*** A Distributed Proofreaders Canada eBook ***

This eBook is made available at no cost and with very few restrictions. These restrictions apply only if (1) you make a change in the eBook (other than alteration for different display devices), or (2) you are making commercial use of the eBook. If either of these conditions applies, please check with an FP administrator before proceeding.

This work is in the Canadian public domain, but may be under copyright in some countries. If you live outside Canada, check your country's copyright laws. **If the book is under copyright in your country, do not download or redistribute this file.**

Title: Seven Sins

Date of first publication: 1943

Author: Sax Rohmer (1883-1959) pseud. of Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward

Date first posted: January 21 2013

Date last updated: January 21 2013

Faded Page eBook #20130120

This eBook was produced by: David T. Jones, Mary Meehan, Al Haines & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at http://www.pgdpcanada.net

Seven Sins

by SAX ROHMER

New York
ROBERT M. McBRIDE & CO.
1943

SEVEN SINS

Copyright, 1943, by
Robert M. McBride & Co.

Third Printing, December, 1943.

SAX ROHMER'S NOVELS ARE PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY IN LONDON AND NEW YORK. THEY HAVE BEEN TRANSLATED INTO GREEK, FRENCH, GERMAN (SUPPRESSED BY THE GESTAPO IN 1936), ITALIAN, SPANISH, DUTCH, SWEDISH, HUNGARIAN, POLISH, DANISH, PORTUGUESE, CZECH, JAPANESE, ARABIC, AND PRINTED IN BRAILLE.

PRINTED IN U. S. A.
AMERICAN BOOK-STRATFORD PRESS, INC.

Contents

1. Black-Out in Babylon 3
2. House with the Scarlet Door 10
3. Shrine of Isis 27
4. Someone Comes In 35
5. Someone Else Comes In 46
6. Misty Morning 51
7. The Limping Man 60
8. Concerning Taxi Drivers 66
9. Simone's 74
10. Reports and Theories 86
11. Destrée of the Lilies 92
12. M. Gaston Max 105
13. Treasure Island 120
14. Pythagoric Buds 128
15. Messieurs, Faites Vos Jeux! 134
16. The Ivory Ball 143
17. Covering Mr. Bernstein 162
18. "Who Is This Limping Man?" 173
19. Counsel's Opinion 182
20. Murder Confessed 194
21. The Quest of Lord Marcus 210
22. Ivory and Powdered Satin 217
23. Dossier Destrée 229
24. The Wheel Rolls On 239
25. Kyphi 250
26. Michael Corcoran Calls 255
27. Gaston Max Wears Pearl Gray 260
28. "Up in the Morning Early" 268
29. Wake Takes a Taxi 276
30. Malta Convoy 290
31. In Berkeley Square 297
32. The Man and the Mummy 301
33. Destrée Closes Her Eyes 307
34. At Scotland Yard 316
35. The Voice in the Shrine 319

SEVEN SINS

1

Black-Out in Babylon

In a somewhat oddly appointed room a man was listening to the nine o'clock news bulletin.

The apartment, in addition to a super radio set, also boasted a large dressing-table with wing mirrors and two tall wardrobe cabinets of the kind seen in a modiste's establishment. There were several trunks and other items of baggage, a camp bed and three ornate gilt chairs; there was a dictaphone and there was no carpet on the floor. Walls from which musty gray paper hung like elephants' ears; nails of unknown purpose protruding from unpainted woodwork; a nearly black ceiling: these things did not make harmony with the costly appointments. This room did not add up.

The man seated on one of the three chairs wore a shabby blue suit with a muffler in lieu of a collar. His hands were dirty and he displayed a two days' beard on his chin. His nose was expensively colored. A small cap, having a greasy peak, rested on the back of his head, to expose a mop of uncombed reddish brown hair resembling a dying dahlia.

His behavior was not without interest. He was attaching a fitting to connect the radio with the dictaphone. When the bulletin came to its rather anaesthetic end, the man pressed a control and the cylinder began to revolve.

"To-night's postscript," said the announcer, "will be by Sir Giles Loeder—and here he is."

Sir Giles Loeder was one of the most popular political broadcasters in England: he had the art of driving home his points to a mixed audience. Formerly member for North Tiverton (Independent), he had resigned his seat soon after the outbreak of war in order to be able to devote more time to what he then described as "direct aid." In fact, he was chairman of so many committees, contributor to such a number of influential journals, and so tireless a radio speaker that his departure from the House of Commons seemed to be wholly justified.

Certainly, the man with the greasy cap gave undivided attention to Sir Giles' remarks, sometimes stopping the record during a sentence or two and then starting it again as if anxious to capture the next phrase. At the conclusion of the postscript, he disconnected his apparatus, put the cylinder in a box and the box in a drawer, and switched the light off.

An uncarpeted stair, which he negotiated with the aid of a torch, enabled him to reach the ground floor and to step into a mews where a deserted taxicab was standing. Climbing to the driver's seat, he pulled out into Windmill Street.

One curious enough, and able, to have followed him, would have learned that he drove at speed, ignoring would-be fares, through the black-out mysteries of Soho and straight up deserted Regent Street. Half way along in spite of his tactics, a pair of unusually determined wanderers appeared from nowhere and ran out to head him off. They were Australian gunners.

"Say, chum, what's the hurry? We need you."

"Can't be done, mates. See—me flag's dahn. I'm bespoke by a gent at the B.B.C."

Whether this reference to the British Broadcasting Corporation, or the man's glittering Cockney, impressed the Diggers may never be known; but they allowed him to proceed unmolested.

The prevalent scarcity of taxis did not facilitate his plans, however. Just outside a Tube station he was delayed by traffic lights, and before he could utter a word of protest, a girl who wore a chiffon cape over a brief dance frock opened the offside door and got in.

"'Alf a mo!" said the man. "'Alf a bloomin' mo!"

He directed the ray of a lamp into the interior; and he saw there a remarkably pretty brunette whose smiling glance caressed him. Her beauty was confident in its young inexperience, and the velvet brown eyes glowed with conquest: she would have attracted a cultured woman-hunter—or a novice.

"Please don't say you're engaged. I simply *must* get to the B.B.C."

"Oh! the B.B.C? That's different—" and an appreciative grin spread over the driver's unshaven face, a grin which

revealed flashing white teeth. "I'm goin' there."

He drove on, and at the entrance to Broadcasting House the pretty brunette jumped out and fumbled in her bag.

"No charge, lady. Me flag's dahn. Also—it's a pleasure. A smile like yours is worth more than a bob."

And this highly unusual taximan moved away and took his stand in darkness outside the Temple of British radio, a darkness fitfully, and startlingly, dispersed whenever high, fleeting clouds unveiled the harvest moon.

Rather less than four hours later, an interesting conversation took place between two men in an office which, when not blacked-out, overlooked the Thames Embankment.

"Ye will have obsairved foreby," said the taller man, and his accent was impressive, "unless ye bought the evening paper as a pipe lighter, that there's a marked decrease o' crime in the West End of London."

He turned hazel eyes, which had an almost leonine quality, in the direction of a smaller man who leaned against a mantelpiece staring vacantly down into an empty grate.

The speaker, large framed, gaunt, his graying hair cropped at the sides of a square, mathematical forehead, and wearing a moustache so closely trimmed as to produce the effect of an unshaven upper lip, might have suggested to some the figure of a Covenanter born out of his generation.

The bare room in which he sat behind a bare desk (it contained a pewter inkpot and pens, a blotting pad, a calendar, a writing block, a wire basket and a telephone) was furnished with such severe simplicity that, excepting the desk and a framed print of Lord Trenchard over the mantelpiece, four chairs and a hatrack would have completed the inventory. This was the Scotland Yard office of Chief Detective Inspector Firth, and the tall man was the celebrated Chief Inspector.

"That's right," remarked the smaller man.

From a pocket of his sports jacket he withdrew a tightly rolled copy of an evening newspaper, glanced at it, rolled it up even more tightly and put it back into another pocket. Red faced, clean shaven, with surprised sandy hair, this was the Chief Inspector's assistant, Detective-sergeant Bluett.

He was never seen without an evening paper; indeed, it was believed that he invariably slept with a Final Edition under his pillow. There was no evidence to show that he ever read one.

"It would be grand news for the likes o' you and me," said Firth—"if it happened to be true." Big Ben, which sounded as though it stood directly outside the darkened window, chimed the half-hour. "Half past one in the morning—and we're still at it. What's more, a wasted night."

Sergeant Bluett produced the rolled newspaper, glanced at it and put it back in the original pocket. "There was a girl dancing at the Green Spider," he pointed out, "with nothing on but her shoes."

"I ha' small doubt," the Chief Inspector commented, "that had ye mentioned your disapproval, she would ha' been glad to take them off. The naked women o' Babylon concern the Church; they are no affair o' this department. A decrease in crime? Wi' black-out thugs, two unsolved murders, and a new and highly efficient cat-burglar in the West End."

"That's right."

"Millions behind the black market, the gambling racket taking more money than Monte Carlo; a big spy ring sending news to Berlin before it's known to the Hoose o' Commons. A decrease in crime!"

He rested his elbow on the blotting pad, pressing tips of long, sensitive fingers together and exposing his angular wrists.

"I mind me of Port Said, where a wee job led me some whiles ago. A cleaner, quieter little bit of a town no man could wish to see. But my opposite number there took me underground. Weel, weel! The black-out has done just that to crime

in London:—driven it underground."

"I'm glad the spy game isn't in my hands," remarked Sergeant Bluett. "Mr. Gaston Max is welcome to his job."

"Gaston Max is a most acceptable confrère. Owing to what he calls a wee misunderstanding wi' Vichy, he's now one o' us. He has a brilliant record wi' the Paris police, and in my opeenion is the best detective in Europe."

Sergeant Bluett withdrew the evening paper and rerolled it almost fiercely. "He gets far more rope from the Chief than we do. We have to stick to the book of the words; he sings his own sweet song."

"Such was the arrangement. And until he has proven himself, it isna' for us to creeticise a clever officer."

"He looks more like a clever comic to me. As for the marvellous Paris methods we've heard so much about, I should say they're twenty years out of date."

"That's as may be. But his English compares verra favorably wi' your French."

"H'm—" the evening paper disappeared into a pocket of Bluett's grey trousers—"I'm none too sure about the French these days. You've only got to look at their history to see what I mean."

"French history has its dark spots, Bluett. But I could remark that England has black patches. I was thinking about the execution o' King Charles."

"Scotland too," said Bluett helpfully. "I was thinking about the massacre of Glencoe."

The 'phone buzzed. Sergeant Bluett groaned. Chief Inspector Firth, frowning, took up the instrument.

"Yes, sir. Firth here." He framed his lips in an unspoken word, whereby Sergeant Bluett became aware of the fact that the caller was Assistant Commissioner Colonel J.N.G. O'Halloran—affectionately known as Jingo, and probably the most popular of Scotland Yard's senior officers. "Sergeant Bluett is in my office. Yes, sir,—I will be along at once."

The Chief Inspector replaced the receiver and stood up, revealing his great height and the fact that he wore a Harris tweed suit which his tailor might with justice have claimed to be well cut, assuming that it had been cut for a smaller customer. Firth smiled grimly, and because he had a slightly undershot jaw, when he smiled one saw his lower teeth.

"Back to the streets o' Babylon," he said. "Wi' this decrease in crime, our work is never done."

2

House with the Scarlet Door

A full moon, veiled from time to time by ragged clouds, looked down upon a crop of giant mushrooms which was really a fleet of barrage balloons floating high above a hushed and darkened London. The police officers were accustomed to these strangely silent streets; they no longer suffered memory's pangs; unmoved they passed by the sites of historic landmarks, of buildings with associations whose tendrils were wound around the heart of every Londoner, but which were marked now only by gaping chasms. The blue pencil of the Luftwaffe had erased those homely records; the red pencil of the Royal Air Force was busily balancing the account.

But the returning Londoner who had known the area in normal times must have surveyed this scene with some astonishment. Revellers there were, although the hour was late, but they revelled behind closed doors, unlighted windows. Wardens, police, and irrepressible taxicabs held undisputed possession. Gloomy reflections no doubt claimed the Chief Inspector's mind, for he broke a long silence only when the police car, entering South Audley Street, swung from thence into a narrow turning. The driver pulled up.

"This is the house, sir."

"Good."

Firth disentangled his great length from the low pitched car, and when he stood upright on the pavement he towered above its roof. Sergeant Bluett, who rode beside the driver, got out also. To their experienced eyes, the scene possessed certain unique characteristics, not least of these being the fact that South Audley Street showed empty from end to end.

"No one in sight," muttered the Chief Inspector.

Sergeant Bluett was shining the ray of a torch upon a door painted vivid scarlet, and further distinguished by what appeared to be silver fittings. He moved the ray slightly so that it illuminated a small silver plate; he read aloud:

"LORD MARCUS AMBERDALE"

As Bluett switched off the torch and turned, staring with innocent looking eyes at the Chief Inspector:

"Ring," said Firth.

Bluett pressed a silver button, and a dim note sounded from somewhere beyond the scarlet door, as a fourth occupant of the car, uttering a loud sigh, clambered out carrying a brown leather bag. This was a short, stout man, with a short, stout black moustache, and wearing a stout black hat. He lingered beside the car for a moment and stared up and down the street.

"The first time in my experience, inspector," he said, "that I have been called to such a scene and found not a soul about."

"Just what I was thinking, doctor," Bluett replied, glancing over his shoulder. "Queer, I call it."

"Ring again," said the Chief Inspector; and Bluett rang.

The three men stood in the silent street, while the uniformed driver leaned out watching. That murmurous background composed of themes mechanical and human, which is the symphony of London, and which until black-out was invented had never ceased, day or night, for several centuries, was hushed to a querulous whisper. This new stillness of metropolitan midnight had a capacity to awe.

Inspector Firth stepped back, and during a brief flood of moonlight surveyed the house. It was one of those bijou Mayfair residences, smart and labor saving, which had become so popular as a result of the insoluble staff problem. It contained no more than seven or eight rooms and had a total frontage of some four paces. Nestling between larger neighbors, a low parapet enclosed narrow strips of tiled forecourt. The corners of this parapet, flanking the obstinately closed scarlet door, supported square stone flower boxes, filled with soil but displaying no flowers. And now, as Firth stood there looking up, South Audley Street's silence was broken.

A sound of distant chanting arose. The voice was a man's, rich, sweet, and informed with passionate intensity.

As this chanting swelled, diminished, and died away:

"Phew!" exclaimed Sergeant Bluett. "This isn't the tradesmen's entrance to Farm Street, is it?"—for indeed, that fashionable Jesuit Church was no great distance away.

The moon became wholly obscured. Drops of rain made a sound like tapping fingers on the car roof. And some small, furry object darted past Sergeant Bluett and disappeared in darkness.

"Here! what was that?" he exclaimed.

"That," said Firth, with ponderous sarcasm, "was an example of *felis domestica*, or common hoose cat. The bell push is directly before ye ... For heaven's sake, what's that!"

"That" was another cat, which had brushed against Firth's leg in retiring. And now Sergeant Bluett began to shine his torch into shadows behind the low parapet—and out from this cover sprang countless cats of all kinds; certainly no less than ten! When the last of the cats, a large and majestic Persian, had been put to flight by the questing ray, Sergeant Bluett inhaled deeply.

The three men before the scarlet door exchanged glances. It was the police driver who spoke.

"That's funny," he said.

Inspector Firth half turned as if to reply, then evidently changed his mind, and addressed Bluett instead.

"Ring again—and keep on ringing."

So that once more that remote buzzing might be heard from somewhere behind the scarlet door. And now Firth pressed his ear to one of the enamelled panels.

"Can you hear anything?" Dr. Fawcett inquired, a nervous note in his voice.

"I can. Footsteps."

The door was opened. Against dim light in a paved lobby, a gaunt figure appeared, the figure of a man almost as tall as Chief Inspector Firth. He wore what looked, at first sight, like a yellow dressing-gown, but which appeared, on closer inspection, to be a robe of unbleached linen. As Bluett uncompromisingly directed the ray of his torch upon the man's face, his impression that they had disturbed a priest at his devotions was strengthened rather than removed. It was a strange face, that of an aesthete, a scholar, drawn and lined, no more than a pallid frame for large, burning eyes which seemed to change from gray to blue. This man was so blond that it was hard to tell if his hair, grown unfashionably long and brushed back from a brow almost Shakespearian in contour, was very fair or nearly white. He wore a slight moustache which drooped at the ends. Save for the fire which burned in his eyes, he was strangely, almost unnaturally composed.

"Good evening, sir," said the Chief Inspector, stepping forward. "Do I address Lord Marcus Amberdale?"

"You do. I am at your service."

Firth turned and spoke to the driver. "Pull around the corner of South Street. Keep a sharp lookout."

And as he spoke, from the dim lobby where Lord Marcus stood, out into that silent street crept a heavy perfume, a perfume so unmistakable that the doctor sniffed audibly, and Sergeant Bluett again exchanged glances with Chief Inspector Firth. It was burning incense. The car moved off.

"You sent a message to Scotland Yard about ten minutes ago, sir. I am here to investigate."

"You are welcome." The refined, musical, rather troubled voice expressed little beyond bewilderment.

"I am Chief Inspector Firth."

"Please come in, Chief Inspector. I was fortunate enough to find Colonel O'Halloran in his office when I 'phoned. He and

I were formerly brother officers, you know. Who are these other gentlemen?"

"Detective-sergeant Bluett, my assistant, and Dr. Fawcett, Divisional surgeon."

"Yes, of course. Will you please come in also, gentlemen? I do not desire to be rude, but this regrettable interruption could not have occurred at a less fortunate moment. I must request you to lower your voices and to make as little noise as possible. You will understand, I trust, that I have a reason for my request."

The lobby which they entered was paved with what Dr. Fawcett (something of an archaeologist) judged to be fragments of Roman mosaic, cleverly reconstructed in a geometrical design. Indeed, there was nothing about the appointments of the place to suggest that it formed part of a London house. Its character transported the doctor to Pompeii. On the walls were singular frescoes, and a ceiling of lapis lazuli blue had been gemmed with stars in mother o' pearl or some other translucent material.

Four antique pillars supported this ceiling, or heaven, and between two of them a purple curtain hung. A niche in one wall enshrined a statuette of Isis, an Ancient Egyptian piece, quite perfect, which must have been of great value. A lamp burned before it. Otherwise, although the lobby swam in a sort of liquid radiance, the source of light was invisible. And now, the scarlet door being closed, that oppression of incense which had been perceptible outside, became almost unendurable—a subtle prompting to be repelled at all costs.

A long Roman couch rested before the wall facing the niche of Isis, and upon this lay the body of a man in evening dress. Lord Marcus, having admitted his visitors, stood before the purple curtain, and one saw, now, that his robe was bordered with a design of a similar color. He wore sandals. His large blue eyes were dreamy, preoccupied.

"I repeat, gentlemen, make as little noise as possible. My house is a small one; and to-night, when I had reached a higher plane than any I have reached before, comes interruption upon interruption."

He folded his arms and stood there; a tall, strangely impressive figure, that of a high priest who guards the holy of holies. Dr. Fawcett glanced at Chief Inspector Firth; found himself thinking about cats; put down his bag, and crossed the lobby. He bent over the man who lay on the couch—stooped lower, and uttered a significant exclamation.

"Good God!"

"What?" asked Firth, and was surprised to note that his somewhat strident voice had uttered no more than a whisper.

"He has a broken neck."

"What!"

"See for yourself."

Lord Marcus, his lips moving as if in silent prayer, did not stir. He looked straight before him in the direction of the closed door, which inside was panelled with dull silver and engraved with cabalistic inscriptions. Firth and Detective-sergeant Bluett joined Dr. Fawcett.

They saw the body of a man of no more than medium height, but of good figure. He wore a double breasted dinner jacket and its usual accompaniments, and his face, closely shaven except for a moustache resembling a pencilled line, was that of one thirty-five or forty years of age, who in life might have been conventionally handsome. He had abundant wavy dark hair, carefully dressed, and all those attributes of good grooming which are usually associated with a man of culture. His complexion, however, and his expression, if expression it could be called, were unpleasant to see. He appeared to have sustained a tremendous blow on the brow above his right eye, and his head was twisted in a grotesquely horrible manner.

"Just lift his shoulders," the doctor directed.

Firth stooped and did so. The twisted head sagged in a fashion so gruesome that he quickly lowered the body again.

"You see? Fracture dislocation of the neck. Skull bent back so as to rupture the anterior ligament. The official hangman couldn't have made a neater job of it."

Dr. Fawcett stooped again, and carefully examined a slight abrasion on the firm, clean-shaven jaw. He manipulated the bones and made other examinations, then straightening up, he stared at that robed immobile figure before the purple curtain. On an Arab coffee table stood a crystal pitcher half full of water, a tumbler beside it.

"Did you try to revive him?" the doctor asked Lord Marcus.

"Yes." He inclined his head very slightly; "but the moment I endeavored to raise him, I realised, as you have realised, that his neck was broken."

"Was he a friend of yours?" The question came from Firth.

"I never saw him in my life before."

"Of course, doctor—" the Chief Inspector turned, the lids of his leonine eyes slightly contracted—"you know who this is?"

"The face is familiar in some way, inspector, but I confess—"

"*You* know him, Sergeant Bluett?"

Bluett, who was examining the contents of a wallet he had found on the dead man, turned. The newspaper in his trouser pocket seemed to impede his movements: he removed it and put it in an inside coat pocket.

"No. I was just trying to find out."

"Aye, it's a fact that a man's appearance undergoes a subtle change after he has had his neck broken. It's Sir Giles Loeder."

"Good God!—so it is," Dr. Fawcett exclaimed. "I heard him broadcast from the B.B.C. this evening—postscript to the nine o'clock news!"

"Aye? Is that so? Weel, no doubt ye'll be wishing to complete your examination, doctor. I will leave you to it ... Is it possible for us, Lord Marcus, to sit down anywheres while I ask you a few simple questions?"

"I am at your disposal, Chief Inspector. Will you be good enough to come this way."

Lord Marcus crossed before the curtain, and opened a door in a recess which one might not have suspected to be there. He stood aside, slightly inclining his head again. Firth and Bluett, each casting an odd, sidelong glance at that which lay on the Roman couch, entered a room which was evidently a study.

The smell of incense was less perceptible here, and in his distinctive way each of the men, as he entered past the white-robed Lord Marcus, experienced a subtle sense of gratitude for this. Lord Marcus, pausing for a moment in an attitude of listening, entered after them and closed the door with a long, white, delicate hand. He indicated a settee and a deep armchair. This, they saw, was an orderly workroom, every available inch of wall space being occupied by closely stacked volumes. On a large mahogany table a green shaded lamp burned; and all the titles of those books within reach of its light reflected up from the carved and lustrous surface, indicated that Occultism and Ancient Egypt played a large part in Lord Marcus' studies.

A nearly illegible papyrus was open on this table, held flat by four unusual paperweights. These were: a black granite figure of Set, god of the dead; a fossilised fish; a lump of quartz glittering with specks of gold; and a mummied hand (that of a woman) highly varnished and mounted in a gold bangle. Before the books on some of the shelves were statuettes and tomb ornaments, with fragments of mural decorations, and there was a complete mummy in a highly painted sarcophagus standing just inside the door.

"Gentlemen," said Lord Marcus, "I beg you to be seated."

Chief Inspector Firth was angrily conscious of feeling ill at ease. The situation was outside his experience. There was

folly, madness, in the story somewhere; for he doubted the sanity of this impassive, linen-robed man, who during a national crisis unique in history could find time for whatever mumbo-jumbo was going on behind that drawn curtain. Nevertheless, Lord Marcus, mad or sane, was a son of the aged Marquis of Ord: therefore the Chief Inspector began awkwardly:

"Might I ask, sir, at what time Sir Giles arrived?"

"Arrived?" the musical voice echoed. "I fear I cannot tell you exactly; but the sound of his arrival, if it may be so described, broke in upon the Rites at a moment of great danger to myself, since I was compelled to break the contact in order to learn what had occurred."

And now the courteous, but incomprehensible, character of this reply increased Firth's ill-humor. What did Lord Marcus mean by "the Rites"—or for that matter, "breaking the contact"?

He decided, however, that these minor mysteries must not be permitted to intrude upon that line of inquiry which he had in mind.

"You mean that you were in another room—a room which we have not seen yet—engaged in some occupation which no doubt ye will explain later, when you heard a sound. What was the sound?"

Sir Marcus raised one hand to his brow in an effort of recollection.

"I had become dimly conscious of a disturbance in the lobby. I had deliberately ignored it, supposing that Wake had returned."

"Who is Wake?"

"My butler."

"And had he returned?"

"No. Shortly after this sound interrupted me, however, (it resembled that of scuffling footsteps and other slight movements), someone rang the door bell."

"The door bell? What did you do?"

"Accepting the interruption as unavoidable, I was forced to inquire what had caused it. In the lobby on the couch, as you see him now, I found a man lying. Until I actually touched him, I did not realise that he was dead, and I had gone to the dining-room for water, hoping to revive him."

"You disturbed the body in no way?"

"Beyond placing my arm under his shoulders in order to raise him, I did not."

There was a short uneasy silence. Even silence in this strange house of Lord Marcus Amberdale possessed some quality unlike that of other silences. Chief Inspector Firth was glad when Bluett broke it.

"Do I understand your lordship to mean that there was no one else but yourself here at the time?"

Lord Marcus inclined his head in that characteristic gesture; "No one else who was conscious."

"Conscious?" Firth repeated in an irritably bewildered way. "Was there someone who was unconscious?"

"The physical shell of a woman: her spirit was far away, climbing the staircase of the planets."

The police officers exchanged furtive glances. Firth's hazel eyes, which could kindle to a flame of anger, or grow moist in the presence of human suffering, flashed danger signals.

Following a momentary consideration of the fine fanatical face of Lord Marcus, the inspector seemed to come to a conclusion.

"I should like to point out, sir," he said, and his strident voice had become stern, his accent strongly marked, "that a

murder, a most brutal murder, has been committed in this hoose to-night. What the staircase o' the planets has to do wi' it is not for me to say. But do I understand there is someone else on these premises—someone we have not seen—who was present at the time?"

"There is—but she remains in a state of exaltation, of trance. To arouse her might be fatal."

"That will be for the doctor to decide," said Firth drily. "Ye say that ye're butler was not in?"

"No. Speaking physically, I was alone in the house, Chief Inspector. I wish to make that clear."

"Quite so. And when ye came out into the lobby, would ye be noticing if the front door was open?"

"I opened it myself, and looked out into the street. There was no one in sight, although I could see right to the corner."

"But," Firth persevered, "ye found the door shut?"

"It was shut."

Firth stared at his assistant rather helplessly.

"This is quite beyond me," he confessed. "Are we to suppose that a man wi' a broken neck admitted himself into yon lobby? I think not. Therefore, someone else must ha' brought him in, and then slipped out again, unless he is still here. Have you searched the hoose?"

"I have not left the ground floor. I was forced to return immediately to the Rites."

Firth stood up, and then sat down again. "The doctor is out yonder," he muttered, "so that if there is anyone else inside, he canna very well get out. Have you a back entrance?"

"No, there is no other entrance."

"Who, other than yoursel', has a key o' the front door?"

"Wake has one. But Wake has not returned."

"Late hours for a butler," Bluett suggested, glancing at his wrist-watch.

Rather wearily Lord Marcus explained: "Wake sometimes sleeps out. His wife acts as caretaker at a house in Grosvenor Square. With my permission, he occasionally spends the night there. To-night, when he set out (it was his evening off), I told him that I should be engaged until very late, and—provided he reported in the morning—that it would be unnecessary for him to return."

"And no one else has a key, sir?" Firth insisted.

"No one else. It is a Yale lock, and there are only two keys for it."

Sergeant Bluett, who had been making notes, glanced up with a puzzled frown. "Was it before or after the bell rang that you heard these shuffling footsteps?"

"Before. I should have ignored them if these sounds had not been followed by that of the bell."

"I see." Bluett scratched his upstanding hair in a manner which suggested that he did not see at all.

"What other servants are there?" Firth asked.

"A woman who acts as cook and who attends daily; otherwise Wake is in sole charge of my small household. Let me epitomise the situation, gentlemen." He glanced with those dreamy eyes from face to face. "I was engaged in a ritualistic experiment the results of which might well have meant the end of that evil which oppresses the world. One corner of the veil, at last, had been lifted. To this moment I had dedicated my life for many years. You see—" he smiled sadly—"I was doomed to be plucked back at the very threshold of Knowledge. Hearing the sounds which I have described, I forced myself from the subconscious back into the conscious, and went out to the lobby. The man—I had never seen him before, but you say he is Sir Giles Loeder—was lying as you found him. The front door was locked. I can tell you

nothing more, gentlemen, for this is all I know."

There was a further uneasy pause: Sergeant Bluett took out the evening paper, stared at it as though he wondered how it had got there, and put it back in another pocket.

"Realising that the man was dead," said Firth, "you came to the 'phone, which I see on the table, yonder, and called up Scotland Yard. Is that correct?"

"It is correct. I then returned hoping that in the short time still left to me before final interruption should occur, I might reconquer some of what I had lost."

"You mean that you went into another room, leaving no one in the lobby but the dead man?"

"Yes."

"Then someone in hiding," Bluett suggested, "might have slipped out? Before we arrived, I mean."

"I have no reason to suppose that there was anyone in hiding."

The door opened and Dr. Fawcett entered, sniffing and looking from face to face, a man whose curiosity could brook no further repression. A wave of that disturbing perfume followed him in.

"Why do you burn incense, Lord Marcus?" he asked rather tersely—"and what is it?"

"It is *kyphi*, the sacred *kyphi* of the Ancient Egyptian temples. Its production is the result of many years of experiment upon the formula of Dioscorides. I am the only man in modern times who has succeeded in producing it. As to why I burn it, I burn it during the Rites."

The surgeon shook his head, staring inquiringly at Chief Inspector Firth. "Probably you will want to check the dead man's possessions," he said. "The cause of death is perfectly clear, of course. He seems to have been lifted up, lifted bodily up, and cast down, head first, upon the paving—an operation which, in the case of a powerful man—and I should say he was a fairly powerful man—would have created a tremendous disturbance."

"There was no such disturbance, doctor," murmured Lord Marcus. "He cannot have sustained that frightful injury in my house."

"Certainly, I can find no evidence of a struggle in the lobby; but I can account for his condition in no other way—unless of course he met his death elsewhere. There is nothing to suggest, however, that he was knocked down in the street for instance. His clothing bears no trace of grease or mud."

Dr. Fawcett stared in surprise at the mummy, which he now saw for the first time, transferring his glance from this to those other curious objects which lay upon the large table.

"You study strange subjects, Lord Marcus," he observed.

His manner was brisk, direct, but strictly professional; his curiosity was professional, too. He believed that Lord Marcus Amberdale dabbled in magic, and he knew from personal experience that such pursuits sometimes lead to insanity. But as if to prevent a possible diversion, Chief Inspector Firth stood up.

He knew that the moment was come to make a demand which he anticipated would be declined. And although he fought a stout inward fight, he was unable to disguise from himself the fact that Lord Marcus, whom he believed to be mad, inspired him with a sort of respect, which, although he despised the weakness he was unable to shake off. He faced him across the dimly lighted room.

"I must now request, sir," he said, his strident voice quite toneless, "to interview the other witness who, by your own account, was present at the time that the events reported took place."

3

Shrine of Isis

Dr. Fawcett observed a change stealing over the ascetic face of Lord Marcus. The dreamy blue eyes grew hard, the jaw more angular. He remembered vaguely that Lord Marcus had formerly been a soldier, and these were the eyes of a soldier which now looked out from the mask of the visionary.

"I appreciate, Chief Inspector,"—his musical voice remained low and untroubled—"that you have power to enforce this request. But if I assure you that the lady you desire to see, although present in the body, is actually far from this house, if I assure you that she has remained throughout oblivious of all that has occurred here, will you accept my word, and not compel me to arouse her? I assure you upon my honor that to do so might prove fatal."

Firth glanced uneasily at Dr. Fawcett. "The decision on that point rests in your hands, doctor, but for my part I must certainly see this lady."

"Can I count upon your support, sir?" asked Lord Marcus, turning to the surgeon. "If I make certain stipulations, as indeed I must, will you see that they are carried out?"

"To the best of my ability, Lord Marcus. But the conduct of this inquiry is in the hands of the Chief Inspector, not in mine."

"My stipulations are these," Lord Marcus went on: "I will permit you to see the shrine on the understanding that no sound is made, no word spoken. If you consider, Chief Inspector, that an interrogation is necessary, I must ask for more time."

The three men exchanged glances, and Firth nodded.

"Verra weel," he said dourly. "This is the queerest business that ever came my ways, but I must carry out my duty. Lead on, sir."

Lord Marcus extended a long, slender hand, inviting his visitors to return to the lobby. Again, in passing, they all glanced down at the dead man. "Be good enough to remain immediately outside the door when I shall have opened it," he said; "no foot but mine must cross the threshold. And be silent."

He pulled a cord, and the purple curtain opened in its centre, to reveal another of the silver-plated doors. This also opened in the centre, its twin leaves sliding silently to right and left. As it opened, an overpowering wave of incense swept out into the lobby.

The tall, robed figure entered. An imperative gesture warned them to pause on the threshold. It was significant that they all moved on tiptoe as one does in the echoing vastness of a cathedral, although the place into which they looked was of no such dimensions. It was, however, of surprising form.

The floor was paved with shiny black stone; the walls were plastered and covered with mural decorations of Ancient Egyptian figures. It was lighted by two globular lamps resting on slender silver tripods to right and left of a golden curtain which occupied a great part of that wall which faced the door. The ceiling was apparently of dull black, creating an impression of space above. Apart from the two silver lamps there was absolutely no furniture whatever in the apartment.

Raising a finger to his lips as he looked back across his shoulder, Lord Marcus, stepping silently in his sandals, advanced to the golden curtain and drew it aside. The origin of those clouds of incense which permeated the house now became apparent. A silver burner rested on a third tripod, and, because of draught occasioned by their entrance, sent up wavering spirals of aromatic smoke through a perforated cover.

In spite of the injunction to silence, three sibilant inhalations marked the astonishment of the onlookers.

Recessed beyond the curtain a sort of shrine or altar lay. Upon a dais covered with a leopard skin rested a throne, evidently of great antiquity and inlaid with silver and gold. The recess embracing this throne was semi-circular, and decorated with designs from the Book of the Dead, so that a grotesque procession of gods of the Nile marched in eternal

monotony behind the woman seated there: figures with the heads of hawks, of cats, of crocodiles; a saturnalia such as might have haunted the dreams of a sleeping Pharaoh.

This woman wore the asp headdress of royal Egypt, a dull gold bangle on her right arm and a number of antique rings upon her fingers. She sat in a rigid pose, her hands palm downward, her body upright, her knees and feet pressed closely together—and her beauty was melodramatic in its flamboyance, in its stark passivity.

Hair dressed in a barbaric fashion resembled polished copper; wide-open eyes which stared eerily before her were of amber flecked with green: beautiful eyes but they held no human spark of life or love or passion, but seemed to survey a past dead world. A sheath-like garment of transparent tissue permitted the curves of her body to gleam through it like those of an ivory statue. No pulse throbbed in that white throat: there was no perceptible movement of her breast. Her lips were slightly parted in a sibylline smile.

Invasion of this secret temple produced no visible change in that entranced beauty. Lord Marcus raised his arms like a priest before the altar, and intoned words in his soft, musical voice, and in a language unfamiliar to any of those who listened. The long-lashed eyes of the woman never flickered. Lowering his arms, he stood aside, and for a period of perhaps a minute allowed the three men to watch—and to wonder. Then, turning, he gave a sweeping gesture to intimate that they should retire.

Stepping again on tiptoe, with extreme caution, acutely aware of their clumsy shoes, those who had watched withdrew. Lord Marcus reclosed the silent door, and replaced the purple curtain ...

It was Dr. Fawcett who broke an awkward silence. His expression, as he watched Lord Marcus, was diagnostic, but the effort which it cost him to recapture his professional manner was not lost upon Inspector Firth.

"Hypnotism?" the doctor inquired, with raised eyebrows.

"Not entirely, doctor," Lord Marcus replied, and that hard light had died from his eyes: he was again the prophetic dreamer. "*Kyphi* has singular properties, and a preparation of *hashish*, which I can procure only from Aleppo, more widely opens the inner eye. Personal magnetism, which is fully established between us, directs the quest of the released spirit."

Chief Inspector Firth interrupted. "I am afraid, sir, there are certain important points which I must clear up before I can send for an ambulance and have the body removed."

"I beg that you will make your inquiries as brief as possible."

"I'll do that. First and foremost I would ask, Dr. Fawcett: Are you prepared to say that yon woman is in a trance?"

"Yes, or under the influence of some drug."

"She's no' just pretending?"

"I am prepared to state that she is unconscious. I can say no more without a proper examination."

"Verra good, doctor. And now, Lord Marcus, I understand that this woman, who has been drugged or hypnotised by you, is being used for some kind of an experiment. Am I right?"

"She is playing her part in the Rites," Lord Marcus replied, in that musical, weary voice, "which are probably more than two thousand years old, and which, it is equally probable, have never been attempted by any living man. You may have observed that to-night is the night of the full moon. It is the full moon of the Ancient Egyptian Sothic month of Paophi, which means that, failing, I cannot even attempt to do what I sought to do for a whole year again."

"Might I ask, Lord Marcus," the doctor interjected eagerly, "what you sought to do?"

"Certainly." The reply was calm and courteous. "You, very properly, in common with these officers, assume that I am mad. I assure you that I am sane. The ancients, so scorned in this machine age, knew more of the power of the spirit than we to-day even suspect. I have endeavored for more than twenty years to recover some of that lost knowledge. To-night I had sent an untrammelled soul upon a voyage of exploration. I sought to know why the world was so sorely afflicted, and when its punishment would end."

"It is possible that ye mean, sir," said Firth, and he was funereally Caledonian in his dourness, "that ye sought to find out when the war would end?"

"Substantially, perhaps, that was my object. It is vain of you to endeavor to conceal the fact, Chief Inspector, that you regard me as a mental case, and even despise me a little for behavior which you look upon as egregiously flippant at a time of national stress. But you are wrong. I stood, to-night, upon the edge of knowledge denied to men for thousands of years, when, ordained by some fatality which I cannot even pretend to explain, that man died who lies there before us."

"Fatality may be right," murmured the Chief Inspector, his eyes fixed upon Lord Marcus with an expression no doubt similar to that which fired the eyes of Torquemada when he rebuked a heretic. "Mysel', I would ca' it the Hand of God. His ways are strange and beyond computing. And I think, Lord Marcus, that what ye sought to know, it is not intended that man should know."

Lord Marcus smiled: It was a sweet and a wistful smile. "You may even be wiser than I, Chief Inspector. I am perhaps not sufficiently purified. Indeed, I may venture too greatly. But I sought, not for my own good, but for the good of the world. This I ask you to believe."

And in fact, despite all that they had seen, all that they suspected, despite memories of the entranced woman upon whose lips rested a smile at once voluptuous and mystic, no one of the three doubted this man's sincerity. But each, in his different degree, doubted his sanity.

Bluett had managed to recall the fact that Lord Marcus in his younger days had been a notable boxer: he remained, for all his asceticism, a physically powerful man. Furthermore, the Detective-sergeant, whose special province was the morals of Mayfair, had recognised the woman. She was none other than the once notorious Mrs. Vane, whose adventures, matrimonial and extra-matrimonial, had afforded society journalists just before the war many spicy paragraphs. In his practical way he was reconstructing what might have occurred; and in the light of this reconstruction, Lord Marcus Amberdale already as good as stood in the dock. He cast a swift glance from ingenuous eyes at his superior. But there was nothing in the way in which Firth was looking at Lord Marcus to suggest that he shared Bluett's views.

"Do I understand, sir," said the Chief Inspector, "that in spite of what has happened, you would wish to renew this—er—expeeriment?"

Lord Marcus shook his head sadly. "Not at all. To do so would be useless. The shrine has been defiled. Forgive me—the implication does not reflect upon yourselves. But I must very gradually, and with infinite care, recall the traveller."

"I see," said Firth. "In the meantime, sir, I am afraid I shall have to put through a few routine inquiries here regarding the dead man's possessions and so on, but I will endeavor to keep as quiet as possible. May I have the lady's name?"

"She is Mrs. Vane, the only woman I have known in thirty years who possessed at once the ethereal subtlety and the physical courage to pursue the path so far." Instinctively, startlingly, he turned to Detective-sergeant Bluett. "You are thinking of the stories which are told about this lady. I would reply that her physical life is beside the point: I neither condone nor condemn it. There are qualities present which I have found in no one else: those of a priestess of Isis. With your permission, Chief Inspector, I will retire."

And Chief Inspector Firth was about to reply and to give the necessary authority, when all four men started and turned as one. Clouds of incense swam, now, visibly in the nearly still air of the lobby; a slowly writhing pall of oily vapor hung over the body of Sir Giles Loeder. But it was towards the silver-plated front door with its cabalistic inscriptions, that all eyes were directed.

Someone had quietly inserted a key in the lock!

4

Someone Comes In

As the door opened, which it did slowly—one might have said furtively—a draught of cool air penetrated the lobby, weaving those oily layers of perfumed smoke into swirls and spirals. Lord Marcus, interrupted in the act of drawing aside the purple curtain, now closed it again and turned as did the others. He, also, stared with a queer fixity of expression, towards the opening door.

Dr. Fawcett frowned nervously; Chief Inspector Firth, whose fierce eyes were set in the same direction, raised his left hand like an orchestral conductor who subdues the violins; Bluett, as if hypnotised by the gesture, seemed almost to be holding his breath. The door being fully opened, to admit that refreshing smell which tells of falling rain, a sound resembling a sigh disturbed the silence of the lobby. It was caused by a quartette of concerted inhalations.

In out of the darkness, somewhat wet and dishevelled, a girl entered, her eyes wide open and frightened, and her fingers still clutching a key which remained in the lock. Color began to ebb from her cheeks as she glanced around at the four men who lived and at the one who was dead.

"Fay!"

Lord Marcus pronounced the name, on a queer rising intonation to which his musical voice lent a sort of elfin beauty.

"Good God! look at that!"

Bluett was the second speaker. He pointed into shadows behind the girl; pointed to where three cats, a tabby and a black, led by a majestic persian, formed a phantom escort. Firth came to his senses.

"Huish! be off!" he cried, and swept towards the feline intruders.

They fled, uttering plaintive miaows, as the Chief Inspector, stepping past the horror-stricken girl, gently removed her fingers from the doorkey (she did not seem to be conscious of the fact that he was doing so) and slipped the key into his own pocket, closing the door. He turned, back to the silver panels, and looked across her head at the three men. Particularly, his penetrating glance searched the countenance of Lord Marcus.

"I believe you spoke, sir."

Startled by the voice which came from behind her shoulder, the girl looked quickly back, and then ran to Lord Marcus, hands outstretched.

"Marcus, my dear—Marcus! whatever has happened!"

He rested his long hands upon her shoulders, giving her a reassuring squeeze, and his smile was infinitely kindly. "You may well ask, Fay, but I fear I cannot tell you. This unhappy affair is as much a mystery to me as to anyone. Let me ask in return whatever has brought you here at this hour of the night."

Sergeant Bluett glanced suspiciously at Dr. Fawcett. Firth stood quite still, watching Lord Marcus: the girl, clutching one sleeve of his robe, was staring aside towards the Roman couch. Perceptibly, she grew still more pale. She was so delicately pretty that the average observer might have overlooked her; a beauty for a connoisseur. Almost boyishly slim, her limbs were alluringly rounded, and her frank gray eyes expressed a sort of primaeval innocence. She had hazelnut hair, wind-blown, and at the moment, wet; and her fresh skin might have belonged to a dryad, to a creature of the greenwood. A light blue cape, which may have formed part of a uniform, was worn over an evening frock, and her dance shoes were spattered with mud. She turned from Lord Marcus, still holding his sleeve, and faced the Chief Inspector.

"Really," she said, "I am afraid I don't understand at all. Please, won't somebody tell me what has happened?"

"Perhaps, gentlemen—" the interruption came in that singularly calm voice of Lord Marcus—"I should make you acquainted. Chief Detective Inspector Firth, Dr. Fawcett, and—er—Sergeant Bluett: my cousin, Fay Perigal."

The Chief Inspector and the surgeon acknowledged this introduction by bows. Bluett alone spoke.

"How do you do, miss?" he inquired.

"A tragic and unaccountable thing has occurred here to-night," Lord Marcus added, "so that your wholly unexpected appearance seems to call for an explanation, Fay. I am curious on this point myself, and these gentlemen are professionally interested."

"Yes, of course." Fay Perigal glanced from face to face, glanced at the couch and then away again quickly: her agitation was pathetic. "It's really quite simple. Just an unfortunate accident. You see—" she addressed herself nervously to the Chief Inspector—"I managed to get leave to attend a birthday party given by a school friend in London. As I knew I couldn't possibly get back to Otterly to-night—"

"Otterly, miss?" Bluett glanced up from his notes.

"Yes, I am at the Royal Air Force Hospital there. And so I arranged with Phil—Phillida Wentworth, another friend—to spend the night at her flat, which is quite near the house where the party was held. Well—" she smiled unmirthfully—"I can't account for it. But when I got there, the outer door was locked, and no amount of ringing was any good. Then, it began to rain—and at last I gave it up in despair. I walked all along Albemarle Street and into Piccadilly, but there simply wasn't a taxi in sight. I really had no idea what to do, especially as I had very little money with me. And then, I thought of you, Marcus."

"I am glad you did. Normally, you would have been most welcome. Indeed, you are welcome now."

"Oh, I didn't mean to disturb you by going upstairs."

She glanced in the direction of a marble stair which led from a corner of the lobby to upper apartments. "My idea was to sleep, or try to sleep—" her eyes turned fearfully in that direction—"on the couch. I didn't expect to find anybody up, you see."

"Then might I ask, Miss Perigal," the Chief Inspector interrupted, "how ye expected to get in?"

"Oh!" She smiled again, and this second smile momentarily swept the horror from her eyes. "That's quite simple. Marcus always hides the key, or what he calls hiding it, in the flower box outside, you see."

"What!" Firth turned frowningly to Lord Marcus. "Do ye mean to say, sir, that it is a habit of yours to leave the key outside the door?"

That old-world, dignified inclination of the head answered him.

"I confess to being somewhat absent-minded, Chief Inspector, and therefore invariably I leave my key in a corner of one of the stone boxes, as Miss Perigal has told you."

"Good lord!" murmured Bluett.

"What did you say?" Firth inquired.

"I said 'Good lord'!" Bluett, whose pencil had broken, delved in an inside pocket and produced the evening paper. This he placed in an outside pocket, then sought, and found, another pencil.

"As you can see from my condition," Fay added, "it was raining quite fast, and I practically ran here. Truly, Marcus, I didn't know what else to do."

"There is no occasion to apologise, Fay. My house is always open to my friends. And now, gentlemen, if you wish to talk further to Miss Perigal, I would suggest that you use the study. The guest room is vacant, Fay, and you are more than welcome to it. I will leave a note for Wake, who will bring your morning coffee and take your orders for breakfast, at which I shall look forward to joining you. I should be glad, Chief Inspector, of your permission to retire for the purpose to which I have already referred."

But Fay continued to clutch the sleeve of his linen robe. It was a physical expression of a bleak mental loneliness; a quest of sympathy, of understanding.

"Marcus!" He paused, as he was about to draw back the curtain. "Is *she* in there?"

"Yes," he answered mildly.

Fay crept closer to him. "But surely, Marcus, you promised me that you would give this business up?"

"When the experiment of to-night should be completed, Fay; such was the understanding. I regret to say that Fate has intervened to make it a failure." He turned to Firth. "My cousin is obviously much overwrought. I count upon you to spare her unnecessary questioning. She knows no more than I know. Until breakfast, Fay."

"One moment, Lord Marcus."

Lord Marcus paused, his hand raised again to the curtain and glanced back at the Chief Inspector, who had addressed him.

"At your service."

"When ye have awakened the lady in yon, I should be glad, wi' the doctor's consent, to see her for a moment."

"I will do my best."

Lord Marcus pushed the plated panels aside, went into the dimly lighted place beyond, and reclosed the door.

Silence became so complete that it was possible to hear the pattering of rain in the street outside. It was broken by a muffled sound of that musical chanting which the police officers dimly had heard before. The Chief Inspector frowned irritably. Fay shuddered, turning away and clasping her hands. Firth looked at the rather forlorn figure and his frown melted into a smile. This smile revealed a man no criminal had ever met.

"I am more than sorry to have to ask, Miss Perigal, but—" he nodded towards the couch—"does it happen ye are acquainted wi' this man?"

Fay Perigal breathed deeply; she was obviously exercising an effort of self control: she remained very pale. She nodded.

"Yes." Her frank eyes were clouded, and one would have said that either the condition or the identity of the man who lay there had taxed endurance close to breaking point. "Sir Giles Loeder."

"H'm!" muttered Dr. Fawcett.

"Would ye be knowing Sir Giles well?" Firth asked.

"No; scarcely at all. He came down to Otterly a month or so ago to interview some of the patients. He had official permission to introduce their experiences into his broadcasts. You know he used to broadcast. That was where I met him. I was detailed to take him round. I never saw him again until ... to-night."

"I see," murmured Firth. "That doesn'a help us a great deal. He had the reputation of being a man o' great charm. Did ye find it so?"

"Frankly—" she forced a smile, but it was a wry and tremulous smile—"it sounds a dreadful thing to say, perhaps, in the circumstances, but I am afraid I didn't like him at all."

"Aye! is that so? And about Mrs. Vane, now? Ye'll be knowing her, I doubt not."

"Yes—I know her."

"Is she a friend of yours?"

"No—I'm afraid she isn't. You see—" she brushed back a ringlet of damp hair—"my cousin Marcus believes that he can rediscover all sorts of lost secrets in some way that I'm sorry to say I don't altogether understand—"

"And of which you don't altogether approve?"

"Well, perhaps I don't. I mean, if it calls for his association with—" she hesitated—"queer people."

"Such as Mrs. Vane?"

"All kinds of queer people. Unfortunately, he is quite indifferent to public opinion."

"So I gather." Firth smiled reassuringly. "Weel—I don't believe there is any further evidence I want just now, Miss Perigal. And as you probably know the way to the guest room—nae doubt ye do—my advice is to turn in."

"Thank you; I will. Good-night." She included all three men in the words, crossed the lobby to the foot of the marble stair, and went up.

In an awkward and rather puzzled way, they watched the slight figure until it was lost to sight on a landing. They heard the sound of an opening door, followed by that of a door being closed; then, once more, nothing but the pattering of rain in the street outside.

"It will be necessary," said the Chief Inspector, a faintly defeatist note in his voice, "to check up on Miss Perigal's evidence in the morning. But I am not anticipating that there will be anything wrong about it."

"Funny thing all the same," murmured Bluett.

"Speaking personally," said Dr. Fawcett, "the more I learn about this very singular family, the more I incline to the idea of some hereditary taint. Lord Marcus I regard as definitely suspect."

"So do I," said Bluett.

"I don't mean of the crime," the surgeon added severely, "but of mental alienation. His custom, which I suppose you have accepted, Inspector, of leaving the key out in the street, for example, quite apart from his somewhat unusual studies, would seem to indicate a lack of what is usually described as common sense. Then, Miss Perigal's failure to make sure of her accommodation to-night, in these days of black-out and overcrowded hotels, is rather irresponsible, if I may say so." He shook his head reflectively, glancing again at the dead man. "The whole thing is bizarre to a degree."

"Aye! that's a fact," Firth conceded. "Phew! I need a breath o' fresh air. I don't know how you feel." He crossed and was about to open the front door when he paused, put his hand in the pocket of his tweed jacket and drew out the key. He stared at it in the dim light, keenly. "Aye. It's still damp," he muttered.

He opened the door, so that again a draught of fresh, sweet air swept in. And almost immediately, he found himself engaged once more.

"Huish! awa' wi' ye!"

A number of cats, their fur diamond-tipped with rain, had entered at the moment that he opened the door. He shepherded them out and closed it.

"The behavior of the cats," said Dr. Fawcett, in an uneasy way, "is another phenomenon for which I find myself quite unable to account."

"Speaking pairsonally," Firth confessed, "nothing has occurred here to-night for which mysel' I am able to account. And so let's get down to routine business. I greatly regret, doctor, the necessity of detaining you longer. But I wish to interview Mrs. Vane, if it is possible, and only yoursel' can tell me if it is possible." Dr. Fawcett sighed wearily. "Regarding the dead man, nae doubt ye will be prepared to make out your report?"

"Certainly," said Dr. Fawcett. "There are several details to which I shall have to draw your attention, but the cause of death is unmistakable. It is for you," he added with a sly smile, "to explain how and where it took place."

"As to when," Firth challenged, "what are your findings, doctor?"

"I should say that Sir Giles had been dead not more than twenty minutes when I arrived."

"In other words, he died at just about the time that Lord Marcus called up Scotland Yard?"

"Exactly. Such is my reading of the matter."

"H'm," muttered Sergeant Bluett, and made another note. "I've got an idea."

"It is possible," murmured Firth. "What is this idea?"

"I was thinking about Mrs. Vane."

"I was thinking you might be."

Sergeant Bluett turned to Dr. Fawcett, his ingenuous eyes and upstanding hair lending him an absurd resemblance to a stout schoolboy. "Has it occurred to you, doctor, that she may be dead?"

"Dead!" the surgeon echoed.

"That's right."

Firth, brows drawn down so that his tawny eyes gleamed fiercely, stared at Bluett. His expression changed, and he glanced interrogatively at Dr. Fawcett. But the doctor was smiling again.

"The idea is not utterly preposterous," he admitted; "but only a layman could have conceived it. Mrs. Vane is unmistakably alive, but unmistakably unconscious. You may accept my word for that."

"Oh," murmured Bluett, and taking the newspaper from his pocket, he put his notebook there, and the newspaper in another pocket. "In that case, let's get down to business."

"I am hoping," said Firth, "for results from fingerprints. I left orders for Sergeant Hawkins to follow on, and it's full time he was here."

"The bell push," Bluett began—

"I have it in mind," said Firth. "If it's true that someone rang the bell immediately after the crime took place, the bell push and the plate may bear evidence."

"It has been raining since then," Dr. Fawcett pointed out.

"I am thinking of that, and I want to find something to hang over it to act as a shield. In fact—"

He ceased speaking so suddenly that the effect was that of a disconnected telephone. Dr. Fawcett, who had picked up his bag and hat, held them in a rigid attitude; Bluett, who had just bent over the dead man, came bolt upright as if at the command of a drill sergeant. Distant awesome chanting arose—and ceased.

For the second time that night the three stood staring towards the silver-plated door; because, for the second time that night, someone had gently inserted a key in the lock.

5

Someone Else Comes In

The door opened and a man came in, quickly closing it behind him as if to exclude some intruder. Then he turned and faced the lobby, and his dark brown eyes opened wider and wider until they seemed to become completely round.

He was a short, broad man, having a remarkable span of shoulder, clean shaven, high colored and with a good head of gray hair, meticulously groomed. But the high color was gradually filtering out of his face. He wore light suede gloves, a black morning coat and a winged collar with a black tie. His trousers were of a discreet gray, his shoes were black. An umbrella which hung from his arm, allowed drops of rain to fall upon the mosaic pavement. Slowly, as he watched, he removed a soft black hat, as one grown conscious that he stands in the presence of death.

"Good evening," said the Chief Inspector ominously. "Who are *you*?"

The man swallowed. His gaze had sought, found, and was now focussed upon the Roman couch. "My name is James Wake, and I am Lord Marcus Amberdale's butler."

Bluett was considering James Wake with frank interest. His expression was that of a punter studying the points of a horse, and deciding whether it shall or shall not carry his money. Firth's tawny eyes conveyed nothing other than an interrogation. Dr. Fawcett replaced his bag on the floor and his hat on top of it.

"You keep strange hours for a butler."

"It may certainly seem so, sir." The man had a punctilious accuracy of speech which the Chief Inspector found faintly irritating. "But in point of fact my return at so late an hour is, if I may so describe it, the result of an after-thought."

"Indeed! Do I take you to mean that you had not intended to come back at all?"

"I had his lordship's permission to sleep out. And if I don't intrude in any way, perhaps you will be good enough to tell me who you are, sir, and what has occurred."

With the unerring instinct of a "gentleman's gentleman," he had placed Firth in that intermediate class towards members of which one displays a reasonable respect (as a well-trained butler should do) but not the peculiar deference which is reserved for social superiority. As if to discount his studiously calm manner, however, the high color of James Wake had now filtered away entirely.

"I am Chief Inspector Firth, and what has happened is a murder. Just step across, Mr. Wake, and tell me if you know the dead man."

Wake, suddenly aware of his wet umbrella, inverted it hurriedly, then, drawing open a curtain which hung before a cupboard immediately inside the door, he placed it in a stand which the curtain had concealed and hung up his hat. He crossed the lobby with short, sturdy steps, and looked down at Sir Giles Loeder. Then he turned and faced Firth.

"I recognise this unfortunate gentleman, Inspector. It is Sir Giles Loeder."

"Quite so. A friend of his lordship?"

"Not to my knowledge, Inspector."

"When did he arrive?"

"I have no idea. He was certainly not here when I left."

"At what time did you leave?"

"Immediately after dinner. Mrs. Vane dined with his lordship, and I understood that the evening was to be devoted to one of his lordship's occult experiments."

"Do you know where his lordship keeps his key?"

"Certainly, Inspector. It is always in the left hand flower box; but I use my own." He held up a bunch of keys attached to a chain. "I should not dream of disturbing his lordship's."

"Where have you been until this hour?"

"I have been balancing my quarterly accounts. My wife usually assists me. I am responsible for his lordship's household. My wife is exceptionally good at figures."

"I see. Where does your wife live?"

"At the town house of Sir George Clarking in Grosvenor Square: she was formerly Sir George's cook, and now acts as caretaker of the premises, which are unoccupied."

"You have been there, then, since what time?"

"Since a little before nine o'clock. I had permission to remain the night, as I have mentioned, but I recalled the fact that his lordship had an early morning appointment, and I thought it better that I should return."

During this conversation Wake had perceptibly recovered some of his normal sang-froid, and with it a trace of his normal color. He was peeling off the suede gloves, which he placed in a pocket of his black jacket. Dr. Fawcett thought that in many respects he more closely resembled a City man than a butler. But there was something else about Wake's appearance, now that hat, gloves and umbrella were discarded, which taunted the Chief Inspector as a thing familiar, yet elusive. The wing collar and black tie formed part of this mocking image which he failed wholly to capture. Suddenly he spoke again.

"Ye were expecting a Miss Fay Perigal, I understand?"

"Miss Fay, Inspector?" Wake's expression of surprise was too sudden to be simulated. "No, sir. Although I am sure Miss Fay would be very welcome."

"Nae doubt," said Firth drily. "Well, she is here."

"What do you say, Inspector?"

"She went upstairs some little whiles back. Lord Marcus said he would leave a note for you; but I misdoubt me if he will remember."

"Thank you, Inspector. I will see that Miss Fay has her early morning coffee. Can I assist in any way, in this highly unpleasant matter?"

"It is probable. So don't turn in at present. By the way, doctor, speaking of coffee, if ye would prescribe the same, possibly Mr. Wake would oblige us. We have much yet to do."

Dr. Fawcett groaned, and glanced at his wrist-watch; at which moment the telephone rang in the study. Wake moved in that direction, but:

"Sergeant Bluett," said Firth peremptorily, "take the call."

Bluett went out, and his muffled voice might be heard speaking. The Chief Inspector, watching Wake, seemed to have another idea.

"Do you keep a lot of cats here?" he asked.

"No, Inspector." Wake shook his head. "But his lordship's experiments result in a number from the neighborhood being attracted here." He sniffed. "I am told that it is the incense which is used at these séances. His lordship has informed me that all domestic cats derive from the temple cat of Ancient Egypt, and that *Kyphi*, which I understand to be the name of this preparation, has what his lordship terms an hereditary fascination for them."

"Thank you," said Firth; "a most lucid exposition. Could I trouble ye to prepare a pot of coffee?"

Sergeant Bluett appeared in the opening which led to the study. "Assistant Commissioner on the line, sir," he reported ...

6

Misty Morning

Somewhat later the same morning—that is to say, not long after break of day—an incident occurred which bore no apparent relation to the mystery of South Audley Street but which, in fact, later fell into its place in the design of that tragedy. A coffee-stall keeper, named William Sawby, had established a highly lucrative business during the heavy London raids by serving coffee to wardens, firemen, police and others whose duties compelled them to remain abroad. He operated in part of the shell of a once popular West End public house, which had fallen an early victim to German bombs.

This astute caterer had fitted up a radio in his stall, so that customers might listen to the seven o'clock news bulletin, whilst refreshing themselves after their night's labor. The enterprise had outlived the blitz. William Sawby's coffee-stall on the morning following those remarkable occurrences at the house of Lord Marcus Amberdale, was well patronised at five minutes to seven by workers of all kinds, who sipped their tea or coffee whilst waiting to hear the early news.

After a night of intermittent rain, sunrise had produced a steamy mist, almost meriting the description of fog. Visibility was reduced to a few yards, and Sawby's stall with its bright urns and lights, around which a cheerful rattle of cups prevailed, formed a welcome oasis. In once orderly Bond Street hard by, a street which had come to resemble the lower jaw of a giant following extensive dental operations (and extraction by bomb is by no means painless dentistry), early traffic was just beginning to stir. But wartime London that morning, much of it still wearing its black-out night cap, possessed a sort of hollow, echoing quality, vaultlike, cavernesque and alien. The soul of a city is its people; and Mayfair had lost its soul.

Many of Sawby's patrons were regular customers: Sergeant Roper from Vine Street, his bicycle resting against the stall; Tom Wilkins, the milkman, his white pony, forefeet on the pavement, eating biscuits out of his hand; Smith, the postman, setting forth on his round; a steel helmeted warden, who in private life was a famous King's Counsel; and Mrs. Ryley, the charlady who "did for" the silversmiths on the corner. One or two others stood by; but these were accredited members of this unique early morning club, good companions between whom no social barriers existed.

"Going to be a hot day, I think," said the K.C. in his cheery forensic voice.

"It certainly 'as the smell of one, Mr. Corcoran, sir," Mrs. Ryley agreed.

"Quite so. Don't know what I shall do when I have to give up my morning visits, Sawby. Always look forward to my spells of duty."

"If you always had to get up in the middle of the night," the milkman observed, "you'd leave off looking forward to it."

"Hear, hear!" chuckled the postman. "Not that I don't enjoy a cup of coffee meself."

"It's in the winter you're a boon, Bill," said the police sergeant. "I reckon it was Vine Street, during the blitz, made your fortune."

Sawby, red-faced, blue-eyed, and wearing a moustache resembling a gnome's grotto, grinned appreciatively, clearing away empty cups and plunging them into the washing tub.

"Some o' them mornings was shockin', wasn't they, sergeant?" remarked Mrs. Ryley reflectively. "I won't never forget standin' at this 'ere counter one Wen'sday and wonderin' what 'ad become of my offices. Clean gone they was."

"Nothing left to scrub, what?" said the K.C. "Othello's occupation gone."

A lorry pulled up. It had come from Southampton during the night, and the driver and his mate climbed out of the cab, stretching their cramped limbs, and joined the group at the stall.

"We ain't late for the news, Bill, are we?" asked the driver.

"Two minutes yet," was the prompt reply. "Bread and butter with yours?"

"Bread an' what!" growled the other. "Give it its right name, chum."

"Margarine is good for us, as a matter of fact; Lord Woolton told me so," said Michael Corcoran. "Got to prefer it to butter, myself."

"Every man to his fancy," muttered the milkman. "But give me the stuff what I used to bring round in the good old days. Cows makes better butter than what coconut trees does."

Another customer appeared. He glanced in a doubtful way at the group about the stall, and then diffidently joined it.

This was a young Royal Air Force officer, a tall slim fellow with the lines of an athlete. He had dark brown wavy hair and very steadfast blue eyes, beneath straight brows. But in the group about the stall, there were two trained observers. The hair which showed beneath the new arrival's cap was slightly dishevelled; his shoes were dirty; and palpably he had not shaved that morning. This, in conjunction with the type of man and the tradition of the Royal Air Force, gave rise to speculation in the mind of the officer from Vine Street, and in that of Michael Corcoran, K.C. Charitably, they formed identical, but inaccurate deductions (a thick night); Corcoran furtively winked at the police sergeant, and the sergeant winked back. They understood one another.

The young Flight Lieutenant ordered coffee, in a nervous manner, glancing about him almost apologetically. Learned counsel, who noted his accent, determined that the officer was a man of culture and a citizen of the United States. However, as such was the rule at the Sawby Club, no one paid any further attention to him, except Mrs. Ryley, who said: "Good mornin', sir. Going to be 'ot, I fancy."

"Maybe you are right," he replied; and his momentary smile was that not of a rather careworn man but that of a likeable boy.

Sawby turned on the radio. The young airman, making an effort to set himself at ease, took out his cigarette case, and as Mrs. Ryley stood immediately beside him, offered it to her.

"Thank you kindly, sir. But I don't 'old with ladies smokin' in public."

"That's too bad." He smiled again and lighted one himself, then returned the case to his pocket as the announcer began to read the news bulletin.

This was commonplace enough, a brief and uninspiring report. Then, nearly at the end, the following item occurred:—

"Listeners who are familiar with his popular postscripts will regret to learn that Sir Giles Loeder was killed in the West End of London last night in mysterious circumstances."

The effect of this announcement on the group in general was not marked by any profound sympathy. Someone said, "Poor devil!" and someone else said: "I heard 'im broadcast only last night." Sergeant Roper shook his head. "Too many of these thugs getting busy in the black-out," he muttered. "No news of the case when I left." But to this apathy the Air Force pilot proved an exception.

He took so large a mouthful of hot coffee that he almost choked. Mrs. Ryley helpfully patted him on the back. He thanked her, his eyes streaming. As he had dropped his cigarette, he took out and lighted another. Then, disposing of his nearly boiling coffee in huge gulps until he had swallowed sufficient to justify his departure, with a muttered "Good morning" he walked off.

Michael Corcoran, his distinguished features marked by a puzzled frown, watched the slim blue figure seemingly dissolve into mist. At one moment the man was there, then he began to fade; and before he had reached the corner, he was gone ...

Later still on this misty morning Fay Perigal, having changed into uniform in the nurses' room at Otterly Hospital, looked up with a start, for she had been in a reverie, as the door opened and the matron came in.

"Good morning, dear," said Mrs. Maddison. "I expect you are rather tired."

It was unusual for matron to address any of the nurses in her charge as "dear," but Fay Perigal, perhaps because she was pretty, or because she was highly efficient, or because (for these accidents are said to count) she was related to the Marquis of Ord, had been a great favorite of Mrs. Maddison's from the first.

She was "Nurse Perigal" in public, but "Fay," or "dear" in private.

"Yes, I am rather tired, matron. In many ways I had a dreadful time."

"Was it such a wild party?"

Mrs. Maddison, her beautiful graying hair never disarranged, her poise unchangeably serene, permitted a worldly twinkle to animate her eyes which few had seen there.

Fay shook her head. "No, it was gay enough, as wartime parties go. Julie and I were at school together: I should have hated not to be there. But first of all, owing to some mistake, and I am not blaming anybody, I found myself alone in London with nowhere to sleep! And then—" she repressed a shudder—"I found myself mixed up in a murder."

"A murder?" The twinkle disappeared from Mrs. Maddison's eyes; her expression became one of some gravity.

"Yes. You see, in despair I went to my cousin's house."

"Lord Marcus Amberdale?"

"Yes, Marcus. It was pouring with rain, there wasn't a taxi in sight, and I hoped to be able to slip in and sleep on the couch, or anywhere."

"At what time was this, dear? And how did you propose to slip in?"

"Oh, the door is always practically open—at least, everybody knows where he keeps the key. But when I did get in, I found the place in the hands of the police. There was a murdered man lying in the lobby!"

"Fay! whatever do you mean? What had happened?"

"Nobody knows what had happened. At least, no one knew up to the time that I left this morning. Haven't you heard the news, matron?"

"No, I have not."

"It was Sir Giles Loeder."

"Dead?"

"Yes—murdered; at least they think so."

"Gracious heavens, child! Most charming man! Why, he was here only last month. You yourself showed him round."

"I know I did."

Fay remembered telling the police that she had disliked Sir Giles. Now she knew that she must not tell matron why: that in exercising his charm upon Mrs. Maddison Sir Giles had been endeavoring to serve a purpose. The reason of Fay's dislike was that Sir Giles had made urgent overtures to his charming guide, pressing her to dine with him in London the same night, and undertaking to use his influence to obtain the necessary leave.

"But how perfectly terrible!"

"I can't tell you what it was like. As though I hadn't been unhappy enough before."

"Unhappy, dear, about what?"

And now, without warning, as Mrs. Maddison watched, tears welled up in Fay's eyes. "My dear, what is it?" The matron stooped and clasped the girl's shoulders. "Whatever is the matter? Can't you tell me?"

"It's sweet of you," said Fay, exercising a tremendous effort and conquering her weakness. "It is such an old story, and so

silly. I haven't the courage to tell you."

"Knowing you, dear, I am sure it is not silly, although it may be old."

"Well, you see—there's someone I am very fond of."

"Do I know him?"

Fay shook her head sadly.

"No, I don't think so. I don't mean that there was any understanding between us; I just mean that I am in love with him. We are quite old friends. We have known one another—oh, for ever so long. Somehow, very stupidly, I sort of took it for granted that—"

"It isn't your special patient?"

Fay shook her head again. "No, it isn't Dan. Dan and I are old friends too, as you know. But ours isn't that kind of friendship. I can't imagine why I should bother you at all—but I just had to. You have always been so kind to me, matron, always ready to help ... No, this is someone you have never met, but someone I am desperately fond of. And at the party, without wanting to know at all, I was just forced to hear the story of his hopeless entanglement with a quite worthless girl."

"You mean she is not—"

"I believe you were going to say, 'a lady'. No, she is not. Worse than that, she is not even straight. But he ... wants to marry her!"

"Oh, my dear! I think I understand. I am most terribly sorry. He must be mad, whoever he is. For his own sake, as well as for yours, something should be done to save him. Have you spoken to Lord Marcus about it?"

"No, I tried to, before I left this morning, but somehow it couldn't be done. Besides—think of what happened there last night—"

"Good gracious, dear, of course! Even now, I find it hard to believe. Do you mean that poor Sir Giles was actually murdered in your cousin's house?"

Fay shook her head wearily. "No one knows. He was just found there." She stood up resolutely, and faced the matron. "Thank you ever so much for listening," she said. "Now really I must hurry along. I am late already."

Mrs. Maddison observed that Fay's usually clear eyes were heavy. "Under those circumstances, you poor child, you cannot possibly have slept well."

"No. I am afraid I didn't sleep at all ..."

7

The Limping Man

In the office of the Assistant Commissioner, Chief Detective Inspector Firth was making a report. The office of Colonel O'Halloran was a comfortably furnished apartment, offering a marked contrast to that of the Chief Inspector. It was more than half a library, having a thick carpet and rugs on the floor, and pictures (chiefly of horses) on the walls; a bright room on this sunny morning, its bay window commanding an extensive view of the Thames.

Colonel O'Halloran, a small, slightly built man, wiry and brown faced, thinning hair crowning a high forehead, wore an unmistakably horsey suit. He had also those rather large, square hands which look as though they were accustomed to managing horses, and he stood beside a slightly untidy desk, tapping his fingers on the top, and shooting little interrogatory glances from deep-set gray eyes at the Chief Inspector. His nervous movements were interminable; for when he was not tapping his prominent teeth he was tapping the desk, or filling a pipe, or rolling a cigarette (he made his own) or toying with papers, or staring out of the window.

"Cause of Sir Giles's death fully established; been confirmed by specialists." The Assistant Commissioner spoke rapidly, in a high, staccato, abbreviated manner. "Personal possessions appear to be intact. Since they include wrist-watch, nearly twenty pounds ready money, may dismiss robbery as motive."

Now, Firth was prepared to stand by his superior officer to the last trench and the last shot; but he was not prepared always to agree with him or even to pretend to do so. "In spite of which, sir," he said, "I hold to the theory, wi' respect, that robbery *was* the motive."

"Oh," said the colonel, blinking rapidly, "do you? Well—we shall see. No discernible fingerprints on bell-push of Lord Marcus' house, or elsewhere. Inquiries to confirm stories of Miss Fay Perigal and James Wake, butler, already afoot. Regarding Lord Marcus, must confess my mind divided."

"So is mine, sir," said Firth.

"Formerly in same regiment in Egypt. We were both with Allenby. Up to time that he left the Army, knew Amberdale well. Always eccentric. Too much money for a young man, as he was then. First-rate horseman, better than myself, and I was pretty hot. Won classic events on his own mounts. Then, suddenly, gave it all up—same time he gave up the Army."

"If I don't interrupt you, sir, am I right in supposing that he was also a good boxer?"

"All-round athlete, Firth. All-round man. Oh! I see what you're driving at. Stupid of me. Thinking of the bruise, described by Fawcett as 'bluish contusion' which he found above Sir Giles's heart? Result of a powerful blow, he suggests. Don't believe Amberdale would deny it, if he'd done it. However—where was I? Oh, yes, Amberdale. Well, something overtook him. Went in for queer studies. Disappeared for years. Told he was living in solitude, somewhere up Nile Valley. Apart from social occasions, here and there, seen practically nothing of him since those days. Of one thing am sure: Amberdale is no liar—but he may be mad."

"That is what I was thinking, sir."

"Keep his address out of it if you can. Tell 'em the body was taken to house in West End and dumped there."

Firth frowned. "I'll do my best, sir. But you know what Fleet Street is like! Then there is this Mrs. Vane."

"Whatever his interest in Mrs. Vane, Firth, doubt if of amorous nature. Never was a skirt hunter, never. Women used to chase *him*. Astonishingly handsome man in young days. Not so bad now, I believe. But Mrs. Vane, well—"

"Sergeant Bluett has her record, sir," said Firth dourly.

"Yes, he would have. One doesn't want to be rude, but we are dealing with a murder charge, and—er—she is very little better than society courtesan, you know. Mixed up with all sorts of men, as well as poor Charlie Vane. Mug to marry her. You tell me her evidence was unsatisfactory?"

"Well, sir—" Firth leaned forward in his chair, resting long, sensitive hands upon bony knees—"strictly speaking, it

wasn'a evidence at a'. She had joined Lord Marcus that night for the purpose of whatever mumbo-jumbo they had in hand, and they had dined together ... When I say 'dined,' according to the lady's statement, confirmed by Wake, the repast consisted of some kind o' specially baked wheaten bread—"

"Dealings with black market," smiled the Assistant Commissioner. "Where the devil does Amberdale get wheat?"

"Aye, it's a fact, sir. But such was their dinner, wi' fresh fruit and cold water. Wake left them, and according to Mrs. Vane's account, she then 'devoted herself to the Rites.' That's what she told me. They both talk verra freely about the Rites, whatever the Rites may be. She claims to remember nothing fro' the time these Rites began until she was awakened by Lord Marcus—that is, more than an hour after the crime was discovered."

The Assistant Commissioner crossed and stared out of the window, apparently fascinated by the spectacle of a stream of barges laden with cement being towed down the river. When he spoke, he spoke over his shoulder:

"Dr. Fawcett is quite satisfied this state of hypnosis or trance, or whatever it is, was authentic?"

"Quite so, sir. As far as that goes, speaking unprofessionally, Mrs. Vane was certainly in a verra queer state."

"Yes, yes. Just run through that part of your report again, Firth. Seem to recall something—"

The Chief Inspector opened a notebook, glancing across at the check back of the speaker. "You mean, Mrs. Vane's reference to a limping man?"

"That's it." Colonel O'Halloran turned, and producing from one pocket a quantity of tobacco which presumably he kept there loose, and from another a packet of cigarette papers, he began with great skill to manufacture a cigarette. "Limping man: that's what stuck in my mind."

"Aye, it was certainly queer," Firth admitted, studying his notes. "Weel, Mrs. Vane was presently produced by Lord Marcus, as I told ye. She came out wrapped in a fur coat of a verra costly character. Sergeant Bluett tells me it is chinchilla—"

"Poor old Amberdale," murmured the colonel, biting ragged ends from his cigarette and snapping a lighter into action.

"Dr. Fawcett made her over, and assured me that she had been under the influence of drugs—"

"What drugs?"

"On that point he remained uncertain, sir. I questioned her closely, but her manner was vague to the point o' imbecility. She was like a body talking in her sleep. Lord Marcus insisted that she must not be asked to see the dead man, and as Dr. Fawcett supported him, I had the body removed before she came in. She admitted, however, wi'out any pressure on my part, that she had known Sir Giles weel at one time. She stated that she had not seen him for six months or more. Then came her words to which you refer, sir. She seemed to come over whimsy—kind o' fey; and she exclaimed:

"'He was there while I was in the shrine! He kept coming between me and the path. I see him now—there, outside the door!'" Firth was reading from notes. "'The limping man, wi' blood on his hands ...'"

"H'm," muttered Colonel O'Halloran; "and you say that Amberdale tried to gather exact details?"

"He did, sir. But Mrs. Vane assured him that she could not see, or could not remember any more."

"Very odd. One wonders if there's anything in it." The colonel sat down, but immediately stood up again. "Sir Giles occupied small service flat, not far away. You tell me the people there have no idea when he set out. No evidence to show, either, where he was coming from at time he met his death. Usual calls sent around taxi depôts, I take it?"

"Yes, sir; I am awaiting results. I am also checking up on James Wake, of course. I examined the door of the house, the steps, and immediate approaches. But it had rained during the night, and quite briefly, I found nothing. The remarkable custom of Lord Marcus—I mean leaving his key outside—complicates the matter to no sma' degree."

"Lord Marcus has done almost everything in his life to complicate matters, Inspector." The colonel turned and stared at Firth, his eyes bright, restless and continually blinking. "Don't think you need bother much about Miss Perigal. She will be his second cousin: his first cousin Geraldine married Commander Stephen Perigal. This girl will be their daughter.

Should be a fine type, but never met her."

"I should say, sir, that as they come nowadays, she is a verra nice girl."

The Assistant Commissioner nodded. "Well, case in your hands, Firth, and I wish you luck of it. Most mysterious. May be superstitious: Irish heritage; but can't help thinking about one thing."

"That being, sir?"

"Limping man, with blood on his hands ... look out for the fellow, Firth—look out for him."

8

Concerning Taxi Drivers

On regaining his own office, Firth found Sergeant Bluett there. Bluett was leaning on the mantelpiece staring down at the empty grate. He turned as the Chief Inspector entered.

"Have ye got in touch with Gaston Max, Bluett, about that sma' matter?"

Sergeant Bluett took out a newspaper and rolled it very tightly: Gaston Max was a sore point with Sergeant Bluett. "Not in his office. Probably making inquiries at the Mansion House, disguised as the Lord Mayor," he said with heavy sarcasm.

Firth stared hard. "Your conception of humor is not mine," he replied dourly. "Any news fro' the taxi depôts?"

"A taximan has come along," Bluett reported. "He is downstairs now. So I told them to ask him to wait till you came back. I think we had better have him up."

"Anything to help us?"

"So they say downstairs." Bluett crossed to the desk and indicated a slip of paper. "He says that he picked up a woman passenger near the scene of the crime, not long before it occurred. She was seen off by a man whose description seems to tally with that of Sir Giles."

Inspector Firth sat down and studied the slip, then slowly nodded his head. He picked up the telephone ...

Less than two minutes later came a rap on the door.

"Come in," called Firth.

The door was opened by a constable in uniform. "The taxi driver you asked to see, sir."

As the taxi driver entered, the constable went out, closing the door. Bluett, who had resumed his favorite pose by the mantelpiece, turned, resting on his elbow, and contemplated the new arrival, whom Firth, also, was studying critically.

The man wore a rusty blue suit and a muffler in lieu of a collar. His hands were exceptionally dirty. In one of them he held a peaked cap. He had an unshaven face, pouchy eyes, and a bulbous looking nose. His untidy hair might have reminded a gardener of a dying dahlia: it was of reddish brown color and quite uncombed.

"Good mornin', guv'nor," he said cheerily to the Chief Inspector, and nodded, grinning to Bluett. One saw that he had brilliantly white teeth, apparently natural.

"I understand," Firth began, "that your name is Peter Finch, and that you have a statement to make." He took up the slip from his desk. "The matter is of no special importance, mark you, but it may have a bearing upon other matters that are. You say that about ten minutes past one last night, you picked up a lady at the Berkeley Square end of Bruton Street?"

"That's right, guv'nor."

"She was accompanied by a man who saw her off. Now—" he laid down the slip:—"Describe to me verra carefully, first, the lady, then the man."

"Well, the bird was a peach, guv'nor. A bit of dark stuff, with lily white skin. She was in evenin' dress, so I had a good dekko—see what I mean? 'Er 'air was black and all beautiful waves, and she 'ad big dark eyes and a great big smile, and the kind of legs what only grows in 'ollywood. At least, I used to think so. Speakin' for meself, I should say A.1. with knobs on."

"Well, go ahead."

"The man wore evenin' clothes, too; one o' these 'ere button-over dinner coats—Tuxedo. Smart 'e was, and likewise very posh, more posh than the bird. 'E didn't seem to want to let 'er go. But she wouldn't listen to no argument; and after kissin'

'er with great gusto, 'e shoved 'er in me taxi and then kissed 'er again. 'Er name was Darling Rita."

"I see. Where did you take her?"

"I took 'er to a block o' flats in King's Road, Chelsea, guv'nor. But 'aving 'ad me little lark, so to speak, I think we might as well discuss this 'ere matter more on the level."

Whereupon, brushing back the untidy tangle from his forehead, and apparently by means of relaxing certain muscles and removing some substance from his jaws, another face, a totally different face, peered out through the bulbous mask of Peter Finch. This was a notably mobile face, and its present expression was impishly mischievous. Sergeant Bluett ran his fingers through upstanding hair, and his boyish eyes expressed an astonishment so profound that it was comical. Chief Inspector Firth gave no sign. He sat there, square chin resting in upraised hands, and merely watched the transformed man.

"Gaston Max!" muttered Bluett. "Well, I'll be—"

"But, Friar Tuck, my old friend! Surely you know me, eh?"

Sergeant Bluett put his newspaper in another pocket, drew out a large white handkerchief, and blew his nose. It was true that he was known at Scotland Yard as Friar Tuck, although the origin of this soubriquet had become lost in obscurity, but its use by Gaston Max represented the last straw.

"There have been occasions, Mr. Max," said Chief Inspector Firth, and the strength of his Scottish accent indicated the depth of his resentment, "when I ha' felt called upon to point out to ye that if the Paris Service is run on the lines of a Hollywood musical, Scotland Yard is more consairvative."

"Ah! but Inspector Firth, my old, you do both Paris and myself a grave injustice."

The speaker's manner, accent (that of a Frenchman speaking English perfectly, except for unusual idioms, and with an uncommon intonation) ill-befitted the character which the distinguished investigator had assumed. It was difficult to understand, now that he had abandoned his impersonation, how one could have accepted as authentic pouches under the eyes which were obviously artificial, as well as those other physical eccentricities which characterised Mr. Peter Finch. Sergeant Bluett put his newspaper on the mantelpiece without removing a disgusted stare from the face of the French detective.

"What I don't understand," he remarked, "is why, if you can speak Cockney (although, mark you, I thought there was something phony about it) you can't speak proper English."

This deliberate *casus belli* Chief Inspector Firth scotched immediately.

"I might point out, Bluett," he said, "that we all have our own ideas regarding proper English. Aye, man, Max—" a smile softened the severity of the hazel eyes—"ye're nothing but a monkey. But I confess that your impersonations astound me. I would only add that I consider them unnecessary."

"But no, my old, how wrong you are! When the biography of Gaston Max comes to be written, then you will see that if I had followed the traditional path which you follow obediently, and I think with such excellent results, I should not at this moment know so much about the affairs of the lamented Sir Giles. Ah! no, no, it is an old trick of mine, that taxicab. It is my shrimping net. Always I have the flag down when it suits me. Always I am ready for a fare I am looking for. And so it was last night."

"It is clear to me," Firth admitted, "that you ha' got hold of a clue which may lead us somewheres. We know that this Rita —"

"Darling Rita," Max corrected.

"We know that this girl was with Sir Giles just before he was killed. But he may have merely picked her up."

"Not at all—not at all." Max's gestures were eloquent. "She had gone to meet him at the B.B.C."

"How do you know that?" Bluett asked, his ingenuous eyes very widely opened.

"I took her to meet him."

"What!"

"This, I admit, was an accident, but it is a fact nevertheless. I picked her up near Oxford Circus and drove her to the B.B.C. I did not know she had gone to meet Sir Giles, but I saw them come out together."

"You mean you were waiting outside?" Firth asked curiously.

"But certainly. And they came out together. I was unlucky, however. Someone, perhaps an artiste, I cannot say, the night was dark, gave them a lift; and although I tried to follow, a traffic block played geese and ganders with me. But, you understand, I had an idea roughly, where they had gone, and upon this idea I acted. I waited at a point d'appui, always with my flag down, hoping that this loving two would presently come out again. And they did. That was when I drove Darling Rita to King's Road, Chelsea. It is strange, is it not, my old? I am working upon another case altogether—one so important—and I cross yours! Eh? strange!"

Firth continued to rest his elbows on the desk and his chin in his hands. "It may be fortunate. We must find out who this girl is."

"I have found out."

"What!"

"I discovered it this morning. She is called Rita Martin. She has a small flat at the address to which I drove her, and she is employed at Simone's, the Court hairdressers. One thing I would advise: Be subtle, be sly. No clumsy interrogations and writing in notebooks. You have clever women here. Send one to Simone's. For my own sake, also, I ask it. To frighten Darling Rita might destroy my own case as well as yours. Eh bien! I leave her to you. I am useful, is it not so? But there is something else."

"Something else?" muttered Bluett suspiciously.

"But yes, something else, Friar Tuck, my old. When poor Sir Giles saw off Darling Rita in my taxi, he was constrained, in order that he might suitably embrace her, to place a small brown leather portfolio upon the running board."

"A portfolio?" Firth suddenly stood up, a tall, dominating figure. "You are sure of that, Max?"

"Always I observe with some accuracy, my respected. Yes, he picked it up and with it he waved, as I drove my taxi away. And now—I must depart." He made certain rapid adjustments and moved towards the door. "I drive back to the mews where I keep my cab. I return to my base. I cease to be Peter Finch. I become again Gaston Max."

"Wait a minute, Max." Gaston Max paused, smiling back at Firth. "There's one feature of your make-up that quite defeats me. Ye are all of an inch shorter! How is it done?"

Max stooped and pulled off one very dirty shoe. This he offered to the Chief Inspector. "The heels of Peter Finch rest almost on the ground. See! This shoe is made for that purpose. Finch is a short fellow. How complete is the artistry of this Gaston Max, is it not so?"

The scene possessed elements of the grotesque; indeed, to Firth's orderly mind, of the indecent. He was about to say as much, when Max, replacing his shoe, spoke again.

"Be, oh so careful, my old. Something much more important than the death of Sir Giles Loeder—something, my faith! that may cause the death of us all!—is concerned; something so difficult and dangerous that I, myself, am confused ..."

9

Simone's

Simone's world famous establishment to which the attention of Scotland Yard now became directed, had fallen upon evil days; Simone's was making heavy weather in wartime waters. Many of those perfectly groomed young men and expert hairdressers who formerly had waited upon titled clients, alas, waited upon them no longer. And as for the maestro himself, the great Simone (who bore so conspicuous a resemblance to Velasquez), M. Simone had never attended any but princesses of the blood and one or two highly favored members of the peerage. Lady hairdressers, attractive, dexterous and possessed of impeccable manners, had largely supplanted male artists.

Nevertheless, although premises immediately right and left had been swept from the map of Old London, Simone's was still Simone's. In the shop on the ground floor, invariably referred to as the Salon, seductive show cases, their plate glass windows glittering like crystal, enshrined exquisite vials for containing perfumes of Paris and the Orient. But (alas again) assuming that they contained anything but colored water these delicate flasks were not for sale: they were museum pieces, taunting memories, high lights on a glowing canvas which the vulgar brush of Hitler had expunged.

The French receptionist, Mademoiselle Dorine, was still at her post; black gowned, discreet, accustomed to those little commissions from titled clients which bore no relation to hairdressing or manicure. The Commissionaire, Sergeant Smith, continued to meet all cars and carriages; for two grandes dames at least who patronised this long established business sometimes arrived in Edwardian fashion. But upstairs, presiding over the cubicles which had accommodated so much nobility, were the houris whom Smith (his ribbons included the South African war) described as the Beauty Chorus.

Simone's young ladies certainly were well chosen, possessing both skill and comely appearance. That they had not been gathered into those uniformed ranks which had claimed so many of their generation, indicated that Simone had influential friends, or else, that the young ladies had.

There were, however, slack hours in the famous house which formerly it had never known, although Mlle. Dorine in making appointments, permitted no hint of this tragedy to reach a client. And it was during one of these intervals, when actually there was not a customer in the building, that the young lady known as Miss Rita, Simone's most trusted hairdresser, sank down into a charmingly upholstered settee in a lobby upstairs upon which the cubicles opened.

Recessed between two slender buhl cabinets containing alluring exhibits, lip sticks, powder puffs, cigarette lighters, sealed and tasselled cut glass containers, reliquaries for Attar of Rose, of Jasmine, indeed a hundred and one trifles to threaten a woman's soul (but none of them for sale), this settee was sacred to clients. Since no client was present, Rita took advantage of the fact.

She wore a spotless white coat over her frock, and lighting a cigarette which she took from a pocket in this coat, she then drew out an early edition of an evening paper, a gesture which could not have failed to remind one, who had known him, of Detective-Sergeant Bluett. She began to read an account of the mysterious death of Sir Giles Loeder; and as she read there were tears in her eyes which a lover might have likened to dew on brown pansies.

As a matter of fact, Rita had been puzzling over certain problems ever since she had heard that morning (she listened to the seven o'clock news bulletin from her bath) that Sir Giles had been killed. Would she be dragged into it? Who knew that she had been with him? Of those who knew, which would be likely to say so?

Some slight movement in one of the cubicles was presently explained by the appearance of another of Simone's young ladies who had been tidying up after a departing client. Whereas Rita wore her jet black curls in a compact mass, Miss Dora, an ash blonde, had apparently taken the Horseshoe Falls at Niagara as her model. One guessed, however, that she stressed a slight likeness to a prominent film actress. Drawing the curtains behind her, she approached Rita.

"Move up, dear," she said. "I can do with a flop, myself."

And any client accustomed to Miss Dora's refined accents must have been surprised to note what a difference occurred off-duty. Rita, still reading, moved petulantly to one end of the settee, the carved arms of which each supported a little jewelled ashtray attached by an embroidered band. Mechanically she knocked ash into that nearer to her, but made no

reply.

Miss Dora, lighting a cigarette in turn, glanced inquiringly at her friend, who, her reading completed, put the newspaper on the cushions beside her, and stared vacantly into space.

"Something bothering you, dear?"

"Yes." Rita nodded. In repose, the expression of her full lips was somewhat sullen. "I'm worried to death and fed up to the teeth."

"Oh, if that's all," said Dora, "we are all fed up. This swell place I'd heard so much about before I came here ain't all honey, is it? Might as well be in the army, *I* say. What with *her* ("Her" signified Mlle. Dorine) and *him* (Monsieur) well —"

"I didn't mean just Simone's. Everything in the world has gone wrong with me."

"Not much else left to go wrong, then?"

"Don't be funny, Dora. I don't feel a bit comic to-day."

"Your humor's your own business, dear," said Dora brightly. "I was only being friendly."

"No offence, Dora." Rita turned and patted her friend's shoulder. "But you don't understand what a mess I am in."

"Mess?"

"Just that: a mess—a bloody mess."

The atmosphere of the lobby, faintly redolent of long vanished essences, mingled with more antiseptic odors, not, however, displeasing, seemed to Dora to become charged with menace, as she watched the gloomy face of her companion. Dora had come from an exclusive establishment on the south coast, Rita, from a high-class suburban hairdresser's. Both selected by the unerring eye of the maestro, their friendship had dated only from their arrival at Simone's, but it had progressed to a point where they had few secrets from one another. And so Dora thought that she had divined the cause of her friend's gloom.

"Is it Dick?" she asked. "Has he done the dirty?"

Rita shook her head, so that some of the little tufty curls danced fascinatingly. "No, but he 'phoned up more than a week ago to say he expected leave: since then, I have heard nothing whatever about him."

"Perhaps his leave was cancelled."

"Why didn't he write and say so, or call me? No. I believe he got his leave all right."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well—" Rita hesitated. "I've got an idea, only an idea, mind you, that I saw him ... one night."

"Up in town?"

"Yes. Of course, I may have been wrong; but I've 'phoned everywhere I can think of, and nobody seems to know what has become of him."

"Did you 'phone his station?"

"Not likely. I got a proper tick-off last time I tried. But there's something very funny about it."

"I am sorry, dear. Dick was a snip, and they tell me Americans make wonderful husbands." She picked up the paper which Rita had dropped, and, glancing at it, seemed to become inspired. Rita, who possessed many qualities essential to the set-up of a good little business woman, had observed a tactful reticence regarding her relations with Sir Giles. Vanity, however, had prompted her to let Dora know that that notability took an interest in her affairs.

"Rita!" Dora raised her long, beautifully blackened lashes, and stared open-eyed at her friend. "What a damn fool I am! It isn't Dick you're bothering about at all. It's Sir Giles! Oh, I'm deaf, dumb and blind! Good lord! I should think you are worrying. I should worry, too. That kind don't grow on gooseberry bushes."

Rita nodded. "No. It's going to make a hell of a difference. I can't afford to lose Dick, now."

"But, Rita, when did you see Sir Giles last? It says here he was carried to a house in the West End where the body was discovered later."

"Why—" Rita checked herself—"why, only a few nights ago."

"Not—"

A bell rang, and light footsteps might be heard on the carpeted stair. By means of minor conjuring tricks, both girls "vanished" their cigarettes. They were standing facing the staircase when Mlle. Dorine appeared.

"Lady Huskin is here, Miss Rita. Are you ready?"

It was a formula, and Rita forced a smile—and a "refined" accent. "Quite ready, ma'm'selle."

Ma'm'selle sniffed suspiciously, and then, "I have just booked a client for you, Miss Dora," she added, "who will be here at any moment; a Mrs. Jameson for manicure." She turned, for voices might be heard.

Lady Huskin (wife of the first baron) made her entrance. She had retained much of that girlish figure for which formerly she had been celebrated. Her suit was perfectly tailored, the skirt coquettishly short. As she was on the short side herself, the heels of her shoes were exceptionally high, so that her cautious gait resembled that of a hen. Her complexion was radiant, for she made up artistically, and her face wore a girlish smile, but her brown eyes (she had slightly overhanging lids, by some said to denote sensuality) did not seem to share in the fun. As for Lady Huskin's hair, dressed high on her head, it was of purest guinea gold.

"Oh, Miss Rita!" she exclaimed, breathing rather heavily, "I simply could not wait another day. My hair is a fright."

"I think your hair looks beautiful, my lady."

Rita's change of voice, of accent, of manner, must have seemed magical to one who had overheard her recent conversation. To Dora it was a professional commonplace, which, discreetly effacing herself, she did not even notice.

As Lady Huskin advanced to the cubicle, one curtain of which Rita deferentially held aside, a second figure appeared on the stairhead, that of a smartly dressed chauffeur, a fair young man, spruce and of good figure. He carried a number of illustrated periodicals, an attaché case, and a toy dog whose golden-brown countenance and protuberant eyes might have reminded an irreverent critic of those of Lady Huskin.

These properties being suitably disposed in the cubicle, Rita brought a cushion for the greater convenience of Dandini, the dog; and the good looking chauffeur, behind Lady Huskin's back, took advantage of this opportunity to squeeze Rita. Rita responded with a glance from her bold eyes which might have shrivelled a lesser man: it merely induced the chauffeur to wink and to contract his lips in the form of a kiss. Having placed upon a small table within easy reach of Lady Huskin's carefully manicured plump hand, her cigarette case, lighter, and other small comforts, the chauffeur retired.

Preparations were made for the ceremony of the shampoo, but before these were completed, Dandini displayed symptoms of dissatisfaction which attracted his mistress's attention.

"Oh, the poor little beastie! He is telling me that I have forgotten his saucer of tea. He so looks forward to his saucer of tea when he comes here, Miss Rita. Do please get it for him."

"Certainly, my lady; I will ask them to make some tea downstairs. You would like a cup yourself, no doubt, later."

"No, not yet. Just make a cup for Dandini."

"At once, my lady"; and Rita was about to go when Lady Huskin detained her.

"Oh, just a moment. Would you give me my notebook and pencil."

A small notebook with tear-out leaves, the cover emblazoned with a glittering crest, was produced from the handbag, and Lady Huskin scribbled a note.

"Please ask Sergeant Smith to give that to Payne. He is to deliver it at once and bring me the reply, here, immediately."

"Yes, my lady."

These matters being arranged, the shampoo actually commenced, very soon to be interrupted, however, by the appearance of Dora, her blonde countenance registering strong disapproval. She carried a saucer of tea and a sheet of newspaper, which she placed on the floor.

"Oh, you are sure it is not too hot?" asked Lady Huskin. "The poor little beastie hates scalding his wee tongue."

"No, my lady." The girl dipped her finger in the saucer. "It is just the right temperature."

"Oh, thank you so much. There, Dandini, darling, that is what you wanted."

As Dandini superciliously surveyed the offering, then walked around it thoughtfully and with a certain grave suspicion, Lady Huskin's faulty memory divulged a second oversight.

"Oh, good gracious! I do hate to bother you, my dear. But we have forgotten the sweet biscuits. How silly of us!"

"I will see what I can do, my lady."

Dora's expression as she retired from the cubicle indicated that several ideas on this subject had presented themselves to her mind. Further suggestions were made by Sergeant Smith (instructed to obtain biscuits from a neighboring store). These suggestions included rat poison. "Some people don't know there's a war on," he remarked. "There's others—one of them's upstairs now—who ought to be dropped by parachute on the Russian front so they can find out."

"Sweet biscuits!" hissed Dora, studying a book of ration-cards. "Bang go my last three points, bless her!"

However, in due course the shampoo was resumed, and operations were not again suspended until Payne, the chauffeur, returned with a message which he delivered personally. This related to dance shoes and coupons, and was entirely unsatisfactory.

"Oh, but how preposterous!" Lady Huskin exclaimed, raising her head from the basin, to reveal the fact that under Rita's treatment it now resembled a large and overblown cauliflower. "Lord Huskin will be furious."

Payne was despatched with a second message, and the shampoo was resumed once more. Mlle. Dorine might be heard announcing: "Mrs. Jameson for you, Miss Dora," her words being followed by movement and voices in an adjoining cubicle. Then, Mademoiselle, discreetly knocking, entered that occupied by Lady Huskin.

"Here are the sweet biscuits, my lady. There is a call for you on the telephone. I said I would inquire."

"Who is it?" Lady Huskin demanded from the depths.

"Mr. Olivar, my lady."

The cauliflower head was raised again. "Bring in the 'phone."

"I regret, my lady, that the extensions are out of order. It will be necessary for you to use the instrument in the lobby."

"Horror! Preposterous! Oh, very well—put the call through at once to the lobby. Miss Rita, get me a towel as I must go to the 'phone."

"I am afraid I must rinse your hair first, my lady."

"Not at all—not at all! when I come back! Give me a towel. Please put the call through at once."

Hurrying footsteps, discreet instructions; and Lady Huskin, her head enveloped in a vast white towel which lent her the

appearance of a eunuch, hurried as quickly as high heels would permit, across the lobby to a side-table on which a telephone stood. Mlle. Dorine, making sure that the caller was connected, placed the instrument in Lady Huskin's hand, and withdrew. As her ladyship took it up:

"Don't forget to give Dandini his biscuits," she called.

Mrs. Jameson, the only other client present, being manicured by Miss Dora, was evidently chatting with that somewhat frigid blonde, since the tones of a more cultured voice from the cubicle became silent as though the speaker found herself stupefied by a monologue which now began at the telephone.

"Teddie darling. How simply sweet of you. How did you find out I was here?... Oh, I see. Are you coming along for me? Oh! What's that, darling ... Isn't it simply terrible ... Sir Giles was so completely charming ... Yes, he was a dear ... Oh, I was horrified when I read it this morning. Whatever can have happened? It makes me simply terrified to move out after dark ... Yes, Teddie darling ... Must have been a dreadful shock to that fascinating Mrs. Destrée ... They seemed to be such old friends ... Oh, yes, I realised that, Teddie. I thought she was most charming to you, too. But then, she's very pretty, isn't she?"

Complete silence reigned in the cubicle occupied by Mrs. Jameson. The 'phone conversation continued.

"To think we were all together last night and having such a good time. Then, such a horrible thing to happen ... No, I don't quite know how long I shall be, darling. Miss Rita—you know, the brunette, who is attending to me—seems a little distrait to-day, I thought. Something on her mind, yes ... Oh! sure to be a love affair ... What do you say? Good heavens! really! No, I didn't see her. You think he kept her out of the way when he found that I was there, you mean?... Yes, I understand, darling. Poor dear Sir Giles, he was always so tactful."

Lady Huskin's white turban had begun to slip forward, and she had soap in her eyes; but she persevered, undeterred by these minor difficulties.

"But doesn't he play for terribly high stakes? And wins, too. Oh, Teddie! listen! It has just occurred to me. Do you think he was robbed?... Yes, darling, it is quite possible, isn't it ... I did enjoy the game. Now that one can't get to Monte Carlo, and all that ... Yes, it was fun. But how his death must have alarmed poor Mrs. Destrée. Yes, of course, it would. They have to be careful, don't they. But there *will* be another roulette game, dear?... Oh, that's lovely ... Of *course* you can't tell me on the 'phone. I realise that, Teddie darling. But you will let me know, then we can dine together and go on later ... Yes, I should simply love it ... Of course I will bring plenty of money ... Yes, I promise ... Oh, I know there's no fun unless one has plenty of money ... Very well. In the Ritz Bar, darling, when I have had my hair done. Good-bye, Teddie darling."

When presently Mrs. Jameson left, which she did some time before Lady Huskin, one saw that she was a tweed clad, middle-aged lady, with tanned complexion, who wore sensible shoes and economy stockings; the wife of a country doctor, or possibly of a clergyman, up in town for the day.

10

Reports and Theories

Sergeant Bluett walked into Chief Inspector Firth's office and placed a bulky volume upon the desk before the Chief Inspector. Bluett's manner was abstracted; one would have said that his thoughts were far away. And that such indeed was the case presently appeared, for Firth, glancing at the volume, raised his eyes, lids contracted and stared at his assistant.

"Ye may recall, Bluett, that I asked you to bring me from the library the latest edition of Burke's Peerage. This is Who's Who."

"So it is!" Bluett stared down at the volume with ingenuous surprise. "Funny thing of me to do, bringing Who's Who."

"Ye'll never know who's who," said the Chief Inspector, "until ye know what's what. However, as it happens, I can make do with this."

"You see," Bluett went on apologetically, "I was thinking about something else."

"A recognised formula for success."

"Well, I've been checking up on Mrs. Vane. You know my theory of the crime? Well, what I've found out supports it."

"Indeed! is that so?"

"Yes. She used to be Sir Giles Loeder's mistress."

"Are you sure?" The Inspector's tawny eyes challenged him.

"I confirmed it by going through the files of social paragraphs from the Riviera. Sir Giles took a villa for her at Cannes in 1937. She lived there during that winter. As I take it she is practically living with Lord Marcus now, looks as though I might have found something out."

"And it looks as though you might not. If your idea is that Lord Marcus killed Sir Giles in a fit of jealousy, where does the missing portfolio come in? Furthermore, where did the struggle take place? There was no sign of a struggle in the lobby!"

"The portfolio might have been lost between the time that Max saw Sir Giles, and the time that Sir Giles met Lord Marcus. He had a service flat not three hundred yards away. It might even have been left there."

"You were there yoursel' this morning. Did you find it?"

Sergeant Bluett took an evening paper from his left-hand coat pocket and put it in the right. "No," he confessed. "I found nothing in the way of evidence. There never was such a man for locking things up, I should think—and until we have authority we can't open his bureau or his safe."

"We'll get the authority," said Firth, "but I doubt if we'll find the portfolio."

"H'm!" said Bluett, "you may be right. Have you heard from Lady Loeder?"

"Yes," the Chief Inspector nodded. "It seems that she has been more or less an invalid for some time. She lived at Llandudno, apart from her late husband, except when he visited her there, which, I gather, was verra seldom. It is clear enough, Bluett, that he led a double life."

"That's right," said Bluett; "married to the daughter of a Cabinet Minister, too."

"Aye, it's a fact."

"There's altogether something too mysterious," continued Bluett, "about Lord Marcus, and all his friends and relations. I called at the Clarking's house in Grosvenor Square where Mrs. Wake acts as caretaker, but she was out. I could get no

reply. I am going back again. Wake is as tight as a limpet, but his wife may spill a thing or two about him."

"You think he knows more than he has told us?"

"Well, he's a sly looking bird, and I am not satisfied that Sir Giles hadn't been there before. I should like a long talk with Mrs. Vane, but I don't want to make her suspicious."

"No."

Firth rested his elbows on the desk and his chin in his hands in that characteristic attitude of his. "It would be a mistake."

"Then there's this Nurse Perigal. I thought of looking her up."

"The Chief assures me that she may be left out o' the case. You must remember, Bluett, that he knows the family weel, and we are skating on thin ice in dealing wi' them. Go and see if you can find Mrs. Wake; that might be worth while."

The 'phone rang, and, raising the instrument:

"Yes?" said the Chief Inspector. "Please show her to my office."

And so a moment after Bluett had gone out, Mrs. Jameson came in, and smiled across at Chief Inspector Firth.

"Good evening, Mrs. Jameson."

"Good evening, Inspector Firth."

"Won't you please sit down?"

Mrs. Jameson did so with a manner of great composure, took out a small notebook, and began immediately to speak.

"I don't know if I should have found anything out, Inspector, if luck hadn't helped me."

"Luck solves most of our cases, or such is my own experience," said Firth.

"You underrate yourself," she smiled. "Well, as I was saying, what really helped me was a visit from Lady Huskin."

The Chief Inspector raised his eyes. "Wife of Lord Huskin of the Food Ministry?"

"Yes, quite unmistakably. She referred to her husband several times, and always she called him Lord Huskin."

Chief Inspector Firth grinned appreciatively, showing his lower teeth, and Mrs. Jameson laughed outright, a silvery laugh which was most infectious.

"I listened to a conversation with the girl called Rita, but except that she was obviously worried about something, I might not have learned much if it had not been for a telephone conversation which Lady Huskin carried on with someone called Teddie Olivar."

"You have a note of the name?"

"Yes, I have all the notes. From this conversation, which was not disguised in any way, I learned that Lady Huskin and Teddie Olivar had been at a roulette party."

"Roulette!" the Inspector exclaimed, his tawny eyes lighting up.

"Yes; I thought it was a trifle significant, particularly as it appears that Sir Giles Loeder was there, too."

"Gad!" said the Inspector, bringing one long, powerful hand down upon the desk. "We are making headway."

"I gathered that this girl, Rita, was actually with Sir Giles at the party. It seems to have been given by someone called Mrs. Destrée."

"Destrée! that settles it. That's something we wanted to know. Go ahead, Mrs. Jameson. I have a quantity o' material about Destrée."

"I am glad to hear it," she went on quietly, "because there is to be another roulette party. I rather thought, but I cannot be sure, that it will take place on Wednesday night, at a different address. I think it possible that Lady Huskin's chauffeur (his name is Payne) might be useful in learning this address: but he would have to be approached tactfully." She glanced at her notes. "Lady Huskin suggested to Teddie, the man to whom she was talking, that as Sir Giles played for high stakes and seemed to win, he might have had money in his possession on the night of his murder."

"My own theory," murmured Firth.

"It seems to be a fairly good theory, Inspector. Lady Huskin, when she returned to her cubicle, which adjoined mine, taxed this girl Rita about her friendship with Sir Giles. Rita had to admit that she had actually been with him that evening, although Lady Huskin had not seen her. Rita and Sir Giles left together. Yes—and he was carrying a leather case when he saw her off in a taxi."

"Which confirms the statement o' Gaston Max. How, in the name o' heaven, the dead man got into Sir Marcus's house is something the imagination boggles at, but that he was murdered for his money I think is as plain as a pikestaff."

"I have made another appointment at Simone's," added Mrs. Jameson, "and, of course, I may learn more."

"Ye have learned a lot a'ready," said Chief Inspector Firth. "By the way, Mrs. Jameson, I should be obliged, as you go about, if ye would keep your eyes open for a man wi' a limp ..."

11

Destrée of the Lilies

Lord Marcus Amberdale sat in his darkened study which was lighted only by the shaded desk lamp. He wore reading glasses with tortoiseshell rims and was absorbed in a manuscript which contained numerous Egyptian hieroglyphics and other mysterious signs. He seemed to be checking this manuscript from a papyrus laid upon the desk beside him, that same papyrus which had been there on the night of the mysterious crime. One would say, in fact, that it had never been moved, for it was still held down by those four unusual paper weights—a piece of quartz, a figure of Set, a fossilised fish and the mummied hand of a woman.

Lord Marcus wore a double-breasted black velvet coat, his invariable substitute for the more conventional evening dress. In lieu of the usual black bow, he displayed a stock which revealed merely the top rim of a high white collar. It lent to his naturally distinguished appearance an odd touch of the Regency. In the downcast light, as his long, sensitive, fingers turned over pages, a spark shone as from the eye of a reptile out of the heart of a green scarab ring which he habitually wore. The house with the scarlet door was silent, its atmosphere faintly permeated by that haunting odor of incense. The sound of a discreet rap interrupted the reader.

"Come in," said Lord Marcus, without raising his eyes from the manuscript.

The door opened and Wake entered. "An apéritif, my lord, or are you still fasting?"

"No," murmured Lord Marcus absently; "I mean, Wake, I am no longer fasting. Angostura and soda."

"Very good, my lord. You are dining out, I believe."

"I am dining at the club. You need not wait up."

Wake withdrew as silently as he had entered, and Lord Marcus continued his studies. The mummy in its case just inside the door seemed to be watching him, and sometimes a chance reflection caused by the turning of a page might have suggested to a nervous onlooker that the highly varnished brown hand which lay so near to Lord Marcus's own slender white hand edged every now and again a little nearer.

If Lord Marcus had dismissed, as apparently he had dismissed, memories of those gruesome happenings which had disturbed his household, clearly this was not the case with Wake. For as Wake went about his duties, passing between the kitchen quarters and the study, rarely did he fail to glance at the Roman couch. Nevertheless his manner when presently he returned, bearing a long necked Venetian glass upon a silver salver, was irreproachably correct. With a slight premonitory cough, he placed the glass conveniently within reach of Lord Marcus, and, the salver under his arm, stood for a moment beside the polished desk.

"Will there be anything further, my lord?"

"Nothing further, Wake. You may go out if you wish."

"Good-night, my lord."

"Good-night, Wake."

Wake withdrew, glanced at the vacant couch, and retired to what he called his pantry, a square alcove curtained off from the kitchen. Here were shelves well laden for war days, and uttering a profound sigh, Wake brewed himself an apéritif, somewhat more stimulating than that which he had recently placed before his employer. Fortified with this and the smoke of a cigarette, which he inhaled luxuriously, Wake took stock of events; and in his rather small, speculative eyes it might have been read that he detected breakers ahead.

Accustomed to the ways of this orderly household, he was aware that Lord Marcus would never set foot in the kitchen. Therefore, when presently he heard his lordship preparing to go out, he merely placed his cigarette in an ashtray, his drink beside it, and tentatively showed himself at the end of the passage.

Lord Marcus, wearing a black French cape, and a wide brimmed soft black hat, was selecting an ebony cane from the

cupboard inside the front door. His hand on the latch, he spoke over his shoulder:

"Don't disturb yourself, Wake; I have all I want." He went out. The scarlet door closed.

The evening was somewhat dull and cloudy, so that although nearly half an hour remained before black-out time, South Audley Street, to which a few long strides led him, appeared to Lord Marcus already partially cloaked in night. A taxicab stood at the corner, a well-groomed vehicle in charge of a particularly dirty looking driver.

"Taxi, sir?"

"Thank you, no."

The refusal was courteous but definite, and Mr. Finch, his peaked cap on the back of his reddish brown hair, accepted it with a grin, which revealed those glittering teeth. Had Lord Marcus lived fully in the conscious world, he might have noticed that the flag was down, although the man had offered his services. However, Finch lighted a cigarette and leaned back in his seat, continuing to leave the flag down. Either he was engaged or expected by waiting there to pick up another fare.

South Audley Street presented few evidences of habitation. Two taxis and perhaps three cars passed in the semi-darkness, possibly bound for a near-by hotel, but pedestrians were rare. Presently a constable strode up, surveyed Finch, studied the vehicle, walked around to look at the number, and then addressed the driver.

"Waiting for somebody?"

"Gent 'phoned from Number 9A; asked me to wait 'ere. Sha'n't wait much longer, though."

"H'm," said the officer. "9A—that's Lord Marcus Amberdale's. H'm!"

He passed on, the squelch of his wet soles dying away in the distance. The sound of a closing door, a few minutes later, seemed to decide Finch's next move, for he put his flag up, moved the clutch and slid into slow movement. He was overtaken by a short, broad figure; a man who wore a square pointed collar and black tie, black coat and gray trousers, the outfit crowned by a discreet black hat. A carefully rolled umbrella and suede gloves completed the ensemble.

"Taxi, sir?"

"Yes." The man opened the door and got in. "Gatacre House."

The address was that of a block of modern luxury apartments, presenting to the world a flat, grayish façade encrusted with square protuberances in the form of balconies, and resembling the sort of building which is run up temporarily at exhibitions. It contained, however, some of the most expensive suites in London, although many of them were now sublet. Paying off the taximan, Wake walked in.

Where formerly in Gatacre House there had been a hall porter (with top hat) and two lift attendants, there was now nobody; the marble atrium sounded a note of echoing desolation, which was odd, perhaps purely psychological, for all the flats in fact were occupied. The elevators, however, had been equipped for the convenience of residents and were provided with numbered buttons each corresponding to a floor. Wake stepped into that on the left of the hall and pressed a button numbered four.

Arrived at the fourth floor, he reclosed the elevator gate as he stepped out, and proceeded along a carpeted corridor to a door numbered 32. He applied a gloved finger to the bell push and dim buzzing sounded from within. Otherwise, the long shadowy corridor was silent. Presently, a man opened the door of No. 32. He wore evening dress, and at a glance one might have been undecided as to whether he was a superior servant or a gentleman dressed for dinner. Clean shaven and sallow, with heavy, flexible—one might almost have said, rubber, features—he had light blue dancing eyes, heavy dark brows and close-cut graying hair. A sardonic smile, conveying an impression that he found most people ridiculous, caused a dimple to appear and disappear upon his heavy chin in a queerly intriguing way.

"Hello, Wake," he said, "you are prompt." And his accent possessed a faint transatlantic flavor.

"Yes, Mr. Francis. I came along as soon as possible." Wake entered, removing his black hat and peeling off his suede gloves.

"We might as well go down right away," said Mr. Francis.

The rooms through which he led Wake were notable for a luxury which was almost magnificence; even the kitchen, which presently they reached, although small, was unexceptionally equipped. Mr. Francis, for all his heavy build, had a cat-like gait; he seemed to rest his weight in walking, on the ball of his foot and not on the heel. Opening a door, the two men stepped out onto a fire ladder. They found themselves on one side of a narrow courtyard, around which Gatacre House was built. Descending the iron steps, they entered a flat immediately below that of Mr. Francis, by means of a door which also communicated with a kitchen.

"Wait a moment," muttered Mr. Francis.

Leaving Wake in the kitchen, he retired, but was absent no more than a minute or so.

"All clear," he reported. "Mrs. Destrée is expecting you."

Again he led the way with that feline stride, along a corridor closely corresponding with that above, to a door at the end upon which he knocked.

"Come in," said a bell-like voice.

Wake, who seemed suddenly to have become far less composed, entered a room, Mr. Francis holding the door open, which in many respects might have reminded readers of Coleridge of something conceived by Kûbla Khân.

Reclining on a settee and watching the doorway, was a woman.

The room contained an unusual quantity of lacquer and ivory. Two particularly fine ivory chests, silver mounted and having inlaid designs in semi-precious stones, were undoubtedly museum pieces. Wake suspected that, otherwise than at Warwick Castle, he had seen nothing like them. There was lacquer furniture, and a tall lacquer screen enfolded a couch upon which the woman was lying. Ivory and jade ornaments materialised out of purple shadows; for heavy silk curtains were drawn, and the only light was that cast by a lamp with a purple shade. It was in the form of an ivory serpent, poised to strike.

On a number of low tables rested porcelain bowls in which floated water lilies of a great variety: green-gold, pink, mauve and yellow; and in tall vases bloomed a profusion of white arum lilies, so that the atmosphere was laden with their rather sickly perfume.

But although Wake noted these things, they formed no more than a hazy background for the figure of the woman who reclined among many cushions. She was smoking a cigarette in a tortoiseshell mouthpiece ornamented with small emeralds, and she wore a clinging robe, having full, open sleeves, a robe which displayed all those variegated tints of the Californian poppy. Her skin possessed a peachlike quality, and her arms, freed by the silken garment, were rounded, slender and girlish. Indeed, her tiny figure, from glossy black head down to toes peeping like lotus buds out of sly sandals, was of rare perfection.

Features, delicate with the delicacy of a jade cameo, so that even slightly distended nostrils failed to mar their calm serenity, were almost overpowered by dark eyes, magnificent in a slightly oblique beauty. They were the eyes of a sorceress, and in them, when she smiled, that image of a beautiful child faded, and became altogether effaced. A soul steeped in experience, a soul which Flaubert might have thought to have shared secrets with Messalina and strange loves with Thais, a spirit old as the lost magnificent sins of Alexandria, shone out through those brilliant eyes, to seduce, but to terrify.

Although he had seen her many times, this was the first occasion upon which Wake had actually spoken to Ysolde Destrée—and he stood before her tongue-tied. A man of some resource and of no little cunning, a vague fear which he had always recognised, threatened now to betray him.

Yet, she was smiling, and so of what had he to be afraid? Perhaps of her smile ...

"Please sit down, Mr. Wake."

He fumbled for the nearest lacquer chair, looked for his hat, and remembered that he had left hat, gloves and umbrella in the apartment above. He glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the door partly close. Mr. Francis had gone. He sat down.

"Good evening, madam," he said.

Destrée watched him for a time in silence, and he found himself to be reviewing all his sins, major and minor, and trying to make sure that he had overlooked no loose ends which this woman might have picked up. A certain assurance with which he had come to the interview, an assurance based upon what he believed to be a mutual danger, was deserting him, and deserting him so rapidly that he sought to account for it in another way. A man of full habit, he decided that the atmosphere, the overpowering perfume of lilies, was making him begin to perspire. Above all he wished, now, that Destrée would cease to smile.

"Well, Mr. Wake—" she spoke with no identifiable accent, but with a quaint intonation, her childlike voice caressingly pretty—"I asked you to call and see me this evening, because I wished to make quite sure that you realise in how grave a position we find ourselves."

"Er—" Wake cleared his throat—"you refer, no doubt, madame, to the—er—regrettable incident."

"To the death of Sir Giles Loeder." The lancet of her contemplation pierced him inexorably; he could not escape it. "But, of course! what did you think I meant?"

"You fear, madam—" Wake was fumbling badly for words—"that this unfortunate incident, happening at a time when he was actually leaving one of the games ..."

"The game at Mrs. Sankey's flat, to be exact, Mr. Wake—yes. You were acting for us that night."

"Yes, madam. I have been happy from time to time to place my services at your disposal, or rather at the disposal of Mr. Francis."

"No, no." She laughed, and her laughter was like a peal of fairy bells. "Leave it the first way, Mr. Wake. You are a citizen of the world, I think, and you know that Mr. Francis is merely my agent. You know that I, Destrée, control roulette in Mayfair."

"Well, madam—" his pointed collar began to bother him—"I may—er—have suspected it, but I assumed that you wished to remain incognito, if I may employ that word."

Destrée continued to smile. "That was so wise of you. Because your employment was satisfactory? Yes? Ten guineas a night, I believe we paid you?"

"That is correct, madam."

"Well—" she dropped ash into a little jade bowl—"what I have to say to you, Mr. Wake, is that on Wednesday night, when there is to be roulette here, in my own flat, although it was arranged for you to act as second croupier, I think it would be wiser—" the words ended on that enigmatical smile.

"I quite agree with you, madam." Wake spoke eagerly: Destrée's smile became more pronounced, became almost voluptuous. "You mean that should police inquiries associate my employment by Lord Marcus with my employment—"

"Just so. That is what I mean."

"Then, madam, I agree with you, the consequences indeed might be disastrous."

"Quite so, my good Mr. Wake. How quickly you grasp things. You will be difficult, of course, to replace, but this will be only temporary, I trust. Good croupiers are rare in London, and you are very good."

Wake bowed gratefully. He began to feel slightly more at ease. "I sometimes accompanied one of my former—employers, Sir Guy Warberly, to Monte Carlo, and he permitted me to play an occasional game on my own account. I—er—" he cleared his throat again—"acquired some knowledge of the subject by watching the croupiers in the Casino."

"The best school in the world," smiled Destrée. "And so Mr. Wake—" she took up an envelope from a lacquered table beside her and handed it to him—"here is your fee for Wednesday night. It is not fair that you should suffer because of this small accident."

"But, madam!"

"No, no, I wish it. And we shall continue to—keep in touch with you, Mr. Wake, at all times."

Now there was something in the way these words were pronounced which served to destroy Wake's growing confidence and to plunge him back again into a state of acute discomfort.

"Certainly, madam," he muttered. "Thank you."

"I suppose—" Destrée stretched herself luxuriously, so that one perfect satiny knee peeped out for a moment through a gap in her silken robe: she was like some beautiful Persian kitten in her lithe movements—"I suppose there is nothing, nothing that has not appeared in the newspapers about the mysterious death of poor Sir Giles, which you know and would care to tell me?"

"I, madam!" exclaimed Wake, almost dropping the envelope. "I assure you, madam, no one was more surprised than myself when I returned and found him lying there."

"He left just before you—if I remember rightly," murmured Destrée.

"Possibly, madam. For my own part I did not actually see him go. I was—balancing my accounts. As no doubt you recall, the table had done badly that night."

"I recall it very well. It is to endeavor to recover some of our losses that we are playing again so soon. I am not sure that we are wise."

"I see, madam."

"In other words, Mr. Wake, you can throw no more light on this mystery?" She rolled indolently onto her back, the tortoiseshell mouthpiece drooping from full lips, and stretching up her arms, rested her head upon pillowed hands.

"Nothing at all, madam, I assure you."

"I am sorry," she murmured, watching him through a screen of lowered lashes. "He was an old friend and I am deeply concerned."

"I quite understand that."

"I thought, but I may have been wrong, that when I left Mrs. Sankey's you were already gone. In that case, it occurred to me that you must have been a long time in reaching South Audley Street—yes?"

Wake became aware, again, of that unaccountable perspiration. "I see what you mean, madam. But it is quite simple. I had left my household accounts in Grosvenor Square and I knew I should require them in the morning. I called there and knocked up my wife—who acts as caretaker for Sir George Clarking, as I believe you know."

"Yes, I know." Destrée's eyes were nearly closed; but she continued to smile. "The newspapers are so small nowadays. So little space is given to so great a tragedy. I suppose you told the police that you had been at Grosvenor Square?"

"I did, madam."

"It would be a great misfortune for you if they should find out that you had been acting as croupier—"

"Indeed, madam—"

"Yes." She sighed. "It would, indeed. However, Mr. Wake, we quite understand one another, I am sure. We shall make a point of keeping in touch with you." She pressed a bell. "Mr. Francis will take you back to his own flat, as no doubt you have duties at Lord Marcus's house."

Wake stood up. "Thank you, madam. I am sure I am deeply obliged. At any time—any time, I mean, which synchronises

with suitable leave from Lord Marcus—please regard me as entirely at your service."

"Thank you, Mr. Wake."

The door had opened quite silently, and Mr. Francis had entered. One might have guessed that he had never been far away. Wake bowed to the seductive, inscrutable creature reclining on the settee, saw that she was still smiling, and nearly overturned a low stool supporting a bowl of lilies as he made his way out into the corridor.

He had just grasped a highly alarming fact. Unless she possessed private sources of information, Mrs. Destrée had tricked him into an admission that Sir Giles's body had been found in Lord Marcus's house ... for no newspaper had reported this!

12

M. Gaston Max

Later the same night, Colonel O'Halloran remained at work in his book-lined office in Scotland Yard. He was industriously initialling a pile of chits with the letters J.N.G.O.'H. which had earned him the soubriquet of "Jingo." A tin of tobacco stood at his elbow, and he smoked a notably clean looking briar. Indeed it was his custom directly a pipe demanded cleaning to cast it aside and to buy a new one. As he was a heavy smoker, this custom, in view of wartime prices, represented an outrageous outlay. One of several telephones on the desk buzzed discreetly. Colonel O'Halloran took up the receiver.

"Yes, at once; expecting him."

He replaced the receiver and went on signing chits. He was still engaged in this way when someone might have been heard coming along the corridor, someone who whistled that old English song, "Up in the morning early". The door opened, the whistle ceased, and a man entered, reclosing the door and then rapped upon it. The Assistant Commissioner looked up.

"Hello, Monsieur Max," he said, not taking the pipe from between his teeth—"sit down. Sha'n't be a jiffey."

Gaston Max smiled. "Always I knock after I come in," he explained, "in case I have the bad luck to intrude."

He crossed and sat down in a padded armchair set before the Colonel's desk; and anyone who had chanced to meet Peter Finch, taxidriver, would almost certainly have declined to believe that Peter Finch and Gaston Max were one and the same.

The celebrated French investigator, in his proper person, was a man of about medium height. In his youth he had inclined to corpulence, but in middle life had conquered the tendency, possibly by dieting. At his present age his hair was touched with silver at the temples, but heavy eyebrows remained obstinately black, shading large intelligent eyes of so indeterminate a shade that few observers would have cared to put a name to it. A blueness of lip and jaw (a rather heavy jaw) indicated that he was called upon to shave closely. This he did, and was in every respect a model of good grooming. His abundant hair he kept carefully brushed and trimmed, and if his taste in shirts and suits was perhaps a trifle spectacular, at least these garments were distinctive and well tailored. To-night he wore a blue suit with a determined red stripe, a dark blue shirt and a green tie relieved by black spots. A handkerchief of similar design drooped gracefully from his breast pocket. He carried a soft brown hat, and a monocle on a thick silk cord swung to and fro, a glittering pendulum, whenever he moved. But despite this slight bizarrerie of toilet, no one would have given a second glance at the man's attire: his pale face must have commanded one's whole attention.

Gaston Max's features possessed a mobility rather bewildering. In collaboration with his eyes, they seemed to respond to every passing thought; even in repose, or the nearest approach to repose which he ever achieved, his flexible lips almost rippled in sympathy with his mental impressions. One sympathised with Sergeant Bluett's opinion that this was the face of a comedy actor, but it was that of a comedy actor supremely endowed.

He took out a cigarette case bearing his initials in small diamonds, selected a cigarette, lighted it with a gold lighter, and replaced the case in his pocket as the colonel, a final chit signed, pushed the pile aside and looked up, blinking furiously as was his wont.

"Well, M. Max—shall we talk French or English?"

"To me, colonel, it is a matter of indifference." Gaston Max shrugged: "I speak all kinds of English. Tell me which kind you prefer. Or French (which you speak with the fluency of a Parisian) I also command to no small degree. Choose, then, my colonel, and let us begin."

The Assistant Commissioner stared at him for a while, replacing the mouthpiece of the pipe between his teeth, and holding the bowl with a square muscular hand which seemed too large for a small man.

"You're a bit of a responsibility, Max, you know," he said in his staccato fashion. "No more sense of discipline than a Spanish mule. So far as I'm aware, you have no rank—at Scotland Yard, anyway. You were sent here by the Home

Secretary and I was glad to see you. Reputation familiar to me for years. Didn't know what to do with you, so lent you to the Special Branch. We get on well; I like you; but if any of your antics land you in the soup, I'm responsible."

"I shall land in no soup," Max assured him. "To my regret I must avoid soup—it is bad for my figure."

Colonel O'Halloran grinned. "To-date, I'm told, you have done uncommonly well; but I won't disguise from you, Max, that you have more rope than any other officer here."

"I acknowledge this with gratitude, Colonel O'Halloran, my friend; I am grateful—but, yes."

"I engineered your taxi license, for instance; madly irregular, you know."

"Ah! my taxi? But think what I have learned with this taxi! A London taxi is like a shrimping net. One gathers many shrimps, and sometimes a small octopus. But there is a matter which troubles me. I should like to discuss this."

"Good," said the colonel, "go ahead."

"In the first place the inquiry upon which I have now been at work for several months recently crossed a case of our good friend, Inspector Firth."

"So I believe."

"I am dramatic, I am the sensationalist; and because this is the first big inquiry which has been entrusted to me since I joined Scotland Yard, I am anxious to present it complete, garnished, piping hot, on a gold plate. Name of a name! I am made that way—I cannot help it. It was, oh, so long ago that I last worked with Scotland Yard. I have worn well, eh, my colonel? I carry the burden of heavy years with some grace, is it not so? But no matter. This time I look for a very big fish indeed; and I have not yet learned the name of this fish. But he is one who snaps up secrets known only to the War Cabinet, and transmits them to Berlin in time to make of himself a bloody nuisance. Sometimes I have wondered if my fish is a Jack pike or a mermaid."

"A mermaid? meaning what?"

"A woman fish. Women to-day are permitted to play a very large part in the troubles of the world. Sometimes they bring about a thousand deaths because one poor fool kisses another. However, *ma'lêsh*, as the Arab says. What I am anxious to settle is this: I have certain information which strictly belongs to Inspector Firth; and this information I wish him to have."

"Quite proper. What is it?"

"One of my fish has been netted by someone else, and I am angry, but yes—furious. It is Sir Giles Loeder. Understand that I am interested in Sir Giles, and for someone to murder him is inconsiderate to a degree. It is Inspector Firth's business to discover this poacher upon my preserves, and it is my business to help him."

"Yes, that's so." Colonel O'Halloran gripped his pipe so tightly that his jaw muscles protruded. "Do you mean there was something fishy about Loeder?"

"It may be. Who knows? I have much to learn. One must not jump to conclusions; but some small points come to my knowledge. Item: Sir Giles was a confirmed gambler."

"Sure of that?"

"But certain. He was a regular visitor to the underground roulette games which are played in Mayfair. I think it very likely that he was coming from one of these when he met his death. He carried a portfolio which may have contained winnings—"

"Portfolio? Firth didn't tell me that."

"The Inspector must have forgotten to do so. He knows. This portfolio has not been found. Very well. Now, to-night, I make another discovery. Wake, the butler who has been questioned about the death of Sir Giles, is perhaps connected in some way with roulette, also. Here, I think, is a link which Inspector Firth should test."

"Entirely agree with you."

"Because it is necessary for me to find out if any association existed between the late Sir Giles and Lord Marcus, or Lord Marcus's butler, I have been watching them both, you understand? To-night Lord Marcus dined at the Athenaeum. I believe he is still there. But Wake, his butler, went to Gatacre House. I drove him. And when at the end of half an hour or so he came out again, he was so disturbed, this poor Wake, that he failed to observe that he was getting into the same taxi. I then drove him to Grosvenor Square, to the house at which his wife acts as caretaker."

Colonel O'Halloran grinned appreciatively, his eyes blinking more rapidly than ever. "You know the right moves in this game, Max," he said. "What's the point about Gatacre House?"

"The point is, my colonel, that a woman called Destrée lives at Gatacre House, and I believe that it was Destrée that Wake went to call upon."

"H'm!" mused the colonel. "Believed to be back of roulette racket. But never got clear evidence. They use different addresses. Very cunning. Lot of money behind it. What makes you think Wake called on Destrée?"

"I followed him in. As the elevator ascended I checked it on the indicator. He got out on the fourth floor."

"Does Destrée live on fourth?"

"No, no—on the third."

Colonel O'Halloran removed his pipe. "Talkin' rot, aren't you? Don't make sense."

"But not at all. On the fourth floor there is a Mr. Julian Francis. He is an associate of Destrée's. Behold! it is sufficient?"

"Yes—I see. What I don't see is reason you're interested in these people."

Gaston Max shrugged. "Destrée is ground bait for my fish. But tell the good inspector, if you please, carefully to watch Wake. For if Wake is connected with Destrée, as I believe, he may know more about what happened to Sir Giles than he has told the police."

Colonel O'Halloran lay back in his padded armchair, an unusual relaxation which possibly indicated fatigue. "Are you suggesting Destrée had anything to do with Sir Giles's murder?"

"But not necessarily. Also, it is not my case. But I think it only fair to Inspector Firth that he should know these things. I think it, also, only fair to me, that there should not be clumsiness. I want no shrimps, I want no cockles; it is my king fish I am seeking to net."

The Assistant Commissioner laid his hot pipe aside and began to roll a cigarette. "Devil of a lot of information leaking, Max. Sooner you hook king fish the better. Can't think where they collect it; can't think how they get it through."

Gaston Max watched him, and the usually mobile features had become still, almost sombre ... "There is a raid by Combined Operations pending, my colonel, as you know—"

"But I don't know when it starts. I bet your king fish doesn't know either."

"I pray you may be right." Max stood up, casting the brief, sombre mood aside and displaying his brilliant teeth in a quick smile. "To-morrow I have a small investigation to make. You are aware that I hold a medical degree of the Sorbonne—for how can one hope to gain the heights of our difficult profession lacking a knowledge of forensic medicine? Eh bien, as I have reasons for remaining incognito, I become then a respectable professional man, a fugitive from Paris." He extended his palms. "Behold!"

"Do you think you look like a respectable professional man from Paris?"

"But certainly."

"Well, you don't. Good-night."

Early on the following morning, Nurse Perigal was about to leave Otterly Hospital when she was recalled by the matron.

"Oh, nurse," cried Mrs. Maddison, standing at the door of her office (this formality of address was occasioned by the presence of two orderlies), "I must detain you for a moment. Will you please come in."

Fay stopped nervously. Moods of preoccupation latterly had possessed her, a fact which had not escaped the vigilant eye of the matron and which that observant lady knew to be due to the tangled affairs of Fay's unknown friend who evidently engaged so much of the girl's affections. However, forcing a smile, Fay walked into the office and found standing there by the matron's desk a man of striking appearance.

The visitor wore a blue suit with an undeniably red stripe, a green, spotted tie, and a conspicuously blue soft collared shirt. A wide brimmed hat lay upon the desk, and its owner was swinging a monocle upon its cord around and around one extended forefinger. Fay thought that he looked like an actor, particularly noting his beautiful hands.

"Dr. de Brion," said Mrs. Maddison—"this is Nurse Perigal, who will be glad, I know, to act as your guide to the ward where we are taking care of the French boys." She turned to Fay: "This is Dr. de Brion, from Fighting French headquarters, nurse, and he would like a chat with some of our patients."

Dr. de Brion revealed glittering teeth in a smile of frank admiration. Raising Fay's hand, he stooped and kissed it. "A beautiful morning, matron," he said, "and you find me a beautiful guide."

"I shall be glad if I can be of any service to you, doctor," Fay replied.

"But you have been of service already," he assured her; "your smile would lift its load from the heaviest heart. I am obliged to you, matron." He bowed to Mrs. Maddison, "I shall try not to detain Nurse Perigal longer than necessary, although the temptation to do so will be great."

On their way upstairs to the ward at the end of the south wing which accommodated the French pilots, Dr. de Brion succeeded in putting Fay completely at her ease, so that she felt as though she had known him all her life. Even before he had plunged into voluble conversation with the first of the patients whom she introduced, Fay had decided that he was brilliantly clever. He discussed symptoms and made suggestions of so shrewdly practical a character that he clearly understood his profession. The reaction of the wounded airmen, all of whom he left laughing happily, paid vital tribute to his bedside manner.

He distributed cigarettes with a lavish hand, from a case emblazoned with a diamond crest, which particularly attracted Fay's attention. He told funny stories and he performed sleight of hand tricks. Before leaving the ward, he promised to come again, a promise which produced cheers, physically feeble but heartfelt, from the occupants. As they walked down the stone stairs together on their way to the ground floor, Dr. de Brion took Fay's arm in his affectionately friendly manner, and began to speak with sudden seriousness of her own affairs.

"My friend Dr. Fawcett," he said, "reported to me about you. You remember meeting Dr. Fawcett?"

"Oh, good heavens, yes!" Fay's eyes opened in a startled way. "You mean the doctor who came with the police to Marcus's house?"

"Yes, yes, to the house of your cousin Marcus. He has been talking to me, you understand; and when he heard that I was visiting here, he asked me to talk to *you*."

"That was very kind of him, but what about?"

"Well, what more fascinating subject could there be than yourself?"

"Oh, but you are joking again."

They had regained the frigid lobby, and Fay stood facing the visitor, trying to read some message in those vivacious eyes, but reading nothing save good humor and admiration. She supposed that Dr. de Brion's rather colorful style of dressing must be professionally correct in Paris; it was certainly unusual in England. Hearing their voices, the matron came out, and Dr. de Brion turned to her.

"Have I your permission, dear madam, to see Nurse Perigal upon her way?"

"But, of course, doctor. How charming of you."

He took the matron's hands and kissed them gallantly. "Soon I shall be coming to see those dear fellows again, and to see you, madam ..."

Outside the gray building and clear of ambulances which stood in its courtyard, they walked on in silence through the outskirts of Otterly; and soon (for Otterly was little more than a village) gained the open country. Dr. de Brion inhaled fragrant morning air and looked about him with unconcealed delight. Once, he paused, and stared up into a clear blue sky.

"Wild geese!" he exclaimed—"like a flight of planes! Ha! There is water in the neighborhood?"

"Yes, Umley Mere, quite near to Rosemary Cottage, where I am going now, doctor. I sometimes watch a kingfisher working there."

"A kingfisher! turquoise with wings! A fairy jewel wearing a robin's waistcoat! Ah!" His eyes seemed to dance as he turned to her, in recognition of her kinship with the fairyland of nature. "You, too, love the wild things."

"Yes, I suppose I do, doctor," said Fay, and spoke a little sadly. "They seem so much more free and so much happier than we do. But perhaps, if we knew more about their lives—"

"Yes, yes, they may have their small bothers, too. Name of a good little man, but certainly. There will be Mrs. Kingfishers who are jealous of Miss Kingfishers. There will be angry geese, and misunderstood geese. Robins fight like the very devil: I have seen them. And the starlings—well, well, those gluttonous starlings! Why don't they get fat? Oh, I know them all."

"Evidently you do," said Fay; and she laughed for the first time that morning, a laugh so young and so fresh that the man who studied her found himself wondering, again, what cloud had cast its shadow over her life: he had instinctively detected the presence of such a cloud.

Illumination on this point was soon to come; for, following a brief silence, Fay suddenly asked, "Do you ever visit the R.A.F. hospital at Ashbrown, doctor?"

"Ashbrown in Hampshire? But, yes—I was there only a week ago. Why do you ask?"

Watching her face, he detected a faint shade of embarrassment, and mentally answered his own question.

"A—very old friend of mine was there until recently—"

"But French?"

"No, not French. He is an American: Flight Lieutenant Hawke Kershaw."

"Hawke Kershaw? Of an Eagle Squadron?"

"Yes. I only wondered if you had happened to meet him." She spoke with complete calmness, but looked straight ahead.

"I cannot recall the name, Nurse Fay. I went to visit a French officer who was formerly a colleague, but I met some others also. Describe, if you please, this fortunate Hawke Kershaw."

"Oh, I don't think I can, really. He is tall and slim, and has dark brown hair—"

"Dark brown hair? And gray eyes?"

"No—blue eyes."

"Blue. He is a handsome fellow?"

Fay, who had flushed momentarily, now seemed to grow more pale than usual. "Yes, I suppose he is rather good looking, doctor."

"I fear I cannot have met him, Nurse Fay. Was he a—dangerous case?"

"No." Fay shook her head. "That's what puzzles me. He was shot down and wounded in the foot. At first, they were afraid he might be crippled, and walk with a limp—"

"With a limp, you say?"

"Yes. But he wrote to tell us that although he actually did limp slightly, with rest and massage this would disappear. We expected him down here, but—well, he seems to have vanished!"

"He has vanished, eh? A strange fellow. But his station will tell you where he is—yes?"

"There is so much official secrecy, doctor. Beyond finding out that he is on sick leave I haven't been able to learn a thing. But as you don't know him, why should I bother you about it. Please tell me what it was that Dr. Fawcett suggested you should ask me?"

They had paused in a narrow, winding lane. A lime tree towered above a briar hedge gemmed with rubies, its leaves a furtive gold as if reluctantly yielding to the spell of autumn; and Dr. de Brion seemed temporarily to have forgotten his companion.

"But, yes." He turned suddenly and that glittering smile brushed a shadow magically from his face. "But, of course! He is much concerned, my faith, the good doctor, about your cousin Lord Marcus."

"I suppose he thinks he is mad?"

"But no, name of a name, not mad—eccentric."

"Is there any difference?" murmured Fay.

"A distinction. Or so they used to tell me at the Salpêtrière, Paris, where for a time I studied such matters. But he thinks, Dr. Fawcett, that your cousin is so lost in his studies that perhaps advantage is taken of him."

As they began slowly to walk along again: "I am afraid that may be true," Fay admitted. "He is, of course, quite unworldly. Perhaps Dr. Fawcett was thinking about—" she hesitated—"Mrs. Vane."

"Yes, perhaps it may be that he had in mind the beautiful Mrs. Vane. But also, perhaps, the butler, Wake."

"Oh! don't you trust Wake?"

"He looks in every way completely the perfect butler. I fear such characters. But you, my dear, no doubt you have known him for a long time. So tell me, please. What do you think of this Wake?"

"Well, since you ask me," Fay replied, "I don't know that I have ever felt quite sure about him, myself. But then, do you think anybody ever did understand butlers?"

One would have said that Dr. de Brion's mobile features reacted to a hundred and one amusing thoughts, presumably relative to butlers. "All butlers terrify me," he assured her. "But you can tell me, no doubt, how long Lord Marcus has had this butler?"

"Oh, for more than three years—since before the war."

"For more than three years, eh? If there had been something wrong with him, anyone could find this out in three years, I think?"

"Anyone but Marcus," Fay amended. "So far as I am aware, Wake is a model servant. No doubt he expects his perks—"

"Perks? what is this, perks? I must conquer this word, perks."

Fay laughed outright again. "It is argot, a vulgarism, an abbreviation," she explained. "It means perquisites, and I understand that all butlers expect them."

"Oh, yes, name of a name! I understand. I shall add this word to my repertory. The odd cigar, the half decanter of port, this and that no doubt? Perks. It is a delightful word. And this Mrs. Vane you know but slightly, I suppose?"

"Very slightly." Fay made a tiny grimace. "She is not living with Marcus, or anything of that kind, although I understand she has the run of the house. But he really believes that she possesses psychic powers."

"A medium, shall we say?"

"Yes, a medium, or so Marcus has assured me. Of course, she may be, but she has a suite at the Barchester and dresses better than almost any other woman in London to-day, so that I suppose—"

"You suppose that she must be a very good medium? Well, well, my dear—" he patted her shoulder—"the laborer is worthy of his hire. It is perhaps that we are unenlightened. Ah! the beautiful prospect. Let me see—what house is that?"

13

Treasure Island

The lane crossed an old stone bridge over a meandering stream. Looking down, one could see roach and carp in clear water which moved lazily over a pebbly bottom. Northward of this bridge the ground rose through parkland to a wooded bay which enshrined a red brick mansion.

"That is Huskin Court," said Fay, "and the cottage there in the hollow—look, you will see it if you follow the stream—is Rosemary Cottage, where my patient is convalescing. It is on the Huskin Court estate, and has been made over to us by Lord Huskin."

"But how intriguing," Max commented, surveying Huskin Court appreciatively; "a stately home of England, yes?"

"Yes, part of it is certainly stately, and very old. But Lord Huskin, who is reputed to be a millionaire, has made a number of changes, I believe. He is very much liked and respected about here. His generosity is wonderful."

"That is nice:—to possess wealth and to use it. That is also wise. For what is money but a golden key? How great a fool is the man who hides the key and never opens the door that it fits! And now, Nurse Fay, the morning is so beautiful that I am reluctant to return to London—that poor patient old London. May I come to your cottage with the romantic name, and make the acquaintance of your case?"

"Oh!" Fay assured him, and there was no mistaking the warmth and sincerity of the invitation, "I wish you would. He has been rather badly knocked about, and he is subject to moods of terrible depression. That's really the worst we have to contend with, now. You are—well, such a tonic—"

"No man should require a tonic who has you near him," said Dr. de Brion. "But I have forgotten your patient's name."

"Squadron Leader Dan Corcoran."

"Ah! the great Dan Corcoran, the pride of Fighter Command, is it not so? Of course, certainly, but yes. I must meet him. He suffers from depression, you say? But pilots must never be depressed. They must be exalted."

"You see, it's so difficult to make him relax. He has such a restless spirit. For instance, he works at night, when he should be asleep, on what he calls 'Flint's Fist'."

"Flint's Fist? But this intrigues me, yes. Acquaint me with the character of Flint's Fist."

"Well—it's a meaningless sentence which he found on the back of an old envelope. Dan is crazy about 'Treasure Island', and he pretends that this thing is a clue to Captain Flint's buried treasure. I should think he has wasted a whole writing block trying to work it out! He pesters everyone who calls with it."

"And what is this sentence?"

"It consists of several odd words—I can't quite remember them; but it has no apparent meaning."

"But the envelope, eh?"

"Oh, the envelope." Fay reproduced that tiny grimace first inspired by a reference to Mrs. Vane; it made her straight nose wrinkle in a really delightful way. "I know I am rather uncharitable, but the envelope was given to me by poor Sir Giles Loeder on the day he visited Otterly. He had no cards, apparently, and he ... wanted me to 'phone or write. It was addressed to him, and he scribbled his number in the corner. This queer sentence is written in pencil on the back."

"Mon dieu!" Dr. de Brion's swift change of manner, of voice, was electrifying: he stood quite still, watching Fay. "If it could be! Nurse Fay, it was your Shakespeare who said 'There is a tide in the affairs of men—' If it could be! Yes—let us go to Rosemary Cottage."

Fay stared at him in a way which reminded Dr. de Brion of a startled deer. "I am of crossword puzzles the expert," he explained gaily. "Perhaps I shall enable Squadron Leader Dan to relax!" And he grasped her arm in his irresistibly

affectionate way and led her on, insisting that she march in step with the strains of "Up in the morning early," which he whistled for that purpose.

So, entering a tree-shaded path which did its best to follow the erratically winding stream, they presently opened a white gate, and walked under a pergola smothered with roses, many still in bloom. It led to the porch of Rosemary Cottage, a typical workman's cottage, modernised no doubt by Lord Huskin. In this porch a very small corporal stood smoking a cigarette, which he immediately extinguished at sight of the visitors, dropped and trod on. He had gray hair, a neat gray moustache, walked with one shoulder higher than the other, and in fact presented much of the appearance of a gnome. It presently appeared that he was Squadron Leader Corcoran's batman, and that he was an Irish Canadian.

"The top o' the mornin', nurse," said he, "and a fine mornin' it is, too."

"Splendid, Toby—and how is our patient? This is Dr. de Brion to see him."

"Good mornin', your honor. Sure the boss is in fine fettle."

And, Fay tripping lightly up an open staircase which began almost immediately inside the door, Toby followed with slower steps.

Dr. de Brion smoked a cigarette, taking almost photographic note of the appointments of this small but cosy room, and listening delightedly to the song of birds in a shrubbery outside the windows. The place was so restful, fragrant, and far, far removed from that world in which much of his life was passed. He turned at the sound of voices and footsteps.

The patient, rather carelessly dressed in mufti, was coming downstairs, assisted by Toby and Fay Perigal. He was a slightly built fellow with a shock of fair brown hair, which evidently defied both brush and comb, for it could not have been described as well behaved; it was not that kind of hair. The clean shaven, rather freckled face in all probability normally displayed a healthy color; at present it was rather pale. Corcoran had steadfast hazel eyes and shaggy brows, and would have been better looking if his nose had not assumed a perpetual expression of surprise on finding itself (at birth no doubt) tip-tilted, slightly, but unmistakably.

"Normal this morning," cried Fay in a gay voice. "We shall have you about again in a week, Dan."

Dan grinned boyishly and squeezed the shoulder upon which he leaned. He wore slippers, and his fumbling gait indicated that he was far from strong, yet.

"So there's no news from old Dick," he said to Fay.

Again that cloud shadowed her expression, and the watchful visitor knew, now, that "old Dick" must be Flight Lieutenant Kershaw. She shook her head. "Not a word, Dan! But I suppose he will turn up, sometime." As they reached the foot of the short stair: "And here is Dr. de Brion—Squadron Leader Corcoran."

"Ah!" exclaimed Dr. de Brion, pushing forward an armchair which evidently had been prepared for the invalid. "Be seated, my dear fellow. How lucky you are to have crashed in so lovely a spot!"

"Yes, I am," grinned Corcoran, raising the steadfast but shy eyes to the speaker. "It would be sheer ingratitude to want to get well too soon."

"It would be sheer folly," cried Dr. de Brion. "Oh, but so stupid."

"Do you want to make me over, doctor? I don't really think there is any need."

"But certainly not! I came to see you, not to vet you. It is a pleasure and a privilege."

"I'm sure you are very welcome."

Dr. de Brion's ornamental case made a flashing appearance. Corcoran accepted a cigarette reluctantly, saying that he had a large supply of his own, and the doctor urged Fay to follow his example in spite of protestations that she was officially on duty. "It is a prescription," he declared, "medical orders."

"You are just the kind of M.O. everybody is looking for," said Dan Corcoran.

"This place is better than any physic. Here is nothing pathological, nothing ugly, nothing deformed. Ah!"—he inhaled the sweetness of the air: "Why do fools herd in towns?"

"Some towns, once, were very good fun," said Fay wistfully. "For instance, doctor, how you must miss Paris."

"Yes." A shadow crossed the smiling face, but was gone again immediately. "Yes, I miss Paris—poor Paris. But one day, Miss Fay, Paris will be herself again. Paris has known many terrors, many sorrows, but Paris is old in strength, in wisdom, in patience—like London. Soon, very soon, you will see."

"Can't you stay to lunch, doctor?" Dan asked, looking up at him. "Then we will take you out to Treasure Island—won't we, Fay?"

Fay laughed, but even her laughter was rather wistful. "Treasure Island," she explained, "is a tiny island in the stream, connected with the garden by a wooden bridge. Dan spends fine afternoons there. A mound in the middle is called Spyglass Hill, and an old wooden barrel in the water is Skeleton Island. Then there's Cape of the Woods, isn't there, Dan?"

"There's everything," Dan assured her firmly, "which appears on Flint's map—except the treasure."

"Here is the treasure," said Dr. de Brion, resting his arm lightly on Fay's shoulder, and he was delighted when she blushed.

"Which reminds me," Dan added: he raised his voice: "Toby!" Toby appeared in the doorway, winking significantly at the visitor. "Bring down Flint's Fist—and all the notes. They're right beside my bed."

"Very good, sir."

Toby proceeded upstairs, and Fay glanced smilingly at Dr. de Brion. "I warned you!" She turned to the convalescent. "Dr. de Brion is a crossword expert, Dan, so perhaps he can help you."

"I need help," Dan declared pathetically. "Because it stands to reason that the words must mean *something*."

Toby returning with a writing block and a bundle of loose sheets, Dan detached an envelope clipped to the block and handed it to Dr. de Brion. Dr. de Brion read the typed address aloud:—

"'Sir Giles Loeder, 90, Mount Street, Mayfair, W.1.'—h'm! 'Mayfair 30031' in pencil." He reversed the envelope. "Ah! the same writing! What have we here, my infants! Name of a name, what have we here!"

"Well," grumbled Dan, "we have the remarkable words, 'Pythagoric buds' written in capitals. I can't find pythagoric in my dictionary. That's bad enough. But in between the capitals a lot of small letters have been added. That makes it worse." He looked up from his armchair—and became silent.

Dr. de Brion's face was transfigured; indeed, his entire body seemed to radiate energy and his eyes to be on fire.

"What is it, doctor?" Fay asked in a hushed voice.

Dr. de Brion turned to her. "It is the answer to an enigma! It is a reproach to my stupidity!" He returned the envelope to Dan. "I can remember it. Take, oh, great care of this! Heaven is on our side after all—" and he extended his hand. "Forgive me! I must go. Au revoir, Dan Corcoran, my friend. I must go."

"Now?" exclaimed Fay with such unconcealed disappointment that he came about in a swift turn, grasped her shoulders and looked into her eyes.

"My car I left at the hospital. Even now, I may not be too late. Au revoir, Miss Fay. I believe your troubles will pass like a summer cloud. God bless you both."

He snatched his hat and darted from the room. Faintly, they heard the tinkle of a cowbell attached to the white gate. Toby crossed to a window and looked out.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" exclaimed Dan, in a voice denoting stark amazement. "Can you see him, Toby?"

"Sure."

"What's he doing?"

"He's running, your honor."

"D'you hear that, Fay? He's running." Corcoran turned in his chair, looking back at her. "Hullo, what is bothering you?"

Fay was staring into vacancy, and the gray eyes were speculative. "I was only wondering, Dan, why a man whose name is de Brion should carry a cigarette-case with diamond initials G. M...."

14

Pythagoric Buds

That gray building known to some as the War Shop, to others as the Stone Jug, and to others (the majority) as the War Office, presented its usual yawn of somnolence to Whitehall when dusk fell. At 'bus stops, jaded looking workers queued up; others hurried towards Tube stations; Naval officers from the Admiralty, near-by, and military officers from Headquarters sought, and sometimes found, taxis. The Naval officers all carried paradoxical walking sticks: for who ever saw a sailor pacing the deck with a walking stick? And in a submarine such a thing would be worse than superfluous—it would be in the way.

As darkness, accompanied by a threatening ground mist, extended its hold on Whitehall, two by two weary workers found their way into arks green or red, that is, into those 'buses for which they had waited so patiently. The human stream being sucked into plugs of the Underground decreased in volume. Officers had found taxis, or had been absorbed by the Tube. The pall of black-out fell upon London.

This phenomenon, this mass disappearing trick, had nearly achieved its nightly purpose when a car came racing to the main entrance of the War Office, and a man jumped out, spoke rapidly to the driver, and ran up the steps. Some slight delay occurred, and this he suffered impatiently. However, he was admitted.

Three minutes later, a staff captain rapped on a door upstairs, opened it and looked across an office the walls of which were almost entirely covered with maps, to a desk whereat Lieutenant General Sir Aubrey Bulwer (in his youth accounted the most handsome officer in the British Army) was seated.

"Mr. Gaston Max is here, sir."

"Please show him in."

Gaston Max entered so promptly that evidently he had been immediately behind the captain, who retired and closed the door. One who knew the Frenchman well would have perceived that his glance had lost some of its vivacity, that he was less spruce than usual, that, in short, he was laboring under the influence of a powerful emotion.

"Sit down, Mr. Max. What can I do for you?"

But Gaston Max did not sit down; he crossed the room and stood before the speaker. "I have a question to ask, General. I beg that you will not hesitate to answer it—to relieve me of a terrible anxiety. The raid by Combined Operations ... has it started?"

He leaned forward, his hands resting on the desk, and searched the lined, somewhat tired looking face of the soldier, who met this strange regard and who seemed to hesitate. "I don't know that I'm at liberty—"

"General! I have made a request. Grant it, I beg! I know the entire composition of this force, the ships engaged, the names of the officers, the armaments and vehicles employed. I will tell you all this, in a minute. But I ask—has the expedition started?"

General Bulwer, manifestly much disturbed, seemed suddenly to make up his mind. He looked at a rather elaborate timepiece which stood before him. "The convoy with its escort left port almost exactly forty-nine minutes ago."

Gaston Max fell back; one might legitimately have said that he staggered: his normally pale face grew even paler, and he clapped an open palm to his forehead in a gesture of anguish melodramatic, Gallic, but passionately sincere.

"My God! I am too late!"

Ten minutes after Gaston Max had uttered that cry of despair, it would have been difficult to decide whether he or General Bulwer presented the more haggard appearance ...

"The details you have given me, Mr. Max, are correct in every particular. The plan of operations is almost equally so. I am appalled. All that can humanly be done I have done; but I fear that recall is impossible. The mere idea that this information is in enemy hands is nearly unendurable. They have gone—"

"To destruction, general—many of them, yes. For this information *is* in enemy hands. For hours I have been at work, but not until an hour ago did I find myself in a position to produce definite evidence—and it was an hour too late. I will show you."

He spoke, and moved, in the dull manner of a dispirited man. The general watched him feverishly: he had abandoned his desk and was pacing the office like a wild thing trapped. From an attaché case Gaston Max drew out a bundle of papers.

"First, the key. For this key I have sought for months. No wonder I failed. See." General Bulwer halted in that febrile promenade, stood beside him and studied a typewritten sheet. "Observe the top line, in capitals, with wide spaces:—

"PYTHAGORIC BUDS"

"Yes, yes. What does it mean?"

"It means, my general, that fourteen letters of the twenty-six contained in the English alphabet are represented here. In their proper order, those omitted are: e, f, j, k, l, m, n, q, v, w, x and z. Now, regard the second line, in which I have filled in these missing letters, in that order, between the capitals:—

"PeYfTjHkAlGmOnRqIvCwBxUzD S"

"Very well. What now?"

"Now, the third line, above which I have written the alphabet:—

"A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

"p e f t j h k a l g m o n r q i v c w b x u z d s"

"And what does that convey?"

"It conveys, with one small flaw represented by the letter N, a scientifically shuffled alphabet! No letter, except N, is in its usual place! If you knew how difficult this is to do, you would appreciate, but yes, the cleverness of these scoundrels; for the formula has to be one that can easily be *memorised*: no code book is carried to incriminate. Hence, 'Pythagoric buds'. One remembers that: the remainder is automatic."

"And the information?"

"Messages, decipherable only by those acquainted with this key, have been cunningly, so cunningly, hidden in speeches openly broadcast from England—and listened to and transcribed in Berlin! It was the sometimes strange language—sentences, oh, so tortured—in these broadcasts, which first attracted my attention. But the code defied me. Yes, I, Gaston Max, was at a loss. A divine accident—perhaps the presence of an angel—put the clue in my hands. All those details which I have given to you have been transmitted to Berlin from time to time in this way. I have records of those speeches; but it has taken me all day to decipher the coded passages. Mon dieu! it took me an hour too long!"

A 'phone buzzed, and General Bulwer literally sprang to the instrument. His expression, as he listened, was tragic; he seemed to age before the eyes of the one who watched, a gray shadow to creep over his fine features. He said simply, "Very good," hung up the receiver and dropping into his chair buried his face in his hands.

"No hope?" whispered Gaston Max.

The stricken man looked up. "They are just approaching the French coast."

Gaston Max sank slowly down into a well worn leathern armchair; and he, too, buried his face in his hands. The blacked-out War Office admitted no sound from a semi-deserted Whitehall. It was the soldier who broke that oppressive silence.

"You have one thing more to tell me:—the name of the man for whom a firing party is waiting at the Tower."

Gaston Max looked up. "It is the name of a clever man; a dangerous man; an evil man—but a man who ceased to be clever or even dangerous, when under the influence of his ruling passion—women. He forgot, this poor fool, that he had (or so I suppose) been actually coding sentences for a broadcast, in his car, on the back of an envelope, when he met a girl so beautiful, and so sweet. He gave her this envelope because it bore his address. He may even have remembered the scribbled notes, but have thought that they could mean nothing to her."

"And his name, Monsieur Max?"

"Sir Giles Loeder."

General Bulwer came to his feet as though the seat of his chair had suddenly become electrified. "What do you say?"

"I said Sir Giles Loeder. Perhaps I should have said, the late Sir Giles Loeder."

General Bulwer, clutching the edge of his desk, glared at Gaston Max as though, even now, he doubted if he had heard aright. "But, good God, sir! *Loeder!* Damn it! he knew *everybody*! The last time I met him (not long before his death) was at a luncheon where there were two Cabinet Ministers and another officer of the General Staff as well as myself! Are you mad?"

Gaston Max forced a wan smile: he shrugged. "Would you like to see the original envelope, my general? It is in safe keeping; but I can borrow it if you wish. It is because Sir Giles Loeder knew everybody that he was one of the most dangerous Axis agents in England. But I have yet to learn, first, who killed him, and second, who was his chief ..."

15

Messieurs, Faites Vos Jeux!

A large Chinese vase rested on a lacquer stool. It contained a quantity of arum lilies and had the effect of dominating the square, thickly carpeted lobby of Destrée's apartment. Shaded lights were so disposed that this vase and the waxen white petals acquired startling prominence against a background afforded by the rose tints of a Persian prayer mat which hung upon the wall.

In an oval niche a green Buddha crouched contemplating these lilies; a tiny, shaded lamp burned before him. There was a note of baroque in all the appointments. A Burmese gong poised in a wooden support gleamed mysteriously from a shadowed corner, and near it, on a ledge, stood a violet lacquered telephone. Facing the entrance, so that it occupied much of the space between two doors, was a Madonna by El Greco; a beautiful ivory crucifix hung above the massive frame. But of all these strange, indeed incompatible, elements, it was the lilies which dominated the lobby.

There was no sound, until this perfumed silence was broken by a faint buzzing. A door opened immediately, and a man came out and went to the instrument. It was Mr. Francis, with whom James Wake had had some conversation recently; Mr. Francis of the cat-like walk, the clean shaven, heavy, expressive face, the dimpled chin. To-night he wore "tails" and presented a notable figure, since many men had given up "dressing" altogether. The telephone conversation was brief.

"O.K. Bring him right up."

Mr. Francis adjusted his white tie before a mirror in a lacquered frame immediately above a dainty bureau. That magnified mosquito note of an ascending elevator proclaimed itself, perceptibly increased and then stopped. The sound of a distant clanging gate, a resumption of the whine, this time diminuendo, and Mr. Francis opened the door, just as a fair young man who wore the uniform of a celebrated infantry regiment was about to press the bell.

"Ah, good evening, Captain Fyne," said Mr. Francis, his chin dimpling. "I was expecting you. Mr. Olivar told me you were coming along."

"Wasn't sure if I'd come to the right spot. Is Teddie here?"

"I am expecting him. My name is Francis."

Captain Fyne, a distrait young man, accepted the outstretched hand. As they entered the lobby and Mr. Francis closed the door, Captain Fyne sniffed, and looked about him in growing bewilderment.

"Let me take your cap and cane."

These being surrendered, Mr. Francis flung another door open and ushered the visitor into a small room evidently designed purely for the alleviation of thirst. A man in a white jacket presided over a red bar, and there were several armchairs and small red tables disposed here and there. Actually, only one customer was present; he wore a dark lounge suit, had iron gray hair perfectly groomed, a brief military moustache, and a cordless monocle which presumably was retained in place by means of hypnotic suggestion. A stiffly upright figure, a slow, easy manner and an ironic savoir-faire recalled the older diplomacy. Mr. Francis performed introductions:

"Ah, Mr. Michaelis, this is Captain the Honorable Peter Fyne, a friend of Olivar's. You may not have met."

"How do you do," said Mr. Michaelis, bowing formally. "Please let me offer you a drink. As an old frequenter of these haunts of vice,"—he smiled indulgently—"I believe the honor is mine."

"Oh, thanks," said Captain Fyne vaguely. "I could do with a drink."

The barman being given instructions: "I know your brother, Lord Abthorp, quite well," said Mr. Michaelis. "Still out East?"

"Yes." Fyne nodded in his puzzled way; "as a matter of fact, in Cairo at the moment. Hope he doesn't push on before I arrive."

"Oh, I see. Enough soda? Good." Mr. Michaelis handed a tumbler to the new arrival. "You expect to be joining him, then?"

"Yes, rather; sailing next week."

"Well, well, here's the best of luck. If, which I trust will not be the case, I should miss seeing you again, please give my warm regards to your brother."

A tiny red light glowed just above the red bar. Mr. Francis went out, closing the door behind him. He returned in less than a minute accompanied by a slender young man of willowy figure, who carried his clothes with an almost feminine grace. His handsome features were so evenly tanned that, since the Riviera was no longer available to Londoners, one suspected sunray treatment or even some preparation in a bottle. His dark hair presented a series of glittering waves and his dark eyes were really beautiful, or would have been considered so if they had belonged to a girl. He wore a dinner suit, but a companion, who followed him, was attired as a City man (or, alternatively, disguised as a stockbroker).

The striped trousers worn by this second visitor any competent stage producer would have condemned on sight as taken off the wrong hook. He had his depressed hair parted in the center and had cultivated probably the smallest moustache in Europe: it looked like two full stops. He wore black-rimmed spectacles, and in profile his figure suggested that a finely developed torso had slipped down in some way to the neighborhood of the waist line.

"Hello, Teddie," called Captain Fyne, as the immaculate young man entered; "you have turned up then?"

"Of course I have. I never miss a game when there is one going."

Teddie's modulated tones were marred by a slight lisp which, however, some women had found fascinating. Mr. Francis entered behind the pair, and closed the door again.

"As this is your first visit, Mr. Bernstein, let me make you at home. This is Captain the Honorable Peter Fyne, and Mr. Michaelis. Mr. Olivar I guess you know already."

"Glad to meet you, captain," said Mr. Bernstein. "How d'you do, Mr. M." He looked about him appreciatively. "Posh little place, ain't it! I'll say so."

He rubbed his hands together, hands which, in marked contrast to his rather pasty features, were distinctly red. He laughed on three rising notes of appreciation, "Ha! ha! *ha!*" revealing yellowish teeth, two of which were redeemed by gold coverings. Mr. Michaelis, who had stepped to a side-table to light a cigar, rejoined the group. Mr. Bernstein, in reply to a courteous inquiry, suggested a double whisky and soda, which was promptly forthcoming.

"Ah! that's the stuff," he declared, sampling it and smacking his lips. "Goes down very well, that does. Not half!"

He took another drink. "A drop of good stuff, that. What ho!"

Captain Fyne drew Teddie Oliver aside, and: "I say, Teddie," he began, and looked more bewildered than ever, "where did you find it?"

Teddie Olivar rolled his eyes, shrugged gracefully and accompanied the gesture with a movement of his shapely hands. "Really, Peter, one has to do it nowadays. I agree that the man is somewhat ungarnished, and his suitings are always shocking, but just look at my Tuxedo, for instance. How could I possibly be turned out as I am if there were no Mr. Bernsteins? And my wine cellar, Peter! Positively pre-war. Mr. Bernstein again."

"Oh, I see. Black market king?"

"Black market emperor, Peter. A really wonderful fellow. Old Huskin would be delighted to meet him, I am sure."

"So would the police, no doubt. But that reminds me. You said Lady Huskin was coming."

"My dear Peter, it is an old story—the jealous husband. Of course Poppy Huskin is simply prostrated, but the old man insisted upon her going down to Huskin Court to-night for one of those unendurable political dinners. Poor Poppy! she is so good to me, too."

Mr. Bernstein had now more or less assumed command of the gathering, however. His ripe and rolling tones possessed

great penetrative powers.

"Between ourselves, Mr. Francis—just as one pal to another, like, see what I mean?—What do they rush you for this line of Scotch?"

"Well," Mr. Francis replied, his chin dimpling, "I could look up the account."

"I'll lay you an even fiver—and here's me money." Mr. Bernstein produced a pregnant wallet, and from it took out a five pound note. "Cover that, old cock." He slapped it down on the counter. "An even fiver I'm layin' you, that I can do you three cases of the same stuff at a fifteen per cent reduck."

"Take back your money, Mr. Bernstein." Mr. Francis smiled, and handed him the note. "I accept your word right now; and I shall be real pleased to have the three cases on the understanding you have mentioned, and at that price."

"They are yours." Mr. Bernstein replaced the wad, produced a small notebook and a pencil and made an entry.

"I can see we shall do a little business. Yes, thanks—" in reply to a mute interrogation from the solicitous Mr. Michaelis. "The other half would go down very well. I never say no to a drop o' good stuff."

Another door communicating with the bar was thrown open and a subdued murmur of conversation suggesting the presence of a number of people became audible. Above it rose a single voice: "Messieurs, faites vos jeux!"

Sounds of movement followed, ejaculations, muttered instructions, then the whirring of a wheel, the rattle of an ivory ball. As the woman who had opened the door entered the bar and closed the door behind her, one heard the voice of the croupier again: "Rien ne va plus ..."

Destrée smiled around upon her guests.

Mr. Michaelis, who stood nearest to the door, raised her tiny fingers to his lips, with continental chivalry. Teddie Olivar dragged Captain Fyne forward.

"The loveliest and cleverest woman in London," he lisped. "This is my friend, Peter Fyne, dear. Needless for me to add, Peter, that this is Ysolde Destrée."

Captain Fyne's bewilderment became something like hypnosis, as he bowed over the extended hands of his hostess. She wore a frock which appeared to be composed of gold tissue, the back of which its designer had left wholly to the spectator's imagination to sketch in; so that there was nothing to mar the beauty of her arms and shoulders. A floral ornament composed of rubies, peeped out from the blackness of her gleaming hair, and red sandals with golden heels seemed, so lightly did she tread, to make no impress upon the carpet. As a model of wartime economy Destrée's frock could not well have been improved upon with propriety, since it terminated not far beneath her gracefully modelled breasts and only resumed its duties where the curve of slender hips began, exposing the powdered satin of her tiny waist. She was dainty as a fairy and alluring as a secret vice; her eyes gave no hint of reward or punishment, but merely beckoned.

Mr. Bernstein rubbed his red hands together, and nudged Mr. Michaelis. "Do the honors, old boy," he murmured, "what ho! Bit of all right."

Mr. Michaelis presented Mr. Bernstein, adding, "A friend of Teddie Olivar, and one who is reputed to be a very daring player. So to-night, dear Destrée, you must be on your mettle."

"I love those who are daring," she smiled, and the fairy bell voice was in harmony with the fairy figure—"in love and in play."

"That's O.K. by me," declared Mr. Bernstein, and his gold teeth added their tribute. "I can see we are going to get along fine. Ha, ha, *ha*! What about a short one on me, everybody, as I've had two on the house."

"No, no," Destrée laid a tiny ivory hand on his sleeve. "You are my guest, Mr. Bernstein—but sometimes I go out to lunch and even to dinner."

"That's a bet." Once more the small notebook appeared. "Let's make a date, now. What about Friday?"

"Alas." She shook her head, looking up at him. "All this week I am so popular that my luncheons and dinners are provided."

"Next Monday, then. The Berkeley at one ack emma. Leave the wine to me."

"That is very nice of you, Mr. Bernstein. I shall be most happy."

"I'll see you're happy." The notebook disappeared. "And now what about a spot of gambling?"

"But, of course," cried Destrée, throwing open the door behind her. "By all means let us gamble. To-day in this dull London, what else is there to do?"

16

The Ivory Ball

The gambling room was a long, rectangular apartment across one end of which a roulette table extended. The remainder of the room contained card tables, armchairs and settees; it was softly carpeted and dimly lighted, since most of the light had been concentrated on the roulette table. A few pictures lurked on shadowy walls, and in contrast to the Madonna of the lobby, these appeared to consist largely of modernistic nudes. Some fourteen people, men and women, were seated or standing around the roulette table when Destrée entered with her new guests.

To one familiar with Monte Carlo it would have appeared, at first sight, noting its circular pit in the centre to accommodate a regulation wheel, that this table had been constructed for roulette. It was of similar size to those used in the Casino, covered with green baize, marked out in the usual way. Croupiers faced one another on either side of the wheel, stacks of colored stakes ranged neatly before them, and two others officiated, one at either end of the table. Play was not particularly high at the moment, but counters were marked in sterling values and not in francs; so that Mr. Bernstein, peering over the bare shoulder of a stout and elderly lady who watched the wheel through raised lorgnettes, saw that the highest single stake exposed represented about five pounds.

He waited for the ball to fall and listened to the monotonous intonation of the croupier: "Trente-deux, rouge, pair et passe."

Remorseless rakes swept stakes away, those of a few lucky ones remaining to be paid out. Mr. Bernstein, glancing aside for a moment, noted a billiard marking-board with cues in a rack, attached to a wall behind the first croupier. He turned to look for Destrée; but Destrée had disappeared.

Mr. Michaelis was obligingly cashing twenty pounds into one pound and ten shilling counters for Captain Fyne. Teddie Olivar had taken an unoccupied chair next to a titled lady whose beauty had created considerable stir at Court during the later years of Edward the Seventh. An addict, banished from Monte Carlo, she was prepared to risk a scandal which might tarnish her ancient name rather than to forego that feverish excitement which can be born in the human breast by the antics of a little ivory ball.

Peter Fyne was the only officer present, or the only officer in uniform. Except for one rather pretty girl who seemed to be a novice, and who was receiving loving instruction in the intricacies of roulette from her companion, a short, lean City magnate, with a long, stout purse, the players were middle-aged to elderly.

Left to his own devices, Mr. Bernstein evidently determined upon a line of conduct. He produced his fat wallet. The slightly amused voice of Mr. Francis spoke almost at his elbow.

"As I believe you have not played here before, Mr. Bernstein, the chips are valued from half-a-crown to ten pounds, and fifty pounds is the maximum on the even chances. What would you like to start with?"

"Here's twenty quid," said Mr. Bernstein. "Lay it out for me like this: ten one pounders; ten ten bobs; ten five bobs; and the rest in half dollars."

"With pleasure." Mr. Francis handed the money to one of the croupiers dealing in cash and indicated to Mr. Bernstein that he should dispose of several mounds of chips delivered, in suitable pockets, or elsewhere.

"Messieurs! faites vos jeux!"

The game went on ...

In that dimly lighted room where miniature lily pools stood upon lacquered tables and waxen blooms loaded the air with their heady fragrance, Destrée lolled on her divan. She smoked a cigarette fitted into the little jewelled holder, and her lips were parted in that enigmatic smile. No echo of the play reached this room. Its silence was almost stupefying; indeed, it was disturbed once by a sound resembling the fluttering of a butterfly, but actually occasioned by a petal

falling from a lily onto the lacquered surface beneath. At last, however, a faint tap sounded upon the door. The tinkling voice of Destrée spoke the one word: "Enter."

Mr. Michaelis came in, closing the door behind him. He crossed noiselessly, his footsteps deadened by the Chinese carpet, and stood for a moment looking down at her. She watched him with those sleepy eyes in which no message could be read.

"I am not sure that I am glad," he began, "that Olivar should bring his friend Bernstein."

She dimpled her satin shoulders. "What does it matter so long as he plays. Is he playing?"

"Yes." Mr. Michaelis, who was smoking a cigar, contemplated the cone for a moment, thoughtfully. "I saw Francis cash twenty pounds for him. But it is not always good policy to think only of the money. Your parties have been justly celebrated for a certain bon ton. It would be regrettable if vulgarity should be permitted to intrude."

"My dear Hugo—Teddie, who is so beautiful but so brainless, has his uses all the same; and his demands are not high. He brought us Poppy Huskin. Even you will admit that she was welcome. Others, too. He brought Mr. Bernstein at my own request. Our wine bill is excessive. Mr. Bernstein is said to be more—considerate." Destrée closed her eyes entirely, or seemed to do so.

Mr. Michaelis contemplated his cigar again. "You admit that Olivar is brainless. This fact has its advantages—but it may prove destructive."

"You cannot possibly have forgotten," murmured Destrée, "that Giles had taken the bank with him on the night that he came to an end so regrettable."

"I have not forgotten," said Michaelis quietly.

"Our—official resources are by no means unlimited." She dropped the cigarette into a little jade bowl. "And so"—she moved her shoulders again—"we must economise as best we can. The loss of so much capital is serious."

"But I pointed out to you at the time, when the arrangement was made, Ysolde, that a man who obeys two masters is the servant of neither."

"Precisely what do you mean, Hugo?"

"Well, I mean that what I may describe as our common fund should have been employed for the game. Loeder, in accepting a portion of the financial responsibility, admittedly was a welcome partner, at the time, as our resources were somewhat depleted. But in proposing himself as a backer, he was no doubt thinking primarily of his own profit."

"No doubt," murmured Destrée lazily.

"That—unfortunate misunderstanding, which led him to insist upon withdrawing his capital before the close of play, resulted in a dangerously awkward situation. As you remember, a run on the table after he had gone very nearly broke the bank."

"That is why we play again to-night. We must restore our fortunes."

"A perilous procedure. A link between Loeder and roulette is almost certain to be established by the police. It was my advice, and it remains my conviction, that we should lie low until the activities of Scotland Yard in this matter have worn themselves out a little. Normally, our risks are negligible, but if we should find ourselves called as witnesses in a murder case—this would be a different affair."

"It would be a truly unpleasant affair. But the situation was one for which I confess I had not provided."

Michaelis frowned. "It is our duty to foresee every eventuality. We know what to expect if we fail. There are circumstances concerning that unfortunate night which I find disturbing. I am not even sure that I enjoy your entire confidence in this respect."

Destrée stretched out her hand in a gesture of appeal. "Hugo, why are you so distrustful?"

Michaelis clasped the tiny hand, stooped, and seemed to feast his eyes upon its delicate ivory and coral. He pressed the slender fingers to his lips for lingering seconds, his gaze fixed, now, upon Destrée's provocative face. She made a petulant moue, withdrawing her hand. "Tell me what you are thinking."

"I was thinking that I would sacrifice everything in the world—if I were sure of you."

"But what else? You were thinking of something else."

He placed his cigar in a bronze bowl, and seating himself on the divan, passed his arm lightly around her shoulders. "I was thinking that many men have loved you, and wondering how many of them you have made happy."

She snuggled her glossy head against his sleeve, like a contented kitten, closing her eyes. "What does it matter," she murmured. "I have always had greater interests: they have left me little time for love, and so—" That expressive dimple appeared upon one shoulder, the dimple which came to life when she shrugged: his arm tightened around her.

"You are so utterly maddening, Ysolde, that sometimes I am afraid—"

"Afraid of what, Hugo?" the drooping lashes were partly raised.

"It would be difficult to express." He spoke with icy coldness. "Afraid, perhaps, that I might be tempted to—"

"Yes?"

"To tell you the truth."

"About what?"

"About yourself."

Destrée fully opened her dark eyes, but otherwise did not stir. "Do you think it would be news to me?"

"No; but it would make you angry. There is no place for anger in our friendship. I watch you as every man watches the woman he loves. Your self-command is perfect—it is wonderful; but I was not alone in detecting your temporary loss of poise when Loeder brought the little brunette to Mrs. Sankey's. Before, I had doubted: then, I knew."

"What did you know?"

"I knew that he was your lover. You were unable to hide your jealousy—from me. I am not reproaching you. Your life is your own."

Destrée lay almost perfectly still, reclosing her eyes. "Perhaps, Hugo," she said, so softly that her voice sounded like an echo of fairy bells, "you may jump to conclusions—yes? But what does it matter? Tell me who else thinks as you do."

"Francis."

"Oh!" she smiled. "As Giles is dead, you find another to be jealous about. Poor Julian! Have you talked it over with him, Hugo?"

Michaelis withdrew his arm, gently, and stood up. "You are angry. It is my fault, and I am sorry."

"Truly, Hugo, truly, I am not angry. I know how much you care, and so, how could I be angry?"

"Yes—I care deeply, and so, I am always watching over you. It is why I am anxious to-night. After all, this man Bernstein is a stranger."

"And if the police should become rudely inquisitive? Well—" Destrée again extended that tiny hand, curling the fingers upward so as to resemble a half opened lotus—"our arrangements have always worked perfectly. Why should they fail us now?"

Michaelis picked up his still smouldering cigar and considered the cone of ash. His urbanity was in no way disturbed, but a slight frown remained between his brows.

"I hope you may be right, Ysolde."

Around the roulette wheel excitement was rising.

The room, closely blacked-out, began, in spite of its spaciousness, to grow stuffy; but this is not to say that it had approached the state of almost solid fug which characterises "The Kitchen" at Monte Carlo. Its atmosphere had become psychologically tense, and play was evidently more serious. Teddie Olivar, gallantly investing the capital of his lady partner, was losing heavily on her behalf. Captain Fyne cashed another twenty pounds. Spin after spin swelled the bank's coffers at the moment that Mr. Michaelis returned and strolled up to the table. To this slaughter of the innocents, however, there was one exception; and the exception was Mr. Bernstein.

A Babylonian mound of winnings lay within reach of his left hand. He occupied a chair behind which two or three spectators stood watching his method, and occasionally they endeavored to follow it in a sporadic fashion.

Mr. Michaelis exchanged glances with Mr. Francis across the table, then strolled around to join him. "A run of bad luck for you, my dear friend."

"Others are losing; that will level it up a bit. Teddie Olivar has earned his rake-off. I don't think he tries to lose; in fact, I doubt if that's possible. But he hardly ever wins. He has presented us with a hundred pounds of Lady Keffington's money. That's ten pounds for a night's work, plus his cut on whatever Fyne loses."

Teddie Olivar, using a rake, at this moment pushed five ten pound notes across the cloth to a cashier, demanding, with an accompanying flick of his long lashes, "Ten fives, if you please ... and that sees me right out."

Mr. Bernstein's forehead displayed a dew of perspiration. He frequently mopped it with a Cambridge blue handkerchief. Through his spectacles his eyes gleamed triumphantly. Rubbing his red hands together and surveying the cloth with the air of a field marshal planning a battle, he began to toss stakes on to selected numbers, calling out to the croupier:

"Nineteen ... twenty-one ... Shove over that onto eleven, old cock ..."

These arrangements being completed, the officiating croupier seized the cross-bar and slowly reversed the wheel into a new spin, at the same time flicking the ivory ball into play. He had set it on its course somewhat too vigorously, however, for from the very first stud with which it came in contact the ball leapt high in the air, dropped on to the green baize, and bounded from there to the carpet. Here, silently, it rolled away into shadow.

The man responsible glanced with a rather guilty smile towards Mr. Francis; and Mr. Bernstein became even more voluble than usual.

"That's done it!" he declared. "There goes me run o' luck. That's torn it! Blimey! not half it hasn't!"

Mr. Francis rang a bell, and the white-coated barman came in. "The ball has been lost. Try to find it."

As the man, using a torch, began to peer under chairs and other pieces of furniture: "Who is that croupier?" Mr. Michaelis directed his monocle upon the offender. "Rather a clumsy fellow."

"Oh, no, I have always found him quite efficient. It's not an uncommon accident. He plays for Mrs. Sankey. Wake is a better croupier, but we thought it advisable to dispense with his services at present."

"That was wise."

"Here! what about my blinkin' stakes?" Mr. Bernstein demanded. "What happens now?"

Several people had joined in the hunt for the ball. It could not be found.

"Put another ball into play," said Mr. Francis. The croupier, taking one from a little box, hesitated for a moment, apparently uncertain whether he should reverse the wheel or let it pursue its present course. "An entirely new spin," added Mr. Francis rather irritably. "The stakes remain."

Some few players made hasty readjustments before the words "Rien ne va plus" were spoken. The new ball rattled into a number and came to rest ... "Trente-cinq, noir, impair et passe."

Mr. Bernstein's misgivings were fulfilled. He had lost every piece he had on the table.

"What did I tell you?" he inquired, extending both palms in a general appeal. He glared at the croupier responsible. "See what you've done for me? Broke the sequence. Lo' lumme!—that's torn it, that has."

However, he renewed his stakes; the hunt for the missing ball was abandoned, and the game went on ... "Messieurs! faites vos jeux!"

A bell rang: it continued to ring—and a red light glowed immediately above the billiards marking-board.

"Here!" cried Mr. Bernstein, mopping his moist brow—"what's up now? A blinkin' air raid?"

Many of the players stood up. The bell ceased to ring; the red light went out. A door behind one of the croupiers opened and Destrée came in, languid and smiling as usual.

"Will you please all be so good as to take up your stakes, and any counters you have before you. Put them in your pocket or handbag."

Mr. Bernstein was first to obey. "Lumme! it's the cops!" he exclaimed, transferring mounds of pieces from the cloth to his pockets with astonishing dexterity.

Teddie Olivar obligingly opened Lady Keffington's handbag which lay beside her, and bundled all the remaining stakes into it. "Safer with you than with me, dear."

"Will you please all come out by this door," the bell voice of Destrée ordered. "Don't make unnecessary noise, and you have nothing to worry about. The counters Mr. Francis will redeem later."

In a retirement which threatened to become a rout, the gamblers obeyed, to find themselves in a short passage, led by Destrée who carried a torch. This passage terminated in a tiled kitchen where the white-coated barman stood by with wraps, furs, hats and other belongings, which he returned to their several owners. A door was opened to admit the tang of chill night air, as four croupiers joined the party.

"These gentlemen will lead the way," said Destrée quietly. "You will go up the fire ladder to the flat above; and provided you make no noise, there is nothing to be alarmed about. Mr. Francis will join you in a few moments."

"I say, Teddie," remarked Peter Fyne, "this will break me if I'm caught."

"Don't be so pettish, Peter," Teddie implored: "you are such an amateur of life ..."

Reclosing the door behind a final departing guest, Destrée returned to the gaming room. It was transformed. The table had been dismantled with the speed of a stage illusion; the wheel, the bank and the rakes had been packed into a wicker basket; the green baize cover, which was in two sections, each of these folding screen-wise into three again, had been removed. The barman, his white coat discarded in favor of a black one, already was carrying the wooden sections off to some other room. Mr. Francis rearranged chairs. The roulette table had become again what it was in reality—a billiard table. Mr. Francis shouldered the laden basket and made for the kitchen passage: despite the burden his gait remained feline, almost that of one who moves on tiptoes. Mr. Michaelis opened the door for him and closed it behind him. Then, stiffly upright, he focussed his monocle upon the figure of Mr. Bernstein, crawling beetlesque about the carpet; but it was Destrée, hands on hips, who spoke.

"May I inquire what you are doing, Mr. Bernstein?"

"I have dropped a chip."

"Oh!" murmured Mr. Michaelis—"that is important. Let me help you to find it. I may add that it is too late for you to leave."

"I'll take my chance. Ah! got it!"

He stood up, holding between finger and thumb a five shilling counter, which, with a golden grin, he slipped into his pocket, watched by the imperturbably smiling Destrée. The whine of an ascending elevator became audible, for all doors were open. Then, followed the metallic clang of lift gates.

"Let us go into the bar," suggested Destrée. "Will you take a drink with me, Mr. Bernstein?"

"Not half! Just what I need. Go down very well, that would."

The doorbell rang. Following a suitable interval, the ex-barman opened the door. Chief Inspector Firth and Sergeant Bluett stood outside.

When, the door being closed, Firth and Bluett were left alone in the lobby (for the man who had admitted them had gone to inform Destrée of their arrival) those spiritual discords which it symbolised impressed themselves on both in a different way.

Sergeant Bluett sniffed the lilies—which he could not believe to be real—and with difficulty repressed a sneeze. Firth, his hazel eyes narrowed, stared at the painted Madonna, at the crucifix above it; and they spoke to him with the voice of blasphemy; they shouted obscenely in raucous merriment. He turned away, tight lipped. A door opened and Destrée joined them. She wore a lace wrap over her evening frock, and her languor, her smile of Eleusis, had not deserted her.

"Good evening, Inspector." She glanced down at a card which she held and then up at the Chief Inspector, who towered above her tiny figure, perhaps wondering if he had grown out of his tweed suit or if it had always been too small for him. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"Do I address Mrs. Destrée?"

"I am Mrs. Destrée. Is anything wrong?"

"Weel—that remains to be seen, madam. In fact, I would wish, if it will no' inconvenience you, to take a look around."

Destrée continued to smile, soundlessly tapping the toe of one red sandal upon the carpet, and her fairy-bell notes fell like enchanted music on the ears. "Can this be, Inspector, what is known in Axis countries as a domiciliary visit?"

The Chief Inspector's frown, created by the painted Madonna and the crucifix, grew more severe; Sergeant Bluett coughed.

"The Defence of the Realm, madam, slightly extends, it may be, the powers o' the police. If ye mean have I a search warrant, I have none. But acting upon information received, I thought it might be wise if I just took a look around the premises."

"You are welcome, Inspector, although I cannot think what you expect to find. Where would you like to begin, please?"

"Weel, while Sergeant Bluett remains here in the lobby, suppose you and I go along this way and see what we find."

"I am entirely at your service, Inspector—except that if we had gone the other way we might have found a drink."

Firth smiled, but it was a fierce smile, which displayed his small, even lower teeth. The aura of this woman dismayed him. He knew her by repute, but hitherto had never seen her. A man of uncommon probity and by nature religious, he sensed the fact that her beauty was a snare, that indeed she was insidiously evil. But coolness in face of danger always appealed to Firth, so that Destrée's charming nonchalance won his reluctant admiration. With no trace of hesitancy, she showed him her own sitting-room where miniature lily pools glittered under purple lamps. She showed him two bedrooms, voluptuously appointed, and a more Spartan sitting-room and bedroom, apparently those of a man-servant; then, a room allotted to a maid. This maid (wife of the man-servant) was out. Even bathrooms were explored.

"That is all at this end, Inspector. Let us see what we can find at the other." Her upcast glance was taunting; her full lips were slightly parted.

They walked back along the carpeted corridor, and across the lobby where Sergeant Bluett sat reflectively tapping his knee with a tightly folded copy of an evening paper. They entered the gaming room.

"Hello," said Firth suspiciously, "what have we here?"

"It is the billiard room," Destrée explained naively.

Firth's fierce eyes swept around as he took in every detail. "A queer feature in a lady's flat," he commented.

"I quite agree, Inspector." Destrée gave a trilling little laugh. "But I didn't trouble to disturb it, you see, when I took the place over. I found it so useful for bridge parties. My flat really belongs to Colonel Lexinham: I am only his tenant. It was too much trouble to take down his billiard table; also, some of my friends like a game of snooker."

"Some of your friends seem to have been here to-night!" Firth inhaled vigorously.

"Yes, they left just a while ago: a small party who came on from a theatre. In fact, I am not sure that they are all gone." She raised her tinkling voice. "Mr. Bernstein, Mr. Michaelis—have you gone?"

The bar door opened, and Mr. Bernstein, wetly hot, came in followed by Mr. Michaelis; both gentlemen carried tumblers.

"Oh!" Destrée clapped her hands like a playful child. "I thought we had thirsty stragglers! Chief Inspector Firth has just called. I am sure he would like a drink, too."

Mr. Bernstein, in nodding acknowledgment of this introduction, spilled some of the contents of his tumbler. With a murmured apology, he pulled out the Cambridge handkerchief, dropped on one knee and began to mop the carpet. He stood up less hurriedly, for his earlier movement had created a suspicious chinking sound traceable to the counters which loaded his pockets. However, he conquered any embarrassment which may have threatened him.

"Wonderful how the police get to know where they keep a drop o' good stuff!" He smacked his lips. "Anything wrong, Inspector? Mrs. Destrée been slackin' off on her fire-watching, or something?"

"I confess that I cannot imagine," said Mr. Michaelis coldly, "to what circumstance you are indebted for the pleasure of this call, Mrs. Destrée."

Inspector Firth studied the stiff, monocled figure reflectively.

"I gather that your name is Mr. Michaelis?"

"That is my name."

"I would say, sir, that the police ha' many duties to perform which are no' necessarily pleasures." He turned again to Destrée. "What lies through yon?"

"There are two more small rooms, a pantry and a kitchen. Would you like to see?"

"I would wish to do so." Led by Destrée he soon completed his tour and returned. "And in yon, where these two gentlemen were?"

"That's the place you're looking for, Inspector!" cried Mr. Bernstein. "That's where police investigations are leading to. Not half! Follow me."

Frowning ominously, Firth walked into the little red bar, glanced at shelves of expensive bottles and stared at Mrs. Destrée. "Ye keep a good cellar," he commented.

"I do my best, Inspector. You must not think, please, I am angry with you for bursting in on me like this. No doubt you had a reason, and you must do your duty."

"What about one for the road?" Mr. Bernstein suggested. "Just a wee doch-an-doris?"

Firth shook his head, narrowing the tawny eyes. "I am much obliged, Mr. MacBernstein, but I must say no, and wish you a' good-night."

"This door leads to the lobby." Mr. Michaelis opened it; and there was Sergeant Bluett still seated in his chair, tapping his knee with the evening paper, Destrée rang a bell, and the man-servant reappeared.

"These gentlemen are leaving, Markham."

Markham opened the front door and stood aside.

No word was spoken in the bar until a clang of distant lift gates came, followed by the fading whine of an elevator. Then, Mr. Bernstein, chuckling unctuously, produced from his pocket a small, round, white object which he threw in the air and caught as it fell ... It was the missing roulette ball.

Mr. Michaelis glanced uneasily at Destrée.

"I picked it up," chuckled Mr. Bernstein, "just a tick before the Inspector stepped on it. See me spill me drink? That would have mucked things up, dear. That would have spoiled the party!" He handed the ball to Destrée. "Kiss your uncle Barney."

Destrée tossed the ball to Mr. Michaelis, and clapped her hands in childish glee. A peal of musical laughter rang out ... and was checked as suddenly as though a hand had been pressed over Destrée's red mouth. Her eyes seemed to change, so that their slightly oblique beauty became annulled, swiftly, oddly, and they resembled the eyes of a hunted wild animal. A dull pallor struck all the youth from her face.

"Hugo! Hugo! *listen!*" She clutched Michaelis convulsively. "Oh, no—*no!*" The banshee wail of a siren rose and fell, rose and fell, to give warning of the approach of German raiders. "Hugo! promise you won't leave me! Please hold my hands ... Don't leave me ..."

And Mr. Bernstein, a man amazed, watched an uncontrollable terror claiming this suave woman whose whole life was lived in smiling defiance, whose spirit he had thought to be unconquerable. He glanced at Michaelis, who nodded.

"Strange? It is always the same. Come and lie down until the all-clear, Ysolde—"

"I am afraid—Hugo—I can't walk ... Oh! stop those sirens—stop those sirens!"

Michaelis lifted Destrée in his arms as one who soothes a frightened child, and carried her to her room.

17

Covering Mr. Bernstein

The tall figure of Chief Inspector Firth was indistinguishable from the shadows of a boarded up doorway, but nevertheless Sergeant Bluett, coming around the corner, stepped in without hesitation, and was immediately swallowed up, too. Clouds drifted slowly across the sky from a southwesterly direction, obscuring the moon, and so still was Mayfair in those small hours that the police officers heard a clock chiming somewhere inside the building above them.

"Ye dismissed the squad?" The breadth of Firth's Scots denoted the depth of his annoyance.

"That's right." Bluett's tones sounded preternaturally gloomy. "I know where their scout was posted."

"Is tha' so."

"In the one-way street leading to the front of Gatacre House there's a call-box, right on the corner."

"I mind me of it."

"Well, that's where he was. He must have put a call through the moment he saw us drive up. He's only just gone: slipped through my fingers."

"It doesna' matter. We had nothing on him."

"I should have liked a dekko at his grid."

"And I should like to point out, Bluett, that thieves' slang is highly objectionable to me—and to the Chief. It recalls some of the lowest characters we have known. I am thinking of Painter, the Hoxton murderer."

"I was thinking of Gaston Max."

"Is tha' so? Weel—we both ha' much to learn from him."

Silence fell. A car or a taxi passed along a neighboring street. Doors opened and closed; one heard footsteps and distant voices. Wardens, fire-watchers and others whose duties began when the sirens sounded, were afoot. A searchlight beam shot up over the dark bulk of Gatacre House and seemed to be nosing a bank of cloud like a questing sword ... It was switched off.

"Nae doubt ye know where the gambling party went? But it would ha' been straining our authority to follow."

"Where was that?

"To another flat, either up or downstairs; like enough by the fire ladders, and taking the evidence wi' them. There's little doubt that Sir Giles was associated wi' this gang, and if we could ha' got them inside, there would be time for a little investigation of their private affairs. However, we haven't."

"They'll come out in one's and two's," murmured Bluett. "If some of them have cars, they are parked a long way off. I can see none."

"That doesna' matter. We know that Destrée is in on it, and I'll find out when I get back to the office where Mr. Michaelis lives. By heaven! but there's a woman for ye!"

"Destrée?" came Sergeant Bluett's voice out of the darkness. "I know. Got the nerve of a man."

"The nerve o' three men. I canna' imagine that woman weakening for a moment, Bluett. There's sma' doubt that those who stayed are her associates; and the one I should like to know more about is Mr. Bernstein."

"That's right."

"He will be awkward to check up on; there are many Bernsteins; and so I am thinking, Bluett, that you must do your best to cover him when he leaves."

"Oh," murmured Bluett, without discernible enthusiasm.

"I am going back, and I'll be leaving this job in your hands. I know I can count on you."

"That's right," said Bluett hollowly. "Do you want me to report to-night, or are you thinking of going home at any time?"

"Report in the morning. Good-night."

"Good-night, Inspector."

As the light footsteps of the Chief Inspector, who had a walk cat-like as that of Mr. Francis, died away in the distance, Sergeant Bluett changed his position for another which he had in mind, and which would enable him better to see anyone leaving Gatacre House. He listened intently, questioning the darkness, for now the sky was heavily overcast, and there was threat of rain. Satisfied that no one was about, his new strong-point gained, he sighed deeply and lighted a cigarette.

This cigarette had been smoked, and another as well, before his patience was rewarded. An elegant young man who wore no hat, and whose wavy hair gleamed effectively in dim light cast by the opening of the door, came out escorting an elderly lady who carried a large handbag, a lady to whom the young man displayed most courteous attention. A car, presumably summoned by 'phone, and in charge of a smart chauffeur, rolled up a few moments later. The cavalier, having arranged the lady comfortably in her place, stepped in beside her and the car was driven away.

Bluett succeeded in discerning the number, wrote it blindly in his notebook, and then resumed his vigil. He was about to light a third cigarette when at last came the signal for action.

The door of Gatacre House swung open once more and a man came out alone, walked briskly down the steps, and looked about to right and left. He wore a black overcoat and a rather narrow brimmed bowler hat. The glitter of his spectacles was visible in the darkness. It was Mr. Bernstein. Apparently despairing of a taxi, he set off with springy step, swinging a tightly rolled umbrella in the manner of a walking stick.

Sergeant Bluett replaced the unlighted cigarette (his stock was getting low) and wearily set out in pursuit. The odds against Mr. Bernstein finding a taxi at that hour, Sergeant Bluett put at a hundred to one. Should he succeed in doing so, Bluett, once he had taken its number, would be entitled to abandon his tedious duties and to question the driver in the morning.

He was visited by a vision of an armchair with a pair of slippers set beside it; of a white cover displaying half an admirable veal and ham pie prepared by his wife the day before. There would be a nice bit of cheese, and there would be a bottle of stout. These blissful images danced before him as he strode resolutely on along Grosvenor Street, across New Bond Street, and, presently, with many twists and turns across Regent Street, too. Mr. Bernstein, not once employing a torch, moved through the black-out mystery of London with all the insouciance of a town cat. Except for police and wardens brought to attention by the alert, normal pedestrians were few; and as Mr. Bernstein wore creaky shoes and those of the sergeant were rubber-soled, the pursuit was a simple matter. On the frontiers of Soho an all-night taxi hove in sight and Bluett drew up eagerly towards his quarry.

"Taxi, sir?"

"No, thank you—" and Mr. Bernstein walked on.

"Economy is all very well in wartime," muttered Bluett, crossing the street behind the cab, so that his presence should not be betrayed by a challenge from the driver, "but to my mind it can be overdone."

A moment later, doubling like a hare, he was racing back to overtake the taxi ... He had seen Mr. Bernstein approach a man who stood beside a stationary car waiting immediately beyond the next corner!

He overtook the taxi and jumped on the running board. "Scotland Yard," he said breathlessly. "Pull round like lightning, and try to keep that car in sight—one back on the next corner."

"Blimey!" remarked the driver. "Want a bit of doin' on a night like this!"

"You can do it." Sergeant Bluett got in, having satisfied himself that the driver bore no resemblance to Peter Finch.

The unforeseen pursuit began; and it took an equally unforeseen direction, leading down the Haymarket and into Pall Mall, past Buckingham Palace guarded by phantom sentries, and out into Buckingham Gate. A theory that Mr. Bernstein was making for Victoria Station (although for what purpose, at that hour, Bluett could not imagine) proved to be wrong. In Buckingham Gate the car ahead was pulled up.

"Stop!" said Bluett. "Wait here."

He jumped out and moved cautiously forward. He was just in time to see Mr. Bernstein enter one of those large, grimy and somewhat threatening buildings which distinguish this thoroughfare. He pulled up with a muffled, "Well, I'll be damned!" The building, taken over by the Salvation Army, was the Buckingham Gate hostelry for stranded Service men!

But Detective-sergeant Bluett was an officer of some resource. In thirty seconds he had rejoined the taxi driver. "Listen. I'll stand by the cab. The man I'm watching has gone into the Salvation Army hostelry. Cut inside to inquire if they have room for two Canadians who've missed the train. That is, if anybody asks what you want. But look out for a stout Jewish bloke; black overcoat, specs, bowler hat and umbrella. Let me know what he's doing. Get back in time. We have to follow him."

"Right-o!" said the taximan, imbued with the spirit of Sherlock Holmes and only too happy to find himself confidentially employed by "The Yard."

He was absent no more than three minutes, an interval which Sergeant Bluett employed for the purpose of taking the number of Mr. Bernstein's car. Bluett also noted, but attached small importance to the circumstance, the presence of another car stationed a hundred yards behind the taxi. When the man reappeared he came doubling back with some appearance of urgency.

"Just comin' out! That place is full up. Told me to try Great Peter Street. Blimey!"—as he climbed to his seat—"that's a queer bloke!"

"What's he doing?" Bluett got in, opening the small window in front.

"Distributin' big cigars to a bunch of Yanks what's lost theirselves. And I see him hand a envelope to the Salvation Army captain in charge and take a receipt for it. Then I see he was comin' out, and—hullo! here he is!"

The chase was resumed. Sergeant Bluett, deep in thought, was not so lost to externals as to fail to note that Mr. Bernstein's car seemed to be returning to its starting point. In fact, this was exactly what happened. At the same spot on the frontiers of Soho, Mr. Bernstein alighted. So did Sergeant Bluett, close behind him. The car moved off.

"Take this card. Stand by for five minutes, and then don't wait. Call at the Yard in the morning."

"O.K., Sergeant—and here's a tip. I think, I only think, mind you, that a car followed us back."

"Oh," said Bluett. "I can't hear anything."

And now came the rain. For Bluett, who wore no topcoat, it meant a drenching but the prospect did not deter him. As Mr. Bernstein plunged into dim mazes of Soho, the dogged man from Scotland Yard followed. Furtive figures crossed his path every once in a while, coming out of secret cafés and merging into shadow again. Mindful of the taxi driver's words, he paused on turning corners, but failed to detect the sound of a pursuer. Near the corner of Windmill Street, a sudden cessation of shoe creaks caused a momentary doubt, until he grasped the fact that Mr. Bernstein had actually turned into this thoroughfare. Here, he overtook him without difficulty, but fifty paces onward, lost him again. That zest of the chase inherent in the human breast having now possessed Sergeant Bluett, he hurried eagerly forward through drizzling rain, questing about like a hound at fault. At the entrance to a narrow courtyard he paused, stood stock still, and listened ... Creaky shoes were moving at its further end.

Sergeant Bluett put himself through a knowledge-of-London test, and presently formed a mental picture of the terrain. Straight ahead was a blank wall, broken by a gateway which communicated with a mews. A once celebrated night club occupied all premises immediately on the left, except for a narrow block of cheap offices adjoining. On the other side,

he recalled an indifferent Greek restaurant (closed now) with apartments above it; and this, so far as Sergeant Bluett could puzzle out, completed the picture. Into which of these had Mr. Bernstein gone?

This problem was almost immediately solved. A faint light, that of a shaded torch, appeared behind a first-floor window, slightly left of the restaurant, revealing criss-cross paper strapping attached to dirty glass; so that evidently no black-out was in use. The light faded and the window became blind again. A moment later, one immediately above it, and of almost identical appearance, awakened in turn. The mystery was solved. Mr. Bernstein had entered by a side door which evidently gave access to the apartments above the restaurant. There was only one more floor, and this Bluett watched intently, so intently that presently he discerned a silhouette of the roof against a temporary rift in the clouds.

Two tiny streaks of light appeared, right and left of another window high up under the tiles. He knew what this portended. The light was shining through crannies of a black-out curtain. And now, zest of the chase strong upon him, he determined to explore further; for one possibility remained. Rain had ceased but the night was clammy, the paving slimily wet. Did the lower door stand open for the convenience of tenants, or did each of these hold a key? Upon the answer to this question his future operations depended.

Bluett approached the door and shone a ray from his torch upon it. He saw an ordinary looking house-door, neglected by the paint brush for many years ... and it stood ajar!

Passing along a short passage he began to mount an uncarpeted stair; its ancient treads, well seasoned, did not creak as he had feared: the handrail he avoided touching. Two doors opened upon the first landing. On one a card was pinned which said: "Sales Transport Company"; the other was blank; and the window with criss-cross strapping confronted him for a moment as he walked on, turned, and mounted the next flight. Here again he found two doors, besides one of which a grimy brass plate was fixed bearing the name: "Paolo Moroni." It contained no clue to the nature of Signor Moroni's trade or profession. The opposite door showed a newly painted board which announced "Wardens." Bluett paused for a moment, listening.

Movements became audible directly above his head, and he deduced that these were made by Mr. Bernstein. He stole on past the second criss-cross window and mounted to the top floor. Here, he paused again, and then shone light upon one of the doors. It proudly offered on polished mahogany with gilt lettering: "Bernard Bernstein & Co." But Bluett's impression had been that the room he was looking for was not this one, but that opposite. He directed a ray upon it. The second door bore no inscription of any kind. He extinguished his torch, and stood there, keenly alert, and thinking hard.

Now, to the best of his knowledge, and he was no amateur, he had proceeded thus far without making any perceptible sound. Yet, at this moment someone began to whistle "Up in the morning early"; the blank door was thrown suddenly open, casting light onto the dingy landing, and Mr. Bernstein stood before him!

But what he saw in a lighted room behind the burly figure astonished him even to a higher degree. He saw dilapidated walls, an uncarpeted floor, a dirty ceiling. He had a glimpse of an expensive radio set, of brightly upholstered chairs; but, and this commanded most of his attention, directly facing him stood a large dressing table which had wing mirrors, a table littered with all sorts of toilet articles, and reminding him of that in an actor's dressing room. The only light, a very bright one, hung immediately above this mirror.

The incompatibility of room and occupant, the mystery of the whole thing, induced in Bluett's mind a sort of momentary amnesia; he felt swimmy. Then, removing his spectacles and smiling that golden smile, Mr. Bernstein ceased to whistle, and spoke:

"Ah, Friar Tuck, my old! but how wet you are! Come in, my friend. I have some good Scotch here!"

Mr. Bernstein was Gaston Max.

18

"Who Is This Limping Man?"

"Name of a name, Sergeant Bluett, it is annoying! But do not blame me, for I think our old friend the Chief Inspector has been somewhat headlong."

Sergeant Bluett, seated on a gilt chair, smoking a cigarette and from time to time sampling whisky and soda of a quality with which of late he had become painfully unfamiliar, was in many respects a man chastened and changed.

"That's right," he said.

"I, myself, have been not headlong enough—and so I have the misfortune to kill a thousand men—"

Sergeant Bluett, who was swallowing appreciatively, almost choked: he set his glass down. "What did you say?"

"I said that I was one hour too late to save I cannot tell, yet, how many poor fellows. Not by my own wit, oh, no, but by a divine accident, I found a clue I was looking for—an hour too late. Listen, my friend: Sir Giles Loeder, who has been murdered, was a German spy. I have known it for ever so long, but I could not *prove* it. Now that I have proved it, he is killed." He extended his hands. "*Ma'lêsh!*"

"Sir Giles Loeder ... *a spy*?"

"But exactly."

Seating himself before the dressing table, Max dipped a small brush in some liquid which he had poured into a saucer, and began to remove gold paint and yellow paint from his teeth. Sergeant Bluett had been reduced to awed silence by that singular revelation: he watched the Frenchman, as, once, audiences were wont to watch Houdini; astounded. Cleaning off the preparation with cotton wool, Max crossed to a washbowl and rinsed his mouth, previously extracting certain pads, attached with gold wire.

This operation resulted in the fat face of Mr. Bernstein becoming the leaner face of Gaston Max. He had already discarded collar, tie and shirt, and now, returning, he dipped his fingers in cream and proceeded to deal with his complexion, talking to Bluett as he worked.

"Grease paint is useless except for the stage, and this watercolor is so difficult to get off. I make my colors with pastel which I crush myself: French pastel, pre-war—very good."

With a towel he removed final facial traces of Mr. Bernstein, including the brief moustache, blinking his lids as if his eyes were smarting.

"Those spectacles—" he indicated them where they lay upon the table—"are slightly tinted. The effect is to change the color of the eyes, but it is very trying to see through them. With spectacles (I have many) I can make my eyes to seem of any color. It is more difficult for the characters which wear no spectacles. And look at my hair!"

"Very limp," commented Bluett.

"But, of course! It is a kind of flat varnish. I must wash it out before I go to bed."

He removed his prominent abdomen, revealing the torso of an athlete. From an elastic girdle, his artificial corpulence extended down somewhere below the trouser band. Bluett watched with wide open ingenuous eyes, whilst Gaston Max detached this singular object, the lower end of which proved to be fastened to his thighs. This accomplished, all that now remained of Mr. Bernstein were his red hands, his baggy trousers and his lank hair.

"You see—" Max extended his fingers—"it might be necessary to wash in public and so this color and that on the nails call for special treatment."

He poured another preparation into a saucer, took some cotton wool, and patiently reduced his hands to their characteristic whiteness, finally returning to the bowl and washing them. He rapidly recombed his hair.

"You are a disbeliever, my old, but no matter. I will show you all the tricks of my trade." He removed his shoes. "Finch, the taximan with whom you are acquainted, is a thin, short fellow. He wears thin clothes, my Bluett, and there are no heels to his shoes. He is an inch shorter than Gaston Max. Mr. Bernstein is a big fellow; he is an inch taller than Gaston Max. How is this, I demand. Regard the shoes of Mr. Bernstein."

Sergeant Bluett regarded the shoes. They were specially made to accommodate elevators. He heaved a sigh and finished his whisky and soda.

"Tiring to the feet," Max commented, "but what does it matter." He laughed gaily, showing glittering teeth. "I love this game. I make of it an art. Mr. Bernstein's coats are padded. Mr. Bernstein's blue handkerchief has oil on it, to make Mr. Bernstein sweat. Help yourself, my friend. The bottle and the syphon are on the side table. One for me also, if you will be so good."

And whilst Sergeant Bluett, dumbfounded, as he was always dumbfounded by this man, acted as butler, Gaston Max went on talking.

"To-night you were clever. I confess that, to this present moment, I do not know how you succeeded in tracking me to Buckingham Gate and back." Sergeant Bluett handed him a sizzling tumbler and chinked it against another which he had prepared for himself. "My compliments, my old, and your very good health."

"Thank you," said Bluett, and flushed like a schoolboy. "The same to you."

"I detected no sign of you until you actually followed me into the yard. Therefore, I left the door open in order to learn if you would come in."

"Oh, I see. It isn't open as a rule?"

"My faith, no! Too many of me use this address. Peter Finch has a small room, and Sales Transport Company is also myself. Mr. Bernstein occupies an office, and below is Paolo Moroni. This rascal is in the wardrobe cupboard, there, with the rest of them. Paolo I consider to be one of my best characters."

Opening the cupboard in question (an exceptionally large one) he hung up the garments of Mr. Bernstein and selected a blue suit with red stripes, which he particularly favored.

"You're a knock-out," said Sergeant Bluett. "You might tell me, by the by, what you were doing in the Salvation Army hostel."

"Ah! name of a good little man!" Gaston Max, who was buttoning a blue shirt, displayed something which vaguely resembled embarrassment. "To-night, you understand, I had won at roulette—over a hundred pounds—"

"Phew!"

"Yes, indeed. This money I do not wish to keep. I am particular. Very well. It is all in notes, and so I go to the only Salvation Army depot which I think is open all night, and make them a present of it. You see, Sergeant Bluett, my dear, I sometimes pick up these illicit profits: it is unavoidable; and what am I to do with them, eh?"

"Well, I'll be damned!"

"No, no—you do not deserve to be. True, I am always hard up, for my pittance from Scotland Yard would not suffice. But the Fighting French make up my salary to that which I formerly received from the Service de Sûreté. In other words, I am like your London hospitals: entirely supported by voluntary contributions! Colonel O'Halloran is my Scotland Yard godfather, and I enjoy many privileges. I am almost a freelance."

"But you surely don't live here?"

"No, no, I do not live here. An old friend, so beautiful and so fervent a patriot, but, alas, a prisoner in her villa at Cap Martin, permits me to occupy her charming flat in Sloane Street."

He had dressed with the speed of a quick-change artiste. Now, draping the monocle cord about his neck, he sat down and lighted a cigarette.

"You're a knock-out," Sergeant Bluett reaffirmed with conviction. "I suppose we butted in on you, coming to Destrée's flat?"

"No, no. I butted in on *you*. When I heard what the Chief Inspector had arranged, I rushed to a friend of Mr. Bernstein and asked to be taken to play roulette. But how fortunate! The good Inspector nearly trod on a ball which had been lost. I recovered it in the chink of time."

"Oh, did you?"

"But of course! I do not wish those people to be arrested. They are part of my fishery. Myself, I care not who killed this Loeder. He was what you call a twirp."

"That's right," murmured Bluett admiringly. "I got the same idea myself. But I didn't know he was a dirty spy. That beats me!"

"But, yes, undoubtedly. We shall find out who killed him, all in good time. Let us not by hurry disturb my beautiful case."

"There's something very big in the wind?"

"But, yes, something very big. Name of a name! larger than all other cases put together! The good Lord Marcus seeks for a great truth to help everybody: so likewise do I. A little murder—" he snapped his fingers—"is no more than that. Besides, he was a twirp."

"It's a miracle to me," said Bluett, emboldened, perhaps, by the merit of his second whisky, "how you can talk English slang. You almost deceived me as a taxi driver."

"Almost?" smiled Max. "My friend, it was a case of quite."

"Well—" Bluett hesitated—"that's right. I must hand it to you. But if you can talk like that when you want to, how is it that you speak English like a Frenchman—or a sort of Frenchman?"

"Ha, ha!" Max's teeth glittered brilliantly. "Ha, ha, ha!" He roared with laughter. "Again, this is the artist in me. Even the Gaston Max you know, my old, is only another character; one of my many rôles. For who in the criminal world, having spoken to me, could suppose that he would not detect my French accent under any disguise?"

"You mean you can really talk straight English if you want to?"

"One day I shall endeavor to convince our old friend, the Chief Inspector, that I can talk straight Scotch!" Again Gaston Max roared with laughter. "But Bluett, my old, how is the little girl to-day?"

"Eh!" Bluett ejaculated; "do you mean my kid? Who told you she'd been sick?"

Gaston Max's mobile lips twitched. "I am the magician. I know all."

"Well, thank you kindly, Mr. Max; she's bucked up no end. All's well. A bit dull eyed, but nearly her old chirpy self again."

Max stood up, crossed to a large and ornate cabinet, opened it and revealed to the reproachful gaze of Bluett, rows of bottles, boxes of cigars and cigarettes, jars of preserves, and stacks of festive looking candies, chocolates and other sweetmeats. One of these he took out, and reclosed the cupboard.

"This will make her eyes to sparkle. Black market, but good chocolate. Tell her it is from her Uncle Barney ... *ss!*"

Abruptly, on that warning hiss, he fell silent, grasping Bluett's arm. He stepped to the dressing-table and pressed a switch. The room became plunged in darkness. "Listen!" he whispered.

Sergeant Bluett, aware of a hastened pulse, stood up and listened; indeed, he held his breath. From Gaston Max, somewhere near him in the blackness, no sound came. And, as he waited there, nerves taut, Bluett became conscious of, rather than heard, some presence outside on the landing—and he remembered that the door below was open. He remembered something else: the taximan's impression that a car had followed his cab from Buckingham Gate. He was about to speak, when Max, as if divining this intention, grasped his arm again in warning.

Their conjoint efforts seemed to impose a sort of super-stillness on the room; and then it was that both detected that faint sound which had first arrested Max's attention.

Creaking ... and Sergeant Bluett knew immediately what occasioned it: someone who groped on the stair, and clutched the handrail, that handrail which Bluett had so urgently avoided. This sound receded.

"Stealing down," whispered Gaston Max. "I wonder what he heard. I, as myself, must not be discovered here."

"What about *me*?"

"Rush, my old! Try to capture this stealthy prowler!"

He flashed a ray momentarily, throwing open the door, and Sergeant Bluett, welcoming action, went out like something expelled from a mortar. "Who's there?" he shouted, directing light down the stair. "I want a word with *you*!"

No response came; only a sort of padded scuffle. Bluett went recklessly down all three flights. He found the door wide open, and sprang into the yard. A southwesterly wind drove clouds across the face of a waning moon, and a rent in the flying vapor allowed light to spill out for a period of seconds. In this brief light he saw the fugitive.

A bent, indefinite figure scudded around the corner into Great Windmill Street. Bluett raced to that point and stood stock still, listening. Darkness had fallen again: he could see nothing—nor could he hear a sound until a heavy truck laden with milk churns came roaring and rattling along. When it had passed, he remained there, listening. But, excepting a vague murmur, which he knew to come from Covent Garden, Soho had no message for him.

"My old, he has escaped!"

Sergeant Bluett physically jumped. Gaston Max stood at his elbow.

"Phew! that gave me a start! Did you see him?"

"I saw him. What did *you* note?"

"He ran like a sprinter—but he had a funny run."

"He is as active as a cat, although he has some injury, some deformity. He is a limping man, my respected—he is one who limps ... Who is this limping man?"

19

Counsel's Opinion

In the gray light of a misty morning, William Sawby's coffee-stall glittered like a beacon. Enshrined in that backwater of shattered masonry beside the main stream of Bond Street, it issued a cheery invitation to early travellers, urns shining, cups rattling, with the beaming countenance of Sawby, a rosy sunrise, to bestow benediction upon all.

Tom Wilkins, the milkman, was there, and his pony, white forefeet on the broken paving, had his head overhanging the counter, inspiring visions of Bottom the Weaver. Mrs. Ryley, the charlady, another "regular," occupied her usual place; and now, up came Michael Corcoran, K.C., the warden, his steel helmet slung on his back.

"Good morning, everybody! that alert kept me out all night, although I never once heard a Jerry."

"Good morning, sir," Sawby replied, and automatically filled a cup with steaming coffee. "They brought one down on the coast, I'm told."

"Good morning, Mr. Corcoran, sir," said Mrs. Ryley.

"I didn't 'ear neither the warnin' nor yet the all-clear, meself. Got quite out of the 'abit of expectin' 'em."

"Beginnin' to form them habits in Germany now," remarked Tom Wilkins, sharing a slice of bread and jam with the pony. "Ain't half koppin' it from the R.A.F., bless 'em."

"Bless 'em indeed," said the K.C. "My boy's with Fighter Command, you know."

"We all know Squadron Leader Dan Corcoran, sir," Sawby assured him. "You've good cause to be proud of a boy like that. How's he getting on, sir?"

"A. 1, Sawby, thank you. First day I can tear myself away from the Courts I'm going down to see him."

Tom Wilkins, his mouth full of bread and jam, was understood to mumble something about "another bar."

"That's correct, Wilkins," Corcoran nodded. "Second bar to his D.F.C. The young devil's a killer right enough!"

A taxi crept out of the mist, was pulled up, and its driver crossed to the stall, rubbing mittened hands.

"Hullo, Fred," said Sawby. "You're an early bird. Chucked night work?"

"Yes." The man, whose purple face wore an expression of permanent disapproval, scowled darkly. "Don't pay for the petrol. Our gov'nor's laid us off it. Too many pirates at the game."

"What, exactly," inquired Michael Corcoran, in his well known cross-examination manner, "is a pirate?"

"A driver that don't belong to no garage," Fred replied promptly. "A bloke that runs his own taxi and can get hold of more petrol than what we can."

"But he is properly licensed no doubt?"

"Oh, he'd have to be licensed."

"Therefore, I would suggest, the term 'pirate' is less suitable than, shall we say, 'privateer'?"

"Give 'em any name you like, sir. They don't do us no good."

"One of 'em done me a bit o' good the other night," said Mrs. Ryley reminiscently. "I'd been over to see me daughter, what's in munitions, and some'ow I missed me last bus. I admit she 'ad a nice drop o' gin, and that may 'ave 'ad something to do with it. But 'ere was me in the black-out let in for a walk from Battersea to South Kensington. I got as far as Chelsea and wasn't feelin' any too spry, when a taxi draws up alongside me and the driver says, 'Which way you goin', ma?'"

Michael Corcoran experienced some difficulty in swallowing a mouthful of coffee, but overcame it, and winked at Sawby.

"I should 'ave took it up with 'im pretty sharp, callin' me ma, if I'd been meself, and told 'im which way 'e could go; but I was that whacked I answered 'im civil. 'Jump in, ma,' 'e says. "Ave you there in two ticks!' which 'e done. I says, 'Thank you kindly, mister—' 'Finch,' 'e says, 'Mister Finch—'"

"Oh, him!" spluttered Fred, whose mouth, also, was full. "He's barmy! You can't tell me nothing about Finch."

The conversation was interrupted by Sawby, who switched on the radio in order that patrons might listen to the seven o'clock news bulletin. It was an unwritten law that no one should interrupt this ritual; therefore, Fred reserved any further remarks which may have occurred to him relative to Peter Finch, and listened with the rest.

There were two items of news which provoked some interest. One was a War Office announcement that Combined Operations units had landed in force at a French port, destroying valuable installations and blowing up stores and workshops. "All objectives were achieved," said the communique. The other related to the death of Sir Giles Loeder. "Scotland Yard is working upon a new clue which points to the probability that robbery was the motive of the crime."

A swift, light footstep attracted Michael Corcoran's attention, and he turned as a tall man whose tweed suit created an impression that it had shrunk, walked up to the stall, his tawny eyes rapidly taking stock of Sawby's customers. "Good morning, Inspector," he murmured.

The bulletin being ended, Sawby switched off and nodded to the newcomer.

"Coffee, please," said Firth.

"You are early afoot, Inspector?" Corcoran suggested: he knew the senior detective officer of the C.I.D. quite well, as he had practised at the Criminal bar.

"I haven't been to bed yet!" Firth replied dourly.

"Great Scott! Loeder case?" The barrister modulated his long range voice.

"Yes, sir. A constable on patrol has found a leather folder—a sort of portfolio—in the area of a blitzed house in Mount Street; empty. It has been identified as the dead man's property."

"Mount Street. That's near where the body was found, isn't it?"

"Quite near," said the Chief Inspector, a reply laconic and non-committal which Michael Corcoran, an enthusiastic criminologist, accepted as a hint that further inquiries would not be appreciated.

On "Treasure Island," Dan Corcoran, in a deck chair, and Fay Perigal, seated on a bank of velvet grass, watched a kingfisher work the little stream, poised upon an overhanging branch. It was conveniently shallow here, cascading over clean pebbles, and its progress made a noise which resembled the gurgling laughter of a child. Sometimes, the kingfisher would turn, exposing his robin waistcoat and seeming to be listening to their conversation. Then, he would twist about again to dart, a shimmering gem, over the mirror of the water, as swiftly returning to his watching post.

The wheeled chair, which Toby had navigated down from the cottage, stood by, a basket which was strapped to it laden with magazines and periodicals. Corcoran, pipe in mouth, lay back, hands folded behind his head, alternately looking at the brilliant plumage of the bird and up into a dazzling blue sky. Fay was knitting a woollen pullover. She was off duty for the afternoon, but had chosen to spend it here on "Treasure Island."

Insects hummed soothingly and thrushes searched for tit-bits at no great distance from them. A robin, who sometimes received donations (he had an especial weakness for milk chocolate) made a third in the party, and an emerald green dragonfly, fully three inches long, hovered by the bank, so that they could hear the curious crackling of its fairy wings, which, unromantically, reminded Dan, he said, of "someone fingering a wad of fivers."

"How did Dick come to be up at Oxford with you, Dan?" Fay asked, breaking a long silence. "I mean, he is an American."

"Dick was a Rhodes scholar, Fay. That's how it happened."

"You were great friends there, weren't you?"

"Well, yes, rather. Our rooms were on the same stair. We went about nearly everywhere together; had similar tastes in sport. I was reading law, but I think I should have chucked it in any case."

"Why? Didn't you want to be a barrister?"

"Not particularly. The Learned Parent's idea. But then he has a flair for it; something I never should have had. Any damn fool of a witness could tie *me* up in knots."

Fay laughed, a burst of that happy laughter which belonged to her true self. But a moment later her gray eyes grew clouded.

"What was Dick going to be?"

"Oh, he was undecided. His people haven't got much money, apparently; and he couldn't bear the idea of going into business. I don't quite know what he would have done, if Hitler hadn't settled it for him."

"You joined the Air Force together, didn't you?"

"Absolutely—hand in hand. But, you see, I had a pilot's certificate already. I'd been flying during my last year. Consequently, I pushed ahead rather quicker than Dick."

"He's a good pilot, though, isn't he?"

"First class. He's the right type, and he has the kind of cool nerve that doesn't take unnecessary risks: level headed, which is more than I can say for myself."

There was another long silence, of which the robin took advantage to extract a morsel from the grass close to Fay's foot.

"Was Dick popular at Oxford?"

"Yes." Corcoran transferred his pipe from one corner of his mouth to the other by means of some conjuring trick performed with his teeth. "Girls could never quite understand him."

"Why not?"

"Well—that straight steady look of his. They always felt he was sizing them up."

"They were probably right." Fay spoke in a wee, small voice.

"So I used to think, until you told me he had gone and made a fool of himself with some wench from a hairdresser's. He doesn't seem to have done a lot of sizing up in that case, does he?"

"No," Fay said miserably. "Has he had much experience of women, Dan?"

"Well—" Corcoran seemed to reflect—"I don't really believe he has. He is what is known as a New Englander. I'm not quite sure, myself, what a New Englander is; but Dick is one. I gather that they take women rather seriously."

"That's a pity."

"Well, it depends on what sort of women they take seriously. Oh! it's all beyond me. Cheer up, Fay." He reached out and patted her arm. "There's a wise old saying which may be new to you: 'Every cloud has a silver lining!'"

Fay burst out laughing again, and laid her knitting down. "You are a clown, Dan," she cried—"but a perfectly dear clown. How did Dick get on with your father?"

"Oddly enough, they have never met. Whenever the Learned cropped up at Oxford, somehow he always missed old Dick,

and Dick would never come to stay, on vacations, because he said he hadn't the means to return hospitality. A queer fish. But I'll bet my boots they get along like anything when they do meet."

"I simply cannot make out what has become of him, unless—" Fay drew a long breath—"he has gone off and married her."

"What! the hairdresser? Oh, chuck it! I can make a better guess than that. He has found out, as you found out, that she is something of a jumble sale, and he's too much ashamed of himself to ... Hullo! who approaches?" He sat upright, staring in the direction of Rosemary Cottage. "The station taxi, unless these old eyes deceive me."

Fay sat up, too, a heightened color discernible in her cheeks; then was heard a masterful, penetrating voice: "Come back and collect me sharp at five. I count on you."

"Ye gods!" said Dan, "it is the Learned Parent!"

And indeed it was Michael Corcoran, K.C. in person. Towering, mentally and physically, over Corporal Toby, who presently appeared in the capacity of guide, saying, "This way, your honor," he approached "Treasure Island," arrayed in flannel trousers, a brown check coat, and other units of a sporting character.

"Hullo, Dan! I've left a big dull case to my junior and dashed down to inspect."

"Hullo, dad! Glad to see you."

"Hullo, Nurse Fay!"

"Hullo, Mr. Corcoran!"

"I count myself worthy to be called Mike."

"I simply wouldn't dare!"

Michael Corcoran, away from Court and chambers, exhaled an infectious gaiety which reminded Fay of the mysterious Dr. de Brion. They were firm friends, and Corcoran senior from the first had entered with boyish delight into the mapping out of "Treasure Island."

"Couldn't we have tea here on Cape of the Woods?" he presently suggested. "I'll lend Toby—Ben—Gunn a hand." He stooped and picked up a newspaper open at a page which bore the headline: "Sir Giles Loeder Mystery." "Which reminds me, while we are on the subject of pirates and other criminals, I've got a tip straight from Scotland Yard about the Loeder murder. Shall we talk about murders? I love 'em."

"Yes, if you like," said Fay, but her smile was a pretence.

"The police have found a leather case, belonging to Sir Giles, empty, in a damaged house in Mount Street. They are practically certain, now, that he was murdered for his money."

"Poor man," Fay murmured. "I wonder why he was carrying money about like that?"

"My own idea," said Corcoran, "but I stand to be corrected, is that Loeder was on his way home from a gambling party. I knew him only slightly, but I feel sure he was addicted to that sort of thing. Used to be a keen patron of the Turf, and there were rumors at one time that he was riding for a cropper ... Well, Dan, it's good to see you looking more like the old bonny boy."

He dropped down on the grass beside his son, squeezing Dan's arm. Fay quietly crossed the little bridge, intending to make preparations for tea. Half way over, unseen by either, she suddenly stood still. A tall, slim figure in Air Force blue, that of a man who had not come through Rosemary Cottage but who had entered by the side gate, was approaching "Treasure Island." He saw Fay at the same moment that Fay saw him. He, too, stood still.

An intuitive observer—and Fay, as her cousin, Marcus, maintained, was acutely intuitive—would have judged that the steady eyes beneath straight brows which watched Fay, were the eyes of one who saw, and recognised, The Promised Land, one who had grasped a stupendous, a dazzling truth—too late.

Certainly, as she stood there on the rustic bridge, wide-eyed, pale, but a vision of perfect youth, any man possessed of common discrimination must have paused to pay homage. Yet there was more than this in the face of the man who watched her: there was a yearning tenderness, there was despair. Fay broke the silence with one word:

"Dick!"

He answered with another monosyllable: "Fay!"

The spell was broken. Fay's glimpse into a tortured soul had made her heart beat almost suffocatingly; Dick was fighting with emotions more complex than any he had known. A shout from Dan Corcoran brought those two troubled spirits to earth.

"Dick, by all that's wonderful! Ye gods, man! Where have you been? Come over here and explain yourself!"

Dick Kershaw managed to smile. He stepped upon the bridge and grasped both Fay's hands. "Fay, my dear," he said, looked into her eyes, and passed on.

Dan was standing up, pipe still between his teeth, and Michael Corcoran had risen also. He stared hard at Kershaw: he was striving to remember where he had seen him.

"I'll take no excuses," Dan shouted. "We want a detailed account of your movements, Flight Lieutenant Kershaw, since you left Ashbrown. My father will conduct the examination."

"So this is Dick," said Michael Corcoran.

"I am very happy to meet you at last, sir."

And as their hands clasped, Michael Corcoran remembered that morning at Sawby's coffee-stall, remembered the disorder which had marked Kershaw's appearance, and buried the memory deep. He was proportionately astounded when Kershaw, meeting his regard steady eyed, added: "I have seen you before. But you may have forgotten."

"Indeed—where was that?"

"At a coffee-stall somewhere near Bond Street, very early one morning, sir—the morning following the death of Sir Giles Loeder, to be exact."

"Oh, yes, let me see, I do seem to recall—"

"I had no idea who you were at the time, or I might have asked your opinion."

"My opinion of what?"

Fay stood just behind Dick Kershaw, listening. A tense note in his voice, a quality in his bearing, warned her of something to come—something of which she was afraid. Dan, facing Kershaw, had recognised this, also.

"Well, sir—your legal opinion. You see, I killed Sir Giles Loeder ..."

20

Murder Confessed

"Fay, dear, can I hope you will understand if I ask you to leave me with Dan and Mr. Corcoran for a few minutes?" Dick Kershaw's voice was steady but his hands were tightly clenched—"I mean, for *your* sake."

Fay had grown ivory pale, pale as on that night when entering the lobby of Lord Marcus's house she had found a dead man on the couch. "I believe, Dick," she replied quietly, "it might be better if I stayed. What you have just said, of course, came as an awful shock ... But I think I know quite a lot of the rest."

Michael Corcoran, one difficult to surprise, stood amazed, looking from face to face. It was Dan, whose tones betrayed how profoundly this news had staggered him, who intervened.

"It's true, Dick. There isn't time to explain; but I think Fay knows why you did this thing."

"What's that?" Kershaw's clear eyes were turned in Fay's direction. "You know? How do you know?"

"Well, Dick, I suppose it was fated that I should know. An Air Force officer (I was never introduced to him) was talking to someone just behind me in a crowded corner at Julie's party on the very night that it happened. He seemed to know quite a lot about—" she paused before pronouncing the name—"Rita Martin. I simply couldn't avoid hearing. I didn't want to listen a bit, but I had to. And he said that you were—entangled with this girl, and that she—"

"Yes?" Dick prompted gently.

"That she was Giles Loeder's mistress, and was—" she made a tiny moue, a mere ghost of its true self—"just playing you up. He said, if you ever found out, he didn't know what would happen. He meant if you ever found out that Loeder was keeping her. It was late by this time, and as soon as ever I could get away, I did. So, although I wasn't prepared for this, I don't think you can have anything to say that I shouldn't hear. Of course, it was a blow, Dick, because—well, I hated to think that you might ruin your life. And when, right on top of it, I found Sir Giles lying dead—"

"*You* found him!" Kershaw exclaimed, and took a step towards her.

"Yes. I know it hasn't been in the papers, but—well, what's the good of talking about it now?"

"No good at all, Fay," Dan Corcoran said. "Also, quite beyond the point. Don't you agree, sir?"

"I am afraid," replied Michael Corcoran, "that I am not at the moment in a state of mind nicely to judge of the value of what Fay may have to tell us. I know very little of the facts. The papers have been unusually reticent, even for war time. But if, as I understand to be the case," he turned to Dick Kershaw—"you require my legal advice, I am at your service."

"Thank God!" exclaimed Dick Kershaw. "Thank you, sir."

"But not at all. You have appealed to me. And I am quite sure that your astounding statement must conceal other facts which have an important bearing upon the case. But I certainly agree with my son that your own account should come first. Do you insist on remaining, Fay?"

"If you please," said Fay, and thanked him with the faintest of smiles.

"In that event, let us all sit down. Perhaps, Kershaw, you would give us your story from the beginning."

Fay, rarely removing her glance from Dick Kershaw's face, resumed her former place on the grass. Michael Corcoran sat down beside her, and appreciating, for he had a profound knowledge of human nature, something, if not all of the situation, put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a reassuring hug. Dan settled himself in the wheel chair, and Kershaw, leaning back upon a rail of the bridge, faced them, clasping the woodwork on either side of him tensely, so that his knuckles showed white. Toby, holding one shoulder higher than the other, had retired.

"Maybe it makes it a bit easier," Kershaw began, "to find that you, Fay, and you too, Dan, know something about what a fool I have been. How you came to be mixed up in this thing, Fay, is beyond me. I don't think—" he lowered his eyes for a moment—"I would have dared tell you any of this, if you hadn't heard about Rita Martin. There is no need to go into the dreary business of how I met her, and all that, and I can't explain to you any more than I can explain to myself why I so completely lost my head over her."

He bit his straight underlip and stared down into the water. For a few moments there was no sound but that gurgling laughter of the little stream.

"Anyway, although I don't believe it seems reasonable, and perhaps it isn't, the whole fabric I was building crashed in a single night, in fact, in a single hour. I can't say who the man was whose conversation you overheard, Fay, but I have since found out that quite a number of my brother officers who go around town rather more than I do, knew I was being led up the garden. I suppose I am one of those fools who needs to see a thing with his own eyes before he can believe it. Well, that proof came my way."

He paused again, as if to collect his ideas, or it may have been to recover control of himself.

"Various rumors had reached me: I expect they were intended to reach me. I had been rather under the weather; nothing serious, as I told you, but the fear of going limping around for the rest of one's life is rather a nervous ordeal; so perhaps it's likely I was a bit on the morbid side. At any rate, when I got sick leave, I made up my mind to settle these doubts once and for all."

In a casual way, but none the less obviously as a prop to his composure, Kershaw took out his cigarette case, automatically offered it, but was met with shaken heads. He selected and lighted a cigarette. The picture in Michael Corcoran's mind was completed. It was thus, almost exactly, that Dick Kershaw had acted that morning at Sawby's coffee-stall.

"I was to have met Rita directly I got away from Ashbrown, but I had formed another plan. I didn't go to any likely hotel, and I kept out of your way, too, down here; I avoided the club as well. I went to a cheap and dreary place at the back of Lancaster Gate, which one of our fellows had told me was the dullest pub in London, where one simply never met anybody but dead-beats and has-beens. He was right. That didn't matter: I only wanted some place to sleep. There's a café in King's Road, Chelsea, and I remembered that from the window tables it was easy to see the door of the apartment house in which Rita lives. Sitting there, I waited for her to come back from Simone's. She came in a taxi. If I had not been what I am—a blind fool—I should have wondered before about her way of life. She always travelled in taxis, and her apartment, now that I began to think about it, could hardly have been kept up on a hairdresser's salary. Anyway, I waited there, drinking more cups of coffee. It was getting dark, but I knew I couldn't miss her."

Memories of the ordeal through which he had passed were beginning to influence his voice, his bearing. Fay had been thinking how tired he looked; now, she thought with great poignance and distress that he appeared positively haggard.

"When she came out again, she was in evening dress. She stood on the other side of the street for a while, looking right and left. She was evidently in a hurry, and as no taxi appeared, she began almost to run towards Sloane Square. I paid my bill quickly, dashed out and followed her. Quite a few people were going by Underground but all the same I saw that I couldn't risk travelling in the same elevator. I took a ticket at random and rushed down the stairs. She had got there ahead of me, but just as I reached the platform a train pulled in, and I was in time to see her get on board. I took a seat in the next coach.

"No need to bore you with details. I nearly lost her when she changed at Charing Cross; but when she got out at Oxford Circus I ran up the stairs there as I had run down at Chelsea. It was black-out by now, and I knew that once she got outside, I should lose my chance. But I had made good time on the stairs, and I picked her up again.

"Once out on the street, I kept close behind her. She was trying to find a taxi. Presently, during a traffic hold-up, she darted right out and jumped into a cab that was pulled up by an island in the middle. I didn't know what to do. I thought all my trouble was going to be wasted. But it was quite dark, and I ran across just as the cab pulled off. I stood there looking after it, right on the island, when a man driving a private car slowed up, and said, 'Can I give you a lift?'"

Kershaw paused, looking from face to face. "That seems like Fate at work, doesn't it? 'I have just missed my friend,' I told him; 'she is in that taxi just ahead. If you could manage to keep it in sight—'.

"He said: 'Jump in. That's in my direction.' Then, only a few minutes later, he sang out, 'The taxi is pulling up outside the B.B.C.'

"That settled it. I thanked him and jumped out just in time to see Rita go into Broadcasting House. When I say that settled it, I mean it confirmed the rumors which had reached me about Loeder. I was certain now that she was going to meet him, because I knew that he was broadcasting after the nine o'clock news. So once more I settled down to wait."

The dull, flat voice of the speaker, accompanied by a harmony of bird notes, the serenity and beauty of an English countryside, served to strengthen, in the minds of those who listened, this drama of tormented jealousy enacted in darkened London.

"There is a rank outside Broadcasting House, just around the corner, and I reserved a taxi. I hadn't very long to wait. I stood on the steps, beyond the doors which open into the big entrance hall. Rita came out with a man. I wasn't three yards from them. I might not have known who he was, if someone else who came out at the same time had not asked, 'Can I give you a lift, Sir Giles?'

"I knew then; I knew that I had been right; and I knew that I was a fool. But I couldn't condemn her, yet. I had no claim whatever to deny her anyone's friendship. I listened, and I heard Loeder reply, 'If it isn't taking you out of your way, I want to go to Hay Hill, Mayfair.'

"When the car pulled off, I worked my old trick. I said to the taxi driver, 'Those are my friends, ahead there. Someone has given them a lift. Do you think you can follow on to Hay Hill, Mayfair?' We arrived just in time to see them get out, and go into a big block of apartments. I watched them step into the elevator, then I read all the names on the board, but Loeder's wasn't there. I knew, though, that a lot of London flats were sublet, and I had little doubt that Rita had gone to his apartment. I had to keep walking away as though I was making for some place on the ground floor, because quite a number of people began to arrive and go up in the elevator. There was no attendant, but it was self-working. It occurred to me that maybe there was a party and that Rita's doings so far were innocent enough.

"I made up my mind to wait, if necessary all night. If she didn't come out again, that was good enough. If she did, I would follow her. I'm not going to describe my frame of mind, but I'm afraid it was pretty ugly. After a time no more people arrived, and I just walked up and down the steep, deserted street outside, wondering if I had misjudged her, wondering which apartment she was in; feeling I wanted to find out, to stand in front of her and to ask her outright what she was to Sir Giles Loeder.

"A full moon kept bursting through the clouds and shining on blacked-out windows so that they looked all lighted up from inside. I never knew that London was so silent at night, so lonely. A warden and a policeman were the only people who passed during the next hour, and I found myself counting the barrage balloons I could see from the top of the street. Well, between eleven and midnight, some of the people I had seen go in, came out again, which confirmed my idea that there had been a party. But still, there was no sign of Rita. More than once I weakened: I was getting very tired, and thirsty, and I was not really quite fit. But I had made up my mind to see the thing through, so I clenched my teeth, and stuck it.

"At last, someone rang up the elevator again. Then, from above, I heard her voice. I ran outside before she could reach the hallway. There was no car, and no taxi anywhere about, so that wherever she was going she would have to walk for a time, at least. It was getting darker with fewer patches of moonlight. I reckoned on following without being seen. When they came out they passed within a yard of me—Loeder and Rita. And right then, from their conversation, I knew there was no more room for doubt."

Kershaw, now, was exhibiting distress signals; he spoke rapidly, tensely. He had discarded his cigarette and clutched the rail of the bridge again with both hands.

"I felt completely sick. I can't explain that feeling, that wave of nausea which swept over me. But I cursed myself for a poor fool, and conquered it. And when they moved off down Hay Hill, arguing, I was close behind. They had been to a party of some sort; so much I gathered. And now he was trying to urge her to spend the night at his flat, which it seemed was quite near. The very way she declined would have been evidence enough. They walked on; he had his arm around her, and was kissing her. He was carrying some sort of portfolio. Suddenly, on the next corner, a taxi appeared, slowed up and the man called out, 'Taxi, sir?'

"Rita seemed to jump at the chance of getting away. 'Really, Giles, dear,' she said, 'I have a hard day to-morrow, and I

must go home.' He tried again to make her change her mind, but she insisted on getting into the taxi. I stood there watching him kiss her, long, possessive kisses. It made my blood boil like mad. Then, picking up his portfolio, he waved as the taxi drew off, and Rita blew a kiss to him. I was standing back in the shadow of a doorway. It was a moment of pitch darkness, the moon was quite obscured; when Loeder, as a sort of parting gesture, maybe, shone his torch and waved its beam in the direction of the taxi.

"A reflection, or something, must have shone upon me for a moment, because I saw Rita, her face white and frightened, leaning out of the window staring back—not towards where Loeder stood, but towards the doorway in which I was hiding."

"Let me be quite clear on that point," Michael Corcoran interrupted. "Are you sure, or moderately sure, that this girl saw you?"

"I think I can say that I am absolutely sure she saw me."

"H'm! Go ahead."

"Although I knew that I was in no proper shape for an interview, I made up my mind all the same that I would have it out with Loeder. I knew he was a married man, because when first the rumors began to reach me, I had made inquiries, and I was not going to miss this chance of telling him what I thought about him. He moved on briskly as if sure of his way. For my part I have never known London very well, and I can't say with any certainty just where we had arrived, except that I think we crossed Berkeley Square. But I followed him until he turned into a side street and I could be sure there was not a soul about. Hearing me overtaking him, he stopped, spun around, and flashed a light in my face.

"'Oh!' he said, 'an Air Force officer. I thought it was a pickpocket.'

"Naturally, I don't remember my exact words in reply, but I told him my name, and said that maybe he had heard it from Rita. He said, 'No, I don't recall it,' and walked on. Then I grabbed him by the shoulder and twisted him around to face me. He said, 'What the hell are you up to? Do you want to spend the night in gaol?' So, keeping my hand on his shoulder, I told him all I had to say. I held myself in check; I used no violent language; I stated the plain facts as I saw them:—that he had used his money and his position to seduce a girl who likely enough would have gone straight if she had never known him, a girl who had to live on whatever she could earn, and in times such as these was to be pitied if she fell for smart clothes and entertainment. Not a soul came near during all this time. I never heard a sound except once or twice that of distant traffic. Finally, I said to him, 'There is just one thing I am going to ask. You have a wife, but I know you are separated. If you mean to get a divorce and marry Rita, that lets me out: I have no more to say; the choice is hers.'"

Kershaw stood up and clenched his hands in an effort to retain control, an effort which he was unable to conceal.

Fay, biting her lip fiercely, stared intently down at the grass.

"His reply was what led to the tragedy. I hold no brief for Rita Martin; I know, now, that she's a little twister. She has no more sense of morals, much less of comradeship, than I would expect to find in a barnyard. That is beside the point. He laughed in my face. What he said about Rita I am not going to repeat. Then, with the portfolio which he carried, he struck my hand from his shoulder, and turned away. By this time, although I had fought hard, I had begun to see red. I tore the thing from him, threw it down on the sidewalk, and said, 'Put up your hands, because I am going to thrash you until I am tired.'

"He did—and he took me by surprise. Dan will tell you that we both worked pretty hard at our boxing. In fact, if the war hadn't come, I guess Dan would have got his Blue."

"You would have got yours first, Dick."

"That's as may be. But I am not entirely useless, anyway. Well, neither was Loeder. Fighting in the dark was a novel experience for me, and he registered one or two hard knocks before I got his measure. Then, the moon shone out, suddenly, just as he gave me an opening, and I caught him with a straight left, over the heart. The weight I put into it gave my groggy foot a sharp twinge; in fact, I almost fell, too. But Loeder went down for the count, rolled sideways, and then lay still."

"Stop there!" Michael Corcoran broke in. "Where was his portfolio?"

"I don't know. I had snatched it away from him and thrown it aside."

"Was he wearing a hat?"

"No."

"Is it possible that his head struck the pavement so hard that he died of concussion?"

"That was not my impression, sir. Although it was a fairly strong blow, I don't believe, when I consider that my ankle let me down, how it could possibly have been a knock-out." After a moment Dick added: "But he seemed to me to fall, for the moonlight was quite bright for a few moments, as a man would fall who knew the game."

"Was the pavement wet?"

"No; the rain came later. Anyway, as he didn't get up, I bent over him—pretty cautiously, because I was expecting a trap. But when I moved him he just went limp, and lay flat with his arms stretched out."

In their excitement, none of the three men had noticed Fay. Now, suddenly, Dick Kershaw noticed her. She was supporting herself unsteadily, one hand resting upon the grass.

"Fay!" he cried, and sprang from the bridge to her side, dropping to his knee and throwing his arm around her. "Fay, dear! don't let it hurt you so much. I know it's horrible, but it was a fair fight."

"I know it was, Dick," she whispered, and looked up at him. "Don't worry, dear. Nurses know how to take care of themselves. But somehow, as you were talking—I could see it all."

"Are you quite sure?" He stood up.

"Quite sure."

He stayed where he was, standing beside her, and went on: "I concluded that he was out right enough, and I may as well admit that I rather lost my head. It came to me in a flash that if the affair led to a police court, I should be kicked out of the R.A.F. and I knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that Rita wasn't worth it." He stared down at Fay during another long pause. "Then I heard footsteps, coming up rapidly. Well, the rest is easy ...

"I bolted. I have told you that I don't know just where this took place, and I may add that I don't know which way I went. I just tramped on and on, along dark streets and across squares, with the whole beastly business going round and round in my head like a crazy circus. It made me sick to think about Rita, and even then, long after I had left him lying, it made me coldly, murderously angry to think of Loeder. He's dead, and I shouldn't say it—but that man was a dirty outsider. I sat for awhile on a seat in some large open space. It may have been Hyde Park, but I couldn't be sure. Whenever I heard a policeman coming, I moved on. You see, Loeder knew my name; I was quite sure he would report the matter to the police when he came to, and I hadn't made up my mind what my defence was going to be.

"In the meantime I didn't know what to do. The little hotel I have mentioned locks its doors about eleven, and to get in I should have had to ring and so attract attention to myself. I thought it better to stay out. I must have walked for miles. Sometimes I wondered if I was going mad, or had already gone mad. Then it rained, as it rained several times during the night. I sheltered under trees, or in doorways—anywhere, but still kept on walking. I went right on like that until daylight came. Then I found myself in Bond Street. As it began to grow light, I recognised where I was. I saw a coffee-stall amongst a lot of wreckage in a corner, and I walked over there." He fixed his steady glance on Michael Corcoran. "That was where we first met, sir."

"Yes," said Michael Corcoran, looking anxiously at Fay. "That was where you heard on the radio—"

"That Loeder was dead. When I heard that, I lost control again. You see, I had been in hospital for some time and I was not quite myself, I suppose. I went back to my hotel at Lancaster Gate, and managed to get in, so early in the morning, without being noticed. I was scared; I admit that. But above all, I was wretchedly ashamed of myself—ashamed of the motive which had led me, although unintentionally, to take a man's life. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know in whom to confide. I had left the club as my address in London, and I used to send a boy to collect correspondence and messages. I took long walks in Kensington Gardens. I told the hotel people I was convalescing—they were very decent to me—and took meals in my room.

"There were only two people I could think of whose advice I would dare to ask. For long days and nights—oh, such dreary, sleepless nights—I tried to whip up courage to come down here. I read every scrap of news I could get hold of. But it was little enough. I realised that for some reason the police were suppressing many of the circumstances; and that was worse than ever. I began to feel like a hunted criminal. Every time a constable came along Craven Terrace I thought he was coming for me. I can't explain this mood: I know it was contemptible; I wouldn't have believed it possible. Fay—" he dropped on his knees beside her again—"I knew how it would hurt, but I came to tell the whole story to you and to ask for your advice." He reached out his hand. "And for yours, Dan."

"There are two things you have to do," said Michael Corcoran briskly. "First, is to stay here. Can he stay here, Nurse Fay?"

"Of course," said Fay. "I can easily arrange it with matron."

"The second," Corcoran went on, "is to make quite sure that no living soul, except the four of us now present, hears a single word of this. I don't want you to go back to London, Kershaw. Arrange in some way to have your things sent down. For the rest—well, I shall have a number of questions to ask ... but leave the rest to me."

21

The Quest of Lord Marcus

An interview which had some bearing upon the astonishing discovery in South Audley Street, or, more exactly, upon a subsequent development in the mystery, took place one morning at the Assistant Commissioner's club. Lord Marcus Amberdale was lunching with Colonel O'Halloran.

They sat at a side table in the lofty bar, an apartment impregnated with that Service aroma peculiar to clubs whose membership is almost entirely confined to officers. The club was noted for its dry sherry, and a small carafe of this stood between them. Lord Marcus, who wore a blue suit and a blue stock with a small white spot, looked more than ever like a hangover from the Regency; his handsome, lined face was troubled as he stared across the table at his old friend, and the colonel's little eyes were blinking furiously.

"I find it peculiarly difficult to state the facts, O'Halloran. I am regarded in many quarters as suspect—an unhappy atmosphere in which to spend one's days. Even here—" he extended a long sensitive hand—"I am conscious of it. Furthermore, I have reason to believe that officers from Scotland Yard are actually covering my movements. I think I have detected this on more than one occasion. I am not complaining: I have no right to complain: but, at its best, it is a waste of your fellows' time, at its worst, an intolerable implication."

"Quite see what you mean," rattled the Assistant Commissioner. "Follow entirely. Must agree. As a matter of fact, wanted to talk to you about it all. Glad to see you in any event. Haven't seen enough of each other in recent years."

"It is a great pleasure to me," Lord Marcus declared, and raised his glass with old fashioned courtesy. "This consciousness of a sleepless surveillance is prejudicial to my work. As you know, I have placed my knowledge of the Near East at the disposal of the Ministry of Information, and my employment is of a highly confidential character. A mere whisper would be sufficient to destroy my usefulness."

"Don't misunderstand me," said the colonel. "Haven't agreed you're being watched in any way. Contrary to my orders if you are. But frankly, one can sympathise with Chief Inspector Firth. Rather groping in the dark; and after all, Amberdale, damn it, dead man was found on your premises. Can't get away from that."

"It is inescapable: but I have no more idea how he came to be there than if he had been found in Buckingham Palace."

"Fully appreciate that. But plain fact remains that man wasn't found in Buckingham Palace; he was found in your house. Infernal eccentricities—" he held up his sherry glass, blinking at it viciously—"key in flower box outside door, that sort of thing, all make it more difficult to investigate. Then, your friend Mrs. Vane knew Loeder."

"Yet I cannot recall that she ever mentioned him. I was, of course, aware of the fact that he had been her lover."

"H'm!" The colonel took an appreciative sip and set his glass down. "Relations with women friends quite beyond me, Amberdale; always were. They used to say in the old days, something to do with a woman led you to chuck up the army."

"I know they did." Lord Marcus spoke wearily but patiently. "And they were right."

"What!"

"Yes, O'Halloran. Something occurred, in Egypt, which radically changed the current of my existence. A woman (I shall not mention her name) died; and it was the end of life for me in that sense in which most men regard life. In another sense, it was the beginning."

The Assistant Commissioner was watching him fixedly, and sympathetically. "Don't tell me if you don't want to."

"I have no more to tell you, O'Halloran—about her. I am merely trying to explain why I went in for those somewhat obscure studies which, from that day onward, wholly enthralled me. You may recall that I was traditionally a religious man, but up to that time religion had meant little to me. I suddenly determined that it meant everything, but not in its accepted form. I proposed to prove, scientifically, as one proves a thing in the laboratory, that the human spirit survived death. Once, there were schools in which this subject was systematically expounded. To-day, it is in the hands of

impostors. I set out to endeavor to recover some of that older, true knowledge; and in a measure, O'Halloran, I have succeeded."

Colonel O'Halloran continued to watch him speculatively; there was an unspoken doubt to be read in his little blinking eyes, but deep sympathy remained.

"Sure you're not deluding yourself?"

"Quite sure." The musical voice was calm, expressing finality. "Some day I hope to prove this to the world. If I were to tell you where my explorations have led me, since those years in which we served together, when I was so keen on polo—" he smiled without sadness—"when I rode my own horse in the Grand National, I doubt if you would believe me, O'Halloran, or credit the cost."

"In terms of cash?"

"In terms of sacrifice. My friends accounted me mad, but I had come to a state of philosophy which, under guidance, rendered me immune to uninformed criticism. I followed my chosen path. Mrs. Vane, with whose record I am familiar, is peculiarly endowed. She possesses, in an unusual degree, a power cultivated by certain priestesses of Ancient Egypt, that of releasing the spirit, which is deathless, from the body, which commonly trammels it throughout earth life. Many such priestesses of the past, whose powers exceeded anything we can well imagine to-day, were in no sense models of physical purity."

Colonel O'Halloran began to roll a cigarette. "Frankly, all rather beyond me."

"Naturally. One is strangely alone in such pursuits; it is part of the price one has to pay. Fortunately, my financial resources, and my family name up to a point, enable me to defy prejudice and to ignore misunderstanding." He raised his hand to his high brow so that the green scarab which he wore twinkled like the eye of a reptile. "But I recognise the fact that when homicide intrudes upon my studies I have no armor against malice."

Colonel O'Halloran bit ragged ends from his cigarette and taking up the carafe refilled both glasses. "Quite satisfied about your man Wake?"

"Yes," Lord Marcus replied, prolonging the word in a meditative way. "He juggles with the household accounts, steals my wine, my whisky and my cigars. I believe he goes in for dog racing, and no doubt the housekeeping allowance is employed to make up his losses. In every other respect, he suits me well."

Colonel O'Halloran grinned: it was a cheerful mischievous, rather boyish grin. "Wouldn't suit me."

"A more honest man would be less competent."

"Might be. Less expensive, too. Fact is, Amberdale—might as well get down to it—you have some queer acquaintances. Wake and Mrs. Vane are only two of 'em. The interest of my department begins and ends, more or less, with the Loeder case; but Loeder case overlaps much more urgent job. There's a spy ring in London. Must know that through M.O.I. It's a big show; serious menace to war effort. These people are believed, in certain quarters, to use the underground gambling racket as a means of getting information."

"Might I ask in what way this concerns my queer acquaintances?"

"Well—saw you lunching with Mrs. Destrée the other day at the Grand Marnier. She's up to her neck in the racket, although we can't catch her out. See what I mean?"

"I take it to mean that these associations lend color to the suspicion that I am an undesirable character."

Colonel O'Halloran grinned again. "Not by me. But the average working police officer to be excused if tries to add up two and two to make four. Destrée is a pretty woman, and goes nearly everywhere; Eurasian, I should say, but attractive. Thing is, Amberdale, why have *you* taken her up?"

Lord Marcus raised his sherry glass, twirling it slowly and watching the amber liquid as a seer watches his crystal. Scraps of Army "shop" floated to them from the counter ... "Hullo, Tinker! how's Tobruk looking?... Don't agree, McAndrew. A first class regimental officer, yes; but ..."

"I am trying—" Lord Marcus's effortless oratory was audible above all other sounds—"to assemble a psychic chain. The spiritual core within a man is much older than his body, O'Halloran. Some of us have shared common experiences when the world was young. Those of us who are peculiarly sensitive recognise these associations: in this way groups are formed, groups brought together by old love and by old enmity. The seven deadly sins turn us aside from our true destiny and have kept us on the treadmill of mortal life all down the centuries. Now, the significance of seven is a subject which I have no time to discuss, but I am trying to assemble a group of seven people whose paths have crossed one another in past lives."

"What for?" asked the Colonel.

"To strengthen my individual power. The *force* which I could generate in this way might achieve miracles. Mrs. Vane, in trance, is able to recognise those who belong to the same cycle as ourselves. She might identify you—correctly, I have no doubt—or she might point to a complete stranger."

"New kind of hunting, Amberdale."

"No, O'Halloran; very old. I make it my business to seek out those whom she has recognised in order to learn if they are in other respects suitable. In this way I recently made the acquaintance of Mrs. Destrée. She is a woman steeped in evil; her spirit is old as Atlantis; but it is a spirit of power. In such an experiment as this which I contemplate, the positive and the negative, good and evil, must be nicely adjusted. My cousin, Fay Perigal, will, I hope, consent to join us. She will help to adjust the scales."

"She isn't keen, I take it?"

"It frightens her," Lord Marcus replied simply. "But since the time when she was a little girl, when during her holidays I used to take her to Hampton Court, to the Zoo, to matinees, and so forth, I have known that her spirit was a white flame, a spirit older and wiser than mine." He sipped his sherry, and, as if he feared that he had transgressed, smiled his disarming smile. "I must apologise, O'Halloran, for this sermon; but you are partly to blame."

"Not a bit of it. Extraordinarily interested." The Assistant Commissioner emptied his second glass. "Suppose we go in to lunch?"

22

Ivory and Powdered Satin

Rita Martin set out at three o'clock from Simone's upon an assignment booked for her that morning by Mlle. Dorine. As she came down the carpeted stair, wearing a discreet but well cut suit and a raffish little hat, her shapely legs gleaming through American silk stockings, elegant insteps displayed to some advantage by suede shoes from a Paris last, she presented an undeniably attractive figure. Rita had poise. Her beauty, though bold, was not vulgar, and she made up with discretion. But her dark eyes were cloudy and apprehensive.

The familiar glass cases with their unobtainable exhibits, those mingled perfumes of the shop, the boxes of powder, lip sticks and implements of manicure alluringly arranged upon the counter: to-day, they all looked different; her nostrils rejected once familiar scents, for something alien seemed to have crept into them.

Recently, her associates had noted this change creeping over Rita, but only one had succeeded in discovering its cause. Sadness was in it, and her friend, Dora, fully understood its origin, since she guessed rather than knew that Rita's smart clothes and comfortable apartment had been due to the munificence of the late Sir Giles Loeder. But there was something else.

Rita seemed to become apprehensive every time the telephone rang; seemed to mistrust any new client who entered the place. Dora understood this, also. She had overheard Lady Huskin cross-examining Rita about her friendship with Sir Giles; she knew that Rita had been with him on the night of his death. Rita, however, had not confided in Dora, who only that morning had said to her: "You are as restless as a cat. What's up with you?"

But Rita had shrugged her shoulders irritably, and had made no reply. Now, as she passed through the shop:

"You can go home when you have finished, Miss Rita," said the receptionist; "you need not return to the Salon."

"Thank you, Mlle. Dorine. Good-bye."

"Good-bye."

She opened the door and stepped into the street, then hurried on around the corner. A young auxiliary policeman (in private life a screen juvenile) who stood there, smiled appreciatively, but his smile seemed to frighten her. He scratched his chin reflectively, looking after the trim figure and wondering if he had lost his sex appeal. In fact, she had barely noticed the man but had merely noticed the constable, and members of the police force had become objects of dread to Rita. There was not an hour of the day and there were comparatively few of the night—those haunted, sleepless nights—when she did not check up in every memorable particular upon the events of her final parting from Sir Giles. Over and over again, a maddening iteration, she had reviewed those persons who knew, or who might know, that she had been in his company just before his murder.

There were the people who had been at the roulette party in Hay Hill. Actually, Sir Giles had introduced none of them: he never did on such occasions. He had contrived to keep her well in the background, so that even Lady Huskin had failed to see her. Teddie Olivar had invited her to a drink in a side room, and there might have been others who knew her by sight. Now, of course, that old cat Lady Huskin knew.

She found herself avoiding the glances of all taxi drivers; for the man who had driven her home on that fatal night would certainly be able to describe her. By an unfortunate coincidence, she had been twice in his taxi, first on the way to the B.B.C., and later from Berkeley Square to her own apartment in King's Road.

Why had the police not asked for her evidence?

Then, there was someone else—someone else whom she knew in her heart had seen her, and had seen her with Sir Giles:—Dick Kershaw.

Why had he not come forward, demanded an explanation? Had he too gone to the police?

This was the menace which overhung Rita Martin, haunted her by day and by night. It was beginning to take inevitable

toll of her good looks. As if, she reflected, fortune had not hit her hard enough already; for where could she hope to find the quarterly rent of her snug little quarters in Chelsea? In fact, failing one man, the man upon whom she had counted and who unaccountably had disappeared, what did the future hold for her? And now, this assignment.

It was with Mrs. Destrée at Gatacre House.

She dreaded the interview beyond measure, but it was impossible that she should avoid it, and she could no longer afford to lose her employment: this would mean going straight into the army. Furthermore, it would mean ... Her thoughts made her feel quite dizzy. In fact, she stood still on the corner of Clarges Street, endeavoring to regain command of herself.

Destrée ... who was Destrée? Destrée's name she had often heard spoken, but hitherto Destrée had not been a client of Simone's; then, on that evening, Rita had seen her glittering in the shadows like a brilliant night moth. Rita, a brunette herself, admired dark beauty, and she thought Destrée was exotically lovely. But even if Sir Giles had offered to introduce her, which he studiously avoided doing, Rita would have refused the honor. Rita was a realist and did not shirk facts. She feared Destrée as the average woman fears an adder. It was unaccountable, but during the time that she had been there at the gambling party she had divined rather than detected glances from those dreamy eyes directed upon her. In the solitude of her own room she had tried to analyse this dread, but she had failed to find any solution to the problem. She was unaware of the fact, but it was a profound psychological problem calculated to defeat a brain more highly trained than that of Rita Martin.

When she arrived at Gatacre House she was almost sick with apprehension.

"Lady Huskin mentioned your name to me," said Destrée. "You know Lady Huskin?"

"Yes, madam, I dress her Ladyship's hair regularly."

Her voice was toneless but not altogether steady. The lobby had frightened her, with its perfume of lilies; the eyes of the Madonna had seemed to accuse her, and Buddha to smile ironically: now, this remarkable bedroom, with its low pedestal bed, its silken coverings of palest lavender. There were lilies here, too: water lilies in bowls; long stemmed lilies in vases; pieces of Chinese tapestry framed upon the walls. And there were some singular modern statuettes which frightened her even more than the Madonna had frightened her.

Destrée sat in a cushioned chair which more nearly resembled a throne. Rita thought that it was some kind of Arab work; the pale lemon colored wood was inlaid with ivory and mother o' pearl. Destrée wore a white swansdown wrap having long sleeves, and she sat before a wonderfully equipped dressing-table, watching her own and Rita's reflections in the mirror.

Rita thought that Destrée had the most beautiful eyes that she had ever seen. She envied her the curled lashes, told herself that the way she had of drooping her lids, so that her eyes became mere slits draped with black lace, must have proved fatal to many men. But she knew, of course, that Destrée was not English, and she had hoped, jealously, that her luxurious hair would prove to be coarse. It was not coarse. It was like silk, and had a slow, natural wave, which made it very easy to dress. Her own lips, Rita considered, were at least as desirable as Destrée's, her teeth as white; but little furtive glances at the two images in the mirror forced upon Rita's rebellious mind the fact that compared with the delicate loveliness of Destrée, her own beauty was commonplace.

"My maid has gone to visit her family," Destrée explained. "She usually dresses my hair for special occasions. You see?"

"I see, madam. She must be very skilful."

"Yes, she is quite good." The silvery voice sounded almost playful. "You have seen me before, sometimes, I believe, Miss Rita?"

Rita swallowed rapidly and stooped to pick up a brush from the small table beside her. "Yes, madam, I believe I saw you once—in the distance."

Destrée sighed contentedly as the brush was passed through her hair, and closed her eyes entirely, or seemed to do so. "At Mrs. Sankey's?" she murmured.

"Well, madam, I believe that was the name of the lady to whose flat I was taken one evening. Mrs. Sankey herself was not there."

"No. She lives out of London. She lets her flat for parties ... Yes, I remember now," Destrée murmured. "You came with poor Sir Giles Loeder."

"Yes, madam."

Rita knew that her hands were slightly unsteady and didn't know what to do to correct this fault. She had always been proud of her hands, but the hands of Destrée, loosely folded upon white draped knees, resembled exquisite ivory carvings, tinted by the brush of a master. Little by little Rita's self-confidence, a quality by no means lacking in her make-up, began to desert her. She felt plain and common, and once, detecting a reflected glance flashed through the grille of Destrée's lashes, experienced again that unaccountable fear.

When Destrée next addressed her, the silver bell voice sounded even more childish. "Poor Sir Giles was rather fond of pretty girls, I am afraid. Yes? His choice was—most democratic."

Perhaps there was nothing in these words but a sort of playful sadness, yet they acted sharply upon Rita; in fact, they stimulated a spirit of bravado which sometimes irrationally took charge of her behavior.

"Really, madam, I am afraid I know very little about that. I have always lived in the country, with my father, a retired Civil Servant."

This statement, which Rita thought necessary in order that Destrée's mind should be disabused of any false idea implied by the word "democratic" was strictly true. Her father was a postman whose enthusiastic patronage of all the bars in his territory had led to his premature retirement.

"You met Sir Giles when you came to London, I suppose?"

"Yes, madam."

Destrée sighed again and was silent for some time, when: "Did he bother you a lot with questions about the clients at Simone's?" she inquired, fully opening her eyes so that Rita, who was watching her reflection in the mirror, met their fixed regard and became conscious of an almost physical effort as she turned her head aside.

"Simone's clients, madam?"

"Yes, of course. Little tit-bits for his articles and broadcasts. Women are so indiscreet at their hairdresser's, and poor Sir Giles was such a student of life and sometimes so boring."

Rita's heart was thumping with such violence that she was afraid to stand too near to Destrée in case Destrée should hear it.

"I don't remember that he did, madam."

"Oh, well, I only wondered. He had such an inquiring mind. How tragic that you should be with him on the very night of his death."

The long expected moment was here. This woman whose silky hair swept through Rita's fingers was going to cross-examine her; perhaps to inform the police, secretly, so that her own association with the gambling parties should not be compromised. Hurriedly, Rita tried to prepare a line of defence, but could think of none. She replied, almost in a whisper:

"It was terrible, madam."

"He had a large sum of money with him, I believe?"

Good heavens! that was a line of attack which Rita had not anticipated. If it were true, and she didn't know if it were true or otherwise, she might find herself arrested for the theft!

"Is that so, madam?" was all that she could think of saying.

Destrée closed her eyes again; she had seen all that she wanted to see. "So I believe. Sir Giles and I were old friends, and the idea that someone killed him for his money is terrible—too terrible! Perhaps you can throw some light upon what became of the case he was carrying?"

"I, madam!" Rita dropped a brush, stooped and picked it up. "Pardon me. How clumsy I am. Really, I know nothing about it."

"But surely, you left together?"

"Well, yes, madam, we did. And I think he was carrying a case, as you say."

"Yes, I think so," murmured Destrée, "and the police seem to be sure. In fact, I think I read that they had a clue to the theft."

"Yes, madam, I believe I read something of the kind."

"A man so—democratic, in his acquaintances, might easily be made the victim of a plot. You see? Such dreadful things are happening all too often in the black-out in London, just now, don't you think?"

Rita stooped over the side table arranging bottles, brushes, combs, and other implements of her profession. "I believe it is so. Nothing happened, madam, while I was with him."

"For your sake, I am glad to hear it. In fact, I am so surprised that you have not been questioned already."

Rita thought rapidly. "I could tell them nothing that would help in any way," she said, hesitantly, "or I should, of course, have come forward. And I suppose that no one who knew me saw me with Sir Giles during the evening. That is, except yourself, madam."

"And Lady Huskin? And Mr. Olivar, too. I know he sometimes went with Lady Huskin to Simone's. Surely he knows you?"

"Yes, madam, I spoke to Mr. Olivar."

Again those frightening, sleepy eyes opened widely. Destrée began to smile, which for a moment reassured poor Rita, so that she tried to smile back at the bewitching image in the mirror, and then forced herself to resume her duties.

"All was well with my poor friend, then, when you saw him last—yes?"

"Certainly, madam." Rita experienced increasing difficulty in retaining her professional refinement of speech. "We simply walked away trying to find a taxi, and we had not gone far, not further than the next corner, in fact, before one came up. I said good-night to Sir Giles and was driven home."

"That is simple enough," smiled Destrée. "He had his case with him, I suppose, when he left you?"

"Certainly, madam, yes, I remember distinctly, now—he did."

"That, of course, is the point in which the police would be particularly interested. If they should get in touch with you, Miss Rita, what you have told me may help you, so that I should be glad if you would let me know if there is any development."

"Certainly, madam. Thank you."

Rita worked rapidly, trying to forget herself in her task, trying to overcome a sense of faintness which she ascribed to the atmosphere of the room, laden as it was with the perfume of lilies.

Destrée, whose eyes appeared to be closed again, spoke suddenly.

"I understand Sir Giles's interest. You are quite pretty. Poor fellow! he was trying to console himself. In time he might have found someone."

"Console himself, madam?"

"Yes, although he was so charming, he was not always fortunate in love. Some women are very capricious, very critical, you know. I have seen much of the world, and I have found that wealthy men who toy with any girl who happens to attract them for a time and then cast her aside, are almost always men who have been cheated of the woman they really desired." She sighed voluptuously. "Poor Sir Giles."

Rita's brain, never capable of close reasoning, began to swim. A curious hush which characterised Destrée's flat was having its effect upon her nerves. This perfumed tranquility for some reason suggested to her that soft-footed creatures who listened, hovered secretly just outside the room, watched, and waited. She believed that Destrée suspected her of being concerned in robbing Sir Giles. She believed that Destrée knew, as she, Rita, had often suspected, that Sir Giles had treated her as a mere convenience, as a concubine rather than a mistress. He had certainly made her recall the conversation of some of Simone's clients, almost word for word. In fact, Destrée, without apparent intent, had thoroughly humiliated her, so that she doubted her good looks, doubted her cunning, and doubted her safety; she was whirling with doubts.

When at last, hairdressing operations were completed to Destrée's satisfaction (and Rita was forced to admit to herself that she was not exacting) Destrée stood up, closed her eyes and stretched her arms. She wore white shoes, lined and trimmed with fur.

"I must rest awhile," she murmured, "before I dress. Please be so good, Miss Rita, as to bring me the wrap hanging on the screen, there."

"Certainly, madam."

Rita crossed the thickly carpeted floor, and took down that remarkable robe displaying all those variegated tints of the Californian poppy, arrayed in which Destrée loved to take her ease. As she turned, having it draped over her arm, Destrée dropped the garment of swansdown, and the powdered satin beauty of her body was so perfect that Rita inhaled sharply and stood quite still for a moment. Recovering herself, as Destrée extended rounded arms Rita draped the silken robe over her shoulders.

"Remember to let me know," she murmured, "if anything should occur."

23

Dossier Destrée

When Sergeant Bluett entered the office of Chief Detective-Inspector Firth he found no one there. He looked about him and began to whistle "Up in the morning early," beating time with a newspaper which he carried. Then a frown crossed his features, and he ceased whistling abruptly. He went over to the desk. Upon that monument of orderliness lay an official envelope bearing the address: Chief Detective-Inspector Firth. "Ah!" said Bluett, picked up the envelope and then laid it down again. He knew that it contained photographs.

He crossed and stood staring out of the window. The day was bright and clear; he could see no barrage balloons, those floating fungi of a wartime heaven. The opposite bank of the Thames, or that part of it visible from this window, engrossed his attention: he studied it with the puzzled expression of one who contemplates a thing unfamiliar. The truth was that Bluett, who possessed an encyclopaedic knowledge of London, had never quite succeeded in re-arranging to his satisfaction the former layout of the Surrey bank. Where certain buildings had stood, there were blank spaces, and it had become his almost daily custom to endeavor mentally to complete the original outlines. He began to whistle again, checked himself, and turned as the door opened.

Chief Inspector Firth came in carrying a bulky volume under his arm. "Ah! there you are, Bluett. I thought likely enough ye had resigned."

He crossed to his desk and placed the volume upon it. Bluett returned to his favorite leaning post, the mantelpiece, as Firth sat down.

"Verra difficult these days," said the Chief Inspector, "to establish contact wi' sources of information overseas. It means a lot of putting two and two together." He opened the big book, which had a thumbhole index. "There she is," he muttered. "But although I would recognise her, the woman hersel' is both better and worse."

Bluett, his ingenuous features displaying a shade of interest, came over and stood behind the Chief Inspector, looking down at a page upon which various items, some typed, and some in small, neat handwriting, were pasted. The page was headed:

Destrée, Mrs. Ysolde.

A paragraph in small manuscript which had been stuck on, read: "Place of birth, nationality of parents, unknown. Unable to trace prior to residence in Madagascar." This paragraph was initialled illegibly, and the hieroglyphics were followed by several reference numbers.

Another paragraph, typed, began with a date. It said:

"Married at Diego-Suarrez, Madagascar, by special licence, to Commander François Louis Destrée of the French Navy." Underneath, was added, again in manuscript, "For details see J.B. pp. 19-21." According to other items it appeared that Commander Destrée had died in Algiers in 1928, having then been separated from his wife for some time. There was a further paragraph headed: "New York State Troopers." This said: "Destrée, Mrs. Ysolde: French, formerly lived in Madagascar; filed naturalisation papers as United States citizen, May 3rd, 1931."

Underneath, and presumably from another source, appeared a brief note: "Party in question residing in Hollywood." Below it, and bearing a date later in the same year, came the statement: "Left Hollywood February 15th of this year: present whereabouts unknown."

Under a date late in 1938, there was a manuscript entry: "Mrs. Ysolde Destrée occupies a suite at Claridge's Hotel. Has accounts at Fifth Avenue Bank, New York; Hambro's Bank, London. Funds apparently ample. United States passport. Social contacts good; credit good; moves in international circles."

"Ye note that?" said Firth, looking up over his shoulder at the ingenuous countenance of Bluett: "that big gap? There's nothing here—" he rested a long sensitive forefinger on the page—"for close on seven years. Nothing between the time that she left Hollywood and turned up at Claridge's."

"That's right," said Bluett. "And I should say from the look of her flat she's still in funds. A beautiful woman—and a widow, too."

Firth, who had redirected his attention to the page, looked up again, and glared at his subordinate. "There are times," he said, "forby, when ye're sense o' humor becomes almost funny."

His eyes half closed, he regarded the smooth, fresh face and upstanding hair with marked disapproval. He returned to his reading. There was a sort of summary:

"Mrs. Ysolde Destrée for some years has spent every season in London, but has travelled extensively, formerly wintering abroad at Monte Carlo or elsewhere in the South. She appears to have plenty of money, but the source of this is unknown. She is believed to have shares, although not held in her own name, in the Green Spider night club, the restaurant Grand Marnier, and also, but this cannot be confirmed, in the Mayfair roulette group. No serious investigation of her affairs has so far been undertaken, since she has never openly transgressed the law. She almost certainly has black market contacts at present—associated with the above enterprises. Her mode of life is bohemian to a degree, but she is received in good social circles; undoubtedly has influential friends."

Firth glanced up again. "Ah!" said he. "Ye weren't reading, I see. Ye were staring at the photograph on the opposite page."

"That's right," Bluett admitted. "Something funny about her eyes, isn't there?"

"That may be, but particularly what are ye thinking?"

"Well, of course, she isn't English, nor American. I was thinking, Inspector, that she's probably a half-caste. What do you think?"

Firth turned his gaze upon the left hand page, and studied a photograph which was pasted there, a head and shoulders of Destrée, depicting her wearing a tightly fitting suit and no hat; in fact, obviously an enlargement of a passport picture. "I wonder," he murmured—"That's a formidable woman, Bluett. I'm open to believe she knows more about the death o' Sir Giles Loeder than anybody suspects."

Bluett meditatively returned to the mantelpiece, where he had left his newspaper. "It's getting a bit beyond me," he confessed. "You more or less wasted a whole night checking up on Mr. Michaelis, after you'd watched his rooms in St. James's Street to make sure that he really went back there. I wasted my time following Gaston Max—"

Chief Inspector Firth closed the large volume with a sigh, and looked up. "What's that ye say?"

"I say we've been wasting our time."

"Is tha' so? What about the man who—according to your report—came upstairs and listened outside Mr. Bernstein's door?"

"Mr. Max had good reasons not to return, in propriâ personâ, but you went back and called up for instructions. As I was still here in the office, working on the Michaelis data, I came along to Windmill Street and brought Sergeant Hawkins wi' me."

"I know you did." Sergeant Bluett stared. "You told me to go home, but stayed behind yourself."

"Now," continued Firth, fingering the envelope, "ye may recall that ye heard this man because he guided himself i' the dark by holding on to the handrail. Later, ye both obsairved he had something wrong wi' his foot when he ran. That was the point o' interest. Weel—Hawkins and I had a good look at that handrail."

Firth, his tawny eyes narrowed, his chin resting in his palm, fixed a meaningful glance upon his subordinate.

"Oh, did you?" said Bluett. "Funny I didn't think of that."

"The rail was verra dusty, as you might expect, and the fingerprints, although a lot o' them were smeared, could be seen as plain as a pikestaff. Weel—" he picked up the envelope. "We got some promising impressions—and here are the photographs."

"I saw they were photographs when I came in."

Sergeant Bluett returned to the desk. They both bent over a number of prints which the envelope contained. "Look here," said Bluett; "a beauty of his palm."

"And here are all four fingers," exclaimed Firth, "verra clear. Another o' the thumb. That's plenty to go upon."

He took up the telephone. "We'll have them sent in right away," he said, an unfamiliar note of excitement in his strident voice. "If they belong to the limping man, it is possible we have his record in the files." He paused, and replaced the instrument without making a call. "What's on ye're mind, Bluett? Is something puzzling the intellect?"

"Yes," Bluett confessed; "there is something I wanted to ask you."

"What would it be?"

"I wanted to ask you why you stood by waiting for Michaelis to leave Destrée's flat. You said yourself he was easy to check up on. That's what I don't understand."

Chief Inspector Firth showed his lower teeth in a grim smile. "Then I'll tell ye. I wanted to find out if he *limped*!"

Restaurant Grand Marnier, a reference to which appeared in the dossier Destrée at Scotland Yard, had become, under the guidance of Louis Marnier, internationally famous maître-d'hôtel from whom it derived its name, *dernier cri absolument*. Situated in the heart of Mayfair, it was possibly the most fashionable luncheon establishment in the West End, and quite the most expensive. Admittedly, the food was good (what there was of it); Colbert, the chef, had come from the Meurice in Paris; its cellar was excellent. To say that it became thronged daily with elegance would be untrue; it is a wartime axiom that the best people are the worst dressed. But it was smart to lunch at the Grand Marnier looking like a tramp.

Colonel J.N.G. O'Halloran pushed open revolving doors and entered its crowded lobby. He was lunching with his sister, who loved the place, and praying that she wouldn't turn up in uniform: the colonel disliked women in uniform.

"Makes me feel a damn fool," was the only explanation he had been heard to offer of this.

He saw that every one of many small tables was already in service; the wall seats were crowded; a queue blocked the entrance to the restaurant. He peered around, blinking rapidly, nodded to one or two acquaintances and then went to leave his hat in the cloakroom.

Coming out again, he elbowed a way into the bar, and, dodging through uniforms of many colors (most of the customers were officers) he ordered a pink gin. If he remained near the door, he knew that he could watch arrivals. Jules, the head waiter, approached with a ten shilling smile.

"Your table is ready, sir. The second alcove."

"Good. Hang on to it. Lady not turned up."

"Why do we suffer this infernal lack of punctuality, sir?" inquired a breezy, white haired sailor who stood wedged beside O'Halloran. He wore mufti, but as he was an admiral he never hesitated to express his views to anybody. "Wouldn't do at sea."

"Quite agree," said the colonel. "Miracle to me women done so well. Sense of discipline—nil."

"Damn nuisance; all of 'em; God bless 'em," the admiral summed up.

It was a notable fact that the Grand Marnier had attracted a clientèle representative of all the services. As many distinguished officers were to be seen there almost any day wrestling for victuals as one would meet at a Royal levée. The wise ones booked tables, and there were four tables especially popular with *parties intimes*. These occupied alcoves in the wall facing the windows, and whilst they afforded a view of the room, they insured also a certain privacy.

One of these his secretary had booked that morning for the Commissioner, whose sister rather overpowered him. She was addicted to bawling embarrassing domestic matters in tones better suited to addressing a Boy Scout rally; in her brother's words, she had a voice like a fairy fog-horn.

Carrying his cocktail, the colonel went out to look for her. Failing interception, he knew that she would yell at the first waiter whom she sighted, "Has Colonel O'Halloran arrived?"

He failed to see, or hear, her in the lobby, and accordingly bye-passed the waiting queue and looked into the restaurant, wondering if she had asked for, and gone to, the table. However, the second alcove remained unoccupied. He noted, idly, that a Cabinet Minister and a woman who might have been his secretary (she was making notes) sat in the alcove beyond. He couldn't see who was in the one nearest to the door; but the third was occupied by a French Naval officer whom he knew by sight and a deeply tanned major wearing the romantic uniform of the Chasseurs d'Afrique.

O'Halloran, turning back, met a smile from the lady receptionist whose desk stood beside the door. "If you care to go to your table, Colonel O'Halloran," she said, "I will direct your friend when she arrives."

"Thanks," he replied. "Obliged. But I think I'll wait outside. Hullo! here she is!"

His sister, Catherine, by name Mrs. Mallory, came striding across the lobby glaring rather than glancing at its occupants. The family resemblance was unmistakable, except that Mrs. Mallory was conceived on a larger scale: larger eyes, larger frame, larger voice. To his relief, she did not wear uniform, but was dressed in what he called a "sensible way"; that is in a heather tweed suit and a plain felt hat. She greeted him with, "Hullo, Jimmy," spoken as though it had been "Slope arms!" so that everybody in the lobby jumped nervously.

"Hullo, Kit! Let's go in. Have a cocktail at the table. How's Bill?"

"Terrific," replied his sister; and an inexperienced waiter balancing a tray of sherry glasses nearly ruined his prospects.

Louis Marnier in person took charge as they entered, and piloted them to the vacant alcove. Colonel O'Halloran, following his sister, was surprised when the major of chasseurs raised his hand in salute. O'Halloran nodded brusquely and passed on. As he sat down:

"Who," Mrs. Mallory inquired in trumpet tones, "is the singing juvenile from 'The Desert Song'?"

"Don't know," snapped her brother. "But as duelling is out of date, kindly shut up, Kit."

"Oh," said Kit. "Then I will have a Scotch and soda—but I want to see the bottle."

And so luncheon began. It was proceeding amicably when a waiter brought a folded note for Colonel O'Halloran. He apologised to Kit, unfolded the message, and read: "Forgive me, my dear friend, for bad artistry. I know you are so critical: my salute was an impulse. I am to-day an officer of chasseurs for most important reasons. Guard your conversation—even though you seem to be so private. This note will reach you by a route roundabout. Please do your best to make peace with your charming friend.

"Gaston Max"

"H'm!" muttered the colonel. "You don't have to be mad to work at Scotland Yard—but it helps."

24

The Wheel Rolls On

"Messieurs! Faites Vos Jeux!"

Roulette was in full swing; not in the lily haunted flat of Destrée, but in that almost equally luxurious apartment on the floor above, occupied by Mr. Francis, a suite which, also, contained a billiard room. Possibly Scotland Yard remained unaware of these matinée performances: the powers that be are prone to bracket gambling with strip dancing, cocaine sniffing, and other midnight vices; but in point of fact Mr. Francis had quite a "good house."

In a room somewhat smaller than that used by Destrée, a typical private billiards room, its walls decorated with sporting prints, nearly a dozen players were assembled around the table, at which, however, only two croupiers functioned. It was one of those gay young autumn days dressed in the finery of summer, and since windows which commanded a distant view of a verdant square were opened, permitting sunshine to enter freely, it was altogether more pleasant in every way, and certainly more healthful, than the blacked-out stuffiness of the larger casino below.

Mr. Francis personally took care of his guests, his eyes twinkling ironically and his chin dimpling, as he moved with that cat-like stride from chair to chair, condoling here, congratulating there. Nobody ever heard his approach: he appeared. A difference one might have noted in the assembly; it was caused by the predominance of women players. Presumably, male habitués were otherwise engaged during the afternoon. Lady Keffington was there, her large handbag upon the table beside her, and so was Mrs. Delarusse, the stout lady who surveyed the gyrations of the wheel through lorgnettes. Her expression, one of keen disapproval, was traceable, no doubt, to the dwindling majesty of a once imposing mound of chips now disintegrating before her on the green baize.

Mr. Michaelis was absent, but presently that white coated barman, who sometimes officiated for Destrée, opened the door to usher in Lady Huskin and Teddie Olivar. One might have surmised (correctly) that he was Mr. Francis's man, and that he lent a hand to Mrs. Destrée only when play took place below. Mr. Francis, who had been talking in an undertone to one of the croupiers, immediately looked up, and then strode across to meet the new arrivals.

"My dear Lady Huskin, this is a real surprise and a real pleasure. Glad to see you, Olivar."

"Dear Mr. Francis," said Lady Huskin, "I have just come from Simone's. Teddie picked me up and told me there was a game on here. I have left Dandini in charge of your man. You don't mind, do you?"

"Certainly not. It's a real pleasure." The elusive dimple appeared and disappeared upon the speaker's chin.

"Would it be asking too much in these days of points and rations, to make him a cup of tea and give him a few sweet biscuits? Something went wrong at Simone's to-day, and he does so miss his tea, poor wee beastie."

"Leave the matter in my hands, Lady Huskin. Would you like tea, yourself?—or a drink? Or do you want to begin play right now?"

"Oh, I think I am too excited to have tea until I have played a little while. What do you think, Teddie?"

"I am fully in favor of play," declared Teddie. He performed an elegant sweeping movement with his left arm, and consulted a jewelled wrist-watch. "Besides, Poppy dear, you haven't long to stay. You told me you had to meet your husband at six."

"Ah!" sighed Lady Huskin, rolling her eyes beneath heavily blued lids, a trick that she may have acquired from Teddie.

"Duty calls, as you remind me, Teddie dear. Yes, let us play."

As she advanced with her oddly mincing gait to a chair which Mr. Francis drew out for her, Teddie stayed behind for a word with Lady Keffington. "Oh, my dear, don't tell me you are losing?"

"I have been here exactly sixty minutes, Teddie, and I have lost exactly sixty pounds."

"Poor darling! Shall I change some more money for you?"

"The odd forty, if you will be so sweet. If I lose a hundred pounds this afternoon, I sha'n't be able to play any more this week."

"Hullo, Lady Keffington!" called Lady Huskin across the table. "Here we are again!" From her handbag she produced a leather wallet, supercharged with notes, and held it out helplessly in Teddie's direction.

"My dear," said he, in Lady Keffington's ear, "when I have cashed this forty for you I must rejoin Poppy Huskin. But I will keep an eye on your play—and perhaps, as I am free this evening, you and I might have a bite somewhere later."

"That would be sweet, Teddie," Lady Keffington replied, with an upcast glance, "I am free, too."

Teddie Olivar performed his duties as cashier, and took a chair beside Lady Huskin, grasping the extended wallet as he sat down. "How much shall we begin with, Poppy?"

"Say a hundred each, Teddie. We really mustn't risk any more."

"Messieurs! faites vos jeux!" The wheel rolled on ...

In that pleasant airy room, appreciable sums of money lightly changed hands, but as a rule in the end remained in the hands of the bank. Several other visitors arrived, amongst them Mr. Michaelis, who in his ambassadorial manner, gravely saluted the ladies known to him, but did not play. In fact, one familiar with the gambling parties carried on at Destrée's, Mrs. Sankey's, Mr. Francis's and elsewhere, could not have failed to note that although Mr. Michaelis was a regular visitor he never did play. Impeccably groomed, straight as a rod, his geometrical bows could be accounted for only by the presence of a hinge, and suggested that at some time he had been folded in half.

Lady Huskin's mink wrap Teddie Olivar had draped respectfully over the back of her chair (he had a deep respect for mink), so that a pearl necklace which surrounded her well-preserved throat became peculiarly noticeable. Lady Huskin began by winning, and her plump hands with their abnormally long nails and superfluous rings, twitched quite nervously as she fingered a growing mound of chips. Probably she had more money than that possessed by everyone else in the room added together; but she loved to win. Her eyes sparkled beneath those heavy lids; her gaiety was almost infectious. But it failed to disturb the graceful boredom of Teddie Olivar, her partner. Indeed, although discreetly, he yawned once or twice; when suddenly Lady Huskin stood up. She had begun to lose. Mr. Michaelis bent over her chair.

"Mr. Francis has asked me, dear Lady Huskin, if you would join him for tea."

Lady Huskin, flattered, indeed, fluttered, by being singled out in this manner, almost immediately turned, drawing her wrap about her shoulders. "Stay where you are, Teddie, and go on staking for both of us, until you recover what I have lost; there's a darling. I sha'n't be many minutes."

In a cosy room which Lady Huskin found pleasantly mannish, she took tea with Mr. Michaelis and Mr. Francis. The walls presented a mosaic of valuable old prints; heavy oak bookcases were laden with works on all sorts of sporting subjects, ranging from African game to ice hockey. A thick blue carpet covered the floor, and leather upholstered furniture, although well worn, had substantial dignity and character.

Mr. Francis presently wheeled in a three-deck wagon containing an assortment of sandwiches and pastries which transported Lady Huskin to the Hôtel de Paris at Monte Carlo. Porcelain teacups, fragile as shells, were used, and the tea was not the sort of tea to which one becomes accustomed in wartime. To complete this soft illusion, a hidden gramophone, discreetly pianissimo, imposed insidiously the magic of Kreisler's playing.

"How divinely restful," murmured Lady Huskin, manipulating a meringue liberally charged with real, rich cream. "Is this delightful room your study, Mr. Francis?"

"It is. I have changed its character somewhat since I came to live here. This apartment formerly belonged to Horace Bagshott, the sporting writer."

"It is too, too charming!" She regarded him coyly. "I am simply thrilled. Shall I tell you why? Teddie has revealed to me that you are Francis Batt, my favorite radio comedian!"

"Really!"

Mr. Francis exchanged glances with Mr. Michaelis. "Well—that's a sort of state secret, Lady Huskin. I don't mean that I'm ashamed of it—"

"Ashamed! I should think not!"

"But as London correspondent of the Transcontinent News Service of New York, it's what might be called a side-line. Do you get me? I was on the stage at one time, and I thought, maybe, I could liven up some of the boys if I returned to my old tricks. Thanks a lot. I appreciate your approval very much."

"Oh, I simply adore your performances."

Mr. Francis bowed as an actor takes a curtain, and busied himself with teacups.

"I was at luncheon at the Mansion House to-day, Lady Huskin," said Mr. Michaelis, standing at her elbow and balancing three biscuits in his saucer with the ease of a professional juggler. "Your husband's speech was remarkably sound."

"Oh!" said Lady Huskin, with her girlish laugh, "John can put it across: I grant you that."

"He is indeed a man of varied talents, and fortunate in possessing a charming and tactful wife. We had a chat, later. He is terribly worried about the big convoy, is he not?"

"Worried!" echoed Lady Huskin, setting down plate and teacup upon an Arab coffee table which Mr. Francis had placed for her convenience, "worried isn't the word. I really have to be very patient with him."

"And I am sure you are," murmured Mr. Francis.

"It is really most trying. Of course, it is the biggest convoy they have ever tried to get through to Malta, and it is simply essential that it should safely arrive there."

"So he was telling me," murmured Mr. Michaelis, bending solicitously over her.

"Some of the things they are sending, we are terribly short of here, you know. That's what bothers John. But the poor dear brave people of Malta are even shorter. So what can we do? They quite expect to lose a lot of the ships, you know. All those brave, wonderful mercantile sailors!"

"Yes," sighed Mr. Michaelis, his monocle focussed apparently on space. "Twenty-five ships, he told me, and a veritable fleet to convoy them."

"Twenty-five, Mr. Michaelis!" exclaimed Lady Huskin. "Thirty, if you will excuse me." She attacked her meringue with renewed vigor. "And practically two fleets to escort them. Both in charge of admirals!"

"Yes, he explained that. The second fleet takes over at Gibraltar, of course, convoying them through the Sicilian narrows. Birkenhead is chock-a-block with stuff, he was saying."

"Chock-a-block!" Lady Huskin's mouth was full of cream. "There's such a jam there they can't get the convoy to sea." She disposed of her cream. "I'll let you into a secret. Poor John is so worried that he has begun to talk in his sleep!"

"Oh, gee!" said Mr. Francis, "that must be real trying for you!"

"Trying! I had to insist that he slept in his dressing-room. Even there, I can hear him." She glanced coquettishly at Mr. Michaelis. "Don't you think I'm very wicked to run the risk of being arrested at such a time? Oh, I'm sure I must be! Think of the scandal! Yet, do you know, I never had such a thrill in my life as on the night the police came to dear Mrs. Destrée's flat!"

"A gay and adventurous spirit, Lady Huskin," smiled Mr. Michaelis. "Your husband gave me to understand ..." And the conversation was tactfully steered back into its former channel.

Some time after Lady Huskin had returned to the roulette table, Mr. Bernstein arrived. He was admitted to the lobby by Mr. Francis in person, and proved to be laden with two heavy suitcases. His brow was dewy.

"There you are," said he, dumping the cases on the floor. "Hennessy Three Star. The real thing, pre-war, as arranged. Put

your shirt on, Barney."

"That's fine," said Mr. Francis, chin dimpling. "Did you manage the three dozen?"

"Three dozen was the order—three dozen is here. I don't let it out of me hands; so where shall we dump it?"

"Temporarily, I think in the kitchen."

"Lead on, old cock. Your obedient follows with the booze."

So presently, laden with his suitcases, Mr. Bernstein entered that faultlessly appointed kitchen which once had attracted favorable attention from Mr. Wake. It was at the moment in use as a service room for the gambling party, and Markham, white coated, hovered about with trays, cups and pots of tea. A pair of highly polished black shoes standing in a corner struck a discordant note, having, presumably, been newly cleaned. Mr. Bernstein dumped his suitcases down beside them, opened the first, and began to cast out crumpled sheets of newspaper used as packing.

Then, from amid this rustling débris he extracted bottles of brandy, and ranged them in orderly rows upon the table behind him. "None of your bootleg muck, old cock. Real French. Smells of the grape. Goes down very well. In fact, we'll sample a spot with your kind permish, when I've finished unpacking."

"That's O.K. by me," smiled Mr. Francis. "Lady Huskin is here this afternoon. I'm sure her husband would be glad to meet you."

"I wouldn't mind meeting Lord Woolton himself. He'd get nothing over me. Old John Huskin is a white man, a man I respect; but I'm an honest tradesman, same as you are. You supply the sport; I supply the booze. People ain't Egyptian mummies. They've got to live! See what I mean? Not half they ain't. We help 'em."

During the sampling of the brandy (which Mr. Bernstein interrupted to return heaps of newspaper to the suitcases) Mr. Francis might have been observed watching the stooping figure with a fixity of expression which wholly changed the character of his face; nor was a dimple present in his heavy chin. Mr. Bernstein closed the last case and stood up.

"As a matter of fact," he said, confidentially grasping the lapel of Mr. Francis's coat, "Lady H. has become one of my best customers. The old man runs his establishment on the same lines as the King. See what I mean? If you want to live like the poor live, go and live in Buckingham Palace—or down at Huskin Court. I'm telling you, they get nothing to eat. And Lady H. don't like it. She's a good customer of mine. Do quite a nice little business together."

"That's fine," smiled Mr. Francis. "She certainly looks well nourished. You will stay for an hour, of course?"

"Not to-day, old sport. Business is business. I got me car outside, and another customer to oblige. To-night, perhaps. Is there a game to-night?"

"No ..." Mr. Francis drawled the word reflectively. "We are being extra careful. Mrs. Sankey's flat, as you are aware, is closed."

"What about Ysolde? I had lunch with her a few days ago. Boy, oh boy! What a star turn!"

"She, also, is going easy. But to-morrow, maybe, I can let you know."

"Always find the old firm at the same address. Bernard Bernstein & Co. Make your own price. Terms, cash. Distance no object ..."

Some little time after Mr. Bernstein's departure, in fact not long before Lady Huskin also was called upon to leave, Markham sought out Mr. Francis in the gambling room, waiting discreetly until he could catch his eye.

"I am very sorry, sir," he said, "but I think Mr. Bernstein must have made a mistake."

"Made a mistake?" Mr. Francis's light blue eyes grew hard. "What kind of a mistake?"

"Well, sir, you remember I had cleaned your dress shoes for to-night. They were on the kitchen floor, and Mr. Bernstein threw all the newspapers on top of them. I believe—I can account for it in no other way: he is rather an impulsive gentleman—that he must have picked them up with the paper and put them into one of the suitcases."

"You mean they are not there?"

"I do, sir. I am sorry; but I can find them nowhere."

25

Kyphi

A constable passing down South Audley Street at about midnight, turned into that little bay which embraced the house with the scarlet door, and in accordance with instructions shone his light upon it. He pressed against the panels to make sure fastenings were secure, glanced up at shaded windows and was about to pass on, when something brushed against his leg. He started, directing the ray downward, and it illuminated a number of brilliant eyes upturned to him from behind low parapets. These eyes belonged to a company of cats.

"Be off with you!" growled the constable, and flashed his light threateningly amongst them.

They scattered in many directions, so that except for two fiery circles which remained focussed upon him from the darkness of a near-by corner, the eyes of a large, gray Persian, night swallowed them up. He flashed his light again upon the door. "Funny business," he muttered.

The constable hesitated, sniffing suspiciously: he thought that he detected a faint church-like odor. However, he could not quite make up his mind on this point, and so, switching off his light, he went tramping on. He wondered if the incident called for reporting, but secretly feared the ridicule which such a report was calculated to invoke. He had been told about the cats which haunted the vicinity of Lord Marcus's house, and as he went on through dark, deserted streets, under a leaden sky, he found his mind constantly reverting to that feline assembly before the scarlet door, trying in vain to account for the presence of those cats.

Explanation lay in that miniature temple, behind silver panels which opened out of the Roman atrium of Lord Marcus's house. The shrine, or altar, with its throne and fantastic procession of Nile gods, was veiled; a tall screen stood before its golden curtain. The only light was that concentrated in some mysterious way upon this screen. It produced the image or illusion of a crystal globe, an image more than a foot in diameter, which alternately cleared and clouded in a manner to suggest that it was hollow and contained moving vapor. It seemed to revolve slowly upon an invisible axis.

One present, and grown accustomed to darkness, would have observed a silver censer placed immediately inside the door, from which arose almost straight pencils of odorous smoke. The air of this secret chapel was laden with the perfume of *kyphi*; and seated stiffly upright facing the screen was Mrs. Vane.

She wore a severe black dinner frock cut square at the neck. None of the raiment of a priestess of Isis adorned her to-night, but her pose was the same: her hands, fingers extended, resting upon the arms of the chair, her knees pressed together, and her green flecked amber eyes widely open and fixed upon the revolving image. Beside the screen, so that he faced her, Lord Marcus Amberdale, wearing his characteristic evening dress, with black velvet jacket, stood motionless, watching. Mrs. Vane's lips moved slightly; she uttered a sound resembling a faint moan.

"Look for the guiding ray." Lord Marcus's melodious voice, low pitched, held a note of absolute command.

"I cannot find it ... I am so tired."

Reflected light touched her flamboyant hair without creating any semblance of passionate humanity; hers was the beauty of one of those chryselephantine goddesses fashioned by the genius of Phidias.

"Search for the ray. I order you to find it."

A brief spasm of pain passed over Mrs. Vane's features. It was gone immediately, to leave them placid, dehumanised. "I am searching," she murmured.

Silence became complete again. The image revolved, grew clear, grew cloudy, pencils of smoke wavered tremulously, as if in that still atmosphere even speech disturbed the air.

"I see it!"

Her lips opened slightly in a rapt smile; otherwise she did not stir.

"Follow where it leads."

"It is so hard," she whispered. "Why must I go?"

"I order you to go."

The smile disappeared, and that pathetic suggestion of pain flashed across her features. Following some moments of silence, Lord Marcus spoke.

"Where does it lead?"

"Away—far away. I cannot say where, but I have left streets behind."

"Look up. Where is the moon?"

"I cannot see it; only clouds."

"Look until you do see it. Look beyond the clouds."

"It is on my right, above a wood. The ray is moving over this wood."

"Follow it."

"I am afraid. It is very lonely."

"There is nothing to fear. Do as I tell you."

She moaned again faintly, and once more that expression crossed her face, that of one who toils with failing strength, who fears greatly, but who presses on ...

"Ah!" It was an exclamation of horror. "The wood is full of great cats! They are all about me! I can see their eyes—everywhere ..."

"They cannot harm you. Go on."

Life, now, might have been detected in the body of the entranced medium. Her breast began to rise and fall; her lips were slightly opened. "I am beyond the wood. I can see a large house."

"Describe it."

"I have been to this house. It is the house of Lord Huskin."

"We fail!"

A note of disappointment crept into Lord Marcus's imperious voice. "To-night we fail again."

"May I return? I am afraid, and I am very tired."

"Does the ray rest above the house?"

"No, it moves on."

"Follow it."

"Oh, I cannot, I cannot! I can do no more."

"Follow it."

Violently, now, that unnatural stillness of Mrs. Vane became disturbed. She began to breathe as one who is all but exhausted. Spasms of pain plucked at the corners of her lips; her fingers, which had rested so placidly on the chair arms, twitched, cluching them for support.

"Where do you find yourself? Speak."

"I can see a cottage."

"Describe it."

"It has a low wooden porch on which roses are growing ... A small stream runs through ... the garden."

Mrs. Vane was now panting for breath as one in the last extremity of exhaustion, but the inexorable voice commanded: "Go on."

"I cannot ... I am falling, fainting ... dying."

"If I call you back, you must return again, later."

"Call me back ... I beg you ... call me back!"

For a moment more Lord Marcus remained in that motionless pose, then stepped forward and rested his hand, the hand upon which he wore a scarab ring, lightly on the woman's head. "Wake! I order you to awake ..."

26

Michael Corcoran Calls

Chief Inspector Firth had been writing busily for more than an hour when Bluett came in. He screwed the cap onto his fountain pen as the Sergeant entered, and replaced it in a waistcoat pocket, raising his tawny eyes.

"Which would you say, Bluett," he demanded, "is the most fashionable night club in London now?"

"Green Spider," Bluett replied promptly.

"Is tha' so? And for luncheon?"

"Grand Marnier."

"Aye, I'm thinking ye're no' far wrong. Now—" he leaned back in his chair—"I have some particulars concerning the shareholders in both o' them. Destrée is almost certainly one."

"That's right. She's got the knack of being in on a good thing."

"I'm thinking so. Roulette in Mayfair is a good thing."

"Ah," murmured Bluett, "but we can't pin that to her." He rested his elbow on the mantelpiece, then, with a startled look began to search all his pockets. "I've left my newspaper behind," he muttered.

"That will be a serious blow. Was your dinner wrapped in it?" Firth showed a row of small, regular lower teeth, in one of his rare smiles. "I ha' been making a summary of the Loeder case to date." He tapped the writing-block. "Maybe you will check it over wi' me. I ha' notes here o' the principal parties so far concerned in the matter, wi' what we know about them." He glanced down:—"Lord Marcus Amberdale: We ha' failed to prove any association between him and the murdered man, or to think of any motive which could have prompted the crime."

"Unless he's mad," muttered Bluett, who, in the absence of a newspaper, didn't seem to know what to do with his hands.

"A fact which is duly noted. Mrs. Vane: Observation has been kept on this lady, but nothing has come of it. Medical evidence and the evidence o' my own eyes suggest that she knows nothing more than she has told us."

"The limping man," muttered Bluett, absently.

"As such, he doesna' appear in my summary. We may be in a poseetion to put a name to him when fingerprint files have been searched. Next: Miss Fay Perigal. I dismiss her from the case. Wake, the butler: I ha' serious doubts o' this man, but we can get no direct evidence against him. You have interviewed his wife, and you tell me she seems a decent body, and that her story of what Wake did on the night of the murder corresponds entirely wi' his own."

"That's right."

"It is a matter into which I am minded to go further. I had him closely covered, as you know, and reports are curious. More o' this later. Mrs. Sankey, at whose flat in Hay Hill it is practically certain Loeder was playing on the night o' the crime."

"Left town," said Bluett; "flat shut up."

"I am aware of it, and the fact in itself is suspeecious. This woman is the widow of an Indian Civil Servant, and I believe she sublets her flat to the roulette gang for a high figure. She is just a stooge, and likely innocent enough as they come. It is Mrs. Destrée who could tell us whether Sir Giles had money in his possession on that night when he left. I think he did."

"The empty case certainly points that way," admitted Bluett.

"It a'most confirms it; but the leather carries no fingerprints. Mr. Michaelis: He is a naturalised British subject, a man o' means and director of a number of City companies, including a concern called 'Mayfair Caterers' which controls The

Green Spider and The Grand Marnier. I am wondering if another of his companies is the roulette racket?"

"In my opinion," said Bluett, "he is in on everything that Destrée is in on. I mean, he represents her on The Green Spider, The Grand Marnier—and like enough on roulette as well."

"Then there is a man called Francis, who occupies a flat immediately above that of Destrée. According to Max, they are associated. This Francis is an American. I have had no chance to check his papers, but, if he's crooked, his papers will be in order. We know that game. I ha' found out, though, that he's London correspondent of the Transcontinent News Service of New York. That's O.K., so far as it goes. In his spare time he is a radio comedian—"

"That's right: Francis Batt. Dam' good, too. *I* found that out."

"*You* did?" The tawny eyes half closed from the bottom upward. "It's just possible, Bluett, that someone told ye? I was thinking about Gaston Max."

"So was I. That's funny. I was thinking he might have mentioned it to *you*."

"Ah." The Chief Inspector frowned thoughtfully. "We know that Loeder was a German agent—one o' the dirtiest villains who ever escaped hanging—and so we have to bear in mind that his murder may have been o' a political character."

"Gaston Max treats it as a sort of side-show," said Bluett gloomily; "but we have got to solve it, haven't we? I mean, whether it's a gang murder or not. But I think your own theory is the right one: that robbery was the motive."

Chief Inspector Firth sighed and lay back in his chair again. "Weel, we had powers some days ago to investigate Sir Giles's affairs and to open his safe. I left it to you. What did you find?"

"Nothing much," Bluett admitted, "except evidence that he paid Rita Martin's rent, and, of course, that curious matter of his drawing five thousand pounds in small notes from his bank about two weeks before his murder. The bank gave me the numbers of the notes, but they haven't traced any yet."

"It wouldn't help us much if they did," said Firth despondently; "at least, not that I can see. Of course, I should like to know what he wanted that money for. It's a large sum to draw out in cash. If only we could ha' got the gambling gang inside for a day or two, maybe an investigation o' their affairs might have shown if he had money on him at the time—"

He ceased speaking as the 'phone buzzed. Taking up the instrument: "Yes," he said sharply, "who is it? Mr. Michael Corcoran?" He glanced up at Bluett through half-closed eyes. "Michael Corcoran, K.C. Oh, very well—please show him up." He replaced the receiver. "That's verra queer," he muttered. "What in the name o' glory can Michael Corcoran want to see me about?"

"Shall I go?"

"No, wait. I'll give you the tip if necessary."

A few moments later Michael Corcoran entered, a portfolio under his arm; his air, one of professional briskness, and his attire, professionally correct.

"Good afternoon, Inspector."

"Good afternoon, sir. This is my assistant, Detective-sergeant Bluett. Would you wish this to be a private interview?"

"Not at all—not at all." Corcoran laid his portfolio on the desk, and turned to Bluett. "My business concerns a case upon which I presume you are both working. In short, I am here on behalf of a client."

"Indeed, sir," said Firth, a puzzled frown between his brows. "How does your client's business concern me?"

"It concerns you very intimately, Inspector, for the simple reason that my client killed Sir Giles Loeder."

27

Gaston Max Wears Pearl Gray

Colonel O'Halloran stared from the bay window of his office. He was busily rolling a cigarette, and his upcast gaze appeared to be fixed upon barrage balloons, oily bubbles in an azure bowl, for the afternoon was a brilliant one. In a leathern armchair near the large and somewhat untidy desk, Gaston Max sat, watching the check coated back of the Assistant Commissioner. Max wore a pearl gray suit, smartly tailored, dark blue soft collared shirt, and a dull red tie with black spots. A handkerchief of similar design drooped from his breast pocket, and he was twirling a heavy-looking monocle by its cord around and around one extended forefinger.

"I am obliged, Colonel O'Halloran, my friend, for your interest. My case against the spy ring is making famous progress. Thanks so much, oh so much, for those facilities which I owe to you. But yes, sacred blue! certainly. Lacking my base in Soho, freedom from those regulations which shackle my confrères, I could have done little. Bernstein & Company are highly respected in the black market. We do a spanking trade. In fact, the good Lord Huskin, a worthy and clever man, acting on behalf of Lord Woolton, of course, has been inquiring about us lately. If I am arrested, you must get me out."

"Thanks," snapped the Assistant Commissioner without turning; "don't count on it. Waiting to hear why you sent me that extraordinary note at the Grand Marnier."

Gaston Max smiled. "As Mr. Bernstein," he said, "I do some small business with the Restaurant Grand Marnier. I make my deliveries at night. Marnier, the celebrated maître-d'hôtel, is an employee of the proprietors—no more. He is not acquainted with the secrets of this place, nor is Jules, his head-waiter. But the second waiter was placed there by the controlling company—Mayfair Caterers; the charming lady receptionist also. Very well. There is a private office of Mayfair Caterers, a small room upstairs, which always is kept locked unless a director should come. Eh bien! those four cubicles *intimes*, so popular, I believe them to be no more than sound boxes connected by microphone with this room upstairs! All that is spoken in them can be heard, you understand? If I am right, we shall see, we shall know."

"So that's why you were there dressed up like an African chasseur?"

"But of course! My case approaches a climax. I must make no mistakes. You saw that I had with me an admiral of the Free French? He is my good friend. Together, we had rehearsed our rôles. We were discussing important details concerning the big convoy to Malta—"

"What's that!" Colonel O'Halloran snapped.

"Such interesting details, my colonel, details known to nobody else, because I invented them! I am spreading such bait in all sorts of places where I think my spy-fish seek their prey—at the Grand Marnier, at the Green Spider, among those who frequent Mayfair roulette parties. The use of this information I can trace—for it is my own copyright!"

"Damn it!" said the Assistant Commissioner, "always startling me to death, Max. D'you mean to say that when I, for instance, book a table at Grand Marnier, that wench at the desk tips somebody off, and he cuts upstairs to private office and listens in?"

"But certainly!"

"Good God!" The colonel looked seriously disturbed.

"For the ordinary, those tables are never available. But for a Commissioner of Scotland Yard, an admiral of the Fleet, a member of the War Cabinet—oh, là, là!"

"This is a hell of a thing, Max! Hope you'll rope those scoundrels in pretty soon. Feel disposed to shut the place."

"No, no, I beg! This would ruin all. Already dangerous elements, yes, malevolent people, you understand, have become suspicious of me."

"Indeed!" the colonel blinked rapidly. "Mean the enemy agents?"

"Unfortunately, yes. And these are very dangerous people. Whilst I have almost obtained my conclusive evidence against

them, I believe they have failed to obtain any against me. But let me tell you this: only a few nights ago I was followed to Windmill Street by Detective-sergeant Bluett, a highly efficient officer. This did not matter. To him I revealed myself; we are all for one and one for all: but someone else followed me, also."

"Eh! what's that?" said the colonel, completing the manufacture of a cigarette and snatching out a lighter. "Weren't spotted, were you?"

"I hope not, and I believe not. But I am sure this will interest you: he who followed me had a limp."

"A *limp*?" Colonel O'Halloran's small eyes grew even smaller, so that their piercing pupils might have been likened to twin gimlets. "Know the story about Mrs. Vane, don't you? May be tommyrot, but somehow stuck in my mind. Limping man, eh?"

"Yes, he limped, this one. But when I departed, for it was unwise that I should return, Sergeant Bluett remained on the premises, hoping that the one who limped might come back. It made me to think furiously. I knew, for the good Bluett had told me, that he suspected a car to have followed him. But this I dismissed as a coincidence or a myth, and I worked out patiently, by deduction and by inquiry, what actually had occurred."

"And what had occurred?"

"I learned that someone, a man called Olivar—oh, without malice, quite innocently—had told some of the people connected with the gambling racket (which is part of my fishery) that when detained late I slept at my office. They spoke, of course, of Mr. Bernstein—"

"Of course!"

"I concluded that what had occurred was as follows:—On my departure from the flat of the charming Mrs. Destrée, someone had gone ahead, perhaps in a car—for these people, under various pretexts, all seem to be able to run their cars in spite of petrol allowances and regulations. This person, I believe, had waited in the yard until I returned, then had crept up the stairs hoping to learn what I was doing and to whom I was speaking."

"I see," said the colonel. "Did he discover anything?"

"I have said that I hope not. But I feel that I again may have aroused their suspicions."

"Again—and in what way?"

"This limping man has become with me, also, an obsession. It is the same with our good Inspector Firth. It is a plague, I think. As there is one mixed up with Madam Destrée who walks like a cat, so lightly, so much on the toes. I wonder if this conceals a—not impediment, but yes, impediment will do—in his feet. By accident, you understand, I remove a pair of shoes."

"Good lord! how the devil did you manage that?"

"I brought them away in a suitcase which had contained bottles of Hennessy's brandy, mixed up in the packing; it was easy. I returned them an hour later with apologies, but I had made a discovery."

"Yes?" the colonel took a step forward, blinking so rapidly now that the movement of his lids became almost continuous.

"One of those shoes had an interior double sole. This man has one leg half an inch shorter than the other!"

"The limping man!"

"We do not know, my colonel. *A* limping man, yes; but *the* limping man—my faith! we have to see. Even when we have seen, what do we know? The dreams of a medium, they may mean nothing!"

"But to whom did these shoes belong?" The colonel displayed definite excitement. His home-made cigarette had gone out. He snapped the lighter into flame again.

"To a man called Julian Francis, who occupies a flat above that of Destrée."

"Yes, yes; mentioned him before. Go on."

"Yes, her first lieutenant at the roulette racket. Wherever play takes place, and they use many addresses, sometimes Destrée is not there, but always Mr. Francis is."

"Have we got his record here?"

"I think not. He is a citizen of the United States, domiciled in London. He is correspondent of a well-known news agency, and he is also a talented radio entertainer."

"Radio entertainer?"

"Surely you have heard him. He sings and plays and makes an occasion. He is called Francis Batt."

"Francis Batt! Yes, believe I heard him only a few nights ago. Wasn't he on program called 'Harry Dean's guest night'?"

"But, yes, certainly. He travels here and there to entertain the Forces. He is very good; oh, very good."

"Interests a bit mixed—what! Keeping something up your sleeve, Max."

Gaston Max revealed gleaming teeth in that smile which dispossessed the thinker and substituted the comedian. "Yes, yes. I know so much and yet so little. I have no evidence, you see, that Francis was the man who stole up Mr. Bernstein's stairs that night."

"H'm," muttered the colonel, doubtfully. "Well—your affair. What about Mrs. Vane. Take it you haven't lost sight of her?"

"But not at all. I called upon her in a so charming suite at the Barchester Hotel one day last week. She received me with great amiability."

"Pretty woman, or used to be. Haven't seen her for some time."

"But delightful. And her hair!—of that wonderful tint adored by artists who paint fire engines. But, yes, but she is beautiful, of course. She is—" Max shrugged, extending his palms—"of no very deep intelligence. No, but not clever enough to be a good criminal. I think Lord Marcus is right about her; she has psychic qualities."

"He seems sure of it," murmured the Assistant Commissioner.

"But, yes, so am I. It seems that she climbs the staircase of the planets, which I suppose is a path which can be mounted only by the use of great force. The Ancient Egyptians, so the charming Mrs. Vane informs me, knew how to generate this force and Lord Marcus has tried, but failed. Now, he is endeavoring to assemble it."

"Told me so." The Assistant Commissioner, whose cigarette had gone out a second time, threw it in a waste basket and began to fill his pipe.

"It seems we have all lived before, oh, ever so many lives, and it is the kindred souls, although they may not now belong to those who are our present friends, which can generate this force. If he can find seven in what he calls 'the same cycle' he believes that he can propel this wandering spirit of the beautiful Mrs. Vane right up to that high place where the secrets of the Universe are hidden."

"H'm!" said the Assistant Commissioner, returning loose shreds of tobacco to his coat pocket and pulling out the lighter. "Her story certainly corresponds with his own. Accounts for queer company he keeps. Saw him at Grand Marnier the other day lunching with Destrée."

"But, yes!" This news seemed to startle Gaston Max. "With Destrée, you say?"

"Yes. I confess I was surprised. Interest purely psychic, so he told me." His expression grew abstracted ... "Tremendously disturbed about Grand Marnier. Wondering what I may have given away there ..."

28

"Up in the Morning Early"

James Wake in these days was a long remove from that chimera, a happy man; and for his uneasy frame of mind a number of things were responsible. In the first place, it was not every butler of his skill and experience who would have accepted the responsibility for such an establishment as that of Lord Marcus Amberdale. Its mysterious atmosphere, the strange experiments which took place there, queer people who called, and the fact (to which Wake was not blind) that the house with the scarlet door remained under police observation: these inconveniences did not add to the gaiety of life; but there was something else.

Now and again, upon his lawful occasions concerning household catering, Wake would drop in at a discreet public house, extensively patronised by upper servants of Mayfair, at about opening time in the morning, for a glass of bitter beer. On two separate occasions, recently, Mr. Francis had joined him.

Possessed of a chronically suspicious mind, Wake associated these meetings, seemingly accidental, with Mrs. Destrée's smiling promise to keep in touch with him. The truth was that he had conceived a horror of the gambling racket which urged him in future to keep well away from it, and from those associated with it. But, unhappily, he appreciated the fact that these people knew too much about his affairs to entitle him to take a high hand.

At the first of these meetings, a reunion so unexpected that Wake had felt his treacherous temperature rising, Mr. Francis had been most charming. After asking about Mrs. Wake, he had insisted upon ordering a whisky and soda for Mr. Wake. He finally suggested that, since Scotland Yard's interest in roulette seemed to have slumbered again, he might care to resume his duties from time to time as croupier.

"It's very good of you, Mr. Francis," Wake had replied, "but with that other matter still, if I may so express myself, hanging over the house of Lord Marcus, I doubt if it would be wise."

Although from first to last no publicity whatever had been given to this fact in the press, Wake was aware that Mrs. Destrée knew where the body had been found.

"Oh, I see; you mean the Loeder murder?"

"Exactly, sir. Police interest in the matter might lead them to the other, I thought."

"Well, we're short of croupiers, and I guess we wouldn't mind raising the fee to fifteen guineas a night. Would that interest you?"

"Indeed, sir, it is a handsome offer; and if you should feel justified in renewing it, shall we say early next month, it is one which I might be disposed to accept."

The purely business part of the conversation had ended there, but this meeting with Mr. Francis left Wake in an uneasy frame of mind. It was not improved when his wife informed him a few days later that Mr. Francis had called at Grosvenor Square, under the impression that Wake was there, and had had some conversation with her.

This disturbed Wake very much indeed, and possibly to relieve his doubts, Mr. Francis dropped in again at Wake's house of call when he chanced to be present. "We were stumped for a croupier on Wednesday night," he explained. "I could get no reply on your line, and so I figured you had very likely gone around to your wife's. But I drew a blank there, too."

"Oh, I see." Wake experienced a measure of relief. "Did you find a substitute, Mr. Francis?"

"I took a hand myself." The dimple appeared in his heavy chin, his whimsical regard hovered on the brink of laughter. "But it was awkward. The offer for next Friday is twenty guineas, Wake. Are you free?"

"I am not, sir." The reply was quite firm. "Lord Marcus is entertaining."

"Bad luck!" And again they had parted, on the best of terms, but Mr. Francis was obviously disappointed. Then, only twenty-four hours later, had come another blow, and from an unexpected quarter.

Lord Marcus was dining out and had given Wake permission to spend the evening away from home; he had therefore joined his wife, as he had done much more frequently of late, and from her had learned the news. An official from the Ministry of Supply (Mrs. Wake showed her husband his card) had called only an hour or so before, to announce that Sir George Clarking's house was to be requisitioned and converted into offices.

"So that means the sack for me, Jim," she concluded sadly, "unless, of course, Lady Clarking can find a place for me in Scotland."

Mrs. Wake, a comely, gray-haired little woman, who feared no one in the world except her husband (whom she regarded as a super-mind) was sincerely distressed.

"Have you written to Lady Clarking?"

"Yes; I posted the letter just before you came."

"When are they going to take over?"

"The gentleman said the premises would be inspected early to-morrow morning. The vans will be here in the afternoon to remove the furniture."

James Wake looked around that cosy sitting-room in the basement which had been his wife's home and his own second home for so long, a pathetic expression upon his florid face. "Phew!" he muttered, dropping into an armchair. "That's the very devil."

It did not occur to him to ask any questions regarding this representative of the Ministry, that is to say, regarding his personal appearance. Had he done so, possibly the line of conduct which he adopted might have been discarded in favor of another.

Chief Inspector Firth was bending over a double sheet of foolscap spread out upon his desk, on either side of which certain photographs were pasted, when he heard someone whistling "Up in the morning early," and the door of his office opened. He did not look up until the man who had entered closed the door behind him and rapped upon it. Firth raised his head.

"Ah, Max," he said, for indeed this pearl gray figure was that of the celebrated Frenchman. "Ye come at a good moment."

"Any moment is a good moment when I see you, my friend." Max advanced, extending the jewelled cigarette case.

Firth took a cigarette, and this the Frenchman lighted, then lighting his own, dropped down into a chair facing the Chief Inspector.

"How is the big case shaping?" Firth inquired. "I gather that for some reason the death o' the man Loeder set ye back."

"Oh, but most seriously. Loeder was their mouthpiece. It was Loeder who told the news to Berlin. At his death, I had to begin all over again. My faith, yes! If you would tell me who killed him, my friend, it might help a little."

"Is tha' so?" said Firth slowly. "Weel, I have here—" he rested a long, sensitive hand upon a document which looked like a legal brief—"a confession witnessed in the presence o' Michael Corcoran, K.C., of the man who claims to have killed Sir Giles Loeder."

Gaston Max sprang to his feet, pushing the chair back. His strange eyes might have been thought to emit sparks; his mobile mouth became contracted into a still, straight line. "What! *what* do you say?"

"This is the confession, no word of which I doubt, of a young American airman, Flight Lieutenant Richard Hawke Kershaw."

"Richard Hawke Kershaw!" Gaston Max raised his hand to his brow, a man bemused. "Where have I heard that name?"

"I canna say, but here is his confession."

"And you believe it?"

"Impleecitly."

"But explain to me, Inspector Firth, my old, relieve me of this great bewilderment: why should this Kershaw kill Sir Giles Loeder?"

"I didna' say he killed him."

Max dropped back into his chair, and the mobile lips began to twitch again so that one might have supposed a hundred conflicting ideas to be passing through his brain at the same moment. "You puzzle me, my friend; but yes, I am puzzled."

"I said it was the confession of a man who *claims* to have killed him."

"Claims, you say?"

"Beyond doubt."

"And to have broken his neck?"

"Tha's the point," Firth replied deliberately. "We ha' been so careful wi' the press that the exact spot where the body was found and the precise nature of the injuries have never been published. This young fellow didn't know that Loeder died of a broken neck."

"But you say that you accept the statement of Kershaw?"

"Most certainly; in every particular. But judging from inquiries which I ha' been making, Loeder lost his life after his encounter wi' Kershaw—and also lost his money."

"You hold me in dreadful suspense. A theory of my own is at stake. Whom do you suspect?"

"With your permission, Mr. Max, I would prefer in words which I ha' heard you use, to serve up my results piping hot on a gold platter."

"But this is confusion. It is contrary to all my beliefs, all my deductions, all that I am building upon!"

"Tha's regrettable. But some time to-night I expect to ha' more facts, and I shall be willing to share them. Indeed, there's a favor I'm going to ask ye."

"Consider it granted, my friend."

"Would it be putting ye out unduly to become Peter Finch for an hour or two to-night?"

"But not at all!" Max cried eagerly. "Give me my instructions."

"I am obliged. We can arrange details later. And now, I would like ye to examine these fingerprints."

Gaston Max stepped around the desk, raised his heavy monocle and through it studied the photographs pasted upon the paper. It became evident to Firth, who had been unaware of this fact, that the monocle was not an ornament, but a powerful magnifying glass, a lens which no doubt the French investigator frequently found useful. His inspection completed:

"These two sets are identical," he pronounced. "Both belong to the same person. May I know his name?"

Firth smiled. "When I ha' all the facts," he replied. "But this much I can say: the prints on the right are those of a man called Johann Fritz Brandt. They came over in a big consignment from the United States. All I know, so far, is just that. The set on the left are from the handrail of your office in Great Windmill Street."

"The limping man!"

"The limping man, exactly! For particulars, I have had to send a long code cable to New York, quoting the name and reference number, and I am awaiting a reply."

"Mon Dieu! But it is wonderful. It is Kismet. You, my friend, have the fingerprints, and I—"

"Weel, what have you got?"

"I have the footprints."

"The *footprints*?"

"But yes, the footprints of a limping man! If it should prove to be the same, name of a little dog!—if it should prove to be the same! How excited I am, how confused. Yes, my faith, I am in a whirlwind!"

29

Wake Takes a Taxi

When James Wake came out of the house in Grosvenor Square, he carried a small attaché case which he had borrowed from his wife. The night was clear but moonless, and he felt disinclined to walk. A taxi which glided up beside him provoked a nervous start.

"Taxi, sir?"

"Yes," Wake said jerkily, and looked surprised when the man climbed down from his seat. "South Audley Street. I will direct you when we get there."

"Right-o." The driver, whom he seemed to have seen before, opened the door for him, and closed it carefully when he had got in.

Less than five minutes later Wake was banging on the glass in front, having tried in vain to open the shutter window. "Hello, there!" he cried, and banged ever more furiously. "Where are you taking me? I said South Audley Street."

But the man, whom he now concluded to be stone deaf, paid not the slightest attention, merely driving on. Wake was too angry and too disturbed to be quite sure of their direction, but an impression that they had crossed Piccadilly and were proceeding down St. James's Street was presently confirmed when the cab swung left into Pall Mall.

"Stop!" shouted Wake at the top of his voice, "stop!" And although this deep chested butler had a voice like that of a sergeant-major, it produced no effect whatever upon the driver.

Thereupon, Wake determined to open the door and to grab the man by his coat collar. But the near side door would not open. Evidently it was jammed. He tried the other with no greater success. He had heard that London was infested with footpads during the black-out, but a pirate cab was something which he had not anticipated. They were proceeding, too, at a dangerously fast speed. At the bottom of Cockspur Street, Wake in despair began to flash rays from his pocket torch, right and left, through the windows, with some faint hope of attracting the attention of passers-by.

He was determined, now, that he had been kidnapped. He was being hurried over to some thieves' den on the Surrey bank. Desperation possessed him, and taking up the attaché case, he dashed it against a window; but again, without result. The window was fitted with unbreakable glass. A few moments later, the real explanation dawned upon James Wake. That unpleasant sense of rising temperature which always disturbed him in emergencies, assailed him now.

Wake knew that he was being taken to Scotland Yard ...

Before a door from which a cavernesque blue light shone out, feebly but threateningly, the taxi pulled up. Two tall figures, those of constables in uniform, came forward, accompanied by a smaller, stoutish man in plain clothes. Again the taxi driver descended from his seat and coming around unlocked the door, which, as Wake realised, he must have locked upon him in Grosvenor Square. James Wake summoned all his fortitude.

"May I inquire the meaning of this?" he demanded, stepping out.

"You are Mr. James Wake, I believe," said the short man.

Wake peered into darkness in an endeavor to discern the speaker's features, and presently succeeded. He recognised the Detective-sergeant who had come to Lord Marcus's house on the night of the tragedy.

"I am James Wake." He spoke hoarsely.

"Just give your case to this constable, Mr. Wake, and we will go upstairs." Then, over his shoulder to the taxi driver: "Go round and get your fare, now, Finch."

"Right-o, guv'nor."

Peter Finch jumped back to his place, and Wake heard the cab being driven away as he turned and entered a small ante-

room: Bluett led, and the constables brought up the rear, one of them carrying the attaché case. Bluett picked up a telephone, and made a call.

"James Wake is here, Inspector. Shall I bring him up?"

Evidently the reply was "Yes," for the fresh colored man with upstanding hair turned to him again. "Be good enough to come this way, Mr. Wake."

"One moment, sergeant: I remember you now." He tried to speak firmly. "I am entirely within my rights in asking why I have been brought here."

"That's right," Bluett agreed, picking up a newspaper which lay on a desk.

"Excuse me, sergeant," said one of the constables; "but that's my paper."

"Sorry," Bluett put it down again. "Quite correct, what you say. Well, the Chief Inspector, who is waiting for a chat with you, will give you all the information you want."

A few moments later, Bluett ushered Wake into the severe office of Chief Detective-Inspector Firth to find the Chief Detective-Inspector seated at his desk, chin in hand, eyes narrowed.

"Good evening, Inspector," said Wake.

"Good evening, Mr. Wake; won't you sit down?"

Wake, removing his light gloves, put them beside his black hat on the floor, and sat down, with a side glance at an attaché case which Sergeant Bluett had placed upon the mantelpiece, the constable having retired. Firth regarded him in silence; his pointed collar, his black tie, his neat hair, and seemed to be satisfied with this inspection, for he nodded.

"I have been promised an explanation, Inspector."

"Ye shall have it. It's this way, Mr. Wake: I ha' had two officers employed—two men wi' whom you are not acquainted —checking up for some time past. Now, it seems to me, fro' reports, that expenditure has exceeded income, a subject upon which, if I mind me correctly, Mr. Micawber had something to say. Ye're losses at the dog races ha' been heavy o' late, and ye spend quite a lot o' money on football pools foreby. Ye see, I ha' been studying your mail, Mr. Wake. There ha' been other extravagances which I need no' mention, for indeed they don't concern me. But when I first saw ye, your appearance suggested something to my mind that I just couldn'a pin down at the time. Later, I placed it. Some whiles back a case took me to Monte Carlo."

Wake started quite visibly, and began to adjust his stiff collar. Bluett, leaning on the mantelpiece beside the attaché case, appeared to be no more than mildly interested.

"Weel, the impression to which I refer was this: ye reminded me of a croupier. And before we go any further, in your own interest, Mr. Wake, I am going to ask a question: Have ye ever been a croupier?"

Wake hesitated for seven dreadful seconds, then nodded his head. "Yes."

"I am glad o' that answer, Mr. Wake, because one o' my officers has twice seen ye in conversation wi' a man called Francis, in a certain bar. We know this man Francis to be associated wi' roulette in the West End of London, and it was this report which freshened my memory. On the night o' Sir Giles Loeder's death, he had been playing roulette at the flat of a woman called Mrs. Sankey. I don't want ye to answer my next question, until I ha' warned ye that anything you say may be used in evidence. But you are not compelled to say anything. You can take legal advice if you want it. But here is the question: Were ye acting as croupier at Mrs. Sankey's flat on the night o' Sir Giles Loeder's death?"

Sergeant Bluett sighed and took out a notebook, at which he stared in a puzzled way for a moment, so that one might have supposed that he expected to find a newspaper there. James Wake moistened his lips, staring down at the floor. His hands were moist with perspiration and he raised them protectively from the knees of his perfectly creased trousers.

"Do ye wish to answer?" Firth asked.

"Yes." Wake cleared his throat. "I was playing that night and I saw Sir Giles at the table."

"Good. Did he win?"

"No more than he lost. He was a heavy player."

"But we have evidence that he had money in his possession at the time of his death."

"That may be true, sir," Wake replied, and his use of the word "sir" was an indication, not missed by Firth, of the depths to which he conceived himself to be falling. "But it may not have been winnings."

"Possibly I don't know what ye mean, Mr. Wake."

"Well, I have reason to believe, I don't know how else to express myself, that the late Sir Giles had a financial interest in Mayfair roulette, at least for a time."

"Is tha' so? Did he foresee a crash and take his money out?"

"That I couldn't say. It is mere conjecture on my part."

Chief Inspector Firth narrowed his eyes still more, so that in upcast light from the desk lamp they glittered like amber beads. "It might ha' been of some small assistance to the police, Mr. Wake, if you had divulged these facts at the time. Also, it might ha' been better for yoursel'. Illicit roulette is not a hanging offence, and Lord Marcus is a singularly broad-minded man."

"I entirely agree, Inspector."

"It has been pointed out to me by those who have reason to know that when visiting the dogs, or other expensive forms of amusement, ye always went first to the house in Grosvenor Square. Correct me if I am wrong."

"You may possibly be right, Inspector."

"Ye agree on that point?"

Wake, speaking like a man whose mind is so closely concentrated on a problem that his utterances are automatic, went on: "It was my custom to keep my savings at that address. I distrust banks, and indeed, governments, in times of stress such as these; and so, I had a certain amount of ready cash available there."

"I see," said Firth. "A private bank of your own? Weel, while you were in the roulette racket, I ha' no doubt ye made quite a lot of money. But it has been noted, Mr. Wake, that you seem to ha' given it up of late."

"Yes, I thought it was hardly fair to my employer; that if I should be caught in a raid and his name brought into the matter —"

"Quite! quite. But although your income decreased, your expenditure didn't. A lot may depend upon what I am going to ask ye now. What have ye in yon bag?"

Wake clenched his hands, his high color deserted him, a drop of perspiration trembled on the end of his nose. "Things I kept at my wife's place, where I sometimes spent the night."

"In that case, let's have a look. Open it, Bluett."

Sergeant Bluett, uttering a blowing sound, placed his notebook on the mantelpiece and opened the attaché case. If Chief Inspector Firth experienced any disappointment, he showed none. But the case contained a shaving set, comb and brushes, pyjamas, soft slippers, a tin of tobacco, two smoking pipes, a towel, a box of soap, and other odds and ends such as a man might deposit at an address where he spent an occasional night. Bluett, kneeling on the floor and exhibiting article after article, looked up when the case was empty, his ingenuous eyes widely opened.

"I see," murmured the Chief Inspector. "Am I to take it ye were moving?"

"Yes, Inspector." Wake dried his forehead with a white handkerchief. "I heard that the authorities were about to requisition the house."

"Is tha' so? Surely your wife could ha' left these bits and pieces at Lord Marcus's to-morrow. Why the hurry?"

"Possibly that had not occurred to me."

"Evidently it had not, Mr. Wake."

There was nothing in the Chief Inspector's tone to betray the fact that he had staked everything upon Wake's acting in just the way that Wake had acted. Using the card of an acquaintance from the Ministry of Supply, he had himself called at the house in Grosvenor Square and had informed Mrs. Wake that the premises were to be requisitioned immediately. His knowledge of human nature told him that if his theory concerning Wake had any concrete foundation, the outcome would settle the matter.

"Perhaps I acted hurriedly."

"Like enough. However, I am sure you would be wishful to remove any doubts that may remain, and so would ye be good enough to empty ye're pockets, and place their contents here on my desk."

Wake stood up, displaying every appearance of disability. His expressive changes of complexion may have indicated a faulty heart, but he advanced to the desk, and complied with the Chief Inspector's order. There was nothing in his possession one might not have anticipated finding there, with the possible exception of an elastic band which seemed to perform no duties. At this Firth gazed with a puzzled expression, and then, raising his head: "Sergeant Bluett," he said crisply, "feel the witness's person, wi' particular attention to his legs."

At that, suddenly, without warning, James Wake collapsed, morally and physically. He stood up, swayed, and saved himself from falling only by clutching the chair.

"Listen!" he whispered, "I'll tell you everything—the whole story from beginning to end. But before I say another word, one thing I swear: I didn't kill him."

Four thousand seven hundred and fifty pounds in ten and five pound notes were strapped in rolls to James Wake's legs by means of strong elastic bands. Fortified by a brandy and soda which the compassionate Chief Inspector ordered and the ruffled Sergeant Bluett fetched, Wake had slightly recovered himself. But he sat there before them, a stricken man, watching the Chief Inspector checking the numbers of notes against a list which he had on his desk. Presently, Firth looked up.

"A fair number o' these notes," he said, "were drawn out of his bank by Sir Giles two weeks or so before the tragedy. So we have to suppose that this was his own money. I'm making no charge and I won't even make any suggestion. I shall merely ask ye, James Wake, to tell me your story in your own words."

And this is the story which James Wake told.

He had been introduced to the roulette group by Mr. Francis, who seemed to recall that he, Wake, had some experience of Monte Carlo. The terms were attractive: ten guineas a night. After a little practice he became quite proficient. He knew that he was placing himself outside the law, but he did not consider the offence to be a serious one. He admitted that, although a careful man in other respects, he had been addicted to gambling since his youth.

On the night of the tragedy he believed, but could not be sure, that an altercation had arisen between Sir Giles Loeder, Mr. Michaelis and Mrs. Destrée. His duties at the table did not enable him to pay much attention to what was going on elsewhere. But at a later stage in the evening, Mr. Francis, who, he said, looked white and angry, came to one of the cashiers and withdrew a sum which he, Wake, estimated to have represented the greater part of the roulette bank. With this he walked out of the gaming room.

A run of luck on the part of certain players followed, and nearly closed the table. Mr. Michaelis, who had gone out, returned, and announced the end of play on behalf of Mrs. Sankey, who was not present. Otherwise, the bank would have been broken.

Wake, having balanced accounts with the other croupiers, set out for South Audley Street. The night was uncomfortably dark in patches, but he was familiar with the route, and within twelve or fifteen paces of that masonry bay which

embraced the house with the scarlet door, he became aware of a fierce altercation in progress somewhere just ahead. He pulled up, and in his own words, heard a sound like that of a wolf or an alsatian attacking. Then, he heard a strangled voice which he thought he recognized as that of Sir Giles Loeder. This voice cried out: "You swine!—you are strangling me!..."

"Then there was a sort of sobbing sound, a crashing thud. This all happened in a matter of seconds, and I dashed forward to see what I could do—to find out whatever was happening. As I ran up I could hear someone else running away. I flashed my torch and called out, but I could see nothing and no one replied. Then, right on the step of Lord Marcus's house, I saw him."

Wake was so overcome by his recollections, that Firth began to believe he might be telling the truth. He exchanged a significant nod with Bluett, who was writing busily.

"Sir Giles Loeder lay there, all in a heap. I couldn't try to describe his position. He was just crumpled up. And I could see that he was unconscious. I slipped my key in the lock, put my torch in my pocket, stooped and lifted him. I am, for my age, a fairly strong man."

"So I ha' noted," said Firth dourly.

"There was no one in the lobby, but I could smell the incense, and I knew that his lordship and Mrs. Vane were in what he calls The Shrine. There wasn't much light, and I laid Sir Giles on the couch. He looked gray; his face was bruised and twisted; but I want to make it quite clear that the fact never crossed my mind that he was dead. I thought he was just unconscious. As I carried him in, my foot had kicked a case which lay half under him, so I went back and picked it up, closing the door." He paused, licking his dry lips. "There was five thousand pounds in five and ten pound notes in it.

"I can only say that temptation was too strong for me. What else can I say? I thought quickly, and it seemed to me that he had been attacked by a thief for his money, that hearing me come up the thief had bolted before he could drag the case from under Sir Giles. I worked out that if I stayed to revive him, as at first I had meant to do, that would be the end of the matter for me. I dare not carry him out again; someone might come along at any moment. That was when the idea came to me upon which I acted. I stuffed the money into my pockets, stood and listened awhile, but could hear nothing from The Shrine. Then, I looked out into the street. There was no one there. So, carrying the empty case, I closed the front door, and rang the bell."

"Why?" asked Sergeant Bluett, with an air of childish curiosity.

"I think it was an impulse. I didn't want to leave him there unconscious, and I hoped that his lordship hearing the bell, would come out and attend to him."

"Ye were wearing gloves?" asked Firth.

"I was. I knew there would be no fingerprints. I had a plan in my mind by now, which as far as I could see would work very well. I was afraid, though, that the thief might have seen me carry Sir Giles into the house. But the chances were against it. At that moment the night was pitch black, and I had heard the man running around the corner before I opened the door; so that if he came back to recover his haul, he wouldn't have any idea what had happened. I was afraid, though, that he might be hanging about. I ran round quickly into Mount Street, and threw Sir Giles's case down the kitchen steps of an empty house which I knew of there. Then I walked on to Grosvenor Square and knocked my wife up."

He paused again, inserting two forefingers between his neck and his linen collar, which now was limp and clinging clammily.

"I knew I should have to make sure of her evidence, so I took a chance. She had never approved of my racing, the dogs, and other amusements that I went in for, but, now, I thought it best to tell her that I worked for a roulette syndicate. I did this—and she took it very badly. I told her I believed the place was going to be raided a few minutes after I had left, and that the police might make inquiries. If they went to South Audley Street it would mean the sack.

"She understood that well enough, and so she agreed to do what I asked. This was to say, if she should be questioned, that I had spent the evening with her, going through Lord Marcus's accounts, which, in fact, it was my custom to do. That's all my wife knows about the matter; and the only thing she has done in any way wrong, is to do what I asked her to do.

"I said I had been paid for my night's work, and as the numbers of the notes might be traced, I would hide them upstairs in one of the empty rooms. She didn't like the idea, but I had my way. I put all the money from the case into a secret drawer in an old bureau, a bureau which I had discovered one day, under the dust sheets, and of which my wife didn't know the trick. When I had made everything safe, I returned to South Audley Street.

"No need to say what I felt like when I discovered what had happened and found police in the house. What I had thought was a case of assault and robbery had turned out to be a case of murder. I knew, then, that I was in it up to the neck. I knew there were people connected with roulette who could be forced to say that I had been there on that night. This would prove that my wife was not telling the truth—and the crime would be pinned to me."

Wake leaned forward in his chair, and Chief Inspector Firth would not have been surprised had he slumped to the floor. His features were leaden, his eyes had the watery glare of those of a dead fish. Bluett looked up from his notes.

"Could you give any description of this man, who, you say, ran off as you came up?"

"I never had a glimpse of him," Wake whispered. "I only heard that cry from Sir Giles, then the thud of his fall."

"Ye heard no word of the altercation which you state was taking place before that?" Firth interjected.

"No—just words here and there, mostly cursing and growling—a dreadful sort of growling. I have no more to say, sir, no more that I can think of. I know I'm for it. It was robbery. Being used to gambling circles, I may not have as much respect as other people for money of that kind. Ask me anything you like. For God's sake ask me something which will help me to prove I am innocent of murder ..."

30

Malta Convoy

"This is the most singular case upon which I have been employed," said Gaston Max; "but yes, the most singular. Twice, I have gathered my evidence: first against Sir Giles Loeder, and some clumsy fool murders him; second, against his associates (I believe, his employers), and this will be completed to-night. I hand my plate of fruit over to Military Intelligence—and become a free man."

The Assistant Commissioner, standing in his bay window, was counting cars passing along the Embankment: he had estimated that private traffic was roughly five per cent of pre-war normal. Behind him, Gaston Max began to whistle, or hiss through partly closed teeth, "Up in the morning early."

"But who murdered Loeder? That's what Firth wants to know."

"Alas!" Max looked up as the Assistant Commissioner turned and stared across at him, small eyes twinkling keenly. The Frenchman began to twirl his heavy monocle, which was really a lens, about an extended forefinger. "For the poor Inspector my heart bleeds. His case is worse than mine. Indeed, they are inseparable. He has now two candidates for the jury: he has Flight Lieutenant Kershaw, who confesses to the crime; he has also James Wake, the butler, in whose possession was found the stolen money. Eh bien! Two should be sufficient."

"Not if neither of 'em did it."

Gaston Max extended talkative hands. "That Kershaw's story is true in every particular I accept as a fact. I have had some conversation with him, you understand. Very well. He did not break the man's neck; he did not make that big bruise on Loeder's forehead which I examined in the mortuary. If Wake is lying about what happened to cause death, he is not lying when he says that Loeder fell outside Lord Marcus's door. Wake could not have carried a heavy body much further; and we can accept, I think, his statement that he, and no one else, placed Loeder in the lobby. No, no, I believe that Wake's story is true."

"Any jury would hang him, all the same. Top marks to Firth for working out that if Wake had the money he wouldn't hide it at Amberdale's. Requisitioning trick worked like a miracle. Caught red handed."

"I salute the Chief Inspector," said Gaston Max gravely. "He is a clever one, this good Firth. I have never done a better thing myself."

Colonel O'Halloran cleared his throat. "What happens to-night?"

"To-night, Colonel O'Halloran, my old, it is the grand jamboree. Luck, or that Kismet of the Arabs, put into my hands a key which enabled me to read messages wrapped up in postscripts, and other broadcasts of the late Sir Giles. Eh bien! these people have no suspicion that I have discovered this key, and so they are using it again! This time it is Francis Batt, the popular comedian, who is craftily broadcasting information to Berlin."

"You have confirmed this, of course?"

"But of course! To-night he will broadcast details concerning the Malta convoy—details which he has learned at the Grand Marnier, at the Green Spider, and from the fools who play roulette."

The Assistant Commissioner crossed to his desk and began to fill a new briar, stuffing it with that tobacco which he kept loose in his coat pocket, and from time to time shooting side glances at Gaston Max. "Green Spider?"

"But yes; ultra smart, undress, most expensive; popular with the very young and the very old."

"Shouldn't expect to find anybody there who counted."

"A man is only as old as his experience. There are Peter Pans with whiskers. But yes. Those political parties given by the late Sir Giles formerly served the Axis also very well. Contacts were numerous and important." Max shrugged. "Why, he, an Englishman—although I believe his father was a naturalised subject—should have worked against his country I know not. Perhaps I shall never know. Perhaps I shall."

"Firth has been checking up on this man Francis, or Batt, or whatever he's called; also on a bird named Michaelis. Anything new in that quarter?"

"Name of a name! who is this Mr. Michaelis? He is a friend of Madame Destrée, and is almost certainly connected with the roulette racket. He is also a big man of business; much respected in the City, a director of several other companies as well as that controlling the Grand Marnier, and the Green Spider. Alas, it is easy for a clever one, who cares to establish himself for a long time in a country before he commits any subversive act, to lose his real identity. We learned this in France! He is supposed to be a native of Belgrade, or of some place just outside that city. He belongs, then, to a friendly nation. His papers, doubtless, are in perfect order. Such papers can be obtained so easily when the German Foreign Office is behind the candidate. His roots in Yugoslavia, if he ever had any, are torn up, burned in the ashes of Belgrade. It is clever, because it is very simple. And so I ask, also, who is this Mr. Michaelis?"

Colonel O'Halloran experienced some difficulty in getting his pipe going: his lighter lacked petrol. "The man Batt, of course, is booked for a firing party. But who the devil *is* he?"

Gaston Max produced his cigarette case, selected and lighted a cigarette. "He is a musician, this one, most talented. He calls himself an American. He sends to Berlin information by word of mouth, and also uses their 'Pythagoric' code in the form of notes on a piano. He, too, is associated with Madame Destrée. There are others; they are small fry; but above all, there is Destrée. Who, you demand, is Destrée?"

"Got her dossier here."

"True—I have studied it. In normal times I could perhaps have filled in the missing parts. To-day—" he made a clicking sound with his tongue—"impossible. Information regarding our raid on the French coast was broadcast to Berlin by the late Sir Giles Loeder, and now this man Francis is up to the same game."

"Why hasn't he been arrested before?"

Gaston Max smiled; his teeth flashed brilliantly. Then he laughed: "Ha! ha, ha, ha! Listen, Colonel O'Halloran, my old. I, too, am cunning like the good Firth, and when I have found from whom they are obtaining this information, I act. Now, the Malta convoy concerns the Food Ministry. Yes? For we must be rationed here, in order that those poor Maltese are fed. Very good. I suspect Lady Huskin."

Colonel O'Halloran, who had sat down, jumped up again. "Draw the line, Max! Silly woman, I grant—but no spy, I'll swear."

"So, too, will I. But how dangerous can a silly woman be! In the past she has spilled vital information. I made some tests, no matter what, and I became sure of this. I called upon Lord Huskin—"

"In what capacity, might I ask?"

"Oh, just as myself."

"Novel behavior."

"He is a clever man, this one, as you know; a small lump of Yorkshire, four square like a gin bottle, with clear gray eyes which tell nothing but the truth. It was by telling the truth that he became Baron Huskin, although he began as a grocer. Very well; a clever man. His wife is his only indiscretion. With such a man I know how to speak, for such a man has no illusions. I told him that Lady Huskin was indiscreet, that she failed to understand the importance of matters which came to her knowledge. He did not throw me out. He did not even frown. He smiled; it was acceptable: he knew. And so we made a plot. I said to him: 'Become so worried over the matter of this great convoy, that you are constantly speaking of it in the hearing of madame. Let it get on your nerves, my faith; talk about it in your sleep. Speak of the tonnage of the ships, of the strength of the escort, of the date of sailing from Birkenhead, the date of arrival at Gibraltar. Speak, my Lord Huskin—and let every word be a lie.'"

The Colonel chuckled horsily. "Did that make old Huskin laugh?"

"Certainly. I said to him: 'As a reward, presently, very soon, I, Baron Bernstein of the black market, will hand over to your Ministry information about this traffic which you will find of superlative interest.' This was agreed, then. But as I

could not know what nonsense Lord Huskin might impart to his wife, in a seemingly accidental manner, I prepared some items—marked coins, you understand—and imparted these myself."

"And the balloon goes up to-night?"

"To-night, Francis Batt is to appear in a star program for Canadian troops, at a camp not many miles from the South coast. The Army entertainment authorities always provide him with a car for such occasions, and a special pass. This performance will be broadcast. The case will then be out of my hands, and in the hands of Military Intelligence."

"This side of case no concern of my department; but I'll listen in," said the colonel, little eyes twinkling and lean, square jaw set very grimly. "Cancel everything else. Is he going to be arrested in camp?"

"No, no—on his way back through Farnborough ..."

Some ten minutes later, Sergeant Bluett rapped on the door, came in and looked around the Assistant Commissioner's office as if in search of somebody. "Sorry, sir," he said. "I thought Mr. Max was here."

"Just gone. What is it, Sergeant?"

"It's a cabled report from New York, sir, which the Chief Inspector promised to show him."

"Let me see it."

"Yes, sir."

"Brandt, Johann Fritz," O'Halloran read aloud: "Born Cologne, August 27th, 1897. Adopted U.S. citizenship, March 23rd, 1930 (New York City). Visited Germany, 1931-32, and again in 1936-37. During these periods received training at Nazi Gestapo headquarters and became a group Leader in N.Y. Speaks fluent English. Arrested at Buffalo, January 11th, 1939, on information laid by the convicted German spy, Adolf Wesser. Later escaped from custody, killing two police officers, one by strangulation, and is believed to have crossed into Canada where tracks were lost.

"Brandt is a powerful man and a trained killer; height 5 ft. 10 inches; weight 176 pounds; hair, dark brown, eyes, light blue. At time of arrest had a short moustache, and habitually used spectacles. Peculiarities:— a dimple on his chin; left leg 3/8ths of an inch shorter than right. (Wears a special shoe).

"He is an accomplished musician. For three years toured with Kit Harkaway's Band as arranger, pianist, and comedy vocalist. Probably using forged passport. A dangerous Nazi agent."

31

In Berkeley Square

As their taxi pulled out from the darkness of Victoria Station to an even greater darkness beyond, Dick Kershaw nervously sought, found and grasped Fay's fingers. She twined them in his, uttering a contented sigh; for it seemed to her at this moment that a hideous black barrier had been raised and that beyond the gloom of wartime London a white sunny road stretched on into infinity.

Neither spoke for a long time. Perhaps each wondered (as many had wondered) what extra sense came to life in London taxi drivers with the institution of black-out; marvelled at the ease with which these experts found their way through streets possessing no visible characteristics to distinguish one from another. More probably, they were thinking of the man whose death had raised the barrier, that gate of folly, of lies.

"I sometimes feel as if I had lived right through one life," said Dick Kershaw, "died, and gone straight on into the beginning of another. The first life ended at the very moment I walked out to 'Treasure Island' and saw you standing on the bridge. I didn't believe then, that the second life could ever begin ... I wonder what made me so blind to plain facts, so blind that I wouldn't even admit to myself that I had made a frightful mistake."

"You weren't really sure of her?"

"Never. It was a kind of misplaced sympathy, at first, and after that just self-love. She was all alone, and had to fend for herself, or so she made out. Of course, she attracted me at the beginning, and, as I can see now, made all the running. I knew her refined ways were a pose, but I didn't blame her. There is nothing against a girl trying to climb to a better position than she was born in. But I was practically sure she hadn't told me the truth on many occasions; and I was beginning to realise that if I didn't trust her, there must be a mistake somewhere. Because two people can't roll on together like that. Then, all the rumors. In fact one of our fellows gave me a pretty direct tip, so that I was half prepared for what I found out. At the time, it was a nasty jar, all the same: but as I see now, it was nothing but self-pity. It's hard for a man to face the fact that he has been run for a sucker."

"You don't know what I suffered, Dick," said Fay, "when you told us the story ..."

Dick Kershaw released her hand and put his arm around her shoulders. His voice was very tender. "Fay, darling, I have hurt you so much that I think only an angel could ever forgive me."

She did not answer, but very contentedly rested her head on his shoulder.

"The way I was received by Colonel O'Halloran," Dick went on, "his assurance that whatever I might say to the contrary, I had not killed Sir Giles Loeder, simply stupefied me. Certainly, I didn't cause the bruise on his head which you described, and even you didn't know that his neck was broken, did you? He must have revived as I ran off, and, poor devil, been set upon a second time by the man I heard coming up."

"Wake," murmured Fay.

"Yes! think of it being your cousin's butler! And think that we are on our way to the house now, the house where his body was found."

"Wake denies murdering him," said Fay. "But he can't deny having the money, because it was actually in his possession."

"It seems a perfectly clear case to me."

There was another silence, which was broken by Fay.

"Have you ... written to ... the girl, Dick?"

"Rita Martin? Yes. I didn't reproach her or anything like that. I have no one to reproach but myself. In fact, I told her I was sorry she had lost her friend and took it for granted she would understand that everything was off between us. Fay?"

"Yes, Dick."

"Have you any idea what this invitation to your cousin's house means? I am naturally glad to have an opportunity of meeting him, but at the same time I am terribly nervous."

Dick Kershaw fingered an invitation card which he had in his pocket. It bore the word "informal" and gave the purpose of the occasion as "Supper, and a psychical experiment."

"You'll love him, Dick. He is simply charming. Yes, I know why we are going, but I don't know who else is to be there. In fact, he had to get my consent."

"Your consent to what?"

"To the séance he is going to hold. You see, he had promised me to give it up, after the night that the body was found in his lobby."

"And after the séance?"

"You can count upon a really good supper, Dick," said Fay dreamily, "although I don't know what arrangements Marcus has made since the arrest of Wake. Have you any idea where we are?"

Dick, without moving his arm, bent to peer out of a window. "We seem to be crossing a square. Would it be Berkeley Square?"

"If it is," said Fay, "we are nearly there." He had drawn very close to her in looking out of the window. "Dick."

"Yes, Fay?"

"Did you ever hear the song 'A Nightingale Sang in Berkeley Square?...'"

32

The Man and the Mummy

"It may be somewhat difficult," said Lord Marcus, "to make clear to those of you who have neither sympathy with, nor knowledge of, a subject to which I have devoted much study, the purpose which inspires me to-night."

He stood before the open hearth of that room which also housed an Egyptian mummy. His guests were seated, some on chairs, others on a deep settee, facing him. A standard lamp, in addition to that on the desk, was alight, so that this study, reliquary of queer treasures from an earlier civilisation, presented a somewhat less sombre appearance than usual. Lord Marcus wore a dark suit with a blue stock, and these seemed at once to accentuate his pallor and his peculiar fairness, and to stress, also, the ascetic beauty of his features.

One might have noted that the mummy in its gaily painted sarcophagus (which stood in a recess beside the hearth, and on the right of Lord Marcus) was that of a man at least equally tall. Refreshments of all kinds were set out on a mobile buffet; and except for the singular appointments of the house, and more particularly those of the lobby, nothing overtly mysterious had so far intruded upon the gathering. Nor had anything been said by their host to account for his assembling these persons together.

"I believe," said Mr. Michaelis, his monocle focussed upon the speaker, "that we are all anxious to learn more about your studies, Lord Marcus. For my own part, I count myself privileged to be present: it would be a privilege at any time. But I am frankly curious to learn to what happy circumstance I owe my pleasure this evening."

Admittedly, the guests seemed oddly chosen. These were: Mr. Michaelis, Lady Huskin, Dick Kershaw, Fay Perigal, and Mrs. Vane. Lady Huskin had come in a spirit more proper to a studio party; to see a daring new picture and to meet the model. She was vastly flattered, nevertheless, to have been singled out by this aloof and exquisite aristocrat. She regretted the "informal" note; but she was wearing her pearls. "I am delightfully and frightfully excited," she declared.

Mrs. Vane, her wonderful hair a fiery halo, had selected that discreet black gown, square cut at the neck. She looked remarkably beautiful but unusually pale. She was acting as hostess, and approaching Fay, seated beside Dick Kershaw on the deep settee, she offered sandwiches. "I am used to these strange ordeals, and you are not. I hope it will be worth while, but I warn you it may be midnight before we get any supper."

"What about yourself?" said Dick Kershaw, with his charmingly boyish smile, jumping up and taking the plate from her. "You are looking after everybody else, and—"

"Unfortunately, I have to officiate," she replied; "I have to fast like a priest before the Mass." She possessed a slightly husky contralto voice, a dramatic voice, suggesting deeps which in fact were not there. Lady Huskin, who had met her on the Riviera but had decided that she was not the sort of woman one takes up, performed a silent volte face, forming a mental determination to cultivate the beautiful friend of Lord Marcus.

Dick shook his head in bewilderment, glancing aside at Fay. "I don't know what it's all about," he admitted.

Fay, gazing in a troubled way at Lord Marcus, shook her head, so that hazelnut hair shimmered like autumn leaves: her frank gray eyes held no reproach; rather, they sped a message of appeal. In her simple walking suit she looked slim with the lissom slimness of a dryad, and, when her glance rested on Dick Kershaw, delicately and radiantly lovely.

"I believe I overheard a thought of yours, Fay," Lord Marcus smiled, clasping his hands behind him. "But I hope to convince you by a palpable demonstration that my beliefs do not rest upon sand." All, now, were listening to him. "My butler, James Wake, was arrested recently in connexion with the death of Sir Giles Loeder. This may be news in some quarters, for the name of the man detained has not appeared in the press. However, I hold my own views regarding Wake. A thief I had always known him to be: that he is a murderer, I deny. Let me, therefore, give you an outline, necessarily incomplete, of an experiment in which I ask you to co-operate with me to-night."

Lady Huskin, thrilled but slightly frightened, moved from her armchair to the settee, where she joined Dick and Fay. Mr. Michaelis leaned against a bookcase, motionless: his monocle catching the light from a standard lamp glittered statically. Mrs. Vane had retired.

"We live in a machine age. Tied to the wheels of a giant Juggernaut, we are swept on, deafened and blinded to eternal Truth, crushing all beauty in our path. The horrors of this war merely illustrate my meaning: as the machine advances, God recedes, so that in time all the world would be plunged into darkness: those lamps laboriously lighted by followers of the great Masters be obscured, indeed, become buried and lost. In humility and deep consciousness of my own limited powers—as well as spiritual—I have endeavored to preserve some of those lamps from destruction."

Lady Huskin was holding Fay's hand. The music of the speaker's voice seemed to be touching chords deep within, chords which rarely sounded ...

"I have failed in a large measure. I have achieved nothing to enable me to place results before the world in a manner calculated to serve any useful purpose. Yet, I have learned much; notably, that it is wrong to work alone. There is an unsuspected power latent in all of us. Few possess a sufficient quantity of this force, or, possessing, know how to direct it, to be able to employ their gifts as the high priests of Ancient Egypt formerly were able to do."

He paused, and the regard of his strange eyes rested upon one after another of his listeners. But no one spoke.

"If the collective resources of seven suitable persons could be concentrated, however, this, as my inquiries have shown me, might under suitable direction achieve remarkable results. Now, regarding this age-old science which modern science ignores, it will be enough for me to say that the power I have mentioned varies in quantity, quality, and character in each individual. Only those within the same psychic cycle can hope to co-operate successfully. Blood transfusion offers a slight parallel. The symbolism of seven is familiar to everyone. There are seven days in the week, seven deadly sins; and for this symbolism of seven there is a strictly scientific reason. Therefore, I have sought for six persons whose spiritual forces are attuned to my own. I have found them, with the aid of Mrs. Vane, who is in my own cycle and is also a sensitive and a trained explorer of the borderland. Four others and myself are present; Mrs. Vane is the sixth; and we await the seventh, Mrs. Destrée, who is returning to London this evening, as Mr. Michaelis informs me, and will be present in time for our experiment."

Mr. Michaelis, now referred to, asked a question. "Do I gather that, in your opinion, all of us now present are associates of some former existence?"

"Not necessarily, sir. That we have had common experiences is certain, as that we have lived in former times and at identical periods. One of those periods, and the fact that I was then alive, I could establish quite easily by means of unwrapping the mummy which stands beside me—that of a high priest who held office at Thebes some one thousand three hundred years before the birth of Christ."

Lady Huskin's hold on Fay's hand tightened.

"No further evidence on this point would be demanded of me. But since my present purpose is not your conversion, but merely your co-operation, let me pass on to the object of to-night's experiment. This is, quite simply, an attempt to settle a mundane problem: namely—who was responsible for the death of Sir Giles Loeder."

This remarkable anti-climax to a discourse so strange, yet so unmistakably exalted, this descent from the spiritual to the physical, produced a strange effect upon Lord Marcus's listeners, notably upon Mr. Michaelis.

"Might I point out, Lord Marcus," he said, "that the inquiry in which you are asking us to take part is already in the competent hands of Scotland Yard?"

"I am aware of the fact, sir, but even Scotland Yard is fallible. Unless my subjects are ill-chosen, I shall have around me to-night examples—all, I trust, upon their ascending journey—of some who in the past have looked up to the same stars and breathed the same air as I, who have fallen with me, as the angel fell, through one of the seven deadly sins. Directly Mrs. Destrée arrives to complete our circle, the experiment can begin. Mr. Michaelis tells me that urgent business called her out of Town ..."

33

Destrée Closes Her Eyes

The nature of the urgency of that business to which Mr. Michaelis had referred would have become apparent to anyone secretly present several hours earlier in Destrée's room where lilies floated. Only one sound disturbed its scented silence, that of almost uninterrupted movement of a fountain pen over rough paper. At a feminine little bureau, the upper part displaying behind plate glass several arresting pieces of jade, Mr. Francis sat writing. He wore evening dress, with a double-breasted tuxedo, which, since sunshine flooded the room, looked oddly out of place; he wore, also, black rimmed glasses, which queerly changed his appearance. He had before him a B.B.C. script typed on foolscap sheets secured with pink tape, and he appeared to be re-writing part of it. Destrée, attired in a tightly fitting fur-trimmed suit which resembled a Cossack uniform, an astrakhan hat upon her gleaming hair, earrings of pearl-shaped emeralds, watched him.

Gauntlet gloves lay on the floor beside her; her feet were shod in soft, high legged boots which perfectly fitted the curve of her calf. Destrée dressed like no one but Destrée. She occupied her favorite place on the settee, smoking a cigarette in a tortoiseshell holder, and sideways, through lowered lashes, studying the writer.

"This is a tough proposition. I just don't see how I can do it," Francis said suddenly, and laid his pen down. "The B.B.C. will stand for a certain number of alterations, slipped in neatly, but if I try to spill this load—"

"Giles spilled even heavier loads," Destrée's tinkling voice reminded him. "Often, he wrote in his own messages."

Mr. Francis's heavy jaw, for she viewed him in profile, jutted out truculently. "That's none so hard to do in a political speech. It's a different matter to have to get laughs with loaded material. This is dull stuff, even for the Troops."

"Then write it in your own way ... but leave out none of the essential words. The names of all the ships must go in," Destrée smiled.

"You know I can't do it. I'm no cryptographer. You invented the Pythagoric code, and writing messages is your pidgin. But if I try to crack a gag like this, I shall arouse suspicion; I shall also get the bird."

"Oh!" she laughed, that childish, trilling laughter, "you are suffering from cold feet—yes? I see what it is. You have read in the papers that a man has been detained by Scotland Yard. It is so?"

"Yes." He swung around to face her. "And we don't know who that man is, how much he knows, how much he may tell."

"I can venture a guess, Francis, about who he is—and I am rarely wrong. You can confirm it if you wish by lifting the telephone. It is Wake, Lord Marcus Amberdale's butler. That was why I sent for him and talked to him. But he is very cunning. You think so?"

"I do. I have suspected this man all along, kept him under observation, as you know. I figured he had the money when he turned down twenty guineas for one night's work. To save himself, he may say anything. We can look for a visit from the police at any moment."

A discreet rap preceded the appearance of a grim looking elderly maid. "The car is here, madam ..."

The car which ENSA had always provided to transport Francis Batt to out-of-Town concerts stood at the entrance to Gatacre House. Its driver, one of those elderly chauffeurs who have been coachmen, so that they might at any moment say "Gee up" to the engine, touched his cap respectfully, gazing into a clear sky pastel led with high white clouds.

"Looks like keeping fine for the drive down, sir."

"That's so," shouted Francis.

He had grown accustomed to shouting at this man, whom privately he regarded as a public danger when in charge of a vehicle, since he was nearly stone deaf, and indeed wore an earpiece to rectify this disability. Otherwise, in spite of his years, he was a competent driver. Francis placed a portfolio inside, and settled Destrée in the other corner before he got in himself. As the old chauffeur was about to close the door: "You know your way to Bidchurch, I guess?" he bawled.

"Oh, yes, sir, I have been there before. We go through Farnborough."

"That's right," yelled Francis; then, lowering his voice, "A fine old British institution!" he added.

They set out. Destrée lay back with closed eyes as Francis opened his portfolio, adjusted reading glasses and set to work on his notes. The commodious saloon car ran smoothly.

Destrée broke a long silence. "You are afraid that if Wake was the man who ran up (I am sure of this, myself) he may have recognized your voice?"

Mr. Francis removed his glasses and looked aside at her; she presented an engaging picture. "Wake, if it was Wake, ran up from the other direction. I left 'way ahead of him, remember. It's true I had to stand by and see Loeder petting his girl friend for quite a while before she quitted in a taxi." He watched Destrée's profile fixedly, but her features remained placid as a cameo. He went on:

"The mystery man in Air Force blue cut in on me just as I was coming up with him. I took cover and so didn't hear what happened until a scuffle started. I moved up just as Loeder went down. The Air Force guy ran off. Of course, Loeder was bluffing. He had stopped a hard one and got wise to the fact that the other fellow was too hot for him."

"So you tell me," Destrée murmured.

"I'm telling you again. He stood up, took off his tuxedo, and shook it, brushed himself down, picked up his portfolio and walked right on. I watched him do all that, and I overtook him just as he turned into South Audley Street. There was no sign of Wake before or at that time."

"He may have been near, all the same."

"No; he had gone the other way. You know croupiers always leave by the tradesmen's entrance. I'm sure of it. No one saw me. There is something I want to say. I'll say it now, whether it offends you or not. You think too much about the money. It was Loeder's damned money that led to all the trouble—that, and the girl."

"I see." Destrée's voice, although it remained silver, was frozen silver. "Is there anything else you want to say?"

"Plenty. I am by no means sure you believe that I don't know what became of this money. I can only guess just what happened between you two on that night, but I know you lashed out at Loeder because of the girl, and I know he claimed the return of all his capital—five thousand pounds. God knows what was in your mind when you sent me after him. All you said was 'Bring him back!'."

"Instead of which, you strangled him."

"That's a lie! But it's true because of what he was to you, that I hated him. I knew he wasn't worth it."

"Oh, oh!" Destrée smiled: there were times when this man frightened her. "I can see that little vein throbbing above your eyebrow, even when you think of him."

The dimple in Francis's chin had become static; it resembled a healed gunshot wound, and the vein to which Destrée referred was unpleasantly evident. He glared at her for a moment, his cold blue eyes shining metallically. "God knows why I should trouble myself. Michaelis (or maybe it's more respectful to call him Major Felsenhayn) is the only man who really counts. He's always with you."

"Indeed, and why not? Major Felsenhayn is a distinguished officer, and—"

"A gentleman? While I'm just a common agent, and neither. But my neck means as much to me as his means to him. The main difference is that he doesn't leave your apartment until three or four in the morning. Some nights, I never hear him leave at all."

"Even so, what of it? If it were true, it would be the concern of himself and of me, but of no one else. Yes?"

"Maybe. It the major were the only one I'd have no case. But what about Loeder?"

Destrée leaned back and closed her eyes again. "I sometimes think of the cause for which we all risk our lives. It may

count for little to you, but to *me* ... Perhaps I have never known love, or perhaps I have. What is sometimes called love is simply a natural appetite, and to gratify it is no more than to eat a peach or drink a glass of wine. If I have had lovers I have given them little. My attraction—*agacerie*—brings nothing to me except a means to achieve my end when other means fail. Giles Loeder was a bad man, a man of poor extraction; but he was strong—except in one respect. So, I played upon this weakness. I told him that he could be of great value to us. I told him that every woman has her price—and that this was mine. Very well. He *was* of great value to us: we may never be able to replace him. The price I had to pay in return was a small one, I think."

"While you had him under your thumb, maybe it seemed that way," said Francis. "But the night he brought that girl along, it seemed different, or so I imagined."

"Ah! so!" Destrée widely opened her eyes and glanced aside at him. "My woman's vanity really betrayed me?"

"Really betrayed you!" Francis mocked. "What did you say to me?—and you knew the man you were talking to. You said: 'Loeder has insisted on withdrawing his capital to-night. I have paid him all we have in reserve. Go to the table and get the rest.'"

"I remember saying something like that."

"I went to the table to draw out the balance. As I have already remarked I don't know how the quarrel had come about, but I can guess. The girl was in the bar talking to Olivar. I just brought the notes to your room and walked right out. After Loeder had left, do you remember what you said to me? I have told you once. Let me remind you. You said: 'Bring him back!'."

Destrée laughed, that tinkling laughter like an echo of fairy bells. "Well, you did not bring him back. If I seem mysterious, it is because you are mysterious. There is something you have never told me."

The vein which throbbed on Francis's brow grew darker. "Listen—I never told you what that man said to me, did I?"

"No, you merely told me that there was a scuffle, and—an accident."

"Well, when I clapped him on the shoulder (he hadn't heard me coming up) he turned around like a shot. I could see he was all tensed up—and I don't wonder. I said: 'Listen, Loeder, I want to step into your apartment and explain to you that you have left us in rather a fix'. He said: 'I suppose that woman sent you after me?'"

"That woman," murmured Destrée.

"I told him I didn't know what had happened and that I didn't care, but if he would be reasonable everything could be settled in the morning. He said: 'Nothing will be settled in the morning; I sha'n't be there. I'm through with the whole business. When I'm sick of a woman I walk out—and I have walked out'."

Destrée laughed.

"Is that really what he said?"

"Just that. He moved on, the portfolio under his arm; and I felt a buzzing in my ears. I had one of two choices: to let him go, or to have it out ... I went after him, grabbed him, and swung him around. It had become very dark. I wasn't just sure where we were standing. But before I knew what had happened, he led off and registered hard on my jaw. He said: 'Take that back to Ysolde with my compliments.' I didn't answer—just reached out for him ... What?"

"I did not speak," Destrée whispered.

"Oh—I thought you did. I pulled him forward and jerked his chin up: routine stuff. He went over backwards. That wouldn't have caused any great damage; I wasn't trying for a kill. But how could I know he was standing right in front of a stone flower box screwed down to a low parapet? He gave a sort of scream as he realised what had happened—not very loud. He tried to save himself, but it was too late. He pitched back, half sideways, onto his skull, and toppled right over ... The weight of his body did the rest: a thing that's happened many a time, but a thing I hadn't planned. There's no doubt he broke his neck. Even then, although he was so still, I didn't know he was dead. I was afraid to use a torch, and the night was black as Hell. I began to feel around for the portfolio, but he was lying on it. I couldn't pull it out. Then, I heard someone running up ..."

The car was passing through Farnborough, and Mr. Francis had completed his notes, when Destrée said, "It will be dark going back."

"That's true. Thinking about your date with the new boy friend?"

There was savage irony in his words, but she gave no sign. "If Lord Marcus is interested, why should I not be interested too? He has influence, and he does important work for the Ministry of Information, so Hugo has found out. Do you want to quarrel with me again?"

"It would be no use. *Major Felsenhayn* is going with you, I believe?" (He stressed the name.)

"Hugo, also, is invited—yes. It is a new contact, and a welcome one. Don't you think so?"

"What I think," said Francis, "I prefer not to say ..."

34

At Scotland Yard

In the Assistant Commissioner's office, Colonel O'Halloran switched off his radio on sustained applause of a wildly enthusiastic character which had crowned the final exit from a military concert "somewhere in southern England" of that popular transatlantic artiste, Francis Batt. Chief Inspector Firth stood before the blacked-out bay window; Sergeant Bluett sat at the sacred, if untidy, desk of the Commissioner, where his dexterity in shorthand had been taxed by the comedian's rapid delivery.

"Got it all, Bluett?" asked Firth.

"I think so."

"Try your hand, Firth," the Assistant Commissioner directed. "You have the key there—'Pythagoric buds,' and so on. Extraordinarily rambling story, that one he wound up with. Sounded phoney to me."

Sergeant Bluett stood up, ingenuously apologetic. "I couldn't take down the music, sir. That can't be done in shorthand."

"Being looked after by another department, Sergeant. Musical code, I understand, can be solved with same key if one knows music." The Colonel knocked out his pipe in a large ashtray on a side table, then delved in that pocket in which he kept loose tobacco. "Sing out last bit to Chief Inspector. See what you make of it, Firth."

And so, whilst the Assistant Commissioner stamped up and down, busily charging the hot bowl of his pipe, Sergeant Bluett in tones much subdued by awe of his surroundings, dictated from his notes to Chief Inspector Firth.

Firth wrote the shuffled alphabet at the top of a page, with the conventional version underneath it, and then industriously set to work. Clearly enough, he was baffled for a time, his tawny eyes narrowing as he studied the words. His lower jaw protruded and his brows were drawn down. Then, evidently, and suddenly, came enlightenment.

"Ah! it begins here!"

"What begins?" asked the Assistant Commissioner.

"List of warships, sir."

"Good Lord!"

"It's child's play once ye grasp the method. Now—here is the name of an admiral."

One of the several 'phones rang. The Assistant Commissioner crossed and took up the instrument ... "Yes," he snapped; "he's here." He leaned across, extending the receiver to Firth. "Your department."

Firth said, "Chief Inspector Firth speaking," and a voice replied: "Mr. Michaelis has gone to the house of Lord Marcus Amberdale. There seems to be some sort of party there. Officer in charge awaits instructions." Firth nodded: "Do nothing until I arrive, unless Michaelis leaves—in which event bring him here." He replaced the receiver.

"Hasn't slipped away, has he?" asked the Colonel.

"No, sir. He is at Lord Marcus's house."

"What! Great Scott! what on earth can he be doing there! House covered?"

"Yes, sir; he's safe enough." Chief Inspector Firth returned to his studies ... "Here is Birkenhead," he reported presently. "May be the name o' a ship or a port. Ah! this looks like a date."

"Date the Malta convoy sails!"

Bluett, who had stood up deferentially when the 'phone rang, now began excitedly to walk up and down in the constrained space behind the desk.

"Take a cigarette, Sergeant," said the Assistant Commissioner, pointing to a large box. "Relax—relax, man. Go ahead, Firth."

There was silence for some minutes as the Chief Inspector bent over his task. Bluett sat on the extreme edge of a chair smoking a cigarette as if he expected it to explode. The Assistant Commissioner blinked and walked up and down continuously. Again a 'phone buzzed. He crossed and took it up, listened for a few moments and then said, "Thank you. Good-bye," and hung up.

"Usual nightly token raid on south coast," he explained. "Nothing serious. Three or four of 'em over."

35

The Voice in the Shrine

That miniature temple in South Audley Street, black ceiling painted to create an impression of infinite space, had undergone yet another change. The shrine was veiled, and a screen stood before it. A circular ebony table occupied much of the available floor room, seven high backed chairs being set at regular intervals around its circumference. In one corner of this otherwise unfurnished apartment, a silver incense burner sent up tenuous wavering columns of smoke from its perforated lid. Already the atmosphere was laden with fumes of *kyphi*.

Its insidious appeal, at once to the senses, to the brain and to the spirit, reacted strangely upon those present. If any element of levity, however suppressed, had lingered amongst them, it disappeared as they entered, led by Lord Marcus. Mrs. Vane already had taken her seat—that directly facing the hidden shrine. She sat upright, slender white hands palm downwards upon the table before her; and at sight of the enraptured face, awe entered into the minds of those who saw her. Indeed, Lady Huskin hesitated on the threshold.

"The traveller is preparing for her journey," explained Lord Marcus. "In fact, she is already on her way. When the circle which I seek to form is completed by the arrival of Mrs. Destrée, we will take our proper places, which I shall point out, resting our hands upon the table in order that power may be concentrated amongst us. We have some time to wait, but I thought it better to acquaint you with the conditions under which the experiment must be carried out. With your permission we will retire again, leaving the door open. Air too heavily impregnated with *kyphi* to those unaccustomed to it is sometimes overpowering."

He stood by the entrance, his head gravely inclined, intimating that his guests should pass into the lobby. Last of all, he came out and joined them. There were those, it is true, to whom the thing smacked of a stage illusion, but there was none who had not come under the influence of Lord Marcus's singular personality. Lady Huskin, avid for fresh experiences, decided that she was really frightened. Mrs. Vane, an experienced woman of the world, had stood for a link with things normal and amusing, but her present condition completed Lady Huskin's alarm.

Crossing to the Roman couch, she seated herself, and beckoned to Fay Perigal with whom she had become well acquainted since Fay had taken up her duties at Rosemary Cottage.

She liked the look of the young Air Force officer too, although this was the first occasion upon which they had met.

"Come and sit down beside me, you two." Lady Huskin patted the cushions to right and left of her. "I must really have a serious talk with you."

Fay hesitated, but at last: "Oh, well," she murmured, "I suppose there is no reason why not ..." And so she and Dick Kershaw sat down right and left of Lady Huskin upon the couch which had supported the body of Sir Giles Loeder.

Mr. Michaelis and his host had returned to the study. Lord Marcus courteously placed an armchair, and himself took a seat behind the mahogany writing-desk, leaning back so that light reflected upward from its polished surface lent to his features an appearance which might have inspired a painter to attempt a head of John the Baptist.

"There are cigars beside you, Mr. Michaelis; cigarettes also. Would you care for a drink—or some coffee perhaps?"

"Thank you, no. I am deeply curious about this queer business, Lord Marcus. It is by no means clear to me what you hope to achieve, nor do I observe anything which I might describe as personal sympathy between the persons you have assembled here to-night."

"That," replied Lord Marcus, "is not surprising. Our bodily ages and mannerisms are no more than remotely related to our spiritual identity. No one in these rooms to-night is younger than Neb-neteru—" he pointed directly over Mr. Michaelis's shoulder to the mummy in its sarcophagus. "All of us, yourself included, were contemporaries of Seti the First."

"Indeed," murmured Mr. Michaelis—and the immovable disc of his small monocle indicated that his gaze was fixed upon the face of Lord Marcus. "You speak with a conviction which I am compelled to respect, but which I am not bound to accept."

"I ask you to accept nothing, Mr. Michaelis, except my hospitality."

"I do not presume to dispute your knowledge; you are unmistakably a scholar possessed of deep and unusual learning; but I wonder if—"

"Much learning has made me mad?" suggested Lord Marcus smiling.

"Not at all. I beg you will not misunderstand me. My reservations go deeper than that. You maintain that the human spirit can, and does, operate away from the body which normally it occupies?"

"Certainly."

"Then on this rock, Lord Marcus, our courses split. I have no idea what mysterious significance may attach, in your estimation, to this mummy, but I think I should make it plain that I dispute even the possibility ..."

He was interrupted. This interruption took the form of a wailing cry:—

"No, no! stop those sirens! Hold my hand ... don't leave me!"

Mr. Michaelis came to his feet as if propelled upward by a powerful spring. A muscular spasm swept that ironic urbanity from his face. His monocle dropped, and rolled silently across the carpet.

Out in the lobby Lady Huskin exclaimed, "Oh my God! what's that?"

As Lord Marcus stood up and moved with long strides towards the study door, from the temple came a piercing scream, the scream of a woman in dire agony, and a babble of sobbing words: "Hugo!... Hugo!... where are you?"

Michaelis grasped Lord Marcus's arm as he was about to pass. "Lord Marcus!"—he spoke strangely, wildly, gutturally: "Listen to me. That voice was not the voice of Mrs. Vane!"

"No," Lord Marcus replied; his tones were calm but grave, "it was the voice of another speaking through her lips."

"It was Ysolde! it was Ysolde!"

"It was the voice of Mrs. Destrée—yes. I recognised it."

A country road in a southern county stretched wide and empty under the moon. A German plane which had traversed some miles of its length at tree-top height might be heard droning away in the distance. At one point, this road swung eastward and was overhung by trees in such a way that a bay of shadow masked the bend. Here, at an angle of forty-five in a wide ditch, a car lay, a commodious saloon, its roof riddled with machine gun bullets.

One might have supposed it to be deserted, have assumed that its occupants were dead, or unconscious. The hawklike shape of a Spitfire streaked by, high above, on the tail of the German raider, as a sound of tearing and wrenching came from the forward part of the overturned car. Presently, a near side door was forced open, and the driver, clutching at a weed grown bank, hauled himself free of the wreckage and stood poised, one foot on the bank, the other on the upturned running board.

He was that elderly, grey-haired chauffeur who resembled an ex-coachman, the driver provided by ENSA to convey Francis Batt to a military concert and back to London again. The man stood there for awhile, inhaling deeply and evidently trying to steady himself; then, struggling back to an uptilted door of the saloon, he succeeded by sheer force in wrenching it open. He shot the ray of a torch into the interior of the car, stooped, and examined what he found there, then hauled himself out again, and climbed the bank looking up and down the deserted road. He had lost his cap, and a slight breeze disturbed his thick grey hair.

A rattle of distant machine gun fire came, and died away again. A far off shouting arose, and almost immediately subsided. High puff-like clouds seemed to powder the face of the moon. He could detect no sound of traffic. Removing that earpiece which, habitually, he wore, he began to run back in the direction from which he had come. He was making

for a Police call-box which he remembered to have passed.

As this was two miles off, some little time elapsed before Colonel O'Halloran, still walking up and down his office in Scotland Yard, rolling and lighting cigarettes, smoking and re-loading his pipe, blinking, snapping his fingers, and generally exhibiting every evidence of suppressed nervous energy, received the call, which was intended for him.

Chief Inspector Firth was busy with further transcriptions of Sergeant Bluett's shorthand notes, and had become involved in a mass of names and figures to which no clue could be found. Sergeant Bluett, who realised that he was listening to a condensed but detailed account of the constitution, personnel, times of sailing and ports of call of a huge convoy bound for Malta—and that this information had that night been placed in enemy possession—sat on the extreme edge of his chair wearing the look of a bewildered schoolboy. Having forgotten his evening paper, he tapped his knee with a notebook.

The telephone buzzed, and in two strides the Assistant Commissioner had reached the instrument ... "Yes, at once. Put him through." He turned and spoke two words: "Gaston Max!"

"Is that you, Colonel O'Halloran, my old?" came the voice of the Frenchman. "Heaven be praised that I live."

"Where are you? What has happened?"

"I am in a Police box on a country road, six miles from Farnborough. Always, Fate snatches my prisoners out of my hands. Wake was the only one I have safely delivered. But I am alive. Yes—I have much to be thankful for. You understand, I was driving Destrée and Francis."

"Don't understand at all," rapped the Commissioner. "You were driving them?"

"But certainly. I have driven them several times, now. I arranged this with ENSA, who provide the troop entertainments as you know. The car is wired, and I wear an earpiece. I learn much in this way, and to-night—I learned all."

"What did you learn?"

"The man we have known as Julian Francis, and also as Francis Batt, murdered Sir Giles Loeder. I was bringing him back to you, with Madame Destrée. She was the leader of the gang and the brains which guided it!"

"Well! where are they? what happened?"

"A German raider swooped down on us in the moonlight. I heard him coming and ran the car into a ditch where there was shadow. Alas, too late! He plastered us with machine gun bullets. My friend, it was terrible! Francis threw himself on the woman, to try to shield her body. One bullet killed them both. She was shot in the throat—screaming for Hugo."

"Good God! who is Hugo?"

"Major Hugo Felsenhayn, of the German Intelligence. We know him as Mr. Michaelis. He was her lover, I think; or at least, her favorite lover. Is it not Fate, Colonel O'Halloran, my old, that never can I make an arrest after so much work? Fate steps in and fools me. You have the worthy Michaelis covered, I trust?"

"Certainly. Know where he is at present moment."

"Send my old friend the Chief Inspector at once to arrest him. Seize him as accessory to the murder, before Military Intelligence can act. Let your fellows at least have *one* worthwhile prisoner to show; a mere thieving butler is not good enough ..."

In the lobby of Lord Marcus's house an atmosphere of nervous tension prevailed. Mrs. Vane, whose condition for a time had caused some anxiety, was now resting upstairs in the guest room: she retained no memory of what had occurred. Lady Huskin had requested permission to sit with her; so that only Dick Kershaw, Fay, Lord Marcus and Mr. Michaelis remained.

Mr. Michaelis was strangely disturbed. He had recovered his monocle and had returned it to its place, but he had not succeeded in recovering his characteristic composure. Frequently, he consulted a wrist-watch. Fay was lying in a deep armchair brought from the study, and Dick perched beside her, one arm thrown across the back of the chair. "Do you feel better, Fay?" he asked in a low voice.

She looked up and nodded. "There is nothing the matter with me, Dick, except that I always hated these occult experiments. They frighten me ... Somehow, I don't think they—are right."

"I don't quite know *what* I think," said Kershaw; "but I know the voice we heard wasn't the voice of Mrs. Vane. There's something else, too:—a sort of foreboding, as though—"

"You were expecting something else to happen? I know. I have it, too. Oh, listen!"

Muffled, for the house with the scarlet door possessed a quality of peculiar silence, the wailing of sirens became audible. One of the coastal raiders was approaching the London area. Mr. Michaelis glanced at his watch, and then turned to Lord Marcus, who stood, seemingly lost in thought, before the silver plated door of the temple, now closed.

"I begin to fear, Lord Marcus, that Mrs. Destrée has been detained. Perhaps, in the circumstances—"

The door bell rang. Its sound, for some reason, electrified the listeners. Fay jumped up and grasped Dick's arm. Mr. Michaelis strode across. But Lord Marcus overtook him, resting a restraining hand upon his shoulder.

"Permit me, sir."

Lord Marcus himself opened the door—and Chief Inspector Firth stepped in. Behind him, indistinct in shadow, two uniformed figures might be discerned.

"Good evening, sir."

"Good evening, Chief Inspector."

Firth fixed the regard of his tawny eyes upon Mr. Michaelis. "Major Felsenhayn—I ha' a warrant for your arrest."

Mr. Michaelis grew visibly pale as he met that set regard of the Chief Inspector. Then, drawing his heels together, he bowed. "Mrs. Destrée?" he asked quietly.

"Mrs. Destrée and Johann Brandt were killed in an air raid near the coast less than an hour ago ..."

BOOKS BY SAX ROHMER

THE FU MANCHU STORIES

The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu
The Return of Dr. Fu Manchu
The Hand of Fu Manchu
Daughter of Fu Manchu
The Mask of Fu Manchu
Fu Manchu's Bride
The Trail of Fu Manchu
President Fu Manchu
The Drums of Fu Manchu
The Island of Fu Manchu
The Fu Manchu Book (*Omnibus*)

STORIES OF CHINATOWN AND THE ORIENT

Dope
Fire-Tongue
She Who Sleeps
The Golden Scorpion
Tales of Chinatown
Tales of Secret Egypt
Tales of East and West
The Green Eyes of Bâst
The Quest of the Sacred Slipper
Brood of the Witch Queen
The Yellow Claw
Yellow Shadows
Yu'an Hee See Laughs
The Bat Flies Low
Egyptian Nights

OTHER MYSTERY STORIES

Grey Face
Moon of Madness
The Day the World Ended
The Dream Detective
The Emperor of America
White Velvet
The Haunting of Low Fennel
Salute to Bazarada
The Orchard of Tears
The Exploits of Capt. O'Hagan

NON-FICTION

The Romance of Sorcery

[The end of *Seven Sins* by Sax Rohmer]