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ASK MISS MOTT

By **E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM**

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ASK MISS MOTT

MISS MOTT INTERFERES

Miss Mott looked up quickly at the sound of the knock at her office door. She had been engaged in the typical task of writing her advice to a young woman whose courtship affairs had become involved and she had rather forgotten the flight of time. Her typist had gone, also her messenger boy, and the lame, but very pleasant young clerk who assisted in her various activities. In other words, Miss Mott was alone on the top floor of a building not far removed from the Adelphi, and the hour being long past office hours, she was not expecting a caller.

"Come in," she invited curiously.

From that moment onwards, strange things happened. First of all, the door was opened only about six inches, and a man's hand—a very well cared for and shapely hand it seemed—crept through the aperture, felt about for a moment, and, finding the switch which controlled the electric light, pulled it firmly down, thereby plunging the room into darkness. The next moment the hand was withdrawn, and the owner had appeared in person, or rather had stepped through the now wide-opened door, and closed it carefully behind him. Little of him was to be seen in the darkness, except the blurred outline of a human being, slim, she imagined, but with broad shoulders, a trifle over medium height, perhaps, but with nothing aggressive in his appearance.

"What do you want?" Miss Mott demanded, an undernote of alarm in her tone.

There was no immediate reply, nor, for some reason or other, did Miss Mott expect one. Congratulating herself upon her presence of mind, she pulled the table telephone instrument towards her and lifted the receiver. There was no answer—a curious deadness, in fact, at the other end of the line. She peered through the gloom, and, although the sensation was unusual with her, she began to be afraid. Her visitor, while his back had been turned towards her, had donned a mask of some dark colour. He had now locked the door, put the key in his pocket, and was leaning back in the easy-chair which she kept for the more distinguished of her clients.

"I shouldn't worry about that, if I were you," he suggested, with a wave of his hand towards the telephone. "I am not an amateur, you know. I am a full-fledged professional criminal, with all the tricks of the trade at my finger tips. I cut the telephone cord outside the room."

"Then you were guilty of a very impertinent action," Miss Mott declared with spirit. "Who are you and what on earth can you want with me?"

"Keep calm, I beg of you," he enjoined. "Do you suppose that I should be likely to mount all these stairs and pay you a visit at this inconvenient hour of the evening without wanting something? If you wait for a few moments in patience, you will certainly hear what it is."

"Wait for a few more moments," Miss Mott lied courageously, "and my secretary and clerk will both be back."

He laughed, derisively but not unpleasantly.

"My dear young lady," he pointed out, "since when have your secretary, and your messenger boy, and your director of intelligence, as I suppose you call the lame youth, returned at something after eight o'clock, when you have once dismissed them? They have all three left for the night. You are here, utterly alone, busily engaged in completing your column for *Home Talks*. In other words, you are delving into other people's troubles and answering the long string of queries which you invite every week under the heading of:

ASK MISS MOTT."

"You seem to know a great deal about my business," she remarked icily.

"Only," he assured her, "since you began to interfere in mine."

She liked his voice and she was not in the least alarmed now, but she realised to the full the unusualness of the situation.

"Perhaps you will tell me," she invited, "when I had the misfortune to interfere in your affairs?"

"I am coming to that," he promised her.

"Couldn't we have the light on?" she begged. "I don't like sitting in the darkness with a stranger on the seventh floor of a deserted building."

"Compromising, my dear Miss Mott, I admit," the voice from the shadows acknowledged, "but necessary. I am a very shy person, as most criminals are. My mask may disguise my features, but I cannot afford to give you the opportunity of taking note of other details of my person."

"You are sure that you are a criminal, I suppose?" she ventured. "You see, I haven't met many, and I need experience badly."

"Absolutely certain," he assured her. "Really, I should be a godsend to you. Not only am I a criminal, but I am a member of a gang which is very seriously looked upon by the police. If you were in the fortunate position of being able to deliver me up to justice, I have no doubt that you might commence your career auspiciously by touching several rashly offered rewards."

"Then, if that is really your position, why are you here?" she demanded. "I have nothing worth stealing and I imagine a nicely brought up criminal doesn't go about frightening young women, unless there's something to be gained by it."

"Very well put, Miss Mott," he approved. "I will tell you why I am here. It is to stop your interference in my legitimate business."

"But how can I have interfered with your business," she argued, "when I don't know what it is? And, furthermore," she went on, "if you have a business, how can you be a criminal?"

"My dear young lady," he remonstrated, "my business is crime."

"Then what is your business with me?" she asked him point-blank.

He settled himself down more comfortably in his chair.

"I will explain," he promised. "You have, I understand, for several years, conducted an extraordinarily successful column in a paper called *Home Talks*. You give advice, chiefly of course, to members of your own sex, who are in difficulties with their lovers, husbands, cookery or wardrobes. Excellent, so long as you stick to that. Lately, however, encouraged by certain minor successes, you have gone farther afield. You have placed yourself privately at the disposal of your clients who find themselves in any sort of difficulty whatsoever. In pursuit of your vocation, you have engaged a small staff, and you now call yourself, I think, an 'Intelligence Agent'."

"That seems to me a very reasonable definition of my activities," Miss Mott admitted coldly.

"I will not quarrel with it," he agreed. "You must permit me to point out, however, that you fly a little high when you interfere in the enterprises of any one so well known in the criminal world as your humble visitor."

"Who are you then?" she enquired.

"I have many aliases," he confided. "The one under which you would know me best, perhaps,—but, wait a moment."

He rose to his feet and moved towards her. She was conscious of a sudden shiver, which, if it were not of fear, was certainly of some kindred excitement. Her pulses were stirred. She felt her heart beating more quickly. He made no attempt to come round to her side of the desk, however. He leaned over it, his eyes, through the slits in his mask, taking swift and appreciative note of her. She caught a gleam of something white in his hand and was at once aware of a waft of delicate perfume.

"Violet Joe!" she exclaimed.

He nodded approvingly.

"You are really quite intelligent," he acknowledged. "So far as one can gather in this light, too, I should say that you are

even more personable than I had imagined. All the same, you must be taught not to interfere in my affairs."

"You are the man who is blackmailing—"

"Hush," he interrupted. "One of the first lessons of our profession—yours and mine, I mean—which must be learned and adhered to, is 'no names.' I have a great many more serious crimes laid to my charge than the present one, but you may take it that it was from my agent that your messenger procured that little packet of letters yesterday afternoon at the Black Boy Inn at Cobham. I must congratulate you upon the idea. It was indeed a very cleverly thought-out piece of work, and I can assure you that it goes very much against the grain with me to insist upon having them back again."

"So that is what you have come for!" she exclaimed.

"That is what I have come for."

Miss Mott was not feeling quite so comfortable. She had an uncle in Scotland Yard who was fond of telling her stories about the famous criminals of the day and she had heard some very ugly tales indeed about the gang with which Violet Joe was connected. There was a murder case in which they were supposed to be concerned, and a case of manslaughter in the suburbs which was put down to them. There was also a crop of minor burglaries attributed to them, and only recently a terrible assault on a wealthy financier, in which the latter had been half killed and robbed of a very large amount of money. She dimly remembered that a reward of a thousand pounds had been placed upon the head of the leader of the gang.

"How do you know that I have not already parted with those letters?" she asked. "You are quite correct in what you say. My agent brought them in yesterday afternoon."

"Because," he answered—"shall I be indiscreet, for once, and mention names?—Mrs. Bland Potterson comes back from Brighton to-night, and she is almost certain to have asked you to deliver them into her own hand. That might almost be one reason why you are working late here. In any case, the letters are in that drawer on your right-hand side and I am afraid that I must ask you to hand them over to me."

It was a very exciting moment for Miss Mott. She had embarked bravely enough upon the high seas of adventure, but she had never dreamed of anything like this happening within a few weeks of her start. How she prayed for a single gleam of light! How she longed to see behind that enveloping mask of purple silk! The eyes and the voice had both their separate thrill, but, more than anything else in the world, she wanted at that moment to look into the face of Violet Joe.

"Supposing I refuse?" she suggested.

"That seems such a foolish supposition," he argued, a touch of weariness in his tone. "You are not a large person, Miss Mott. I personally have a penchant for small, elegant young ladies of your type and build, but you will admit that they are not in a position to deal with affairs where physical strength is the deciding factor. You have heard a few things about Violet Joe, I daresay?"

"I have indeed," she acknowledged.

"Not all to my detriment, I hope?" he enquired anxiously.

"Mostly negative," she confided, sitting upright in her place. "I have heard that you absolutely decline to carry firearms in any of your enterprises, that you can break a man's wrist with your hands, that you are an amateur boxer, a famous wrestler, and all those stupid things. They are part of the equipment of your profession, I suppose."

"Slightly withering," he commented.

She shrugged her shoulders. Her eyes were becoming accustomed to the gloom now and she could trace the outline of his figure as he lounged opposite.

"One wonders," she went on, "why a man so well equipped as you to fight for what he wants should stoop to the lower branches of crime—perhaps I should say the lowest branch of all—blackmailing."

"Ah, but my dear Miss Mott," he expostulated, "you do not know Mrs. Bland Potterson. You have probably never met Mr. Bland Potterson. I can assure you that if you had made their acquaintance, you would understand the joy—the

positive ecstasy—of having them both shivering in their shoes."

"I don't know either of them," Miss Mott acknowledged, "but I don't see what that has to do with it. In any case, I have the letters and I am going to carry out my contract. I am not in the least afraid of you. Besides—"

"Well?"

"There is just one thing more that I have heard said of Violet Joe. He has never robbed or laid his hands upon a woman."

"Touched," he admitted. "My problem then will be how to get the letters without using force—that is, if I am to preserve my reputation."

"What do you want them for?" she asked curiously. "Surely blackmailing on a small scale like this—just for the possession of a few stupid letters—ought to be beneath you. I thought Violet Joe only went in for *crimes de luxe*."

"You do not know Mr. and Mrs. Bland Potterson," he reminded her once more, with a grimace behind his mask which she was perfectly well able to divine.

"I don't see what that has to do with it," she repeated.

"Some day you may make their acquaintance. You will understand then the extreme pleasure it would be likely to give a man with a sense of humour—for, though you might not think it, I have a sense of humour, Miss Mott—to keep those two in a state of constant worry and anxiety upon the little dunghill they call life."

"Well, you're not going to have their letters," she assured him firmly, "and if you stay here much longer," she added, with a sudden inspiration, "you will have my uncle to deal with."

"And who may he be?" Violet Joe enquired. "I hate to think that any one, even an uncle, may be taking you out to supper, but let me know about him."

"Superintendent Detective Wragge of Scotland Yard," she answered, with a gleam of triumphant malice in her eyes. "The name may be familiar to you."

He laughed long and softly.

"Oh, Miss Mott," he expostulated—"Miss Mott, how can you tell falsehoods to an engaging stranger who is behaving so nicely to you? Dear Mr. Wragge is a very great friend of mine, but I can assure you that he won't be here to-night. He would probably give a great deal to be in your place and to have the pleasure of a little chat with me, but don't you see, if he was where you are, I wouldn't be where I am. Your respected uncle, Miss Mott, is at Southampton to-night, the passenger list of the *Berengaria* in his hand."

Miss Mott was uncannily surprised, for she happened to know that her visitor was telling the truth.

"You appear to be very well informed," she remarked.

He leaned back as though to laugh again. Then Miss Mott had the shock of her young life, for she was young in years as well as in her career. Like a crouching cat through the darkness he was by her side with one spring. The drawer towards which her eyes had too frequently wandered was opened. His fingers had closed upon the letters. She struck out at him and met only the empty air. She cried aloud, but that she knew was hopeless, for they were on the seventh storey of an almost empty building. Violet Joe was back again in his chair on the other side of the desk, the packet of letters in his pocket. His eyes were smiling at her through the narrow apertures of his mask. A little breath of the perfume of violets lingered in the disturbed atmosphere.

"Sorry, my dear young lady," he apologised, rising once more lightly to his feet, "but, after all, you mustn't complain. Flash bank notes, which I suppose you got from Scotland Yard, were quite a clever device of yours, but tricky—very tricky. You might have got my poor messenger into serious trouble, supposing he had been obliged to change one—say for his bus fare on the way home. If you stoop to that sort of thing, you must expect this sort of retribution."

He rose swiftly and unexpectedly to his feet, and she saw his outline in the gloom, the head thrust forward, listening intently. Then he crossed the room and felt about as though searching for something. He was by the window now, a little

distance behind her desk, moving noiselessly,—an almost invisible presence. Suddenly she became conscious of a familiar, but at that hour unusual, sound. She heard the lift, the terminus of which was two flights down, as it came rattling into its place. A cold wave of air swept through the room. Violet Joe had opened the window.

"You are going to have a caller, Miss Mott," he confided. "Do you know who it might be?"

She listened. They both listened. The roar of the traffic far below came to them as a dead thing. It was a windless night and there was no other sound.

"I know of no likely caller," she admitted, rather breathlessly. "That was not true about my uncle, of course. You were right about his being at Southampton."

"Dear Miss Mott," he went on, and, though she thought of it afterwards with fury, at the time it almost thrilled her to hear the caress in his tone, "I am a little afraid of this mysterious visitor. If you had told me of any one else whom you were expecting, I should only have smiled, but a visitor whom neither you nor I know anything about fills me, I must confess, with apprehension."

Again they listened, and this time there was the faint but distinct sound of shuffling footsteps mounting the last flight of steps.

"Dear me!" Violet Joe sighed. "And I loathe bloodshed—especially before a lady. Do you like bloodshed, Miss Mott?"

"Indeed I do not," she answered vigorously. "Whatever are you doing out there by the window?"

"I have one hand," he confided, "upon the rail of the outside fire escape, but it's an awful long way to swing myself. Will you pray for me, Miss Mott?"

"Don't be mad!" she cried. "Come back into the room and take your mask off. I—I promise—I suppose it's silly of me—but I promise I won't give you away and I won't remember your face afterwards."

"You're a sporting little lady," he acknowledged, "but you see, there's your prospective visitor to be taken into consideration. He might not be so amiable. He may be out after me and this room is too small for a man's fight. Besides which, I should hate to have you mixed up in anything of the sort."

She could trace the outline of his figure, poised upon the window sill.

"Come back," she begged. "You can never reach that, and remember—we are seven storeys up."

He was halfway out of the window now. He looked at her and there was a quality of laughter in his voice, as he pulled the key of the door from his pocket and let it drop on to the floor.

"Pray for me, Miss Mott," he begged once more, "and if you hear a very unpleasant crash—in other words, if I miss my swing—it doesn't matter what you do, but if I make it, pull the window down, there's a dear."

For a few seconds he seemed to brace himself. Then his body swung away out of sight. It seemed to Miss Mott that it was the most dramatic moment of her whole life. Every sense she possessed was concentrated in a terrible effort of listening. There came no sound, no cry. She crept towards the window, her knees shaking beneath her. There was a dark form safely upon the ladder, a sheer silhouette against the sky, something which might have been a chuckle, and then blackness. Miss Mott closed the window, and then came back to a consideration of her own affairs, which were in their way pressing...

First of all, she turned the light on and unlocked the door. The footsteps were drawing near. They were definitely mounting now to her modest little suite of offices. She glanced at the telephone with bitter regret. Her thoughts were feverishly distracted. Curiously enough, her most imminent fears were not for herself. She found herself thinking first of the man crawling down those iron steps, storey by storey, the tops of the elm trees hundreds of feet below, with death the penalty for a single slip. She shivered violently, then forced her thoughts back to herself and her own predicament. She listened to the mounting footsteps. Who would be likely to pay her a visit at such an hour? She asked herself the question in vain. She had always laughed at nerves but this was a queer coincidence that, twice in one evening—the first evening of her life amidst her new surroundings—adventure should come and flaunt her. She thought of many things in those few seconds. She must have a revolver and take some shooting lessons. She must have two telephones. But most of all, she

thought of that figure stealing down towards the street.

The knock at the door came at last and Miss Mott's apprehensions were not lessened by the sight of the visitor who made his furtive entrance. He could not, by any means, be called prepossessing. He wore the clothes of the shabby-genteel clerk out of work, but the clothes themselves were very much more shabby than genteel. His linen was doubtful and it was obvious that he was wearing his tie inside-out. His coat showed ink stains, but least pleasing of all was his face—long and narrow, with close-set eyes, and unpleasant mouth.

"Good evening, miss," he said, as he slipped across the threshold.

"Good evening," Miss Mott answered coldly. "What do you want? I am busy."

The young man deliberately closed the door behind him. Then he approached the desk at which Miss Mott was seated. He looked her over and there was a gleam of ugly admiration in his eyes. She shrank a little back in her chair.

"First of all, I have a matter of business to discuss with you, miss," he began. "You do the answers, don't you, for ladies and girls what gets into trouble in *Home Talks*?"

"I do," she acknowledged. "Are you one of my readers?"

Her visitor chuckled.

"Not much, miss," he scoffed. "I ain't come here to waste your time, either, nor mine. You've set up what you call an 'Intelligence Agency', on your own. You had a job from Mrs. Bland Potterson of Portland Place. You got some letters back for her. She hasn't had them yet because she's only returning from Brighton to-night. I'm after those letters."

"Blackmailer Number Two," Miss Mott observed calmly.

"You can call me what you jolly well like," the young man replied. "It was one of the big five who pinched them first. You settled with his messenger, who was a pal of mine, at Cobham this afternoon, and you've got the letters, waiting to give them back to Mrs. Bland Potterson."

"Well?"

"She'll have to pay twice over for them, that's all, because I've cut in to the game," the intruder announced with a grin. "No use making a fuss, miss," he added unpleasantly. "Hand over the letters."

"You are unfortunately too late," Miss Mott told him. "A previous visitor—probably the gentleman to whom you refer as one of the big five—was here half an hour ago, and, finding me alone and unarmed, has, in most chivalrous fashion, possessed himself of them."

"Who are you getting at?" the young man sneered. "I'm not taking any of that stuff, miss. The man I was speaking of isn't that sort of bloke. He wouldn't interfere himself in a trifle like this. My pal handed them over to you at Cobham and I know damned well that you haven't been to the old girl's yet, because you've been watched. As to any one else having pinched them, that's all me eye. Hand 'em over."

He struck the table with his unwashed fist, and the odour of him as he leaned across towards her, a threat in every gesture, was not in the least like the perfume of violets.

"I can assure you that I have not the letters," Miss Mott persisted. "If you do not go away at once, I shall telephone to the police."

She took the receiver from her disabled telephone and promptly regretted it. The young man leaped forward, swept the instrument from the table, and thrust his very disagreeable face within a few inches of her own.

"I ain't no time to waste, miss," he declared. "I'll look for them myself, and if you try to stop me," he went on, with a savage leer, "you'll get what's coming to you, and a bit more besides."

He flung open a drawer, in which Miss Mott had forty pounds in cash, several photographs, which she valued very much, and various other personal trifles far too sacred to be pulled about by this unwholesome person. She had the spirit of a lioness and she forgot her physical deficiencies. She struck out at him with all her power. He only grinned and imprisoned her wrists with one hand. Holding her in that fashion, he swept the money and a few oddments from the drawer into his pocket. He searched the desk in vain. There was no safe in the room and, as Miss Mott had not yet had time to complete her furnishing, there was obviously no other hiding place.

"Tell me where those letters are," he snarled.

"I have told you I haven't got them," she reiterated. "I haven't got them; and if I had, I wouldn't give them to you."

She struggled more violently still. He suddenly changed his tactics. He held her in a grip of iron and there was a sinister leer in his eyes.

"I'll teach you, you little devil!" he muttered. "That's right! Come closer to me! Now, it's you or the letters. Make up your mind."

She shrieked madly—shrieked and shrieked again. He only laughed.

"I know all about this place," he warned her. "No one nearer than the sixth storey down. That's why they have to let these offices so cheap. Now, my dear! The letters, or—"

There was a sound which, to her dazed ears, seemed like the smashing of a thousand windowpanes. The carpet all over the farther side of the office was littered with glass. The man in the purple mask, his hands upon the sill, leaped into the room. He asked no questions. He came at Miss Mott's assailant like a wild-cat. Miss Mott, opening her eyes from the horror which was encompassing her, heard a yell of agony, and saw her tormentor lying motionless in a far corner of the room. The smell of violets was in her nostrils, the fire of a pair of burning blue eyes blazed into hers. Nevertheless, the newcomer's voice, when he spoke, was remarkably steady.

"Turn out the light," he directed. "I've cut my cheek and my hand, and I shall have to take my mask off. I do not wish you to see my face."

She moved over to the switch and obeyed. The blood from his cheek was now dripping on to the desk.

"You had better get out and go home," he told her. "Here are your damned letters. I only wanted them to punish those beastly people, and they're not worth all that fuss, anyway. Get your hat."

She was trembling in every limb now, but she never thought of disobeying. With her coat upon her arm, she went shivering to the door.

"But you must let me bathe your cheek," she begged, stopping short.

"I have already told you," he said sternly, "that I will not allow you to see my face. I will leave this rubbish upon the stairs. He can tell his own story to any one he pleases, when he recovers."

"Why," she gasped, "did you come back?"

He hesitated.

"I didn't feel altogether easy about those shuffling footsteps," he confided. "Besides, some of the rungs of the ladder were very unsafe. Then I heard you call out."

"I'm not going until I have bandaged your hand, at any rate," she insisted.

But for once Miss Mott had met her master. He dragged her late assailant outside and left him groaning upon the stairs. Then he locked the door for her and gave her the key. The letters he had thrust into her bag.

"Go and finish your job," he enjoined.

"But you!"

"As soon as you're out of sight," he assured her, "I shall become a perfectly respectable member of society, who has banged against the lift in the darkness. The only way you can get me into trouble is by hanging about here. On your honour, remember. You won't look?"

"I swear," she promised.

He thrust the torn and blood-stained mask into her hand and she pushed it to the bottom of her bag. Then Miss Mott went flying down the stairs, and Violet Joe, after a contemptuous examination of the groaning figure sprawling upon the stairs, became an ordinary human being. He dabbed the cut in his cheek with a handkerchief, lit a cigarette, and descended towards the lift.

Miss Mott was very nearly cured that evening of any secret feeling of fondness she might have had for the women and girls whom she addressed every week in her column of *Home Talks* as "My dear friends." The butler at the great house in Portland Place gazed a little more haughtily than usual out of his front door at her timid summons. He rather resented visitors at this unusual hour.

"Mrs. Bland Potterson has just returned from Brighton, miss. If you are the young lady whom she is expecting, I will take you to her. Otherwise the mistress is not at home."

Miss Mott gave her name and was conducted through scenes of Tottenham Court Road magnificence into a glaring drawing-room, brilliantly illuminated, as Miss Mott suspected, for her especial benefit.

"The young person whom you were expecting, madam," the man announced.

A rubicund lady, dressed in clothes which seemed all too short and too tight for her, nodded patronizingly and pointed to a seat.

"So you're Miss Mott," she remarked, folding her hands in front of her,— "the young lady who gives us all the good advice in *Home Talks*. Parkins, tell your master that Miss Mott is here."

"Very good, madam."

Miss Mott waited until the man had left the room. Then she produced her little packet.

"I have brought your letters, Mrs. Potterson," she confided.

"How clever of you, my dear!" the lady exclaimed, leaning forward, and positively grabbing them from Miss Mott's outstretched hands. "Well, now, I am glad I thought of writing to you. Bothered to death I was about those letters. You see, my 'usband's by way of being a public man—may have a knighthood next year—it might run to a baronetcy—and when you get into circles like that, you see, young woman, there must never be any scandal. Not a breath of it."

"I quite understand," Miss Mott acquiesced.

Into the room bustled Mr. Bland Potterson and he was very much what one would have imagined the husband of Mrs. Bland Potterson to be like. He, too, was short. He was sleek. He was pompous. His tweed clothes were too load in pattern, his brown shoes were too yellow, and no one appeared to have pointed out to him the enormity of wearing a diamond pin in his tie with a soft shirt and collar.

"My 'usband," Mrs. Bland Potterson announced. "This is the young lady who's got back the letters, 'Erbert. She's brought them with her."

Mr. Bland Potterson smiled as amiably as he knew how. His cunning little eyes were devouring the packet.

"Well, well!" he exclaimed. "I'm not going to ask how you got them, young lady. Very clever of you, I'm sure."

Miss Mott, having risen to her feet, remained standing. She was aching to get away to her small flat, to think over the events of this amazing evening. Husband and wife exchanged glances. Mrs. Bland Potterson coughed.

"I suppose, Miss Mott," she said, "having had the letters in your possession for a whole day, as it were, that you have read them?"

"Why should you suppose any such thing?" was the indignant rejoinder. "I have done nothing of the sort."

Mrs. Bland Potterson coughed again. It was perfectly clear that she did not believe her visitor.

"My 'usband and I have talked it over," she continued, "and we think it only fair to let you know the truth about them. Sit down for a moment, please."

"I really don't want to know the truth about them," Miss Mott said wearily, "and I am anxious to get home."

They appeared not to have heard her. Mr. Bland Potterson, with his hands in his trousers pockets, came over to his wife's side.

"You see, they are all signed by the wretched girl's Christian name, which was Ellen," Mrs. Bland Potterson explained. "She was with us when we lived at Forest Hill, where we 'ad a much smaller establishment. 'Ousemaid, she was, and a very bad one at that. Well, as the letters show, she got into trouble. The first thing the 'ussy does is to try to get to see my 'usband alone. He's too clever for that and keeps out of 'er way. The impudent 'ussy then actually came to see me and an outrageous story she told. Out of the 'ouse I packed her pretty quick. My 'usband may have his weak moments—gentlemen do, it seems to me now, since the War—but not with servant girls."

Mr. Bland Potterson fingered his tie impressively.

"I should think not," he declared. "Very awkward position for me, you can see, Miss Mott, in my station of life. I was coining money at the time and we were making new and more important friends every day. No good tinkering with the young woman. I know the game too well. You begin to give them a little money and they cadge on to you for life. Not for yours truly. She had the impudence to come down to the office. I just sent for a policeman and that was that."

"What happened to her?" Miss Mott asked quietly, with a sudden inexplicable curiosity.

They were both silent for a moment.

"She appeared to have no friends," Mrs. Bland Potterson confided. "I'm not surprised at it—a hussy like that! She came from the country and she knew no one. They took her in at some sort of institution, I believe, to have her baby. Her last letter was written from there."

"And now?"

"She died," was the indifferent and yet somewhat shamefaced reply. "She was a vicious little cat, even on her deathbed. She got the clergyman to write that last letter there for her. Spiteful little beast!"

"And the child?"

Mr. Bland Potterson jangled the keys in his pocket.

"Who the devil cares anything about the child?" he demanded. "They put her into the workhouse, I think. Best place too. Anyway, like a couple of mugs, we kept her letters—some of them to my wife and some of them to me—and they were stolen by a servant. Now you know the whole of the story, Miss Mott, and the letters are going upon the fire within the next few minutes. We shall have a bottle of champagne to drink to their ashes. If you care for a glass yourself, young lady—"

"No thank you," Miss Mott, who was very badly in need of refreshment, replied. "I must be going."

"I suppose you had to pay a trifle for them, my dear," Mr. Bland Potterson enquired, with narrowing eyes.

"Yes, it cost something, naturally," Miss Mott acquiesced, trying to bring her mind to business. "I have opened an office, as you know, and my expenses mount up. I had quite a little trouble to persuade the people who had got possession of the letters to deal with me at all. However, I understood from your last communication that you were in a state of great anxiety, and I think you said that you would give almost anything in the world to recover the letters."

Mrs. Bland Potterson smiled.

"Well, well," she murmured, her puffy fingers tightening upon the packet, "one always exaggerates a trifle, I suppose. Anyhow, I am sure you did very nicely, and we must give you something to remember us by."

She leaned over and opened a bag upon the table by her side. From amongst a sheaf of money, she selected a five-pound note and showed it to her husband.

"Yes, yes, my dear," he agreed, with a wave of the hand. "We can afford it. Certainly."

Mrs. Bland Potterson handed the five-pound note over to Miss Mott and rang the bell.

"There you are, young lady," she announced, with ponderous grandiloquence. "Don't say a word, I beg of you. You're very welcome. I must certainly continue to subscribe to *Home Talks* and, if any of my friends get into trouble, I shall tell them to call you."

Miss Mott was feeling a little confused. She looked at the note, she looked at Mrs. Bland Potterson, she looked at the short, pompous figure of her husband, she looked at the butler, waiting to see her out, and gained at last some inspiration. She handed the note into his eager fingers.

"Perhaps you wouldn't mind getting me a taxi," she begged.

Miss Mott, as she crossed the pavement towards the waiting taxi, was very angry indeed. She was angry with herself, she was angry with the obsequious butler, she was more than ever angry with Mr. and Mrs. Bland Potterson. It seemed to her, however, that the climax had been reached when she flung herself back in the corner of the taxicab and became conscious that it was already occupied!

"Who are you?" she cried, leaning forward. "This is my taxicab."

"Then I cannot congratulate you upon your choice, Miss Mott," a voice answered. "It is a nasty, smelly vehicle. The fellow's been driving about all day with the windows up, I should think."

Miss Mott gasped.

"What on earth are you doing in here?" she demanded.

"I followed you," her dimly seen companion confessed. "The butler should have made sure that he was handing you into an empty cab."

"But what do you want?"

"I wanted to see how you got on with Mr. and Mrs. Bland Potterson."

"Beastly people!" she exclaimed.

He laughed softly.

"I had an idea you would not be pleased," he said. "I have to ask you a delicate question, Miss Mott. Please do not refuse to answer me."

"Well?"

"How much did they give you?"

"Five pounds," she answered scornfully. "I gave it to the butler."

This time his laugh, although just as soft, was more prolonged.

"I told you what unpleasant people they were. I am going to call on them myself in a few minutes."

"What do you mean? What do you want with them?"

"That would take too long to tell just now," he answered. "We are, I gather, on our way back to your rooms."

"We are just there."

"Then, will you be so kind," he begged, "as to slip into an evening gown—black would suit you very well, I think, with your pretty hair and your perfect complexion. I should like to dine somewhere where the light is not too strong or the music too loud—say *Ciro's Grill Room*—in an hour."

"Thank you," she replied. "I never dine out."

"My dear young lady," he protested. "Is it or is it not true that you have embarked upon a career of adventure?"

"I suppose it is more or less true," she admitted.

"You are Miss Mott, the one Miss Mott, who teaches people how to live their lives. It is your ambition to penetrate into every nook and cranny of the living world. I have heard all about you, you see. How can you lead the life adventurous if you refuse to dine with a humble criminal? There is much that you still have to learn about my profession. I will be your instructor. Besides, I want to tell you about Mr. and Mrs. Bland Potterson."

"I think," she said deliberately, "that you are mad!"

"And I think," he rejoined, "that you are terribly attractive. That little dash of colour—anger, I am afraid—becomes you, and I wish that I could believe that I were the first to tell you that your eyes are marvellous. In one hour's time, please, I shall be waiting for you in the hall. Don't be surprised if at first you fail to recognise me. I have many aliases. And do not trouble about this taxi, please," he added, as he stepped out and handed her to the pavement. "I am going to take it on. In one hour then."

"I shall not be there," she declared positively.

"I shall hope for the best," he replied.

Mr. and Mrs. Bland Potterson were still indulging in their orgy of complacent self-congratulation.

"And to get them for only five pounds!" Mrs. Bland Potterson chuckled.

"Your cleverness, my dear," her husband declared. "One could plainly see that the little girl was overpowered by her surroundings."

"She has probably heard, too," Mrs. Bland Potterson remarked, "that you are soon to be an M.P."

The door was thrown open. The butler once more insinuated his bland presence.

"The Honorable Mr. Gervase Mallincourt," he announced.

Mr. and Mrs. Bland Potterson were surprised. The young man who was approaching them was without doubt a person of consequence. Mrs. Bland Potterson smiled a greeting.

"I must apologise for this intrusion," the newcomer said. "My only excuse is that I shall merely keep you a matter of two minutes."

"Something to do with the election, perhaps?" Mr. Bland Potterson suggested. "Take a chair, Mr.—er—Mallincourt."

"Your surmise is correct," the visitor agreed. "Something to do with the election."

He produced a packet of letters from his pocket, folded together and secured with a rubber band. Something about those letters from the first seemed ominous—the mauve notepaper, the faint odour of cheap patchouli!

"A quarter of an hour ago," the young man went on, "you bought and have doubtless already destroyed a packet of letters written to you both by the domestic servant whom you, Mr. Bland Potterson, seduced. You imagined that you were destroying the originals. You were not. You were destroying copies which had been palmed off upon a cheap blackmailer. The originals have been kept for a different purpose. Here they are. Ten thousand pounds would not buy them, Mr. Bland Potterson. Your resignation from your candidature of the Western Division of St. Pancras would and will."

Mrs. Bland Potterson collapsed in her chair. Her husband sat with his mouth open—incapable of speech. This amazing young man stood between them, turning the letters over so that they could both catch a glimpse of them. Gradually the horrible truth became perfectly apparent to Mr. Bland Potterson. These were, without a doubt, the genuine letters. There had seemed to him something inexplicably unfamiliar about the others.

"Who are you?" he demanded at last.

"I am a patriot," the visitor replied. "I live for the sake of my country, and I conceive it very much against my country's interests that you, sir, should become a member of the British Parliament. Mr. Hulings Johnson is an infinitely better man. All my friends wish Mr. Hulings Johnson to be elected. As there will be no time to secure a new candidate, it seems to me that he probably will be. The time is very short. I should recommend, sir, that you take to your bed to-night, send for your doctor, announce your illness and communicate with your party organisation."

There was a babel of angry questions, disjointed threats, unbridled fury from Mr. and Mrs. Bland Potterson. The young gentleman who had introduced himself as the Honorable Gervase Mallincourt once more waved the letters in their faces and turned towards the door.

"If the announcement of your resignation, sir, appears in the evening press to-morrow, upon my word as a gentleman, the letters will be destroyed or returned to you—whichever you prefer. If it does not appear, I shall be on the platform of your meeting at two o'clock in the afternoon. Do not trouble to ring. I can find my own way out."

"I came," Miss Mott said severely, "because I was curious."

"And you will remain," her companion replied, as they descended the stairs into the Grill Room, "because you are going to have a delightful dinner."

"What have you done to yourself?" she asked. "You look about twenty years older and, although you have been frightfully clever about it, I know that that is not your own hair, and those lines in your face are not natural."

"We criminals," he assured her, "get into the way of this sort of thing. We are quite accustomed to being blonds one evening and *bruns* the next! You may yet see me as Father Christmas. How thankful I am," he went on, as they seated themselves in the bar and ordered cocktails, "that you are on the right side of the fence. You will never need to disguise yourself. On the whole, I am glad that you did not wear black—although I'm afraid that that was obstinacy—that particular shade of grey goes with your eyes. You are very distracting, Miss Mott—"

"I did not come here to listen to you talking nonsense," she said severely.

"Of course not. I know that," he acknowledged. "Wait a minute. This has been a busy day. Let's drain these cocktails; then I will take you to the little corner table I have engaged. You shall read the menu of the dinner I have ordered and then, when I am quite sure that nothing would induce you to get up and leave me until after the dinner has been served, I shall tell you what you are dying to hear."

She looked at him curiously. After all, he had not exaggerated. They were very beautiful grey eyes and very beautifully set.

"I could almost believe," she said, "that you are rather masterful."

"I am also disagreeable," he told her, "if I don't get my own way."

Miss Mott read the menu and gave a little sigh of content. She had a weakness for exquisite food.

"Nothing," she assured him, "would induce me to leave until after the strawberries!"

"Then here is the truth," her companion confessed. "Such matters do not come within the sphere of our activities as a rule, but I have a young cousin, brilliantly clever, who is aching to get into Parliament. Mr. Bland Potterson's withdrawal at the last moment will make the seat a certainty for him. How we got to know about the letters doesn't matter. We should never have done anything about them in an ordinary way—not in our line at all—but in a good cause, against a Bland Potterson, everything is admissible. The letters you got back were copies. I have just shown the originals to Mr. Bland Potterson. I think that he would have given me more than five pounds for them but I told him that there was only one price. That he will pay. To-morrow night you will see the announcement of his sudden illness and retirement!"

Miss Mott's lips parted in a faint smile. There was a twinkle in her eyes as she watched the Amontillado being reverently poured into her consommé.

"Perhaps," she murmured, "after all, five pounds were as much as my copies were worth!"

II

THE MAGIC POPGUN

Miss Mott, engaged in her usual Wednesday afternoon task of answering the inevitable crop of letters demanding her advice in next week's *Home Talks*, paused in perplexity before one of the last she opened. She read it slowly, and, as she read, the delicate pink colour mounted almost to her temples. Her eyes shone—deep-set, grey eyes, Miss Mott possessed, with silky lashes, the eyes of a beauty, notwithstanding her demure appearance. Her fingers distinctly shook. Yet the letter in itself seemed harmless enough. It was written on what appeared to be Club stationery of expensive quality, but the address at the top had been carefully cut out:—

Dear Miss Mott—*it began*—

Give me your advice, please, in the next issue of your paper. I have recently met and been immensely attracted by a young lady whose friendship and affection I should much like to gain. Unfortunately I have not, up to now, led what is termed a respectable life, and I am afraid if she became aware of the nature of my profession she would not grant me the privilege of her acquaintance. Should I be justified, under the circumstances, bearing in mind the fact that my intentions are what are termed "strictly honourable," in seeking her friendship under an assumed name, and endeavouring to secure her interest in me before I divulged my profession?

Please reply to

V.J.

Miss Mott placed this epistle on one side, and answered all the others first. Then she turned back to the waiting letter, lifted it for one moment to her dainty nostrils, and half closed her eyes. Afterwards, with no further display of sentiment, she thrust a sheet of paper into her typewriter, and dealt with it:

V.J. I am surprised that you should ask me such an unintelligent question. Under no circumstances would you be justified in approaching the young lady until you have entirely changed the manner of your life, and are prepared to live according to accepted standards.

Miss Mott, whose touch upon her typewriter was usually both light and delicate, thumped out these few lines with unaccustomed force and energy. Afterwards she rang the bell for the tall, bespectacled young girl who acted as her secretary.

"Ring up Scotland Yard for me, Amy," she instructed, "and enquire whether Superintendent Detective Wragge is in. If so, put me through to him on the telephone."

"Superintendent Detective Wragge. Yes, Miss Mott."

"My uncle," the latter continued. "And afterwards, Amy, take this package of manuscript round to the *Home Talks* office."

The girl accepted a bulky envelope and retreated to her own den. Presently the telephone bell rang. Miss Mott exchanged a few words with her uncle and arranged to lunch with him at one-fifteen that day at the Milan Grill Room.

Superintendent Detective Wragge was a big, loosely built man, whose success in his profession could not have depended in any way upon his ability to disguise himself from his prospective victims, for he was a person of unusual appearance. He was over six feet tall and his face was large, creased and lined. His eyes were shrewd and penetrating, his mouth sensitive and humorous. He might more easily have been taken for a Cabinet Minister, or a barrister, than a detective. He was known at the Yard, and to a certain section of the criminal world, as "Rags", and he enjoyed a thoroughly well-earned popularity with both. His successes had mostly been achieved from the armchair behind his desk and were owing in large measure to his amazing memory of and insight into the ways and habits of the criminal world.

He was commonly reported to be able to tell you offhand the favourite haunts and habits of any well-known evil-doer, together with his chosen brand of cigarettes, and any other personal details. He seldom stirred from his room in Scotland Yard, but, on the few occasions when he sallied out professionally, either eastwards or westwards, things usually happened. He was very fond of his only niece, and it was, to a certain extent, under his auspices, that she had combined her present venture with her newspaper activities.

"Is it true, Uncle," Miss Mott asked him, during the course of their lunch, "that you know the names and nicknames of every one of the principal criminals in London?"

"Perfectly true, my dear," he assented. "Nothing much in that. There aren't more than twenty or thirty of what we call 'big shots.' The remainder work under them in gangs."

"Do you know of a criminal I read about in the papers once, whose nickname is Violet Joe?" she enquired artlessly.

"Why, do you?"

She was a little disconcerted by the swiftness of the rejoinder, but she adroitly concealed the fact.

"I heard him spoken of the other day, quite by accident," she confided. "I haven't any information about him, if that's what you were hoping."

"No, I don't suppose you would have," her uncle mused. "Violet Joe doesn't give himself away like some of the others do. If you were in a position to do anything about him, it would be the biggest send-off your show could possibly have."

"He's—bad?"

"I wouldn't say that he's bad, but he's terribly clever," Superintendent Wragge replied, with an unusual note of seriousness in his tone. "He and his chief—Boss Meredith—are about the only two of the big five I couldn't lay my hands on at any time, if there was any object in it. Violet Joe's too clever for the ordinary police brain. All we can hope is that some day he makes just one slip. Then, by God, we'll have a look into his past."

"That doesn't sound very pleasant," Miss Mott shivered.

"Crime isn't pleasant," was her uncle's dry response. "It's all right to read and write about, but it's a nasty business to live amongst. Don't let's talk about it. Have an ice before your coffee?"

"I will have a chocolate and vanilla ice mixed," Miss Mott announced—"and, in the meanwhile, why shouldn't we talk of it? In my new department, I might be mixed up with criminals at any moment. Crime fascinates me. I'm tired of giving advice about these courtship and domestic matters. I should like to be drawn into a really serious affair."

"Then you're a little fool and I'm sorry I ever encouraged you to start your intelligence agency," Superintendent Wragge growled. "Crime—real crime—is an ugly and beastly thing. I don't suppose you'll ever come in touch with it and I sincerely hope you won't."

Their conversation was broken into in somewhat abrupt fashion. A good-looking, exceedingly well-turned out young man, who was passing their table, paused, and, with a courteous bow, held out his hand to the Superintendent. He was moderately tall, with clean-cut features, a pleasant mouth, shrewd eyes, and brown hair which had a distinct wave in it where it was brushed back behind his ears. He wore a blue serge suit, with a tie of elusive purple, and a bunch of violets in his buttonhole.

"Superintendent Wragge, isn't it?" he remarked, with an ingratiating smile. "I am afraid you don't remember me."

"Not entirely," the Superintendent admitted, as he shook hands. "To say that your face is familiar wouldn't be exactly a compliment, as you seem to know my profession."

"About two months ago," the newcomer reminded him, "you came to Amberley Square—wedding reception, you know—Lady Hoskinson's. You had a man there already, watching over the wedding presents, but you thought you might spot a pet thief you were after."

"I remember the circumstance, but not you," the Superintendent meditated.

The young man sighed.

"Lady Hoskinson is my aunt," he confided. "Victor Jones is my name. I asked you to have a drink and you wouldn't."

The Superintendent shook his head.

"It doesn't sound like me," he objected. "All the same, there was a—what did you say your name was?"

"Victor Jones," the young man repeated. "Might I have the pleasure—"

He glanced towards Miss Mott. Her uncle accepted the hint.

"Mr. Victor Jones—my niece, Miss Mott."

The young man took Miss Mott's somewhat timidly proffered hand in his. She looked into his eyes and fear came.

"I am delighted," he murmured.

There was a moment's somewhat curious silence. For some reason or other, Miss Mott, not usually a shy young woman, seemed incapable of speech.

"You hadn't the best of luck that night, had you, Superintendent Wragge?" Mr. Victor Jones continued easily. "Your man was there. You knew that. You couldn't spot him and the diamond pendant was stolen. Never been recovered to this day, my aunt tells me."

"You seem to have the events of that evening at your finger ends," Superintendent Wragge remarked, "but, curiously enough, even now I don't seem to remember you."

He frowned, as though in a further effort of memory, gazing intently at the young man. Suddenly his eyes narrowed. Mr. Victor Jones was bending over Miss Mott, and she was trying hard to take no note of the appeal in his eyes, to be unaware of the scent of violets creeping once more into her nostrils. Her heart was beating fast. Furthermore, she was somehow conscious of the sense of drama closing in upon her.

"You, too, they tell me, are, in a small way, a follower in your uncle's profession," he remarked.

"A very small way indeed," she assented deprecatingly.

She raised her eyes and looked at him, and what he saw in those grey depths was quite sufficient warning to him. He smiled back a message of reassurance and left her swiftly. She herself had heard nothing, but she had seen her uncle's urgent summons to the *maître d'hôtel*, the whispered replies, the man's hurried departure and egress through the door. Then she heard a disappointed exclamation. Mr. Victor Jones had swung away from the door, crossed the Grill Room, and plunged into the Restaurant, disappearing almost at once amongst the incoming crowd. Superintendent Wragge, with an agility little short of marvellous, followed him, and Miss Mott was left alone with her thoughts....

It was at least a quarter of an hour before Superintendent Wragge reappeared. He resumed his seat very much as though nothing had happened, but he pushed on one side the glass of very mild white wine, a bottle of which he was sharing with his niece, and ordered a double whisky and soda.

"Sorry to leave you, my dear," he apologised. "I had an idea—merely an idea—but one can't afford in my profession to neglect even the semblance of one. That young man now! What the mischief made him come to this table and tell me a deliberate falsehood?"

"Did he?" Miss Mott asked simply.

"You heard him tell me that his name was Victor Jones, and that he had met me at his aunt's the afternoon the old lady persuaded me to go in there and superintend the arrangements for guarding her daughter's wedding presents. That was a distinct untruth. I never met him there or any one like him. The only young man who approached me was a fair, insignificant little chap, with an eyeglass, who was a brother of the bride's, and even he didn't ask me to have a drink. What this fellow's object was in telling me that rigmarole, I cannot imagine."

"Perhaps," Miss Mott suggested modestly, "he wanted an introduction to me. I am afraid—he had been looking at me a

good deal and every one knows who you are, so I daresay he tried a bluff."

Superintendent Detective Wragge stroked his chin and regarded his niece thoughtfully.

"That never occurred to me," he acknowledged. "You are, I suppose, personable. It may have been that, after all."

"Tell me about your idea," she begged. "What made you send for the *maître d'hôtel* and afterwards follow the young man?"

Her uncle leaned forward in his place. He satisfied himself that there was no one else within hearing distance.

"I will tell you," he confided. "We have information that Violet Joe is in town and that there is something doing almost at once. That young man had to pass my table. He is notorious for doing impudent things. It would have been just like him to try to establish a false identity with me. Then look at his name. Probably invented on the spur of the moment—Victor Jones—Violet Joe. Look at the clever way he disappeared too. There was a touch of the habitual criminal there."

"He could have passed our table without your seeing him," she pointed out. "He needn't have come to such a public place, either, unless he had chosen."

"Quite so," her uncle agreed, "but we know that Violet Joe will take big risks to frequent the best places and he always prefers offence to defence. If I had looked up as he passed, he might have been forced into the defensive. As it was, he chose the offensive, and, provided there is anything in my idea, he got away with it."

Miss Mott looked at her vis-à-vis very earnestly.

"Do you really believe that that was Violet Joe who stopped at this table and to whom I was introduced?" she asked him point-blank.

"It might have been," was as far as her uncle would commit himself.

Two dreary weeks! February weeks too, of snow and slush, frost and swift thaw! Outside the weather was filthy. Inside her little office, Miss Mott was depressed. Her volume of correspondence had been as large as ever. She had written two articles for her paper, which had been most favourably received. She had installed a service of electric bells in her office—one under her foot, which would bring her prompt help in case of unwanted callers—and she had purchased the smallest revolver made, which would go into her hand bag and which she had learned to use with some skill. Not a caller, however, legitimate or otherwise, had disturbed the serenity of her days. No perplexed husband or anxious wife had called to solicit her aid. Her connection with the criminal world seemed to have ended as suddenly as it had begun. Then, about five o'clock on an impossible afternoon, the crash came. Miss Mott began to be very busy indeed.

The telephone started the riot. She was told that her uncle wished to speak to her from his room at Scotland Yard. When they were connected, however, he seemed to have curiously little to say. He asked a few family questions, added his own to a million other daily curses upon the weather, talked vaguely on various matters, and only once broke into adventurous ground.

"Seen or heard anything more about that young man who disturbed our luncheon party?" he enquired.

"The young man who might have been Violet Joe? I was just going to ask you that. Not a thing. Have you?" Miss Mott rejoined innocently.

"Indirectly. I believe he is about, though. We must have another luncheon one day next week."

"I should love to. I have no engagements."

He still held on. Whilst she was wondering what on earth he had rung her up about, he coughed uneasily.

"By-the-bye, Lucie," he said, "while I think of it, if ever anything should happen to me suddenly—foul weather this for elderly people, and I've got a bit of a cough—my will is at Wyman's the solicitor, 18 Holborn Row. Got that?"

"Why, of course, Uncle, but what's the matter?" she enquired, suddenly alarmed. "You're not ill, are you?"

"Not I," he assured her, his voice suddenly more natural now that he had got rid of what he had really rung up to say. "Just occurred to me, that's all. I am perfectly well, but—there's no reason why you shouldn't know—"

"Shouldn't know what?"

"I'm going out to-night after Violet Joe's crowd."

There was nothing Miss Mott could do. No good ringing up hysterically, and begging him to go safely home, and get to bed before the snow came on again. Her uncle was Superintendent Detective Wragge, and if it was his duty to go out after a famous gang of criminals, he had to go. She was sensible enough to know that and not to dream of interfering. All the same, she was sorry that this one particular person was concerned in the affair.... She told herself that her little romance was a thing thinner than air, that it was already melting away before the hot fire of blazing reality. Yet it hurt her very badly to know that before to-morrow Violet Joe might be arrayed in the manacles of shame, or her uncle—she was fond of him too—for his sake, she might have to make that little journey to Holborn Row.

Footsteps upon the stairs—just as she was putting on her hat! Soft, swift footsteps, mounting through the darkness of the two upper flights of stairs. She felt the quickening of her pulses. She had plenty of time to get to her newly installed electric bell beneath her chair. She had plenty of time to get to the telephone. She did neither. She let her coat slip back from her shoulders, leaving her slim and straight, flowerlike in her one-piece frock. Then she waited. To others it might have seemed long—Miss Mott had lost count of time—the footsteps at the door, the masked face peering through the aperture, the cautious, furtive entrance, the figure of her former visitor, lithe, alert, the flashing eyes, pinpricks of fire darting round the room.

"You are alone?" he snapped out.

"Absolutely," she assured him. "Look under my desk, if you like."

He seated himself coolly in her clients' chair as she glided into her own place. Her alarm bell was under her foot, the telephone instrument at her elbow. In the drawer at her right hand was her miniature revolver—and something else she would have hated him to have found—a torn, purple silk mask, with a few spots of blood upon it, and a withered bunch of violets.

"Miss Mott," he began, "I don't want to seem sentimental, but I do want to save your uncle's life. Tell me where he is or how to get in touch with him."

She tried her best to steady her voice, and, on the whole, she was fairly successful.

"My uncle has gone after you, if you are Violet Joe," she replied.

"But where?" he demanded. "Where am I supposed to be?"

"I have not the slightest idea."

"Don't be a fool," he enjoined sharply. "Didn't you hear what I said? I want to save your uncle's life, if I can. If you won't tell me how to get at him—he's finished."

"Why should you want to save his life?" she persisted. "You are Violet Joe, aren't you?"

"I suppose so. I am not the only criminal in the world, though. There are others more anxious to get rid of your uncle than I am, and with more cause. I think he's a very nice old gentleman and perfectly harmless if left alone. All the same, I can't save his life without your help."

"What can I do?" she faltered.

"Do you know any one at Scotland Yard?" he asked. "What I mean is, do you know any one who knows that you're Wragge's niece?"

"Several people."

"Get in touch with them as quick as you can then," he begged. "My car is waiting downstairs—a small black coupé. Tell the man to drive you to Scotland Yard. Mr. Grant's orders, say. Not my name. Code word. Go to one of your friends. Tell him of your business here. You have a client whose confidence you must respect. You can't mention names, but you've been given a word of warning about your uncle. You want to know where he is. I'm the nameless client, mind. Don't mention me, unless you want to give me away. The telephone's no use. They might answer you, but they wouldn't tell you the truth, unless they saw you."

"All right," she promised. "I'll go. What about you?"

"I'll wait here till you come back."

He helped her on with her coat. He had drawn off his gloves and she caught a glimpse of a fine, strong hand—a man's hand, although the nails were carefully manicured. She caught also more strongly than ever a wave of the perfume of violets and shrank from their fragrance. He threw open the door. His eyes flashed down upon her through the slits in his mask and again there was a gleam in them of something personal and appealing.

"God, how pretty you are!" he muttered.... "Hurry, hurry!"

Miss Mott fled down the stairs to the lift, tingling from head to foot. Perhaps she was angry; perhaps she was sorry; perhaps she was glad. Many a time afterwards she asked herself that question, but at the moment she certainly did not know.

It was exactly thirty-two minutes later when the man who had been left behind in Miss Mott's room heard her footsteps upon the stairs and threw open the door. She was looking distinctly relieved.

"False alarm!" she announced cheerfully. "They didn't hesitate about telling me for a moment. There are no flying squad orders for to-night and Uncle had to have his evening clothes sent down to the office. He is dining with Mr. Anthony Durban, who has something to do with the Stock Exchange, at 11-B, Manchester Square. Uncle's rather fond of the Stock Exchange, you know, and he knows heaps of brokers."

Her visitor groaned. Already he was buttoning up his coat. He glanced at the platinum and gold watch upon his wrist.

"Look here," he said, "this is all you can do now. Ring up Scotland Yard and ask if they can find any Mr. Anthony Durban living in Manchester Square, or anywhere else, for that matter. When they've discovered that there isn't such a person, they'd better order out the flying squad in case they get a summons."

"Do you mean that Uncle is in danger, that he didn't go to Manchester Square?" she gasped.

Her visitor looked back from the door. His fingers were already toying with the fastenings of his mask.

"Little Miss Mott," he explained, "in Chicago, when a man who has been selling secrets is asked by another whom he may suspect of being a gangster to take an automobile ride with him, he orders a drink and knows it's the last he's going to have on earth. It's pretty well the same thing here."

"What do you mean?" she shrieked.

"I mean that when any one in the criminal world is asked to dine with Mr. Anthony Durban in Manchester Square, he knows very well that it's his finish."

She wrung her hands.

"But we must do something."

He reflected for a moment, but he only shook his head.

"Ring up Scotland Yard. It's all you can do."

"But where shall I tell them to go?" she asked breathlessly.

He hesitated for a suspiciously long time.

"I can't tell you that," he sighed. "You see, after all, although I'm only in with them on certain occasions, I'm nevertheless one of the gang. I'll do what I can, but I'm afraid it won't be worth a snap of the fingers. It's heaven or hell, according to his past life, for your lamented uncle."

The door swung to and closed. The footsteps of Miss Mott's departing visitor, swift and muffled, were still audible upon the stairs. Miss Mott was not listening. She was studying intently the oblong purple card, fallen apparently from his clothing as he had left the room.

Superintendent Detective Wragge, a little earlier in the evening, descended from his taxicab in front of a handsome mansion in Belgrave Square and presented his hat and coat to a pompous-looking butler. Any slight misgiving he might have felt at the somewhat unusual conditions of his visit should certainly have been allayed by a brief study of his surroundings. The family portraits upon the walls were without a doubt valuable and authentic. The butler might have served in ducal households from the moment of his first escape from the pantry. The furniture was heavy and ponderously Victorian, the carpets soft to the feet. Everywhere was an atmosphere of complete and unassailable respectability.

"Has Mr. Thornton arrived?" Superintendent Wragge asked. "He was taking me to Manchester Square to dine with Mr. Durban, but telephoned me at the last moment to come here instead."

"That is quite all right, sir," the butler replied. "Mr. Thornton will be here in a few minutes and Mr. Durban is expecting you. Mr. Durban being a bachelor, sir," he confided, "the drawing-room is seldom used. We receive in the lounge."

He threw open the door of a spacious library in which five men were seated in various attitudes of ease.

"Mr. Wragge, sir," he announced.

A tall, thin man of apparently early middle age slipped from the edge of a heavy mahogany table, dropped his eyeglass and threw down the evening paper which he had been reading.

"Good evening, Mr. Wragge," he said, holding out his hand. "Glad you were able to join us. Not sure whether you know everybody. Hartigan—Dick Hartigan—you must have met, I think. Ponsford, Bill Cheyne, and Bolton. There they are! Terrible lot of fellows, but they'll tell you all you want to know about the Stock Exchange and they are just as anxious to meet you as I am. Meredith, my name is, by-the-bye, not Durban."

"Mr. Thornton, I presume," the Superintendent remarked, after a brief but hectic silence, "will not be coming."

"Mr. Thornton is not dining to-night," Meredith acknowledged. "As a matter of fact, he never dines with us and we're only slightly acquainted. He told one of us of your weakness for the Stock Exchange and we paid him five thousand pounds to bring you here. You see how highly we value you—or your absence—whichever way you care to put it."

Superintendent Wragge shook hands with everybody, and, although he knew now that he was face to face with death, he addressed a pleasantly indifferent word to each one of the men whom he had been hunting so assiduously. Syd Bolton! How they had combed the East End, and even parts of the West End, for the famous international jewel robber. They had never thought of looking for him, though, in Belgrave Square! One little link, one slip in his statement, and the Haxelly murderer was found. Meredith, his gracious host, smiling so imperturbably, would surely take that one-minute walk at eight o'clock if only the handcuffs could be fastened upon his wrists....

A footman handed cocktails around.

"Success to crime!" Meredith remarked, raising his glass.

"Rather a discourteous toast under present conditions," Cheyne drawled.

"Make it crime and all connected with crime," Meredith amended.

"The idea merits a second cocktail," Bolton declared, helping himself.

"And a response from me," Superintendent Detective Wragge added boldly. "I represent the law. You are under arrest, Meredith. You are all under arrest."

There was a roar of laughter, yet Wragge had his moment. He sprang backwards towards the door, and out came his two automatics, one in each hand. It was in this fashion that he had captured Bob Perrigon and the Perrigon gang, and earned his first stripe. But to-night he had cleverer people to deal with. The men in front of him cowered back, or seemed to cower, and threw up their hands readily enough. Then from behind came a terrible exhibition of force—just that pompous-looking butler, who had once been within an ace of winning the middle-weight championship, and one footman—footsteps, as though on wool, a grip of steel, and back went those automatics. Away they went clattering on to the carpet and Superintendent Wragge was unarmed. The tension was over. There was a fresh outburst of laughter. Every one took another cocktail,—and this time with Wragge.

"Success to the prevention of crime," they toasted, knowing that they had escaped death by inches.

"I am with you, gentlemen," Wragge declared, accepting his second glass. "An excellent toast! To the prevention of crime! I think that if I had been of a more bloodthirsty temperament in the few seconds at my disposal, I would have done something towards it just now."

"Etiquette, my dear fellow!" Meredith murmured. "One must follow the rules."

They all drank. They were inclined to like Wragge, but they closed in upon him, and he knew that death was not far off. Then there came an unexpected, an almost ludicrous interruption. The butler threw wide open the connecting doors, showing beyond the vista of a round dinner table, flower adorned, with servants standing behind the chairs.

"Dinner is served, sir," he announced.

There was a queer hesitation while they all glanced towards their guest. He set down his empty cocktail glass.

"Excellent!" he acclaimed. "I am hungry and Thornton assured me that you had a first-rate chef."

There was admiration in their eyes as they looked at him—cold eyes, avaricious eyes, lascivious eyes, murderous eyes. All the world, though, loves a brave man.

"Lead on, Meredith," Bolton called out. "We are a quarter of an hour late already."

"And it's up to us," Cheyne put in, "to see that our guest dines well."

Superintendent Detective Wragge did dine exceedingly well. He ate caviare and, looking over his shoulder to be sure that it was being offered, waited for the vodka. He was even a little peevish at the late arrival of the lemon. His turtle soup he tasted first before he permitted the wineglassful of Amontillado. Of the turbot he thoroughly approved, but asked twice for sauce—he had missed the lobster at first. Conversation swung round to the doings of the Stock Exchange, with which institution it seemed they were all in some way connected, and Wragge himself contributed one or two pertinent observations. Once, even, he ventured to ask for advice upon a certain matter of taking up a new issue—a gesture which brought a smile to the lips of every one of them. They all appreciated his *sang-froid*, for they themselves were brave men, but they had looked forward to this occasion for a long time and planned it most carefully, and they never for one moment intended him to study the quotations in the next morning's papers. With dessert, came port in heavy cut-glass decanters, and a single bottle of Château Yquem. It was then that silence fell upon the little company and Meredith leaned forward.

"Wragge," he said, "I suppose you realise the position?"

"I imagine," the Superintendent replied, "that as you have allowed me to see you all face to face, you mean to kill me."

Meredith nodded.

"As a man of common sense," he pointed out, "you must see that we have no other alternative. For years, you have been the only man in Scotland Yard whom we have feared, and latterly you have shown signs of vision which, to be frank, have alarmed us. We are engaged in a species of warfare, but we can't take prisoners. We have come unmasked to meet you to-night. To our guest that means death."

"I understand the position perfectly," Wragge admitted. "If I lived, there isn't one of you I shouldn't be after in the morning, working backwards from this, I must confess, unsuspected rendezvous."

"Precisely," Meredith murmured. "Now, to prove that we are in earnest, let me run through a few names. Inspector Lowden. Now, you recollect Lowden?"

"Died from a stroke in Hyde Park Square," Wragge reflected.

"He dined with us," Meredith confided. "Detective Simpson."

"He was found dead in the Metropolitan Hotel—no evidence," Wragge observed.

"Precisely. He dined with us. Inspector Holmes."

"Found dead in Kensington Gardens, no signs of violence," Wragge remembered.

"Exactly. He too dined with us. There have been others. There will be you."

"You are not helping me towards the enjoyment of my dinner," Superintendent Wragge grumbled.

"The time for that sort of pleasantries has passed," Meredith pronounced, with a note of almost tragic irritability in his tone. "My butler is now serving the port. With it, he offers a bottle of Château Yquem, 1870—a really priceless wine. No one else, Mr. Wragge, will take the Château Yquem. It will save time and trouble if you do."

The Superintendent made a grimace.

"Why not study my tastes," he complained. "I hate sweet wine, and I love port. From the colour, I am sure that is vintage wine. Jubilee, perhaps, or even better—'90."

They looked at him steadfastly—that little vicious circle, each one prepared with a readier means of death. Then, into the silence, there broke a strange voice—the voice of the one other man who had the *entrée*. They all stared at him in amazement. He passed through the folding doors, which were immediately closed behind him. Meredith stood up. The two faced one another—the newcomer in the purple mask, and—Meredith.

"Sorry I'm late," the former observed. "Don't bother about dinner. I've already dined. Why are you having a meeting to which I haven't been invited?"

Meredith regarded him with cold disapproval.

"This isn't your show," he declared. "You're not with us when it comes to this sort of thing and we don't want you around."

"What kind of a show is it then?" the other insisted. "And what does it mean?"

"Take the truth, if you will have it, and be done with it," Meredith replied. "We've got Wragge here and we're going to kill him. Damned well time, too! He'd have had us by next week."

"You're going to kill him, are you?" the man in the purple mask repeated blandly. "Well, I'm here to see that you don't."

"What the hell have you to do with it?" Meredith expostulated. "You're not in the inner circle. You've no right here. Since you are here, though, look around. Can't you see—it's an unmasked dinner. What's to happen to us if Wragge lives?"

"A problem, I admit," the latest arrival acknowledged, subsiding on to the arm of an easy-chair. "Let us devote a few minutes to thinking it out. Have you any suggestions to make, Superintendent?"

"Can't think of any, except that I damned well won't drink that sweet wine," Wragge rejoined. "I'd sooner die some other

way. I came here to take Meredith. I never expected to run into the whole gang, or I should have had the G.F.S. around the corner. I might have suspected Thornton, though," he concluded, after a moment's pause. "I knew that he was in a devilish tight corner for money."

"One has to take a risk sometimes, in your profession as well as in ours," Meredith remarked soothingly. "This time you happen to have lost. It might have been worse. I do wish you'd drink a glass of that wine, Wragge. It would save us so much trouble, and I hate an absolutely fruitless discussion."

"Don't touch the stuff, Wragge," the man in the purple mask advised. "You'd be dead in two minutes and carted off to Kensington Gardens or somewhere in five."

Meredith scowled—a lean, melancholy-looking man, he was, with a scar on one side of his cheek and deep lines in his face. He addressed the man in the purple mask.

"Look here," he said, "we don't want to quarrel with you. You don't belong here any longer and you've no right to interfere in anything we choose to do. If Wragge doesn't drink a glass of that wine, in thirty seconds he's going out another way."

"Better hear my proposition first," the other suggested. "You came here, Superintendent, after Meredith. You didn't expect to meet these other gentlemen."

"I certainly did not," Wragge admitted. "I have a fair amount of self-confidence, but I should scarcely have ventured to tackle five such illustrious gunmen single-handed."

"Very well then," his questioner continued, "what about Violet Joe?"

"I want him too."

"Well, here's a sporting offer for you. These men mean business and you cannot possibly handle the crowd. I am Violet Joe. Will you blot this little party out of your mind and forget every one else you have seen in this room, if I give myself up?"

There was a moment's stupefied silence; then, from around the table, a chorus of disapproval. Meredith shook his head.

"You're mad, Joe," he admonished. "How the devil could he make such a promise, or, if he made it, keep it?... Tie him up," he ordered curtly. "That's right," he added, as Cheyne and Bolton flung themselves upon the Superintendent from behind. "He's going out. Fill a glass of the wine, Hartigan. If he won't drink, I'll shoot him my—what the hell's this?"

"This," was Miss Mott, very savage and very determined, after all she had overheard through the chink between the folding doors. She stood in the open space between the two doors which he had just thrown back and she proceeded forthwith to action. She seldom read detective stories and was completely ignorant of the etiquette of a hold-up. She issued no invitation nor gave any warning to her prospective victims. She simply stood where she was and plugged the small bullets from her miniature revolver into every one. Cheyne, who was engaged in tying up Wragge's wrists, dropped the cord with a yell of pain. Bolton rolled over, with a bullet in his shoulder blade. Hartigan, on the further side of the table, collapsed momentarily, with a shriek of pain. Meredith she missed, and, as she saw him leap towards her, she kept her last two bullets to save her own life. She felt a grip upon her shoulder. Some one—the man in the purple mask, who had announced himself as Violet Joe—swung her behind the sheltering door, just as a bullet whistled between them. Then—a new pandemonium seemed to break out. From down below came the beating of a gong, electric bells were ringing throughout the house. Every one who could stand on his feet seemed to be rushing towards a distant corner of the dining room, while, to complete the confusion, all the lights in the place went out. There was the roar of an automatic fired at close quarters, a shout of anger, and the slamming of a trapdoor. Miss Mott, left to herself, was very much afraid, until from the middle of that pool of darkness she heard her uncle's voice.

"Are you all right, Lucie?"

"Quite," she answered. "Are you?"

"That devil Meredith missed me from half a dozen yards," he grunted. "Try to find a switch. I've got one of the fellows you shot to look after. The G.F.S. are breaking in."

Miss Mott found the switch, and when the police made sudden and violent appearance, streaming in from every door, they discovered Cheyne, who was badly wounded, handcuffed upon the floor, Miss Mott staunching with a white napkin the blood from a gash upon her uncle's forehead, a bolted trapdoor underneath the dining table and not another soul.

"Do you know which way they have gone?" Superintendent Wragge snapped.

"I think so, sir," the Inspector, who had brought in the men, replied. "There's a passage comes out of the area next door. We've got it surrounded, anyway. I'll take another gun and be off," he added, snatching one up from the table.

Superintendent Wragge rose unsteadily to his feet and poured himself out a glass of champagne. To the Inspector's amazement, his superior was shaking with suppressed laughter.

"What's the joke, sir?" he asked in astonishment.

Her uncle held out Miss Mott's weapon. In his huge hand it looked like a child's first popgun.

"She's broken up the toughest gang in London with this," he guffawed.

The Inspector grinned, as he hurried out.... Superintendent Wragge, although he stood on guard with a real gun in his hand, was still shaking with uncontrollable laughter. Miss Mott's terrified eyes were searching everywhere for Violet Joe.

But Violet Joe, by that time, was a long way off.

III

NOAH'S ARK

Miss Mott of *Home Talks* and "Mott's Enquiry Agency" finished going through her letters with a little sigh of relief and rang the bell to indicate that she was ready to receive a waiting visitor. A few minutes later a young woman was ushered in who seemed entirely typical of the class whose domestic and love affairs Miss Mott so often supervised.

"This is Miss Moore?" Miss Mott asked, glancing at the card on the table by her side.

"That is my name," the visitor admitted. "Miss Helen Moore."

Miss Mott looked her over calmly. The young woman was pretty in her way, neatly dressed, with a pull-over hat, underneath the brim of which one caught a glimpse of dark, very expressive eyes. She was obviously nervous.

"Tell me all about it," Miss Mott begged, "in as few words as you can. And tell me, too, why you didn't consult me by letter—which I very much prefer."

"I expect I was silly," the girl replied. "I am always nervous where Henry's concerned, thinking I might get him into trouble. Henry's my young man, you see. We are sort of engaged to be married."

"What do you mean by 'sort of'?"

"I mean that we were properly engaged," the young woman explained, "until I found out things about the way he earned his living. Then I called it off. Now he's getting troublesome again, though, and I don't know what to do."

"Are you fond of him?" Miss Mott asked.

The girl considered the matter.

"I'm fonder of him than I am of any of the others around," she acknowledged. "A girl must have a chap to go about with. I'd like to get married too."

"What is there wrong about the way he earns his living?"

"He's a hairdresser by trade," the girl confided.

"Well, what is there wrong with that?" Miss Mott queried.

"Nothing, of course," the girl replied, "but I found out not long ago that he's got what he calls a side line. He was always clever at making people up for the stage—wigs and suchlike—and he's a perfect marvel at disguising people. It's that what's got him into trouble."

"Go on," Miss Mott invited. "Tell me all about it."

"He's been working lately for a gang of criminals," the girl confessed. "He can change any man's appearance in a quarter of an hour so that you'd never know him. He's making good money at it, but they take him out with them sometimes, and I'm afraid."

Miss Mott looked properly shocked.

"I should think so, indeed," she declared. "You mustn't have another thing to do with him."

The girl's lips quivered.

"But I'm fond of him. He swears that if I'll marry him, he'll give it up and get a regular job out in the country somewhere, so as to be away from them all."

"Do you believe him?"

"I do—honest," the girl said earnestly. "What I wondered is, whether you'd have just five minutes talk with him one day

—let him come and see you. You'd be able to make up your mind, then, what you think of him and I'll do what you say."

"Very well," Miss Mott sighed. "When does he leave work?"

"Six o'clock," the young woman replied. "He's in a hairdressing establishment in Hammersmith just now."

"He can come at half-past six to-morrow night," Miss Mott assented. "I'll tell you what I think and give you my advice in next week's paper. I prefer that to having you visit me here. Tell me your name again."

"Helen Moore."

"There will be a reply to you in my column. I will make use of your initials—H.M."

The young woman rose to her feet.

"I'm very much obliged to you, miss, I'm sure," she said. "You won't mind having Henry here a bit. I can promise you that. He's quite the gentleman always, and when he's dressed up for the evening, you wouldn't know him from any of these West End swells."

"It won't matter to me how he looks," Miss Mott assured her, a little impatiently. "I shall make up my mind about him from the way he answers my questions."

Henry Leneveu was certainly a young man of a most displeasing type, Miss Mott decided, as he was shown into her room on the following evening. She disliked the shape of his head, the smallness of his eyes, his smoothly brushed hair and his generally sleek appearance. He had good looks of a certain sort and he was neatly enough dressed. Miss Mott, however, distrusted him at first sight and Miss Mott was becoming quite a physiognomist. She motioned him to a chair and went point-blank to the matter.

"You want to marry Helen Moore, I understand," she said.

"That's what I mean to do," he acknowledged, a shade of truculence in his tone. "She's got it into her head that because I've been off the track once or twice, I sha'n't make her a good husband. That's all old-fashioned stuff, of course, and not worth thinking about nowadays. To please her, though, I've promised to run straight in the future. I've saved a little money, I'm ready to settle down, and what I say is—the sooner we're married the better."

"From your point of view, I daresay," Miss Mott agreed coldly. "The question is, are you absolutely serious when you say that you've made up your mind to run straight?"

"I've said so, haven't I?" was the impudent rejoinder. "I have an outside line which pays far better than any ordinary work, but it's a bit risky, perhaps. And, anyway, I've promised to give it up."

"Have you ever been in trouble?" Miss Mott asked.

"I was in prison for three weeks the month before last," he admitted, with obvious reluctance.

"On a serious charge?"

"A charge of 'loitering with felonious intent'," Henry Leneveu confided bitterly. "I was only strolling about, as any fellow might. They framed that on me while they tried to get evidence of something else. They couldn't do it. That's the only time I've been in prison."

She looked him straight in the eyes.

"They had something else against you, I suppose?"

"In a way they had," he confessed. "In the course of my profession, I've waited on a good many of the criminal classes, and there was a great deal of information they would have been glad to have from me. They didn't get it—and that's the end of the matter."

"And you've honestly and truthfully made up your mind to go straight if the girl marries you?"

"Of course I have," was the irritable reply.

"Has the young woman any money?" Miss Mott enquired, after a moment's reflection.

"Yes, she's got a bit," Leneveu acknowledged grudgingly. "And a small house left her by her aunt."

"I see," Miss Mott murmured. "Well, I don't think I need keep you any longer, Mr. Leneveu. I shall think it over and you can tell Miss Moore that she will receive my advice in next week's issue of the paper."

"What's that advice going to be?" he asked, picking up his hat.

Miss Mott glanced at him out of those eyes which could be so beautiful, but which, at that moment, were cold and almost steely.

"That is my affair," she replied coolly.

The young man took ungracious leave, and Miss Mott, after a brief conversation upon the telephone, proceeded to Scotland Yard and received some terse but significant information from an inspector to whom her uncle introduced her....

In next week's *Home Talks*, amongst the answers to correspondents, was one which was very much to the point:

To H.M.

Have nothing whatever to do with the young man on any account.

That brief sentence made for Miss Mott a very cunning and unscrupulous enemy.

Boss Meredith suddenly paused in his task and laid upon the table the gun which he had been cleaning. From some unseen place in the large, stone-flagged kitchen of the old-fashioned Essex farmhouse, an electric bell was tinkling. He leaned towards the window, listening, a glint of feverish anxiety in his sunken eyes. His appearance had entirely changed during the last few weeks. He had grown a short, straggling beard, and, in his thick shooting boots and gaiters, flannel shirt and leather coat, he represented well enough the typical keen sportsman back from an hour's tramp after flighting duck. There was nothing whatever left of the dandy in his unkempt appearance, and it is doubtful whether even Superintendent Detective Wragge, if he had seen him at that moment, would have recognised him as the debonair host of that murderous dinner party in Belgrave Square.

The electric bell continued to ring. There were footsteps from all parts of the house; Bolton and Hartigan—similarly attired in the garments of sport—came stealthily in. They were equally unrecognisable, and as they grouped themselves around the long oak table, they all three exchanged glances of silent apprehension. Hartigan had already pulled out his automatic, Bolton followed suit. Meredith, in greater danger than either of them, had already laid his on the table in front of him. Gordon, the pompous butler, reduced by some miracle to half his former size, made swift and noiseless entrance.

"There's a motorcyclist coming down the dyke path," he announced. "The lights are all out. Shall I put the bar on the door?"

Meredith reflected.

"He must have seen from the lane that we were lit up," he muttered. "Better find out what he wants, Gordon. No nonsense, mind. We can't have inquisitive people around here, at any price. If you have the slightest suspicion—"

Gordon grinned.

"That's all right, sir," he interrupted. "There are several patches in the near marsh would suck in the whole of Scotland Yard."

There was a ring at the bell—a hoarse, clattering summons of the old-fashioned type. Meredith stooped down, picked up a couple of mallards which he had brought in a few minutes before and threw them upon the table, concealing under the feathers of the nearest one a very deadly-looking automatic. Then he recommenced his task of cleaning his gun...

Gordon was gone longer than they expected. There was nothing of alarm in his face, however, when he returned.

"It's Henry Leneveu, our hairdresser," he announced. "The only man who could make up your scar properly," he added, addressing Meredith. "He was copped in the Hazel Street show, but they could only get him for felonious loitering. We haven't seen anything of him since, but he kept his mouth shut, all right."

Meredith frowned.

"Does he know we're here?" he asked.

"He appears to," the man replied. "He wants to see you."

"Bring him in," Meredith enjoined briefly.

Henry Leneveu, in the somewhat forbidding costume of a serious motorcyclist, made due appearance. He was carrying his goggles in his hand but his face was still half masked. He was splattered from head to foot with mud, for there was no more desolate corner in Essex than this, and the lanes to Ilsom Grange, as the place was called, were nothing but frequently flooded cart tracks. Meredith eyed him coldly.

"What do you want here, Leneveu?" he asked. "You ought to know that we're not inviting visitors."

The young man smiled deprecatingly.

"I know that, sir," he admitted. "I shouldn't have come if I'd dared write, but I wasn't sure whether the 'busies' hadn't tampered with the post office here. Thought I'd better run down. I've a couple of boxes of cartridges tied on behind there, and if I had met any one I should have said that I was from the gun-makers'—that you had telephoned for some extra special Number Fours."

Meredith nodded. At least his visitor showed intelligence.

"All right," he said. "You're here. Now, what about it?"

"Could you give me a drop of something?" the young man begged. "It's been a cruel ride."

Gordon, who had remained in the room, at a gesture from his master, produced whisky and soda. Leneveu drank thirstily.

"It's that young woman, sir," he confided—"the one who plugged the baby shot into Cheyne and Mr. Hartigan here."

"What about her?" Meredith asked swiftly.

"I saw her last week with Wragge," the young man went on. "You may say it's not my business now, as you're not working, but I'm hoping the time will come when you're back again and finding us lads useful. I've learnt a few new tricks with the pencil, mind, and remember we're always ready for a scrap or a job of any sort—especially now."

Meredith nodded.

"We'll see," he promised. "Go on."

"She's a vicious young dame, that," Leneveu continued, with an ugly twist of the lips. "And it's my belief that bureau of hers is nothing but a fake. She's there to pass on what she can pick up to the Yard. She was working with Wragge all right, that night. Anyway, I sent a question to her column in the paper and got permission to call and see her. We talked a lot of tommyrot about a young woman I was supposed to be engaged to, but I noticed a few things."

"Well?"

"She was studying an A.B.C. when I got there. She laid it face downwards upon the desk when I came in, but I saw the page. I bought an A.B.C. when I left her. Page fifty-seven it was. On page fifty-seven there are the trains to Driseworth. That's the station for here, ain't it?"

Meredith frowned. A curse broke from Hartigan's lips.

"Yes, that's the station for here," the former admitted thoughtfully. "No one in their senses would think of coming by train, though. The roads are almost impossible now, but between here and the station there are four miles under water when the tide's up."

"Well, anyway," Leneveu reiterated, "she was looking up Driseworth in the A.B.C., and I wondered why."

"How did you know where we were?" Meredith asked curiously.

"I'm captain of Number Two gang," was the somewhat bumptious reply. "We arranged the transport down here."

"That's right," Hartigan put in. "Number Two are a good lot of boys. They've done their work well, up till now."

"Go on then, Leneveu," Meredith enjoined.

"There isn't much else," the young man admitted, "but while I was there the telephone rang, and she spoke. I'm pretty well sure it was to her uncle at Scotland Yard. She wanted to see him to-day, but he had to go to Southampton. They made a rendezvous for to-morrow night. I was wondering whether, if the young lady was interested in Driseworth, something hadn't better be done to stop that meeting."

Meredith looked gloomily out of the casement window. Filled though his brain was with sinister thoughts, the memory of that piquant little face was also there, mocking him.

"When will the *Lavinia* be down the river, Bolton?" he enquired.

"Not until Saturday at four o'clock," was the regretful reply. "Johnson couldn't get her there before, however hard he tried. He's got to change her colour, or the whole wharf will be talking."

Meredith nodded.

"You've still got something on your mind, Leneveu?" he asked, turning to his visitor.

"The young woman's office," the latter confided slowly, "is in a damned silly place for any one who meddles with things she ought to leave alone. She's only got a young girl and an errand boy working for her there, and they always leave before her. The hall porter's O.K., and there's only the lift boy besides."

"Well?"

Henry Leneveu swung his goggles backwards and forwards.

"There's only one safe way," he remarked, "but I'm not out for that sort of thing."

"Chickens, you lads are becoming, nowadays," Meredith sneered.

The young man shook his head.

"I'll back my lot in a scrap against any one," he boasted. "We don't care what we take on. I'm not pretending we're squeamish, either, but there's not one of us is going to risk that three minutes with the chaplain and the eight o'clock bell. I wouldn't mind taking my chance of going out to the sting of a bullet, but I wouldn't face the other thing."

"So far as the young lady in question is concerned," Meredith observed, "I'd see that you didn't. She is much too attractive to be hurried out of the world like that. You have still something you want to say, haven't you? Let's hear it."

Henry Leneveu had evidently thought the affair out.

"She is to meet her uncle to-morrow night at the Trocadero at eight o'clock," he confided. "She's staying on at the office and going direct from there. It's no good half doing the job, because she'd squeal from hospital. What I'll undertake to do—it will cost me money, mind, but I'll do it—is to deliver the young woman here to-morrow night, between ten and eleven. You can make your own plans afterwards."

Meredith reflected for a moment.

"What do you fellows say?" he asked, addressing his companions.

"How the devil," Hartigan demanded, "did she get to know anything about Driseworth?"

"Speculations of that sort won't help us," Meredith reminded him.

"Is there any one else in your gang who is not quite so squeamish as you?" Bolton asked their visitor.

Leneveu shook his head.

"No one I'd trust. They're young yet, and even if they did the job, I wouldn't trust them afterwards."

"There could be no better place in the world, if we're driven to extremes, than this," Meredith meditated. "Even the farm labourers disappear."

"It's a murderous piece of country," Bolton shivered. "There's scarcely a farmer around here hasn't had some one sucked down into the earth."

"What will it cost you, this little enterprise?" Meredith enquired.

"It should be worth five hundred quid," Leneveu replied promptly. "For that I'll undertake to deliver the young woman here to-morrow night."

Meredith nodded.

"You'd better have another drink and get back again then," he enjoined.

At half-past seven on the following evening, Miss Mott tidied her desk, locked up her valuables, made some slight changes in her toilette, and descended to the lift. It came rattling up in answer to her summons, and a strange young man, though wearing the uniform of the hall porter, threw open the gate for her to enter.

"Where's Dick?" she enquired, as he slammed the door behind her.

"Dick's gone out on an errand," he announced. "The hall porter's got the evening off and I'm taking his place."

There seemed something vaguely and unpleasantly familiar about the young man, but Miss Mott thought no more about it until the lift came to an unexpected standstill between the fourth and fifth floors. The last thing of which she was conscious was a grip upon her shoulder and a handkerchief placed over her mouth.

"That'll teach you to come between a young man and his girl," she heard a savage voice mutter. "No good struggling, my dear. You're 'for it' this time."

Miss Mott certainly was "for it." The next thing she remembered was opening her eyes and finding herself being driven in a somewhat shabby automobile along a very rough country lane. They were passing an inn with a swinging sign, but there was no other habitation in sight.

"Where am I?" she gasped.

"You go back where you belong, young woman," was the unfriendly reply, and up went the handkerchief again...

Miss Mott's second awakening was perhaps equally alarming, but not so unpleasant. She was lying upon a huge, mahogany four-poster bed, with chintz hangings and curtains. There was a fire burning in the grate, several comfortable articles of furniture in the room, and an elderly woman seated in an easy-chair by the fire, knitting. Miss Mott blinked once or twice rapidly; then she opened her mouth cautiously and closed it again. No gag! She stretched out her arms very gingerly at first and swung them from the elbows—free! She moved her legs and discovered that they were unbound. Then she slid gently off the bed. The old woman turned her head unconcernedly and went on with her knitting.

"Where am I?" Miss Mott demanded.

"Look out of the window and see," was the curt reply.

Miss Mott crossed the floor in her stockinged feet, for her shoes, she found, had been removed. She opened the casement window, looked out—and gasped. So far as she could see, on each side and in front of her, was water, softly swaying, waveless water. It was lapping against the lower windows and what appeared to be the front door of the house. It seemed illimitable. A steely, menacing plain, beneath which gardens, and fields, and even villages might lie buried. Half-immersed trees and barns studded the wilderness. Carcasses of animals were floating about. A confusion of birds twittered and called between the misty clouds and the grey water. In the far distance, Miss Mott could trace the masts of moving ships. Nearer was one tiny speck, which might have been a boat. Otherwise, here was desolation—supreme—complete.

"What a flood!" she gasped.

"Us as lives in these parts are used to such," the hard-faced woman with the steel-rimmed spectacles said. "I've known worse. I've seen people clinging on to the roof of this very house: maybe we'll be there ourselves before nightfall, when the tide fulls."

Miss Mott watched the speck that she had first noticed, approaching. It might well be a boat.

"To whom does this house belong and why have I been brought here?" she demanded.

The woman glanced at her without change of expression.

"What a fool you must be to think that I am here to answer questions," she rejoined contemptuously.

Miss Mott moved towards the door and opened it. She peered down into the silent hall.

"Go round the house, if you want to," the woman invited. "You'll see that it isn't man that's made a prisoner of you. It's the Lord God—if there is such a person. And don't you open a door unless you're looking for sudden death. If the water once gets in, we'll drown like rats."

She resumed her knitting, and Miss Mott, taking advantage of her liberty, descended the stairs gingerly, taking full note of her very gruesome surroundings. The house seemed to be a sort of small manor, with panelled oak walls in poor condition, rafted ceilings, and stone floors. The door of a large lounge sitting room was wide open. She peered in nervously. The whole of one side was occupied by a long gun rack in which were ranged weapons of every description. There were piles of cartridge boxes upon the floor, a quantity of ancient and mouldering furniture, book-shelves, the calf-bound volumes of which were reeking with damp. First and foremost, however, in her mind, deadening all her other apprehensions, was the amazing fact that water—already more than a foot deep—covered the floor of the hall and of the room into which she looked, lapped over the bottom stairs and was even oozing in bulbous drops through the thick walls. She stood and shivered. There was something absolutely terrifying in the slow but inevitable absorption of everything by the one overwhelming element. A panic seized her and she called out.

"Is any one here?"

To her surprise a civilised voice at once answered her.

"Coming, madam."

There was the sound of paddling footsteps flopping through the water. A green baize-covered door leading to the back regions was pushed open and a strange figure presented himself, a figure of a large man attired in the correct morning costume of a butler to his hips, but with his lower limbs encased in an enormous pair of waders. His little bow seemed to Miss Mott ludicrous.

"Will you have breakfast, madam, or will you wait for the master?" he enquired.

"Wait for whom?" Miss Mott demanded.

"The master."

"Who is your master?"

The man coughed apologetically.

"We don't care about mentioning names to any great extent, madam," he replied. "Shall I say your husband? The gentleman to whom you were married last evening on your way down here."

Miss Mott's beautiful eyes grew larger and rounder with amazement.

"What are you talking about?" she exclaimed. "I have never been married to any one."

The faint gleam of a wintry smile disturbed the placidity of the man's expression. Almost in that instant Miss Mott recognized him and clutched at the banisters with a little moan.

"The master's instructions were that he was bringing his wife home last night. Soon after your arrival, he was obliged to leave with the other gentlemen on urgent business, but we expect him back at any moment now."

Miss Mott wasted no breath. The situation, horrible though it was, was becoming clear to her.

"I should like some coffee upstairs," she told the man, and, turning around, retraced her steps....

Viewed from her bedroom window, the speck was no longer a speck. It was clearly in sight now—a punt, with a grey-headed seaman handling the pole, and an unrecognisable person in oilskins and sou'wester smoking in the stern. She leaned forward eagerly—she hoped—she feared—she was terrified—she was tremulously excited. She saw the punt ride over what must have been the flower garden. She watched a man who climbed a rope ladder which had been thrown down from one of the windows. Then she fainted.

It was late in the afternoon before she was fully recovered, to find herself stretched in an easy-chair before a blazing fire in an unfamiliar room. She looked wildly around. The curtains were drawn and the lamps lit. There was a trickle of water under the door, a few blobs of moisture on the outside wall, but the carpet itself was dry. There was tea and toast by her side. She found herself ravenous and began to eat. Then she caught sight of a long, lean figure lounging in the chair opposite and her heart almost stopped beating. Nevertheless, she preserved her self-control.

"Why have I been brought here?" she asked.

The man was obviously a good actor. The slight elevation of his eyebrows was inimitable.

"My dear young lady," he remonstrated, "there was never any question of our going anywhere else after the ceremony. Of course, I'm sorry about the conditions—"

"What conditions?" she interrupted bluntly.

He waved the question away. She leaned towards him.

"What ceremony?" she demanded uncompromisingly.

"Our marriage," he explained, with reproachful emphasis. "One realises, of course, that you were in a hysterical state, but such an important event should not have escaped your memory altogether."

"Our marriage!" she scoffed. "And pray, when and where did this take place?"

"Westminster Registry Office, after hours, by Special Licence," he replied. "Cost me a great deal of money, but I do not grudge it," he added, with a gleam in his eyes and a little bow. "Ever since one night in Belgrave Square, no other woman has meant anything to me. Superb, you looked, potting away at us all with that little pistol. By-the-bye, I hope you haven't got it with you now?"

"If I had," Miss Mott rejoined, "I should certainly use it."

The man rose to his feet. Fully revealed in the circle of lamplight, his long, narrow face seemed more sinister than ever.

"I have to present you my apologies," he said, with an undertone of mockery in his tone, "for my regrettable absence last night. I was compelled to see some friends off on a long voyage. Nothing but stern necessity would have kept me from your side. To-night, however—"

He came a step nearer. Miss Mott held out her hand. An awful sense of helplessness swept over her. That waste of waters outside—a gruesome, impassable barrier! The old woman knitting! The butler with his fat, wicked face! The life adventurous was failing, at that moment, to appeal to Miss Mott.

"Please don't talk nonsense any longer," she begged. "It—frightens me."

His eyebrows went up.

"Nonsense?" he queried. "Do you doubt that we are man and wife?"

"Of course I do," she scoffed. "It isn't possible. No one can be married without knowing anything about it."

He produced from his pocket an oblong strip of paper and held it out to her. It was the usual printed form, carefully filled in and purporting to be a record of a marriage between Malcolm St. John Meredith—bachelor—forty-four years old, and Lucie Mott of Branksome Mansions, aged twenty-two. She pushed it away.

"You know that it is a forgery," she cried.

He shook his head.

"It's genuine enough," he assured her smoothly. "There was a little trouble with the registrar, owing to your condition, but he happened, fortunately, to be a friend of mine. So were the witnesses.... Poor place for a honeymoon, I'm afraid," he added, looking around him deprecatingly. "A short one too, alas. I can only spare four days. Can you learn to love me in four days, do you think, Lucie?"

"You beast!" she sobbed.

"My dear!" he expostulated, the menace in his eyes reflected in his tone. "How unreasonable you are! You break up a famous gang of lawbreakers, you take away our very prosperous occupation and send us flying to all parts of the world, you separate two loving hearts—my Figaro and the girl to whom he was engaged—and see how I treat you! I could have had your company here for four days, my sweet little spitfire, without going through this tiresome ceremony. I respected your possible scruples. I gave you my name—in the first place that you might not be able to give evidence against me, and secondly, that you might give me in return—"

Miss Mott struck out at him fiercely, but he only laughed. He held both her wrists with one hand, while the other encircled her waist. He drew her to him, regardless of her desperate struggles; his face was bent over hers, and the scar on his cheek was like a line of fire. His lips touched her eyelids, then moved downwards, notwithstanding her frantic screams.... He raised his head for a moment to listen to the gurgling splosh of waders in the back hall. The butler made his appearance at the door. Miss Mott, from her imprisonment, turned eagerly towards him.

"Let me go!" she cried. "Take me away from this place. You shall have everything I possess in the world."

The man changed not a muscle of his face. Meredith patted her head soothingly.

"A little overwrought," he murmured.

"Just so, sir," the man acquiesced. "I came to enquire about dinner."

"In here at eight o'clock," Meredith directed. "The 1911 champagne. Two bottles."

The butler departed, closing the door firmly behind him. Miss Mott, who was saving her strength, lay almost passively in her captor's arms. He was not deceived, however.

"So you will need taming, my little love bird?" he mocked. "That will amuse me. Too good sport to hurry over. I'll get out of these clothes. After dinner, I'll read to you from the prayer-book."

He laughed and laid her lightly in an easy-chair. As he straightened himself, he suddenly stiffened. He turned his head

towards the window and remained transfixed in an attitude of listening. Very cautiously, tea, Miss Mott also raised herself in her chair. A faint streak of colour stole into her cheeks, a shiver stirred her heart as she, too, listened. Sound of any sort was hope, and against the dull background of that monotonous swell and gurgle of water came the thud of the beating of an engine from some distant place—its dull roar echoing through the great void....

"A lost soul," Meredith jeered, "or perhaps one of these new motor steamers, trying to get up the river before nightfall."

He rang the bell.

"Gordon," he told the butler, "put out every light in the house at once."

There was a swift, questioning glance. Meredith nodded reassurance.

"It might be a plane overhead," he confided. "It isn't likely they're looking for the Manor, but anyhow, we can't entertain any more guests."

Miss Mott had drawn aside the curtain and was gazing out into the gathering twilight, when Meredith returned from a whispered conference with Gordon. He hurried to her side and together they watched the dimly visible plane riding through the mists. Meredith studied it long and silently. Then he went to a gun rack built into a recess by the fireplace, took the automatic which it held, charged it and slipped it into his pocket. He was not taking quite so much notice of Miss Mott.

"The plane is coming down," he muttered. "Some madman who has lost his way, I should imagine."

He threw open the window and leaned out. Without a doubt, the plane was circling around and was already much lower.

"Can it land here?" she asked eagerly.

He nodded.

"Can't you see that it's a seaplane?" he pointed out. "It might get down safely if the light holds, but—" he added, turning towards her, with a smile of derision, "do not be deceived, my fair visitor. Whoever this may be—it is for us his visit is intended and not for you. Your clever uncle would never dream of so romantic a way of seeking for you."

"I don't care who it is," she declared, "so long as it's some one who's going to stay—so long as I'm not here alone with you."

He passed his arm around her waist and drew her shrinking form towards him.

"You'll soon get used to that," he assured her.

She wrenched herself away as he turned once more to the window. The plane was skimming the surface of the water now, slackening speed with every yard, and the figure of a man was clearly visible—one hand upon the stick, the other holding a small anchor.

"She's down," Meredith muttered. "A damned clever piece of work, anyhow."

The plane was riding at last upon the strange heap of waters. It narrowly escaped the top of a sunken tree, swerved and shivered as it was nearly enmeshed by the unseen branches, then the anchor caught and she came to rest.

"Damn fine landing," Meredith repeated approvingly. "I was right, I see. Our visitor is a friend of the house."

"I don't care who he is," Miss Mott reiterated, with a strange throbbing of the heart. "If he's a man at all, he couldn't be brute enough to leave me here alone with you."

A look flashed across Meredith's face which brought back all the fear into her shivering consciousness. He was a dour and menacing figure in this cold and gloomy half-light. Withal, he spoke and had the air of a man in supreme control of the situation, utterly confident of himself and his powers. He watched the slow approach of the man, who had launched a small rubber punt, with mingled curiosity and indifference. As the latter drew nearer, he tapped a cigarette upon the window sill and lit it.

"I shouldn't wonder if that was Violet Joe," he speculated. "Looks like his crouch."

She tried hard to conceal her sense of passionate relief. If only it were! Presently, she began to believe it. There was something familiar in the movements of the tense figure. They watched him, with the aid of his long slim pole, make his way skilfully towards them. He was dressed in a leather flying suit and wore a great vizor over his head, but Miss Mott recognised him and her heart beat with joy. Yet all the time there was terror mingled with her relief. She thought of the automatic in Meredith's pocket and she remembered that Violet Joe went unarmed.

The punt struck at last the edge of the bank in front of the Manor. Meredith, who had stepped from the window, held out his hand, and the visitor scrambled up, dragging the punt after him.

"Any trouble?" Meredith asked quickly.

"None at all," Violet Joe declared, shaking himself. "It was you fellows I was wanting news of. No telephone—no telegraph—no trains. Did you get to the river?"

Meredith nodded gloomily.

"Bolton and Hartigan are both of them safe on the *Lavinia* and well in the Channel by now," he reported. "I lost the draw, of course. I offered the purser another thousand to slip me on board, but he wouldn't. You'll find I've discovered a compensation for another four days in this infernal hole, though," he added, with a glance back into the sitting room.

The two men stepped through the open window, Meredith leading the way, his hand firmly in his jacket pocket. His companion, following, suddenly recognised Miss Mott standing in the middle of the room, her eyes like stars, torn between passionate hope and deadly fear. In the twilight she saw nothing of Violet Joe's face. She heard only his words and they sounded cruelly cold and indifferent.

"Why, it's little Miss Mott!" he exclaimed. "What on earth is she doing here?"

"Mrs. Meredith, if you please," Meredith corrected. "Congratulate me, Joe, and wish the young lady every happiness."

"Rubbish!" the newcomer exclaimed tonelessly.

"Special Licence yesterday evening," Meredith announced. "Returning good for evil, eh? Miss Mott has done more than Scotland Yard ever could. She has broken up my noble army of gangsters and yet I've married her.... She's attractive enough to have married for her own sake," he went on reflectively, "but of course I couldn't help remembering that she's the only person who could swear to my identity, and a wife can't give evidence against her husband."

Violet Joe laughed.

"Clever fellow! Well, it's not my business, anyway. Give me a drink, Walter. Had a hell of a ride for nothing, it seems."

Meredith smiled and remained warily in his place. He pointed to the sideboard. Miss Mott found her voice.

"It is not true that I am married," she cried passionately. "I was chloroformed and brought here by force. If ever I was in a Registry Office, I was unconscious."

Meredith chuckled.

"What does it matter, dear, so long as you are here? Joe, if you really came thinking that Bolton, Hartigan and I were stranded, it was sporting of you, and I am much obliged. If you came for any other reason, you can see that you are not wanted—not wanted, Joe."

Her heart sank as she looked in vain at the man whom she had hoped might be her deliverer. Violet Joe was apparently resigned to his dismissal. He avoided her eyes. Was it possible that he believed Meredith's story? He mixed himself deliberately a whisky and soda at the sideboard. A tumult of words was quivering on Miss Mott's lips, but some instinct kept her silent—an instinct which seemed to come straight from heaven into her brain. Violet Joe was weaponless. He was fencing for time. Even she knew the meaning of Meredith's right hand, toying with something in his jacket pocket. She pointed out of the window and gave a little cry.

"What's that? Listen."

Violet Joe leaped towards the window, by the side of which stood the gun rack just out of sight of the spot where Meredith lounged. He seized the gun, a twelve-bore, and a handful of Number Four cartridges.

"A flight of teal, Meredith," he shouted. "Look sharp."

"I've shot teal till I'm sick of them," Meredith growled, as he sauntered around the corner to look into two long and deadly barrels.

"Perhaps you're right," Violet Joe replied. "I've Number Fours in here, Walter, and they make a hell of a mess of a man. Up with them and bring your right hand out of that pocket empty! Quicker!"

Meredith obeyed without hesitation, but his expression was satanic.

"You came for the girl," he snarled.

"Of course I did," was the cool retort.

"You're one of my men," Meredith reminded him. "You know what you'll get, if you interfere with my concerns."

"I'm one of your gangsters," Violet Joe acknowledged, "but when you forget our creed, I forget that you're my superior officer. Take off your coat and throw it into that corner. I've a steady finger on the trigger, remember, and if your hand goes near your pocket—you'll die in agony. You may get me, but I'll get you first."

Meredith obeyed with a curse. He knew his man better than to attempt to snatch at his gun.

"Get your coat, Miss Mott," Violet Joe enjoined. "If it isn't a thick one, bring a blanket. Come straight out to the punt as soon as you can. First of all, though, take the automatic out of that pocket and throw it into the flood."

"I'm afraid of that man—the butler," she confessed, as she hastened to do his bidding.

"Keep the automatic, then, and shoot any one who attempts to interfere with you," Violet Joe snapped out. "You needn't be afraid of Gordon, however. I saw him sneaking off in the dinghy as I landed."

Ten minutes later Miss Mott, wrapped in an enormous blanket, with the stars and pale moon shining down on her through a lacey mist, with the wilderness of water below and a northwest wind whistling around her, was flying happily to London.

IV

BUTTERCUPS AND DAISIES

Superintendent Detective Wragge bowed formally to Miss Mott upon his entrance into her private office, laid his hat upon the floor and seated himself in the clients' chair.

"Don't be silly, Uncle," the young lady laughed, holding out both her hands. "Come and give me your avuncular salute at once."

He shook his head deliberately.

"This," he warned her, "is a professional visit. I have not come here to consult Miss Mott about any courtship troubles, nor have I an interesting case to lay before her, but it is, nevertheless, a strictly professional visit."

Miss Mott raised her eyebrows.

"Have I done anything wrong?" she asked anxiously.

Her uncle smiled in his own somewhat peculiar fashion. The smile rippled away over the lines of his creased face and seemed to leave him afterwards looking sterner than ever.

"Not consciously, my dear," he assured her,— "not consciously, of course. I can't think why the devil these people won't leave you alone."

A light flashed into her very beautiful eyes. Miss Mott was quite interested in "these people."

"Do explain," she begged.

Superintendent Wragge, with an apologetic glance at his niece, produced a packet of Gold Flakes and lit a cigarette. He drew his chair a little nearer to the table.

"I think I remember telling you the last time we dined together," he began, "of a very interesting secret pamphlet circulating in the Yard, dealing with the manner in which watched and suspected criminals, when they are hard pressed, communicate with one another. The Agony Column of the *Times* for many years was freely used."

"I have often wondered," Miss Mott murmured, "whether those amazing messages one reads ever mean anything."

"They probably mean something," her uncle observed drily, "but the sense lies underneath the words. Our code experts have often intercepted messages of great importance concealed in the most harmless sentences. No one suspects the owners of the newspapers of complicity. You understand that, of course? It would be absolutely impossible for any editor to discriminate between the real thing and the faked."

"Naturally," she agreed.

Superintendent Wragge dived into his pocket, produced two copies of *Home Talks* and spread one of them out in front of him. A little cry of delight escaped his niece's lips.

"Don't tell me that they've been making use of my paper!" she exclaimed.

"That's just what they have been doing. Here is apparently a perfectly harmless nom-de-plume and your reply to the question, whatever it was. Let me read it to you.

JENKS IN LONDON. I think the young lady of whom you write must be very unreasonable. I should tell her plainly that you do not think it fair of her to keep you in such suspense and would insist upon a definite decision."

"Whatever can there be in that?" Miss Mott asked curiously. "They can't build up a code on my reply, because they don't see it until it appears."

"The whole of the message," her uncle confided, "is contained in the pseudonym—'Jenks in London.' It means—never

mind what it means. That is a different story. We shall come to the reply presently. Now, tell me, do you keep the letters of your correspondents?"

"For one month," she told him.

"Then you have 'Jenks in London's' letter?"

"Of course."

"Can I see it?"

Miss Mott became very professional.

"These letters are all supposed to be entirely confidential," she warned her uncle.

For the first time in his life Superintendent Wragge was almost angry with his niece. There were no visible signs of it, but she knew.

"Must I remind you," he asked drily, "that it is not your uncle, but Superintendent Detective Wragge of Scotland Yard who asks this favour?"

Miss Mott rang the bell under her foot without further protest. At her request, the lanky, bespectacled young secretary brought in a file from which her employer drew out a letter. She handed it across to her uncle. He studied it with some care and laid it down by his side.

"The usual sort of piffle," he remarked. "But the handwriting must go to our expert. Now, if you will turn to this second number of your magazine, which I have here, you will notice on the first column of 'Answers to Correspondents' a pseudonym, 'Buttercups and Daisies.'"

Miss Mott did not trouble to look at the magazine.

"I remember it perfectly," she declared. "I remember thinking what an odd choice."

"You may be interested to know," her uncle confided, "that 'Buttercups and Daisies' is the reply to 'Jenks in London', and a very interesting reply too. I see you advised the young lady to forgive her erring lover. Very nice and human of you, my dear. Now I shall have to trouble you for the letter from Buttercups and Daisies'."

The file was reopened. Miss Mott found the letter and passed it silently across. After a brief examination, her uncle placed it with the other in his pocket.

"A very clever stunt this," he meditated. "Much better than any Agony Column. The young man in our Code Department who tumbled to it deserves a medal."

"May I know what 'Jenks in London' said and 'Buttercups and Daisies' replied?" she begged.

Superintendent Wragge stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"I can't say that the message is as clear as daylight to us, even now," he admitted, "but it contains an address we were very interested to get hold of. And furthermore," he added, with a covert glance across the table, "we are practically certain that the communication is between one branch of a certain company of gangsters and another."

Miss Mott's was almost a painful silence. A flood of reminiscences brought the colour streaming into her cheeks. Superintendent Wragge looked tactfully away. He tapped another cigarette on the arm of his chair and lit it.

"You've heard nothing more, I suppose, of our friends who were flooded out?" he enquired.

"Nothing."

"No more mysterious visits from Violet Joe?"

She shook her head.

"That long devil with the scar hasn't tried to get at you again?"

"I haven't seen or heard a word from any of them," she declared.

"Meredith—that's the arch blackguard's name; I'm sure of that," Superintendent Wragge continued thoughtfully. "Two of the gang got away by the river but I have an idea that Meredith's still in London."

"You haven't anything against 'Violet Joe', have you?" she asked timidly.

"If I had, I should forget it," her uncle assured her. "Meredith's the man I want. He's dangerous. So long as he's at large, you should be extra careful, Lucie. Watch your step all the time. Don't accept any invitations unless you know the people well."

She shook her head.

"I never go out anywhere," she confided. "I keep William here till I leave myself at night and he sees me into a taxi."

Her uncle nodded approvingly.

"Good girl. What about a little dinner with me to-night, then? I'll fetch you and take you home. Are you doing anything?"

"Nothing at all. Except—" she went on, holding up an envelope—"these came along this morning. I haven't made up my mind what to do about it."

Superintendent Wragge drew out the cardboard slips and studied them. He turned over the envelope and noticed the address in clerkly handwriting.

"Two stalls for 'The Humming Bird'?" he remarked. "Some one's being kind to you. I saw in the paper yesterday that every seat was booked for months."

Miss Mott nodded.

"I believe it's awfully good," she confided. "How would you like to go there first with me and have a little supper afterwards, instead of dining?"

"By all means," Superintendent Wragge accepted enthusiastically. "An excellent idea. I haven't been to a theatre for months."

He glanced at the tickets again before he passed them back.

"You say you don't know who sent them to you?"

She shook her head.

"I haven't an idea," she admitted. "The Box Office, I suppose."

Superintendent Wragge picked up his hat and smoothed it. Those keen, narrow eyes of his had almost disappeared under their heavy lids and among the puckered-up creases of his fleshy face—a sign that he was thinking deeply.

"What's troubling you, Uncle?" Miss Mott enquired.

"It seems to me queer," he meditated, "for the theatre to be sending you complimentary seats when it's so heavily booked up, and especially for Friday night. They aren't marked 'Complimentary', either. You're quite sure you can't think of any one who might have sent them?"

"I can't think of a soul," she admitted. "My editor gets complimentary seats now and then, but if he offers them to me, he always wants to come with me. Still, as long as they're here, there's no reason why we shouldn't use them, is there?"

Superintendent Wragge selected one of the tickets and returned the other to his niece.

"Not the slightest reason in the world," he agreed. "If you don't mind," he added, "I think it would be better if you went on first and I'll join you later. We're sometimes rather busy at the Yard on Friday night, and I should hate to have you

miss any of the show. I'll come as soon as I can get away."

"Just as you like," Miss Mott assented. "I shall be there when the curtain goes up on the first act; I can promise you that! Don't miss more of it than you can help."

Superintendent Detective Wragge, looking slightly distraught, took affectionate leave of his niece and departed for Scotland Yard. His conscience was troubling him badly, as it had done once or twice before. Nothing in the world could have prevented his occupying one of those stalls at the Universal Theatre that night. He knew very well, however, that if he did his duty as a blood relation, he ought to take particular care to see that the adjoining one was vacant.

Miss Mott found her seats excellently placed and thoroughly enjoyed the first act of "The Humming Bird." She was just looking around the crowded house at the fall of the curtain when a girl, seated immediately in front, turned around and smiled at her.

"Do you mind if I speak to you for a moment, Miss Mott?" she asked.

"Why, of course not," was the courteous reply. "Do I—ought I to know you?"

"We are complete strangers," the young woman admitted. "But I feel that I know you very well because I read all your articles in *Home Talks*. I hope you won't think it a great liberty, but I sent you the tickets for to-night. It was the only way I could imagine of getting to meet you."

Miss Mott laughed pleasantly.

"A very delightful way for me. I've been longing to see this show. You're not, by any chance, one of my correspondents, are you?"

In the subdued light, the girl seemed to flush.

"I'm afraid I have been guilty of bothering you with my poor little affairs," she confessed. "You answered me in this week's number. I called myself 'Buttercups and Daisies'."

Miss Mott was well trained for her profession and she heard the announcement with only the faintest flicker of polite interest in her face. For once, then, her uncle must have made a mistake.

"I remember thinking your pseudonym a trifle unusual," she remarked. "I hope what I said was of service to you."

"I should think so," was the enthusiastic reply. "You have so much common sense and yet you look scarcely any older than I," the girl added, with a sigh.

Miss Mott smiled tolerantly.

"Everybody looks the same age in this light. Some of you girls—"

"May I introduce my fiancé?" the girl begged. "Major Lingard—Miss Mott."

A dark, clean-shaven young man, turned out with punctilious care and wearing a rimless eyeglass, rose in his place and bowed.

"Glad to meet so distinguished a young lady," he said pleasantly. "I know what Miss Carruthers wants me to ask you before the curtain goes up. We should be so glad if you would come on to a new Supper Club with us after the show—you and your escort, if you have one coming," he added, looking at the vacant place. "Otherwise, we will look after you."

"Do please come," the girl urged. "My real name is Betty Carruthers. I should like to talk to you so much and I am sure you would meet some interesting people."

Miss Mott hesitated. The invitation sounded attractive enough to her, but some one had suddenly turned on the lights in an

adjacent box and Miss Betty Carruthers' appearance seemed no longer that of the somewhat silly young ingénue. There were one or two lines in her face and little ones—almost crows'-feet—about her eyes. Her hair, too, was obviously tinted and her eyes themselves were strange, not at all the eyes of a young girl. Miss Mott's instincts of caution were awakened.

"You are very kind," she said doubtfully. "I am expecting my uncle every moment."

"But you must bring him along," the girl insisted. "It's the quaintest place, only been opened for a week or two. It's run by one of Dick's—that's Major Lingard's—ex-brother officers, and there are always lots of nice young men there."

"I'm sure it would be very delightful," Miss Mott conceded. "May I just see what my uncle says when he arrives?"

"Why, of course," the girl assented. "We shall be going, anyway. We dance there every night. It would be so nice to have a good long talk with you...."

The curtain rose and Miss Mott gave herself up to the enjoyment of the show. Immediately on its descent, Superintendent Wragge made his appearance and edged his way to the vacant seat.

"Oh, I'm so sorry you've missed two acts of this," his niece lamented. "It's been perfectly wonderful. The best show I've seen for ages. I want to tell you something," she went on, in a slightly lower tone.

The girl in front, with her escort, had strolled over to one of the boxes to talk with some friends. Miss Mott directed her uncle's attention to them.

"Are they friends of yours?" she asked.

"Never seen either of them before in my life, to my knowledge," he replied.

"Well," she confided, "the girl's name—she isn't nearly so young as she looks—is Miss Betty Carruthers, and I'm afraid your Code Department were wrong for once, for it was she who wrote to me under the pseudonym of 'Buttercups and Daisies'."

There was a moment's silence. Superintendent Wragge had made no remark, but Miss Mott knew that he was interested from the swift intake of his breath and from the way he leaned forward, with his hands upon his knees, looking at the girl and her escort.

"She has just introduced herself to me," Miss Mott continued. "It was she who sent me the tickets. She thought it would be a good way to get to know me. That is her fiancé she is with,—Major Lingard. They want us both to go on to a little Dance Club to-night, which has just been started by some friends of theirs. They asked me to bring my escort, whoever he was."

"Did they know my name and who I was?" Superintendent Wragge asked quickly.

There was an expression of gentle deprecation in Miss Mott's upraised eyebrows.

"Do I run an Intelligence Office for nothing? I simply said that you were my uncle. The girl smiled at me in a most peculiar way. She may be everything that she ought to be, but I don't fancy that in her world girls go about with their real uncles. Here they are, coming back."

Superintendent Wragge picked up his programme. It was hard to see that his lips were moving.

"Harness is my name," he whispered. "Mr. Charles Harness—solicitor."

The two glanced expectantly at Miss Mott as they took their places. She introduced her uncle, who beamed upon them with unusual affability.

"I hear you have been kind enough to ask my niece and me to a new Supper Club to-night," he said. "We shall be delighted to come, of course."

"Capital!" Major Lingard exclaimed. "I hope you'll like the place. Miss Carruthers and I are rather keen on it: run by an old friend of mine. The food and drink's all right, anyway, and the music isn't bad."

"If you'll give me the exact address," Superintendent Wragge suggested, "we'll follow you on, directly the show is over."

"Oh, please let us take you," the girl intervened. "Father's lent us the family coach—as I call our old limousine—for the evening, and there's room for everybody."

Superintendent Wragge accepted without hesitation.

"At my time of life," he confessed, "I hate struggling about, looking for taxis. Besides, it's a wet night."

"We'll all get out together, as soon as the curtain's down," Miss Carruthers declared. "Dick's ordered a table, but it's always just as well to be on time. I can't tell you how much I'm looking forward to a talk with your clever niece."

The curtain rose and Mr. Wragge gave himself up to a whole-hearted enjoyment of the performance. At the end of the act, tears of laughter stood in his eyes.

"Best thing I've seen this season," he announced with enthusiasm. "No, I'm not going out to get a whisky and soda. I've been working hard at the office to-night and I had to scamp my dinner, so I'm determined not to spoil my supper. I'll just talk to Harry Philpott for a moment."

Superintendent Wragge, the laughter still lingering at the corners of his lips, moved a few places down the row and talked to an elderly gentleman who had also been a late arrival. Miss Carruthers and her fiancé whispered softly together for a few moments. Then the former turned around in her place.

"I can't help feeling that I've met your uncle before," she remarked. "What did you say his name was?"

"Harness," Miss Mott repeated. "Mr. Charles Harness. He is a solicitor in Bucklersbury."

"Very striking face," Major Lingard observed. "He might be a statesman or a great physician or something of that sort. Does he dance at all?"

"Loves it," Miss Mott assured him.

Superintendent Wragge made his way back to his seat as the curtain went up and apparently enjoyed the last act as much as the preceding one. Afterwards, in high good humour, all four made their way out together and stood under the rain-dripping portico while their car was being called.

"I hope this little place will amuse you," Major Lingard said, as they took their places in the limousine, after the briefest of delays. "Not a great many people go there yet, but that's only because it isn't sufficiently known, and Captain Allen—that's the proprietor—doesn't want to spoil it by letting every one in."

"It really is the quaintest place," Miss Carruthers declared....

It certainly was quaint. The approach up the narrow mews was quaint. The blue lamp hanging over the entrance was quaint. The two front doors, both of unusual thickness, were surprising, and the descent of four or five narrow steps from the entrance was unexpected. A young man in resplendent livery relieved them of their coats and hats. A tired-looking young clerk held open a book, while Major Lingard wrote down their names. Then, with a flourish, the second door was opened.

"Come this way," the latter invited, taking Miss Mott by the arm.

They stepped forward and passed into what seemed to be nothing more or less than a civilised and over-decorated cellar. The colour-washed walls were hung with sepia drawings of mad design and flaming colours. The furniture was of almost Saxon simplicity and looked as if it had been knocked together by some village carpenter. On the other hand, the few tables that were laid were glittering with plate and glass and almost overladen with flowers. The floor was of glass, illuminated from below, and a small coloured orchestra at the farther end of the room was making strange sounds of musical import. There were several waiters standing about, of a more robust type than is usual in a night restaurant, and the only other guests were a party of four, two young men of the gigolo variety, with flamboyantly attired companions. Major Lingard led the way to a round table set in a corner of the room. It was profusely adorned with masses of yellow roses and two jugs of amber-looking liquid stood in ice pails by its side.

"Would you mind sitting down and looking through the menu for a minute while we go off and speak with our friend who runs the place," he begged. "You'll find that champagne cup excellent, or you may like to dance. We sha'n't be five minutes."

Superintendent Wragge checked his niece, who was on the point of sitting down in the chair which his host had indicated.

"Major Lingard," he said, "I am going to ask you two favours, which I hope you will not take amiss: one is to let me be the giver of the party to-night—I am the eldest present and I think it is my privilege; the other is to allow us to have a table at the other side of the room. That is a stupid fad of mine, I know, but I will explain the origin of it later on."

There was a vague look of anxiety on the young man's face. He seemed ill at ease and his forehead was wrinkled in deprecating fashion.

"But, my dear sir," he protested, "Miss Carruthers is so anxious to entertain Miss Mott. You see, we have ordered special flowers in the hope of your coming and specially prepared champagne cup, and the table is surely the best in the room."

"I am an ill-mannered pig," the other acknowledged, "but I am an elderly man and I have my whims. There is nothing in wine or food possible here which it will not be my pleasure to offer you."

Major Lingard gave brief directions to a waiter but he found it difficult to conceal his annoyance. His manner, too, had become nervous, almost uneasy. He was obviously reluctant to leave his guests. The girl, however, remained unmoved. She turned towards Miss Mott.

"Would you like to come with us to meet Captain Allen?" she asked. "Perhaps you could persuade him to join us and dance. He is a wonderful partner, but he's not keen on dancing unless he finds some one really attractive."

"I'll stay with my uncle, if you don't mind," Miss Mott decided, wholly unconscious of the magnitude of her decision. "He is rather an important person in my young life."

The girl did not press her invitation but the smile lingered a little sourly upon her lips. As soon as she and her companion had left the room, which they did by a door at the farther end, they exchanged a swift glance of apprehension. Miss Betty Carruthers was no longer in the least like an ingénue and there was a very unpleasant expression on the young man's smooth face.

"What do you make of it?" she asked anxiously.

"It looks rotten," he admitted.

"And yet," the girl pointed out, "how could they guess anything? They've never seen either of us before and they couldn't have known of this place, because we never even said where we were going. You weren't at Amberley Square, were you?"

"Not I," he assured her. "I was doing business in Amsterdam."

"Then how could they have even the slightest suspicion about us?" she demanded. "There isn't a loose end anywhere."

"I can't see one," Major Lingard admitted. "But will you tell me why the mischief he shied at the table? There aren't half a dozen people in the world who know the secret of that. And why on earth did he want to be host, if it wasn't to get out of drinking the champagne cup?"

"All the same, just remember this," the girl reflected. "The old man couldn't possibly have known that we were going to be at the theatre or that we were going to ask him here. He hasn't been out of our sight since he took his place in the theatre, so he couldn't have communicated with any one. It can't be anything but his manner."

They passed down the little passage and entered a small room, luxuriously furnished, something between an office and a masculine sitting room. A tall, lean man, with a thin scar on one side of his face, was lounging in an easy-chair with his hands in his pockets. He looked swiftly across at them as they entered.

"Well?" he demanded.

"They're here," Lingard announced.

"I know they're here," was the irritated reply. "What did you leave them for?"

"Dick's all fussed up," the girl declared. "Old man Wragge's calling himself Mr. Charles Harness, by-the-bye. Wouldn't sit at the guests' table and he won't have anything to do with the champagne cup."

"Did you make a clean get-away from the theatre?"

"Absolutely. Tom was there, wearing a uniform exactly like the commissionaire's. We didn't see one of the real men on duty and the plates of the car have been altered again."

The man in the chair meditated for a moment.

"Your invitation for supper was given inside the theatre?"

"Yes, and we didn't even mention where the place was we were taking them to."

"Did either of them get away by themselves afterwards?"

"Not out of our sight for a single second," the girl declared.

"Then go back again to your job and don't be silly," the tall man enjoined brusquely. "The others'll be coming in directly. I don't want the show-down before one o'clock."

Meanwhile, Miss Mott and her uncle danced away gaily to some really excellent music. The place, except for its two heavy front doors, seemed to differ very little from other Night Clubs of its order. One or two guests had come in and taken their places at different tables. No one, however, seemed to want to sit at the corner table with the yellow roses....

The ventilation was none of the best and in due course Superintendent Wragge felt the need of a rest and some refreshment. They sat down and he ordered a bottle of whisky to be opened at the table and some champagne. The latter arrived in an ice pail and the cork of the whisky was drawn by the *maître d'hôtel*. The Superintendent was having his first drink when Major Lingard and his fiancée returned, with profuse apologies for their brief absence. Any passing cloud which may have been on their faces had vanished. The champagne was opened and poured out for every one, without reference to the cup. Some caviare and other choice sandwiches were ordered. Major Lingard danced with Miss Mott and Superintendent Wragge danced with and paid many compliments to Miss Carruthers. The somewhat forbidding atmosphere of the room was forgotten. Every one seemed to be having a good time and the band played whatever they wanted. Half an hour passed—an hour. At last Miss Mott, at a glance from her uncle, who was paying the bill, rose to her feet.

"It's been so delightful," she murmured. "We've enjoyed it ever so much. Haven't we, Uncle?"

Producing a fine cambric handkerchief, Superintendent Wragge wiped the perspiration from his forehead with one hand, while he handed out liberal tips with the other.

"Delightful," he echoed. "I like your orchestra too, Major. My niece and I will join with pleasure, if you care to put us up."

Major Lingard was watching the second of the front doors which led into the room, as it slowly swung shut, and they heard the little click of the spring. The change in their host and hostess which ensued seemed to Superintendent Wragge and Miss Mott amazing. The woman who had posed in the uncertain light as a good-tempered, good-humoured ingénue, suddenly revealed herself as a vicious and evil-looking woman. Major Lingard, with a twist of the mouth, the departure of his eyeglass and a relaxation of all the muscles of his face, was no longer in the least like an English officer. They threw disguise to the winds. Lingard leaned back in his chair, with his hands in his pockets. Through the door near the orchestra, the tall, thin man with the scar on his cheek had issued, and was making leisurely progress down the room.

"We don't, as a rule, welcome gentlemen of your profession as members, Superintendent Wragge," Lingard said, with a sneer in his tone, "but we are going to make you a life member and keep you here for the rest of your life too. That may not be a very long time, though," he added meaningly. "It will be only a few seconds if you can't keep that right hand of yours still."

"You needn't be afraid," Superintendent Wragge assured him calmly. "I don't carry firearms when I am out for a pleasant evening."

The tall man with the scar on his face had come to a standstill before their table. He bowed low to Miss Mott, who looked at him in horror. The illumination of the place was faulty and his gaunt face seemed more saturnine than ever. He turned to Superintendent Wragge.

"I know that it is your custom to go unarmed, Superintendent," he remarked, "but I thought that perhaps the memory of a certain night in Amberley Square might have changed your ideas on that subject. Has Miss Mott brought her popgun?"

Miss Mott was incapable of any reply. She was looking despairingly at the little circle of male guests who had left their women companions and were closing in around the table. She had always had the most unbounded confidence in her uncle, but she reflected with sinking heart that he had come to the theatre without the slightest idea of this invitation and that since receiving it he had not left her side except for a moment. It was impossible for him to have communicated with anybody. They were cut off from the world completely and utterly. In that windowless cellar, even the roar of the distant traffic was inaudible. Yet the smile upon Superintendent Wragge's lips seemed natural enough, and even at that moment he lit a cigarette.

"You're Meredith, aren't you?" he asked the tall man abruptly.

"That is my name," the other acknowledged.

"I thought I couldn't have forgotten you," Superintendent Wragge meditated. "Quite an honour, I'm sure, this. Are you shooting any better these days? You missed me from a dozen paces last time we met."

Meredith grinned. The detective's attitude appealed to his dramatic instincts.

"You must remember, Superintendent," he apologised, "that I was in a hurry. I have you now here all to myself, with plenty of friends around, and the Club all nicely closed up for the night. I shall do better this time."

"I don't seem to remember my host of the evening," Superintendent Wragge went on. "A junior member of the gang promoted, I presume, owing to recent misfortune. He makes up quite well. I almost mistook him for the real thing."

"Don't, Uncle!" Miss Mott interrupted, with a sudden touch of hysteria.

He patted her hand. Meredith laughed outright.

"I like to hear your uncle talk," he said. "And for once we have plenty of time. Major Lingard is one of my chief lieutenants at the present moment. He has taken the place of that impossible young man whom we have had to discard altogether. Yes," Meredith went on, scrutinising the end of the cigarette which he had just lit, "we had to get rid of Violet Joe. It was painful, but he was too sentimental."

Miss Mott swayed in her chair. Her uncle passed his arm around her.

"Don't you worry, dear," he begged. "From the little I've seen of Violet Joe, I'd back him against our friend here, any day. My niece is feeling the strain, Meredith, so let's get down to business. What are you going to do with me? I'm after the remainder of your gang, you know, and I shall get you all some day."

Meredith stared at the speaker incredulously.

"Aren't you inclined to be something of an optimist?" he asked. "For instance, may I enquire how you expect to get out of here alive?"

"Well, I may not," Superintendent Wragge admitted, drawing the whisky bottle closer to him. "I've paid the bill but I'm going to cadge some more whisky, if I may," he added, helping himself. "I may not get out of here alive, as you suggest,

Meredith, but there's one thing very certain—"

"I like to hear about certainties," the latter interrupted, with an ugly smile.

"One thing very certain," Superintendent Wragge repeated impressively, "and that is, that if you kill me, before six weeks have passed you'll be taking that fifty-yard walk at a few minutes before eight in the morning, with a chaplain reading the prayers, a warder to hold you up, a bell tolling in your ears, and that bare, ugly room yawning before you. Murderers don't escape nowadays, you know, Meredith, and there are special reasons why you won't."

There was something terrifying in his prisoner's deliberate speech and absolute composure, and Meredith shivered for a moment, half in fear, half in anger. He looked around at the others, who were waiting for his orders, and he waved his hand towards the corner table. Four of the men stole around to the back of Superintendent Wragge. Meredith turned towards him.

"Wragge," he said, "you're a rotten detective, but with the help of this very intelligent young lady, your niece, you've come pretty close to us once or twice. After to-night, you aren't going to trouble me any more. As for your niece, you needn't worry about her: she and I have a little bargain to carry out, and this time there isn't going to be any mistake about it!"

He leaned towards Miss Mott with that queer, satanic smile at the corners of his lips, and Miss Mott, although she held herself bravely, felt her eyes dilate with horror. Her uncle held his head a little on one side—listening—and as he listened, he smiled.

"The trouble with you, Meredith," he deplored, "is that you always refuse to give your enemies credit for even the rudiments of common sense. You bait your trap cleverly enough, but you expect us to walk into it a trifle too ingenuously. For instance, you imagined that a harmless paper like *Home Talks* would escape the notice of the Scotland Yard Code Department. Not at all! 'Jenks in London' told us its message. 'Buttercups and Daisies' confirmed our suspicions."

Both Meredith and Lingard were speechless. They appeared to be stiffening in preparation for some form of action, but they still listened breathlessly.

"And another detail," Superintendent Wragge went on—"details are so important, you know, Meredith. When you send theatre tickets from a popular theatre for the use of a young lady, and you would like her to believe that they had come from the Box Office, go to the expense of having a rubber stamp made. 'Complimentary'—in purple ink across the face of the slip of white paper—would be so much more convincing.... That's one o'clock striking, I think. You'd better scuttle off to your hole, wherever it is. Do you hear—"

The Superintendent broke off abruptly in his speech. Every one for a moment seemed to be holding his breath. There was a violent banging at the outside door, a confusion of voices, some raised to the pitch of shouting.

"Open the door there!"

"You can't close a night club before one o'clock!"

"We're members!"

"Open the door and look sharp about it!"

"The Prince of Wales is here and Lord God Beelzebub!"

Doggerel followed, every one singing, or rather yelling, in a different key—

"We won't go home till morning,
We won't go home till morning,
We won't go home till morning,
Till daylight doth appear!"

"Hip, hip, hip, hurrah! Open the door, you fellows!"

Then silence. The sudden wave of apprehension which had drained the colour from Lingard's cheeks and brought a flash

of dismay into even Meredith's eyes passed. The latter even smiled.

"Drunken roysterers!" he muttered. "Sit tight, every one. They'll be off directly."

"I wonder," Superintendent Wragge speculated.

There was a storm of blows upon the door. Then silence again. A couple of the pseudo-guests stood over Wragge, evidently waiting for Meredith's orders. A waiter crossed the floor on tiptoe. A woman who wanted a drink held up an empty bottle. The place became a study in still life.

"They'll be gone directly," Meredith repeated in a whisper.

A further brief period of silence. Then, with appalling suddenness, a cataclysmic roar which set the whole place shaking, and beneath the thunder of which were lost all such trivial sounds as the shrieks of terrified women, the tumult of flying feet, the falling of crumbling masonry. The stout entrance door and part of the wall fell crashing into the room and there followed, for a brief and indeterminate span of time, a flying panorama, utterly grotesque and unreal. A single file of black-uniformed police streamed through the room, like gnomes in some fantastic, futurist drama. They were running at the double, their strangely shaped peaked caps bent towards the ground, flashing by the amazed group of satyr-faced men and terrified women. Unearthly puppets they seemed against the strange background of the weirdly emblazoned walls, hastening towards that farther entrance, through which Lingard and Meredith had already disappeared. The three members of the coloured orchestra filled the air with a hideous clamour, yelling like human beasts gone crazy. There was a single shot fired by one of the pseudo-guests at a distant table,—a shot which buried itself harmlessly in the wall and brought a stream of crumbling plaster on to the table before which Superintendent Wragge was still seated. The rearmost of those black, stooping forms, without faltering in his stride, threw out his arm—there was a stab of flame—and the man sank in a huddled heap upon the floor. Superintendent Wragge passed his arm around Miss Mott's waist and led her toward the open space where the door had been, and through which the night wind was now sweeping.

"They won't have me in the fighting squadron," he remarked. "We'll leave them to it. I ordered the car for one o'clock."

THE HOUSE BY THE RIVER

Miss Mott sat before her desk, worshipping a large bunch of violets. They were very beautiful and they filled her small office with fragrance. Her eyes shone as she looked at them. She buried her small, dainty nose and her flushed cheeks in their cool sweetness. But when she sat back in her swivelled chair and tried to look and feel as a young woman of business should, she came to the firm determination that something must be done about them. She felt that their daily arrival and constant presence upon her table were creating a false impression. Her juvenile secretary sighed sentimentally as she looked at them. Her errand boy grinned. Her male protector—Sergeant Harrop—a lusty commissioner whose chest was covered with medals—an appendage insisted upon and paid for by her uncle, regarded them evidently as a sign of weakness, and her uncle himself, when for the third visit in succession he had found a similar bowl of loosened violets perfuming the musty air, suddenly realised their significance and indulged in more or less mild badinage. Miss Mott decided then that it was time something was done about it, and accordingly, next time an offering was due—they came with singular regularity every third day—she arrived at the office half an hour earlier and detained the messenger boy. With the information which she secured from him, she presented herself later on in the day at one of the two famous flower shops of Bond Street. She interviewed the manager with confidence and retreated in humiliation. She discovered that silence was the etiquette of his vocation; the words of his dismissal were final.

"If our clients wish their names divulged, madam," he said, "they send a card. When they do not, we assume that they wish their offerings to be anonymous and we respect their wishes."

Outside in the street, Miss Mott, who was very angry, met her uncle, Superintendent Wragge of Scotland Yard. He shook his head at her sorrowfully.

"Sending flowers to yourself," he accused her. "I thought only actresses did that."

She indulged in a little grimace.

"I went to find out where my violets came from," she confided, "and the man wouldn't tell me."

"Quite right too," was the only sympathy she received. "A most improper curiosity on your part, I call it. If your mysterious admirer had meant you to know who he was, he'd have sent a card. I can guess why he didn't, though," the Superintendent concluded with a chuckle.

Miss Mott felt her cheeks burn.

"I'm sorry I met you," she said spitefully.

"You won't be, when I tell you the news," he replied. "The Liverpool Express was held up in Derbyshire yesterday and five chests of bullion for a Liverpool Bank were stolen—sixty thousand pounds, at least."

Miss Mott's eyes were round with excitement. She glanced at the passing crowd.

"Do you believe—"

"The same lot, beyond a doubt. Not that your friend's in it: the belief of the Yard is that he's broken with them. It's that long Mephistopheles who's escaped us twice who's worked this."

"Are you on the business now?" she asked eagerly.

"I might be," he admitted.

She passed her arm through his and looked up at him appealingly. The male portion of the passers-by sighed. When Miss Mott looked like that she was very pretty indeed.

"I've nothing to do just at present," she murmured.

"Then go back to your office and write an article for *Home Talks*," Superintendent Wragge advised her sternly. "We've

had this out before. I've been through hell for the close shaves you've had with me and I'm leaving you out in future, my dear."

"You don't mean it," she pleaded.

"Never again," he assured her, "am I going to pander to your love of excitement or be wheedled into letting you go where you don't belong. Bring me any information you get in your office and you shall be paid for it, but hunting criminals is no girl's job. You'll excuse me, my dear."

There had been a quick flash in Superintendent Wragge's eyes and his niece knew that he had good reasons for his departure. She made no attempt to detain him, but she stood and watched him cross the road and enter the establishment of a famous gentlemen's outfitter where she was perfectly certain he never bought his own atrocious neckties. She waited a few minutes without any further sign of him. Then, very reluctantly, she made her way back to her office. All day long she was occupied in writing sympathetic little messages to her various correspondents. She wound up with one on her own account and her fingers trembled on the typewriter as she struck it out:

To Violet J.

Thank you so much, but please, no more.

Miss Mott, somewhat to her surprise, found herself, in obedience to a message from Scotland Yard, taking a cocktail with her uncle that evening, at a very cosmopolitan café in the neighbourhood of Regent Street. She had had rather a dull day and she found the atmosphere refreshing.

"Why do you never come near me now?" she asked.

"Because we are better apart," he replied. "I've arrived at the conclusion that that long devil we're after is about the most dangerous fellow who ever declared war against us, and from several small things which have come to my notice," he went on, looking intently into his cocktail, "I think that, although that marriage certificate business was all bunkum, of course, he would run almost any risk to get hold of you again."

Miss Mott shivered. Nevertheless it sounded very exciting.

"Half the criminals we have run to earth in this world," he went on, "we've caught because they've taken a risk about a woman. I believe this fellow's in the same frame of mind. I'm telling you this, Lucie, in order that you may be warned. In my opinion, as I have said, there isn't anything he wouldn't do or almost any risk he wouldn't run to get hold of you, and if he did, I think he'd finish—he'd get right away, if he could. We've evidence that he's planning something of the sort."

She laid her fingers upon his large, hairy hand.

"Why don't you make use of me, then?" she begged. "I'm not afraid. We've been foolish before, but we needn't be again. Supposing I went about in the evening with a harmless person—like my editor—and you put two or three of your best men on—"

"No more of that, Lucie," her uncle interrupted more sharply, perhaps, than he had ever spoken before to his niece. "I've had my lesson and I've finished. Why I sent for you this evening to have this little chat was just to warn you once more, and more than warn you. No theatre tickets, mind, no free automobile trials, no acceptance of invitations, even from well-known people, and no strange taxis. Walk to your flat or take a bus, or if you don't want to do that, have my car. I can get one from the Yard at any time."

She laughed.

"I'll take care," she promised, "and I wouldn't think of having your car. Don't imagine, though, that I don't notice. You've got a man from the Yard in as commissionaire at the flats, besides my friend Harrop. I'm not sure about the lift boy. And there's a second man about the place who doesn't seem to have much to do."

"I've taken some precautions," Superintendent Wragge admitted, "for our sake as well as yours. Meredith's hiding places have, so far, beaten us. Where he got to after the Club raid the other night, for instance, is a mystery, but I am convinced of this—if anything'll bring him up to the surface, it will be you."

Miss Mott laughed softly. Youth has the gift of forgetfulness, and some hours of horror that lay not so far back in the past troubled her now very little.

"I suppose I should be flattered," she murmured. "I don't know whether I am or not: I can never think of the man without a shiver.... Now, I want to ask you something, Uncle. Do you see a man opposite, rather thick-set, not very tall, wearing glasses and reading a French newspaper? He was angry with the waiter because he didn't give him enough absinthe."

"Yes, I see him," Superintendent Wragge admitted.

"Is he my watchdog?" she enquired.

Her uncle was a little annoyed.

"Yes," he acknowledged, "but you just let him alone, Lucie. You're not to speak to him, look at him or address him at any time. You understand that?"

"Perfectly."

Wragge paid for the cocktails and rose. He drove his niece back to the building in which her residential club was situated, and wished her an affectionate good night.

"You're making life rather dull for me," she complained.

"It isn't easy for any of us, just at present," he assured her. "We made four important captures the last raid and this particular company of gangsters aren't what they used to be. All the same, the Chief resents Meredith. He's like a great many other semi-civilians—he doesn't realise that, given an equal show-down, the odds are on the criminal every time. We've wiped the Bill Sykeses off the face of the earth, but there's more poison in one Meredith than in all the criminals of twenty years ago put together."

Miss Mott laughed to herself as she passed across the cheerful hall of her club and rang for the lift. The man who had been in the café was making some inconsequent enquiry of the concierge. It was, after all, rather exciting to be guarded by detectives. Here, too, she was so safe. A benign and virtuous committee had excluded, by their rules, the presence of men, except in the dining and smoking rooms. Miss Mott dined at her favourite table, with a book propped up in front of her, smoked a cigarette afterwards in the lounge, played a fifty up at billiards with Mrs. Hart-Williams—the lady manageress of the club—and at the latter's insistence, indulged in the unusual luxury of a lemon squash. At ten o'clock she ascended to her small but comfortable bedroom on the second-floor back, especially chosen by her—when her uncle had insisted upon her leaving her flat—because there were trees waving in the wind outside, a strip of waste land which might have passed as a garden, and no disturbing traffic. She undressed slowly, folding, or hanging up with great care, her tastefully chosen and somewhat expensive clothes, said her prayers a little vaguely—for Miss Mott was religious by instinct, although agnostic by mentality—and in full peace and security went to bed and to sleep. When she awoke, she found herself in a perfectly strange room and by the side of her bed a gaunt, familiar figure with a thin scar running down one side of his face.

Superintendent Wragge, mounting the stairs to his office the following morning, a cigar between his teeth, and his hat, as usual, a little on the back of his head, was met with tragic news. In less than a quarter of an hour he was seated by the side of one of the cots in the casualty ward at St. George's Hospital, listening to the choked words of a dying man. The drawn, white face was scarcely recognisable, but to Superintendent Wragge it was familiar enough, and he only cursed himself that he had not given the job of looking after Miss Mott to a younger man. The doctor who had been Superintendent Wragge's escort whispered in his ear.

"Better get his story. He can't live an hour."

The detective shivered, for he was a man of kindly temperament. Nevertheless he steeled himself to listen.

"Tell me anything you can remember, Burrows," he enjoined.

The dying man plucked feverishly at the bedclothes.

"I was supposed to have finished for the day when Miss Mott reached the Hostel," he began. "Those were your own instructions. I didn't like the look of the back of the place at all, though. It seemed made for a ramp—a few sheltering trees, a bit of rough land and then the huge hotel they're building—room for a hundred people to hide there on a dark night—and a half-made road leading up to within a dozen yards of the back of the Hostel. I sent my card in to the manageress—Scotland Yard on it, remember—and asked to have Miss Mott's room pointed out to me. She refused. I'd get a— a line on her, sir. She'd got a diamond ring on I'd swear was new, that must have cost a small fortune. I tried the concierge. He'd been spoken to by the manageress and he wouldn't say a word. Something odd about this, I thought. Oh, God!"

The man's face was convulsed with pain. A nurse came and stood on the other side of the bed. She smoothed his forehead and held a glass to his lips. In a moment or two he went on—but his voice was perceptibly weaker.

"I didn't bother them—any more—I thought you'd deal with them—in the morning, sir. Refusing information to the police! I made up my mind for a night out. No good before one, I thought, so I had a bit of a rest and then I came on duty again. I brought a shooting stick and sat in a dark corner behind some mortar tubs. I didn't know for certain that Miss Mott's was a back room, but I decided to act as though it was. It must have been about four when something happened. It wasn't light, but there was a greyish streak where the clouds hung over the houses. At first I thought I was dreaming. Then, through those two weedy trees, I saw a man, carrying what seemed to be a bundle, and dragging a ladder after him. He threw the ladder down on the grass and came on towards me, and just then I heard a motor not far behind—kind of sobbing—high-powered engine running slow. I pulled my gun and came out when he was twenty paces away.

"'What have you got there?' I cried, all ready to shoot. Then, with my finger on the trigger, I had to stop, for I could see that what he was carrying was a woman, seemingly drugged or unconscious, and I was afraid of hitting her. I tried to run him instead, but he got me. Scarcely a sound, just a spit of fire and a stab in my chest—one of these new-fashioned ones.... I wasn't done, though. I fell, but I got up again, and I staggered after him. The car had come into sight and he pushed the woman in. Then he looked back and I let go at him. Just as I pulled the trigger, I got my second one a little lower down. I don't know whether I hit him or not, but he'd have been in the next world all right, if he'd been one second later."

"You can't remember what he looked like—or anything about the car?" Superintendent Wragge asked, with almost pathetic wistfulness.

"I couldn't see his face," the sinking man groaned. "He had a black hat pulled over his eyes and he was dressed so that he seemed a part of the darkness, but the chauffeur—oh, my God!—"

Twice the lips opened and closed without speech. The sweat was standing on the man's forehead. His agony was manifest. The doctor glanced significantly at Superintendent Wragge and shook his head, but Wragge in those moments was a man without a heart.

"There is something you can tell me," he murmured, bending lower still. "The chauffeur? It may save a girl's life."

"The chauffeur—Miss Mott—motorcycle—flood," the man gasped—and died.

In the billiard room of a large public house, somewhere between Aldgate and Shoreditch, a young man of Jewish appearance, flashily dressed, his coat removed for the purposes of the game, was busily chalking his cue. He felt a light touch upon his shoulder. The cue fell with a clatter to the ground; the chalk rolled away under the table. The young man cowered back.

"Where were you last night, Henry Leneveu?" a stern voice asked.

The youth was incapable of speech. Neither Sergeant Betts nor his companion were in uniform, but there wasn't a man in the room who didn't recognise them as detectives.

"Quick! Out with it!" Sergeant Betts insisted. "We know, but I want to hear it from your own lips. Where were you? And

where were you driving that car to?"

Henry Leneveu picked up his cue. It was the old trick, he thought, with a little spasm of resentment, trying to rush you before you knew where you were. He made a weak effort to pull himself together, and faced his questioner.

"In 'ere playing billiards, s'elp me God, Sergeant," he avowed. "You ask any on 'em. They'll tell ye. In 'ere I was from seven o'clock till closing time," he went on, raising his voice and looking appealingly around.

There was a confirmatory murmur of voices. Sergeant Betts regarded them all scornfully.

"An alibi from this place wouldn't be much help to you, young fellow," he declared. "However, that's neither here nor there. Put on your coat and come along with me."

"What for?" was the sullen demand. "You've nothing against me."

"Nothing whatever," the Sergeant assured him. "Yours may be the purest life of any young man of your profession in the city of London. All the same, Superintendent Wragge wants a few words with you at the Yard. Come on, we've a car outside."

"You're not pinching me, or anything of that sort?"

"Not we! Just a friendly little chat with the Superintendent, that's all."

Mr. Leneveu handed his cue to the marker.

"Anything to oblige Mr. Wragge," he said, with a slight swagger. "I'll finish the game when I get back, Charlie."

"Righto, Hennie," was the amiable response from his late opponent.

Sergeant Betts having failed in his first frontal attack, neither asked nor answered any questions on the way to the Embankment, a journey which was completed in almost unbroken silence. Arrived at the Yard, Superintendent Wragge, who had been awaiting his visitor eagerly, pointed to a chair close to his desk. No one else was present in the room, but an anæmic-looking young man bending over a notebook. The Superintendent seemed to have forgotten his haste. He filled his pipe slowly and lit it. Most of the time he was looking at his victim.

"Henry Leneveu," he said at last, "you're for it!"

"You've got nothing against me," the young man blustered.

"Don't be a fool," was the contemptuous reply. "What do you suppose we're here for? We've got enough against you, if we cared to use it, to put you away for five years. You're more useful to us out, because you're easy to watch. Now, no nonsense about it! Where did you drive that car to last night from the back of Dorset Street?"

The young man's expression was one of almost exaggerated surprise.

"I, driving a car last night, Superintendent!" he exclaimed. "You've got hold of the wrong end of the stick, I'm afraid. I was playing billiards till closing time."

"Well, we'll call it this morning, if you like," the Superintendent suggested. "Throw in your hand, Leneveu. You're finished. We've known all about you for months. We know the date you were appointed to lead the Number Two gang. We know the first time you were chosen to work for the Number One lot. You were working for them last night."

"Take my solemn oath," the young man began—

"Chuck it," Superintendent Wragge interrupted wearily. "Look here, I'll tell you what I didn't mean to. We have the dying depositions of the man whom one of you shot last night. He identified you. He saw you on the driving seat of the car, which had been hidden in that new hotel they're building at the back of Dorset Street."

"S'elp me, God—"

"Shut up!" Superintendent Wragge admonished sharply. "Now, if you'll be reasonable, I'm going to talk to you like a man. We don't want you—just yet—but, if you're obstinate, down you go to the cells at the nearest Police Station, and we can

keep you locked up for a bit without committing perjury, either. We want the girl. Where did you drive her to?"

Henry Leneveu looked helplessly into his questioner's face. He was a terrible man, this Superintendent. No one could ever tell how much he knew. He was a man of his word too. Blast that cop who had recognised him! He got his all right, but depositions counted.

"Supposing," he faltered—

"Mum's the word, so far as we're concerned," the Superintendent assured him. "We don't want your evidence. We're just as anxious to keep our sources of information secret as you are."

Henry Leneveu picked up a piece of paper from the desk and made a little plan upon it. He pushed it across to Superintendent Wragge who glanced at it and nodded. He rang the bell.

"You can go back and finish your game of billiards, Henry," he said pleasantly.

"Let us," Meredith begged, as he looked into Miss Mott's wild face, "abjure melodrama as far as possible. These continual abductions must be getting on your nerves. This time I propose that we settle down peacefully."

Miss Mott looked around the room, which was pleasant enough but unfamiliar.

"Where am I?" she demanded.

"The one question you were bound to ask, of course," he replied patiently, "and the one question, too, which you knew could not be answered. After all, what does it matter whether you are in Essex, Sussex or Northumberland? Especially, as you're not likely to leave this room for several days."

"I demand to know where you have brought me and why?" Miss Mott insisted.

"I will answer your last question," Meredith conceded. "I brought you here because you are the woman I want for a companion; because I consider you are my wife; because, if you prefer a more legal ceremony, it could doubtless be arranged from here. I am willing to run risks, you see, to satisfy your scruples. I'm not a woman's man, which is perhaps why I am so successful a gangster. But you are going to be my woman for the rest of your life and mine, married or not, just as you please—"

Miss Mott sat up in bed. Somehow or other his coolness was becoming communicated to her.

"Do I join the gang?" she asked.

"You do not," he answered. "I have finished with crime. I have made the most elaborate plans for getting away from this country. You will accompany me."

"I can't see myself doing anything of the sort," she remarked coolly.

She looked around her. The room was nicely, even luxuriously, furnished, and there was a fire in the grate. She bit her lip when she saw the clothes which she had taken off the night before put out for her, and realised that she was wearing a crêpe-de-Chine nightgown of Bond Street possibilities.

"There is really no reason why you shouldn't know where you are," Meredith observed, lounging against the chimney piece. "You are in a very large and old-fashioned house in Greenwich. This side are the gardens—rather neglected, I fear. On the other side—just across the road—is the river."

"You seem to be fond of water," she remarked.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"The flood was not my fault," he pointed out. "Here, I admit, the river is useful. It provides means of escape in a dozen different directions and I—or rather, we—own the swiftest motor launch in this country. You will perhaps discover an

element of humour in the fact," he went on, with a queer little smile, "that I competed in the recent speed trials and won two prizes."

"You are a wonderful man," she said thoughtfully. "How did you contrive to drug me this time?"

"The manageress of your Hostel," he explained. "The Cartier's ring was a little more than she could resist. No headache, I hope?"

"Nothing to speak of, thanks," Miss Mott replied.

"I will send your maid," he said, moving towards the door.

With his hand upon the knob, he paused. He turned around, and for a moment he was the old Meredith—dark, saturnine, villainous.

"I have tried to introduce different elements into our conversation," he continued, "but, remember, this remains a truth—I shall kill you before I allow any one to take you away. I do not think that it is within the bounds of possibility that you should be discovered here, but if you are, I shall kill you and myself. For the rest—you know. If it can be managed, I shall risk a special licence to satisfy your scruples. If it cannot—you'll be mine within three days, just the same. Make up your mind to it, please. I am richer than you ever dreamed of and I am going to take you to a country where we shall never be found. Some day you will agree with me that one man who loves you is very like another."

He opened and closed the door. Miss Mott listened to his retreating footsteps and fear came into her heart. Before, she had always been conscious of a surrounding atmosphere of melodrama, which had invested even the most terrifying moments through which she had passed with a sense of unreality. To-day Meredith had spoken in a tone of deadly but commonplace earnestness. He was so sure of himself and his success that he had not even made any mystery as to her whereabouts. The three days he had spoken of were actually and indeed the measure of her respite. Somehow or other the optimism which had kept up her courage during those terrible hours at IIsom Grange seemed to be slipping away from her. She had a sense this time of being utterly and completely trapped.

The sound of running water attracted her. She sprang out of bed and turned the handle of a door at the farther end of the room. A woman, with her back turned towards her, was manipulating the taps of a large bath. Miss Mott recognised at once her duenna from IIsom Grange. The latter turned and looked at her.

"So you're back again," she remarked tonelessly.

"Is that bath for me?" Miss Mott asked.

The woman rose to her feet.

"The water's there and the towels," she pointed out. "Bath salts and perfumes I don't understand. There's a great box there from some place in Bond Street. Help yourself."

She passed out by a door at the other end of the room, which closed after her with a spring lock. Miss Mott, determined to make the best of present joys, used twice as much of the choice bath salts as she had ever ventured upon before in her life, and, perfumed and refreshed, completed her toilet in the other room. Just as she was finishing, a key turned in the lock outside and a breakfast tray was brought in. There were newspapers, flowers, fragrant coffee, two silver dishes and a note addressed to her in bold handwriting. She tore it open.

My dear little Visitor,

I fear that you will see little of me during our three days' engagement, for as I am leaving this country for ever at the end of that time, I find a great deal to do. Your maid will bring you a box of books when she comes for your breakfast tray, but I must ask you to be content with your room until to-morrow evening, when I hope to be able to ask you to dine with me.

My homage and devotion,

Walter Meredith.

Miss Mott tore the letter into small pieces. She ate her breakfast, however, with a good appetite and read the papers with a curious sense of detachment from the world of actual events. Afterwards she made a careful inspection of the room and decided that any form of escape was impossible. The windows opened one foot only from top or bottom, and the garden below, although nearly a wilderness, was walled in and deserted. Miss Mott, with her usual common sense, decided to wait upon events.

On the following evening her dinner tray failed to arrive at the usual time. There came instead a deep voice outside her door, a word of warning and the turning of a key. Meredith presented himself. In his rather severe dinner clothes, with black tie and black studs, his appearance seemed even more forbidding than usual.

"You haven't forgotten our plan for this evening, I trust," he said.

"Your plan," Miss Mott corrected him. "I shall be very pleased to see some other room than this."

He drew her hand gently through his arm and led her toward the stairs. His gesture seemed to be one of courtesy, but she felt the imprisoning touch. She felt, too, that his muscles were like iron. They passed down a spacious stairway into a dining room of immense proportions. There was faded tapestry on the walls and the remains of some fine furniture. Dinner was served, however, at a small round table drawn within reasonable distance of a huge fire.

"What a strange house," Miss Mott remarked.

"It is the house," he confided, as he fetched her a cocktail from the sideboard, "for which the police have been searching for seven years. During the whole of that time it has been the headquarters of—what is it they call us?—the Number One Gangsters."

"Aren't you being a little over-confidential?" she asked, setting down her empty glass.

"Not in the least," he replied. "You and I are one, or shall be in a few hours. You have a right to share all my secrets, and besides, as I reminded you before, a wife cannot give evidence against her husband."

"I shall never be your wife," Miss Mott said firmly, "nor shall I be the other thing—whatever you like to call it. You are a much less intelligent person than you seem if you have not already discovered that there is no such thing as force between men and women."

"There is persuasion," he ventured.

"There is persuasion," she admitted, "but if that fails, there is nothing."

"You're not afraid then?" he asked curiously.

"Not very much," she answered. "The only fear I have is that I might have to die. I don't really want to: I'm much too interested in life."

Gordon, the perfect butler, began the service of dinner. She watched him with wondering eyes. His manner was entirely respectful, he might never have set eyes upon her before.

"Don't you sometimes feel," she asked her host, "that yours is a life of unrealities? You are so near the edge of the precipice at every moment. I think it is perfectly wonderful how you manage to ignore it. Look at Gordon there, for instance; he might be serving a little dinner for two in Grosvenor Square or anywhere. He looks as though the idea of a policeman would shock him and that he'd never heard the whistle of a bullet in his life."

Meredith smiled.

"We all get to be like that," he said. "It seems to be courage. It is really a sort of inbred fatalism. No one who does not possess it would drift into this desperate life."

"What made you do it?" she enquired, with genuine interest.

"The war," he answered, without hesitation. "It was the same with all of us, I think. The war left us with newly aroused impulses—the lust of killing, the craving for excitement. Those of us who had the instinct became freebooters quite naturally. An interesting war somewhere else would have been the only thing that could have saved us. The country, or rather the Government of the country, treated its heroes foully; they treated its rank and file worse. We represent the spirit of revolt. That's all I can tell you about it."

"What were you before the war?" she asked. "Since," she added, with the strangest smile that had ever flickered at the corners of her lips, "you expect me to become your wife, I have a right to ask, haven't I?"

"I was the youngest son of a peer and a very decent fellow, though poor," he confided. "So was the man whom you seem to have weaned away from us and whom I shall kill at any time if he comes near you—Violet Joe."

"Where is Violet Joe?" she enquired.

Meredith shook his head.

"I don't know," he admitted. "He has made a more or less honourable retreat. Nevertheless, there are a few bullets waiting for him when he comes into view. No good your looking cloudwards this time, my dear Miss Mott. Neither Violet Joe nor any other man on earth is coming to rescue you."

She shivered a little and watched the champagne bubbling in her glass.

"I don't see why you should be so confident," she said. "This seems to me to be a very conspicuous house."

"It is," he acknowledged. "That is why no one would believe the truth about it."

"What would happen if they did?"

"Since you ask me, I will tell you. We should fight until the last and we possess here every known device for fighting. When, finally, we were overpowered, as of course we should be, there are three separate buttons in different parts of the building enclosed in glass bulbs. One of us would smash the glass bulbs, press the buttons, and there would be the most wonderful exemplification of that old Biblical remark about one stone not remaining on another!"

"Then you yourselves would all be killed," she commented.

He smiled.

"You get the idea," he confessed. "As a matter of fact, no one is allowed to cross the portals here, to attend the meetings or to become a resident, unless their lives are already forfeit. You may take it that there is not a soul in this building, excepting yourself, who has not been guilty of either murder or manslaughter in the first degree."

Miss Mott had borne herself bravely, but the colour was leaving her cheeks. She finished her champagne and pushed back her chair. The tablecloth had been removed and the shaded electric light shone down upon a bowl of hothouse fruit and two decanters of wine.

"A peach," Meredith begged—"muscatel grapes—a glass of port or Madeira?"

Miss Mott braced herself. There was something terribly fascinating about her host's confidences. She broke off some muscatel grapes from their stalk and accepted half a glass of Madeira.

"You know I expect to be rescued," she said. "What will you do then?"

"The worst thing that could happen to you," he declared. "You'd have to share our fate without having the joy of the fight—"

"That doesn't sound very gallant," she complained. "If there's a fire anywhere, they always let the birds and the animals free."

He bowed a trifle satirically.

"The birds and animals in natural life are dumb," he reminded her. "They don't even possess a cockatoo uncle in

Scotland Yard!"

She finished her wine deliberately. Then she looked across the table at her host. For the first time she realised that in a strange sort of way he was handsome.

"I would not marry you, even if it were possible, I will not become anything else to you, and if you try to make me, you will be guilty of murder, because I shall kill myself. Will you let me go if I promise to keep the secret of this house and of everything else you have told me?"

His voice was incredibly gentle, his eyes disturbingly soft.

"I will not," he replied. "I will not, Lucie," he repeated, "because I love you and because I hope to make you change your mind."

"It is impossible," she cried.

"So has been my escape from justice on more than one occasion," he reminded her. "But I am here."

With every hour that passed, there grew stronger in Miss Mott's mind the conviction that this time Fate had proved too much for her. People came and went all day but, so far as she was concerned, the house at Greenwich was a complete and absolute fortress. The woman who waited upon her, and to whom, in a weak moment, she appealed, looked at her with scorn.

"A thousand pounds wouldn't be no use to me, nor ten thousand," she said. "No one ever got away from the master whom he wanted to keep, and no one ever will. If I let you out into the street, you'd be back by nightfall and I should be lying at the bottom of the river. If he wants you, better make up your mind to it. There's many'd like to be in your place."

Gordon brought up the cocktails the next morning, announcing that his master was out to lunch. His contempt got the better of his perfect manners.

"I like money, madam," he said, "but I value my life. Money is no use unless you've a year or two to spend it in. Did you read the papers this morning?"

"No," she confessed listlessly.

"There was a young Jew chap," he confided, "found dead on the Embankment, with a hole in the middle of his forehead. He'd been taken to Scotland Yard the day before and he was on his way there again. That young fellow was your chauffeur! The master doesn't run any risks. They're still waiting there to know where he drove you. They'll wait: he'll never be their guide."

Miss Mott drank her cocktail and said no more.

Meredith was back for dinner and, for him, in gay humour. He even ventured on a little badinage as to her pale cheeks and the rims under her eyes.

"All that will soon go, dear," he assured her, "when we get south. I'm beginning to hate these grey skies myself. Do you know that the time is drawing very near?"

"Is it?" she asked, with well-simulated indifference.

He laughed across the table.

"One part of my scheme," he confided, "has miscarried. We run too many risks in attempting that little ceremony here."

"It would have made no difference," she told him, "If you had brought your special licence and the clergyman, I should still refuse to marry you."

"You prefer '*la vie libre*'?" he questioned lightly. "Perhaps you are right. The only trouble is that when, in the natural

course of things, death will have washed my sins away, there may be children, and my son might very well become the heir to a title of some importance. My being a more or less notorious criminal, you see, doesn't affect that situation at all."

Miss Mott failed to afford him the satisfaction of a single sign of emotion, whatever she might have been feeling. Her eyes met his steadily across the table and there was a note almost of contempt in her tone.

"The occasion for disquietude on that account will never occur," she assured him...

He held the door open for her with his usual courtesy. Contrary to his custom, however, he mounted the stairs with her. She made no comment, but as she entered her room she gave a little cry. It was swept bare and her hat and coat alone remained upon the bed.

"What does this mean?" she asked, with sinking heart.

"The time is up," he told her gravely. "We leave in five minutes. We cross the river by motor boat to the yacht. She is anchored on the other side."

Then terror indeed came to Miss Mott and she shivered where she stood. Even the kindness in his tone when he spoke to her was like a subtle threat. He had seen the approach of her dour handmaiden and he frowned.

"As I daresay you know by experience, Miss Mott," he continued, "it is perfectly easy to keep you semi-conscious or wholly unconscious, until you are safely on the boat. I would rather treat you like a sensible human being. Will you give me your word not to open your lips to any one, not to cry out or try to attract any one's attention if I leave you as you are?"

Miss Mott, also, had noticed the approach of the woman, whom she had grown to hate, with a towel in one hand and a small medicine glass in the other, and she shivered.

"Yes, I will promise that," she agreed reluctantly.

Miss Mott wrapped herself in her cloak, drew on her hat and descended the stairs with Meredith. She passed into the front part of the house, which as yet she had not visited. She was dimly conscious of people about, like shadows, all men, all with that serious look in their faces which betokened a certain amount of anxiety. At the front door, Gordon was stationed, no longer in his livery, but dressed for a voyage. They stepped out and crossed the road, empty of pedestrians. Alongside the wharf a beautiful motor boat was waiting, her engines throbbing softly. Miss Mott took her place upon the cushioned seat, feeling her way there, for they were travelling without lights. Meredith went into the bows and, leaning forward, watched. One of the two men took the wheel and they shot away across stream...

Miss Mott looked up at the stars and prayed—this time very earnestly indeed—and when she glanced on each side into the black waters of the river, through which they were tearing, she seemed very near to death. For a single moment she weakened. She had lost much of her fear of Meredith. Life in its material aspects—and how else, after all, did life appeal to one nowadays—might still offer her something very near happiness. Then the subconscious revolt of her implacable virginity swept aside all such falterings. Unseen in the gloom she slipped off her coat, kicked off her shoes and stood for a moment poised on the edge of the boat. Meredith saw her and a great agonised shout burst from his lips. He leapt forward. Too late! There was a splash, and nothing to be seen on the other side of the wall of darkness!

Miss Mott swam steadily on into the white rays of the searchlight of an anchored liner waiting for her pilot. Gordon was on his knees in the launch, with his long automatic, waiting for her to come into sight. His finger was upon the trigger when he felt the gun snatched from his hand and his master's fist crashing into his face.

"She'll peach," he cried.

"Let her," Meredith answered savagely, as he threw the automatic into the river.

Up that long streak of white light, Miss Mott swam boldly. Hoarse voices were shouting from the liner. The sound of oars drew nearer at every moment. She was smiling happily when they dragged her into the boat.

VI

LOST MISS GREENE

Miss Mott, a little weary of the criminal world, welcomed with some curiosity the caller who presented himself towards the middle of a somewhat uneventful morning about a week after her return to the office. His visiting card piqued her too. Its original inscription was clearly—

THE REVEREND GEORGE PADMORE

but a thick-edged pencil had removed with meticulous care the prefix.

"Unfrocked," Miss Mott murmured to herself. "I wonder?"

George Padmore, duly ushered in, proved to be a rather shy, engaging young man, awkward in his movements and carriage, with large hands and feet, dressed in a shabby pepper-and-salt suit of semi-clerical cut, lanky, with very little healthy colour in his cheeks, but with a pair of large, earnest eyes. Miss Mott did her best from the first to set him at ease, but it was clear that he was desperately nervous.

"Mr. Padmore, isn't it?" she asked pleasantly, as she motioned him to a chair. "What can I do for you? It isn't often that I have a gentleman client. I don't know much about your sort of troubles, you know."

"I doubt whether you or any one else in the world can do anything for me, Miss Mott," he replied. "But it's about a missing young lady."

"Well, that seems to be in my line of business," she remarked, with an encouraging smile. "Tell me about it."

"She's disappeared," the young man declared tragically, leaning back in his chair.

"What's her name, when, how and where?" Miss Mott demanded.

"Her name's Florence Greene," the ex-divine confided. "She disappeared from her home in Farringford about a week ago and no one's heard a word of her since."

"Why do you come to me instead of the police?" was the next question.

He drew a copy of *Home Talks* from his pocket and turned to the "Answers to Correspondents."

"Because she must have written to you for advice," he explained. "Here's your reply to her:

To Florence G. My dear, surely you have some personal friend to whom you can confide your troubles. If, as you say, you are twenty-one, your aunts have no right to detain you and force you to do work which you dislike. With regard to the young man, if he is as fond of you as you think, I am sure he would disregard the fear of offending your aunts and help you, if you asked him. You say that you believe your father left you a little money, but you have never been told about it. Why not consult the local solicitor?"

Miss Mott nodded.

"Yes, I remember now," she acknowledged. "The young lady seemed in great distress."

"I want you to show me her letter."

Miss Mott shook her head.

"Impossible," she regretted. "My client's letters to me are personal."

"But don't you see," he pleaded, "that something in her letter might give me a hint as to what has happened? It might enable me to trace her."

"I can't help that," Miss Mott persisted.

"There were reasons," he went on earnestly, "why, at the time she wrote that letter to you, it was very important that I should be on friendly terms with her aunts. They have disappeared now. The whole situation is different. I must find her and tell her so."

Miss Mott rang the bell and went through the file which her clerk presently brought her. She drew out a letter and read it thoughtfully.

"There is nothing in this to indicate any intention of leaving home," she announced, looking up.

"I'm sure she didn't mean to go," the young man affirmed eagerly. "She—well—we're engaged. I'd been called away for a month, and only two days before I returned, I had a letter from her, saying how she was looking forward to my getting back. Then I got back and found her disappeared. Her aunts declare that she just walked out of the shop with a string bag to make some purchases, about a week ago, and they've never seen her since."

"I think," Miss Mott decided, "that it is a case for the police."

"If she's just gone away to hide for a few days, she'll never forgive me if I go to them."

Miss Mott looked across at him sweetly.

"You have something at the back of your mind which you have not told me," she suggested. "Is there any special reason why she should want to go away and hide?"

He flushed up to the temples and Miss Mott liked him for it. Suddenly he rose from his place. He walked to the window and back with long, awkward strides. Then he stood in front of her desk. Watching him closely, she could picture him as a revivalist preacher.

"We've been married nearly a year," he confided, "and there might be a reason. That's why I'm so terrified. She was under a promise to me not to tell her aunts. I wasn't independent then—and they supported the Chapel."

Miss Mott nodded and there was more sympathy than she had intended in her gesture.

"I will motor down to Farringford this afternoon," she promised.

At five o'clock that afternoon, Miss Mott—having recently invested in a Bentley—found herself seated upon an exceedingly slippery horsehair sofa, waiting for the coming of Miss Caroline Greene, who was at that moment occupied with customers in the adjoining shop. It was a small and stuffy parlour, which apparently did duty also as a dining room, for the odour of many meals still hung about it. The window abutted on the market place and was protected from the curiosity of passers-by by a wire blind of ancient design. There was no single article in the prim, ugly room upon which the eye could rest with pleasure. Miss Mott, who was sensitive to surroundings, had already begun to sympathise with her unknown correspondent—the mysterious Miss Florence Greene.

The door was opened and the proprietress of the shop presented herself. She was a thin woman of medium height, with a plain, anæmic face, a poor complexion and hair brushed severely back from her forehead. She wore a black stuff dress, the front of which was decorated with many pins. Hers could not by any chance be called a pleasing personality. She was a spinster growing old unwillingly and ungracefully. Miss Mott felt that her task might possibly become more difficult than she imagined.

"What do you want with me, please?" the shopkeeper asked sharply.

"I am a private enquiry agent," her visitor announced. "I want you to tell me what you can of your niece's disappearance."

"A private enquiry agent indeed!" Miss Greene repeated resentfully. "What has happened to Florence is nobody's business but our own."

At that moment the door was again opened. A very short, fat old lady wearing steel-rimmed spectacles entered and

seated herself somewhat precariously upon the edge of one of the slippery chairs.

"This is my manageress—Miss Toller," the other woman announced. "She has been with us for forty years. She was the last person to see my niece. Martha, this young lady says she is an enquiry agent. Some one's engaged her to find out what's become of Florence."

"It seems a strange thing," the little old lady declared in an unexpectedly shrill voice, "that any one should think it necessary to meddle in our business to that extent. Farringford's a small place and folks can't slip off the edge of the earth, as it were."

"Maybe not," Miss Mott agreed, "yet, according to your own story, Miss Greene, it is ten days since your niece walked out of this parlour and went through the shop, swinging her string bag, without any one having set eyes on her since. Do you mind telling me exactly what her destination was?"

"Weggs, the greengrocer, on the top side of the market place," Miss Greene replied.

"Had she other errands?"

"Not that I know of."

"Had she any money with her?"

"She had her purse. Neither she nor I go about penniless. She might have had a matter of six or seven shillings—no more."

"Did she seem in good spirits?"

"She was whistling when she passed through the shop—a habit I never approved of myself for young girls."

"Do you know whether she was in any sort of trouble?"

"Not that any of us were aware of," was the stiff reply.

"What was her age?"

"Twenty-one."

"Have you a photograph of her?"

Miss Greene rose to her feet, fetched an album bound in limp morocco and fastened with a gilt clasp from its resting place upon the top of the family Bible, took out a loose photograph and passed it to Miss Mott. To her surprise, although it was badly taken, it was the photograph of a very pretty girl.

"She left here at eleven o'clock last Wednesday week," Miss Mott recapitulated, replacing the photograph; "you saw her start out across the market place and you have not seen her since. Did she order the vegetables?"

"Never went near the shop."

"Did any of the tradespeople see her?"

"Not one."

Miss Mott glanced thoughtfully across the market square. It was a very small town, with the principal shops set in a circle round the market place. It seemed incredible that any one could cross it without being seen by some loiterer.

"Was any one else in the shop when you saw her leave?" Miss Mott asked.

"There was the young lady assistant, Miss Brown, and the young gentleman, Mr. Murdin, about at the time, but they neither of them happened to be looking," Miss Toller explained. "Miss Brown was packing up a parcel and Mr. Murdin was examining some calico we'd had some complaints about—yellow spots there were on every other roll. She came out of the parlour—opened the door of the shop, lifted the flap of the counter, just gave me a sort of nod and out she went, whistling."

Miss Mott reflected for a moment.

"She had nothing on her mind? No special anxiety that you know of?"

"None whatever," the missing young lady's aunt replied tartly. "She disliked the shop very much and never took her place behind the counter if she could help it."

"Life here," Miss Mott mused, "must be very quiet for an attractive young lady. Had she any special admirers?"

"Not that I am aware of," Miss Greene rejoined. "We do not encourage anything of the sort."

Miss Mott looked thoughtfully at the woman opposite to her, flat-chested, anæmic, with all the evidences of indifferent health in her sallow skin and colourless lips, yet with that curious half-suppressed rebellion against spinsterhood in her uneasy eyes.

"You yourself have no theory," she enquired, "as to what has become of her?"

"None at all."

"When she failed to return at the end of the day," Miss Toller pointed out, "we mentioned the matter at the Police Station. We could do no more."

"Can I have a look at the young lady's room?" Miss Mott asked.

Her aunt seemed somewhat surprised. After a moment's hesitation, however, she rose reluctantly to her feet.

"If you wish," she assented stiffly. "She shares it with our young lady in the shop—Miss Brown."

Miss Greene led the way up two flights of narrow stairs to a sleeping apartment which was scarcely better than an attic. Even here there was very little light or air. The whole place seemed built in—musty with the dead odours of generations of inadequate ventilation. The wall of the adjoining house butted out across one window, the other was in the nature of a skylight, grimy and inaccessible. There was a worn fragment of oilcloth upon the floor, a text upon the wall, two iron bedsteads and a few articles of deal furniture.

"The chest of drawers belongs to my niece," Miss Greene explained. "Our young lady assistant keeps her things in the wardrobe."

Miss Mott pulled open several of the drawers and glanced through their contents.

"You will find nothing there but ordinary wearing apparel," the missing young woman's aunt assured her, frowning.

"Quite so," Miss Mott concurred. "On the other hand, your niece did not disappear without some reason or other, and the very slightest thing might furnish us with the clue we want. Is there no place where she would be likely to keep letters?"

"She very seldom received any. That desk is hers."

Miss Mott tried it and found it locked.

"You haven't the key?" she enquired.

"I have not," was the curt response. "I am sure that you are wasting your time here, Miss Mott. Your enquiries had better be prosecuted outside."

Miss Mott raised her eyebrows deprecatingly.

"I'm obliged to work in my own way," she regretted. "You will have to apologise to your niece when she returns."

She inserted the thin blade of a knife and the desk opened easily. It contained, after all, little of interest. There were some letters of ancient date, most of them from girl friends or relatives, several prospectuses from shorthand schools, and a faded photograph, at which Miss Mott looked for several moments doubtfully until she suddenly remembered the young divine at whose bidding she was here. She was in the act of replacing it, when to her amazement it was snatched from her hand. The woman by her side was staring at it with the venomous gleam of a tigress in her eyes.

"Where did you find that?" she demanded. "It wasn't in the desk."

"It was," Miss Mott replied.

The woman by her side was breathing so fast that speech for a moment seemed almost impossible. Before Miss Mott could interfere, she threw the photograph upon the floor and stamped on it.

"Deceitful little slut," the woman almost shrieked. "He never gave her that. She stole it!"

Miss Mott became aware of an unexpected interest in her wearisome task.

"Is that the photograph of any one you know?" she enquired.

"It is the photograph of our pastor, the Reverend George Padmore," she declared. "He is a wonderful man, but Florence—why, he's never taken the least notice of her! He may have said a few kind words, because he's kind to everybody. She must have lost her head. She stole that!"

"Well, it doesn't seem of much consequence," Miss Mott observed, stooping to pick it up. "There was another thing I wanted to ask you about."

She reopened one of the drawers over which she had lingered previously and pulled out a dress. It was a poor, crumpled little affair of thin brown serge, very creased and torn in several places.

"When did your niece last wear this dress?" she asked.

For several moments there was no reply, and, glancing around, Miss Mott realised why. The woman's thin, disagreeable face, still distorted by its recent fit of passion, had developed a new repulsion. The weak eyes were half closed. She was blinking as though she wished to avoid the sight of something repellent.

"I don't know," she replied at last. "Why do you ask such a question? What have her clothes to do with the matter?"

"Nothing, I daresay," Miss Mott acknowledged. "Most probably nothing. And yet the condition of this frock is rather surprising, when compared with the neatness of the rest of your niece's things. It looks as though it had been bundled up and thrown in hurriedly."

"Florence is only tidy by fits and starts," her aunt explained. "Let me fold up the dress and put it back."

Miss Mott, however, retained it.

"I'll keep the dress for a short time, if you don't mind," she decided. "I should like to have a look at the shop now, if I might."

"What do you want to look in there for?" Miss Greene demanded suspiciously, as she followed her visitor downstairs.

"Well, just a fancy," the latter answered. "We have to work on ideas, you know, in a case of this sort."

The other made no further protest. Arrived in the passage, Miss Mott opened the door leading into the shop and found herself behind the counter of a dingy, unprepossessing-looking emporium. A young woman had just finished wrapping up two reels of cotton for a child. Miss Mott turned towards her with the dress upon her arm.

"I believe," she ventured, "that you share the room upstairs with Miss Florence Greene, don't you? I wonder whether you could help us by remembering when she last wore this frock?"

Miss Toller was crossing the floor from the opposite counter. She looked fatter and more grotesque than ever. Her face was very red, her eyes beady.

"I can't have you in here, interfering with my assistant," she exclaimed in a shrill, angry voice.

The girl appeared frightened for a moment, but Miss Mott smiled at her reassuringly.

"Miss Toller doesn't quite understand," she confided. "You must please answer my question. It is important."

The girl examined the dress, glanced nervously at the flushed, furious face of the manageress and back at her questioner.

"I thought that was the dress Florrie had on the morning she disappeared," she confided.

There was a moment's silence. Miss Mott seemed puzzled.

"Well, I'm afraid that's impossible on the face of it, isn't it?" she observed.

"I suppose so," was the doubtful response. "I thought Florrie put it on when she got up: of course, she might have changed later."

Miss Mott turned towards the grotesque little figure by her side. Miss Toller was breathing stertorously as she leaned against the counter.

"By-the-bye, you saw Miss Florence leave the shop," she remarked. "Did you notice what dress she was wearing?"

"Why should I?" she rejoined sullenly. "She had too many dresses for an idle young woman, in my opinion. She couldn't have been wearing that one or you wouldn't have found it in the drawer."

"She was wearing grey," Miss Greene declared, creeping a little nearer to them from the other end of the shop. "Grey tweed—at least, it looked like tweed. It was made from a sample length we bought from one of the travellers."

Miss Mott nodded and laid the dress, which she had been carrying, on the counter, pushing it on one side, as though dismissing the matter from her thoughts.

"After all, it isn't very important, is it?" she observed, "unless we issue bills later on with the description. The great thing is to find out what has become of the young lady. What do you think of it, Miss Brown? Where do you think your bedroom companion's disappeared to?"

Miss Brown was a tall, awkward-looking girl with high cheek bones and she spoke the dialect of the county. She seemed half pleased and half disturbed at being invited to give her opinion.

"Can't say, I'm sure," she declared. "Doesn't seem to me she'd any call to upset us all like this—going away without a word to anybody."

"Just so," Miss Mott agreed. "Very inconsiderate. Well, Miss Greene, I am very much obliged to you for your information and I shall now go and think things over. If I have any more questions to ask, perhaps I'll look in later on."

"I don't see why you should have," was the acid reply. "I don't quite see why you're poking your nose into the business at all and in any case there's nothing to be learnt here. It's outside you ought to be making your enquiries. When you know already that the young woman walked out of the shop and didn't come back, what's the use of hanging around here?"

"I expect you're right," Miss Mott acquiesced humbly. "I'll stroll across and have a talk with the police."

Miss Toller threw down a bale of cloth which seemed far too heavy for her to lift, upon the counter. Somehow or other, one felt that she was expressing her opinion of the police.

Miss Mott found her presence in the lounge smoke room of the George Hotel during the early hours of that evening a matter which excited little comment amongst the tradespeople who had dropped in for their drink and chat. There were Roman remains in the neighbourhood, a curious hill which had puzzled many an archeologist, and tourists of both sexes were by no means a rarity. Neither had she to go out of her way to learn what popular gossip said about the disappearance of Miss Florence Greene. The conversation drifted naturally into this one subject of absorbing interest, without any encouragement on her part. It was the local stationer, a grey-haired, pompous little man, with gold-rimmed glasses and a somewhat protuberant stomach, who opened the subject. He was vicar's churchwarden, chairman of the Farringford Literary Society, and a member of the County Council. His name was John Standish.

"No news of the young lady, I suppose?" he asked the company generally.

"Fatty Grimston thought he saw her come out of one o' them tea shops in Didcot," some one observed.

"Fatty's always got a tale to tell," Mr. Adams, the butcher, scoffed. "What would she want to go to Didcot for? Besides, it isn't humanly likely that she could have got away without being noticed. There's old Sam, the station master! I bet you there's not a morning he couldn't tell you the names of every passenger on his train."

Fellowes, the ironmonger, stretched out his hand for his glass of whisky.

"I spoke to the Sergeant this morning and he seemed at his wits' end. The Chief Constable is wanting to send to Scotland Yard about it, but her aunt and Miss Toller, they're dead against it."

There was silence for a moment. One gathered that the two ladies mentioned were scarcely popular.

"It seems to me it would be better to have the girl back again and risk a bit of scandal," Mr. Adams declared.

There was a little murmur of assent. Then Miss Mott decided on a somewhat unusual course—a course inspired by the fact that the case itself was unusual in its simplicity and yet in its vagueness. She leaned forward and joined in the conversation.

"May I tell you all something?" she begged. "I own a small Enquiry Office in London and I have been engaged by some one to come down and look into the matter of Miss Florence Greene's disappearance."

The announcement was received courteously but with some surprise. Observations of a tentatively welcome nature were made. Mr. Standish, the stationer, expressed the general feeling.

"Glad to meet you, Miss—" he began.

"Miss Mott, my name is," she confided.

"—Miss Mott," he went on. "Seems a queer thing for a young lady like you to be a kind of private detective and to be so ready to own up to it. The sort you read about generally hides in corners and pretends to be some one else."

"Turns up with a case of samples, like a commercial traveller," Mr. Adams suggested.

"Or pretends to be an American professor come to view the tumuli," a dapper little man, who appeared to have some connection with horses, interposed.

There was a guffaw of laughter. It was a tradition of the George Lounge that a laugh must always be raised when Billy Dent, who was the town's humorist, opened his mouth.

"It is unusual to be quite so candid about oneself, I admit," Miss Mott agreed. "This is one of those cases, however, where secrecy doesn't seem particularly necessary, and I may get just the hint I want at any moment from any one of you. I take it you are all interested in discovering what has become of the young lady? She seems not to have an enemy in the world or the slightest complication in life, therefore why should I make any mystery about the fact that I have come down to see if I can find out what's become of her?"

"Common sense," Mr. Standish acknowledged portentously; "sound common sense."

"Of course, I am a complete stranger here," Miss Mott went on. "I didn't know a soul until I arrived this afternoon. Miss Greene now, the young lady's aunt, and Miss Toller, the two ladies I have been to see—they're old residents, aren't they?"

Mr. Standish removed his pipe from his mouth. It was evident that he was usually regarded as being spokesman.

"They're as old as any we've got in the town," he confided. "The business belonged to Caroline Greene's father. I remember him well. He died thirty years ago, when Caroline was something like twenty-two or twenty-three years old. Miss Toller was manageress then—a slim young body she was too, and she and Miss Caroline have carried on the shop ever since. Don't know as it's much of a catch nowadays," the stationer continued thoughtfully, "but they must have made a decent bit of money out of it. They haven't been spenders either, except that they've always been ready to put their hands into their pockets for the Chapel."

"Charitable, are they?" Miss Mott ventured.

Mr. Standish knocked the ashes from his pipe and paused for a moment.

"There's charitable and charitable," he propounded. "They don't take much stock in the poor. It's their own Chapel—the Independent Chapel here—that all their money goes to. Last year they gave one of those new American organs and this year they paid for a stove between them. Three times a day to worship—that's them on a Sunday—and there's never a Tuesday or a Friday but young Parson Padmore doesn't take tea or supper with them. They're religious folk, without a doubt, but it's in a way of their own."

"And Miss Florence?"

"Well, she used to go to Chapel too, pretty regular at one time," Mr. Standish confided. "Since last Easter, however, she's taken to coming to Church."

"I suppose," Miss Mott observed thoughtfully, "no one can suggest a reason as to why she should have been anxious to get away from home?"

The dapper little man with the horsy appearance chuckled.

"I could, and a darn good one too," he declared. "To get away from those two, her aunt and t'other. You've seen them, miss?"

"Yes, I've seen them," Miss Mott admitted, with the flicker of a smile upon her lips.

"Well, the Lord forgot the looks when he was fixing them up. I ain't a particular man, so as you'd notice it, but it would give me the shivers to sit at the same table with them, year in and year out. Good and holy folk they may be as the Bible itself, but when you've said that, you've done with them. I always thought that some day or other Miss Florence would launch out—get up to London or something of the sort."

"Typing it was she was considering," Mr. Standish intervened in an important manner. "She came to me for advice upon the matter."

"A typist is very likely what she's gone to be," Mr. Adams assented, "but she have done it in the most mysterious way."

"Extra mysterious," the stationer agreed. "Listen here, Miss Mott, market day might have been a different matter, but Tuesday ain't a busy morning with us and we're curious folk, as people grow to be, living in a quiet place like this. That she could walk out o' that shop at eleven o'clock in the morning, as her aunt and Miss Toller declare she did, and go anywheres in this town without a single pair of eyes following her, seems to me amazing. I'm generally on my shop doorstep myself, taking a breath of air, and there's plenty of the others always looking out to see what's going on. Amazing, I do call it, surely."

"No young man, I suppose?" Miss Mott enquired. "She wasn't engaged to be married or anything of that sort?"

"Not as ever I heard tell on," Mr. Standish replied, with a sigh, as he thought of his own unmarried daughters. "Young men in these parts are scarce."

"Snapped up quick, we young 'uns are," Billy Dent, who was well over sixty, chuckled.

There was a brief and somewhat strained silence. Miss Mott was trying to find her way behind it.

"I fancy," the stationer continued presently, "that Miss Florence, although she seemed cheerful enough, was none too well pleased with life. You might find plenty of motives, Miss Mott, for her going away, but the puzzle to us is—how did she do it, with the whole town's eyes upon her?"

"If she'd wanted to sneak away," Mr. Adams pointed out, "being a young woman of ordinary common sense, she wouldn't have come out with a string bag at eleven o'clock in the morning and started off across the market place. What I should have done now," he went on, accepting a tumbler from a tray which the landlady, at Miss Mott's request, was carrying round, "if my little business was going bust, say, and I had to make a mysterious disappearance from my creditors—"

"What about that bob you owes me, William?" Billy Dent interrupted.

"I should have left at night, when every one had gone to sleep," the butcher continued unmoved. "And to sleep they do go early in these parts. I should have walked to the Junction, which is only two miles and a half away, and caught one of them night trains somewhere."

"Apparently," Miss Mott observed with a smile, "the young lady was more clever. She managed to disappear quite as effectually in broad daylight, and from the middle of the town."

There was a renewal of that strained silence and the thoughts engendered by it were practically all that Miss Mott gained by her unconventional effort. Then the clock struck half-past seven, and as though with one accord, every one in the room rose to his feet and straggled towards the door.

"See you later, miss," Mr. Standish remarked, with a little bow towards Miss Mott.

"I expect so," she answered pleasantly, "unless I've finished my job and found the young lady before you come back!"

There was a guffaw of laughter as the room cleared. When the last man had departed, Miss Mott finished her glass of sherry and, approaching the bar where Mrs. Holmes the landlady was seated, making up her accounts, produced a photograph.

"I wonder, Mrs. Holmes," she asked, "if you could tell me if this is a photograph of any one living in the neighbourhood?"

Mrs. Holmes adjusted her spectacles and looked at it curiously.

"Why, surely!" she exclaimed. "That's a picture of the Reverend George Padmore, the Independent Minister here—him that Mr. Standish was talking about."

"Married?" Miss Mott enquired, although she was beginning to have faith in her client's story.

Mrs. Holmes shook her head.

"Better for him if he were," she confided, "though seventy pounds a year is no decent wage for any married man. The way these old women who ought to know better runs after him must make life cruel and uncomfortable sometimes. There's them two opposite," she went on, dropping her voice a little, although the lounge was empty, "who surely did ought to know better—Miss Caroline Greene and Miss Toller—it's something cruel the way they persecute the poor man. And what for, a body'd like to know? They're both of them—well, you've seen them, Miss Mott! I ask you what sort of sense there is in females like that pestering a young man of thirty-five, pauper though he may be, and man of God. There's others in the congregation, but them two are the worst. It's my belief Miss Florence left the Chapel and took up Church religion sooner than watch her aunt and the other old lady making fools of themselves all the time."

Miss Mott replaced the photograph in her pocket.

"Very interesting," she murmured.

"You found the photograph over in Miss Greene's sitting room, no doubt?" the landlady asked curiously.

"It was somewhere lying about," was the evasive reply. "I'm going to have a wash now and see about dinner."

"You'll be in and have a talk with the other gentlemen later, perhaps?" Mrs. Holmes invited. "They'll all be here again, round nine o'clock, and Mr. Goodlip as well, the bank manager. A very nice company they are and as sociable as can be."

Miss Mott took her leave with a noncommittal reply. She felt that she had already learnt all that the local gossips had to tell her. The lounge was fuller than usual that night, in anticipation of her coming, but while they waited, the very trim little lady with beautiful eyes, who had seemed to them so untrue to type, was justifying the more conventional traditions of her profession. With a pair of light rubber-soled shoes upon her feet, a torch in her pocket and a burglarious instrument in her hand, she had crossed the market square of the drowsy town, picked a lock and undertaken a brief investigation of the rear of the premises from which Miss Florence Greene had disappeared. Her task proved to be a very brief one. In less than a quarter of an hour she was knocking at the front door of the six-roomed cottage next to his Chapel, in which Mr. George Padmore lived.

Caroline Greene, when the shop was finally closed for the day, and supper disposed of, rose to her feet and drew the curtain a little more closely over the wire blind, in order to shut out the observation of even the least curious of passers-by. Secrecy ensured, she crossed the room to the cupboard, produced a decanter and two glasses, set one before Miss Toller and retained the other. Solemnly she half filled both, poured in an equal quantity of water, and resumed her seat on the hard horsehair sofa. Miss Toller, seated sideways at the table, for the reason that her legs were too fat to go underneath it, looked up from the heavy calf-bound volume she had been studying and drank slowly from the tumbler, her weak eyes rolling all the time. Miss Greene followed her example.

"Have you found any new ones?" the latter asked.

"There's one here," Miss Toller announced, fixing a stubby forefinger upon the open page. "'The harlot hath no place amongst the children of men nor in the heaven to come. She shall be thrown into everlasting darkness.'"

Miss Greene sighed.

"I sometimes wish," she murmured, "that we had taken George into our confidence; if she could hear him read these lines, then indeed she might be afraid."

"It is hard," Miss Toller said, taking another gulp from her tumbler, "to put fear into the heart of the sinner. As for George Padmore—he's a holy man, but it is better that he knows nothing of our disgrace. We must persevere, Caroline. Last night she weakened; to-night we must pray."

"Yes, we will pray," Caroline assented.

They sat for some moments in silence. As though by mutual consent, they finished the contents of their tumblers as the church clock across the way struck ten. Then they rose and left the room, Miss Toller leading the way with a book under her arm, making swaying progress down the smelly passage, through the stuffy kitchen in which was no window opening to the light, out into a paved way covered with a whitewashed glass roof. They passed several doors and paused at length before one secured on the outside with a padlock. Miss Greene opened it with a key which she drew from her pocket, and the two women entered. There was a slight moan from somewhere in the darkness, as they closed the door behind them. Miss Toller, breathing stertorously, struck a match and lit a malodorous tallow candle. In the roughest of iron bedsteads, set in a corner of the room, a girl was lying. The bedstead was shaped like a baby's crib, with high rails at the sides, and to these the girl's wrists were bound with strong packing cord. There was no window or any ventilation in the place. A spider hung down from the ceiling, dust lay thick upon the floor. A pile of newspapers, the accumulation of years, had been thrown into a corner. Two empty packing cases and a few bales of calico stood against the grimy, whitewashed wall.... The girl's eyes were open. There was fear lurking in them, as she looked at the two women, but it was fear which had lost its panic, a sort of numb, hopeless fear. She said nothing. She only moaned slightly. Miss Toller brought a short stool up to the side of the bed and seated herself. Miss Greene held the candle high, while she found her place in the book. The girl shook her head piteously.

"No more," she faltered, "I think that I am dying."

Miss Greene leaned over her niece. In the candle-light her teeth seemed yellower and more prominent than ever. Her voice was thin and acrid. There was hate in her expression, as she seemed to realise the soft pathetic beauty of the trembling mouth and pleading eyes even in these mortal straits.

"If you are dying, Florence, you will die in sin. You will pass from here into hell unless you confess. Read to her, Martha."

Miss Toller read the passage which she had quoted in the sitting room and she read it with relish. The girl kept her eyes closed.

"Read some more," Caroline Greene enjoined; "then I will pray."

The girl's eyes were closed now, although her eyelids fluttered. Her face was wasted. There was a delicate but unhealthy flush in her cheeks. She was breathing quickly.

"Stop," she begged. "Don't read me any more out of that terrible book. If you won't give me any food, give me some water."

"And he stretched his hands out of hell," Miss Toller droned on, dropping the spectacles over her pudgy nose and reading with fervour. "He cried out to the passers-by for drink and they gave him vinegar."

The girl began to sob. There was something appallingly inhuman about the indifference of the two women. Miss Greene produced a bottle from the bag she was carrying, poured out a wineglass full of water and offered it to their victim, who drank it feverishly. Then she fell on her knees and broke into a rambling prayer which ended in an exhortation:

"Into this house where you have lived, Florence," she declared solemnly, "sin has never before entered. We have found grace here and we have kept it. Our days have been days of holiness. We have been blessed with the spiritual aid of one of the Lord's good men. Think how terrible a shock, then, to find that one of our household whom we have trusted has dipped her hands into the waters of abomination."

"I am dying," the girl moaned. "Why can't you leave me alone?"

"You will not die," her aunt assured her harshly. "You will have no peace in earth or in hell until you have told us the name of the man."

There was a moment of complete silence. Then the girl raised herself as much as the cord which bound her permitted.

"I will tell it to one person in the world," she announced, with unexpected strength, "not to you, Aunt Caroline, nor to you," she added, turning away with loathing from the other figure by her bed. "I will tell it to George Padmore."

There was anger now, furious and venomous, in the expressions of her torturers. Miss Greene buried her face in her hands.

"Our friend in God!" she cried. "You would pollute his ears with your horrible story!"

"One of the Lord's chosen," Miss Toller added unctuously. "You would besmirch our good name, you would mark with a black cross this godly household."

They leaned over her, scowling. Then, from outside, came the sudden rush of heavy footsteps. The two women stood dumbfounded. The door was crashed open by some unseen force and the ex-Reverend George Padmore stumbled in. He was wearing black, semi-clerical clothes, bicycle clips still confined the bottoms of his dusty trouser legs, perspiration streamed down his face. He looked past the two women with horror towards the form upon the bed. In the background stood Miss Mott.

"What does this mean?" he gasped. "What are you doing to Florence?"

He pushed roughly forward, knife in hand, and cut the cords which bound her wrists. They fell down like dead things. Caroline Greene stood erect—a thin, ugly figure of denunciation.

"Florence has committed what you yourself have called the great sin. She is here until she tells us the name—the name of the man."

He knelt by the side of the bed. His rough hands caressed the girl's face, upon the lips of which a slow smile was breaking.

"Do you mean that you have kept her a prisoner here all the time I've been away—all the time the police have been searching for her?" he demanded.

"That is what we have done," Miss Toller pronounced sonorously. "She will remain here until she loses the strength of which she has been so proud, until she feels the threshold of the other world beneath her feet, and tells the truth. We have kept her alive, but to-night she is weaker. She is nearer confession. I have read the word of truth to her for hours—" the woman ogress went on, her breathing becoming more difficult. "She takes no notice, she is in the clutches of sin, her heart is hardened."

"And I too have prayed, dear Brother George," Miss Greene cried fervently. "She is far gone in evil, the obstinacy of sin

is hers. It is for you, George, to make her speak. Lift your hands as you do in our blessed Chapel, speak so that the ceilings are opened and her heart is moved. We have heard sinners sob out the truth to you before, Brother George! Make this poor Magdalen confess."

The man rose to his feet and swung suddenly around. His eyes were on fire. He looked at the two women by the bedside and they shrank from him aghast.

"In Christ's name, what has she to confess?" he demanded. "*Mine* is the name her lips have never uttered, for me her foolish sacrifice. I am the father of her child, and her husband. My wife—it is my wife whom you are doing to death here—you two she-devils.... Florence dear, you should have broken your promise. Everything is all right now. Can you forgive?"

The most tremulous but happiest of smiles quivered upon her lips. One of her hands twitched with reawakening life and he took it into his. Miss Mott was holding water to her lips and gently massaging her other hand. Miss Toller's mouth was grotesquely opened—an unwholesome colour was flooding her face. Caroline Greene stood like a figure of stone.

"Curse you, I had to live!" he shouted to them. "Thirty pounds a year was all I got from the Ministry—you made up the rest. I worked for you, I prayed for you, I put up with your hypocrisy—the small hypocrisies of all the men and women—even the best of them, who kneel every Sunday in my pews. You kept the church going; I know that. What for? What sort of charity was in your hearts—you two, who could torture a human being like this? And she—we were married a year ago, but she daren't tell you, for my sake. She knew the truth. She knew the jealousy that was in your hearts," he added, scowling at Miss Greene. "You'd have left the Chapel to go to ruin and me to starve, if you'd known the truth. And I wasn't man enough to tell you.... Well, you know now. I've finished. I may have done some good here—there are a few honest people whom I've helped and comforted—they've taught me to feel sometimes how ignorant I am. Whether God deserts me or not—blast you both! No more of your Chapel for me; I can take care of Florence without it."

He stooped down, drew off some of the bedclothes and, with Miss Mott's help, wrapped a blanket around the trembling figure and lifted her gently up. Her hands went around his neck, the fingers of one of them seeking for Miss Mott's kindly clasp. He arranged the covering tenderly around her. Still neither of the two women spoke.

"Well?" he challenged them.

There was still silence. He turned towards the door.

"I am taking my wife home," he said. "You can come and fetch your furniture to-morrow, you can stop your money, you can fetch your organ away, if I haven't smashed it up first, and you can close the Chapel. If people like you are coming to pray there, it's better closed. We sha'n't starve. But," he added, glowering back at them, "if you've done her real harm, if she suffers from this, I'll send you where you belong. You shall taste a prison on earth before your kingdom in heaven."

He strode out. The girl in his arms was sobbing softly, but he felt the warmer blood in her veins as she clung to him with one hand and to Miss Mott with the other. At the outer gate, with his fingers upon the latch, they all three looked back upon a curious sight. Holding the fluttering candle in her hand, Miss Greene led the way towards the house, gaunt and uncertain of step, Miss Toller following, swaying from side to side, more like a great, unwholesome insect of fabulous age. George Padmore opened the gate and slammed it, and the girl in his arms gave a little sob of pleasure as the fresh sweet air blew into their faces.

"Life!" she murmured. "After all, life—"

In the airless sitting room, with its hard horsehair chairs and grim ugliness, the two women hours later slept, Miss Greene half upon the couch, Miss Toller doubled sideways, with her head upon the table, making terrible noises. The empty decanter was between them, the grandfather clock in the corner ticked away the minutes towards daylight. Across the dreaming market place Miss Mott, having given orders for an early morning start, was slumbering peacefully in her four-poster.

At nine o'clock the next morning, Miss Mott, seeing the Chapel door open, peered in. George Padmore with a sheepish

grin upon his face and a hatchet in his hand, came down the aisle. Behind him lay the mangled remains of an American organ. Neither Miss Mott nor he made any allusion to the circumstance.

"How is your wife, Mr. Padmore?" she enquired.

"Fine," he answered. "She's sleeping still."

"Can I do anything for her?"

"Thank you, Miss Mott. I've a woman in to look after things. If you wouldn't mind telling me," he went on awkwardly, "what I owe you for finding her—you needn't mind taking a bit of money. My uncle left me his business and a thousand pounds. That's why I've been away so long—fixing things up!"

Miss Mott went out into the sunny morning, laughing happily.

"You can tell me the nearest cut into the Great West Road."

VII

MEREDITH WALKS OUT

Miss Mott studied her visitor with more than ordinary interest. She, the visitor, was almost flauntingly Italian—in complexion, colouring and the grace with which she wore her somewhat shabby clothes. Her black fringe descended low over her forehead, her brown eyes flashed with every word she spoke, her mouth was sullen and a little hard.

"Did you say that you had been one of my correspondents?" Miss Mott asked.

"Yes," the girl replied. "You answered me in last week's paper. Fenetta I called myself. I wrote to you about my husband."

"I remember."

"I wanted to follow him when he stayed out at night," the young woman went on. "You advised me to do nothing of the sort. You told me to ask him frankly what was keeping him out so much and so often late at night. Well! I followed your advice—I asked him. He replied with one word—business. He would say no more. Business indeed!"

"What does your husband do for a living?"

The girl threw out her hands.

"That is what I ask myself. When I married him he was a *maitre d'hôtel*. Now he sells on commission—the wine of Italy—the oil—what he can."

"I see," Miss Mott remarked briskly. "Well, I gave you the best advice I could. I think he ought to tell you more. I'm afraid there's no other way I can help you."

"But you have here an enquiry agency, haven't you?" the girl asked.

"Quite true, but to use it costs money," Miss Mott explained. "It has nothing to do with my work upon the paper. It is an independent enterprise of my own."

"I have money," the girl announced. "Out of my savings I will be able to pay."

"What do you want me to do?" Miss Mott enquired.

The girl smoothed out a strip of paper and laid it upon the desk. There were a few words only—and the paper was scented:

"Café de la Pomme d'Or—8 o'clock."

"That I find in his pocket," the girl exclaimed, with a little, dramatic gesture. "It is in a woman's writing. There is a woman; I always knew there was one."

Miss Mott was bored. She had come to the conclusion long ago that to meddle, even to the extent of giving advice, in the love entanglements of Italians of this class was a dangerous thing.

"It is for you, this affair," the girl decided, with a new vivacity in her tone. "I pay. Do not be afraid. You send or go to the Café de la Pomme d'Or to-night and you tell me with whom my man is."

"Thank you," Miss Mott refused. "I'd rather not."

The girl burst into a stream of rapid speech. Miss Mott checked her firmly.

"I do not take divorce business," she explained. "I do not care to interfere between husband and wife. Besides, I have plenty of work to do at present."

"What I ask is not much," the girl insisted. "I give you a photograph of my husband—here it is. You go to the Pomme d'Or

a little before eight, you eat your dinner there, you watch—my husband come in—you see with whom—you find out the girl's name and where they go. I pay."

"It would cost you ten guineas," Miss Mott warned her.

The girl opened an almost worn-out black bag, with tarnished silver clasps. She counted out the money.

"I come to-morrow to know," she said, rising to her feet. "You are satisfied, yes?"

Miss Mott sighed resignedly and pushed half the money back again.

"This will be quite enough," she said. "I didn't really want to take your commission at all. However, I'll do what I can."

"I come back to-morrow morning," the girl repeated, as she left the room.

Miss Mott rang up her uncle at Scotland Yard. Superintendent Detective Wragge was in and very pleased to talk to his niece.

"The Pomme d'Or Restaurant," he repeated. "Wait a minute; I'll send for the records."

There was a brief pause devoted to desultory conversation. Then another pause. Finally Superintendent Wragge's announcement.

"Absolutely clean sheet," he reported. "Kept by an Italian name of Entonelli. Never been in trouble, looked upon as one of the best type of small restaurateurs. Why the enquiry?"

Miss Mott disclosed the nature of her commission. Her uncle grunted.

"I thought you didn't go in for that sort of business," he said.

"I don't usually," she admitted. "The girl got round me."

"Well, it doesn't look as if you'd come to much harm, anyway," he declared, and rang off...

Miss Mott went out that afternoon to a tea party at the house of a girl friend. When she returned at six o'clock, there was an official-looking envelope on her desk with the always impressive words "*On His Majesty's Service*." It was also marked "*Immediate and Important*." Miss Mott opened it quickly. There was only one sentence in her uncle's handwriting:

"On no account go near the Pomme d'Or. Wait for me at your office."

The bespectacled young girl who attended to Miss Mott's correspondence came hurrying in.

"You've got your note, Miss Mott?" she asked.

Her chief nodded.

"Yes. When did it come?"

"About an hour ago," the girl confided. "The man had two others. One addressed to you at your club and one at your flat."

Miss Mott felt a little thrill of excitement.

"Tell them in the office they needn't wait," she said, as she took off her hat. "My uncle is coming in to see me. I'll lock up afterwards."

"There's a young woman to see you, in the other office," the girl announced. "The young woman who was here this morning."

Miss Mott was interested.

"Show her in at once," she directed. "And, if my uncle comes before she is gone, ask him to wait."

The girl hurried out. For the second time during the day Signora Ferruchi was ushered into Miss Mott's sanctum. This time it was apparently a young woman of a different temperament who presented herself. There was a furtive light in her beautiful eyes, distinct traces of nervousness in her manner.

"What brings you back again?" Miss Mott asked curiously.

"Everything's all right now between Guido and myself," the girl announced. "No more dispute: everything has been explained. You can keep the fee, miss, because I take up your time, but the watching to-night—it is not necessary. Guido has explained."

"Sit down for a moment," Miss Mott invited.

The young woman complied unwillingly. Miss Mott unlocked a drawer.

"Of course, I shall give you back your five guineas," she said. "I should not think of taking it for doing nothing. I am very glad everything is all right between you and your husband. I don't like watching people. I always think it rather mean, don't you?"

"I know now that there is nothing to watch Guido for," the girl explained anxiously. "If you wish, I will take the five guineas, but I must go."

Miss Mott slowly counted out five treasury notes and five shillings. Just as she was finishing, there was the sound of a heavy footstep upon the stairs, a familiar voice outside, a knock at the door and her uncle walked in. He nodded to his niece and his eyes flashed in a quick glance of enquiry towards the girl.

"This is my uncle—Signora Ferruchi," Miss Mott introduced, with a little wave of the hand.

The Superintendent's interest in the young woman seemed to cease at once. He drew a chair up to his niece's desk.

"I'm not intruding, I hope?" he asked.

"Not in the least," she assured him. "My client was just going."

The young woman grabbed at the notes which Miss Mott was offering her and, with a hurried word of farewell, left the room. Superintendent Wragge's right arm shot out towards the telephone.

"Give me the commissionaire," he demanded. "A Government call please, miss.... That you, Johnson? Good. There's a young woman on her way down from Miss Mott's office—Italian—dressed in black. You'll find my car outside with Preston on the box. You know the car?... Good. Tell Preston to follow the young woman. It's important, mind. He's not to lose sight of her. He's to report at my room in the Yard. I'm going back there from here.... Just coming out of the lift, is she? That's right. Look sharp."

The Superintendent replaced the telephone and, producing a crumpled package of cigarettes from his pocket, lit one.

"What's it all about, please?" his niece asked patiently. "First of all you tell me that there isn't a thing against the Pomme d'Or Restaurant, then you stop my going there, and just when I'm getting over my disappointment, the girl comes back in a state of terror and withdraws her commission. Not only that, but she seems paralysed with fear lest I should go there. I am becoming a little intrigued."

"What were you to do?"

"Really, I might just as well be a branch of your Scotland Yard," Miss Mott declared, with mock sarcasm. "I'm all the time having to give my clients away. There's nothing wrong with Signora Ferruchi, is there, except that she seems to be one of these fatally jealous Italians?"

Mr. Wragge stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Ferruchi she calls herself, does she?" he mused. "A very nice name too. No, there's nothing wrong with her, except that she's not married and that her name is something very different. She and her man are trying to earn five thousand pounds. You can't blame her, can you? Five thousand pounds is a very nice sum of money."

"How could they earn a sum like that?" Miss Mott demanded incredulously.

"They might have earned it," was the grim rejoinder, "if you had been induced to climb the back stairs of the Pomme d'Or on a suitable occasion. To-night, it appears, was an unfortunate choice."

"Somebody either hates me or loves me, apparently," Miss Mott exclaimed incredulously.

"You've had proof of that before," was her uncle's dry reminder.

Miss Mott sprang suddenly to her feet. The colour faded from her cheeks. The ghosts of forgotten fears reassembled in her heart.

"You told me—that he had left the country—that he had been traced to Brazil!"

Superintendent Wragge nodded.

"It looked like it," he admitted. "At present, we are a little bewildered with too much information. He's either in Brazil, or if you take a pair of compasses with a radius of one hundred yards and make a circle around the Pomme d'Or—he's inside that."

"My God!" Miss Mott murmured softly. "So that's why you've made me come and stay with you and why you've got a couple of men sleeping in the house. I could understand Holmes, although he's not the cleverest butler in the world, but why you brought Mair in, I couldn't imagine."

Superintendent Wragge lit another cigarette.

"Men who are supreme at their jobs, who are what is called diabolically clever," he remarked, "have nearly always one weakness. Meredith—I say this deliberately—is the cleverest criminal we've ever had on our books at Scotland Yard. He's walked through brick walls and regiments of police. He ought to have been dead or in prison a dozen times and he's free; and his one imbecility, my dear Lucie—I don't want to turn your head—is you."

"Don't I know it," she agreed. "But where's the connection between all this, my visit to the Pomme d'Or and my jealous little Italian lady? First of all, she was crazy for me to go there and now she is crazy to keep me away."

"I forgot," her uncle remarked, "you don't read the afternoon papers. There was one of the worst burglaries we've had in London this season in Soho this afternoon. The premises of a firm of Italian merchants—eleven thousand pounds in cash stolen and two men killed. It was such an amazingly conceived affair," the Superintendent went on impressively, "and obviously a gangsters' affair too, that we've only been able to think of one man."

"You haven't anything against—against—"

Superintendent Wragge glanced at the inevitable bunch of violets on the table.

"No, we've nothing against Violet Joe," he admitted. "In fact, if you ask me, I think he's quit the gang for good. By eight o'clock this evening, though, we shall have a hundred men on the outskirts of Soho, working inwards. The centre of the circle will be the one place without a black mark to its name—The Pomme d'Or. That's why, although I don't think they'd have time to bother about you to-night, I want you to keep away. That is also the reason why Madame Ferruchi has been told to withdraw her commission. That is also the reason why I am here to see that you don't set foot inside the place."

"I understand," Miss Mott murmured.

Nevertheless, at eight o'clock that evening, Miss Mott pushed open the swing door of the Restaurant de la Pomme d'Or, and with her much derided little gun in her black bag and her heart in her mouth, took her place at the corner table to

which she was ushered. The appearance of the place surprised her. It was neat and clean and almost elegant. There were flowers and a shaded lamp on every table. The linen of the *maître d'hôtel* who had shown her to her seat was spotless, his manner pleasant without being too effusive. The only trouble seemed to be lack of custom. There was a whole row of empty tables and barely half a dozen diners. Miss Mott sat down and then ventured to glance around her. The general effect of her survey was one of reassurance. The *clientèle*, though small, appeared perfectly harmless. She ordered half a bottle of claret and addressed a question to the wine waiter.

"I thought this was a popular place," she remarked. "Why are there so few people here?"

The man leaned downwards almost to within whispering distance. He was Italian and his white teeth flashed as he spoke.

"There has been great trouble near here this afternoon," he confided. "A burglary. Men shot dead. The police are still on the look-out. People are afraid and they stay indoors. Even in here," he added, dropping his voice and glancing in scared fashion towards the door, "it has been terrible. One hears heavy footsteps all the time. Always they pass on. Nevertheless, one is afraid."

Miss Mott felt that curious little shiver of excitement that came to her at rare intervals.

"But this place has a very high reputation, hasn't it?" she asked.

The man was silent. In a sense there was nothing significant about his silence. He had not the air of reflecting or deliberating about his reply, only he said nothing. He looked out of the windows, a healthy-complexioned, brisk Italian of the most respectable class, with smoothly brushed hair and manicured finger nails.

"The Maison de la Pomme d'Or has an old reputation," he agreed. "In these days, though, one has to fight to keep anything. Mademoiselle will accept my recommendation? She will eat the dinner that I will serve?"

"Willingly," she assented. "I hate ordering...."

Miss Mott had no reason to regret her choice. In its initial stages, at any rate, she had never dined better. She took note once more of the people in the room and found them still harmless. There were no signs here of the man hunt outside. Once in the distance she fancied she heard a police whistle and then—

There are several unmistakable sounds in the world. One is the sound of flying footsteps inspired with the urge of fear. Miss Mott sat up suddenly in her place and listened. The footsteps were on the opposite pavement, coming rapidly down the street. There was a hoarse cry as though some one had been hurt. Now it seemed that they were crossing the road. The door shook and opened with a wide sweep. A man, breathless and pale, pushed his way through, a man whom Miss Mott recognised in a moment as the original of the picture she had seen that morning. He may have been young in years, but at that moment he was old in terror and anxiety. The skin was drawn like white parchment over his high cheekbones, his lips were parted like a dog's waiting to bite, the upper lip close to his teeth and showing his gums. With the door closed behind him, he paused to listen, a matter of seconds only, his head turned backward, every pulse of his long, lean body stiff with the effort. Miss Mott instinctively listened too but she could hear nothing. Then the man, without removing his black slouch hat, walked stiffly between the tables across the restaurant, and, lifting a curtain about halfway down the room, disappeared. There was a pause. Miss Mott listened again. She heard no following footsteps, outside was an almost unnatural silence. Suddenly the door seemed to be pushed open by an unseen hand. Another man made deliberate entrance, a stalwart, keen-eyed man with small moustache, neatly dressed, wearing no overcoat, notwithstanding the inclement weather, but carrying a heavy walking stick. He hung up his hat and seated himself deliberately exactly opposite Miss Mott, at a table within a few feet of the entrance. As he turned away, Miss Mott saw the shape of something in his pocket. She took note of his firm, square shoulders, and she knew that the stage was being set for grave happenings. She had paid too many visits to Scotland Yard not to recognise the type....

A waiter came up and accepted an order from the newcomer. A flask of Chianti was placed upon the table and he drank a half tumblerful almost at a gulp. Notwithstanding his leisurely, almost stealthy, entrance, Miss Mott saw that the damp of perspiration clung to his forehead. He looked across at her once or twice keenly and then buried himself in an evening paper. She had all the average human being's sympathy with the hunted object, and yet, owing to her long association with her uncle, her keen sympathy was also with the hunter, taking his life into his hands. All the time she wanted to cross the room and whisper in his ear—"Through that curtain, you fool! You're giving him time to hide or get away.

What about the back entrance?" She did nothing of the sort, of course. She sat in her place and presently, after a lengthened disappearance, the waiter who had been attending to her reappeared. He brought her a wonderful ice and spoke of the *café* of the house, an Italian liqueur too, Campari, which every one tried. "Mademoiselle would excuse that he had been away for a long time? There were guests that night in a private room."

"Where are your private rooms?" Miss Mott asked him.

The man pointed discreetly towards the curtain. There was no meaning smile upon his lips, nothing but the most perfect respect and good humour.

"One has clients," he murmured, "who prefer solitude."

Then—looking over his shoulder, Miss Mott saw what neither he nor the man opposite saw—the slow drawing back of that curtain—a white face peering slowly into the room—the face of the man who had entered only a few minutes ago. Even at that distance Miss Mott saw the pin-point of fire in the eyes, the terror in the face as he saw the man by the door. Then the curtain was dropped.

On the other side of that curtain, up a narrow flight of stairs, in the first of the little row of private dining rooms, the man for whose apprehension were various rewards amounting to over ten thousand pounds was enjoying a leisurely and sybaritic repast. The dining room was small, but pleasantly furnished; the usual easy-chair and couch were against the wall, an ornate but not unpleasing French mirror hung over the mantelpiece, and a blazing fire burned in the grate. The table was laid for two but the other place was unoccupied. The chief of the Number One Gangsters dined alone. With his back to the window stood the man who had just returned from his furtive contemplation of the restaurant.

"They're on to us to-night, Chief, if they never were before," he said earnestly. "They're closing in all the time. The streets between here and Shaftesbury Avenue are swarming with them. Lynn and Peterson are both taken. Down below Hurlbut's sitting next the door—Jim Hurlbut, who shot Parry and took in both the Regans single-handed. Got his stripes for that. I can see the shape of his gun under the newspaper on the table. He wouldn't be sitting there so quiet if they hadn't got all the back entrances stopped. You and me are the only two left, sir. How are we going to get away?"

Meredith poured himself out another glass of wine and sipped it in leisurely fashion. He pushed the bottle in its cradle towards his companion.

"I shall leave when I've paid my bill and I'm ready, by the front door," he declared. "Here, take a glass of that wine and don't stand there, shaking like a leaf. It isn't the first time you've had the police on your heels, is it?"

The man poured himself out a glass of the wine; some of it was slopped over on to the tablecloth. His companion watched him with a sneer.

"I can't imagine," he said calmly, "how some of you fellows had the pluck to come into this game. You stood up and did your share all right this afternoon. You picked off that fellow with the glasses as neatly as any one could wish."

There was a little sob from the man who was trying to drink.

"Don't!" he begged. "It wasn't I who killed him. It was some one from behind me. I swear it was some one behind me! It was Tom Baum—that's what I told—"

The man broke off in his sentence as though he were shot. He staggered and caught at the table. His eyes fell before Meredith's steely glare. He mopped at his forehead, on which the unhealthy sweat was breaking out.

"That was what you told whom?" Meredith asked, with deadly precision.

"Told Jansen, told all of 'em. I told the wife so too. The little lady's downstairs. We were to have got something for that—the wife and I."

Meredith listened with unchanging expression. The words seemed to fade away on the other's lips.

"You were going to say something else, Ferruchi," Meredith suggested. "Perhaps you stopped just in time."

"I swear I wasn't," the man declared eagerly. "I'm scared; I'll admit I'm scared. We've never been so close boxed up as this before. We've got the police on every side of us."

"Is it the police you're frightened of?" was Meredith's cold query. "Not altogether, Ferruchi. You've killed a man and you've lost your nerve. Tell the truth, you dog!" he added, in a suddenly changed tone. "You've been to the Yard. You've sold us. You're trying to save your miserable skin."

"I swear—"

Ferruchi suddenly lost the power of speech, his eyes rolled, faced with the hideous revelation. Meredith's hand came up from underneath the tablecloth. There was a little stab of flame across the few feet of intervening space. Ferruchi rolled over, twitched once and never moved again. Meredith glanced at him contemptuously. Leaning across the table, he watched for the signs he knew so well, ejected the shell from his automatic and slipped in another. Then he finished his wine, holding his glass with perfectly steady fingers, glanced at the bill which lay on a plate by his side, counted out some treasury notes from his pocketbook and added a sovereign tip. On the sofa his black silk-lined coat was lying and a black Homburg hat. He removed both carefully and carried them behind the large screen which almost covered one side of the room. He reappeared almost at once and, for the first time, there was a certain hesitation, a look almost of disgust upon his face, as he crossed the floor and looked down on the body of the dead man. What he was about to do was obviously costing him an effort. Nevertheless, he proceeded with his task.... In ten minutes' time he opened the door, locked it on the outside and threw the key down the corridor. With leisurely, unhesitating footsteps he descended the stairs.

Miss Mott, from her distant table diagonally opposite, was perhaps the first to see that slight shiver of the curtain. Almost immediately afterwards it was drawn aside and a tall, gaunt figure came hesitatingly into the room, walking down the almost deserted restaurant with his black slouch hat low on his forehead and his hands in his overcoat pockets. Half-past nine was striking from the church clock near at hand as he paused for a moment to light a cigarette. His back was towards the other solitary diner. He faced Miss Mott. His twitching face, his nervous movements, his attire all belonged to Ferruchi, but the eyes which flashed for a moment across to hers, while his lips parted in the slightest of smiles, seemed like an insane reminder of some other person. She clutched at the tablecloth and looked eagerly round for the little *maitre d'hôtel*. She had disobeyed orders in coming, but she was safe, she told herself, she must be safe. Hurlbut was opposite—one of the most dreaded of her uncle's myrmidons. Her heart beat madly. For whom was it that he was watching? Not for Ferruchi, for he could have taken him an hour ago. She stared across at him—he was sitting sphinxlike and motionless, his eyes turned indifferently towards the now approaching man. The latter, his cigarette hanging from his lips, his hat drawn even farther over his eyes, was apparently bent upon leaving the restaurant in the same furtive manner as he had entered it, with the least possible delay. He looked now neither to the right nor to the left; his slouch as he neared Hurlbut became a little more pronounced. Miss Mott gripped the sides of her chair. Now surely the great happening would occur. She looked to see Hurlbut rise, see him hold out his arm, tap the departing man upon the shoulder, whisper a word in his ear. Would there be a fight, she wondered? Miss Mott's hand stole into her handbag and her fingers closed upon the butt of her own minute but deadly weapon. She need have had no fear. No one asked for her help. Hurlbut was leaning lazily back now, watching the man who had reached the swing doors, with only a faint gleam of contempt in his eyes,—the contempt of the detective for an informer. The door opened and swung to. Miss Mott was suddenly conscious that the *maitre d'hôtel* was standing by her table and had twice addressed her. She took the note which he passed surreptitiously into her fingers. As she read it, the colour mounted into her cheeks:

Alas, it was all so well arranged for this place, but our friend Ferruchi played the fool and chose the one impossible night. Wait for me, Miss Mott. The next time the luck will be with us.

Miss Mott tore the note into pieces and rose to her feet. From outside came the soft beating of a high-powered automobile in the act of starting. She rose in her place and called across to Hurlbut.

"For whom are you waiting there?" she demanded.

There was a very official frown upon his face as he rose to his feet. He came across the few intervening yards of space.

"You are Miss Mott?" he enquired.

"Of course I am," she answered. "What I am asking you is—why do you sit there and let the man for whom you were waiting walk out?"

"How do you know for whom I am waiting?" he asked.

"I am not a fool," she replied passionately. "It seems to me that you are—brave man though you may be. You should be waiting for Meredith, the head of the Number One gang."

"You appear to be well informed," he admitted caustically. "I am."

"Then why did you let him pass you?" she demanded.

"That," he told her patiently, "was a man called Ferruchi. He came in an hour ago. We can take him any time we want him, which it seems to me won't be very long. At present he is more useful to us free."

"You idiot!" she cried. "That was Meredith who went out in Ferruchi's clothes."

Hurlbut was only half a fool and he knew the truth when he heard it. He snatched at his hat. Miss Mott mocked at him. She was really very angry.

"You will find Ferruchi probably with a bullet through his heart upstairs," she gibed. "The gang don't like informers. Why not run after the car instead? It can't have got any farther than Leicester Square."

Hurlbut, with a profane exclamation, tore up the stairs, wasted at least five minutes before the key of the sitting room could be found, and discovered then the melancholy truth. In a corner of the disordered apartment he found the body of Ferruchi stripped of his outer clothes, a stark and revolting sight. He hurried downstairs again, and within a few seconds word was being flashed around the cordon to detain and search every high-powered car occupied by a single passenger. When he emerged from the telephone box, Miss Mott was still seated in her corner, drinking a second cup of coffee.

"How did you come to recognise Meredith?" he demanded.

"Well, it obviously wasn't the man who came in—Ferruchi," she pointed out. "He was very cleverly made up about the head, but Ferruchi's boots were splashed with mud and the man who went out wore very well-cut patent shoes. Besides, Ferruchi was only in danger from his friends, not the police, so he wouldn't have had a gun ready, but this man was ready to shoot from his pocket all the way down the room."

Hurlbut glowered across at her. What an exceedingly unpleasant young woman this niece of his Superintendent's was!

"You ought to join the force," he remarked, with a distinct note of bitterness in his tone.

"I do very nicely on my own, thanks," Miss Mott assured him sweetly.

VIII

MARCONI SAVES MISS MOTT

Superintendent Wragge had finished his breakfast, folded his *Times* for more careful perusal during the day, lit his pipe and accepted his overcoat from his very soldierly-looking butler. Still he seemed in no hurry to leave the house. His car was waiting outside and it was already five minutes past his usual hour of departure. Miss Mott looked at him speculatively.

"You have the air, Uncle," she confided, "of wishing to say something to me, or some one, before you leave."

"Amazing intuition," he grunted. "You are the victim."

She laughed across at him from her place at the breakfast table.

"I knew it," she exclaimed. "Well?"

"I'm still a little uneasy in my mind about you," the Superintendent admitted.

She looked at him with raised eyebrows and a smile of protest upon her lips.

"My dear man," she expostulated, "what can you do more, short of locking me up in a cell? I've come here to live with you and find myself in a fortress. That has to be for your sake as well as mine, I suppose. The commissioner is an ex-Scotland Yard man, so is the lift man, so is the butler. They are also expert gunmen, they are never off the floor without being relieved and I drive the little way to my office escorted always by one of them. What do you mean—you are not comfortable about me?"

"You're all right here," her uncle conceded. "What I'm always afraid of is that you'll tumble into some faked business through applicants at the office."

She laughed scornfully.

"I've had my warnings, haven't I?" she asked. "And I'm not quite an idiot—besides, you've practically smashed up the dangerous gang—two of them hanged, one of them penal servitude for life and two others seven years each. I should think the Number One Gangsters would keep quiet after that."

"The Number One Gangsters as a body are finished," her uncle acknowledged, "but you mustn't forget that their chief, who is probably the most dangerous criminal living in any country, is still free. Remember this, too, he is a desperate man—he'll stick at nothing. He must know that he's near the end of his time—that's when you have to really fear a man."

Miss Mott made a little grimace.

"Well, I haven't come to much grief up till now, have I?"

Superintendent Wragge looked down at her. His mouth was hard set. He could be stern when he liked, as well as kindly, and he was stern now.

"Let me tell you this, young lady, if you don't know it," he said. "When we want a man badly at Scotland Yard and we think it's going to do any good, we offer a reward for him. Meredith has taken a leaf out of our books. There's a reward at the present moment of five thousand pounds offered for you, delivered—God knows where. It's gone through the underworld like a flash of lightning. They've brains, you know, our enemies—criminals. There aren't many of 'em who wouldn't risk the maximum penalty for abducting a young woman to get hold of that five thousand pounds. The man's mad, of course. Most criminals go mad in their last moments, but that doesn't make your danger any the less."

"Shall I enter a convent?" Miss Mott suggested. "What do you want me to do?"

"I should like you to drop your agency," her uncle replied, "and just go on with your newspaper work."

"I can't do that," she answered firmly. "I've made nearly two thousand pounds by my agency already this year and I won't be frightened out of it."

"Then I should like you," he went on, "to submit to me every case you are offered and not to proceed with it until I give you the O.K."

"I'll do that," she promised, after a moment's reflection. "You're a dear old thing to worry so much about me," she added, standing on tiptoe and kissing him. "I won't take on the simplest case in the world without telephoning to you."

He nodded and relit his pipe.

"You've taken a load off my mind," he confessed, as he hurried out.

Miss Mott was only halfway through her pile of correspondence that morning when Mr. Wells, her editor in chief, was announced. She welcomed him with some surprise.

"Why didn't you send for me?" she asked. "I feel that there is something all wrong in an editor coming to see a contributor."

He coughed a little nervously and leaned back in the client's chair.

"Still plenty of mail," he remarked.

Miss Mott nodded.

"I shall have to be asking for another column soon," she warned him. "Even now I'm scrapping a few letters I feel I ought to deal with."

"We might manage that," he declared. "Certainly we might manage that. How is the agency business going?"

"I've had some interesting cases," Miss Mott acknowledged.

"And got into a little trouble now and then, haven't you?" he asked frankly.

"You're quite right; I have," she assented.

Mr. Wells coughed once more, patted his shaggy hair for a moment and broached the subject of his visit.

"Miss Mott," he began. "I wonder whether we could induce you to give up this agency business?"

She looked at him ruefully.

"What, give it up altogether?"

"That's what we'd like," he admitted. "Has it been a success financially?"

"I've made nearly two thousand by it this year," she confided.

"Of course, we couldn't compete with that," he confessed, "but I have an offer to make to you, Miss Mott. The directors—Mr. Warren and the others—talked it over, and we have decided to offer you the post of sub-editor of the paper with an increase in salary of five hundred pounds a year, if you cared to accept it."

"That is very nice of you all," Miss Mott declared. "I think it is an extraordinarily pleasant offer."

"We should want you," Mr. Wells continued, "to give up the agency business and to take up your position in the offices. You would have a suite to yourself, a secretary, a typist, and a seat on the Board. In short, we would try to make it as comfortable as possible."

"But you would want me to give up my agency?" she queried.

"We certainly should," Mr. Wells agreed. "We think that it brings you into touch with a good many undesirable people. If you had more time on your hands—although with your new duties I'm not sure that you would have—we should always welcome independent articles from you."

Miss Mott remained silent for several moments. Mr. Wells whistled softly to himself—the sign of a very perturbed state of mind.

"Leaving the business side of the matter alone altogether for the moment, Miss Mott," he went on, "I personally have been occasionally very much worried by the adventures into which you have been led. My own feelings as regards you are quite unchanged."

Miss Mott sighed.

"You are very kind to me, Mr. Wells," she admitted. "I don't think I was made for marriage and that sort of thing."

Mr. Wells sighed.

"If only you had a little more sentiment," he lamented.

Miss Mott leaned ever so slightly towards the huge bunch of violets which decorated her table and drew in a waft of their perfume. Away danced her heart into the misty places of life. A voice, a never clearly seen face, a queer tangle of throbbing memories. No sentiment, indeed! She smiled faintly and very wistfully. Mr. Wells, who was a sensitive and apprehensive man, saw the smile and sighed once more.

"I suppose I'm very stupid," she declared, with a new briskness. "I've the love affairs of too many other people to think of to develop one of my own. I consider yours is a very wonderful offer, Mr. Wells. I can't just make up my mind for a moment about giving up this agency business. I know my uncle would love me to and, of course, one has to take one's risks."

"Think it over for a week," Mr. Wells suggested. "I need a sub-editor badly and I'd rather have you than any one."

She nodded.

"In one week you shall have my reply," she promised.

Mr. Wells thereupon took his leave and Miss Mott, with half her letters unopened, indulged in the very reprehensible practice of day-dreaming. She broke off one of the violets and held it for a moment to her lips. He was a very unseeing person who imagined Miss Mott to be devoid of sentiment....

Miss Mott was still feeling a little dazed as she greeted the two callers who were ushered in a few minutes later. Mother and daughter, she decided at once, strictly middle class, the girl affected, over-addicted to the use of cosmetics, but pretty, and the mother of the same type, but *passée*. Miss Mott glanced at the card:

MRS. EWAN BROWNE

and underneath, in somewhat smaller type:

MISS DOROTHY EWAN BROWNE

All very stylish and what it should be!

"What can I do for you?" Miss Mott asked, brightly, but with an involuntary glance at her still unopened letters.

Mrs. Ewan Browne spoke as one who had a grievance.

"I thought it best to come and see you, Miss Mott," she said, "with regard to the advice you gave my daughter in your paper last week."

"Really," was the somewhat chilly reply. "I don't as a rule see my correspondents personally. I'm afraid I should never get through my day's work if I did. You won't mind telling me what it is you want as quickly as possible, will you?"

"You can have it in two words," Mrs. Ewan Browne declared. "I want to know how you dared advise my daughter to throw away her money on those silly dancing lessons?"

Miss Mott was a little bewildered. The girl was helpful.

"I signed myself Dorothy," she reminded her. "I wrote and told you that I was twenty-one years old and had just come in for a thousand pounds left me by my uncle. I told you that I'd decided to spend a small part of it in taking stage dancing lessons and that my mother disapproved. You replied last week, saying that if I was satisfied I had some ability and that the dancing school was a first-class one, you thought I was justified in going on with the lessons. So I did and I mean to continue."

Her mother drew herself up.

"That's the spirit one's daughters grow up with nowadays," she remarked bitterly. "I'm surprised to find any one connected with a magazine so widely read as yours, madam, advising a girl to go against her own mother."

"Having given my advice," Miss Mott said, glancing at the clock, "I have no further interest in the matter. Do you mind my pointing out that I am very busy?"

"But I haven't begun yet!" Mrs. Ewan Browne protested.

"Begun what?" Miss Mott asked impatiently.

"To explain what I came for. You yourself, in your reply to Dorothy, mentioned the standing of the dancing school—I don't approve of it."

"Why not?"

"There's a footman to answer the door," Mrs. Ewan Browne confided; "the house is much too large and expensive, they only charge two guineas a lesson and strange gentlemen are there watching."

The girl looked across at Miss Mott appealingly.

"Mother is such a fool," she complained. "The men who go there to watch are the agents for theatrical managers and they often give engagements. Then Madam Hansen only charges two guineas a lesson, but you have to pay her a commission if you get an engagement. I don't know what we came here for, anyway," she added peevishly; "I'm going on with the lessons. We're taking up Miss Mott's time, Mother."

"Sensible girl," Miss Mott declared. "I'm afraid I can't be of any assistance to you, Mrs. Browne."

Miss Mott's finger was upon the bell and it seemed as though the matter would have ended then and there but for the tears which suddenly appeared in the elder woman's eyes. Miss Mott's finger hesitated.

"What did you want me to do?" she enquired.

"They told me you ran an enquiry office as well as just answering these questions in the paper," Mrs. Ewan Browne said a little brokenly. "I wanted you to go and see if this place is all right. I'll pay you your fee—after all, you did advise Dorothy to go on with the lessons."

"Name and address of the place, please," Miss Mott asked briskly. "I'll let you have a report on it by to-morrow."

"The name is Madam Hansen, Number 7a Kensington Square," the girl said. "Why wouldn't you come with me, Miss Mott, when I go for my lesson at five o'clock this afternoon? You could set Mother's mind at rest then about the place."

Miss Mott reflected. She had two or three unanswered enquiries for an establishment of that sort which was absolutely above suspicion.

"Call here at a quarter to five," she enjoined. "Don't be late and please let me send you away now."

Mrs. Ewan Browne wiped her eyes and, with a mincing little gesture, opened her bag. Miss Mott waved her away.

"If there's any charge," she said, "I'll let you know how much it is later."

The girl smiled her farewell behind her mother's shoulder and these strange visitors took their leave....

Later in the day, Miss Mott received the following reply to the enquiry which she had put through to Scotland Yard:

Dancing School, or Academy as it is styled, conducted by Madam Hansen, Number 7a Kensington Square, is believed to be a quite responsible institution. There have never been any complaints and it seems to be frequented by a very respectable class of people.

Miss Mott thrust the note into her bag and made an entry on her block for the engagement that afternoon.

It was no footman, but a butler of very staid appearance who opened the door of Number 7a Kensington Square, in response to Miss Ewan Browne's summons. He led the way into a large Victorian-looking drawing-room which had been almost denuded of furniture and the floor of which was highly polished. There was no doubt about the bona fide nature of the Dancing Academy, at any rate. Four young ladies in tunics and knickers were performing gyrations at one end of the apartment under the instruction of a dapper little man and to the music of a piano and one string instrument. A thin, rather austere-looking woman, plainly dressed in black, was taking careful note of the performance. She came across the room to meet the new arrivals.

"Better get into your costume at once, Miss Browne," she suggested. "Mr. Fitch is able to spare us another quarter of an hour to-day."

Miss Browne introduced her companion, who was graciously received.

"Another possible pupil?" Madam asked with a smile.

Miss Mott shook her head.

"I am rather past the age when one takes up a new profession," she said. "Miss Browne asked me just to come and have a look at her dancing."

Miss Browne had already disappeared. Madam nodded indifferently.

"You wish to judge whether she has talent, I suppose," she remarked. "Nothing extraordinary, I'm afraid. The course of instruction she is getting here will improve her style of ordinary dancing, but I don't think it will ever get her on the stage."

Two gentlemen were shown in and took seats at the far end of the room. Madam waved her hand to them.

"That's Mr. Paxton—one of the best agents," she pointed out. "He only engages girls for provincial shows, though."

Miss Mott sat in an easy-chair and watched a very quaint, but, in its way, businesslike performance. Presently Miss Browne returned, having changed her clothes. Madam took her on one side and whispered with her for a few minutes. Miss Mott, who had the gift of seeing without looking, fancied that they were speaking of her. She turned her head and for a moment caught Madam's quickly averted but somewhat supercilious gaze. The young woman came across the room.

"I shall be dancing in ten minutes," she confided. "One of the girls has to do a show dance. Afterwards we are going to practise some ballet steps. They say the taller of those two men in the corner engages more girls than any man in London."

Miss Mott glanced at her wrist watch.

"I hope you won't be too long," she said. "After all, I don't know that I need to stop. I can make a fairly good report to your mother as it is."

"Stay and see me dance for five minutes," the girl pleaded. "If you tell her that you think it's worth while, it will make such a lot of difference."

Some folding doors were half opened and a girl appeared from an adjoining room and danced, so far as Miss Mott could judge, with some skill. Afterwards cocktails were handed round. Miss Mott's refusal passed without comment. But when, a little later, she rose to go, Madam crossed the room towards her.

"You mustn't hurry," she begged. "You haven't seen your young friend dance yet."

"I can't stay much longer," Miss Mott demurred.

"I never like my visitors to hurry away," Madam observed, with a regretful intonation. "It seems as though they weren't interested. Sorry you wouldn't have a cocktail. Would you care for some tea or something?"

"Nothing at all," Miss Mott assured her. "Thank you very much."

The music was changed again and the little troupe, with the addition of Miss Browne, indulged in some fancy dancing. Miss Browne seemed to be neither better nor worse than the average young woman who imagines that she has a vocation for the stage, and as soon as the performance was over, Miss Mott rose to go. At a sign from Madam, the dancers passed into the back room, followed by the musicians. The folding doors were closed and it seemed to Miss Mott rather a strange thing that Miss Dorothy Browne departed without even a wave of the hand. Madam, the agent and his friend, and Miss Mott were alone in the apartment. Miss Mott made her little speech of farewell.

"So good of you to let me come, Madam Hansen," she said. "I agree with you about Miss Browne—she seems to have just an average talent—but I certainly cannot discover any reason for her not persevering in her lessons. I shall tell her mother so."

"Very kind of you, I'm sure," Madam acknowledged, with mock graciousness. "You mustn't think of leaving us yet, though, Miss Mott. We are expecting some friends of yours presently."

Then, for the first time, a cold shiver of apprehension stole into Miss Mott's heart. She had done the unforgivable thing: she had broken her word to her uncle, she had embarked upon an enterprise without consulting him. Madam was looking at her with a cryptic smile upon her lips. In the room behind the closed doors she could hear the tinkling of strange music and the shuffling of feet. She found herself following the rhythm of it and she shook her head impatiently.

"Friends of mine?" she repeated. "I do not think that there are any friends of mine likely to be coming here, madam, and even if there were, I haven't time to stay and see them."

Madam shrugged her shoulders but she made no effort to ring the bell, and Miss Mott, even though she made her way to the door and turned the handle, felt that her gesture was useless. In a few seconds she was convinced of it. The door was fastened. She turned around with flashing eyes.

"What is the meaning of that?" she demanded, pointing to the door.

Madam laughed, not at all pleasantly.

"Your friends," she confided, "have come to the conclusion that a course of dancing lessons would be good for you."

Superintendent Detective Wragge was clearing up his desk and filling his pipe, preparatory to leaving his office for the day, when a commissionaire opened the door, saluted, and handed over a folded minute.

"From Mr. Harrison of Number 8 Department, sir," he announced.

The Superintendent glanced at the minute and frowned. He read it over half-aloud, slowly and thoughtfully:

With reference to your enquiry of this morning's date, as to the character of Dancing Academy carried on at No. 7a Kensington Square by Madam Hansen, an addendum has now been made to our information on the matter.

While there is still no information to hand reflecting upon the general character or conduct of the establishment, it is reported that two members of well-known London gangs have been seen to enter and leave same. It is believed that one is employed there in some capacity or other. The premises have been placed under observation.

Superintendent Wragge folded up the memorandum and reached out for the telephone. Miss Mott's young secretary answered the enquiry he made as soon as he obtained her number.

"Sorry, Mr. Wragge," she said. "Miss Mott left early this evening. She has been gone quite an hour."

"Do you know whether she was making a call on her way back?" Mr. Wragge asked.

"I believe so," the girl replied. "She had two clients here this morning—a mother and daughter—about a dancing class, and I think the mother paid a fee to have Miss Mott go and look at it."

Mr. Wragge rang off without comment. He turned to the commissionaire.

"Tell the Sergeant to put two plain-clothes men in my car at once," he ordered.

The man saluted and withdrew. In five minutes, Superintendent Wragge was being rapidly driven westward. The car came to a standstill before the somewhat imposing entrance to the house in Kensington Square. The door was opened by the same rather pompous-looking butler, who admitted the three men without hesitation.

"I should like just a word with Madam Hansen," Superintendent Wragge announced shortly. "Never mind my name."

The three men were left in the hall. From inside the room into which the butler had disappeared came the haunting little air of some popular dance tune and the shuffling of feet. Superintendent Wragge was half inclined to believe that he had made an idiot of himself and wondered for a moment how he could dispose of his two attendants. Without delay, however, the door was opened and the butler signed to him to enter.

"Madam will speak to you in the dancing room, sir," he explained. "She is occupied with her pupils."

The same girls were there and the same musicians. This time, however, it was Madam who was instructing. She held a little baton in her hand and she looked at Superintendent Wragge with chilly curiosity.

"What can I do for you?" she asked.

Superintendent Wragge was very polite.

"You have, I believe, a pupil called Miss Dorothy Browne here?"

Madam nodded.

"What about it? Do you wish to speak to her?"

"For a minute, if you please," Mr. Wragge begged.

"Take a seat there, then," Madam invited, pointing to a chair. "I can't have my lesson interfered with in the middle. We must finish this movement. Now then, music, please."

The music struck up again. The girls revolved and danced, retreated and danced, and, with a terse volley of instructions from Madam, performed even more complicated gyrations. When at last the figure came to an end, Madam took Miss Browne by the arm and led her ungraciously towards Superintendent Wragge.

"This sort of thing is altogether against the rules," she complained. "You must not have your friends call upon you again, Miss Browne."

The young lady—an anticipatory lipstick in her hand—gazed at Superintendent Wragge in surprise.

"This is no friend of mine," she told Madam Hansen. "I never saw him before."

Superintendent Wragge rose to his feet, large and ponderous.

"My name is Superintendent Detective Wragge of Scotland Yard," he announced. "I am in search of a Miss Mott who came here with you this afternoon."

"No one came here with me this afternoon," the girl answered. "I came alone. Didn't I, Madam?"

"I don't know who you brought with you to the front door," Madam Hansen replied. "Certainly no one entered with you."

"You called for Miss Mott this afternoon," her uncle persisted.

"Yes, I called for her, all right—Mother and I were there this morning—and she promised to come and see this show and my dancing. At the last moment she wouldn't come. She left me at the door and got into a taxi."

Superintendent Wragge looked at the young woman with eyes which had won the truth from many a criminal. The girl returned his gaze with light-hearted impudence. A lie was nothing to her.

"You will permit me, madam, to use your telephone?" Superintendent Wragge begged.

"You'll find the instrument in the hall," was the brusque reply. "I hope that will be the end of your interference here. I don't care whether you come from Scotland Yard or not—my Academy is above suspicion and I dislike having policemen about the place."

"You shall not be troubled with us any longer than is necessary, madam," Wragge promised, as he left the room...

In five minutes, the Superintendent was back in the dancing room. Madam watched his reappearance with a little exclamation of annoyance. The music was just starting a gavotte.

"Do tell me what else it is you want, please," she demanded irritably.

"I'm taking that young lady I spoke with to the police station," Superintendent Wragge bluffed. "Miss Mott was seen to enter this house with her."

The girl was plainly terrified.

"Who saw her?" she cried. "It's a lie. She left me on the step—ask the butler."

"I shall have a few more questions to ask the butler presently," Superintendent Wragge said sternly. "In the meantime, madam, I shall require to search the house."

Madam at any rate had nerve.

"You can search it until you are black in the face," she agreed, "so long as you leave me and my pupils in peace."

Superintendent Wragge turned towards the door.

"If I let the young lady remain here for a few minutes," he asked, looking back, "will you see that she does not leave the premises?"

"I don't make prisoners of my pupils," Madam answered. "However, we sha'n't have finished for three quarters of an hour."

Nevertheless, when Superintendent Detective Wragge returned to the room in considerably less than three quarters of an hour, Miss Browne was missing.

"Where's the young woman?" he demanded of Madam.

"You've frightened her to death," was the brusque reply. "She's run off home."

"And where's that?" Wragge enquired.

"I'm afraid we haven't her address."

Superintendent Detective Wragge squared his shoulders. He held out his hand firmly.

"You'll leave that telephone alone, madam," he ordered, "and be so good as to put your hat and coat on immediately. One of my men will escort you to your room if you need to go there."

"What do you mean?" she demanded furiously.

"I mean that you're coming to the nearest police station with me," was the stern explanation. "You are under arrest—on suspicion of being concerned in the abduction of Miss Mott."

The butler of the very dignified-looking house in Berkeley Square, who had completed his task of drawing the curtains, in an apartment spacious and handsome enough to have been the library of a palace, threw a log upon the fire and loomed through the shadows which surrounded the writing table.

"Can I bring you anything, my lord?" he enquired. "It is after six o'clock."

The man, whose pen had been scratching wearily across the paper for the last two hours, looked up. He pushed one of the books of reference by which he was surrounded a little farther on one side. A powerful electric lamp threw a strong light upon the paper below, but the man himself was almost invisible. He sat head and shoulders above the green shade, and the whole of the rest of the room was in darkness, save for such faint and uncertain illumination as came from the dancing flames upon the hearth.

"You can bring whisky and soda," a quiet voice answered.

"The young lady is asking to see you, my lord," the man ventured.

"She must wait. These sheets must be at the typist's to-night."

The man started for the door, and long before he reached it had faded into obscurity. His master bent once more over his task. In due course, whisky and soda and ice were placed on a table by his side.

"There have been callers, Grover?" he asked.

"Quite a good many, my lord," the man replied. "I told them all that your lordship was finishing some work and that you were not to be disturbed. There are a good many telephone messages too, when your lordship has time to look through them."

The man at the table nodded impatiently. A perfectly shaped hand, wearing a wonderful signet ring, flashed from underneath the little circle of light in a gesture of dismissal. Almost immediately he was alone again and his pen was continuing its rapid progress across the pad of foolscap....

He left off presently to mix himself a drink. With the tumbler halfway to his lips, he paused. A draught from the nearest window was stealing into the room. He listened. Yes—there was some sort of a sound behind him. He turned around in his chair. The curtains of the window immediately behind him had been drawn aside and were still shivering. The dimly seen figure of a man was standing within a few feet of him. The firelight flashed upon the dull metal of an outstretched revolver.

"Don't move, please, Walter—I know where you keep your gun and where I should be if you could get at it, but you can't. It's just out of your reach. Move your chair a little farther from the table—that's good."

The man laid down his pen and obeyed. Then he swung around to face the intruder and laughed—mirthlessly.

"Since when have you gone in for this sort of thing, Joe?" he remonstrated. "I can scarcely ever remember seeing you hold a gun. Be careful it doesn't go off. I'd sooner face a Chicago killer than an ignoramus fiddling about with firearms."

The newcomer came on towards the table, cautiously watching for a sudden spring. He found a chair and dragged it out.

"Why this unexpected visit?" the other asked. "Since your withdrawal, I thought it was understood that we only received and exchanged visits in a social way. If you have anything to say, why didn't you say it at Glenster's dinner last night?"

"I didn't know then what I know now," Violet Joe replied. "I've come after Miss Mott."

The man at the table chuckled.

"How do you suppose you're going to get her?" he enquired. "Certainly not by this stunt of brandishing firearms at me."

"There are several methods I might make use of," Violet Joe said calmly. "One of them will have to succeed."

"Be as brief as possible; there's a good fellow," the other enjoined. "The F.O. are waiting for this report of mine. Ridley

wants to go through it before the Cabinet Council to-morrow."

"I should hate to interfere with your political activities, Walter," the visitor remarked, "and I don't think there's a man in the world knows more about Abyssinia than you do, but at present—I want Miss Mott."

"So do I," was the curt rejoinder. "I happen to have the advantage, too, of being the man in possession."

"What do you mean by that?" Violet Joe demanded, with sudden fierceness.

"Not what you seem to fear," was the calm reply. "You forget that I am an artist."

"I should have thought you would have gathered by now," Violet Joe observed, "that the young lady was never likely to stay with you voluntarily."

Meredith sighed.

"The young lady has been difficult," he admitted. "I think that this time, however, my reward is coming."

Violet Joe laughed scornfully.

"You flatter yourself!" he scoffed.

Meredith pushed his writing pad away from him and leaned back in his chair.

"Supposing we have the cards on the table," he suggested. "What are you butting in like this for?"

"I don't mind explaining," was the quiet reply. "Get up and walk two yards towards the fire, will you?"

Meredith obeyed without hesitation. He stood upon the hearthrug with his hands behind him, the firelight playing upon his thin, ascetic face, upon which the scar no longer showed—a sinister and yet a not unprepossessing figure of a man. He watched his visitor indifferently while the latter removed an automatic pistol from one of the drawers of the desk, extracted the cartridges and threw it on to the top of the desk.

"I hate this melodramatic nonsense," Violet Joe observed, replacing his own revolver in his pocket. "Now we can get to business. You're asking for trouble, Meredith, and bad trouble."

"Think so?" Meredith rejoined. "I never looked upon you as the brains of our enterprises, you know."

"Like all conceited men," Violet Joe remarked, "you underrated the brains of your opponents. I broke away on this woman question and I'm hanged if I don't believe I've had better information than you since I left. You think because you had your double arrive in Aden by aeroplane and travel home under an assumed name that your alibi for the last eight months is complete, but you're wrong. There's just one person who has got you in the hollow of her hand—and that's Miss Mott."

Meredith laughed scornfully.

"Well, as my wife," he remarked, "she won't be able to give evidence against me."

"Going as far as that, are you?" Violet Joe murmured.

"You'll find a special licence in that drawer, if you care to look," Meredith confided. "Notwithstanding that lack of intelligence with which you reproach me, I realised some time ago that Miss Mott was my chief danger. That was one reason why I made up my mind to marry her."

"Interesting! Has she, by the by, made up her mind to marry you?"

Meredith smiled—a gesture of supreme contempt at the imbecility of the question.

"Why not? The family estates are rehabilitated and it isn't every Miss Mott in the world who can become a Countess."

"Snob!" Violet Joe sneered. "Look here, Walter," he went on seriously, "I'll grant I'm the half-wit you seem to think I am, and I'll admit that you've planned some great and successful enterprises, but listen to me—you don't know Miss Mott."

Would you mind having her down and letting me ask her one or two questions?"

"With pleasure," Meredith acquiesced, "so long as you will remember that we are back in the humdrum world and will promise not to make any silly attempts at carrying the young woman off."

"I promise that," Violet Joe agreed.

Meredith touched a bell, gave an order to a servant and in a very few minutes Miss Mott appeared. Notwithstanding his bold front, Violet Joe gave a little start as he saw her calmly crossing the room. She was in street clothes, as usual plainly but exceedingly well dressed and she showed not the slightest signs of any nervous discomposure. Only when she saw Violet Joe rise to his feet was there any change in her expression. At first, her face brightened as though with pleasure; then she became graver and the smile faded.

"I thought that you had stopped this sort of thing," she said.

"So I have," he assured her. "At the same time, one remains human. This man was my associate and chief for years and I have come to save him from making a bad mistake, if I can."

Miss Mott indulged in a little grimace and sank into an easy-chair. Her arms dangled down on each side.

"And I hoped that you had come to rescue me," she sighed.

"I'm not at all sure that you need rescuing," Violet Joe replied.

"Why should she?" Meredith asked coolly. "We have an interesting document here to which we propose to give effect within the next few days."

The intruder rose to his feet and stood between the two. He looked older than the last time Miss Mott had seen him clearly in the Milan Grill Room, but his expression remained the same.

"Miss Mott," he begged, "please answer me these questions. Our friend here had made elaborate plans for having you carried off from that dancing Academy in Kensington Square. You rendered them all useless by offering to come with him voluntarily. Will you tell us both why?"

She hesitated.

"Would it be wise of me, do you think," she meditated.

"No harm shall come to you now, at any rate," Violet Joe promised. "Please answer my question."

"I came," she confided, "because I knew that he"—pointing to Meredith—"had offered a reward of five thousand pounds to any one who would trap me into coming to him. I came voluntarily, first because it was not my desire that any one should earn that five thousand pounds at my expense, and secondly because there was a ten thousand pounds reward for the man known as Walter Meredith, head of the Number One Gangsters."

There was a dead silence for several moments. Then Meredith spoke. His voice was not quite natural. The old restlessness was back in his eyes.

"You came here to earn that?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"How?"

"By delivering you over to justice."

"Your prospective husband?" he mocked.

"I've never had the slightest intention of marrying you," she assured him firmly.

"Then why did you come here quietly?"

"In order to betray you."

He took a cigarette case from his pocket, selected one deliberately, knocked it against the mantelpiece and lit it.

"Are you breaking your parole?" he asked.

"I'm not," she answered. "I have not spoken to one of your servants, except as regards their service. I have not used the telephone or attempted to leave the house. Yet you will be in the hands of the police, I should say, within the course of the next five minutes."

The old ugly smile distorted his lips, it took him away from his dignified surroundings, it thrust him back amidst the squalid places.

"You must have cheated, then!" he exclaimed.

She opened the hand bag which lay in her lap and drew out a strange-looking little metal case in the shape of a box. She laid it upon the table, raised the lid, touched a spring and the four walls fell away. Within were a mass of discs and springs and tiny plaques of oxidised metal. The whole thing seemed to be just a tangle but from a case fastened on to the side, Miss Mott produced a pair of miniature receivers, the ends of which she inserted into two plugs, and the listening portions of which she placed in her ears. She then touched a spring and a confused jangle of sounds crept out into the room. The two men stared at it in amazement. Miss Mott smiled somewhat cryptically, as her fingers touched various knobs and dials.

"An ingenious little toy, isn't it?" she remarked. "My uncle and I have the only two in Europe. They came from Detroit and cost a small fortune. However, just now, they're worth the money. If I have the wavelength right.... Yes, Yes—" she went on—"Miss Mott speaking.... Is he? Yes, that's right; he'll be here directly, then. Number 42a Berkeley Square. Thank you."

She removed the receivers from her ears, pulled out the plugs, and pushed back the spring.

"The reason why I came quietly," she explained, "was because I had this in my bag. I have been talking to Scotland Yard from upstairs. It's Marconi's latest invention. At present we can only manage a wave length of ten miles: as soon as he can make it twenty, the secret will be out and there will be thousands on the market."

Meredith lost his marvellous composure. He hurried to the window. As yet there was only one car at the door—his own. He crossed the floor in half a dozen strides. From the threshold he looked back.

"I wish you'd wring that little devil's neck for me, Joe," he called out. "I'll do it myself some day."

He disappeared. They heard the car drive off. Violet Joe rose to his feet with a gesture of politeness but Miss Mott had already rung the bell.

"Will you get me a taxi at once," she asked the butler, who made prompt appearance.

"Very good, madam," was the undisturbed reply. "There will be one here immediately. There's a stand just around the corner."

Violet Joe walked by her side down the hall and handed her into the cab. She gave her uncle's address.

"What about me?" he enquired.

"Oh, you're all right," she assured him. "You're off the black list altogether. Besides, I told them not to come unless I didn't report in half an hour."

"How long have you had that infernal instrument?" he asked.

"About a week," she confided. "It's a marvellous idea, isn't it? The only trouble about it is that so far we haven't got it to work!—Au revoir, and no more violets for a week, please."

The taxicab drove off and Violet Joe faded away into the shadows on the other side of the square. Miss Mott leaned back among the cushions of her taxicab, lit a cigarette and began to smoke meditatively. She was speculating as to how

Superintendent Wragge might behave when he was thoroughly angry.



IX

THE TERRIFIED WIFE

Miss Mott was caught again. She sighed as she waved her visitor to a seat—a middle-aged, over-dressed woman, with a hard, but not disagreeable face.

"Tell me your name once more, please," she begged, "and in which number of the magazine my answer to your enquiry appeared."

The woman sank into the client's chair, deposited her stubby little umbrella and bag upon the floor and began the story of her woes.

"My name is Mrs. Belton," she confided—"Bessie Belton. I used the pseudonym of Bonnie Bess, and your answer to my enquiry appeared in last Saturday's *Home Talks*."

Miss Mott rang the bell and presently had a copy of the magazine and a letter in front of her. She glanced through the latter, a slight frown upon her face.

"I don't like anything to do with divorce business," she said, "and to my mind it is a terrible thing to have a husband watched. You say in your letter that he wrote you apparently from Leicester, saying that he had been working there all day, whereas you know that he was in London on that day and was seen late at night in Pimlico. Why not ask him about it and make him tell you the truth? There may be a mistake in the date—that is what I suggested, I see, in my answer. I advised you to have it out with him."

"That is very good advice in an ordinary way and among ordinary people," Mrs. Belton agreed. "My Sam, though, isn't an ordinary sort of man. He goes to church on a Sunday and reads very serious books; he never looks at a woman that I can see, very seldom enters a public house and saves money all the time. He's saved far too much, to my way of thinking," she concluded mysteriously.

"That is quite an unusual complaint," Miss Mott remarked. "I don't want to take up your time, Mrs. Belton, and I must warn you that I am letting my agency business run down. I have an uncle who strongly objects to it and I am taking very few fresh cases. If you want me to have your husband watched, I must tell you frankly that I cannot do it. I only took a case of that description once and it got me into trouble. Cases of disappearance or blackmail I am still interested in, but very few others."

The woman listened but showed no signs of being willing to take her departure.

"I thought you might be inclined to help me, Miss Mott," she persisted. "Your answers to people who consult you are always so kind and sympathetic. There's none of them who write about their silly little love affairs who have trouble so near to their hearts as I."

"I don't think you ought to have," Miss Mott argued. "Your husband, according to your own showing, is a sober, religious and saving man. His only fault seems to have been that he did not tell you the truth on one occasion about his whereabouts. For heaven's sake, have it out with him instead of brooding."

"I didn't say it was on only one occasion," Mrs. Belton sighed. "It's happened already eight times."

Miss Mott was startled.

"Do you mean that eight times he has been away, or not been away, and deceived you as to his whereabouts?" she asked.

"I do mean that," Mrs. Belton asserted; "and each time he has not only written me from a place where he wasn't, but each time he has had the letter registered."

"Registered?" Miss Mott meditated.

"Looking, to my mind, as though he meant to have it to use as an alibi, if necessary."

"You don't imagine that your husband is a criminal, do you?" Miss Mott asked.

"God knows," the woman replied. "He's a strange, silent sort of person and in some ways he's as far aloof from me now as he was when I married him—thirteen years ago. Perhaps it's because we've had no children. Anyway, there's always seemed to be something between us."

"What excuse did your husband make for registering his letters?" Miss Mott asked.

"He always said that he'd taken a good order and he enclosed me a pound or thirty shillings to buy something with."

"And how do you know that *all* these letters were posted from places where he hadn't been?"

"Because when I got the one saying he was in Leicester, when I knew, for a positive fact, that he was in London, I made enquiries about the others."

"You have employed some one to watch him, then?" Miss Mott said quickly.

"No, I haven't," the woman answered. "I'm acquainted with a young man who works for the same firm and I got to know from him that Sam wasn't supposed to be in one of those places on the dates the letters were posted."

"I'm afraid I can't help you," was Miss Mott's decision. "Your husband evidently has something in his life which he desires to keep secret from you. A stranger can't do any good. Have it out with him yourself. That's my advice."

"You don't know Sam," Mrs. Belton said gloomily. "It isn't as though it were only once, either. It's the best part of a dozen times he's deceived me."

"Do you suspect him of infidelity?" Miss Mott asked.

"Sometimes I almost wish I did," was the passionate avowal. "I don't—and that's the worst of it. He never casts an eye at another woman. I've some good-looking friends, girls that used to work in the dress-making establishment where I was, and they often come to see me. He never takes any notice of them, never jollies them like any other man would. He's always either reading some deep book that no ordinary person could understand or else studying stocks and shares."

"You haven't told me yet what his business is," Miss Mott reminded her visitor.

"He's a traveller for a firm of leather merchants in Bermondsey. They give him a lot of liberty, it seems. He can go anywhere he likes in reason where he thinks he can make a sale."

Miss Mott deliberated for a moment. There were some curious points about the case.

"Look here," she said, "I don't think I can help you, but tell me this—if you don't suspect your husband of infidelity, what do you suspect him of?"

Mrs. Belton suddenly began to shake in her chair. The hardness seemed to fade from her face. She was a care-worn, anxious woman.

"I don't know," she groaned. "I wanted to find out privately."

"By privately," Miss Mott suggested, "I suppose you mean not through the police?"

The woman was shaking now in every limb. There was real terror in her face.

"The police!" she muttered. "They couldn't have anything to do with Sam, but I don't know—I'm miserable till I find out."

"Have you anything more on your mind?" Miss Mott asked her, after a moment's pause.

"Nothing," the woman almost shouted. "Why should you think that?"

"Perhaps there is something you would rather not tell me?" Miss Mott persisted.

The woman picked up her stubby little umbrella and bag and rose to her feet. She made an attempt at a dignified exit.

"Since you don't want to help me," she complained, "what's the use of asking all these silly questions?"

Miss Mott rang the bell.

"If ever," she concluded, "you feel inclined to confide in me what your real trouble is, and everything that is on your mind, I will reconsider the matter. I might then, perhaps, be disposed to help you."

The woman made no reply. She looked for a moment at the open door as though uncertain, then she took her leave without saying good-bye.

Miss Mott had an article to write that morning and very soon forgot all about her disappointed client. Just as she was finishing it, however, her young secretary brought her in a card.

"A gentleman to see you, madam," she announced.

Miss Mott gazed at the card—a neatly engraved, impressive affair—and frowned slightly in perplexity. It bore the name of Mr. Samuel Belton, and in small type in the corner, crossed through in pencil—H. Castle & Sons, Leather Merchants.

"The gentleman said he would only detain you a few minutes, Miss Mott," her secretary added.

"Show him in," was the brief injunction.

Mr. Belton, carrying a small bag in his hand, made due appearance. He was well and quietly dressed, a man apparently about forty-five years old, with a brownish-grey moustache, pale complexion and thoughtful eyes.

Miss Mott waved him to a chair.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Belton?" she enquired.

"I picked up a copy of your magazine a few days ago," he explained, "and read the column entitled 'Ask Miss Mott.' There was one reply there addressed to some one under the pseudonym of 'Bonnie Bess.' That is a pseudonym which my wife has adopted on many occasions; and before she was married, it was her nickname. I found out your address from the office of the paper and I came to ask you, Miss Mott, whether the reply to Bonnie Bess was in answer to an enquiry you had received from Mrs. Bessie Belton?"

"Possibly without meaning it," Miss Mott pointed out, "you have come to ask me a most improper question. I do not disclose the identities of my correspondents."

"Not even to their husbands?" Mr. Belton asked softly.

"Not even to their husbands," was the firm reply.

"In that case," Mr. Belton said, stretching out his hand for his bag—

"Quite so," Miss Mott interrupted briskly. "Good morning."

There was a little glint in the man's eyes as he lingered before taking his leave. Miss Mott's manner had been perhaps unnecessarily abrupt, but she had taken a dislike to the man.

"I should have preferred your showing me the letter which my wife had addressed to you," he said, "and letting the matter remain there. As it is, I have no alternative but to seek an explanation from my wife herself. It may perhaps lead to some trouble between us."

"Why should that affect me?" Miss Mott rejoined. "Good day."

There were no more troublesome callers and Miss Mott had recovered her spirits when she met her uncle at the close of the day at a famous grill room near the Strand. As they were ushered to their allotted table, she realised with a little catch of the breath that it was the exact scene of her first meeting with Violet Joe. She glanced at the table which he had occupied, as though expectantly. There was no sign of him there or anywhere else. A wave of her former listlessness came back as she took her place.

"Busy day?" her uncle asked.

"Not very," she admitted.

"You look tired," he remarked. "Case for a cocktail, I think. Waiter—two dry Martinis."

"What a heavenly idea!" Miss Mott murmured. "Anything fresh to-day?"

Superintendent Detective Wragge shook his head.

"Nothing in my department," he replied. "Wonderful article in the *Times* this morning by Lord Westerleys. He seems to have spent the last eighteen months absolutely hidden in the southern provinces of Abyssinia. Fellow must be a second Lawrence."

"He's back in London now then, is he?" Miss Mott enquired.

Her uncle nodded.

"He owns one of those fine houses in Berkeley Square," he confided. "One of the most interesting men of modern days, I should think. The Westerleys have always been a brilliant family, but they say that this man, if he could have settled down, could have been anything. There is no man in the world," he concluded, with a meditative gleam in his eyes, "with whom I would sooner have half an hour's conversation."

"Why don't you go and call on him?" Miss Mott suggested. "I expect he'd be very glad to see you."

"He might," her uncle mused.... "So you had a quiet morning?"

"Only two stupid callers—a man and his wife. The husband had recognised his wife's pseudonym in one of my replies to correspondents and came to ask me what his wife had written me about. Damn fools!"

Her uncle smiled and Miss Mott also relaxed. The cocktails had been excellent; so was the omelette which had subsequently been served.

"I think you're right," she went on. "I shall have to give up this agency business. The fact that every now and then it pays wonderfully well doesn't atone for all the time it wastes and the silly people one has to talk to."

"The day you finish with it finally," her uncle promised, "I will make you a present of a thousand pounds. I hate the idea personally."

"It might have been quite all right," Miss Mott sighed, "if only I'd found the right sort of clients."

"The right sort of clients come to the police, if they're in trouble," Superintendent Wragge told his niece. "The only ones who don't are the wrongdoers, and you don't want to help them, I suppose."

"There is something rather attractive about a wrongdoer," Miss Mott reflected wistfully.

Her uncle looked at her across the table with a queer expression in his eyes.

"The sooner you get that idea out of your head the better," he admonished her. "Slushy sentiment, I call it. Worse than that—it does real harm. Perhaps you'd sympathise with the Western Street murderer?"

"Never heard about him," Miss Mott confided.

"It was only last week," her uncle recounted. "A harmless old man who made a fortune out of his shop, and committed the usual mistake of keeping too much of it in cash and bearer bonds—got bragging a little about it, I suppose, in the local pub, and when closing time came, invited a stranger to go home with him and have a drink. The stranger strangled him in his sitting room, emptied his safe, tidied up the place and was making his way from the house when he came face to face with a policeman who challenged him. He shot him through the chest and disappeared. He died this morning—the policeman. I've just come from the hospital. You'd sympathise with a brute like that, I suppose."

"Of course I shouldn't! No one could. A cold-blooded criminal is too terrible. You've got him, I hope?"

Superintendent Wragge glanced gloomily at his plate and, for the moment, his very excellent cutlets seemed to have lost their flavour.

"We haven't," he admitted. "The policeman—fine fellow he was too, and a married man—never recovered consciousness, and the descriptions we got of the murderer from the public house aren't worth a snap of the fingers. He'll get away, unless he trips up on a fluke."

"Was it a gangster affair, do you think?" Miss Mott asked a little timidly.

Her uncle shook his head.

"No, it was a single-handed affair," he confided. "They are always the most difficult. The gangsters are keeping pretty quiet."

"Ten thousand pounds you offered for their chief, didn't you?" Miss Mott reflected. "It's a lot of money. I wonder whether any one will ever earn it."

Her uncle looked at her again with that queer expression in his eyes. There were times when he wondered about this brilliant little relative of his.

"It would be money very well earned," he said. "Our reports just now," he continued, "are that the man we wanted, and whom I should think you would have felt glad to know was safely in prison, has got away again. If no one takes his place, we rather expect the gang will break up."

Miss Mott gazed greedily at the asparagus which was being served.

"Let us," she suggested, "abjure crime for a while. We waste too much time talking shop. I've been offered the sub-editorship of the magazine. What do you think of that?"

"I'd rather you found a husband," her uncle replied bluntly.

Whereupon the conversation became frivolous and ended without further reference to the criminal activities by which they were surrounded.

On her arrival at the office on the following morning, Miss Mott discovered confusion. The commissionaire was absent from his box, the lift man told a confused story of burglary, of which Miss Mott could make neither head nor tail, and her office, when she arrived at it, she found invaded by her youthful secretary, her typist, the commissionaire and a policeman. The safe door, which she had carefully locked before leaving, was open; her desk, which was always a miracle of neatness, was in complete disorder, and, most curious thing of all, the wastepaper basket had been emptied upon the carpet and its contents scattered far and wide.

"What on earth has happened?" she asked.

The commissionaire, who was an ex-Scotland Yard man and a protégé of her uncle's, explained in a few sentences.

"Some one broke in here last night, Miss Mott. Easy enough, of course. Got in through the windows of the furnace room, picked the lock of one door and just walked up the stairs. He found your keys in your outside office and seems to have searched the place thoroughly. How much had you in the safe?"

"About ten pounds," Miss Mott replied. "I never keep any money here, except for petty cash."

"Any papers?"

"Nothing that would be of any use to anybody."

"Perhaps the young lady would look around," the policeman suggested, "and report upon what is missing."

Miss Mott made careful search for a quarter of an hour. The trifling amount of money had gone from the safe but every

paper she could remember owning was in its place. The drawers of her desk were practically undisturbed. Her cigarette case, gold lighter and one or two other trifles remained intact. The most curious feature of the whole affair was, without a doubt, the attention that had been paid to the wastepaper basket—the contents of which had been strewn far and wide.

"There's about ten pounds gone from the safe," Miss Mott reported at last. "Not another thing."

"And nothing at all from our office," the young secretary declared.

The constable was disappointed.

"I've sent for a man, madam, to take fingerprints of the safe," he said, "although, under the circumstances, it scarcely seems worth while. There isn't anything you've removed from here," he went on, "that might have been more valuable?"

"Nothing at all."

"Because," the policeman continued, "the affair, although it doesn't amount to anything, was evidently carried out by an expert. The cutting of the window and the picking of the locks prove that. An expert would scarcely be likely to risk trouble for the sake of ten pounds."

"I've never kept more than that here," Miss Mott assured him, "and I've never had anything here of the slightest intrinsic value. I'll ring up my uncle at Scotland Yard. He'll probably like to hear about it."

The constable closed his book.

"There isn't any more to be done, then, so far as I am concerned," he decided.

A myrmidon from Scotland Yard arrived within a short time, but a further and more scientific search of Miss Mott's two offices failed to discover any possible clue to the apparently purposeless burglary. Everything, as the visitor pointed out, was done in the best possible fashion. The safe had been opened without leaving a scratch, the pane of glass had been removed in the lower premises with perfect neatness, footmarks in the dust had been brushed away, gloves had evidently been worn, for there was no sign anywhere of a fingerprint.

"The only thing one can conclude, Miss Mott," the detective decided, as he prepared to take his leave, "is that there were false rumours of your having been in possession of some valuable property. It was lucky you were all out of the way. A man as clever as this one seems to have been wouldn't have stood any nonsense."

"You can't suggest any possible cause for the burglary, then?" Miss Mott enquired.

"The suggestion—if any—would have to come from you, miss," the man replied. "Sit down and think whether you have had any letters in your possession lately which might have been of value or incriminating to any one. Take particular note of the care with which the wastepaper basket was searched."

The detective took his leave and Miss Mott, somewhat intrigued, sat down to think. Very slowly she began to reconstruct. In the midst of her somewhat vague reflections, there was a knock at the door and a visitor was announced.

"It's the woman who was here yesterday," her secretary confided. "I didn't let her in because you made no notes about the case, so I thought there was nothing doing."

Miss Mott nodded.

"Quite right, Esther," she said. "I'll see her for a moment, though."

Mrs. Belton was ushered into the room. It was obvious that this morning she had again committed the sin of indulging too freely in her weakness for cosmetics. Rouge and powder had been applied with a wanton hand. Nothing, however, had been able altogether to conceal the dark lines under her eyes. She had the look of a haunted woman.

"Well, what can I do for you this morning, Mrs. Belton?" Miss Mott enquired pleasantly. "I thought you were rather fed up with me yesterday."

"For one thing, I left without paying my fee," the woman explained, drawing two treasury notes from her pocket. "Would this be all right?"

"I don't want a fee, thank you," Miss Mott assured her. "I wasn't able to do anything for you."

The woman pushed the two notes across the table.

"Anyway, you did your best," she acknowledged. "You needn't mind taking it. Sam, with all his faults, ain't a mean man, and I can afford it."

Miss Mott did not argue the matter. She was studying her visitor's expression.

"More trouble?" she asked kindly.

The woman shook her head.

"Rather the other way," she confided. "I know all about it now. Sam's owned up."

Miss Mott nodded in sympathy and waited. Her visitor dabbed at her eyes with an unprepossessing handkerchief and continued.

"I never thought it of him. He seemed so different, what with his church going and that. He's owned up, though. He's been carrying on with a little bit o' stuff out Chiswick way, and that's where he was those nights when he pretended to be somewhere else. We've had it all out—nearly killed me, it has—"

She began to sob and showed signs of hysterics. Miss Mott waited patiently.

"You're going to forgive him, I hope," she suggested.

Mrs. Belton sighed.

"What is there for a woman to do in this life," she pointed out. "I'm like the rest of the poor muts—I'll have to forgive and make the best of it. If I were young and had my looks back again, I'd take a man of my own and that'd teach him. It's too late for that, though. Sam's saved enough money—he's given up his post and we're going abroad."

"Well, perhaps it's all for the best," Miss Mott said vaguely. "I'll take your two pounds if you insist, Mrs. Belton, and wish you a pleasant journey."

The woman dabbed once more at her eyes.

"Can I have the letter I wrote you?" she asked.

Miss Mott looked at her in some surprise. The woman's tone had suddenly changed. There seemed to be an attempt at indifference but underneath was a note of almost crafty anxiety. She was drawing her handkerchief restlessly through her fingers.

"Why, I suppose so," Miss Mott acquiesced. "Wait a moment and I'll see if I can find it."

She made her way into the outer office, closing the door behind her, gave a few rapid instructions to her young secretary, lingered several moments and reappeared.

"My clerk is going through the files," she announced. "It hasn't been destroyed, so you can have it with pleasure. Where are you going to settle down?"

"My husband wants to go to the Argentine. He's got a cousin or two out there and doing well, and he likes company. Not that he needs to work, either. He had money left him, Sam did, three years ago, and he's scarcely touched it yet.... Your clerk don't seem to be able to find that letter," she broke off uneasily.

"She'll come across it all right," Miss Mott declared. "With our filing system, nothing is ever lost, but occasionally it takes some time to get at. Here we are," she added, as the young person from the outer office entered the room.

The woman almost snatched the letter away. She stowed it into the bottom of her bag, but, apparently changing her mind,

drew it out again, tore it savagely into small pieces and, making her way to the fireplace, dropped them carefully into the flames. When she stood up, she seemed a younger woman.

"So that's the end of that," she concluded, with a little sigh of relief. "I was a foolish woman. You were quite right, Miss Mott! Never work against your husband secretly. It don't do any good."

As she walked across the room, her footsteps were lighter and the ghost of some terror seemed to have left her. She picked up her bag and the same stubby little umbrella and took her leave. For nearly half an hour Miss Mott sat at her desk with her hands behind her head, thinking hard. Then she rose quickly to her feet, drew on her small hat, wriggled into her coat, picked up her gloves and hurried out.

"Back in five minutes," she called into the office. "You took a copy of the letter?"

The girl held it up.

"And James witnessed it?"

"I did that, madam," the man replied.

Miss Mott descended to the street, walked about a couple of hundred yards and entered the shop of a small dyeing and cleaning establishment. She greeted the woman, whom she knew quite well, with a pleasant smile.

"I only had your gloves yesterday, Miss Mott," the latter remarked reproachfully.

"I didn't expect them," Miss Mott assured her. "What I came about was something quite different and—much more important. I came to know whether, by any fortunate chance, you had kept the long envelope in which I sent them."

The woman was puzzled.

"The long envelope," she repeated thoughtfully.

Miss Mott nodded.

"Yes," she said. "I was in a hurry to send them in to you. I hadn't an envelope large enough in my office and I picked up a crumpled one from the floor. I didn't even address it. It wasn't necessary because I sent the commissionaire in with them."

The woman opened a drawer.

"Well, you'll have to excuse me, Miss Mott," she begged, "but the fact is we're very busy just now, and it's no good sending things into the room which can't be touched. Your little packet's just as we received it and here it is."

She placed it upon the counter—a couple of pairs of gloves, the ends protruding from a long, legal envelope on which an address had been half scratched out. Miss Mott stared at the address and her eyes grew larger and rounder. Her first impulse was one of triumph, then she felt a little shiver pass through her frame. She could almost see the enactment of those last few minutes of the greatest tragedy left to us in the world.

"There's nothing wrong with you, Miss Mott, is there?" the woman asked anxiously.

"Nothing at all," Miss Mott declared, in a voice she scarcely recognised as her own. "I'm not leaving the gloves, if you don't mind. Give me a piece of tissue paper, will you."

The woman obeyed, still brimful of curiosity. Miss Mott wrapped up her packet and took her leave.

Superintendent Wragge was not altogether too pleased by his niece's message. It was rather a busy morning, his chief was in a bad temper, and Miss Mott, after all, had not the appearance of a serious visitor.

"Wouldn't this evening do, Lucie?" he asked her.

"Nothing would do but ten minutes from this instant," Miss Mott replied. "And you ought to be able to trust me."

"I'm clearing the office already," he assured her. "Come right along."

Miss Mott, in her uncle's car, with James on the box and her own little unneeded popgun in her bag by her side, drove in guarded state to Scotland Yard. Her uncle received her without delay but with just that slight note of impatience in his manner which warned her to get started.

"Is any reward offered for the Galliope murder in the Western Road?" she asked.

"Five hundred pounds. The bills are up this morning," he replied. "What have you got to do with the Galliope murder? Your little company of friends are not in that."

"What was the date of it?" she enquired.

"Eighth of March," he answered.

She nodded.

"Now would you be so kind as to tell me," she went on, "whether any burglary, robbery with violence, or other misdemeanours took place on January 27th, February 18th, March 1st?"

"March 1st was the Hatton Garden robbery," he replied quickly. "February 18th was the date of the murder of Francis Green, the shopkeeper, and the raiding of his premises. The other date—wait a moment—" he consulted a ledger and closed it with a snap. "On the other date," he announced, "Barclays were robbed of fifteen thousand pounds at their Fenchurch Street Bank."

Miss Mott felt her heart beating fast.

"A few days ago," she began, "a woman who was obviously jealous of her husband wrote me this silly letter, asking for advice."

She passed a copy of Mrs. Belton's letter across the table. There was a gleam in Superintendent Wragge's eyes as he noticed the date.

"Well?"

"I made the usual sort of reply," Miss Mott went on, "and she called on me. Each one of the dates on which he had written her she had found out that he was somewhere else. She wanted me to have him watched. I refused the business. Then he called. He wanted the letter back. I can guess why now—I couldn't at the time. Of course I refused. When he was leaving, he drew a muffler from his pocket and I noticed that an old envelope fell out. I made no remark, however, for it was empty and didn't seem to be valuable. Last night, as you know, my premises were burgled, a few pounds were taken from my safe, but nothing else, although your man whom you sent down—Detective Russell—reported that he considered it a very cleverly done affair."

"The letter wasn't stolen then?" Superintendent Wragge asked.

"Would he have been such a fool?" she rejoined. "The letter which contained the three dates of the various robberies and the date of the murder—no, it wasn't that he was after—Madam came for that this morning—said she had made it up with her husband and had discovered that there had been another woman, but had forgiven him and was going abroad at once. I let her have the letter," Miss Mott went on, "so that they should not become suspicious, but I kept an attested copy of it."

Mr. Wragge pushed his watch rudely out of the way. He had forgotten that there was such a thing as time.

"Clever girl," he murmured. "Now tell me, what was the object of the burglary, though?"

"This," Miss Mott replied, producing a crumpled long legal envelope. "It's the envelope which fell from the man's pocket when he drew out his muffler. You see—it's got the name of a firm of stockbrokers on the back and what's far more important—it's addressed to John Galliope, Western Street, Shepherds' Market."

Superintendent Wragge turned it over and over.

"You can swear that this is the envelope?" he asked.

"I can swear to it," she answered. "I picked it up after he had left, without looking at it, put a couple of pairs of gloves that needed cleaning in it, and sent them around to a shop near the corner. I retrieved it this afternoon exactly as I had sent it there."

Superintendent Wragge went through the papers once more rapidly, then he leaned back in his chair and looked at his niece.

"A good day's work, Lucie," he declared. "Four crimes cleared up. Belton will certainly hang. Five hundred pounds' reward for you and the Chief Commissioner will probably ask me to dinner. What licks me, though," he went on meditatively, "is the luck of this whole criminal business. The best brains in the Yard have been focussed upon the Galliope murder and these preceding crimes for months, and there a jealous woman walks into your little show and gives the whole thing away."

"All luck!" Miss Mott sighed complacently.

"A very comfortable start," Mr. Samuel Belton remarked, as he pushed back his empty teacup and with deliberate fingers commenced to fill his pipe. "I see our taxi's coming around the corner. You're sure the luggage is all right?"

"Twenty-two pieces," Mrs. Belton announced, "all properly addressed to Southampton. I sha'n't be sorry when we're on the steamer."

Mr. Belton smiled in superior fashion. He struggled into his overcoat and picked up his well-brushed hat.

"There is nothing to be alarmed at, my dear," he said. "With the exception of your somewhat foolish letter to that flighty young woman, which is now happily destroyed, the slate is clean."

She clutched at his arm. There was a terrified light in her haunted eyes.

"Sam," she begged, "when we're right away—when we start life afresh—you won't begin again—promise that!"

"I promise," he said indulgently. "We have quite enough money for the rest of our lives, and that's the great thing. The Galliope money, indeed, was far more than I'd expected. Come along, my dear—"

They moved into the dark little hall. The front doorbell pealed. They looked at each other through the gloom and even Mr. Belton's equanimity was shaken.

"What the hell did the taxi man need to ring for?" he demanded.

"It may be one of the tradespeople we've forgotten," she faltered. "I tried to think of every one."

"Open the door and see," he ordered curtly.

She drew back the latch and peered out. Scotland Yard men are polite enough as a rule, but Belton's record was scarcely in his favour. They were in the hall, three of them, before she could cry out, and if Belton's swiftly moving right hand had really a destination, it started too late. The handcuffs were on his wrists before a word was spoken. Then the Sergeant was ready enough of speech.

"I'm arresting you, Samuel Belton," he announced, "for the murder of John Galliope of Shepherds' Market on the night of March the eighth. I should advise you to make no reply to the charge but to come along with me to the station."

The woman's shrieks filled the deserted house. Belton crumpled up in a senseless heap, but the law took its course—then and five weeks later, in the dreaded chamber of Wandsworth Gaol.

X

INFORMERS STILL PAY

There had been an investiture at Buckingham Palace, and the grey streets were bright in patches with visions of waving plumes and brilliant uniforms. A dandified youth, issuing from Jermyn Street, caught sight of a slim, aristocratic figure leaning back in the corner of his car, as though to escape as far as possible from observation—a figure in brilliant uniform with rows of medals and a hat with waving plumes. The young man stood still, entirely heedless of the fact that a passer-by almost elbowed him into the gutter. He stared at the impressive figure in the car until it had passed him. A fortunate block enabled him to copy down its number. Half an hour later, as Lord Westerleys' valet was carrying down a lounge coat to his master, and a butler was serving him with whisky and soda, a visitor was announced.

"There's a young man outside, my lord," the footman explained, "who claims that he has found something of yours this afternoon. He won't tell me what it is and he won't hand it over to any one but your lordship."

Walter Paul Meredith, Earl of Westerleys, took another gulp of his whisky and soda and set down the glass empty.

"You can show him in," he directed. "I don't remember having lost anything. But one's always liable to shed a medal on a day like this."

In the hall, Reuben Kochs handed his smart little Derby and cheap cane to a second man and was ushered into the library.

"The young person, my lord," the footman announced.

Westerleys glanced at his visitor but no sign escaped him. He looked him over coldly as he might have done a stranger.

"What is it that you have found, young man?" he enquired.

"If you'll give me a moment alone, I'll show it you—my lord," was the awkwardly spoken reply.

Westerleys waved the servants from the room, after which he seated himself in an easy-chair and stretched out his legs with an air of relief.

"Well, Reuben Kochs," he asked coolly, "what do you want?"

The young man's admiration was uncontrollable.

"Governor," he declared, "you've got me speechless. We always knew you were a toff, of course, but God strike me dumb if ever I thought of anything like this!"

Westerleys yawned.

"It would have been more in accordance with etiquette," he remarked, "if you had failed to recognise me. However, since you have done so, and since you have followed me to my home—what is it you want from me?"

The young man, unbidden, seated himself on the edge of a chair. His host looked at him distastefully.

"I don't want to waste your time," the latter continued. "The gang is broken up, as you know. I have retired and resumed my own station in life. You are in a position to do the same, if you wish. You must forgive my adding that now that our association has ceased, there is no need for us to exchange visits."

"So that's it," Reuben Kochs muttered.

"That is it," the other assented smoothly. "I found it unnecessary to draw my portion of the spoils, when things were wound up, so you ought to have done quite well. If my memory serves me rightly, you drew over twenty thousand pounds."

"Twenty-one thousand nine hundred and seventy-two pounds, eighteen shillings," the young man confided.

"An adequate return for your labours, I should imagine," Westerleys commented. "I wish you well, but—relieve me of your presence now, if you please. I'm giving a lecture to-night and I desire to rest for an hour."

Reuben Kochs clasped his forehead tightly.

"It's a blooming picture show," he declared. "Wotcher been wearing all that circus stuff for?"

"That circus stuff, as you call it," Westerleys replied, "is part of the costume in which it is my duty to array myself before I make my bow to my sovereign. You observe," he added, stretching out his hand, "that I am ringing a bell. That is for a servant to show you out."

Mr. Reuben Kochs rose to his feet.

"I'm ready," he acquiesced. "I couldn't talk to you now, if I tried. Strike me lucky, if this ain't a game. I expect I'll find Violet Joe in Piccadilly, wearing a coronet instead of a billycock!"

"You may find yourself in a police cell with something on your wrists, if you become impertinent," was the cool rejoinder. "Grover, you can show this young man out, if you please."

Mr. Reuben Kochs accepted his hat and stick from a footman in the hall and meekly departed. On the pavement outside he paused and gazed at the house. He counted the windows carefully each way, he examined the area with a practised eye, then once more he took in the *tout ensemble*.

"Strike me lucky!" he muttered, as he turned away and sought the seclusion of a pub at the corner of Clarges Street.

Miss Mott was hard at work upon an article urgently required by her editor when Mr. Reuben Kochs was announced and shown in. She looked at him coldly. Unabashed, he grinned back at her in ingratiating fashion.

"If I had known who my visitor was," she told him, "I certainly should not have seen you. Please say what you have to say and go away."

"Come, come, young lady!" he protested. "This time I'm here to do you a bit of good. How would you feel about a cool thousand pounds, eh? And nothing to do for it."

"I should imagine," she said coldly, "that any money that came from you would have to be earned dishonestly."

"That's where you are wrong; and you're not only wrong, but I can tell you this—you can not only earn the money legally and lawfully, but you can get a bit of your own back at the same time."

"Indeed?" Miss Mott rejoined.

"You haven't forgotten Meredith yet—the man with the scar—who tried to carry you off more than once? Well, the gang's bust. There's five thousand pounds' reward offered for him and I know where he is."

"Why don't you earn the money then?" Miss Mott asked, speaking more calmly than she felt.

"I'll be straight with you," Reuben Kochs replied. "If one of the gang splits, their light's put out in twenty-four hours. Even though we're bust, that goes on. You never were one of the gang—in fact, you were on the other side; you can split and earn the money and nothing'll happen to you."

"I see," Miss Mott murmured, "and I'm to have one thousand and you four thousand pounds."

The young man was temporarily discomposed. His recovery, however, was almost magical.

"I'd never be one to drive a hard bargain with a dame," he said. "Make it fifteen hundred yellow goblins. What about that? And remember, miss, you ain't got half the information nor a quarter of it. I'm the only one can put my hand on Walter Meredith."

"Are you?" Miss Mott queried.

"Aye, and when I give you the address, your eyes'll pretty well fall out," the young man declared. "Does it go?"

"I'll consider the matter," Miss Mott promised.

Reuben Kochs argued for some time longer, but he could gain no more than a noncommittal reply from Miss Mott. He took his leave at last, therefore, with an appointment for three days hence.

Miss Mott felt a little lost in the immensity of the apartment, even in the confines of the capacious leather chair in which she was seated. Softly toned lights flamed from unexpected places and the long, apparently endless rows of calf bound books in their ancient shelves gave a sort of monastic atmosphere to a room which indeed possessed only a few embellishments in the shape of pictures or flowers. Meredith himself was dressed in morning clothes of rather severe cut and hue, and from behind the green lamp his face seemed paler than ever. He waved away his secretary with a few parting instructions—sharply spoken, incisive words. When he turned towards Miss Mott, his voice seemed marvellously changed.

"So the mouse has wandered alone once more into the trap?" he murmured. "What temerity!"

"The mouse believed it was safe," Miss Mott replied, "because it came on an errand of mercy."

She felt his keen instincts almost anticipating the words that lay behind her brain.

"I came," she said, "because you're in danger. I don't know why I should care, but, in a way, I do."

"For me, Miss Mott?" he asked softly.

She shook her head.

"Not for you. You have been very cruel to me and sometimes you have frightened me out of my wits."

"I wanted you for my mate, Miss Mott," he acknowledged. "I still do. The special licence remains in that drawer—"

"I can never care for you like that," she assured him. "Sometimes you play the great gentleman wonderfully, but I think that at heart you are cruel."

He gave no immediate reply. His eyes were fixed upon a distant wall and it seemed to her that all the weariness of a man's misspent life was graven in his face.

"Yet you refuse to betray me? You came to warn me," he muttered presently.

"Because you are at least a man," she said. "If you are a criminal, you are not a criminal of the type of Reuben Kochs."

"A coward's courage, this of his, at the last moment," Meredith reflected. "I never thought he would dare. I thought that so far as he was concerned, I was safe."

"But don't you see how clever he is?" she pointed out. "He isn't going to give you away at all. I am to do that. I am to go to my uncle and just whisper that one little word which is to be your undoing."

"Yes, I suppose it could be done," he admitted. "Yet mine is the most wonderful alibi for the last few years that a man ever wove. It cost me months of thought. I could fill the court with people who would swear that they had seen me in distant parts of Asia and Abyssinia. No one in the world has lain so deeply hidden as I have in this city. However—Reuben Kochs was always the weak point. He fashioned all our disguises, painted our scars, turned men into women, turned youth into age with a few simple implements and a touch of genius. So Reuben Kochs wants to be an informer, eh? He'd better have lived to have spent his twenty thousand pounds and left me to become a Cabinet Minister."

She studied him speculatively. Amazing though it was, she was forced to admit that there was nothing in his face, his bearing, or his expression which reminded her in the least of the terrible Meredith. He had stepped back into his own

identity with a facility which was perfectly marvellous. His lined, ascetic face, his cold but brilliant eyes, the firm cynical mouth—they were all the hall marks of the aristocratic politician, the great gentleman absorbed in the cares of his country. She felt a surge of bitter, indignant contempt against a creature like Reuben Kochs.

"Can't you find some means of securing that young man's silence?" she asked, almost afraid of the sound of her words, certainly afraid of the slowly formed thought in her heart.

He smiled at her.

"Bravo, Miss Mott," he murmured. "Yes, I shall deal with Kochs, but the poison of a reptile like that is an indestructible thing. Not even I could wash the world free from it."

He touched a bell and Miss Mott knew that she was dismissed. He rose to his feet, however, as the servant entered the room, and his farewell smile seemed to chase from his face all those things that had terrified her, and left her with a new memory of the man.

"My congratulations to lucky Joe, Miss Mott," he sighed, as she was crossing the threshold.

It was towards the close of the third day when Reuben Kochs made his promised reappearance at Miss Mott's office. She looked at him, as he slunk into the room, in blank astonishment. He seemed less than the shadow of his former self. During those first few seconds his eyes wandered restlessly and anxiously around the little room, searching out its distant corners with fear in their uneasy depths. He had the air of a hunted man—a man moving in mortal fear—terrified and torn with imaginings. Even his clothes betrayed signs of the state of panic into which he had fallen. He had lost his natty and spruce appearance, he was unshaven and his linen was not above reproach—one might have imagined that he had stolen away from the casualty ward of some asylum or prison and that recapture meant death.

"What has happened to you?" Miss Mott asked wonderingly.

"It's these blasted three days' waiting," he confided, as he sank into a chair. "I ought to have made you decide straight away. It's no good going about with a thing like this in your brain. You want to do it or forget it."

"Well, if you take my advice—you'll forget it," Miss Mott told him.

"You're not coming in, then?"

"I certainly am not," she assured him. "Fifteen hundred pounds is a pleasant sum of money, but I don't care to go about with a curse upon my head for the rest of my life."

"What do you mean—a curse upon your head?" he sneered. "The gang's all broken up nowadays—if Meredith's once in prison, he'll never get out again and there's no one left but Violet Joe to turn awkward."

"What about Violet Joe?" she rejoined. "Why wouldn't he be dangerous?"

"Never touched firearms," Reuben Kochs explained triumphantly. "Never parked a gun, even against the cops. No need to fear Violet Joe."

"It is a question of my own feelings more than any sentiment of fear," Miss Mott confided. "I do not wish you to tell me where Meredith is or what name he is living under. Even if you do, I shall not give evidence against him."

Reuben Kochs sat for a few minutes in sullen silence. Miss Mott looked across at him with a scornful smile. He certainly presented an almost pitiable appearance.

"You're trying to pay me for doing what you're afraid to do yourself," she continued curtly. "If you are so sure that there will be no retribution, why do you look already as though you were terrified of your own shadow? I shouldn't have thought five thousand was worth it."

The young man rose to his feet.

"You mind your own business," he snapped. "All I came to know was whether you were in this with me or whether you weren't."

"I am not," she told him firmly, "and if you take my advice, young man," she went on, "you'll give up the idea too. They aren't fond of informers at Scotland Yard, you know. You may find they'll have something to set off against that five thousand pounds."

"I can take care of myself, thanks, young woman," Reuben Kochs declared, with a touch of his former swagger as he rose to his feet.

"You'll need to," she remarked, as she turned back to her work.

"What do you mean?" he snarled from the door.

"I mean," she replied, "that any one who turns informer against a man like Meredith must be a brave man."

Reuben Kochs took his leave, slamming the door noisily behind him...

Miss Mott rang up a number upon the telephone and soon found herself speaking to Walter Meredith.

"Reuben Kochs has just been here," she reported. "He is terrified but, I'm afraid, determined. I believe that he is on his way now to Scotland Yard."

Meredith's voice as he answered her was cold and pitiless.

"He will never reach there," he said.

"But I thought the band was all broken up," she suggested hesitatingly.

"Yes, the band is broken up," he agreed, "but informers still pay."

"You yourself," she began—

"I have made my plans," he interrupted. "Good-bye, little Miss Mott."

The telephone went dead. Miss Mott sat for a moment with the vision of ugly things before her eyes. She was not sure, after all, whether crime appealed to her so much.

On that same afternoon, Superintendent Wragge gazed long and earnestly at a visiting card which had been brought in to him. Upon it was engraved the name of "The Hon. Joseph Chilcott," and in small characters in the left-hand corner "Bachelors' Club." "You can show the gentleman up, Parkins," he told the commissionaire.

A tall young man, personable, and of a pleasant expression, in spite of a few telltale lines on his face, was presently ushered in. He smiled good-humouredly at the Inspector and took the indicated seat. Superintendent Wragge's keen eyes seemed almost to disappear in those creases of flesh. There was a momentary silence during which the door was closed.

"Violet Joe," Superintendent Wragge murmured softly.

"They would call me that," the young man admitted. "A trifle familiar of them, I thought."

"Why have you walked into the lions' den?" Superintendent Wragge asked.

"I came to find out if it was a lions' den," was the prompt reply. "In other words, Superintendent, I have come to ask you if you have anything against me?"

"A curious question," the latter meditated. "For six years you appear to have been a member of one of the most dangerous bands of gangsters in London, and although I am not prepared to say that we have evidence involving you in any of their exploits, I have no doubt but that it could be collected."

"Why rake up the past?" Violet Joe asked deprecatingly. "I haven't come to plead my cause, but, remember this, I was compelled to step out of the gang because of my stipulations—no women and no firearms. I've never carried a gun against the police in my life. I have more than once, as a matter of fact, been on the side of the law."

The Superintendent held out a warning hand.

"I know all I wish to know about you, Mr. Chilcott," he said. "I will answer your question if you like. We have nothing against you."

The young man laughed pleasantly.

"Just the reply I'd hoped for," he confessed. "Well, now comes the next thing. Have you any objections to my marrying your niece?"

Superintendent Wragge winced.

"Several," he admitted. "But I sha'n't press them. Have you any money?"

"Eight thousand a year and a fine property in Norfolk. I don't think that will make any difference to Miss Mott, though."

"I don't think it will," her uncle admitted. "If you've made up your mind about it, I have nothing to say."

Violet Joe coughed.

"You understood my reasons for paying you this little visit first?"

"Perfectly," Superintendent Wragge acknowledged drily. "You can look through your dossier if you like. I've marked it 'O.K.' myself."

"Then you won't mind shaking hands?" Violet Joe suggested with a broad smile.

The Superintendent extended his large and hairy fingers to the other's grip, after which Violet Joe brought his unusual visit to an end and went on his way.

A light rain was falling as Violet Joe proceeded towards the Embankment, and he glanced enquiringly first at one and then at the other of two taxicabs drawn up by the side of the curb. Neither responded to his summons, and, moving a step farther, he saw that their flags were down. He saw something else too which brought back the lines of anxiety to his face. He glanced quickly around him in every direction. A moment later he grasped the shoulder of a young man who, with a mackintosh turned up to his throat and a bowler hat pulled down over his eyes, had just crossed the road.

"Stand close to me, Reuben Kochs," he ordered. "Don't move!"

"Who the hell are you?" the young man blustered, shivering.

"You know who I am well enough," Violet Joe replied. "Look at those two taxicabs. Do they seem familiar to you?"

"So help me God," Reuben Kochs muttered, as he gazed through the twilight from one to the other of the two waiting vehicles, "they're the 'fly by nights'."

"Another few yards," Violet Joe said to him sternly, "and you'd have felt a bullet rattling in your chest."

The young man was shaking like an aspen leaf. He looked towards the City and he looked towards Westminster; in each direction two great staring eyes glittered at him.

"What shall I do, Guv'nor?" he asked anxiously.

Violet Joe looked down at him and his usually kindly eyes were like points of fire.

"You dirty little skunk," he said. "You were going in there to give Meredith away."

Reuben Kochs had just sense enough to know when lying was useless.

"They'll nab him before long," he declared earnestly. "He can't bring a bluff like this off. House of Lords and circus togs at Buckingham Palace! They'll get him sure. Why shouldn't I have the five thousand?"

"You were a good deal nearer a ten-foot plot in the police cemetery a few seconds ago," Violet Joe reminded him. "Do you want to go on with it? Step away, if you do. I don't see any reason why I should interfere to save your life."

"Don't you leave me, Guv'nor," Reuben Kochs begged nervously. "I'm not going in there—I'll swear to it."

"Walk along by my side, then," Violet Joe ordered. "We'll find a taxi at the corner and I'll take you to some place where you can hear a few words of plain truth."

Reuben Kochs, however, had obviously no desire to hear those few words of plain truth. He slunk along the pavement, keeping as near as possible to his protector, but glancing furtively around in every direction. Suddenly he saw what seemed to him his chance. They had passed the broad entrance and were within a few feet of the narrower gate. They were no longer alone on the pavement, either, for a little crowd of men and women had hurried over from one of the islands in the middle of the broad road. Reuben Kochs ducked low and broke into a coward's run, as he had done many times before in his life. Unfortunately for him, the crowd thinned for a moment, just as he moved. There was a startled shriek from one or two dumbfounded passers-by, but the singing bullet sped safely to its home. People even a dozen yards away had no idea of what had happened. There was a sharp report like the cracking of a whip, a pencil of flame and a groan. Reuben Kochs, rapidly surrounded by a little crowd of people, none of whom realised the cause of the tragedy, lay huddled upon the pavement—one hand clutching at the railings, the other at his side. Violet Joe was one of those apparently who felt no interest in street accidents, for he walked calmly away into the sheltering twilight. The two taxicabs were lost in the stream of traffic.

Miss Mott recognised the step upon the stair and she felt her knees grow weak, although there was nothing at all like fear in her heart. She had been day-dreaming a moment before, but she surrounded herself swiftly with papers and affected to be deeply immersed in their perusal when the expected knock at the door came.

"It's the gentleman who's been here before," her secretary announced. "Mr. Joseph Chilcott, I think he said his name was."

"You can show him in," Miss Mott directed calmly.

Mr. Joseph Chilcott seemed to be little changed under the shelter of his new name. He shook hands with Miss Mott across her desk and she felt suddenly and ridiculously embarrassed.

"I've come to consult you on a personal matter, Miss Mott," he said, as the door closed.

"You haven't come for any rubbish of the sort. I won't be made fun of," she laughed.

He took her other hand, and then, changing his mind, relinquished both and came around to her side of the desk. Her knees trembled more than ever. So this was what it was like to be in the power of a criminal!

"No one has ever dared—" she faltered.

"No one else has ever had the right," he told her, as he took her into his arms....

Superintendent Detective Wragge ought to have knocked at the door, but he was so used to visiting his niece at unexpected moments that this time he forgot. He made indifferent amends by turning around to hang up his hat.

"So you've taken a partner into the business, Lucie," he remarked.

Miss Mott smoothed her hair. Her heart was singing and there was the light in her eyes which shines only once in the eyes of young women of her type.

"You won't mind, Uncle?" she ventured.

"A reformed criminal is the safest kind of nephew-in-law," Mr. Joe Chilcott added.

Superintendent Wragge shook hands with them both, then he sank into the one vacant chair.

"Look here," he said, "come back for a moment to serious subjects. It's no question of informers any longer. We linked up early this morning on Lord Westerleys."

There was a twitching at the corners of Miss Mott's lips—a look of pain in Violet Joe's eyes.

"I needn't tell you both," the Superintendent went on gravely, "that as between you and Lord Westerleys there is, from the official point of view, an enormous difference. What I was able easily to do for you, Chilcott, no person on earth—not even the Chief Commissioner himself—could do for Westerleys."

"He isn't arrested yet?" Chilcott asked.

The Superintendent shook his head.

"My niece's office being the repository of many confidences," he continued, with a sad little smile, "I may tell you that I've delayed the arrest upon the pretext of verifying an unimportant piece of evidence. If either of you young people should think it worth while—"

"Thank you, Superintendent," Violet Joe interrupted. "You needn't say any more."

Superintendent Wragge picked up his hat and stick.

"We shall perhaps have the pleasure of seeing you at dinner to-night, young man," he suggested. "I'm sorry to say I shall have to leave you early myself, as there is a meeting of the Police Orphanage Fund, but—"

"Please don't apologise," Violet Joe begged earnestly. "About eight, I suppose?"

There was a sober-looking but very handsome limousine car drawn up outside the house in Berkeley Square, when Chilcott's taxicab set him down. He fancied, as he rang the front doorbell, that the place presented a gloomy, almost a barricaded appearance. The door was promptly opened, but not until he had recognised the visitor did the butler withdraw his portly form from the entrance. There were several other menservants lurking in the background.

"I will send your name in to his lordship," the man promised. "He is engaged for a few minutes with his physician—Sir Godfrey Foss—but he may be able to see you afterwards. Step this way, sir."

Chilcott had barely established himself in the morning room before the butler reëntered.

"His lordship would like you to meet Sir Godfrey," he announced. "Will you step this way."

Chilcott acquiesced without delay. He was ushered into the great library where Meredith, assisted by his valet, was resuming his clothes. The physician was standing with his hands behind his back, examining a celebrated Romney upon the wall. Meredith nodded to the newcomer and waved the servant away.

"I'll finish myself," he told the valet. "I'll ring for you when Sir Godfrey's ready, Grover—" he went on. "Glad you came, Joe. I should like some one else to hear what Sir Godfrey has just told me. My friend—Joseph Chilcott, Doctor—Sir Godfrey Foss."

They shook hands. The three men were now alone. The physician turned to his patient.

"Yes, tell him, please," the latter begged, "exactly what you told me."

The physician cleared his throat.

"Lord Westerleys," he confided, turning to Chilcott, "has asked me here to make an examination of his heart. He described to me certain symptoms which I confess I found somewhat ominous—so much so, in fact," the physician continued, "that I was not altogether unprepared for what I discovered. I am afraid there is no doubt that Lord Westerleys is suffering from a rather uncommon and dangerous type of heart disease, which one sometimes finds in men of his age

and adventurous disposition."

Meredith straightened his tie and drew on his waist-coat; then he touched the bell and held out his hand to the doctor.

"I am much obliged to you, Sir Godfrey," he acknowledged. "It's a relief to me to know the worst, at any rate."

"But can't something be done?" Chilcott intervened anxiously. "A period of—"

Like a flash, the recollection of the truth flashed into his mind. He broke off in his speech.

"I have given Lord Westerleys my advice," Sir Godfrey said, "although I am afraid he won't find it much to his liking. I have told him that his days of travel and active life are over. It is a very sad decision, but I was able to arrive at no other."

Westerleys handed over the cheque which he had just signed and the famous physician took his leave. The two men were alone.

"I say, Meredith, I'm awfully sorry about this," Chilcott sympathised a little awkwardly.

Meredith leaned back in his chair and for a moment the old laugh disfigured his face. Then he broke off. There was a sudden change. A different expression had triumphed.

"Joe," he said, "I think I was born with a sardonic sense of humour. It stays with me to the last, you see. Thanks to my travelling in those out-of-the-way places, I know as much about drugs as most physicians. I took some tabloids before the doctor came which did exactly what I meant them to do. They fooled him! My heart's leaping about now so that I can scarcely keep my breath. By to-morrow it would have been all right again, but you probably know as well as I do that there will be no to-morrow."

"You've heard?"

"Yes, I've heard. I'm surprised they haven't had their hands on me by now. I'm running no more risks. I want you out of this room in less than two minutes, Joe. The physician will give his evidence—you will give yours. The life of an—invalid wouldn't exactly suit me. Shake hands, Joe. Don't be a fool, man," he went on, in altered but a kindlier tone; "you went your way and I went mine. There wasn't excitement enough in your way for me. I'm sorry for some of the things, of course. For what I stole from life, I pay. Not another second. My time's up. Grover," he added, turning to the butler who had opened the door, "show Mr. Chilcott out and admit no one else for half an hour. I have some important letters to write."

From the door Chilcott looked back. Meredith was seated at his table, his pen in his hand, his head bent. Chilcott strangled the last word of farewell upon his lips in deference to Grover's stately presence and followed the butler down the hall with a queer little singing in his ears.

For weeks after Westerleys' funeral, the few words of his unfinished letter were quoted everywhere as containing the very elements of dramatic pathos. No one knew for certain to whom it was written:

My dear Friend,

The physician has this afternoon told me that I am suffering from a mortal disease, that I must forego my life of adventure, my travels, any thought of a political career. It is a sentence of death which I claim the right to deal with in my own fashion....

The butler in his evidence admitted that against his late master's orders he had knocked at the door within a few moments to deliver a note from the Prime Minister, and found him dead in his chair, the pen fallen from his fingers. What was written served its purpose, however.

THE END

[The end of *Ask Miss Mott* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]