, but which it isn’t. The butler, after I had shown him my card, on which the Count had written, was grave and courteous. He led me to a bedroom which was plainly and decently furnished. He said:

“Dinner has already been served, sir; but I am bringing you your meal on a tray.”

When he left me, I looked appreciatively round the

room which the Count had assigned to me. The windows were open, and a sultry breeze fanned my cheeks. I thought, knowing the mosquitoes of Spain (which resemble large and well-equipped armoured cars on wings), "How dangerous!" I stepped over to the windows, and tried to pull them to; but I could not make them budge. The butler caught me struggling with them. He asked me, quite politely, what I thought I was doing. I explained about mosquitoes.

"Señor," he said, "you will not be troubled by those insects here."

"No?" I answered, "why not?"

"Because of an invention of the Count's, señor. I trust the dinner will be to your satisfaction. You will ring if you need anything?"

As I fell asleep that night I had the most ridiculous ideas. "Supposing," whispered some idiotic and drowsy section of my subconscious, "the windows are left open so that the Count can enter? Dracula was a count, wasn't he?" Then, as I drifted further towards oblivion, I thought, "What a thing to do to one's host—to drive a stake through his heart! And does even a stake through the heart keep a vampire quiet? Wasn't there the girl of Lewin who, when exhumed, was found to have chewed and swallowed one half of her face-cloth, which, on being pulled out of her throat, showed stains of blood. Wasn't a stake, therefore, driven through her breast? But didn't that wretched creature then walk abroad with the stake in her hand and kill quite a number of people with this formidable weapon?"

In the morning I was conducted by the butler to the breakfast-room. There my fellow-guests were tucking in to coffee and snips of that delicious hot batter which is cooked in Spain, seemingly, in an endless rope. Two old ladies (whom I guessed at once to be French) had surrounded their plates with a number



of tiny paper umbrellas; thereby giving to their simple meal the air of a doll-house festival. There was no sign of the Count. A wrinkled American, who was seated on my left, without any warning lent towards me and said:

“I’ve been here a week. Yes, sir, I’ve been here a week, and I haven’t once spoken to the Count. This Count bird will give any stranger who asks him a decent bed and free breakfast, and you can stay as long as your conscience will let you. But can you personally give the Count thanks for his hospitality? Oh dear, no! He’s far too grand. He’ll entertain the traveller, but he won’t speak to him. I don’t like it, sir. My name is Homer George, and I’ve been brought up to believe that one man is as good as another. If it wasn’t for his excellent coffee, I’d say the Count was positively insulting.”

I put on what I hope is an expression of severe reproof.

“If,” I demanded, “it is so distasteful to you, why do you stay here?”

“Because,” he replied, “because I believe that something funny is going on in this villa. I’m a man of public spirit. I want to find out what it is. I want to put anything crooked straight.”

I pushed back my chair from the table, regretting that my gesture entailed sacrificing a second cup of coffee. “Mr. George, I shouldn’t say that you are public-spirited, I should say that you are curious in rather a beastly manner.”

I walked across the room and out on to a cool verandah. Oh dear! these Moorish gardens with their fountains and tiles. As soon as lady novelists see the tiles they cry, “How brilliant, my dear, to have blue tiles with this glorious blue sky!” But why do I think of—er—well . . . public baths? I closed my eyes against the offending tiles, and thought about the mysterious Count. As I lay in a convenient deck-chair thinking, a choking odour

assailed me. I half opened my eyes, and found Homer George at my elbow puffing a vile cigar. I had forgotten how difficult it is to snub an American.

"Look here," said Mr. George, in no way abashed, "you're the first person who has turned up since I've been here who may be able to help me."

"Sir," I protested, "I have no intention of helping you."

"That's because you don't understand," he said. "These Spanish villages, they haven't got over the superstitions of the Dark Ages. Do you know why the peasants in these Catholic countries are so cruel to animals? The Catholic used to believe that he aided the Almighty in maltreating brutes. Devils, you see, although condemned to everlasting fire, did not begin their punishment in hell until after judgment day. In the meantime they roamed the earth tempting men. But, with their numbers being constantly added to, the number of devils on the earth became a problem for the ecclesiastical fathers. Finally, they made the extra room for them, by deciding that the devils who had no room to go elsewhere went into the bodies of animals. So the Catholic thought that when the dog howled and the butchered pig squealed, it was the embodied demon who really suffered."

I confess I was surprised at this long and somewhat erudite speech. "But why do you tell me all this?" I asked.

"Because I have been poking around the village, making a friend here and a friend there. From what they have told me I have been able to patch together a very queer story—a story of something that could only have happened in a Spanish village like this which is still under the shadow of mediæval superstition. . . . Now, all I want is for you to help me one night. I know the room in which the Count works, and I know how the window of that room can be reached by a balcony. I will be quite satisfied if I

can get one look through the window—oh yes! I have watched the lights in that room, from the garden, far into the morning. But I must have a witness in case something goes wrong. I mean . . . if anything goes wrong . . . a companion is a help, isn't he?"

I refused blankly, Homer George continued as though there had been no interruption. "You can make up your mind *after* you have heard. . . . When the Count came into his title he had his predecessor exhumed. He dressed the corpse in its best clothes and issued a writ against it, for unlawful and extravagant management of the estate. No legal formality was omitted, and a lawyer was appointed to defend the accused. The instant sentence was pronounced, the corpse was stripped of its clothes and . . . and mutilated. Of course it all happened very much as if it were between friends. The lawyers were local men who had to humour the Count if they wished to make their livelihood in the district. The police? corrupt . . . and bribed. But the Count. . . .! A man who could do such a thing is capable of any inhumanity. Now do you see why I want to look into the Count's workroom and check up on what our elusive host does in the night?"

## 2

We tiptoed down the passage which led from my room, and Homer George paused when we reached the corner. He took two steps forward, and then he peered to the left and the right. Then he beckoned me to follow him. He opened a door, and my heart was in my mouth. But nobody accosted us. He led me through an empty picture-gallery. At the end of the gallery he turned towards a window; fumbled with a catch; and threw it open. I began to realise what an efficient amateur detective Homer George was. He must, before I had arrived, have put in a good deal of time snooping around the house.

On the balcony outside the window the moonlight streamed down on us. Again I felt afraid. I thought of my dream idea about the Count being a vampire. Better a vampire than an enraged aristocrat whose hospitality had been outraged! But I had little time for such grim speculations, for my companion crouched and ran. A second later we had reached the corner of the house where the balcony turned into shadow. Chinks of bright light fell from between heavy curtains drawn behind a great window. I could hear my companion breathing heavily. It may have been from the exertion of running, or it may have been that he was frightened now that the moment had come. But he moved forward resolutely, and bent to put his eye to the largest crack in the curtains. At the same instant the curtains were snatched apart, and a man with a high-domed forehead stood framed in the window. Dramatically, he stood there while I counted ten. Then he flung open the window.

"Come in, gentlemen, I have been expecting you. One of my servants heard you making your plans on the verandah this morning. You know how servants will talk?" He spoke calm and fluent English.

Homer George, now that he was trapped, lost his nerve. He stood, positively shivering with fright.

"Come, Sir," pressed the Count, "it was you gentlemen who wished to pay a call on me." He stretched out his arm in a kind of mock invitation.

My companion misunderstood the gesture. He leapt back, and leapt too far. He staggered against the parapet. His arms shot above his head. He gave a cry, and crashed into the courtyard below.

The Count walked to the balustrade, and gazed down. "Too bad," he said, coolly.

"But," I stammered, "we must go down and help."

"Help? My dear man, see his scattered brains! My servant will arrange everything, even to cleaning my nice blue tiles. Or are you interested in the casual connection between cranial capacity and mental

capacity. I admit I am extremely interested in the argument against the higher education of women which is based on the fact that the average female brain weighs only 1272 grammes. Surely a person with such a light encephalon cannot be receptive of the higher branches of study. Ah! but I forget that you English think we are very backward about . . . about our ideas: the social status of women, the Church, and so on."

He had been speaking quickly, as if he would cover up the fact that he had been manœuvring me into his room. He shut the window behind him, and drew the curtains. I found myself in an immense apartment. In the centre of the chamber were some chairs and an enormous desk. Two of the walls were covered by rows of bookshelves. One spacious corner of the room had been fitted up as a laboratory.

"I'm afraid," he said, "that it has the air of being the room of an amateur chemist. But in this room I have made several of my small discoveries. In this room I have pushed my great research to its—yes, I think I may say so—triumphant conclusion. I have managed to isolate a certain bacillus. It's a strange microbe, my friend. It turns gelatine black, and admits a fetid stench. . . . But I must offer you refreshment. Won't you sit down there, near the desk? And I will ring for the servants."

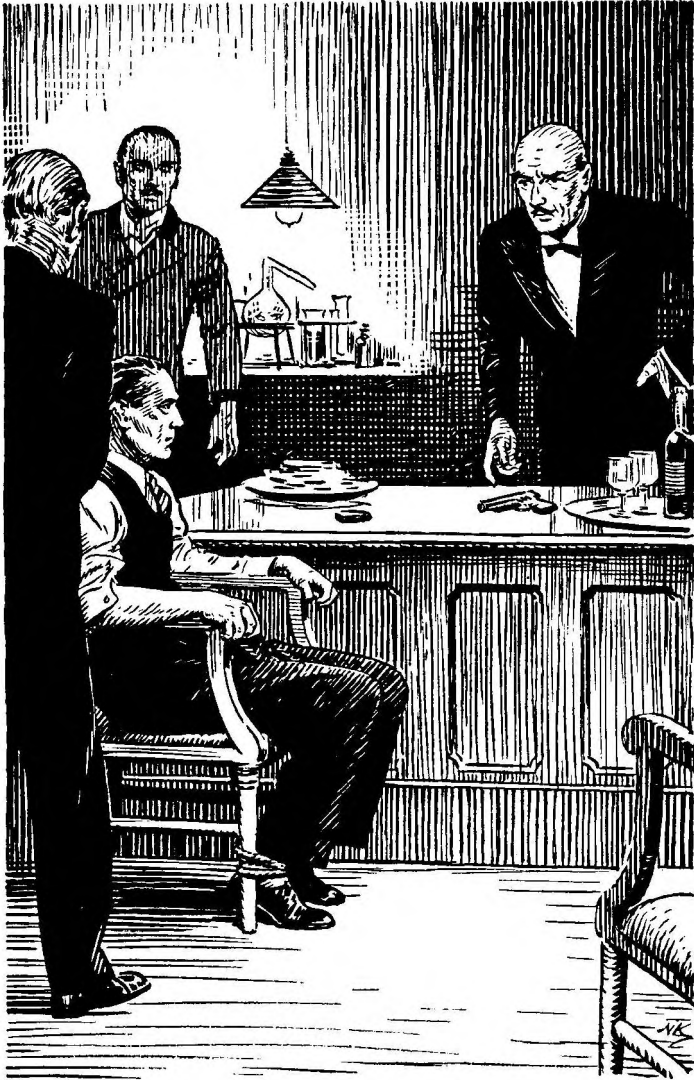
The butler answered the bell, and the Count said, "Refreshments for one, please."

The butler returned bearing a tray on which were arranged bottles and glasses. He was followed by a second man-servant, who carried a tray of sandwiches. The trays were placed on the desk. The servants retreated. As they passed me. . . . It happened in an instant. It could not have been more neatly done. I was taken completely off my guard.

The Count smiled, softly. "Yes, I fear the refreshment is for me. To-night I shall stay up very late, my friend, watching your reactions. . . . If you

start screaming, we will have to gag you. You won't help yourself that way. . . . I must remind you that you thrust your company on me. You and your American friend decided to take an interest in my experiments. Now I am going to talk to you about them. The microbe I have isolated . . . ah! I wish I had time to show it to you through the microscope. There are two little feelers which might be horns, and something that looks suspiciously like a tail. You sneer? That is because, my friend, you are too proud for the yoke of Mother Church. What do you think went into the Gadarene swine? At last I have isolated the *bacillus infernalis*. Science is vain unless it helps man to salvation. Evil a microbe! Don't you see what it means to have discovered the most insidious disguise of the devil. . . . Still you laugh? Perhaps that is well, for you won't object, then, to having a few of these microbes injected into your blood-stream? . . . Don't wriggle. . . . Mario, just bare his arm. . . . All over, my good friend. . . . See this automatic? I shall sit this side of the desk watching you. All I wish is to observe symptoms. I give you my word, as a gentleman of Spain, that nothing more will happen to you. Just sit still, be reasonable and let my servants go to bed. . . . Mario and Alfonso, you may go. I feel certain my guest is going to be reasonable. . . . Supposing you did escape; is there a doctor in the world who could help you? Surely the doctor in our little village would not be prepared to administer an anti-toxin for the *bacillus infernalis*? But you will not escape. If you try to leave this room I will shoot you, without compunction, for I have warned you. You may guess that I am a man of my word, yes? Police? I shall tell them that you and your American were robbers. I have great power in this district. . . .”

His eyes glittered with a certain madness, and they seemed to hypnotise me. I remember very little of that night. But I remember how, whenever his



“ ‘ See this automatic ? ’ ”





attention was partly turned from me, I managed to coax with the tips of my fingers the paper-weight on the desk a little nearer.

I remember that, when some night creature flew against the window, the Count looked for an instant behind him, and in that instant I had seized and hurled the paper-weight.

I remember how I picked up a sharp knife, scalped, and opened the cranium.

I remember taking slime in my hands. Yes, yes, I remember that I found that his brains weighed less than a woman's!

I remember how they discovered me, in the morning, writing out a statement of how the Count was unfitted for the higher education.

I remember how they discovered me and brought me to the home. . . .

I have been in the home a long time now.

Do you know, I really believe they will send me mad here.

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*L. A. G. Strong*

## THE SHOP ON THE CORNER

GEORGE CALLINGTON halted and pulled out his watch. It said five-and-twenty to three. Finkelstein would not be alone till after the hour.

He put his watch back and went on slowly up the street. The time since lunch had seemed endless. He had dawdled over the meal as long as he could, sitting at the marble-topped table, sipping at coffee he did not want, coffee that chilled and went bitter on his tongue; dawdled till his restless nerves could bear it no longer, and he had set out to trudge the streets; until it was time. His feet ached; he was sweating; his tongue was dry. Not because he was afraid.

There was no fear in his mind—nothing but impatience. Now that his resolve was taken, there was no room for anything but the fierce longing to put it into action, and be done.

So fierce was the longing that it had by now completely obliterated all thought of the first set-back to his plan. Unlikely though it was that anyone should connect him with the affair, he had planned to call in upon a friend, who would, if need arose, be able to testify that shortly before three o'clock George Callington was in a part of town far removed from Finkelstein's. Besides serving this useful purpose, the call would help to pass the time.

But, to George's dismay, the friend had been out. An untidy message, pinned to the door of the little office, blankly confronted him. "Back at three-forty-five," it said.

Because he had never for a moment envisaged such a thing, the discovery unnerved him. He stood, staring at the paper, unable to decide what to do. Then, slowly, he went down the stairs and into the street. After all, what did it matter? There was no need to see anyone first. It was an extra precaution; but it was not essential. With a shrug of his high shoulders, he set off to pace the streets once more.

And still he had the best part of half an hour to wait. Looking up, he read the name of a side street. For a moment it did not register in his mind, which was contemplating its purpose with the dull fixity of a bull staring at a red cloak. Then he remembered. At the top of the street was Sydney's studio. Sydney, his brother-in-law, was a photographer. There was not a great deal of portraiture in that not-too-fashionable neighbourhood, but Sydney made quite a good thing out of commercial work, photographing permanent waves for hairdressers, gowns for modistes, and window displays for sanitary engineers. He would call in and have a word with Sydney. That

would do, just as well. Every bit as well. Why had he not thought of that before?

Two minutes' walking brought him to Sydney's place. The approach was bad; bad enough to discourage any possible portrait clients, even if they should happen to be attracted by the sign and samples at the foot of the stairs. People were often telling Sydney about it, but he was a happy-go-lucky sort of a chap. He agreed with them cordially, and did nothing. Such portrait customers as he had came to him through personal recommendations. Seeking to be done cheaply, they did not trouble about such details. It's a pity, thought George, as he groped his way up the dingy staircase, because his work is good. Sydney irritated him. George, a methodical worker, a plodder, could not understand the type that is cheerfully content to muddle along.

"Why, hallo, George! How are you? How nice to see you! Here, have a chair. Shove those things anywhere—on the floor. Here. That's right. How good of you to look in!"

Sydney always seemed pleased to see him. George could not think why. But then, he seemed pleased to see everybody.

"Well, how goes it?" Sydney smiled at him, with disarming friendliness. "Everything all right?"

"Not so bad, thanks. How's May?"

"Capital, thanks. Little bit tired, you know. Looking forward to her holiday. She'll be all the better for a change."

"Um."

"You look as if you could do with a change yourself," continued his brother-in-law. "Feeling a bit tired?"

"Well—yes: a bit." George looked moodily round at the lights, tables, and general litter.

"Place is in an awful mess, I'm afraid," said Sydney cheerfully. "I really must have a clear up.

I've been meaning to, for days now. But there—I never seem to get time, somehow."

George swallowed.

"Are you busy, then?" he asked mechanically.

"No, not really. Not as busy as I'd like to be. Still, as soon as I think of having a real old turn-out, something always seems to crop up. Don't mind if I get on with what I was doing, do you?" He began to rummage about at one of the tables.

George watched him, uncomprehendingly, his mind still staring ahead like the bull at the red cloak. Every now and then it forgot the import of what it was staring at, as the tired bull might for a moment confusedly forget, standing still to get its breath, dreaming dully of something far from the arena and the encircling crowd; then feel the sting of rage again, as some bland pass, some gesture of the taunting matador recalled it. George swallowed again. His throat hurt.

"We're going to have a great treat to-night," said Sydney, over his shoulder.

"Oh! What's that?"

"The musical club. We've got the Graveley's. Had to pay the devil of a fee; but they're worth it. May and I heard 'em last summer, in Scarborough. They *were* good. Doing a Beethoven, a Mozart, and the Debussy." He turned round. "You ought to join, George. Really you ought. The sub's only a guinea. Do you good. Take you out of yourself."

George shook his head.

"Chamber music's not much in my line."

"Oh, but you'd come to like it. I didn't care very much for it at first, till May made me go. I went once or twice and I was quite converted. Now I'm as keen as she is."

I'll bet you are, thought George, looking at him. You'd let May or anyone else convert you to anything. You don't know what it is to have a will of your own. Looking at his brother-in-law's pleasant,

weakly good-looking profile, he suddenly wondered what Sydney would say if he told him what he was going to do: what, in half an hour's time—or sooner—would be safely done.

"I wish you would. Let me propose you? I'd easily get someone to second you."

George shook his head.

"No, thanks. Not at present, anyhow."

"Oh, well. Later on, perhaps? In the autumn, for the new season?"

"I don't know. I'll think about it."

Yes, safe though it is, I'd better not make any plans yet. Though, if I bring it off, I might as well let him put me up for his rotten club, or anything else. Shut up, you fool. Of course you'll bring it off.

He took out his watch. Twelve minutes to. At three, Finkelstein's assistant left him and went out for a cup of tea. Finkelstein himself went out between a quarter-to-two and two. He would be back sometimes as early as twenty-to-three, but he never let the assistant go till three. Then, for twenty minutes or so, he would be alone in the shop. Maisie had told George all about Finkelstein's movements. Unless a customer should chance to come in, there would be no one to find out what had happened until the assistant came back. Of course, the tailor who worked upstairs, at alterations and repairs, *might* come down to ask some question, but it was most unlikely. Maisie had only known him come down twice, all the time she had been there. Finkelstein did not encourage questions. He preferred to complain afterwards, if anything went wrong. Oh, yes, Maisie had told him a whole heap about Finkelstein: and then, thinking of other things she had told him about Finkelstein, but not until too late, George gritted his teeth, and the blood rushed to his face, almost blinding him.

Afraid that in some way he might betray himself,

he rose abruptly. He could hardly stand: he swayed on his feet.

"I must go on now," he said.

"Must you? Sure?"

"Yes. It's—it's—what time do you make it?"

"Just on three. I'm a bit fast, though, I think."

"Just on three," George repeated. "Well—I must be going."

"Good-bye, then, old man. Thanks for looking in."

Sydney was looking at him queerly. This wouldn't do. If—if anything came out, it was very important that he should have seemed normal.

("Tell us, Mr. Fairfield. When the accused was with you, did you notice anything at all strange about his manner?")

"Well, since you ask me, I'm bound to say . . .")

George saw the picture all too clearly. That wouldn't do. He forced a smile.

"I think there's something in what you said just now. I do need a bit of a change."

"My dear chap, I'm sure of it. I don't want to frighten you, but you look all in."

"I *am* a bit tired. Haven't been sleeping too well. I think I'll take a day or two off. Run down to Brighton, or something."

"Make it a week if you can," Sydney urged, coming out on to the landing with him. "Here—wait—I'll switch on the light. That's better. Yes—make it at least a week."

"I'll try. Thanks, very much."

"And—think it over, won't you, about the Musical?"

"I will. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

"Give my love to May," George called up, half-way down the flight.

"I will indeed."

Hope I haven't overdone it, now, thought George,

stepping out into the street. He walked slowly till he reached the corner, then hurried as fast as he could go till he came to a broad main thoroughfare. Hailing the first taxi he saw, he bade the driver make for the nearest Underground station.

He had worked it all out to a nicety. It was possible to get from this neighbourhood to Finkelstein's, a distance of over three miles, in something like ten minutes.

## 2

George Callington was one of those apparently misanthropic creatures whom, in reality, nothing but diffidence and an awkward manner estrange from their fellow men. The manner, plus a rather overgrown, uncouth appearance, had earned him rebuffs as a boy which drove him further and further in upon himself. Fiercely sensitive, he brooded over each incident until he could savagely assure himself that he did not care. By the time he was seventeen or eighteen, and all the grapes were sour, he had developed a way of life as unattractive as his exterior, and was voted a sulky, intractable specimen, best left alone. This, he told himself, was just what he wanted: yet in moments of honesty and discouragement he knew that it was not at all what he wanted, that he longed to join in with others of his age, and be accepted by them. At such times, when the sense of personal inadequacy would no longer be kept down, his poisoned imagination extended it to cover everything, till he saw himself as a leper and an outcast. No longer could he blame the rest of the human race, or be angry with them. He could merely grit his teeth, turn over once more on the hot, comfortless pillow, and be miserable.

The sense of inferiority kept him away from women. He was thirty-three when he met Maisie. It was a crowded, hot Saturday evening, and she had to share his table in a tea-shop. How they got into conver-

sation George could not properly recall. He could only remember sitting behind his paper, going hot and cold, strangely excited, and cursing himself for the excitement. The next thing was, they were talking. Something had happened—she had dropped her umbrella, and he had picked it up; and they were talking. A week later, they met again. George had gone through all manner of torments, and called himself all manner of names, before he could bring himself to go to the same tea-shop again. Other people came and sat at the table he chose, an innocent old man and a woman, and he scowled at them so fiercely that they became quite uncomfortable, and the old man's hand shook as he tipped his tea into his saucer. Then, when he had given her up, allowed her another five minutes, and another, and another, and given her up again, she stood in the doorway. She caught sight of him, smiled, and came straight across. He got up awkwardly, upsetting a chair.

After that, they met regularly, and Maisie told him all about herself. At least, as he had subsequently discovered, not quite all. If only she had! If only. . . . But what was the good of saying that? She had not told him all: he supposed he must be to blame. He had not the gift of giving. He could not open out properly to anyone, so it was only natural that Maisie did not open out to him. Besides, she was perhaps ashamed: poor little girl, poor dear—and at the thought of lost endearments, of love never spoken, George reeled and had to catch hold of a door-post to steady himself. When he thought of what had happened, and what, had he been another sort of man, might have happened instead, he felt such anguish that he could have thrown back his head and howled like a dog.

Old Finkelstein, the dealer in misfit clothes, had employed Maisie to keep his accounts and look after the little room in which he did the ladies' side of his



business. It was only a sideline, and he had since given it up: but, when George first met her, Maisie was nominally in charge of it. Finkelstein underpaid her, and she knew it. She could get more elsewhere, if, as she told George, she could find an elsewhere to go to. Meanwhile, with a consumptive sister to look after . . . It was the old, old story. Then that foul old devil . . .

Picture after picture boiled up savagely from the cauldron of George's mind. Maisie, lying in her last illness, flushed and feverish, her breath rattling like dry leaves, telling him in broken gasps how it had been . . . Finkelstein at the inquest, all grease and shocked, paternal sorrow. No, he had no idea of Miss Wilkins's condition. No, he could throw no light on this sad business. He had no idea who was responsible. At least—no, he could not say. Pressed, he admitted, with every show of reluctance, that there *was* a young man she had been keeping company with. He, Finkelstein, had not liked the look of him, and, as a man old enough to be her father, he had thought it his bare duty to say a word of varning . . . No, he did not know the young man's name. Nor where he lived. Of course, the young man *might* have had nothing to do with it . . .

Oh God, God, God! How *could* she? Why had she never told him, George, what was happening? She had no money. Then, why could she not have asked him? He would have given her all he had, done anything, anything . . . And perhaps, if she could bring herself to submit to Finkelstein, she might even have let him, George . . . He might have married her. Too late, too late . . . All these things were too late. He had asked her just once, before they took her away to the hospital, why she had not told him. He had not been able to help it: the question was wrung from him, in tones of agonised reproach, before he knew what he was saying.

“ . . . I would have . . . done *anything*, if I'd only known. If you'd only told me . . . ”

She had smiled, a grim, twisted little smile, and pressed his hand.

“ I thought, if you knew, you'd never speak to me any more . . . ”

“ Yes, yes, but why didn't you tell me *before* . . . ? ”

She shook her head, miserably. The tears ran down her cheeks. Oh, he could imagine it all now, after sleepless nights spent twisting and writhing on the wound. The old brute had taken advantage of her. She had had no warning. At least, not the first time. Afterwards, she had been afraid. Then, finding how it was with her, she had tried, as a million poor girls had tried before her, to escape from the trap.

Well—it was too late to do anything about that now; but it was not too late for revenge.

## 3

Finkelstein's shop was on a corner, just off the main avenue. Traffic was brisk on the avenue, which was a by-pass for vehicles going north. Figgis Street, of which Finkelstein's was Number One, was narrow and rather ill-favoured. It consisted for the most part of small shops, one or two of them similar to his, with here and there a theatrical costumier, a pawnbroker, a barber, an Italian restaurant—an ordinary enough little side-street on the Soho fringes. Its other branch, Claremorris Street, was just such another, except that, farther down, it was enlivened by the offices of one or two dubious film companies. Each street was narrow, and, at that hour, comparatively unfrequented. The few people to be seen walked quickly, intent upon their own concerns.

George knew quite well what the shop was like inside. A few weeks earlier, on Maisie's expert advice, he had made a purchase there. He had been

in need of a new suit, and she had told him of a real bargain, a misfit just his size, of a style and cloth far beyond the reach of free-lance journalists. Finkelstein had served him in person, so that, even in the gloom of the little musty shop, there was no fear of his mistaking his man. Finkelstein, on the other hand, though he would very probably recognize him, had no idea who he was; for it had been a cash transaction.

George stood for a moment at the window, gazing with unseeing eyes at the garments so enticingly spread out. Without moving his head, he looked to right and to left. The street was almost empty. Moistening his lips, he slowly slid a hand under his mackintosh, undid the button of his hip pocket, and felt inside. Yes: it was there, all right. Then, raising his head, he turned, walked casually in at the opaque glass door, and closed it after him.

Finkelstein was behind the counter at the far end of the shop. A parcel of clothes had evidently just come in, and he was going through them, peering carefully at seams and button-holes. He glanced at George, then went on examining the coat in his hands. George walked straight across to him.

The Jew looked up.

"Yes?" he began; but he got no further, for George, with methodical swiftness, put his hand into his hip pocket, pulled out a revolver, and shot him three times in the chest.

At the first shot Finkelstein gave a loud gasp. Then, as the second and third struck him, he rose on tiptoe, raised both hands to his head, uttered a high, gargling sound, turned stiffly to one side, and fell, pulling down some of the clothes with him.

For a few seconds George stood quite still, listening. The explosions had barked out sharply in the narrow space, but the clothes hanging everywhere would have muffled them. They would hardly be heard in the street outside; the traffic on the avenue would

see to that. The only chance was that the tailor working away upstairs might have heard. But there was no sound from upstairs. If he had heard, ten to one he would think it was a car back-firing.

Then George moved swiftly. He went round behind the counter, and laid the revolver on the floor beside Finkelstein. Barrel, butt, and trigger alike were swathed in sticking plaster. Let them find finger-prints, if they could! No one knew he had the revolver. He had bought it from a sailor, whom he had met, weeks before, in a public house by the river. The transaction had taken place in the street, under the shelter of an outhouse. The sailor was half drunk. No fear there!

There was no point in leaving the revolver on the floor, since no one could possibly suppose that Finkelstein had committed suicide, but George reasoned that the sooner he was rid of it the better. The sooner he was out of the shop the better, too. He came out from behind the counter, and then suddenly a panic desire came over him to get away as quickly as possible. He ran lightly over to the door, and hesitated, his hand on the knob. Finkelstein groaned. Let him. He was finished. Three, point blank, in the chest. That would teach—George caught his breath. Footsteps sounded outside; passed the door; and went on. He waited for perhaps ten seconds, then stepped casually out, closing the door after him.

The street was almost empty. No one was looking: yet it was all he could do not to take to his heels and run. Mastering himself, he crossed the road, and came into the avenue. A taxi, one of the newest, fastest type, came cruising up on the near side. Instinctively, he hailed it, and jumped in. The driver turned in his seat, and opened the door.

“Where to, sir?”

“Oh—sorry. Chancery Lane.”

Risky, decidedly risky—but it did get him away. And, even if the man did remember, and they did

trace him to Chancery Lane, what chance had they of tracking him further? Once down the burrow of the Underground, and he was safe.

The taxi brought him to his destination almost before he was aware. He paid, dived into the Underground, and took a ticket to Notting Hill Gate. A minute later, and he was boarding a train—safe—anonymous. His heart was beating wildly: he felt a thrill of exultation. It had all gone according to plan. He had brought it off!

There were few people travelling. Opposite George, a woman with a shopping basket, and an anæmic-looking girl, stared at him, so he thought, in an odd manner. Aha, he told himself: you're beginning to fancy things already. Everyone now, who looked at him, he would imagine was seeing something queer about him. If they knew what he had just done, they'd stare all right! Then, suddenly, his heart went cold and sick with dread. Suppose they really saw something! Suppose there were a spot of blood on him! He'd never stopped to look. Slowly, and with elaborate care, he squinted down at himself. One at a time, he furtively examined his wrists and hands. No: not a speck.

Look here, my man, he said to himself, leaning back, sweating with relief; you know, you mustn't go committing any more murders. You're an amateur at the game. He felt contented, and began to smile. That wouldn't do. They'd think he was mad. Steady, George: behave yourself! He sat sedately, looking down at his boots.

Getting out at Marble Arch—if they were going to get on his trail, he'd give them some tracking to do—he boarded a bus, and rode as far as Hyde Park Corner. There he sought out a pavement artist, whom he knew. He found the man working busily.

“Hallo, Harry.”

“Hallo, sir. Haven't seen you for some time.”

“Busy, I see.”

“Yes. I reckoned it was going to rain, and it would be a waste of time to draw much. Now, o’ course, it’s come out lovely. But there, that’s the way things always are, ain’t it?”

“Oh, well: it’s early yet. You’ve lots of time.”

The man screwed up his eyes at the clock.

“Five-and-twenty to four. I ought to have half a dozen done by now.”

“Well,” said George, “I won’t keep you from your work.”

He gave the man threepence, and got on a bus bound for Fleet Street, in high good humour. He’d managed that neatly; uncommon neatly. Got the man to notice the time, all off his own bat.

Arrived in Fleet Street, he called in on the editor of a weekly paper. The editor, after a few minutes’ desultory conversation, led him over to the bookshelves, and gave him a book to review.

“I may not be able to do it for a few days,” he warned the editor, turning round in the doorway.

“That’s all right. There’s no hurry. Well—thanks for looking in.”

I bet there’s no hurry, said George to himself, as he walked down the four long flights of stairs. Ten to one he won’t print it at all. “Rambles with a Rucksack,” indeed! Been in the shelves for months, I expect. Only gave it to me to get me out of the office. Lord, if he only knew, he’d have been in an even greater hurry to get me out! Suppose I’d said to him, when we were looking through the shelves together, “Do you know you’re standing beside a murderer?” A murderer. He, George Callington, walking along Fleet Street, blinking into the afternoon sun, was a murderer. A murderer. And it didn’t feel any different. It didn’t change life. He felt just the same. Rather tired, perhaps; and rather hungry. That was an idea—tea. He turned into the first tea-shop he came to, and sat thankfully down.

A quarter-of-an-hour later, refreshed and comforted, he sat, his soul filled with a tired happiness. It was all over now. The job was done, and he had covered up his tracks. He had left no clues behind. There was no gap through which the enemy might reach him. The one risk had been of discovery at the time. If the tailor had heard and run downstairs; if someone had been in the shop when he went in (in which event he would have had to put the whole thing off): or if someone had come in before he had time to get away. No: he had made his getaway. While he had no precise alibi for the time of the murder, he was fairly well equipped, with Sydney just before, with the pavement artist quite soon afterwards, and then with Jenkins of the *Vigilant*. Yes. It was all right. There was no gap. He sat for a few minutes longer, sunning his heart in the warmth of comfort: then paid his bill, and boarded a bus for home.

The bus put him down at the corner of the street where he lived. As he let himself in, his landlady, with a scared, important face, came out from her back premises to meet him.

"Mr. Callington," she said, barely above a whisper. "There's two gentlemen upstairs, waiting to see you."

"Two gentlemen?"

"Yes. Been here the last half-hour. I told them you was out, but they said they'd go up and wait."

George stood quite still. After the first numb shock, his wits raced to his aid, and took command. He was quite cool. The men were, of course, detectives. Of that he had not the faintest doubt. But how on earth had they—— Never mind that now. He must not hesitate. They would be listening: they would have heard him come in.

"Thanks, Mrs. Jones," he said loudly. "I'll go straight up."

And he went up, the landlady gazing fearfully after him.

For an instant, as he climbed the last flight, George felt an impulse of panic. He'd had no time to think . . . What should he say . . .? Then, resolutely, he opened the door.

The two men rose as he came in. They were soberly, neatly dressed. Their bowler hats were on the table. One, lined, clean-shaven, was older than the other. Urged by something he had read, George looked at their boots.

The older visitor spoke first.

"Mr. George Callington?"

"Yes?"

"My name is Garnett—Detective-Inspector Garnett. This is Detective Onslow."

"How do you do," said George mechanically.

"I am sorry to trouble you in this unceremonious way, Mr. Callington." The man's manner was friendly enough. "But, just to help me in a certain inquiry on which we are engaged, we should be greatly obliged if you could give us an account of your movements this afternoon."

"This afternoon?" George looked at him vaguely.

"D'you mind if I sit down? I'm rather tired."

"By all means."

The younger detective hastened to pull forward a chair.

"Thanks. My movements this afternoon. From what time?"

"Well . . . since midday?"

"Since midday. Let me see now. At twelve, or soon after, I was in the office of the *Sun*. Yes. I stayed there till close on lunch-time. Then I went with one or two friends and had a drink. I called in at another office, the *Record*, and left a couple of paragraphs for to-morrow's 'About Town' column. Then I went and had my lunch."

"Where did you lunch, Mr. Callington? Or perhaps you don't remember?"

"Of course I remember." George looked at him



in surprise. "I lunched at the Polar Bear, in Paint Court."

"And after lunch?"

"I don't know exactly when I left the Polar Bear. I should think I was there about three-quarters of an hour. Oh, no, longer. It must have been longer. Because I walked on from there to my brother-in-law's in Punnet Street, which is only twenty minutes' walk at the most; and I didn't get to him till close on three."

"Did you happen to notice the time at all particularly?"

"Not when I got there. But I left him just at three. I remember, because he pressed me to stay. He thought his watch was a little fast."

"And then——?"

"I took a bus to Liverpool Street, and another from there to Hyde Park Corner."

"Why—if I may ask?"

"I thought of sitting in the Park; but I found it was too chilly. So I got on another bus and went back to Fleet Street."

"You didn't meet anyone at Hyde Park Corner?"

"Meet anyone?" (I'm doing this well, he thought. A fool would have blurted out about Harry.)

"I mean, anyone who would confirm that you had actually been there. Don't think that we disbelieve you, Mr. Callington, please, but, in these cases, it is as well, purely as a matter of form . . . I'm sure you'll understand."

"I talked to a pavement artist, if that's any good."

"Would he know you again? Does he know who you are?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, he does. I wrote a paragraph about him, some months ago, and we struck up an acquaintance on the strength of it. He gives me odd bits of material sometimes: you know, things he comes across on his pitch."

“ Good. Well, after you found it was too chilly to sit in the Park——”

“ I went back to Fleet Street, called on the editor of the *Vigilant*, and got this book to review.”

“ I take it that your brother-in-law, and the pavement artist, and the editor, will be able to confirm your statement? ”

“ Well—yes. I should think so.” George did his best to look surprised and slightly injured.

The senior detective looked at his notes.

“ Then, the only time for which you cannot produce a witness to your whereabouts is from three o’clock till about half-past? ”

“ Well—no—I suppose I can’t.”

“ That’s a little unfortunate,” said the detective: and then something happened which made George almost faint for sheer astonishment. He stood, gaping, hardly able to believe his ears: for the detective was actually taking him into custody for the attempted murder of Mr. Joseph Finkelstein, and warning him that anything he said might be used in evidence.

“ But—but—but it’s impossible! I mean—what on earth makes you think that I had anything to do with it? ”

“ Mr. Finkelstein identified you as his assailant.”

So he had bungled the job, after all. But, even so, Finkelstein——

“ But,” George shouted, “ he doesn’t know me.”

“ You made a purchase at his shop, early this spring.”

“ I know I did. But he doesn’t know who I am. I paid cash. He doesn’t know any more.”

“ I’m afraid he does, Mr. Callington.”

“ But—how could he? ”

The detective looked at him almost sadly.

“ Your brother-in-law is, I believe, a photographer? ”

“ Yes.”

“ He has taken a portrait of you? ”

“ Several. But——”

"Just one moment, Mr. Callington. Let me finish."

A fearful chill settled on George's heart. Though he did not at all know what was coming next, he felt that the game was up.

"Mr. Finkelstein——"

Suddenly the telephone bell rang, making them all start with its harsh summons. At a glance from his superior, the younger detective went over to it.

"Yes? Hallo. Yes."

"Go on," pleaded George of the other man.  
"Go on."

"Mr. Finkelstein is very fond of music. He is a member of a musical club, to which your brother-in-law also belongs. He and your brother-in-law happened to meet at one of the concerts. They fell into conversation, and later on Mr. Finkelstein took his wife and daughter to be photographed. While he was there, turning over a tray full of photos, he came upon one of the portraits of you, recognized you as a customer, and asked your brother-in-law who you were."

George sat aghast. The words fell upon his heart like blows of ice. Good God! Of all the simple, absurd, unforeseeable ways of being caught out! All his precautions for nothing. The room spun round him. He gripped the edges of the chair.

The younger detective, with a grave face, replaced the receiver.

"I'm afraid the charge has become a more serious one," he said. "They have rung up from the hospital to say that Mr. Finkelstein has just died."

Suddenly George began to cough. He coughed helplessly, till the tears streamed from his eyes. The detectives were very kind and considerate. One patted him on the back, and the other went into the bedroom and fetched him a glass of water. George drank it gratefully.

"There," said the older detective. "That better?"

"Yes, thanks," George gasped. He smiled weakly at him. He felt that the detectives were sympathetic to him, and a sudden desire came upon him to tell them all about it.

"He was a swine," he blurted out. "I don't care. I don't care. He was a swine. He took advantage of her. She went to——"

"That's all right," interrupted the older detective. "You don't want to tell us about that now. Keep that for later."

"He was a swine, I tell you! He deserved it. I——"

"I wouldn't say any more just now, if I was you."

But George would not listen. He went on telling them, in a loud voice, what a swine Finkelstein was, and he was still telling them as they led him downstairs.

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*E. H. Visiak*

## THE CUTTING

THE Great War produced many instances of dementia. One of the most extraordinary cases—which, however, exceeded mere hysterical aberration—was related to me by a medical practitioner.

I fell into talk with him on a blazing afternoon in August, near the Lizard, as we both stood contemplating from the cliff-top the jewel-like pool of seawater in Kynance Cove. I was attracted to him from the first, curiously registering my impression of him verbally as a *perspicuous personality*, with his high, aquiline nose and eager-bright grey eyes. It transpired that he, as I, was on a walking tour; and we went on to Falmouth together, finding that our intellectual interests were pleasantly in accord. Both students of "psychology" (in the current derivation), we compared our observations of Cornish

character—so far as we had been able to get any insight into that occult and queerly guarded mentality. This was after supper at an inn, that evening. At length, the doctor remarked:

“But they are a very shrewd, hard-headed kind of people, for all their Celtic *inwardness*, or whatever it may be called. In general, I believe, the tendency to idealism, or imaginative dreaminess, is the very opposite to being gullible in matters of actual fact. During the war, for instance, I expect the Cornish were well represented among the cynics. I doubt if many of them saw the Russians in England—with snow on their boots—or even believed in the angels at Mons. At any rate, the man I am going to tell you about wasn't a Cornishman. That coffee must be cold. Put it on the hob, will you? I like those old metal coffee-pots. Whole breakfast-cups at night, and all! Well, I'm not one of my patients!”

He laughed; and, sitting up in his chair with a quick, energetic movement which was characteristic of him, he went on somewhat stridently:

“It was a mental case—a—a *war casualty*; and, like a lot of other things at that time, it was hushed up. Beyond a brief paragraph to the effect that the schoolhouse was burned down, I don't think that anything appeared in the papers, and I never could find out exactly what happened. It was a school, right enough—a preparatory school in Norfolk—all boarders, probably; for it was miles away from anywhere but obscure villages. I was in practice at Norwich at the time. It was in June 1917—June the eleventh: I recollect the exact day, as I especially noticed, and cut out, this paragraph in the morning's *London News*. By an odd whim, I have kept it by me ever since.”

As the doctor spoke, my attention was arrested by the appearance of his eyes, which glittered, as it seemed to me, very strangely in the lamplight. Next moment his head was bent as he fumbled in his

waistcoat pocket, to take out and unfold a newspaper cutting. This he read to me, as follows:

“New weapons of a formidable nature were brought into use by our men on Thursday. These are in the nature of instruments for projecting inflammable liquid. To our men they are known as ‘oil-cans,’ and their deadly effectiveness is attested by nerve-shattered prisoners. Improved tanks, it is reported, were also brought into use.”

“Well, you know,” he resumed, “I was asked to interview him.”

“You mean——?” I asked as he paused in his narrative, which had become increasingly involved.

“I mean, of course, that I was called in to certify the man as ‘mental,’ as he assuredly was. I got there in the late afternoon. It was undoubtedly a school: I saw classrooms—desks with books on them, and on the floor, scattered about. Not much discipline, apparently. No boys. No servants—not even a housekeeper: he opened the door himself. It was a huge, massive building called Cithaeron House, and one of the gloomiest places that ever I saw. In the entrance-hall, the horrible, discoloured, oily-dark wallpaper—imitation marble, you know—was absolutely oozing from the walls. Victorian in the last stages—*ugh!* But it’s gone now—*cremated!* However, the man was cheerful enough. Fill up my cup, will you? As Voltaire said, coffee’s a very *slow* poison! Yes, the man—the head master, you know—was an enthusiast and an optimist. He assumed at once that I had called in order to arrange for a new pupil, or pupils; and he began to expatiate upon what he called the ‘mission’ of the school as soon as ever he had virtually flung me into an arm-chair.

“‘I train up *men*,’ he told me. ‘The boy is not only *father to the man* in my school; he *is* the man. Why, you might send them out to the trenches at once—*my* boys, I mean! The War Office won’t see

it. Tapeworms, the War Office—red-tapeworms! I'd bury them,' he cried in a sudden frenzy. 'I'd——' He used really frightful expressions, and he looked—well, frightful. I remember the expressions, and I could give you a very good imitation of the look; for I possess quite a histrionic power of mimicry. But it's nearly bedtime, and the effect would be worse than any coffee. I let him rage, of course, until the fit was over; and then he placed in my hand the school prospectus.

"At least, he said that it was the school prospectus; but what surprised me was that it was typewritten. I was absolutely staggered as I glanced down the front page; for I saw such statements as:

" 'Boys inured to weeping-gas.'

" 'Punishments utilised to accustom boys to bearing pain. (Care is taken that knife-wounds are antiseptically treated.)'

"Appended were copies of what purported to be letters written by one of the pupils. I have lost the prospectus, unfortunately; but here are the letters. You can read them yourself."

He took them from his pocket-book, and I read in typescript:

"DEAR SIOPE,

"I told you about the *Lobstacle Race* in our Sports. We've now got to the Burning Oil and Molten Metal Competition. It's ripping! Isn't it rot that I can't enter for the Sports; but, you know, I feel that I am more useful in looking after the furnaces. You really ought to see some of the disfigurements! And doesn't it whack their nerves! I never saw chaps in such a state in all my life. And it's going to be better still! I overheard old Asopus (our Head, you know) say that he was experimenting with something that would be better even than that burning stuff that gets on a chap's

clothes and can't be put out. I *am* looking forward to seeing that on a chap!

"Next letter I'll tell you about the unsporting funks who won't join in, and jabber a lot of rot about their *conscience*. They do get on old Asopus' nerves!

"Yours,

"PHRIX."

"DEAR SIOPE,

"We have started a Debating Society, and the first debate was on 'Sports and Cold Feet.' This was because of those beastly anti-Sport funks I told you of. I think the Head got rather shaky about them—you see, he shuts them up in the boot-room, but lets them off if they will help to hand round the refreshments and wear the Sports badge; and, though they are a laughing-stock, of course, some of the chaps keep talking about them, and it leads to arguments, and that gets on his nerves.

"The first debate was started by the Sports Captain. He said our Sports vindicated conscience, because they were spiritual and not material. The *means* might be material; but the principles were spiritual, and it was a heroic death if you got killed in them. Conscience was only against your hating your competitors, not against your sticking or burning their bodies, because the body was material, but the soul was spiritual. When the soul left the body, it was free. Therefore, we were competing for the principle of Spiritual Liberty.

"I never heard such a splendid argument; but one of the funk-beasts shouted out to know why *he* (I mean, the Sports Captain) didn't join in the Sports himself if they were so noble. But the Captain soon shut him up; although I couldn't hear what he said, there was such a cheering directly he began to answer the swine.

"Then the Head came in, and apologised for being



late because he'd been to see one of the scalded chaps, who seemed to be expiring. You should have heard the solemn way in which he said this! It endeared him to all our hearts and lifted the occasion above mere faction. He then made his great speech, which does not leave the funk-beasts a leg to stand on. I will copy it out from our school mag, the *Weekly Report*:

“ ‘ This is the first anniversary of the most sanguinary Sports,’ began the head master, ‘ that the School has ever seen. What are we competing for? To cover the School with laurels!’ (Applause, and a voice: “ And to cover the graves with laurels, too!”) ‘ Yes, we are competing to cover the graves *with the laurels of heroes!*’

“ ‘ There are those who say: *Stop it!* What are they driving at? What are they out for?’ (Cries of “ Cold feet!” and a voice: “ Most of them are *in*, not *out!*”) ‘ Yes, they are in the boot-room!’ (Loud and prolonged laughter.) ‘ These fellows are like Macbeth and cry, *Hold, enough!* What they really mean is, *Cold enough!* (Uproarious laughter.) Let there be two ideas in every brain-box: *Bl-ood!* and *bl-ows!*’ (Loud and enthusiastic applause.)

“ Isn't he a scorcher? I expect you will want to hear all his speeches.

“ Yours,  
“ PHRIX.”

“ The comic side of all this was irresistible,” the doctor went on, “ although at first I didn't in the least know what it meant. Obviously the letters must have been faked; but I did not feel at all certain that *something* hadn't happened. In fact, when I recollected certain expressions, certain evident reticences, of the solicitor who had called upon me about the business, I had a very strong feeling that

something, in fact, had happened: I mean to, or among, the schoolboys before they left. The absurdities I had read might well be the mask of some horrible occurrence. But it was no kind of place to laugh in, and laughter probably would be dangerous; for there was no doubt at all that I was in the presence of a complete lunatic. Yet I did laugh. The very effort to restrain myself only increased the impulse. I laughed immoderately—and put myself on the *qui vive*.

“The maniac appeared to take no notice at all. He seemed to have become absent-minded, and began humming to himself. It sounded like some dreary, sentimental air. Presently he took to singing in a high, peculiarly unpleasant falsetto, the words:

*A few white flowers are blooming  
Upon a little grave,  
A few sweet-scented roses  
That in the sunshine wave.*

“He looked at me as if to invite my applause; and I remarked sociably that he was evidently fond of music.

“To this he made no response, but asked abruptly whether I would like to see one of the school reports. ‘It was left behind,’ he explained as he went to his writing-desk and opened a drawer. ‘I was very sorry. He was a promising boy—might have made a Lieutenant-Colonel. *Now*, I mean,’ he added—‘or in six months.’

“I was seized with a spasm of laughter. He took from the drawer a tiny glass article, which I perceived to be a phial; and he tossed it across the large room in my direction. There was an explosion, and I lost consciousness. I recovered my senses to find that I lay in bed, in a nursing-home at Norwich, and that I had had concussion.”

The doctor reached down for his coffee-cup, which he had placed upon the floor. The movement



*“ There was an explosion ”*



seemed curiously absent—or perhaps it was the look in his eyes that gave me this impression. I was just going to speak, to comment upon and thank him for his extraordinary story, when I sustained a shock.

He had begun to laugh; and he continued to do so, with a queer, high, disconcerting sound. This horrible laughter did not stop, did not diminish. I kept on imploring him to pull himself together, but he could not.

“*You* are Asopus,” I cried in sudden enlightenment. “My God, you never called at that school, *you ran it*,—you’re Asopus! That cutting sent you mad.”

He nodded again and again, now absolutely convulsed; and a panic of horror overcame me. I fled from the room, and from the inn. Deep into the darkness of the night his maniacal laughter followed me.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

FYTTON ARMSTRONG (b. 1912), short-story writer, critic and publisher, compiled in 1933 the successful anthology *Full Score*. During 1931-1932 his Twyn Barlwm Press issued works by Arthur Machen, Edith Sitwell, Edmund Blunden, Herbert Palmer and W. H. Davies.

OSWELL BLAKESTON (b. 1907), author and designer, has something of an international reputation. Books of his have appeared in France and America as well as England. For several years he edited the film paper *Close-up*.

THOMAS BURKE (b. 1886), novelist, essayist and anthologist, has published nearly forty books. Representative among them are *Limehouse Nights* (1916), *Twinkletoes* (1917), *The Book of the Inn* (1927), *The Flower of Life* (1929) and *The Beauty of England* (1933).

CHARLES DUFF (b. 1894), translator, playwright, biographer and short-story writer, has written history and much criticism. All his work is enlivened by Irish wit and a sense of satire which is, perhaps, best illustrated in his *Anthropological Report on a London Suburb* (1935).

JOHN GAWSWORTH (b. 1912), poet, essayist and bibliographer, founded the "back-to-the-lyric" movement, *Edwardian Poetry*, in February 1936. Representative among his books are *Ten Contemporaries* (First and Second Series), *Poems 1930-1932*, and *Some Annotations on the Minor Writings of "T. E. Lawrence."*

HERBERT DE HAMEL, dramatist, novelist and short-story writer, has had two plays produced in London. In 1915 his detective novel, *Many Thanks—Ben Hassett* appeared. Recently, he collaborated with R. L. Mégroz in the much-discussed Rossetti play, *Women Loved Him*.

KENNETH HARE, poet and author, besides for his books of verse, *The Raven and the Swallow*, *The Green Fields*, and *New Poems*, is particularly known for a study he wrote of London's "Bohemia."

EDGAR JEPSON (b. 1863), novelist, short-story writer and the creator of *The Lady Noggs* and *Pollyooly*, has published some sixty books. Of late years, his output has consisted chiefly of detective-novels.

PHILIP LINDSAY, the young Australian historical novelist and biographer, has made a considerable reputation with his *The Little Wench*, *London Bridge is Falling*, *Here Comes the King*, *King Henry the Fifth*, *King Richard the Third*, and *Kings of Merry England*.

JOHN LINDSEY (b. 1909), novelist and short-story writer, has written eight books of fiction; worthy of note are *The Lady and the Mute* (1931), *Stricken Gods* (1932) and *Peacock's Feathers* (1933). Tales of his have appeared in national newspapers and in anthologies.

ANTHONY M. LUDOVICI (b. 1882), sexologist, novelist and short-story writer, has written, as well as his indictments of civilisation, six novels, *Catherine Doyle* (1919), *Mansel Fellowes* (1919), *Too Old for Dolls* (1920), *The Goddess that Grew Up* (1922), *French Beans* (1923) and *The Taming of Don Juan* (1924).

G. R. MALLOCH (b. 1875), poet, playwright, critic and short-story writer, is represented in many poetry collections with a lovely lyric *The Enchanted Princess*. Hugh MacDiarmid, writing of him in *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (1926), declares that he is one of "the twenty principal Scottish poets."

FRANCIS MARSDEN (*b.* 1885), critic and short-story writer, edited with Austin O. Spare, in 1916 and 1917, *Form: a Journal of the Arts*. In 1921 he wrote an Introduction to Spare's *The Focus of Life*. Several of his tales have appeared in English prose anthologies.

E. H. W. MEYERSTEIN (*b.* 1889), poet, biographer of Chatterton, novelist and short-story writer, has applied the methods of the eighteenth-century picaresque in his unique modern trilogy, *Terence Duke*. His *Selected Poems* appeared in April 1935 in *Macmillan's Contemporary Poets*.

R. EDISON PAGE is a pseudonym: under it a world-famous novelist has published his philosophical and critical writings pertaining to the Religion of the Life Force. Here, for the first time, this writer (who desires to remain unrecognised) uses it over fiction—two new short-stories.

M. P. SHIEL (*b.* 1865), novelist and short-story writer, has been called the British Dumas-père. Chief among his books, which number over thirty, are *Prince Zaleski* (1895), *Shapes in the Fire* (1896) and *The Purple Cloud* (1901). In July 1935, he was awarded a Civil List Pension for his services to English Literature.

SIMON (*b.* 1907), novelist, short-story writer and the creator of Superintendent Deering, instituted a new type of detective novel with his trilogy, *Murder Among Friends* (1933), *Death on the Swim* (1934) and *The Cat with the Moustache* (1935).

L. A. G. STRONG (*b.* 1896), novelist, poet, anthologist and short-story writer, achieved fame with a series of novels: *Dewey Rides* (1929), *The Jealous Ghost* (1930), *The Garden* (1931) and *The Brothers* (1931). In the same year as this last, a volume of his *Selected Poems* was published.

E. H. VISIAK (*b.* 1878), poet, novelist and critic, has published ten books. Significant among them are *Buccaneer Ballads* (1910), *Flints and Flashes* (1911), *Milton Agonistes* (1922) and *Medusa* (1929). His prose is often imbued with mystery, ecstasy and strange horror.





Thrills



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