

**CURIOUS
HAPPENINGS**
to the **ROOKE**
LEGATEES



**E. PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM**

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ROOKE LEGATEES

By
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



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*The characters in this book are entirely imaginary,
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CURIOUS HAPPENINGS TO
THE ROOKE LEGATEES

I

THE ATONEMENT OF MR. MOUNTAIN

Five people were seated around a table in the private office of a well-known solicitor in Lincoln's Inn. Their expressions and general attitude were sufficiently disturbed to suggest that their gathering was of no ordinary moment. A grey-haired, untidy-looking woman in seedy black was tapping the mahogany table in front of her with long, ill-cared-for nails, and breathing quickly. A fat, red-cheeked man, with a waistcoat the lower buttons of which failed to connect, with blue watery eyes and a loose, but good-humoured, mouth, was whistling softly to himself. A pleasant-faced, but shabbily dressed, young man was leaning back in his chair with his hands in his pockets and a palpably assumed air of indifference. Next to him a girl of agreeable, almost striking appearance, with attractive, light-brown hair, thoughtful eyes, the blunt finger-tips of a professional typist and the rather wan complexion of the underfed City toiler, was seated a little grimly in her chair, with eyes which seldom moved from the door. She showed no signs of nervousness, but there was an intense light in her eyes which betrayed her condition of mind. Her rather jaunty beret seemed an unsuitable headgear. Every now and then, notwithstanding her efforts, her lips twitched a little under the strain. Next to her was an older man, better dressed than his companions, with deeply lined face and weary expression. He had somehow the air of a man facing a crisis, but he had also the air of one prepared to receive the good or the evil of life with resignation. A tentative conversation had petered out. The little company either watched the swaying of the boughs of the lime trees outside the window or concentrated their attention upon the door.

"I'm fed up with this," the stout man declared, mopping his forehead with a handkerchief of dubious appearance. "Why don't the bloke come?"

"We have only been here about ten minutes," the younger man reminded him.

"It seems an hour," the woman with the grey, untidy hair moaned. "It seems a whole day—it seems a lifetime!"

"And all over a matter, I dare say, of a paltry fifty quid," the man with the weary expression muttered.

"Fifty quid would do me a bit of good," his neighbour sighed.

Then their suspense was suddenly ended. The heavy mahogany door was pushed inwards. A tall, exceedingly good-looking elderly gentleman, followed by an obvious clerk, entered the room. The former bowed stiffly to the little company, who greeted him almost in silence. He made his way towards a vacant chair and took a

sheet of paper from his secretary's hand.

"Let me introduce myself," he began curtly. "I am Sir George Eastman, head of the firm of Eastman and Pelligrew. You, I gather, are the legatees under the will of my late client, Mr. Desmond Rooke?"

"That sounds all right so far, Sir George," the stout man said, once more mopping his forehead. "What we are anxious to know is—what are we legatees of? Scarcely ever heard of the old boy myself."

"We shall come to that," Sir George announced. "I have here a list of your names. The first upon the list is Miss Ann Rooke."

The girl leaned forward.

"That is my name, sir," she said in a low but quite pleasant voice.

Sir George consulted his paper once more.

"You are twenty-two years old, an orphan, employed as typist by a firm of provision merchants in Thames Street?"

"That is correct, sir."

"Then I have here Mrs. John Rooke, widow of John Rooke, builder, of Tottenham, aged fifty-two."

The woman with the long fingernails paused in her nervous movements.

"My name," she admitted huskily. "John Rooke was my husband."

The solicitor passed on.

"The next name on my list," he continued, "is Phillip Rooke, aged forty-eight, of no occupation."

The stout man nodded gloomily.

"I've been everything from an auctioneer to a scene-shifter," he confided. "Nothing doing at present. I'm touching the dole," he added, with a semi-defiant glance around. "Got as much right to it as anyone, after all. Paid my taxes when I was better off."

"The next," Sir George went on, studying the list through his horn-rimmed eyeglass, "is Mr. Colin Rooke, aged twenty-five, journalist."

The young man held up his hand.

"Rather a vagabond sort of journalist, I'm afraid, sir," he said, with a faint smile, "but I scrape along somehow."

"The last name on my list," the lawyer concluded, "is Mr. Percy Rooke, insurance agent."

"That is my name, sir," the better-dressed man assented, a little wearily.

Sir George Eastman leaned back in his chair, laid the paper before him and pressed his finger-tips together. He was so much the typical family solicitor that he

might have stepped out of a film.

“After the most exhaustive enquiries,” he said, “I have been able to satisfy myself and, what is more important, the Court, that you five are the only possible relatives of the late Desmond Rooke bearing his name. That, I may add, was one of the stipulations of his will.”

“There is a will, then?” the fat man asked eagerly.

“There is a will,” Sir George admitted.

“Sounds hopeful, anyway.”

“I should perhaps explain,” the lawyer continued, “that Mr. Desmond Rooke was by no means an old client of the firm. He came to me some six months ago and asked me to draw up a will for him. I explained that it was not the custom of this firm to accept clients without a recommendation. He said that he had no friends, and in any case he preferred a lawyer who was a stranger. He handed me his card, from which it appeared that he was associated with an undertaking conducted under the somewhat curious title of ‘Investments Limited,’ having offices in Crane Court, Moorgate Street. I asked him to call again in a few days’ time, but he insisted upon transacting the business at once. My office, therefore, rang up his bankers, who within a few minutes were able to reassure me as to the respectability of the company in question. I thereupon accepted the task of drawing up the will, accepted the deposit of a certain box which has remained in the vaults of the firm, and the executorship of the estate, and am in a position——”

“For God’s sake,” the nervous old woman broke in, “tell us where we are! Is there anything for us?”

The lawyer looked at the woman in mild surprise.

“My dear lady,” he remonstrated, “you will forgive me. These details have to be faced and I have had to satisfy myself before I could call you together that you five were the people you purported to be and that there was no other person who had a right to the name of Rooke. The money left by my client consisted wholly of War Loan stock. On his instructions this has been disposed of, the death duties have been paid, the fees of my firm have been deducted and the balance is here in my clerk’s hands for your acceptance.”

The girl could keep still no longer. She leaned shivering across the table.

“How much is it?” she gasped. “How much, please?”

Again there was an irritating pause while the eyeglass was fitted into its place. Sir George glanced at the paper which his secretary passed to him.

“The amounts of the drafts which my clerk will now hand you, and for which he will collect the receipts,” he announced, “are sixty-four thousand seven hundred

pounds. Five bank vouchers for that amount are here. I congratulate you all,” the lawyer concluded, rising to his feet, “upon what must be, I am sure, a pleasant windfall.”

They were all on their feet except the grey-haired woman, who twice strove to stand up and failed. The clerk, who was watching her narrowly, poured out and passed her a glass of water, which she drank feverishly. Sir George smiled tolerantly at them as, with the drafts in their hands, they stood almost speechless. The girl was sobbing quietly. The young man seemed dazed. The perspiration was pouring down the forehead of the stout gentleman and his mouth was wide open. Sir George, with slightly relaxed expression, bade them all farewell.

“My clerk,” he said, “will answer any further questions. You will excuse me if I hurry off.”

The girl leaned towards him.

“There is one question I want to ask, sir. Where and how did Mr. Rooke die?”

“Yes, where was it?” the young man added.

The lawyer hesitated for a moment.

“Mr. Rooke,” he confided, “died under somewhat unfortunate circumstances on one of the smaller Channel Islands. He was living there in concealment.”

“My God!” the young man exclaimed. “The Sark murder case!”

The motley little gathering of five—dazed, excited, still scarcely able to realise this thing which had arrived—paused on the broad pavement outside the impressive-looking offices which they had just left and exchanged friendly glances. The woman with the untidy grey hair, Mrs. John Rooke, held on to one of the iron palings. Phillip Rooke, the stout gentleman who was in trouble with his waistcoat, addressed the others.

“Look here,” he said, “we’re all relatives of a sort. We came together by chance. It don’t seem right to separate without a word. I don’t know about the rest of you, but I went up those stairs a broken man. I’ve come down feeling I want to cry or laugh or dance or something. I haven’t got a wife to go home to, but I want to drink a glass of wine with someone. What about it?”

The girl and the young man beamed acquiescence. Mrs. John Rooke smoothed her hair. The insurance agent grunted.

“What I’m coming to is this,” the stout man went on. “I have a draft for sixty-four thousand seven hundred pounds in my pocket and four bob and a few pence, but what I’ve got, too, is a pal in that bank over there—branch of Barclays. I would propose that we go over there, I show this draft, and if I can open an account I’ll

draw out fifty quid or so, and I know a little restaurant round the corner where we can just sit down and drink a bottle of the best and get acquainted, and if anyone says a spot of lunch afterwards, I'm not against it. What about it, my fellow relatives?"

"I call that the right spirit," the young man declared. "What do you say, Miss Ann?"

"I'd love it," she declared. "Do let's go. We should feel so much more confidence."

They trooped across the street. The stout man, who had buttoned up his waistcoat and acquired a swagger, led the way. They marched into the bank, which happened to be almost deserted, and notwithstanding a few curious glances from the clerks, walked up to the counter. The cashier looked up, nodded and welcomed his friend.

"Mr. Broadbent," the latter introduced with a little wave of the hand, "friends of mine here—as a matter of fact, relatives. We have all come into a bit of money. Know the lawyer chap across the way—Sir George Eastman?"

"Know him!" the cashier replied with a smile. "One of our most valued clients."

Phillip Rooke produced his draft.

"See what I've got here, Mr. Broadbent," he said. "You being my landlord and knowing me well, you might tell me—is this bit of paper all right?"

The cashier glanced at the draft, turned it over, read it through carefully and smiled.

"This strip of paper, as you call it, Mr. Rooke," he said, "is worth sixty-four thousand seven hundred of the very best. No getting away from it. It is as good as Bank of England notes."

"Then what I should like," the stout man observed, "is to open an account with you, deposit that draft and have you hand me across fifty quid. You know that's my name—Phillip Rooke—you know the Sir George Eastman whose name is at the bottom of it, and it's drawn on your own bank."

"Mr. Rooke," the bank official declared, "we shall be delighted to have you for a client. If you will sign your name at the back, the business will be accomplished."

There was a little ripple of relief amongst the four people behind. Their guide turned and smiled at them triumphantly.

"There you are, my relatives," he said. "It's a cinch, you see. We're all right. The money is real. You see, sir," he went on, signing his name laboriously and pushing across the draft, "this came like a bolt from the blue to us five surviving relatives of an old cove that's just pegged out."

“Very lucky people, all of you,” the cashier said with a smile, as he began to count some notes. “How much did you say, Mr. Rooke?”

“Make it a hundred quid if it’s all the same to you,” the latter replied.

“I’ll make you out a cheque to sign in a moment,” the other promised. “You can either conclude the business now or come in later.”

“I’ll come in again later,” was the prompt response. “We have something to do first with a bit of this hundred quid. Can you guess what it’s going to be, Mr. Broadbent?”

The cashier for a moment was positively human. He smiled at his friend and tenant and he smiled at the other four.

“Knowing you, Phillip,” he said, “I can guess! . . .”

Out into the sunlit streets again they trooped. Somehow or other they felt a little more alive. The thing seemed real.

“You hadn’t any money there before, had you, Mr. Rooke?” the lady with the untidy grey hair asked.

“Not a bob,” her relative assured her. “I’ve not had an account there for four years and then it was only a pettifogging one.”

“Handed out the money without a word, didn’t he?” the elderly lady asked, looking around.

“It’s all very well,” the young man remonstrated with a smile, “but I don’t see why you should entertain us, Mr. Rooke. I’ve got a pound in my pocket. Couldn’t we make a little pool?”

“No more of that, my lad,” the other insisted. “The one thing I’m short of is relatives. I have no one at home to hurry back to—and God, how I want a drink! This way.”

He led them into a small, unassuming-looking restaurant, passed the downstairs room, and mounted to an apartment on the first floor where about a dozen tables were set for luncheon. In the corner was a small bar. Mr. Phillip Rooke grinned at the barman. The barman grinned back again.

“How’s time, Fred?”

The barman glanced at the clock.

“Two minutes to go,” he said.

“Two bottles of champagne—the best you’ve got,” his patron ordered. “You can get ’em on the counter ready and open ’em as the clock strikes. We’re all for the law this morning, me and my friends, and we wouldn’t break it for the world. The law has done us all right, hasn’t it?” he went on. “Come along to that table in the corner. Just a couple of sandwiches each, Fred. We’ll see about lunch later on. . . .”

It was a strange, staccato kind of feast, punctuated here and there with hysterical laughter, wondering exclamations. The melancholy insurance agent lost his dumbness. He was the first to raise his glass and drink a solemn toast to their departed relative. Then they all began to talk. In half an hour's time they were busy exchanging addresses; then there was a good deal of hand-shaking and they all prepared to separate.

"Keep the table," Mr. Phillip Rooke ordered the barman as he paid the bill. "I'm going to collect an odd pal or two and be back to lunch."

The girl, who seemed to have become prettier with every sip of her wine and every moment's realisation of this new happiness, kissed him lightly on each cheek as she took her leave.

"You're such a dear human being," she exclaimed, "and I love to think you are half an uncle. What a wonderful day!"

"The young lady's said it," Mrs. John Rooke agreed, wiping her eyes. "It's a wonderful day."

"One, I think," the young man declared, with his eye fixed upon the girl, "which we are not likely to forget in a hurry."

They met again a month later. This time it was the young man who welcomed them one by one, as they mounted the stairs of a Strand restaurant and came to the round table where he and Miss Ann Rooke were waiting. There was a great change in their appearance. Mrs. John Rooke's hair was still a little untidy, but a coiffeur had been at work upon it and she wore a very smart black frock and a hat that was almost fashionable. Mr. Phillip Rooke flamboyantly sported a tail-coat and white tie. The insurance agent was attired in a dinner-jacket like his host. Miss Ann looked charming in a sort of semi-evening dress of black taffeta. They talked volubly for several moments whilst every one of them took a cocktail. The young man indicated their places at the table, ordered another round of cocktails and told the waiter to serve dinner in ten minutes.

"Look here," he said, leaning forward, "I thought it would be nice to all meet again and see how we were getting on, but I had also a purpose in asking you to come together. You remember the end of our conversation at the lawyer's?"

"I have thought about it many times," the insurance man admitted, looking up suddenly. "Our old benefactor being done away with, you mean?"

"That's what I've had on my mind," the young man confessed. "Now, I'll tell you something I didn't let on to at the time: we were all sort of struck dumb that morning. I was in the Channel Islands at the time that old man was found dead at the bottom

of the cliffs. I was reporting on a special trial in Guernsey. We heard of this affair, and another friend and I sailed a small boat over to the island. We were both journalists, both inquisitive—although I never for one moment dreamed that I was ever going to be personally interested. There is little doubt, of course, as to whether it was a murder, accident or suicide, but my pal and I came to a certain decision. We believed that this old chap was murdered, and what I have asked you all to come and talk over to-night is just this—I think we ought to do something about it. The police have practically dropped the case. When I think what we all owe to the old gentleman I think it's up to us to look into it. I propose that we make a little fund, it won't take much money, but I thought you would all like to share, and if you like to entrust the thing to me, I will work on the case and see if I can make anything out of it. I think we owe it to the old boy."

There was a murmur of assent. Mrs. John Rooke straightened her hair under her hat and looked with anxious eyes at her young host.

"Whatever happened," she said, "it wouldn't touch our legacies?"

"Of course not," he assured her. "We've got our money all right, we're secure for our lives, and I think it's only reasonable we should show a little gratitude. I'm going to suggest that you each contribute a hundred pounds to the fund and I'll get to work. I rather think that Miss Ann is going to help me—in fact, she has started on her share of the work already—and if there's anything any of you others can do, of course, you're welcome. I rather fancy, though, that we don't need much outside help, except, of course, from the police."

"My hundred pounds is here when you want it," the stout man declared.

"And mine."

"And mine," the other two chimed in.

The young man smiled his thanks and clapped his hands.

"Now," he directed the maître d'hôtel, "business is over. We will get on with the dinner."

The young lady typist who passed by the name of Miss Ann Smith rose from her chair with a little sigh of resignation, covered over her machine, picked up her notebook and, crossing the floor of the somewhat barely furnished office, knocked at the door and entered the sanctum of Mr. Herbert Mountain, managing director of "Investments Limited." That gentleman, who had been engaged in the task of signing a number of blue-sheeted documents, finished the last, pushed them away with a gesture of relief and leaned back in his chair.

"Sit down, Miss Smith," he invited.

Miss Smith, recognising that the daily battle of wits had commenced, obeyed at once and opened her book. Her employer eyed her approvingly.

“Been here a month to-day, haven’t you, Miss Smith?” he enquired.

“I believe that is so,” she admitted.

“Comfortable?”

“Quite, thank you.”

“Satisfied?”

“I find my salary rather small.”

Mr. Mountain coughed and rustled the pile of papers by his side. He was a man apparently of youthful middle age, with sallow complexion, dark eyes of which he was very proud, a toothbrush moustache, and expensively dressed. His nails were highly manicured and his cuff-links were in affinity with his shirt.

“We consider three pounds a very excellent remuneration,” he remarked. “The girls in the outer office get only two.”

“They do nothing but circulars,” she reminded him.

“It would be quite open to you, Miss Smith,” he continued, looking at her thoughtfully, “to qualify for a better position, and naturally a—er—higher salary. Tell me how you like the business.”

She hesitated.

“So far as I have been able to understand it,” she replied, “it seems to me quite interesting. You seem to deal in every sort of effort at money making.”

A momentary shade of enthusiasm was in his tone as he replied.

“We deal in everything by which it is possible to make money,” he told her. “We are ready to pit our brains against anyone’s.”

“Very clever,” she commented.

“Yes, we are clever,” he admitted. “I have never heard anyone deny it. It is a pleasure for us to make money for others so long as we can be sure that we are making it for ourselves. We are not above small transactions either. Now you yourself, Miss Smith, you must have a little money put by. Why don’t you invest it with us? You are probably getting four or five per cent for it. As often as not we can get you ten.”

“Very pleasant,” she remarked. “I should be afraid of losing.”

“I should make myself personally responsible for seeing that you didn’t lose,” Mr. Mountain assured her meaningly.

“I should not like to be under an obligation to anyone,” Miss Smith said.

“You need not be. We often have schemes which we deal with ourselves—the directors—and where it is possible we allow a friend to share. If in course of time

you prove yourself worthy of our confidence and you should happen, for example, to become my private secretary, you could make a great deal of money, too.”

“And remain honest?” she asked.

“Honesty is only relative,” he remarked.

“And virtuous?”

Mr. Mountain’s eyes glistened. After all—perhaps——

“There are degrees of virtue,” he ventured with an insinuating glance.

Miss Ann Smith scratched her rather dainty little nose with the end of her pencil. She had the air of one confronted with a problem. Mr. Mountain looked at the clock.

“If you will be my guest for lunch to-day,” he invited, “I will answer all the questions you care to ask me about the business.”

“I will be ready at one o’clock,” she promised, rising to her feet.

Mr. Mountain at any rate knew how to order lunch. He had chosen a corner table in a small but quite select restaurant. Miss Ann Smith, who had had occasion to be a little firm during the drive from the City, spoke very plainly as she finished her caviare.

“Business first, please,” she begged. “How many directors are there of ‘Investments Limited’?”

He made a little grimace, but answered promptly.

“Five. There is myself, Sir Percy Hardross, Lord Quillingham, Alderman Fraser, and for the fifth we have at present a vacancy.”

“What happened to number five?” she asked.

“He died.”

“What was his name?”

Mr. Mountain hesitated for a moment, then he answered the question.

“Mr. Desmond Rooke when he left here. He was talking of changing his name when he retired.”

“Was he an old man?” she asked.

“About sixty-five, I think.”

Ann leaned back in her place for a moment. She was suddenly aware that her companion was watching her closely. She changed the conversation. She had already discovered all that was necessary.

“Tell me how you make your money?” she asked.

“We have special sources of information in the matter of gold shares and the Far East markets,” he told her. “One of our directors—Fraser—is on the Stock

Exchange. We have capital and we buy shares when they are low and sell them as soon as we make a decent profit. We have principles in business that have paid us. We cut our losses. We never hold on to a falling market. We take our friends in with us when there is a good thing going and we never hesitate to share our profits. Of course, we are not philanthropists," he concluded. "If we do come across a bad egg, to be frank, we dress it up and try to sell it. We generally succeed. . . . How much money have you to invest, Miss Ann Smith?"

"Well, I could raise ten thousand pounds," she said.

"Wonderful! And you are content to do typing?"

"I choose my posts," she reminded him. "I like to see a little of life. I don't suppose I shall stay with you very long. I shall go somewhere else."

"I hope you will never leave us," he said fervently. "We shall try, Miss Ann Smith, to make your post attractive in every way."

"Tell me some more about the business," she invited.

"Well, I'll tell you a condition we have amongst our directors which is very unusual," he explained, "but it makes a sort of happy family of us. We have an agreement amongst ourselves to bequeath half of the money we make in the business to the capital fund of the firm."

"Never heard of such a thing," Miss Ann Smith declared.

"It's been done before," he assured her. "Three years ago Sidney Vallans was a director. He was a bachelor with very few friends. His will was proved at ninety thousand pounds and he left the whole of it back to the other directors to be added to the capital account. I am a single man. My own will is made and I have left everything to the firm—so have Lord Quillingham, Fraser and Hardross."

"Supposing I invested ten thousand pounds should you expect me to leave that capital to the firm?" she asked. "Why, I scarcely know any of you!"

"No," he told her. "We should expect you to leave half the profits you made from that ten thousand back to us—that is, if you joined the firm permanently."

"Did your last director who changed his name leave his money to the firm?" she enquired.

Mr. Mountain frowned.

"As it happens, that is rather an unfortunate question," he confessed. "Mr. Rooke did what it is always possible for any dishonest person to do. He deceived us. He made a will leaving his money back to the company, and when he retired it appears that he went to another lawyer and made another will leaving all his money to unknown relatives. The first time," Mr. Mountain concluded ingenuously, "that anyone has let the firm down in such a fashion."

“Did he have a long illness?” she asked.

“No illness at all,” her host replied. “He met with an accident of some sort. He was living on an island and could not get a doctor, and that was the end of him.”

She sighed.

“And very nearly the end of this delightful lunch, I am afraid,” she said, as she ate the last of the strawberries. “If you don’t give me some coffee, I shall go to sleep over the work.”

“Come and see my French water-colours,” he invited, “and you can have a sleep before you go back.”

She looked at him reproachfully.

“I’ll wait until I am a director of the firm,” she said.

It was about a week later, towards the end of a strenuous afternoon, when Miss Ann Smith opened the door of her employer’s private office and made what was to turn out a fatal announcement.

“Three gentlemen to see you, Mr. Mountain.”

Mountain, who was seated behind his desk signing letters, half rose to his feet with a frown.

“What name, Miss Smith?” he demanded. “I’m not seeing anyone else this afternoon.”

The three gentlemen, however, were already in the room and one had closed the door behind him. There was Colin Rooke, very sunburnt and attired in a well-cut blue serge suit, a pleasant-faced burly man of undoubted nautical appearance by his side, and in the background, a powerfully built man who had a very official look about him, and at whom Mr. Mountain stared with undisguised apprehension. It was he who took the lead.

“Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Mountain, but I have to ask for a minute or two of your time,” he said. “I am Inspector Williams, of the C.I.D., Scotland Yard. This young gentleman is Mr. Colin Rooke, a distant relative of a late partner in your firm, and the other gentleman is Captain Bowles, the harbourmaster at Guernsey.”

Mountain was standing up now. His was a strange example of momentarily inspired bravado. He had been a coward all his life, yet he faced these three whose message he already knew without blenching.

“If you have business with me,” he said coldly, “get on with it. We have had a busy day and I was just leaving. I was not aware that my late partner had any relatives.”

“Ours is quite a simple mission although a serious one,” the inspector announced.

“Captain Bowles, is this the man for whom you found a pilot on March the fifteenth last to take his yacht over to one of the adjacent islands?”

“No manner of doubt about it,” was the confident reply. “He was wearing a yachting-cap and oilskins, as well he might have on such a dirty night, but I should have known him anywhere. That’s him, sir.”

“Of course I’m the man,” Mr. Mountain acknowledged. “I was——”

“You will pardon my interrupting you, sir,” the inspector broke in. “I should advise you to say nothing more at the moment. I have a warrant for your arrest for the murder of Mr. Desmond Rooke, your late partner.”

“I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life,” Mr. Mountain exclaimed. “Why, we were the greatest friends! What possible motive could I have——”

Mountain stopped short. He suddenly knew. The hand which had stolen into his right-hand drawer became nerveless. He dropped the revolver on to the floor and collapsed in his chair. He was half carried into the police car which was waiting in the street.

“It takes them like that sometimes,” the inspector observed, as he attached the handcuffs to his prisoner. “They put a brave face on it for a minute or two and then they go phut.”

It was several hours later and in very different surroundings before Miss Ann Smith found herself completely recovered. She was seated opposite Colin Rooke, her fellow legatee, at a corner table in a small restaurant near Bury Street.

“After all,” she reflected, “it is false sentiment to be sorry for anyone just because they are frightened to death.”

“He deserves to hang if ever a man did,” her companion declared.

“Tell me some more about it,” she begged.

“Well, Mountain had all the luck up to a certain point,” her companion explained. “He arrived off Guernsey in a falling mist, so that no one actually saw what sort of a craft he was on, and he was able to get rid of the pilot he picked up, the moment they reached their destination, by sending him back in Rooke’s own private launch. Rooke seems to have been alone in the bungalow he was occupying until his house was finished, and his body was found at the bottom of the cliffs with his skull battered in.”

“What about Mr. Mountain?” she asked.

“There was no trace of Mountain nor any trace of any boat. That is where the detective work began. We found the yacht at last in the harbour of a small fishing-village on the Portuguese coast. There it was, absolutely derelict; no papers on

board, everything destroyed that could be destroyed. Mountain must have found his way to Lisbon or Oporto and so home. As a matter of fact, if you had not found that letter from Rooke refusing to lend the firm the fifty thousand pounds they were in need of, and the other letter from Quillingham to Mountain practically ordering him to go over and see Rooke, I should never have known where to make a start. What probably happened was that Rooke refused to change his mind about the loan, and Mountain pushed him over the cliffs, thinking that his money would revert to the firm.”

“Instead of which,” she remarked, smiling, “it came to us! All the same,” she added a moment or two later, “if those two men were alone on the island, I don’t see how they can prove that Mountain actually committed the murder.”

“There isn’t any direct proof,” he agreed, “although a local fisherman saw two men struggling on the edge of the cliff, but you see—Mountain confessed.”

II

THE POPINJAY AND THE EMERALD

Mr. Phillip Rooke, recently established as an auctioneer and valuer, halfway through one of his weekly sales of miscellaneous objects, paused to nod a welcome to a youthful connection who had slipped into a vacant seat below the rostrum. He did not allow his momentary exhibition of avuncular cordiality, however, to interfere with the business on hand.

“Lot eighty-nine,” he announced, consulting the catalogue which he held in his hand, “is described here simply as ‘a box.’ It was discovered at the last moment amongst the deceased’s effects and is to be sold—er—in its present condition.”

“Without a key?” one of the little company remarked, holding up the box to examine it.

The auctioneer smiled acquiescence.

“Not only without a key, sir,” he replied, leaning forward, “but without a keyhole or visible hinges, or any means of definitely deciding that it is a box. Our cataloguer, however, has so described it. Kind of bronze or some inferior metal. No time to be wasted about it. Will any gentleman bid me ten shillings?”

“I will,” the man who had remarked upon the absence of a key decided.

Colin Rooke, the journalist nephew of the auctioneer, turned his head curiously towards his neighbour. The man was obviously a foreigner, good-looking in a flamboyant sort of way, with strange eyes and a full, sensual mouth. There was nothing in his features to denote supreme intelligence, but he had not in the least the appearance of a man likely to give the sum of ten shillings for a worthless article.

“If there’s no other bid——” the auctioneer began.

“Fifteen shillings,” Colin interrupted.

The preliminaries were over. The battle commenced. At two pounds fifteen there was a pause. The first bidder, somewhat to the surprise of the little company, seemed to have worked himself up into a state of suppressed excitement. There were drops of sweat upon his sallow forehead and he was handling with slim, nervous fingers a small pile of notes he had dragged from his pocket. He leaned over and touched his opponent upon the shoulder.

“Why do you want that box?” he asked huskily. “It is not worth so much money.”

“If it’s worth it to you, it’s worth it to me,” was the brusque retort. “Here, Stephen, pass it over.”

The man with the green baize apron tied around him handed the article to Colin. The latter turned it over curiously. There was nothing to be gathered from its exterior, but upon shaking it there was some sense of muffled movement.

“It certainly doesn’t seem worth the money,” he remarked as he replaced the box upon the table.

The foreigner, who kept one hand in his pocket, took it into the long evil-looking fingers of his other hand, fingers which might have strangled a man or have caressed the bow of a violin. Something in his expression as he glanced furtively round warned the man in the green baize apron, who made an apparently casual but purposeful movement. He stood between the foreigner and the door.

“It is my belief that the box belonged to a friend of mine,” the latter muttered.

“Sorry,” Colin replied. “My last bid was two pounds fifteen.”

His opponent looked at the money in his hand doubtfully.

“Any advance upon two pounds fifteen?” the auctioneer asked, lifting his hammer. “For the first, second and third——”

“Five pounds,” the stranger interrupted.

Colin was momentarily staggered. The auctioneer leaned forward to the prospective purchaser.

“Five pounds seems a generous bid, sir,” he said, “but you understand that the cash must be paid before the box is taken away.”

The expression upon the face of the man who wanted the box was dark and evil. Nevertheless, he struggled to retain the semblance of politeness. There was, indeed, in his voice a note almost of passionate appeal.

“Half an hour,” he begged hoarsely. “Knock it down to me and I will fetch you the money.”

The auctioneer shook his head.

“Our rules,” he decided, “must be kept. The last bid I have received is two pounds fifteen. Going—going—gone!”

The auctioneer struck the desk in front of him. The man in the apron handed the prize to Colin, who paid the amount to the clerk. He turned round for a word with his unsuccessful opponent. The man had gone. . . .

A few minutes later Mr. Phillip Rooke and his several-times-removed nephew found themselves seated side by side in the private quarters of an adjacent bar with whisky-and-sodas in front of them.

“What brought you down this way to-day, young fellow?” the auctioneer asked.

“Pure chance. I was on my way to Soho to see if there was a story for the *Sun* in that stabbing affair a few nights ago, and your mart was only a few yards out of

my way. Tell me—whose effects were you disposing of?”

“Bankrupt stock of a small jeweller who died suddenly. Nothing but rubbish in the whole collection.”

Colin drew his purchase from his pocket. The two men handled it curiously. It was certainly a very battered-looking object.

“I wonder whether our disappointed friend knew anything about it,” Colin speculated.

“Nasty-looking piece of work he was,” the auctioneer observed with a dubious grin. “If I were you, I should take that to a metal-worker’s and have it opened quickly. I don’t trust a man who wants a thing as badly as that dago seemed to want the box.”

Colin, who was six feet in height, in perfect condition and a boxer of some renown, laughed softly.

“You’re not suggesting that that fellow could take it away from me?”

“Easily,” his relative declared. “A knife between your shoulder-blades from behind, my lad, and he would have the box long before you woke up in the hospital—if ever you did wake up.”

“Rubbish! Why, the fellow cleared out as soon as he saw that it was no good.”

The auctioneer handed back the box.

“The fellow cleared out all right,” he acknowledged, “but I fancy that he was lurking at the corner when we crossed the street, with another of the same kidney. If so, they saw us come in here.”

The young man finished his whisky-and-soda. There was an amused smile upon his lips. He was full of the confidence which presages disaster.

“I learnt how to deal with that sort of scoundrel,” he said, “when I was in the South African Police.”

The two men rose to their feet.

“Any chance of our hearing the good news at dinner to-night?” Mr. Phillip Rooke enquired.

Colin shook his head gloomily.

“Ann is a little unreasonable,” he complained. “She is of age and I am getting on for thirty, but she can’t seem to make up her mind to settle down. Too adventurous a spirit, I suppose.”

“A good thing to have, anyway,” the auctioneer observed. “Eight o’clock at Rupert’s. Short coats, black ties. Don’t be late.”

The young man promised, but for once in his life he broke his word.

The occasion was the monthly dinner of the unexpected legatees of Desmond

Rooke, deceased, and, except for a slight undertone of anxiety, it was a very pleasant little gathering. There were present Mrs. John Rooke, an attractive, almost distinguished-looking, elderly lady with neatly coiffured grey hair, a well-cut black evening dress and a recently acquired smile of contentment which had transformed her whole appearance. On one side of her was Mr. Percy Rooke, the retired insurance agent, middle-aged to elderly, who sported a seldom-used monocle and possessed a generally studious air. On the other side was Mr. Phillip Rooke, the auctioneer, a pleasant-faced, cheery and somewhat dominating person, and next to him an exceedingly pretty young woman with brown hair and hazel eyes which continually strayed towards the door.

“Colin’s all right,” her neighbour, who seemed to be in charge of the party, declared. “I didn’t part with him till nearly five. He was at my sale down in Hatton Street. We both talked about to-night.”

“Whatever was he doing at an auction sale?” the girl asked.

“He drops in sometimes. I rather hoped,” Phillip Rooke went on with a smile, “that he might have been looking at a few suites of furniture I’d got to dispose of.”

The girl blushed very slightly and looked up towards the ceiling. Her elderly relative continued knowingly.

“Anyway, they weren’t good enough. The only thing he bought was a battered old metal box. What we had better do, I think, is have just one more cocktail and then start dinner. I expect his paper gave him a story to write up at the last moment, and you know, although he’s not obliged to do it, he hates to neglect his work.”

“That’s true,” the girl observed with relief. “I hadn’t thought about that.”

The cocktails were scarcely served, however, before with a little exclamation Ann sprang to her feet. Colin had just entered and with a somewhat rueful expression upon his face was making his way towards them. His arm was in a sling, there was sticking-plaster on his cheek and he was walking with the help of a cane.

“Colin!” the girl cried.

“It’s that damned foreigner been after the box,” Phillip Rooke exclaimed.

“My dear fellow!” the ex-insurance agent ejaculated, making great play with his monocle.

“Awfully sorry,” the young man apologised. “I had a sort of accident on my way back to change, and they took me to a hospital to fix me up. When they had done with me it was so late that I thought I had better come direct here and ask whether you minded sitting down with such a battered object.”

There was a little chorus of protestations. They almost forced him into a chair. A glass was pressed into his hand. He set it down a few seconds later empty.

“The quickest cocktail I ever drank!” he observed.

“Now tell us about the accident,” Ann begged.

“I’ll bet it was the man after the box,” his uncle declared.

“Well, I’ll tell you all the truth,” the young man said, making a mysterious sign with his empty glass to the wine waiter. “You’re right, Uncle Phillip. It was the chap after the box. A few minutes after I left you it happened. I went down that stupid little Tugwell Court to save a dozen yards and three of them were laying for me. I knocked the first one out, but one of the others got me from behind. The next thing I remember is waking up in Charing Cross Hospital!”

“But what did they want?” Ann exclaimed.

“Highway robbery, I suppose,” he admitted.

“Had you a lot of money on you?” Percy Rooke asked.

“Very little indeed, and what I had they didn’t take!”

“What about the box?” the auctioneer demanded.

His nephew grinned.

“Well, that’s rather the amazing part of it,” he declared. “You seem to take that fellow quite seriously, Uncle Phillip, and I had an idea I saw him hanging around when I came out from having that drink with you, so I just dropped back to the Manhattan Café and handed it over to Louis—told him to put it in the safe for the night.”

“So they didn’t get it after all!” the auctioneer exclaimed vociferously.

“They did not,” his nephew replied. “And, to tell you the truth, I don’t intend that they shall. . . . Now, I’m sure I’ve kept you all waiting long enough.”

The host of the little gathering gave the sign which the maître d’hôtel was awaiting and dinner was served. The episode of the box was discussed from every point of view. Towards the end of the meal Colin suddenly laid down his fork and stared with wide-open wonder at the young man who was being shown to his place at the adjoining table. He was being received with every mark of respect. The manager, the chief maître d’hôtel and several obsequious waiters were already grouped around him. Colin leaned over and grabbed Phillip Rooke by the arm.

“Am I going mad?” he demanded. “Look at that man who is just taking his place!”

The auctioneer obeyed, and into his face, too, there crept an expression of bewilderment.

“I never saw such a likeness in my life!” he gasped.

“Likeness!” Colin repeated. “That’s the man who bid against me for the box, and set the other two on to me in Tugwell Court.”

Colin rose to his feet. The occupant of the next table, as though conscious of some sense of disturbance, was looking curiously towards them. His smile on this occasion, however, was entirely pleasant. The furtive light had departed as though forever from his eyes. He had the appearance of a well-bred stranger slightly interested in what might be happening. Ann laid her hand upon her companion's arm.

"Colin dear, you must be mistaken," she whispered. "Do sit down."

Colin swallowed hard and looked across the table.

"What do you think?" he asked Phillip Rooke.

"I'll be shot if I know what to think," was the blunt reply. "If it's a likeness, I never saw such an extraordinary one in my life. But look at the fellow! He has quite a pleasant smile, and he's evidently someone of note here."

Colin stopped one of the *maîtres d'hôtel* and whispered in his ear.

"Tell me the name of the man at the next table?" he asked.

The *maître d'hôtel* dropped his head discreetly.

"That's the Count Andromeda," he confided. "He's a very good patron of the house. . . . Pardon, monsieur."

The waiter hurried away. Ann patted her companion's hand gently.

"I hope you are convinced, Colin?"

"Of course he's convinced," the elderly lady declared. "I'm sure that young man looks far too nice——"

"I expect we're making a mistake, Colin," Phillip Rooke interrupted, looking anxiously at his young relative. "I'll admit it is a remarkable likeness, but we must be mistaken."

Colin, regardless of Ann's clinging fingers, rose to his feet.

"I may be wrong," he said. "If so, I am on the high road to lunacy. Please trust me, all of you—you especially, Ann. I am not going to misbehave in any way, but I am going to ask that young man a question and watch his face while he answers me."

"I wouldn't," the ex-insurance agent advised, shaking his head.

"Please don't," Ann begged.

Colin, however, was already halfway towards the next table. . . . The young man, who had just finished ordering his dinner, behaved perfectly. He seemed to take it for granted that Colin was an acquaintance whose identity temporarily eluded him. Colin's manners were equally unexceptionable. His perfectly well-bred voice was raised scarcely at all. There was even the glimmering of a smile upon his lips.

"I hope very much," he said, addressing the young man, "that you will forgive my asking a personal question."

"Certainly," the other assented. "By the by, have we met before? I do not seem

to remember your face.”

“Well, it’s in rather a battered condition just now,” Colin replied good-humouredly, “but I was under the impression that we met at an auction-room in Hatton Street this afternoon and afterwards in Tugwell Court.”

The young man shook his head in perplexity.

“I have been engaged in official work all day,” he said, “and I have never heard of such a place as Hatton Street. Furthermore, I am not in the habit of attending auctions.”

Colin was staggered. His *vis-à-vis* met his steadfast, incredulous scrutiny with complete composure.

“I was within a yard or so of you on both occasions,” the former said slowly. “It seems inconceivable that such a likeness could exist.”

The other glanced at his left hand, from which the fourth finger was missing.

“If you were so near,” he said, “you may have noticed my infirmity. I have had to call attention to it before now in order to establish my identity.”

Colin shook his head.

“I didn’t notice your hands,” he admitted. “In fact, most of the time you kept them in your overcoat pockets, except once when you were counting some notes.”

“I can produce my card,” the young man went on with a pleasant smile, “witnesses who were helping me with my work, the secretary of my country’s legation, who is also my cousin, my chauffeur-valet and a few more people who between them, I think, could provide a sufficient alibi. The people here in the restaurant, too, know me well. If the person for whom you are mistaking me——”

For the first time Colin was guilty of a slight breach of manners.

“I have, of course, nothing more to say,” he interrupted. “I regret to have disturbed you. I offer my apologies, sir.”

He turned on his heel and limped back to his table. Ann received him a little coldly.

“Well, I hope you’re satisfied now,” she said.

“Yes, I am satisfied,” he answered. “I am satisfied that that is the man who bid against me for the box, and one of the three men who are responsible for my maimed condition. I know I can’t convince any of you. I shan’t try. Ann, my dear, a glass of wine with you, if you please. I must see you smile, and know that I am forgiven.”

“You are rather a dear,” she weakened, “but you are very, very obstinate.”

The bell of his flat rang whilst Colin was still at breakfast the next morning, and

his auctioneer uncle was shown in. The latter wasted no time.

“Read the paper?” he asked.

“Haven’t glanced at it,” Colin confessed.

“The Manhattan Café was broken into last night, the safe rifled and a clean sweep made of its contents.”

“Well, I’m damned!” Colin exclaimed. “There goes my box, after all.”

“Seems as though that foreigner chap has been one too many for us,” the auctioneer admitted. “I thought we might go round to the place where I got the stuff from. It’s still open, though the stock’s gone. There may be someone there who knows something about it.”

Colin rose to his feet, filled his pipe and took up his hat.

“I’m ready,” he agreed.

On their way they passed the Manhattan Café. Phillip Rooke stopped the car and they alighted. There was a small crowd of loiterers about the place, and Mr. Golden, the proprietor, who was talking to a police sergeant, came up to speak to them. Louis was in the background arranging some bottles.

“Sorry to hear about your loss, Mr. Golden,” the auctioneer remarked.

“A very small matter,” the café proprietor assured them. “There was only about forty pounds in cash and most of the papers were old IOU’s that I should never have touched on.”

“What about my box?” Colin asked Louis. “It seems to me I should have done better to have kept it in my pocket.”

The barman stared at him for a moment blankly.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “I forgot all about the box.”

“What do you mean?”

“It clean went out of my head. It don’t make much odds now, I don’t suppose.”

“You mean that you never put it in the safe?”

“I didn’t and that’s a fact, sir. What with one thing and another——”

“Where is it now, then?” Colin interrupted.

“One moment, sir.”

The barman slipped out of a door behind. A moment or two later he returned with the box in one hand, his linen coat over his arm.

“It was just where I left it, sir, in my coat. It’s been hanging up there all night!”

A few minutes later Colin Rooke’s uncle pushed open the door of a dismantled shop about halfway down an adjacent street. The clanging of the bell brought a disagreeable-looking young man from somewhere in the rear.

“Come to see if those sweeps have left anything behind?” he asked truculently.

“Not at all,” the auctioneer replied. “We are here to ask you a friendly question and you might find it worth your while to give us a civil answer.”

“Well, what is it?”

Colin produced the box. The shop assistant stared at it blankly.

“Well, what do you want to know about that?” he demanded.

“Where Mr. Meadows got it and from whom?”

“You ain’t the first to ask questions about it,” the young man observed. “There was some sort of a foreigner came in—drove up in a taxi in a great state of excitement the morning of the sale. Said someone had seen it in the window and recognised it. I told him that he would probably get it for an old song if he hurried, and pointed out your sale-rooms.”

“How did it come into Mr. Meadows’s hands?” Colin Rooke asked.

The assistant smiled contemptuously.

“Same way as pretty well all the junk that didn’t come from Birmingham,” he replied. “There was a row in the street outside old Mother Gluckstein’s paint shop. Someone picked this up off the pavement, scooted round here and Mr. Meadows gave him half a crown for it. Looks about all it’s worth, too.”

Colin Rooke took out his pocketbook.

“Here’s a ten-shilling note for you,” he said, “and a pound extra if you promise that you won’t answer a single question about this box from anyone except the police.”

The assistant clutched the money.

“It’s a bet, guv’nor,” he promised.

Outside, Colin was taking no risks. He hustled his uncle back into the car.

“Twenty, Clerkenwell Road,” he told the chauffeur.

“And when we get there?” Phillip Rooke enquired.

“Israel, Levy and Company, workers in metals,” his nephew confided. “I’m going to have this box opened.”

The premises of Messrs. Israel, Levy & Company were impressive enough in appearance, but the reception accorded to Mr. Rooke and his nephew was scarcely enthusiastic. A shop-man handled the box without any visible interest.

“What do you wish us to do with this?” he enquired.

“Tell us what it is, for one thing,” Colin replied.

“The outside is an alloy of some sort,” the young man pronounced. “There may be something inside—doubtful, I should think.”

He turned to an elderly man who had just joined him behind the counter.

“These gentlemen want to know about this bit of stuff, Mr. Levy,” he confided.

Mr. Levy took the box into his hand, weighed it thoughtfully, examined it through a magnifying-glass and suddenly betrayed an interest which bordered upon excitement.

“Where did you come across this?” he asked.

“That doesn’t matter,” Colin replied. “What is it? A box or a piece of hollow metal or what?”

“It’s hard to say off-hand,” the other answered, “but I’ll tell you what I think it is. I think that it is a box smeared over with an alloy of metal which conceals the original casket altogether. It is as though all the stuff you see here on the outside was the brown paper around a parcel.”

“How can we get rid of the brown paper?” Colin asked.

“We can remove the alloy,” the metal-worker explained, “by electricity, using a method of our own. It will take some little time, and need very careful workmanship.”

“What will it cost?” Colin persisted.

“We shall have to put a man on to the job who earns very high wages,” Mr. Levy warned him. “It might cost you twenty-five pounds. On the other hand, if we discover after a time that the alloy is only a cover for some other worthless material, we could break it up for you at very little cost, if any.”

“How long will it take?”

“Five days.”

Colin laid his card upon the counter.

“We shall be back for it on the morning of the twenty-sixth,” he announced.

Five days later Colin and Ann were dining tête-à-tête at Rupert’s Restaurant. Colin had the air of one happily engaged in some interesting enterprise. Ann, on the other hand, was distinctly nervous. He leaned a little towards her.

“I know it’s hard, dear,” he said, “but do try to keep your eyes away from the door.”

“I’m sorry,” she answered penitently. “You believe that he’ll really come?”

“I do,” her companion assured her. “But remember this, Ann. He has telephoned for a table. There it is—next to ours. He means to come, I’m sure, but he will arrive here in fear and trembling. If he realises that we are waiting for him, if he suspects in any way that those two men, for instance, at the table behind us are Scotland Yard detectives, he will be off.”

She nodded.

“I won’t be stupid again,” she promised. “The whole of my attention shall be given to dinner and to you.”

The orchestra was tuning up for the dance music; the place as usual was filling up rapidly. Colin appeared to be absorbed in fingering the strangely shaped casket of gold and inlaid ivory which stood on the table between them.

“I am cleverer than you, Ann,” he confided, “for I can see without looking. Our friend has arrived. He is on his way here. Here’s luck to us!”

He raised his glass. Ann followed suit. They bent over the menu and Colin summoned a maître d’hôtel. When they had completed the business of ordering their dinner, the young man whom they were expecting had already taken his place at the adjoining table. This time he did not persevere in his attitude of haughty aloofness. On the contrary, there was a faint smile upon his lips, a look of recognition in his eyes as he glanced towards his neighbours. He laid down the menu which he had been studying and rose to his feet.

“We’re for it, Ann,” her companion whispered. “Sit tight and keep cool. Remember our friends at the other table are watching. There won’t be any trouble.”

The young man known to the management as the Count Andromeda approached their table in the same tentative manner as when, on a recent evening, Colin had himself made the advances. He crossed the few yards between the two tables, and for a moment there was an almost fanatical look in his eyes as he glanced towards the casket. Then he seemed to recover himself. He bowed to Ann, who made some sort of a response. He bowed less stiffly and in friendly fashion towards Colin.

“You will permit my intrusion?” he begged.

“Certainly.”

“I have come to offer you my apologies,” he continued. “I did not tell you the truth, Mr. Rooke, when we last met. My lips were sealed. I was not at liberty to disclose the fact that the little casket which I see upon the table before you was my property.”

“Scarcely that,” Colin objected. “You will forgive my reminding you—you were a little short of money at the auction, and it was I who purchased this box—and its contents.”

“I shall trust to your sense of honour in the matter,” the Count said courteously, “and I think in any case an arrangement will be possible. You have at least penetrated the secret of the casket. You have had the covering of alloy removed. You have doubtless investigated its contents?”

“To tell you the truth,” Colin replied, “my cousin and I were just about to do so.

We only received the box in its present condition from the metal-worker's an hour ago."

The Count bowed.

"If, before it is opened, I inform you of its contents," he said earnestly, "you will at least admit that I have some claim to consideration."

Colin hesitated as one choosing his words with deliberation.

"I shall wish to do what is fair," he said, "if you can prove that this box was stolen from you or lost."

"The box was enclosed in alloy by a certain great personage whom I trust it will not be necessary for us to name," the Count explained. "It contains one of the most famous jewels in the world—an emerald. It belonged to a very beautiful woman—a dear friend of mine. The emerald is practically uncut and unique. I have its exact weight at home in a pocketbook which I can easily give you. The lining of the casket is of white satin and there is a crown in the right-hand corner embroidered in black silk. A very large reward has been offered for the stone, to which you will become entitled. Will you please open the casket and see whether I have spoken the truth?"

Colin looked across the table at his companion. Ann inclined her head graciously.

"I think that what this gentleman says is reasonable," she decided. "You had better open the casket, Colin. I have been longing for you to do so."

They had spoken in very low tones, but the two men at the next table had pushed back their chairs as though preparing for departure and were only a few feet away. The young man, however, seemed to have passed into another world. He saw nothing. He heard nothing. His dilated eyes were fixed upon the casket. . . . The orchestra was playing loudly. Dancers were streaming on to the floor. The usual restaurant sounds—the clatter of china, the popping of corks—had increased in volume. One person there, however, was living in a world of his own. His tense long fingers were clutching at the tablecloth. The pupils of his eyes had grown larger. He seemed like a man freed from the emotions of either fear or hope. He watched the handling by Colin of the place where the secret spring was concealed, the pushing back of the lid upon its stiff hinges. He gazed at what lay disclosed and as realisation came he seemed to turn into stone. The emerald was there very much as he had described it, but its setting was a horrible thing. It rested upon the knuckle of a man's finger, severed at the stump, rudely bound up—a withered and ghastly thing!

Ann shrank away shivering. She held her hand in front of her eyes.

"Horrible!" she exclaimed.

Colin had reached over and had unfolded the strip of coarse-woven yellow

paper at the head of which was a miniature crown. He read aloud the few sentences written there in sprawling characters:

The jewel herein remains upon the finger of the thief who stole it, then further polluted it by wearing it, and now pays the price of discovery. If sudden death should come to me at any time by the hands of an assassin, he will be the guilty person. Proofs of his intention will be found in Box D, Secret Service Department of the Ministry. They are deposited there in the charge of General Nicova on the day of his exile.

N.

Something in the young man seemed to snap. He flung himself across the table towards the coffer. Colin, however, held his wrists in a grip of iron until the two men who had joined the little party unnoticed led him away through the astounded crowd. . . . Colin leaned over, locked the box and carefully secured it in the pocket of his dinner jacket. He refilled their glasses.

“Of course,” Ann observed, steadying her voice with an effort, “adventures like this are stimulating to the appetite, but I should like to understand a little more of what it’s all about. You must remember that you have told me scarcely anything.”

“I’m not very clear about it all myself,” he confessed, “but as long as we have the emerald someone will find us out and tell us the whole story.”

“I believe that it must have belonged to a queen,” she sighed. “What a romance!”

“Nothing compared to ours, dear,” he assured her.

At ten o’clock the next morning an urgent telephone message summoned Ann to the Temple. She found Colin already in conversation with a foreigner of distinguished appearance and well-known name.

“The Baron,” Colin explained, “has called about the emerald.”

The visitor threw himself upon the consideration of his two young friends. His manner was charming and entirely deprecatory.

“You will excuse,” he begged, “if I do not make everything quite clear to you. It is difficult. There is this story, though. That emerald is famous in the history of my country. It was indiscreetly loaned to a certain beautiful lady whose name has often been mentioned in connection with that of my sovereign. A scapegrace acquaintance of the lady’s stole that ring from her one night whilst on a secret visit and dared to wear it upon his finger. He was surprised by my master, and punished in the horrible

fashion you have seen. He was also exiled. My master is of passionate temperament. His fury was excessive. He wrote the lines you read. He placed the emerald on the finger in the casket, he had it soldered up and for safety it was to be despatched to the Bank of England. The messenger was murdered in Soho on the night of his arrival in the country, and the casket disappeared. Of its subsequent adventures you know as much as I.”

“What will become of the man who was arrested last night?” Ann asked.

“He will be extradited to my country,” the Baron replied. “Arrived there, he will be shot. There is an easily proved charge against him of desertion from the army. And now, Mr. Rooke, the question of the jewel?”

Colin unlocked his safe and took out the casket.

“Well,” he enquired, “what do you propose?”

“The jewel is loathsome in the eyes of my master, but its reappearance amongst the Royal jewels is necessary. The reward offered was ten thousand pounds. I have here a draft on the Bank of England for that amount.”

Colin handed over the casket. The Baron accepted it with a sigh of relief. He bowed to Ann. He shook hands with Colin. He took his leave.

“I should have liked to have felt the emerald once more,” Ann sighed.

Colin held out the cheque.

“Feel this instead,” he suggested, with masculine brutality.

III

THE PERFECT WITNESS

Mr. Percy Rooke's trouble began upon a certain morning when driving his very beautiful new Daimler car from his cousin's select guest-house in Hampstead to the small office which he had rented in Norfolk Street. He was proceeding slowly along the main road at a respectable distance behind a crowded omnibus. He saw the eager gestures of the girl in the middle of the pathway, he even heard her appeal to the driver, but the part of the incident which affected him most was the look of weary disappointment on the girl's face as the bus pursued, without stopping, its relentless course. For once in his life he acted upon impulse. He brought his car to a standstill and leaned towards the pavement.

"The buses all seem very full this morning," he said. "If you are going towards the City can I give you a lift?"

She looked at him blankly. At first she seemed scarcely to understand. He opened the door invitingly. She stepped from the kerb and took her place by his side. Still she remained speechless.

"I cannot think why they don't run more buses at this busy time," he remarked a little lamely, as he started off.

"I wish they would," she agreed. "I get so tired of waiting about for them."

A gentle, almost a pleasant voice. Percy Rooke permitted himself a glance at his companion. She was very pale, even for a City worker. She was neatly dressed, but her clothes lacked any sort of distinction. It seemed to him in those first few moments that she would have been plain but for the dark, suffering eyes and the wistful appeal of her tremulous lips.

"What part of the City are you making for?" he enquired.

"The Strand," she answered. "My work is in Surrey Street."

"Capital! I go to Norfolk Street—scarcely a hundred yards away."

She leaned back amongst the cushions with a faint gesture of content.

"Yours is a beautiful car," she said. "After the buses this is wonderful."

"You don't like buses?"

"Does anyone?" she queried. "Yet, after all, it's not the buses. It's the people—the crowd, the pushing and the atmosphere."

She closed her eyes deliberately and Percy Rooke, who had intuition in such things, felt that she was indisposed for conversation. He gave his whole attention to the driving of the car, which for him was a new accomplishment, and the silence

between them prevailed until he drew up by the kerb at the top of Surrey Street.

"There you are," he exclaimed. "I think we've been a little quicker than the bus!"

She slipped not ungracefully down on to the pavement and turned to look at him.

"Thank you very much," she said. "The drive has been so pleasant."

He raised his hat and the incident would probably have passed altogether from his mind but for the smile which suddenly parted her lips before she turned round and disappeared amongst the throng. It was a strange, almost seductive, though mirthless gesture, and the dark eyes looking into his at the same moment seemed to lend to it a puzzling, indefinable significance. Then she was gone. The memory of the smile remained.

The rest of the day passed for Percy Rooke very much like all others. He transacted a little business, left his office at five o'clock, drove slowly home to Hampstead, played a game of billiards with his co-star boarder, a Colonel McGleesh, dined in tranquil comfort, retired to bed at half-past ten and, somewhat to his surprise, went to sleep at an unduly late hour, haunted by the memory of a smile. In the morning he found himself in a curiously undecided frame of mind. It was not his custom to go to the office every day, and being Saturday he had intended to invite his cousin, the proprietress of his temporary home, to take a drive into the country. Without any conscious change of intention, however, he ordered his car round at the usual time, started out Citywards and repeated his itinerary of the previous day. He drove more slowly along the Broadway, and gazed almost eagerly at the scattered little groups of would-be passengers waiting at the various bus stations. He arrived at the spot where he had picked up his previous day's companion without catching a glimpse of her. Unreasonably disappointed, he pulled up by the kerb and lit a cigarette. Just as he was closing his *briquet* he felt a step on the footboard of the car. He glanced around. With quite an unreasonable glow of pleasure he realised that she was calmly taking her place by his side.

"Good morning," he greeted her.

"Good morning," she replied. "Were you waiting for me?"

"I was hoping that you would come."

She disposed of her bag in her lap, toyed for a moment with a bunch of keys she was carrying, settled herself in her seat and leaned back, half closing her eyes.

"Surrey Street?" he enquired.

"I suppose so," she answered listlessly.

"Don't you go there every morning?" he asked.

"Yes. I was not sure that I would go to-day, though. I am not obliged to work on Saturdays."

He drove on in silence. The few young women with whom he had come in contact, especially since he had become known as one of the famous Rooke legatees, were seemingly all the time anxious, a little too anxious, to talk and make the best of themselves. This girl, with her habit of silence and the almost ungraceful slouch of her repose, seemed utterly indifferent. He had the feeling that if he asked her questions it would bore her to reply. After all, though, he reminded himself, she was here of her own accord.

“What sort of work do you do?” he asked her.

“Thieving of various sorts,” she replied.

He glanced at her as though eager to catch the trend of her thoughts. She was quite indifferent, however. She showed no signs of having said anything unusual.

“Ought I to look after my pocketbook?”

“I might take it if I had the chance! Pocket-picking is not one of my specialities, though.”

“How do you indulge your criminal instincts, then?” he enquired good-humouredly.

“I help other people to rob on a larger scale,” she confided.

He stole another glance at her. She was just as pale as yesterday, and with the light from her eyes half hidden and her mouth in repose her face lacked character. Her clothes were even shabbier than he had thought them. Only her fingers—she wore no gloves—seemed well cared for, and her shoes, though old, had been fashioned with a certain elegance.

“You don’t look like a thief,” he remarked.

“I suppose I look too stupid. All the same, I am one. I don’t know what your profession is. If you are a detective, you ought to hunt me down and have me sent to prison.”

“I am an insurance agent,” he told her.

“Fires and that sort of thing?”

“Fire insurance is part of our business.”

“Did you ever hear of the firm of Engelhart and Crisp in Surrey Street?” she asked.

He looked at her dubiously.

“Got into some sort of trouble, didn’t they?”

“Mr. Crisp is in prison,” she told him. “Mr. Engelhart spends most of his time hiding from people who want money from him. I have been carrying on the business—what there is to do.”

“A very bad case of fraud,” he pronounced. “If I were you, I would find another

post.”

“Nice references I should have, shouldn’t I?”

“You have probably worked for other firms.”

She shook her head.

“I went straight from school to Engelhart and Crisp. I think the firm engaged me because they believed that I should be tractable. You see, Mr. Crisp is my father.”

“I’m awfully sorry——” he began.

“You needn’t be. How were you to know? You wouldn’t like to engage me yourself, I suppose? People are fighting rather shy of our firm just now.”

“I haven’t enough business to employ a secretary.”

“I dare say I could bring you plenty. I might show you how to make money. I don’t know, though,” she went on. “You look almost painfully honest.”

“If I am,” he replied, “it is because I have no temptation to be otherwise. I have a certain amount of money outside of anything I earn.”

She took the trouble to look at him more closely. Even then her eyes were devoid of any personal interest.

“Perhaps,” she remarked, “that is just as well.”

At the corner of Surrey Street he drew up by the kerb. She made no motion to leave the car.

“I don’t want to go to the office this morning,” he said. “I very seldom work on Saturday.”

“Drive me somewhere, then,” she suggested. “A very disagreeable man is probably coming to the office on a very disagreeable piece of business. I think it would be very much better if I didn’t meet him. If I do what he wants me to do, I shall probably join my father in prison.”

“What about Hindhead?”

“Any place,” she answered listlessly. “Don’t start for a moment, though, please.”

Her face was turned from him. She was looking down the narrow, crowded street. He had no means of divining her thoughts, of making even a guess at the nature of her temporary irresolution.

“If you don’t mind waiting for five minutes,” she begged, “I think that I had better go down to the door, at any rate. The office boy may be there, and only Mr. Engelhart and I have keys to the place.”

“Certainly,” he agreed. “I will wait with pleasure.”

She slipped from her place, and again as he watched her he took note of her graceful movements. She was gone a little longer than the five minutes which she had stipulated. When she returned she was walking quickly. She had come up the ascent

with almost flying footsteps, but she was not in the least out of breath. She sank into her place with a sigh of relief. Her only comment was a brief one.

“I’m glad I went,” she said.

It always seemed to Percy Rooke that the keynote of his relations with Miss Dorothy Crisp, as he discovered her name to be, was struck that morning when, later on, after a brief pause for an *apéritif* at a wayside inn, they drew up upon the fringe of a stretch of picturesque moorland country to light a cigarette. He laid his hand for a moment upon her slim cool fingers. She made no attempt to withdraw them, but her perfect impassivity would have chilled a far more amorous buccaneer than the middle-aged insurance agent. Her brief speech completed the douche.

“Of course,” she said, “if you really care for that sort of thing, here I am. In your way I suppose you have been very kind to me and naturally you look for the usual sort of return. I wish I didn’t hate it so much. I am one of those unfortunate people who seem to be born without a temperament and who hate being touched.”

He rose nobly to the situation.

“To tell you the truth,” he confided, “I am not much of a philanderer myself, but your hand is rather attractive.”

“Well, that’s all right,” she observed with a relieved smile. “You must remember, after all, it’s the hand of a criminal. If I doze off, don’t be angry with me. I have accomplished something this morning which has been on my mind for a long time. Now I am happy, this air is glorious and I haven’t slept for some nights.”

“A good bit of road in front,” he remarked cheerfully. “I’ve never tried out my fourth speed properly.”

It was without a doubt a queer sort of day. They lunched pleasantly enough, but with the minimum of polite conversation. She vouchsafed no more revelations of her life, but when her companion had brought the car to a standstill at the spot which she indicated, and the moment for farewell came, she seemed to throw off her lethargy, to become for a few seconds intensely in earnest. Her eyes sought his, her fingers rested upon his hand.

“Please will you believe,” she begged, “that I am very grateful indeed to you for to-day. You are very human and very nice. I say good-bye to you now and I want you to remember this—I regret nothing. I am quite, quite happy. Good-bye.”

She checked the reply which was upon his lips, brushed aside his offer of assistance, sprang lightly out and disappeared down the street, at the corner of which they had drawn up, with a farewell wave of the hand. Percy Rooke drove back to his garage a little dazed by the enigmatic nature of her farewell.

“Pleasant day?” his cousin asked him as he strolled into the lounge a few minutes before dinner-time.

“Very restful,” he answered. “I’ve been down to Hindhead. Any news?”

“More horrors,” she replied with a grimace. “A man found dead in his office in the next street to yours.”

“Which street?” he enquired.

“Surrey Street, I think it was. He was found in the office of that man who has gone to prison—Crisp. You know—the fire-insurance man.”

Percy Rooke looked with unseeing eyes at the tray of cocktails which the butler was handing round.

“Evening papers arrived?” he asked in a queer strained voice.

“You’ll find them in the lounge, Mr. Rooke,” the man replied. “Can I get you one?”

Percy Rooke’s reply was inaudible. He was already on his way to the lounge. He picked up the *Evening Standard* and found the paragraph he sought at once.

Late this afternoon the dead body of a man was discovered in the offices of Messrs. Engelhart & Crisp, Surrey Street, Strand. He had apparently been killed by a revolver bullet which had penetrated the heart and the state of the office seemed to indicate that a struggle had taken place before the fatal shot had been fired.

Later. The deceased man has been identified as Mr. Herbert Engelhart, principal of the firm of Engelhart & Crisp, insurance brokers. The junior partner is at present serving five years’ penal servitude for fraud in connection with certain transactions in which the firm had been engaged. The deceased had also been charged, but acquitted. The police are anxious to obtain information as to the whereabouts of a young woman, secretary to the firm, who is reported to have been seen on her way to the office within a few minutes of the deceased’s arrival.

The paper slipped from Rooke’s fingers. He was not a brave man, and there was a chill feeling at his heart. He remembered the enigmatic words of his companion of the morning, her hesitation at leaving the car, the vacant look in her eyes upon her return. It was a horrible admission to have to make, but it seemed that he had very probably spent the day in close companionship with a murderess.

The moment which Rooke had dreaded with an almost overwhelming fear, which had kept him stretched upon the rack through long sleepless nights, brought him upon its arrival an extraordinary, an almost unbelievable sense of tranquillity. The

scene was exactly as he had pictured it—horrible in its intense and dramatic reality. There was the judge only a few feet away—a stern, inhuman figure of fate. There were the rows of bewigged counsel, the crowd of eager spectators pinned in behind, the still, white figure of the prisoner in the dock, standing as he had imagined she might, her hands folded in front of her, a lifeless calm on her set expressionless features. The duskiess of the court, the close atmosphere which he had dreaded, the subdued, occasional whispering, the periods of spellbound silence, were all in evidence. He could scarcely believe, as he leaned forward in calm preparation for his ordeal, that the moment had really arrived, that it was really he—Percy Rooke—the man of nerves and many forms of cowardice, who stood there with a great responsibility upon his shoulders, the man for whose evidence the whole Court was waiting, the man who was the object of palpable curiosity to those nine men and three women kept rigidly apart, leaning forward now that the crucial moment had arisen. The counsel for the defence, who had delayed for a few moments to confer with his clerk, turned towards him. The examination had begun. It was all so easy—nothing to do but reply to simple questions.

“Your name is Percy Rooke?”

“Percy Rooke.”

“You are an insurance agent with offices in Norfolk Street?”

“Yes.”

“On the morning of the thirteenth of May you saw the prisoner for the first time in the neighbourhood of the Hampstead Broadway?”

“That is so.”

“Will you tell the Court what happened?”

Percy Rooke turned slightly towards the jury. His voice was well pitched and clear. He seemed almost the perfect witness.

“I was driving my car to the office at about nine o’clock,” he said. “I saw her on the sidewalk, endeavouring to board a bus. They were all full, however, so I pulled up and offered her a lift. I took her as far as Surrey Street.”

“That was the first time you had met the prisoner?” the judge enquired.

“The first time, my lord.”

“Continue, if you please.”

“I passed almost the same spot again on the morning of the fourteenth of May. I did not at first see the prisoner on that occasion, but when I pulled up to light a cigarette I saw her standing by the side of the car. I invited her to enter and we started off at once for the City.”

“Had the prisoner any luggage?” counsel asked.

“An ordinary handbag under her arm. I happened to notice it because it seemed to me singular that she should be carrying in her hand also a small bunch of keys.”

There was a subdued murmur in court. The mention of the keys carried with it a tremendous significance.

“Did you have any conversation with the prisoner on the drive to the City?”

“I remarked that it was a fine morning,” the witness continued, “and I suggested that perhaps instead of going to the office she would like to take a drive into the country.”

“And the prisoner’s reply?”

“She hesitated for some time. She admitted that she was very tired, and that she would like to come, but she seemed uncertain about her work at the office.”

“You knew with whom she was employed?”

“She had told me her name on the previous morning.”

“You knew of the unfortunate position in which the firm of which her father was a member was involved?”

“Certainly.”

“Now tell me,” counsel went on, “what happened when you pulled up at the corner of Surrey Street?”

“I repeated my invitation. The prisoner said that she must go down and see if she was wanted at the office, and if not she would return in a few minutes. I opened the door for her and she stepped out.”

“Did she take the handbag with her?”

“She was carrying it under her arm.”

“What about the keys?”

Again there was that indrawn breath of suspense throughout the court. The witness’s voice had never been more clear.

“I did not see them at the time,” he replied.

“During the journey,” counsel continued, “you did not see the prisoner slip the keys into her bag?”

“I am sure that she did nothing of the sort,” was the firm reply. “I must have noticed it.”

“Very well,” counsel went on, hitching his gown a little farther up on his shoulder. “Tell us what happened afterwards.”

“The prisoner was gone barely five minutes. When she returned she stepped back into the car and said that it would be quite all right for her to be away from the office for the day. We started off immediately.”

“The prisoner did not seem to you in any way discomposed or flurried on her

return?”

“Not in the least.”

“She had no appearance of having passed through any exciting experience?”

“She was perfectly calm.”

“She spoke of nothing which might have occurred at the office?”

“Nothing.”

“Now, Mr. Rooke, I am going to return to the subject of the keys,” counsel continued. “You say that, so far as your knowledge and observation went, the prisoner left the car without the keys. She returned with the bag still under her arm. When did you next see the keys?”

“Within the next ten minutes or so,” witness replied. “I noticed that she was peering about in the bottom of the car and feeling the cushions behind and I asked her what was the matter.”

“And what did she reply?”

“She told me that she was taking French leave from the office, because when she had arrived there she found that she had not taken the keys and the door was locked. We were in a traffic jam, so I helped in the search. We discovered them at the back of the cushions where she had been seated.”

“You discovered the keys,” counsel repeated. “Your impression is then that the keys had remained in the car all the time that the prisoner had left you to visit the office?”

“That is not an impression. It is a certainty.”

This time the murmur was almost one of agitation.

“During the rest of the day did the prisoner show any signs of depression or excitement?”

“She seemed perfectly normal. I knew, of course, that she must be in trouble, because I had taken some interest in the case in which her father had been concerned, and I knew that the business was being wound up, but she did not refer to it—no more did I.”

“And to use your own words, Mr. Rooke—I must be insistent on this point—there was no time during the day which you spent together when the prisoner gave you any impression of being upset or disturbed?”

“Not for one moment,” was the emphatic assertion. “She was inclined to be depressed, but she seemed to be enjoying the drive, and our lunch together. When we parted she thanked me for the day and left me with the impression that she had enjoyed it.”

The counsel glanced at the judge, he glanced at the jury and resumed his seat.

There was a brief pause and then almost a buzz of conversation. The judge looked around severely. Counsel for the prosecution rose to his feet amidst a dead silence. The nervous little man in the box prepared for his ordeal with no visible effort.

“According to your evidence, Mr. Rooke,” the former began quietly, “your acquaintance with the prisoner commenced on the day before the committal of the crime with which she is charged?”

“That is so.”

“You picked her up in the street and drove her to the City?”

“Precisely.”

“And the next day you did the same thing?”

“Yes.”

“Is it a habit of yours to drive round offering free rides to attractive-looking women?”

“No.”

“Why did you do it on this occasion, then?”

“I thought that the young lady looked very tired and the buses were very full.”

“I see. Your action, then, was one of pure good nature?”

“It seemed so to me. It was an action perhaps liable to be misunderstood by people with an unpleasant outlook upon life.”

Counsel for the prosecution frowned. He glanced angrily towards the back of the court, from which came the sound of subdued chuckles.

“When the prisoner stepped into the car with her bag under her arm and the bunch of keys in her hand didn’t it occur to you as strange that she did not put the keys in the bag?”

“No.”

“Answer this question carefully if you please. When did you next see the keys after the prisoner had seated herself by your side and you had driven off?”

“When we fished them out from behind the cushion.”

“That was after the prisoner had left you for five or ten minutes to visit her office?”

“Certainly. We were well on the way to Guildford.”

“So that the keys, according to you, were in the car during the temporary absence of the prisoner?”

“Certainly.”

“You are asking the Court to believe, then, that the prisoner entered your car with the keys in her hand, showing, I imagine, the importance she attached to them, that she got out at the top of Surrey Street to visit her office knowing that she could

enter it in no way except with the help of those keys, but still leaving them behind her?"

"That is certainly what she did."

"You will swear that according to the best of your belief and knowledge—you are on your oath, remember—it was impossible for her to have had the keys with her when she left the car to visit her office?"

"It was quite impossible."

"She could not, whilst you were occupied in driving, have brought them out from her bag afterwards or her pocket and have slipped them under the seat by her side?"

"Quite impossible."

Counsel for the prosecution resumed his seat. Almost immediately his place was taken by the counsel for the defence.

"I wish to ask the witness, with your lordship's permission, only one more question," he said. "The matter, however, is of such vital importance that, notwithstanding the clear and convincing way in which the witness has given his evidence, I shall ask him to make one repetition. It was in your opinion impossible for the prisoner to have left your car to pay her visit to the office with the keys in her possession?"

"It was a sheer impossibility," was the calm reply.

There was a portentous murmur when Percy Rooke left the box. A whole train of damning circumstantial evidence seemed suddenly to have lost its point. Counsel were whispering together. There was an audible burst of conversation. Percy Rooke heard nothing. He felt only the policeman's kindly hand upon his arm as he was guided towards a chair. He felt the water trickling down his throat. The court was going up and down. That murmur of conversation had become like thunder in his ears. Soon he was outside, being helped along the passages. Fresh air came to him like a wonderful thing. The bonds seemed to fall away. He had survived his ordeal.

"Tell me how it really feels," his distant relative, Ann Rooke, begged that evening at dinner-time, "to be the hero of an occasion?"

"Isn't that rather exaggerating the affair?" Percy Rooke remonstrated.

"I don't think so," was the confident reply. "You had to submit yourself to examination and cross-examination by two of the cleverest men at the Bar, with the jury listening intently to every word, and knowing that a mistake, a contradiction, even a hesitation, and that poor girl might have been hanged. I don't call myself a nervous person, but I should have been terrified to death."

"I agree with Ann," Colin Rooke declared. "All the other evidence had gone

against the girl. It was proved that it had been the dead man's evidence which had sent her father to penal servitude. It was proved that there had been ill-feeling between the two, owing to the girl having resisted his advances. The medical testimony was to the effect that the wound could only have been self-inflicted with great difficulty, and the revolver was proved to have belonged to the girl's father and had been kept in a drawer of the desk. It was only necessary to prove that the girl had obtained access to the office when she left you to go there and the jury would have had to find her guilty."

"She might have knocked at the door," Phillip Rooke suggested, "and Engelhart might have let her in."

"If you had heard the rest of the evidence, you would have realised how unlikely that was," Colin pointed out. "Engelhart was obviously anxious to avoid a meeting with her. He had left word that if she came to the office while he was there she was not to be allowed to go up. If she insisted on mounting the stairs and knocking at the door, he told the doorkeeper that he would refuse to open it, and no notice need be taken, however persistent she might be. The doorkeeper happened to arrive a little late that morning, but even if he had been present, in the face of Engelhart's stern injunction it is certain that he would not have admitted her. Unless she had brought her own keys she would never have obtained admission to the office. Engelhart had very serious reasons for wishing to avoid her, and Saturday was a day upon which she was not supposed to go to Surrey Street. Hence his presence there."

"Mr. Henslow, the barrister, who is staying with us," Mrs. Rooke confided, "takes exactly the same view. He maintains that if it could have been proved that the girl had the keys with her when she left the car, or that she had them when she returned, she would probably have been found guilty. He paid you a great compliment, Mr. Rooke," she went on, smiling across at Percy, "on the manner in which you gave your evidence and the uncompromising way you answered questions. Even Sir Richard, clever, brilliant man though he is, could not lure you into a single contradiction or evasion. You spoke like a man who knew the truth and meant the whole of the rest of the world to know it, too."

Percy Rooke bowed his acknowledgment.

"I wonder," Ann reflected, "how that poor girl is spending the evening?"

"She must have friends," Colin observed. "I saw in our late edition that she had left for either abroad or the country. She must be blessing you, Percy."

"What for?" he asked calmly.

"For your marvellous evidence."

Percy Rooke's reply was for a moment or two delayed. He glanced around at

the adjoining tables. It was obvious that no one was within hearing.

“Isn’t it the law,” he asked Colin Rooke, “that a person who has been charged with the crime of murder and has been found not guilty can never be charged again for the same offence?”

“That is the law,” the journalist admitted.

Rooke dabbed at his forehead with a highly perfumed handkerchief. He reached for the bottle, filled his glass with champagne and drank it off. His unnatural state of repression left him. He was a human being once more.

“I should not think,” he said, “that there is a man alive who could have sent a girl with a smile like hers to the gallows. My evidence,” he concluded, after one more glance around, “was a tissue of lies!”

IV

THE UNEXPECTED MURDER

Colin Rooke, with the air of a man desperately bored, looked at his empty glass and sighed. The stranger who was seated on the adjacent stool at the bar of the very famous and exceedingly exclusive Hobgoblin Club leaned slightly over and addressed him.

“You can have your glass filled again,” he said, “and then again, but the man for whom you are looking will not come. You waste your time.”

Colin scrutinised his neighbour curiously.

“That’s bad news,” he remarked. “How do you know that I’m waiting for anyone?”

The other smiled. His body and his clothes were insignificant. His face was intelligent. To judge from the slight movement at the corners of his sensitive mouth he was smiling inwardly. He had not the air of a man who was conscious of taking a liberty.

“Well, I might reply that it was pretty obvious,” he replied. “You sit there at an angle which enables you to watch the door without seeming to watch it. Every time it is opened I can trace the reaction in your apprehensions. You are waiting for someone you are half anxious and half afraid to see. I can set your mind at ease or disappoint you—I am not sure which. He will not come.”

Colin attracted the attention of the barman and touched his glass. The latter smiled, removed the empty glass and, turning his back upon the two men, stretched up to the shelf, selecting the bottles. The stranger leaned a trifle nearer to Colin.

“Get out of here, you idiot,” he advised. “If he comes, there will be hell to pay when he and Belle meet. How would that little rencontre suit you, I wonder?”

Colin’s expression was one of bland bewilderment. He took the glass which the barman had pushed across the counter and twirled its stem between his fingers.

“I wonder who you think I am?” he said.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the other enjoined. “I know who you are and I tell you you are a fool to be in this place at all. Have you noticed how empty the dancing-rooms are?”

“There doesn’t seem to be so many people as usual,” Colin admitted. “I can’t say I am surprised at that. There are several other amusements to be met with in this place. What I should like to know is—for whom are you mistaking me?”

The man by his side slipped from his stool and strolled a few feet away to a

point of vantage from which he obtained a better view of the dancing-room beyond. For a moment he watched the couples swaying around and moved his head in time to the music.

“Several friends of yours, at any rate, don’t seem to have been scared away yet,” he remarked.

“I wonder who you think I am or what you know of my friends?” Colin reflected.

The man in the rather crumpled dinner suit smiled. He mounted his stool again and whispered confidentially in his companion’s ear.

“Room number five on the third floor, Annexe A, New Scotland Yard. Not exactly an academy show of portraits, but interesting in their way. ‘The Rogues’ Gallery,’ Inspector Henderson calls it. The seventh from the end on the wall opposite as you enter. What about that, eh?”

Colin took a long sip of his cocktail. Anything to avoid for a second or two the searching, half-fierce, half-quizzical gaze of those narrow black eyes. He set down the glass. The moment when he might have betrayed himself had passed.

“Whatever makes you think that I am Abel Martin?” he asked.

The other slipped from his stool again with a shrug of his shoulders.

“You make me tired,” he said and strolled away.

Colin entered the dancing-room. The stranger’s words came into his mind as he looked around. There was certainly a tense air about the place. He approached a dark, untidy-looking woman who was seated at a table with a vanity case outspread before her and a mirror in her hand.

“Will you dance?” he invited.

The girl laid down the glass. She was carelessly made up, her dress was unbecoming, but she had large flashing eyes and an ill-humoured but provocative expression.

“What do you mean?” she asked. “I don’t want to be disturbed for nothing. Supper afterwards or what?”

Colin smiled. He rather admired her frankness.

“No supper,” he told her. “I dined too late. A bottle of champagne and a jetton or two if you like.”

“There’s no gambling to-night and there are no jettons,” the girl said. “Still, a bottle of champagne is something. If you dance badly, I shall leave off.”

Colin danced exceedingly well, as his partner was pleased to admit after the first turn. She gave herself languorously to the music. When it stopped they were almost facing the man in the crumpled dinner clothes. He was leaning against the wall, his

arms folded, his eyes travelling restlessly around the room.

“Who is that fellow?” Colin asked.

“If you take my advice, you will mind your own business,” was the curt reply. “People who ask questions of us girls or the staff are not popular here.”

“Seems to me a queer sort of place,” he observed.

“It is,” the girl agreed. “There are a good many of your sort who have left here in an ambulance—one or two who have not left at all!”

“Do you want to dance once more?”

“Stop asking all those questions, then,” the girl snapped and slipped into his arms as the music recommenced.

They danced again and the girl left off with obvious reluctance. Colin ordered champagne and changed his manner. He did his best to be impressive. His companion listened to him suspiciously.

“Who brought you here?” she asked. “You are not a member.”

“I have been a member for years,” Colin assured her.

“Rubbish!” the girl replied. “I know every one of the regular members.”

“I am abroad most of the time,” he explained. “What’s your name?”

“Belle. You can make whatever you like out of that.”

“And who is the man I asked you about?”

She looked across the table at him steadily.

“Do you want to get me the sack?”

“I might offer you a better position.”

“Rubbish!” she scoffed. “I’m not your sort and I’m not a fool. You are not here to dance with us girls. You haven’t any friends here——”

“Wait,” he interrupted. “I came to meet one.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know what he’s calling himself just now. I shall know him all right when I see him, though.”

The girl drank a full glass of champagne appreciatively.

“You know how to order wine,” she admitted. “That Pommery is the best stuff they’ve got. But you are kind of young to wander about in these places alone, looking for a man whose name you don’t know. Kind of stupid, too, to choose me for a companion to-night of all nights. Come from the country, don’t you?”

“Brought up on a farm,” he confided. “I’m up for the cattle show.”

She smiled at him.

“I like you,” she said. “If you’ll leave off asking questions, we might get on together. Are you a detective or a journalist?”

“Detective,” he replied in a hoarse but very audible whisper. “I’m here looking for a murderer.”

He watched the shiver pass through her body. For a few seconds she lost her poise, then she snapped open her vanity case and her face was momentarily concealed. Colin, however, had been watching her like a lynx. He had seen the involuntary turn of her head. He had realised her moment of shock.

“I’m going,” she announced abruptly. “Want to drive me home?”

“Delighted,” he answered. “Wait until I’ve paid my bill.”

Even Colin, who was by no means an habitu  of such haunts, recognised the sitting-room as being a little unusual. It was small enough, but a window was open and a log fire burning. There was a profusion of country-grown flowers, mostly of the sweet-smelling variety. There were two or three old but reasonably good French engravings upon the walls, a shelf full of books, upon the table the current issues of various magazines—mostly French and German. The atmosphere of the place was curiously at variance with what he had anticipated. She threw herself into an easy chair opposite to his and folded her hands in front of her.

“And now?” she asked.

“You said something about a drink,” he reminded her.

She frowned and rose reluctantly to her feet.

“You have been drinking champagne and I haven’t any. If you like,” she suggested, “you can have a glass of liqueur brandy.”

“Excellent,” he agreed.

She passed into an inner room, closing the door behind her, and emerged in a few moments with two beautifully-cut goblets, each containing a small quantity of brandy. She placed them on the table.

“Sorry I can’t give you more,” she said. “It is rather good—Courvoisier ’65. A gentleman friend gave me a bottle the other night and we nearly finished it.”

He raised his glass and sniffed its contents.

“Smells good,” he observed.

She nodded and, turning back to the door, closed it. When she threw herself once more into her chair his glass was empty.

“I’m awfully sorry,” he apologised. “Too good to keep.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“The only reason I invited you to drive me home,” she complained, “was because I thought you had such good manners. However, one makes mistakes. Sure you liked it?”

“Best brandy I have tasted for a long time,” he assured her.

She drank her own and set down the glass.

“Well, you have had your drink,” she said. “And now?”

“You seem in a desperate hurry to get rid of me.”

“I don’t know that I am,” she replied. “As a matter of fact, before you go—if I let you go—you must satisfy my curiosity. You must tell me—why did you come at all?”

“A trifle abrupt, aren’t you?”

“I am of a nation which is supposed to lack finesse,” she answered. “I am Russian.”

“You speak wonderful English.”

“Russians usually do. My French is even better—but that is not the point. You are here, and before you go I should like to ask you a question—one or two questions, perhaps.”

“Well?”

“Why did you go to the Hobgoblin Club this night of all nights in the year? What is your real name? And why does it amuse you to have people take you for a low-down criminal like Abel Martin?”

He smiled.

“I will imitate your candour,” he said. “My name is Colin Rooke. I am not what you think I am—a detective. I am a journalist. But I like to look a little into life and my greatest friend is a detective. I am interested in the search which is giving him a great deal of worry just now—the case of Edgar Chilston, the Pimlico murderer.”

She was watching him intently now. Her eyes were dilated. There was a vague look of trouble in them.

“My detective friend—no harm in telling you his name—Inspector Seymour,” he continued, “possesses one scrap of paper from which we gathered that Chilston was to be found at the Hobgoblin Club one night this week. I am one of the few outsiders who can march into that most exclusive of West End clubs. I went there to-night to see if I could see or hear anything of him.”

She rose to her feet—not too steadily—and, moving to the sideboard, poured out a glass of water and drank it off. She returned to her chair. Her expression had changed. The uneasiness in her eyes had deepened, the insolence of her tone had lessened.

“You got in, I suppose, because they took you for Abel Martin?” she remarked.

“Of course,” he admitted.

“Has it ever struck you that it is rather a dangerous thing to do—to trade on

your likeness to a criminal?" she asked.

"Danger," he replied, "comes to everyone. It comes just as readily to those who do not seek it as to those who do."

She laughed hardly.

"You wanted to help your friend," she said. "You take no count of the danger and you visit the Hobgoblin Club to look for a murderer. Edgar Chilston may be in danger, but he is not in such great danger as you at the present moment."

"I don't feel that way," he rejoined. "Through that judiciously opened window of yours I can hear the buses and the traffic of Shaftesbury Avenue. I can leave this room when I choose, and to tell you the truth I am getting so sleepy that I think it will be very soon. You need not disturb yourself. When I am ready to go I am quite capable of handling your automatic lift."

She was leaning a little forward, her chin resting upon the fingers of one hand, her elbow upon the side of her chair.

"A little sleepy?" she queried.

"Very," he answered. "Your room is not too hot either. I wonder whether the champagne was good?"

"Excellent," she assured him. "No need to blame the champagne. But I will tell you something. You are sleepy now, but when you get up you will be sleepier still. You will be giddy. You won't be quite certain where you are going to put your feet. Try——"

He rose and stood looking down upon her with a smile, took a cigarette from his case and lit it. As she watched him the distress in her eyes seemed to grow.

"You know," he said, "I rather think that it may be you who are going to feel that way. I never felt better in my life."

She held on with apparent bravery.

"You may think yourself clever," she sneered, "because you had sense enough to change the glasses. You are really the biggest fool that ever lived. I was inclined to give you a chance. You have lost it. You had better sit still and wait for what will surely happen to you."

Her head fell back. He picked up his hat and moved across to the door. He tried the handle carelessly enough at first. A gurgling chuckle from the chair reached him as he tried a second time. He looked around. A distorted but mirthless smile was parting her lips.

"Tell me how to open it," he begged. "It will be worth your while if you do."

She shook her head and fell back in her chair. He stooped down once more to examine the handle of the door, which answered readily enough to his touch. The

door, however, remained immovable. There was a second shining slat of metal—a lock over which he had no control. He drew back aghast. From outside on the landing he heard the stopping of the automatic lift, the closing of the gate, light, swift footsteps on the bare floor. The footsteps ceased. There was the sound of a key being gently inserted in the lock. The top latch moved back. There was again the chink of metal and he could see that second bar of steel slowly leaving its place. Soon it disappeared. The door was being pushed open an inch at a time. That was one of the few moments in his life when Colin Rooke was afraid.

Slowly and noiselessly the door was pushed open and the figure of the intruder was revealed. At first glance there seemed to be nothing alarming, nothing specifically portentous, in his appearance. He was a man of middle height, and Colin Rooke's first impression was that he was the most immaculately attired person he had ever seen. His silk hat, worn at exactly the right angle, was carefully brushed and shining. The white handkerchief round his neck was tied with meticulous exactitude and folded under the silk lapels of the black overcoat. The patent shoes were merely a reflection of the glossy perfection of the hat. The man's white kid gloves were perfectly fitting. The fingers of one hand held a dark Malacca cane, from the others a bunch of keys was dangling. The man was of about Colin's height, but his eyes and complexion were considerably darker. His mouth, too, was strangely different. There might have been a suggestion of humour about it, but even in repose it was bitterly cynical. It was the face of a man who had lived in the hard places. He stared fixedly at Colin, but he remained speechless.

“Am I by any chance an intruder here?” the latter asked.

The visitor answered him with a not disagreeable smile.

“It might seem so,” he admitted, “considering that I own the keys of the flat.”

He swung them gently in front of him. Suddenly he seemed to realise the presence of the woman lying back in the armchair, her eyes closed, her head pendulous.

“What the mischief's happened to Belle?” he exclaimed.

He took a quick step forward and just as swiftly Colin sprang towards the door. The newcomer checked himself, swung round and closed it with a slam. Both latches clicked. To the lower one there was no key.

“In a hurry to depart, my friend?” he asked mockingly. “There will be plenty of time for you to make your adieux when I have had a little chat with the young lady there.”

Colin Rooke remained motionless. The other's apparent harmlessness had no

reassuring effect upon him. He was desperately afraid.

“I am in no hurry,” he declared.

The stranger was bending over the woman in the chair. He lifted her eyelids and looked into the pupils of her eyes, leaned closer down and smelt her breath. Then he turned round to Colin.

“That’s queer,” he observed. “Her instructions were to bring home any inquisitive stranger from the Hobgoblin Club and ensure his remaining here for an hour or so. She seems to have prepared a little loving-cup and drunk it herself.”

“Entirely my fault,” Colin acknowledged. “You see, I guessed what she was up to and I changed the glasses.”

The intruder laughed softly. His mouth relaxed. He had absolutely the appearance of a man enjoying a good joke.

“Well, I never!” he exclaimed. “What an amateurish blunder for an old hand like Belle. Fancy her trying that sort of thing—on a person of experience like you, too.”

Colin shrugged his shoulders slightly.

“After all,” he remarked, “I was rather looking for trouble. I pick up the young lady at the Hobgoblin Club and she brings me to a flat in Shaftesbury Avenue! You couldn’t blame me for keeping my eye on her.”

“Of course not,” the other assented. “But I do blame her for thinking that she could hoodwink a person of your experience so easily.”

“What do you know about me?” Colin asked.

The man who had been carrying the keys slipped them into his pocket. He leaned over to the table, took a cigarette from a box, sniffed and lit it.

“Well, anyhow, the people at the Hobgoblin think you have had plenty of experience,” he said. “They believe that you are Abel Martin.”

“Aren’t I?” Colin asked.

The stranger shook his head.

“You are not,” he affirmed tersely. “If you were, I shouldn’t have bothered. When they told me that Abel Martin had been hanging around the place and had taken Belle home I thought I’d better come along and look into things. I knew you were not Abel Martin, so it became rather interesting to me to find out who you were.”

“Why?”

The unexpected visitor paused for a moment. He looked steadily at the end of the cigarette, then he looked across at his questioner, and Colin Rooke saw a new and menacing light in his steely eyes.

“Because,” he explained, “there are a good many people in London to-night

who are rather anxious to find me, and when I hear of a man who has found his way into the one place where I am usually safe—the Hobgoblin Club—under a false identity, and has made friends with the girl whom I allow people to think is my property and set up as a puppet in my flat, and leaves the place with her, then it becomes to me a matter of curiosity—of more than curiosity, of necessity—to find out who this man is who is so closely on my tracks. Do you understand now, my friend? Who are you? Come over with it. If you are from the Yard, you are a new hand. I know all the men who are on my job, but you are not one of them. Are you a new hand or some blundering amateur? A man doesn't throw himself about at the Hobgoblin Club under a false name a night like this for nothing. A pretty risky thing to do, you know. No wonder you looked longingly at that door a minute or two ago."

"As to who I am," Colin said, "I scarcely see what business it is of yours. I will tell you this, though. I am not a detective. I have nothing whatever to do with the police."

"Well, that's good news so far," the other observed. "Why then are you running the risk of masquerading as a well-known criminal?"

"I could not have got into the Hobgoblin Club any other way," Colin confessed.

"And what did you want to get into the Hobgoblin Club for?"

"I am a journalist," Colin confided. "My name is Colin Rooke."

The other looked at him gravely.

"A journalist," he repeated. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Why?"

"Because I think that on the whole I dislike journalists almost as much as I do detectives."

"Come along to the Press Club and have supper with me," Colin invited. "I may be able to make you change your mind."

"I don't think you would," the visitor replied. "I don't think you would take me to the Press Club to start with. You wouldn't care about writing my name in the visitors' book."

"What is it?"

"Edgar Chilston."

"Edgar Chilston—the Pimlico murderer?"

"Precisely."

From outside there still came the incessant roar of the early-morning traffic. Inside the room there was a silence so intense that both men were conscious of the heavy breathing of the woman in the chair.

“Now you understand,” the newcomer continued, “why I was obliged to close that door a little hurriedly when I found you so anxious to take your leave. You were hunting me at the Hobgoblin Club. Why?”

“Before we deal in such home truths,” Colin said, “I should like to ask one question. There’s a slight protuberance on the right side of your hip?”

“A pertinent question,” the murderer replied. “You shall see.”

He thrust his hand into the hip pocket of his trousers and drew out a long black case. He opened it and held it out to Colin.

“There,” he said. “You shall see one of the sights of the world. Those are the diamonds of the Princess Dracopoli. For those diamonds they say some seven or eight murders have already been committed. I, Edgar Chilston, committed the latest one and I have the jewels.”

“I have never seen anything like them in my life,” Colin acknowledged in an almost awed undertone.

“That I can well understand,” the other replied, as he restored them to their place. “If you were not already on the threshold of eternity, you would not have seen them now.”

“A revolver in the other pocket, eh?”

Edgar Chilston smiled.

“I am rather tired of fire-arms,” he confessed. “Old-fashioned stuff. I’ll permit you one more sensation during these last few seconds. I will show you something really wonderful.”

He measured with his eyes the distance between Colin and himself, then he twirled for a moment his Malacca stick lightly in his hand as though he were a drum major. Suddenly he flung out his arm. Through the embossed gold head of the Malacca cane there flashed an amazing length of blue steel—cruel-looking steel, like living fire. Rooke started back with a little cry. The point of the weapon, almost as fine as a needle, had come to within half a foot of his neck. He stared at it hypnotised. Edgar Chilston pressed his forefinger upon the ferrule. The sword flashed back again into its place and disappeared with a click. The gold top closed upon it.

“Your life is mine at any moment, young man,” he declared calmly. “I am never in any hurry to proceed to extremes, though. I only regret that a person so agreeable as you seem to be should have put himself in such a situation. Tell me—you are not a detective, you were not forced to take this terrible risk—did you do it, then, for the sake of your newspaper?”

“Not altogether,” Colin replied. “It will be a magnificent story for them at first

hand, of course, and I shall look forward to promotion, but I really did this to oblige my greatest friend—Detective-Inspector Seymour.”

“A pity you told me that,” the murderer meditated. “Still, since you have gone so far, tell me why a detective, who is supposed to be as shrewd as the average Scotland Yard duds, didn’t work out his little scheme for himself?”

“I see no reason why I shouldn’t tell you that,” Colin Rooke decided, glancing for a moment towards Belle’s prostrate form. “Seymour had an idea where you were for the last three days, but he was afraid to move. He was afraid of your slipping through his fingers.”

Chilston nodded approvingly.

“Quite right,” he admitted. “What I should have done. Not only that, but he would never have seen the diamonds.”

“Exactly what he realised,” Colin went on. “He sent for me because he knew that I was a member, through sheer accident, of the Hobgoblin Club because of my likeness to Abel Martin. He explained to me that if he moved a man to within a street or a square of the Club, if he tried to plant anyone inside it, he was certain to lose you. He has the utmost respect for your present spy system.”

“It is practically perfect,” the murderer murmured. “Before I entered the Club this evening I knew the name and history of every member present. I had a gang of men patrolling the street and, as I dare say you have heard, there is a private way out of the Hobgoblin which I could have used, the secret of which is known to no one on earth except myself.”

“Just so,” Colin agreed. “I was about the only person, with my bogus membership in the place, who could afford him any assistance. I offered to do it. I carried out my promise. I waited about the place until twelve o’clock, I danced with this young lady who I understand is only your reputed associate and I brought her home to this flat. My part in the little drama is finished. She made so clumsy an attempt to get rid of me that I can scarcely believe she was in earnest. However, the warning was enough. I was on the point of taking my leave when you arrived.”

“All quite clear,” Edgar Chilston assented. “The time, alas, arrives to break up this little conference. I trust you have found these last few minutes pleasant? You have talked confidentially with one of the most famous criminals of the age—with Edgar Chilston himself—you have seen the most wonderful jewels in existence, so you can never complain that your last few minutes have been ill spent. The only thing I cannot tell you is how I visited and left the Hobgoblin Club undetected, or how, in a matter of thirty seconds, without unfastening that door, I propose to leave these premises. Alas, you will never know. Belle!”

The girl rose suddenly to her feet. From somewhere within the folds of her loose dress she must have drawn the revolver tightly clenched in her right hand. Edgar Chilston watched her with a smile of approval.

“You will not suffer, Mr. Colin Rooke,” he continued gently. “Belle could hit a sixpence at a longer range than your heart at the present moment. The time has arrived.”

Colin Rooke saw death down the dark muzzle of the weapon held in the girl’s steady fingers. Then death passed. It swept in a semicircle over those few feet to the right.

“Two nights of hiding, Edgar!” she cried, leaning towards him, her eyes blazing, the wild passion of a tigress in her drawn features, “and I know where you were! You are right—the time has arrived.”

Edgar Chilston was also right in his estimate of the girl’s prowess. The bullet passed through the middle of his heart. When they opened his coat there was only one dark spot of blood to mark the place. He died with only a single twitch.

The usual comfortable table in a quiet corner of Rupert’s Restaurant. The five Rooke legatees. Upraised glasses. Once more Phillip Rooke proposed a happy continuance in the life of adventure.

“It’s all very well,” Mrs. John Rooke grumbled as they resumed their places. “You three men have had a very good turn. Colin here publicly thanked by the police for his help in tracking down a murderer. By the by, Colin, I haven’t seen the papers—I hope the girl got off?”

“She got off all right,” Colin replied.

“Well, then there’s Phillip here mixed up with a king’s famous jewel in a sealed casket, and Percy actually the principal witness in a murder trial. That’s what I call living a life of adventure! What about Ann and me?”

“You wait till next month,” Ann said significantly.

V

THE AUCTIONEER'S LICENCE

There was no doubt that prosperity, arrived since the whim of an unknown relative had brought him his very handsome legacy, agreed with Mr. Phillip Rooke. He had put on at least a stone in weight, he had changed his tailor, to the immense advantage of his figure, and he had allowed his naturally cheerful disposition unlimited sway. At ten o'clock on a dreary February morning he descended from the taxicab which had brought him from his comfortable apartments in Half Moon Street, entered his office in Cumberland Street and, with cheery greetings to the members of his staff who were already assembled, passed into his private office.

"Anything in the letters this morning, Miss Penfold?" he asked of the young woman who had risen from her place before a typewriter and followed him in.

"Nothing disturbing, Mr. Rooke," she replied. "Two more sales for April or May, one of them quite a large one, I should think, and one letter marked 'private' which, of course, I have not opened. It is there, just on the right of the blotter."

Phillip Rooke glanced away from the neatly arranged pile of correspondence and looked suspiciously at the square blue envelope addressed in scrawly handwriting to: Mr. Phillip Rooke, Auctioneer and Valuer, No. 9, Cumberland Street, W.C. He turned it over and looked at the flap.

"What's that?" he asked, holding it up.

"A coronet," Miss Penfold replied.

"What's the meaning of it?"

Miss Penfold smiled tolerantly.

"Something like a crest, only more so," she explained.

"Of course, I know that," was the somewhat irritated reply. "What I mean is, who is writing me with a coronet on their notepaper—'Strictly private' on the envelope, too?"

"Probably a lady who wants you to subscribe to some charity," Miss Penfold suggested.

He contented himself with a grunt and turned to the rest of his correspondence. It was easily dealt with. He dictated replies to one or two letters which Miss Penfold took down in her usual competent fashion. Then he handed the little pile back to her. His fingers toyed still with the blue envelope. Miss Penfold, who was herself a little curious, realising that he did not intend to open it until she had left, rose to her feet and left the room.

A coronet—there was no doubt about that! A rather impressive one, too, beautifully stamped on expensive notepaper. There was a whiff of fragrance, the suggestion of a perfume altogether strange to Phillip Rooke. Somehow or other the letter suggested just that spice of romance of which his life was badly in need. He would have preferred to have carried it about with him, for a portion of the day at any rate, feeling always that he had something interesting in store. Even when his common sense prevailed, and he slit the envelope, it was with some reluctance that he drew out its contents. It was dated from an address in Brooke Street and posted on the previous evening.

DEAR MR. ROOKE,

I am a stranger to you, but I am nevertheless about to ask a favour. It is that you will grant me a brief interview to-morrow morning. In the hope that you will be so kind, I shall present myself at your office in Cumberland Street at eleven o'clock.

Sincerely yours,

OLGA PRETSINOFF

Phillip Rooke touched a button on his desk.

“Miss Penfold,” he asked, as his secretary entered the room, “can you make anything of this? Do I know anything of the lady?”

He handed her the letter. Miss Penfold read it through and frowned slightly as she returned it.

“No,” she replied, “you have no business acquaintance of that name, at any rate.”

Mr. Phillip Rooke, for whom the day had started so cheerfully and well, felt himself suddenly irritable.

“Then what the devil does she want to see me for?” he demanded. “What is that ‘P.I.A.’ in brackets by the side of her name?”

“That means that she is a princess—the Princess Olga Pretsinoff,” Miss Penfold confided.

Mr. Rooke positively scowled.

“What could I have to do with a princess?” he scoffed. “You had better see her for me, Miss Penfold.”

“I don’t think,” the latter answered dryly, “that that would suit the lady’s purpose.”

Phillip Rooke looked at the clock and grunted.

“Oh, all right,” he muttered, “show her in when she comes.”

So for twenty minutes Phillip Rooke was left alone with the hastily scrawled note at his elbow. It was a message which brought to him the faint incessant perfume of musk-rose, a queer flavour of romance—a letter in a blue envelope . . .

It was several seconds after her announcement and entrance that Phillip Rooke recovered himself sufficiently to indicate with an hospitable gesture, and a muttered word of invitation to his visitor, a chair adjacent to his desk. His impression of princesses had been acquired from the few Society novels he had read and the Sunday newspapers. He had expected something flamboyant, lurid and dangerous. He saw only a very quietly dressed girl, very pale, with beautiful rather appealing eyes of no particular colour. Her walk was unlike anything he had ever seen, her faint, sad smile as she sank into her chair seemed to be making a first-aid appeal to his charitable sense, and her voice, notwithstanding its foreign accent, seemed to him subtly pathetic.

“You are surprised that I come to see you—yes?”

“Well, I don’t remember ever having made your acquaintance, Princess,” he replied guardedly.

“We have never met before,” the young woman acknowledged. “Nevertheless, Mr. Rooke, you are in a position to do me a great favour.”

Mr. Rooke coughed, and listened. It seemed to him to be safest.

“You have been one of those very much favoured by fortune,” she continued. “I read about you in the newspapers. You are one of the Rooke legatees. You were a poor man, and then an unknown relative leaves you a fortune. You become—is it a good word?—opulent.”

“Well?” Phillip Rooke queried in wholly noncommittal fashion.

“I have been as unfortunate as you have been fortunate,” the Princess continued. “You would not believe it, because I am wearing a Worth gown and a hat from Ozanne. Mr. Rooke, I am in despair.”

“Taking that for granted,” Phillip Rooke remarked with what he considered courageous brutality, “how am I interested?”

She looked steadily across at him and for the first time he made up his mind as to the colour of her eyes. They were a deep, rich, sea-green hazel. They went strangely with her complexion—she might have been a mermaid sitting in his chair of consultation. His eyes travelled down to her bottines and he was reassured. Incidentally it occurred to him that her pearl-grey stockings were exactly the right shade to blend with her skirt.

“I come to you,” she said quietly, “because circumstances have directed it. I was glad, because I realised that a man of good heart, such as you must be, could not fail to remember, when I made my request, that chance had brought him a great stroke of fortune. You see,” she went on, as though appreciating his puzzled gaze, “it was a perfect stranger who befriended you. Therefore, I say, why should you not befriend another perfect stranger?”

“Well, it’s queer reasoning,” Mr. Rooke observed. “What is it you want—money?”

From the first he had disliked his role of “man-of-the-world” cynicism. Now he hated it and himself. She answered him so quietly and yet he thought with apparent pain.

“I chose you, Mr. Rooke,” she explained, “not only because you have enjoyed an unexpected stroke of fortune, but also because you have charge of a small sale within the next few days at which there are to be disposed of the letters and the scraps of music left by Louis Mambré, the mad Montmartre fiddler, as he was called up to the day of his death.”

“I have a small sale of the effects of a man called Mambré on Thursday,” Phillip Rooke confessed. “I don’t see how that can possibly affect you.”

“How should you?” she murmured. “I am not to imagine, Mr. Rooke, that you have been blessed with the gift of inspiration. You could not possibly know. I do not wish to interfere with your disposal of poor Louis’s effects. I have nothing to say about his property—his violin which was accounted priceless, or even any letters which he may have kept from the women who worshipped him—but there is one thing he left behind which I must have. I have come to you to help me.”

“Look here,” Phillip Rooke observed suspiciously, “I have been up against this sort of thing before. A very difficult position I found myself in. Is there another box amongst Mambré’s effects with a necklace of emeralds or anything of that sort? If so, I must tell you frankly, Princess, that it is going to be sold for what it is worth. The man left scarcely enough to pay for his funeral expenses and I am selling the few oddments in his rooms simply to oblige the lawyer.”

“It is not a box, nor is it jewels which I ask,” she told him. “It is just a fragment of music.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well, I will explain. One of the lots consists of unpublished sheets and scores of music he composed and never finished. Some of them have little merit—the whole lot might go probably for a few shillings. But there is one fragment—it is a pencilled score, it is not even properly annotated. It was to have formed the principal theme of

a modern opera, but he died. I want that scrap of music.”

“Why?” he asked bluntly.

“Because it was written,” she confided, “when he was my lover. It was written when we spent what was almost the working man and woman’s Sunday in a café on the banks of the Seine not a dozen miles from Paris. It was a noisy, blatant place, but night came and a soft rain, and people went away and we were left alone in an arbour, and there was just the slanting rain and the patter on the river, a faint row of lights and the sighing of the water as it passed almost at our feet. The lamp had burned out; we had borrowed a candle; he sat there humming to himself and sometimes he took up the violin—he was never parted from it—and he struck a chord or two. Well, there it was. A scrap of music, and he wrote my name upon it and he carried it back to Paris. I was ill at the time, Mr. Rooke, and I was taken worse on the next day. They sent me to hospital, and when I recovered he had gone to London. Then I read of his death in the paper. I come here just to claim what belongs to me.”

Mr. Rooke was troubled. His affected cynicism had gone. A kindly common sense had taken its place.

“But, Princess,” he expostulated, “the settlement of his affairs has nothing to do with me. I have to sell what is handed over to me.”

“I know,” she admitted. “I should not have come to you, but I have been to the others in vain. They would not listen to me. The odd lots of music must be sold, the lawyer told me, according to instructions. A greedy widow, long since forgotten, living in Bayonne, has willed it thus.”

Phillip Rooke considered the matter. During the brief interval of silence his eyes lingered not coldly but appraisingly upon his visitor. He became conscious that his attitude of mind towards her was slowly changing. He forgot that she was a princess. The glamour of her name and the charm of her presence faded into the background. She was a waif of humanity, passionately anxious to cling to this scrap of music which had been written for her by her lover on an unforgettable night. Phillip Rooke was no longer a licensed seller of unconsidered trifles, always ready to exchange a jest with his little gathering of patrons. He was a simple, kindly man, and he made up his mind that this pale-faced, hollow-eyed woman should have her scrap of music.

“It seems to me,” he reflected, “that it would have been simpler, since you set so much store by those two or three bars, Princess, if you had kept them instead of letting him take them away.”

“I wish that I had done so,” she sighed. “Louis took them because he wanted the prelude. The bars he had written were to be the soul of his opera. He was terribly

afraid that even a single phrase might slip from his memory and that he might never recapture it. He took it away. It was to be for such a short time. And then he fell ill.”

Mr. Rooke nodded.

“Well,” he suggested, “the simplest way would be for you to buy the whole bag of tricks. I don’t suppose there is a great deal of music, and I don’t suppose there would be much bidding.”

“I would pay for the portfolio every penny I had in the world,” she said earnestly, “but that is very little. What I am afraid of is that someone will get to know that there is a treasure in that portfolio and will bid against me. They would offer more money than I possess and then my melody, his last gift to me, would be gone forever.”

“I will help you out there,” Mr. Rooke said. “I have had to sell unfinished pictures and unfinished novels and unfinished scores of music in my time. They don’t fetch much, you know, Princess. How much money can you afford to pay?”

“I have only ten pounds,” she confided.

“I should think you could probably buy the lot for ten shillings,” he told her, “but I will go up to one hundred pounds for you if it is necessary. What about that?”

“It is very generous,” she admitted, and there was gratitude shining out of those strange eyes of hers and the rigidity of her face had lessened, yet there was also fear there. “It is very generous of you, Mr. Rooke,” she repeated, “but I must tell you something. When Louis was in the hospital he was for days in a delirium. There were times when he used to hum or croon strange pieces of music, and I think he must have hummed my melody.”

“Why do you think so?”

“The nurse wrote me that his agent used to listen to him every now and then entranced. Once he brought two other friends with him to listen. One was a Jew named Usher who had already bought some of Louis’s songs. The nurse told me that she heard them whispering together. The man Usher was trembling with excitement. ‘Where did he get that refrain from?’ Usher demanded. ‘It is to be the theme of an opera,’ the agent told him. ‘I will buy it,’ Usher declared. ‘I will pay him his own price.’ The nurse told me more. She said that when Louis hummed this one tune people used to stop in the corridor outside to listen; the other patients within hearing, however ill they were, seemed to forget everything. Even the doctors paused and asked afterwards who he was. No one who ever heard it seemed to be able to recapture it, and yet no one who ever heard it forgot it. This man Usher is very rich. He is a common man, but he knows about music. I am afraid that he will come to the sale.”

“That certainly complicates matters,” Rooke meditated. “One moment, Princess.”

He rang his bell. Miss Penfold came demurely in. It was obvious that the length of the interview had incited her disapproval.

“Miss Penfold,” her employer asked her, “we have a small sale in a few days—the effects of a Louis Mambré, who died in hospital. The things from his lodgings were sent here by the lawyer.”

“The sale is Thursday, Mr. Rooke,” she told him.

“And when is view day?”

“The day before—Wednesday. We had a letter from Ushers, the music publishers, asking if they could inspect the odd scores of music before that date. The letter is on your desk, waiting for attention.”

“It can wait,” Phillip Rooke replied. “That will do, Miss Penfold.”

The secretary took her leave. The Princess’s face seemed whiter than ever. Her lips were trembling.

“You see,” she said as soon as the door was closed, “this man Usher has heard the melody. He will be here to try and buy the manuscript.”

“No need to worry yet, Princess,” Rooke assured her cheerfully; “come right along with me this way.”

He rose to his feet, opened another door, led the way into a large warehouse and called to a porter.

“Where, William,” he asked, “are the effects of Louis Mambré, for sale on Thursday?”

“On the second floor, sir,” the man replied. “A miserable lot of stuff. Mr. Harrison thought we had better put them in at the end of Thursday’s sale.”

“Come and show them to us,” his employer directed.

They mounted the stairs. They were led towards a motley heap of what was frankly little better than rubbish lying in a remote corner of the warehouse. There were a few chairs, a miserable collection of old clothes and ragged books, and a portfolio of music tied up with string. The Princess stooped down and took up from the floor a cheap photograph frame. She held it out towards her companion.

“You see that I tell the truth,” she said. “That is my picture. He carried it everywhere.”

Phillip Rooke took it into his hand. There was no mistaking its identity, although between the picture of the happy child who smiled at him from behind the cracked glass and the woman who held the frame dumbly towards him there was a bridge of tragedy.

"I never doubted your word, Princess," Rooke assured her quietly. "William," he said to the man, "take that portfolio to the table and unfasten the cords."

He felt her fingers for a moment as she grasped at his hands for support. They were icily cold. Her eyes, however, still remained empty of tears. The moment the cords were undone she fell upon the shabby portfolio. It was filled with a great pile of scraps of manuscript music, here and there written on prepared sheets, here and there on paper across which an unsteady hand had drawn the bars, fashioned grotesque emblems of treble and bass, and covered pages with what seemed to Phillip Rooke a chaos of fantastically-shaped notes. The Princess had lost her calm. She was leaning over the table, her fingers tearing at the loose sheets. One by one they were rejected with scarcely a glance, then she paused and a low cry, a cry that was like a sob, broke from her lips. With both hands she was gripping a single crumpled page.

"Is that the score?" Phillip Rooke asked.

She made no reply. She had passed into a different world. Her head went slowly back, her lips opened, music came floating out from her—strangely delivered music, sometimes a French word, sometimes a low croon, but there was melody, strange, sad, almost biting melody, sorrows that clawed their way into the heart and made the eyes hot with tears, and then some quality of resignation, some apprehension of coming relief, something that brought tranquillity; gentle music which seemed to sponge out misery and bring back colour and life and light-heartedness to the world. One felt the sun burning its way through the storm clouds. The reassuring laughter, the twin fairies gaiety and hope, and then, once more, strangely mingled this time with the transformed melody, there came back reminiscent notes of that first air, exquisitely plaintive, aching with melody.

Close by William, the warehouseman, was standing with mouth open, dumb-stricken. He found himself trying to think of the days when he was a child in the fields sprinkled with daisies and buttercups, himself lying in the quaker grass listening to the passing of the river, smelling the new-mown hay. Phillip Rooke felt the rush of a new promise into life. Old ambitions reshaped themselves, old desires seemed reborn. All the clumsiness and day-by-day squalor of life had fallen away. Everything in the world was pointing upwards. He caught hold of that stray sheet, rolled it up and placed it in her hands.

"I am to take this?" she asked, a sudden flame in her eyes. "And if there is trouble?"

"My shoulders from now on are the broadest in the world."

At ten o'clock on the following morning a portly and well-attired gentleman, accompanied by a young woman carrying a violin-case and a young man whose long hair, soft hat and flowing cravat flamboyantly proclaimed his profession, presented themselves at the sale-rooms of Mr. Phillip Rooke and asked to be conducted to where the effects of the late Louis Mambré were to be found. They were conducted to the second floor, where they fell ravidly upon that worn portfolio and commenced their all-day search. At four o'clock Miss Penfold made her way to her employer's sanctum.

"A Mr. Usher insists upon seeing you, sir," she announced. "He has been here since ten o'clock this morning poking about in the sale-rooms."

"Dear me," Mr. Rooke replied with a surprise which was more apparent than real. "Whatever did he find to interest him all this time?"

Miss Penfold made no comment. She profoundly disapproved of her employer's present attitude, but nothing could break through her loyalty. She ushered in the visitor, who was neither so sleek nor so eager nor so neat as when he had presented himself on the premises at a few minutes past ten. Perhaps the fact that his lunch had only consisted of a couple of sandwiches and a bottle of beer brought in from a neighbouring public-house accounted to some extent for his disturbed state.

"Mr. Usher?" the auctioneer enquired genially.

"That is my name, sir," was the somewhat curt reply. "I have a serious matter to discuss with you."

"Take a seat," the other invited.

Mr. Usher accepted the invitation. Even in his confessed state of fatigue and agitation he did not forget to find a safe resting-place for his once carefully brushed hat. He leaned forward towards the auctioneer.

"Mr. Rooke," he said. "To-morrow you are advertising for sale the effects of a man named Louis Mambré."

"Such effects as they are," was the smiling acknowledgment. "From what I have seen of them they might have been sent to a second-hand junk shop."

"That shows you don't know what you are talking about," Mr. Usher snapped. "Mambré died a pauper, to all appearances, but he was a genius, sir—that man was a genius. If he had lived to be our age, he would have been one of the greatest musicians in the world."

"What kept him back?" Phillip Rooke enquired.

Mr. Usher frowned. In a way that was a most unfortunate question.

"Poverty," he replied. "He never quite made a hit, and so however generously people felt towards him it was impossible for them to pay him very much for his

productions.”

“Oh, that was why he died in poverty, was it?”

“Naturally. To-morrow you are going to dispose of a lot of unfinished stuff that he wrote at various times. I don’t suppose they will fetch a ten-pound note, but I have something serious to say to you. There was one score which should have brought him in real money, and that score is missing.”

“Where do I come in?” Mr. Rooke asked.

“Now I will tell you,” his visitor said, drawing his chair a little nearer to the table and extending his podgy hands. “Louis Mambré’s agent visited him in hospital, a very kindly action, and from what he told me, I too went to see the poor fellow.”

“The action of a true Samaritan,” Phillip Rooke declared enthusiastically.

“He was in delirium most of the time,” Mr. Usher went on, unheeding, “always singing and humming to himself, and in the midst of it all—I know, because there is nothing about the trade side of music that can get by me—that man, Mr. Rooke, hummed or crooned or sang, whichever you like, not more than a dozen bars perhaps of the most marvellous melody man ever placed upon a score. I tell you it was worth a fortune. It was glorious. It got you right in the place music tries to get you. If it had been played once in a London theatre, there isn’t an errand-boy in the streets, not a clerk upon a bus, who wouldn’t have been whistling it as he went upon his way. What do you think of that, Mr. Rooke?”

“I call it damned interesting,” Phillip Rooke confessed.

“I got his agent on one side,” Usher went on, “and I showed him a few bank-notes I generally carry round with me. ‘Attwood,’ I said, ‘your job is not to leave this hospital until Louis recovers. Get an illness yourself—anything you like—I don’t care; I’ll pay your expenses. Your job is not to leave Louis until you have got the rest of that music out of him. There is a fortune for the three of us there, and I will do the square thing by everybody.’”

“Very generous of you,” Mr. Rooke remarked.

“Attwood did his job. I am not blaming him,” Usher went on, moistening his red lips, “but in two days Louis was dead. All that Attwood could get out of him in his last moments was that he had written that music in Paris whilst he was in the company of some woman or other, and that the score was in his portfolio at his lodgings. He had brought it over to play to me when he was taken ill.”

“Well, your agent seems to have done his job by finding that out,” Mr. Rooke observed.

“Yes, but this is where you come in, sir,” Usher proceeded, with an unpleasant note in his voice. “We have been all the morning, me with a violinist and a technical

musician, going through that portfolio of Louis's and the score isn't there."

"What rotten luck," Mr. Rooke said sympathetically.

"Rotten fiddlesticks!" the other exclaimed. "The score has been stolen."

"Dear me."

"Not only that, but we have found out that the young woman he was with the night he wrote it—a highfalutin young person, but a bit of a musician herself—is in London at the present moment. She has nabbed it. How did she manage that, Mr. Rooke?"

"How on earth should I know?" the auctioneer asked.

"But do you know? That is what we are here to find out," Mr. Usher declared truculently. "Ten o'clock this morning was advertised as the earliest time the goods could have been inspected. I have had it out with the lawyer. There was a seal on the door of Louis's rooms which was broken by the lawyer's own messenger. The things were brought here on a small trolley in charge of the clerk and deposited in your upstairs room. Now, what have you got to say, Mr. Rooke?"

"What is there to say," was the gravely puzzled rejoinder. "Ten o'clock was the earliest hour, and you were the first visitor."

"I am not so sure of that," Mr. Usher exclaimed belligerently. "I insist upon seeing the foreman who is in charge of that room."

Mr. Rooke rang the bell and gave a message. William, in his green apron and with tousled hair, made his appearance. He was still in a detached state, with a sort of feeling inside him that he wanted to get away into the country and smell the honeysuckle and hay, and the sweetness of the meadows, and he had taken a particular dislike to Mr. Usher.

"William," his employer told him, "this gentleman is very interested in the scraps of manuscript which I understand were in a portfolio with the Louis Mambré effects."

"I should say he were interested," William replied roughly. "He's been poking about amongst them since opening time."

"A piece of music which he expected to find there is missing," Mr. Rooke confided. "Has anyone else inspected that portfolio, William?"

"Not a soul ain't been near it," was the emphatic rejoinder.

"You mean to say that no one has been in at any other time to ask to inspect the portfolio?" Mr. Usher enquired, a little dashed.

"Not a soul ain't been near the place," William repeated. "I know, because I come at opening time; I bring my breakfast and dinner with me, and I lock up when I go. You are the first and only one who has looked through them scrawls, and if the

gentleman wouldn't mind me saying so," William continued, turning to his employer, "we had a horrid morning of it, what with the girl with the fiddle playing scraps which sounded like the moaning of a cat, and the gentleman with the long hair hooting things. If them were the sort of noises they came after, it seems to me a good thing they didn't find them."

Mr. Rooke waved him away.

"Well, there you are, Mr. Usher," he said. "Anything else I can do for you?"

There was nothing else which Mr. Rooke could do for Mr. Usher. The latter took his surly departure. Mr. Phillip Rooke went out and had a drink.

It was one of the regular dinner gatherings of the Rooke legatees, and everyone was very merry and gay. Everyone, too, was wrapped in sympathetic admiration of the beautiful, sad little stranger whom Phillip Rooke, their chairman for the evening, had introduced to the gathering. It was after the third round of the champagne that Phillip Rooke, who was looking extremely happy but somewhat subdued, tapped lightly on the tablecloth with his forefinger, and leaned over to address his fellow members of this unique club.

"My friends," he said. "Mrs. John, Miss Ann, Mr. Colin, and Mr. Percy, since we were brought together by that wonderful stroke of fortune which entitled us to be described as the Rooke legatees, one or two of us have been favoured in our day-by-day life with adventures of various sorts. To-night I am in the happy position of being able to tell you that I too have met adventure such as I never dreamed of. My guest of this evening is going to be sweet enough to tell you, in a few words, the somewhat curious happening which enabled me to render her some slight service."

The Princess smiled pleasantly, but a little sadly, upon them all. The wine of which she had drunk sparingly had brought no colour to her cheeks. Her eyes remained that negative shade of hazel, yet the lines of her face were becoming, hour by hour, more relaxed. Mr. Phillip Rooke had already christened her the Murillo Madonna.

"My host this evening," she said, "has done me such a great service that it is a joy to me to confide in you others, his friends, how glad he has made me. It is a simple story and you need to give me your attention for only five minutes."

In less than five minutes the story was told, and very well told. Colin alone assumed an air of mock severity.

"In cold blood, my cousin Phillip," he said, "you told that admirable Mr. Usher a deliberate—a real whopper!"

"A deliberate falsehood," Mr. Phillip Rooke confessed. "Not only that, but I

found my man William and my whole staff acting and trying to tell the same whopper.”

“And the melody?” Ann, the sentimentalist, asked softly.

“Someday, it is my earnest prayer,” the Princess said, “that you will all hear it. Thanks to Mr. Phillip I possess the one exquisite air which goes through the whole opera and in the portfolio which he generously bought for me I have found some of the finger-posts. You do not know, perhaps, that I have a position in a small orchestra and play four times a week at private houses. I keep myself now and work all the time. Someday I shall finish the opera. You will all come and hear it—yes?”

There was not the least doubt about the willingness of everybody, and when the party broke up, under the portico of her temporary home, she laid her hands upon Phillip’s shoulders and lightly and sweetly she kissed him upon the cheeks.

“When that time of success comes, you will forget?” he asked fervently.

“I shall remember always and I shall listen to whatever you have to ask,” she promised.

VI

ANN JOINS THE CLUB

A fortuitous meeting in the Strand, opposite the attractive entrance to the Milan, led to Phillip Rooke's hospitable invitation.

"What about a spot of lunch, Colin?"

The younger man hesitated.

"I half promised to turn up at the Club."

His uncle took him by the arm. The rest followed as a matter of course. In two minutes they were drinking Dry Martinis in the grillroom lounge.

"What's wrong with you, young fellow?" the prospective host demanded bluntly.

Colin accepted a cigarette gloomily.

"It's Ann," he confided.

"What about her?"

"She won't marry me."

"What do you mean?" Phillip Rooke demanded. "She hasn't refused you?"

"No, not exactly that. She simply won't decide anything. She won't even let me announce that we are engaged."

"Give any reason? Is there anyone else do you think?"

"I don't think so," Colin acknowledged. "Seems to me the trouble with her is that she has got this sort of craving for adventure into her blood. I was foolish enough to introduce her to Deanes Seymour one day, and he told her about the unofficial staff of young women they employ sometimes. She is aching to take something of that sort on."

"Well, it wouldn't do her any harm, would it?" Phillip queried.

"Not if she were content with the small things," Colin agreed, "but she isn't. They wanted a few unofficial people to mix with the crowds in some of the big stores. Ann wouldn't take that on. She's crazy about this kidnapping business and this last affair, Lady May Chester's daughter, you know, made her furious. If she gets mixed up in an affair of that sort there is no telling what might not happen. I had a narrow shave myself as you know, just through making a few enquiries in a place Seymour can't visit himself."

Phillip Rooke paid for the cocktails and led his nephew into the grillroom.

"I should talk plainly to your pal Seymour, if I were you, Colin," he suggested. "I don't think they ought to let an amateur go meddling in a serious job like that."

"You would think not," Colin agreed. "All the same, they are pretty

unscrupulous, these fellows, when they see a chance of real outside help. . . . Good God!”

Colin half rose to his feet. There was something distinctly alarming in his expression. His uncle caught hold of his wrist and forced him back into his chair.

“Don’t be an ass, Colin,” he said firmly. “What’s the matter with you?”

Colin’s face was dark with anger. He made an effort at self-restraint, however.

“Ann! Over there,” he indicated with a little movement of the head, “sitting in the corner with that dirty blackguard from the Hobgoblin Club.”

Phillip Rooke returned Ann’s pleasant but rather startled salute and permitted himself a glance at her companion.

“Well, you don’t have to be jealous of a fellow like that, Colin,” he remarked.

The young man was still furiously angry.

“But I object to Ann being seen about with such a person at all,” he declared warmly.

“Do you know who he is?”

“I know quite enough,” was the angry reply. “He is a sort of tout of the Hobgoblin Club. He is better dressed now than when I saw him last, but there is no mistaking the fellow.”

“You don’t know his name, then?”

“It won’t be long before I do. Waiter, get me a chasseur, a sheet of notepaper and an envelope.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“Of course,” his companion observed, “I can’t help your making any sort of an ass of yourself, Colin, but do remember that you are my guest. I don’t want to be involved in any silly business.”

“I want to know that fellow’s name,” Colin said sullenly.

“You don’t need to get up from the table for that,” his uncle replied. “I will tell it you now. It’s Regnier—Sir Walter Regnier.”

“God bless my soul!” Colin exclaimed. “You’re right. I’ve seen the fellow’s pictures in the paper.”

“Anyway, that lets Ann out,” Phillip Rooke insisted. “There are very few girls would refuse a luncheon with Walter Regnier.”

“I don’t see why,” the young man protested. “He’s a bad lot.”

“Perhaps so,” Phillip agreed. “On the other hand he is a millionaire, and although he may be a sort of degenerate he comes from a good family, and he has never actually been in trouble.”

“He is looking for it now,” the other rejoined.

The maître d'hôtel, who sensed trouble at the table, filled their glasses with wine. Phillip caught Ann's eye and raised his glass; Colin perforce followed suit. Ann waved her hand.

"Keep anything you have to say to Ann until you see her alone," Phillip begged. But Colin made no promise.

Regnier smiled as he watched the interchange of civilities. It was scarcely a pleasant smile, but then the man's expression scarcely lent itself to such amenities.

"A disappointed suitor?" he asked.

"Not so much disappointed," Ann replied coldly. "He is a distant cousin whom I shall probably marry one day."

"If that is the case you had better give him a word of good advice," her host said.

"What sort of advice?"

"Tell him to stick to his journalism and stop playing amateur sleuth. He very nearly got into serious trouble the other night."

"How do you know about that?" Ann asked.

"Because I am one of those, too, for whom crime has a sort of inordinate fascination," he told her. "I am all the time hovering on the outskirts of it. The only difference between your young cousin and myself is that whereas his sympathies seem usually to be with the police, mine are generally with the criminal."

Ann, despite herself, was fascinated.

"How can you say such things?" she exclaimed.

"Because I feel them," he answered coolly. "I haven't the reputation of a saint, as you would find out if you knew much about me."

"I can see quite clearly," Ann declared, "that I ought not to have lunched with you."

He looked at her quizzingly, with a little contraction of the lines at the sides of his eyes.

"Of course you ought not," he agreed. "It isn't good for any girl's reputation to be seen with me. You happen to be an independent young woman though, brought up in the ways of respectability, and you wanted to see what one of the real black sheep was like."

"Well, I haven't succeeded, have I?" she asked good-humouredly.

"Well, you are scarcely likely to in the grillroom of the Milan," he reminded her.

"Where do you suggest then would be a more suitable place for you to talk to me about crime with the lid off?"

She shivered a little as she met his full gaze. He was a man of sallow complexion and with curiously set, extremely bright dark eyes—eyes empty of any manner of humanity or kindness, but brilliant with intelligence. The deeply engraven lines of his face, with the exception of the telltale droop from the upper lips, were not necessarily the lines of dissipation. It was a worn, almost tired face, but it might well have been the face of a man in whom the fires of life still burned intensely.

“*Chez-vous ou chez-moi?*” he quoted. “That is to say, in your I am sure very ladylike apartments or at a certain famous club of which I am a member and which, according to some people, is a very hotbed of sin, the Hobgoblin?”

“I love the name,” she observed, “and I wouldn’t dare to ask you to my rooms.”

“Then you must dine with me at the Hobgoblin Club,” he invited. “You won’t find the telephone number in the book, and the Club itself is in a backwater between Soho and Regent Street. Nice people do not go there. There is no printed book of members. It is a haunt of criminals of every description. It is the only club in London that I know of which has private rooms. You can scarcely be seen entering or leaving the place without losing your reputation.”

“Shall we say half-past eight next Wednesday?”

“That would suit me admirably,” he replied, making a small note in the diary which he had drawn out of his waistcoat pocket.

“Shall I meet any other criminals?” she asked.

“I shall keep you entirely to myself,” he assured her.

He glanced at his watch and paid the bill.

“I regret to say that I must now leave you,” he went on. “You will permit me to escort you to the door? I have to see the five o’clock race at Sandown. I have a mare running there whose form I have kept secret from the bookies and the public. She’s being ridden by a jockey who has been in prison twice and will find himself there again if he fails to win this race. She will start at twenty to one, and if you promise not to put more than ten pounds on I will tell you her name.”

“I promise,” Ann agreed.

“The Comet,” he told her, as they rose to their feet. “You will forgive my hurrying?”

“You can leave me at the table with my relatives if you will,” she begged.

A few yards from the table she nodded her farewell. Regnier accepted the hint and without waiting for introductions passed on towards the door.

Inspector Deanes Seymour faced a very indignant young man later that afternoon when Colin was shown into his private room at Scotland Yard. The

interview led to what practically amounted to an ultimatum. The inspector closed it in somewhat summary fashion.

“Look here, Rooke,” he said. “If you weren’t a pal you would have been in the street before now. Listen to reason if you can. It is true that you have introduced me to Miss Ann Rooke. Some three weeks after that introduction she came here and asked for amateur employment. I had no opening and told her so. Last week she came again. By the merest chance she seems to have stumbled against something that might turn out to be a clue in the Chester case.”

“She never told me that,” Colin muttered.

“She would have been a fool if she had,” was the composed reply. “The clue was a very difficult one for us to handle. I will tell you as much as that. She proposed her own scheme and it was a damned good one. I am doing as much to save her running into any sort of danger as I should if it were one of the Royal family under my charge, but I have got to make use of what she brought me and in my own way. Remember what I have just told you, Rooke. She is a clever girl and a brave one, and if she can bring this thing off there would be millions of people in the country who would be grateful to her. I’ll protect her, Rooke, if it costs me my job. I can’t say more.”

“You can’t let me in on it?” Colin begged wistfully.

“There’s no place for you, old chap,” Seymour assured him. “Remember, the odds are that nothing will happen at all. If the best happens you will be a proud man, even if only we three ever know about it, and the worst is not worth thinking about. I’ll look after that.”

Colin held out his hand.

“You can’t say more, Seymour,” he admitted. “I don’t mind telling you that she’s forbidden me to go near her for a week.”

“And at the end of that week,” his friend said, with an encouraging smile, “she will probably give you your reward.”

Ann paused to take breath as the sliding doors, which had opened with almost miraculous swiftness before her, revealed an utterly unsuspected prospect. She had passed through a shabby anteroom, along a short, dimly-lit passage into what seemed to be the very heart of luxury. Her feet sank into a thick Oriental carpet, the modern lighting effects of the place revealed dark green walls on which were sketches and wonderful paintings in the most chic French style. The heavy curtains at the farther end permitted glimpses of a still larger room and a bar of dark oak. In front of the bar was a row of armchairs set upon pedestals, and behind the shining

counter three very capable young men in linen suits. There were a dozen men and women drinking cocktails and talking at a round table on her right. Ann's host, who seemed to have appeared from nowhere, greeted her with a low bow.

"I am flattered by your punctuality, Miss Rooke," he said.

"But why all this mystery?" she asked smiling. "A street which I have never been in and which I thought was leading me into Slumland, a dingy front door, anterooms which might have belonged to a temperance hotel, and now—this!"

He laughed softly.

"We disguise ourselves," he confided. "Believe me, we have a reason for everything we do. Crime does not flourish in the open light of day."

A handsome woman with a very familiar face turned from the round table.

"If you are going to talk about crime, Walter," she said, "come and join us. You will be losing members soon, you know, if you persist in being so hideously respectable."

Regnier sighed.

"So long as your grace does not desert us," he murmured.

The lady repeated her invitation. A small, dark man rose from his place by her side to make room for Ann. Regnier shook his head.

"If we may be excused," he begged. "I have a business affair with this young lady and we are dining early. . . ."

"So you have Duchesses amongst your criminals here," Ann remarked, as her companion led her towards the bar.

"Duchesses and worse," he admitted. "We have several Princesses, and a Grand Duke is one of the blackest of our sheep. On the other hand, the lady sitting on the stool there has served three years imprisonment for shooting her lover. If the trial had been in England it would probably have been ten. . . . What can I offer you in the way of a cocktail?"

"A Dry Martini, if you please," Ann replied.

They took a small table in a recess, which procured for them a certain amount of isolation. Ann looked around her in genuine surprise.

"I expected to receive shocks here," she remarked, "but surely that little man who has just come in—why, I see his picture in the paper every day."

Regnier nodded indifferently.

"Yes, that is Rowland Margetson," he confided. "The jury found him 'not guilty' or he would have been in prison to-night."

"Your cocktails are wonderful," she told him, precipitately abandoning the conversation.

“We try to make everything the best of its sort,” he assured her. “Sometimes it is difficult. Would you be shocked if I told you I had ordered our dinner in a private room?”

“Why should I be shocked?” she answered. “You will be able to tell me more about this business of crime.”

He looked at her keenly for a moment through slightly narrowed eyelids.

“Sometimes you puzzle me,” he confessed. “I should hate to think I was disappointed and that you were really one of these ingenuous young women who play at innocence and think they can get away with anything. You are in the home of vice remember. There isn’t an altogether honest man in this room, except, perhaps, my three barmen. Are you honest, Fred?” he went on, addressing the man who had served them.

“We have to be here, Sir Walter,” the man replied, “considering there are so many millionaires amongst the members and a great many—you will excuse me, sir—of whose honesty there has been a certain amount of question at the Law Courts—I never served in a club where the members were so careful about their change.”

“I am surprised at that,” Ann murmured.

“It is quite true, madam,” the man went on. “Lord Grantham, who was one of the directors charged in that big shipping case last year—they say he made a million out of the public—and he only got two months—he’s always complaining that cocktails ought to come down in price.”

“If they are all as good as these,” Ann declared, “I think you should advance them.”

“I hope I may take that as a hint,” Regnier observed.

“You may, if you are sure I am not being too expensive a guest,” she laughed.

Regnier declined a second cocktail but smoked a cigarette. Then he excused himself for a moment while he spoke to three men who had just come in.

“I was afraid this was going to be altogether a society evening,” he observed when he came back. “Those three belong to the other world though all right.”

“Tell me about them,” she begged. “They looked such dears.”

“The man with the monocle, Harrison Barr,” he confided, “is the man in that manslaughter case down at Brighton. He is out on bail. The man he is talking to, Sam Lennox, would have been doing time for blackmail but his prosecutor died during the trial. The other fellow is a Greek, a Captain Phœbus. He was sitting next to the Duchess when we came in.”

“What a heavenly place!” Ann declared with a little sigh of contentment.

A maître d’hôtel approached them and respectfully announced the service of

dinner, and Regnier led the way through several beautifully furnished reception-rooms, at present unoccupied, and along a passage towards an automatic lift. They ascended to the third floor. A bowing waiter met them in the corridor and threw open the door of a small dining-room, very chic and elegant, with doors opening on the other side of it. A table laid for two stood in the middle of the room. There were pink orchids in a Sèvres vase upon the table, caviare already upon their plates, with iced vodka in long thin glasses.

"I hope you won't refuse my vodka," Regnier remarked. "It's genuine and quite scarce."

"I am inclined to regret the second cocktail," Ann sighed as she sipped it.

"I'll let you off with just a thimbleful," he promised.

"I am going to ask to be let off with quite a small dinner, too," she said, leaning back in her chair and looking round with interest. "I have to sup out at eleven."

He looked at her curiously. The lines round his mouth deepened a little, but it was scarcely a smile. He seemed to have developed the gift of silence.

"My guests," he said quietly, "are not always in such a hurry."

"Ah, but I am not an ordinary guest," she reminded him.

"I should like to know why you came," he meditated.

The waiter had left the room in search of the next course. She answered him quite frankly and without embarrassment.

"Why, because I wanted to! Haven't you gathered by now that I love the unusual in life? I love adventures. This is an adventure."

"I suppose," he went on thoughtfully, "you are not entirely the ingénue you would have me believe. You have an idea as to what it may mean to dine alone with a man in a private room—a man of extraordinarily bad character—in a club which is known as a nest of criminals?"

"I suppose I do," she replied. "On the other hand, when the girl is a girl of extraordinarily good character, what does it matter?"

He balanced a fork on his long, delicate forefinger.

"Well," he observed, "that is one way of looking at it."

"It seems to me to be the only sane way," she persisted. "I think men love to feel that they are terrifying. You don't terrify me in the least, Sir Walter."

"Humiliating," he murmured.

"Not at all," she laughed gaily. "I know perfectly well that I shall not need to be melodramatic. Even those doors, which connect with a suite or something, I suppose, leave me unafraid."

"It is beginning to occur to me," he said as he nodded approval at the dish which

the maître d'hôtel had presented to him, "that you would be a very desirable member of this club if you could be induced to humour our criminal proclivities."

"You would find me very tolerant," she confided, looking straight across at him, "of every crime but one."

"And that?" he asked.

She waited until the man had left the room.

"Kidnapping children," she said.

He set down the glass of wine which he had just raised to his lips.

"You are thinking of the Chester case?" he asked politely. "It seems to have created a great deal of unnecessary commotion."

"I am interested in the Chester case," she admitted. "That is why I am dining here with you to-night."

There was a curious and a profound silence. Not by a twitch of the eyelids had he shown any surprise or emotion at her speech. He was looking at her fixedly. Even with her perfect nerves the silence seemed to have become uncanny. She looked round the room and discovered the reason.

"How modern!" she observed. "No windows, no ventilation, sterilised air! What a dangerous apartment this is in which you choose to entertain your guests, Sir Walter!"

"That is why I admired your courage so much when you came," he remarked. "I am beginning to understand you a little better, Miss Rooke."

"You will understand me better still when I tell you of a slight happening which took place a week or ten days ago," she recounted, "the day, by the by, when the Chester child disappeared. I was driving my car along a rather lonely byway in Surrey when something came fluttering down from the sky in front of me. I couldn't imagine what it was. I saw that it was coming down in little circles from a beautiful, small, smoothly running aeroplane which was mounting rapidly. I drew up my car and waited. Soon I saw that it was a book. It fell with a plop in the field at the side of the road. The aeroplane was now almost out of sight. I entered the field and picked up the book. . . . One moment, if you please, this chicken is too delicious."

She continued her dinner for a moment or two in silence. Then she took a sip of her wine.

"The book was a child's picture book," she went on, leaning back in her place, "but a child's picture book de luxe. Its illustrations were by Rackham and it struck me that the letterpress might almost have been one of those private ones, the type was so exquisitely clear. I looked it through and was fascinated. I took the book back with me to London. That night the evening papers were blazing the news of

little Pamela Chester's kidnapping.”

Once more she paused, this time because the maître d'hôtel had slipped into the room and filled the glasses. Even after he had withdrawn she was in no hurry, and Regnier sat, a figure of stone, without speech or movement of a single muscle.

“I think from the first thirty seconds,” she continued, “I have connected in my mind the discovery of that book and the abduction of the Chester child. Chester, as we all very well know, is a millionaire. The picture book which had fluttered into the field by my side was the picture book of a millionaire's child. The hour was about one hour after the child had been missed by her governess in Bond Street. I went to the one or two bookshops in London which were likely to have sold such a production, and the third I called at recognised it at once. It had been sold across the counter of their establishment in Piccadilly about a week before and despatched with two others to the address of the buyer.”

Again a brief pause, again that sphinxlike silence of her host. Not in the least discomposed, Ann presently continued.

“The number of the aeroplane,” she said, “was very distinctly visible, but two of the figures seemed to me to be curiously drawn. I made a note of them and I got a friend of mine who understands aeroplanes to make enquiries. With the exception of those two figures, a seven or a nine and a five or a three, which lent themselves easily to alteration, the aeroplane was easily identified. It was a luxury Moth delivered some three weeks ago to the same person who was the purchaser of the picture books. At this stage of my investigations I sought the advice of a friend at Scotland Yard.”

“I cannot tell you,” Regnier said, speaking at last, “how interesting I find your narrative. One thing, however, you have omitted. The name of the purchaser of the Moth and the picture books.”

“It is a name which has never yet passed my lips,” Ann said. “I kept it to myself for certain reasons. I shall tell it to you for other reasons. It was a Captain Phœbus, a young man, I believe, of Greek descent. He was sitting on the left hand of the Duchess when we came in this evening and he was one of the trio of friends to whom you spoke in the bar.”

“An interesting story, excellently told,” Regnier remarked, his smooth tone perhaps a little more cynical than usual, but otherwise undisturbed. “‘And then?’—as the child says to the storyteller——”

“‘And then’ with me lasted for twenty-four hours—a very anxious time,” Ann continued. “Eventually I sought an interview with the Chesters.”

“That would seem very discreet,” Regnier murmured.

“Their attitude,” Ann proceeded, “was exactly what I had imagined. Revenge, justice, punishment, although no criminal in the world deserves hounding out of it as much as a kidnapper, had no place in their minds. They wanted their daughter. They had no other thought but that.”

“And Scotland Yard?”

“You must remember,” Ann went on, “the official at Scotland Yard whose advice I sought was not a person in the highest authority, neither did I disclose to him all I knew. I asked him a plain question, and that was whether he thought that the prosecution of the criminals could be safely accomplished without the slightest risk to the child. He pointed out to me that I imposed upon him a tremendous responsibility, which he refused to shoulder. From a friend he turned into an official. He told me that my duty was to report myself to the Chief Commissioner. He could give no guarantee as to the safety of the child. The chief business of the police was to bring the criminal to justice. He left it at that.”

“You are a marvellously wise young woman, Miss Ann Rooke. So you came to me, whom they call the father of the Hobgoblin Club?”

“So I came to you.”

Regnier toyed with his cigarette for a moment and then lit it.

“Let me be sure,” he said, “that I have this matter properly envisaged. Your friend at Scotland Yard is aware that you could trace the owner of the Moth aeroplane, but you have not yet given him its number?”

“Precisely,” Ann agreed.

“He knows that you are aware of the name of the purchaser of the child’s picture book which fell from the aeroplane?”

“Yes.”

“But you have not shared your knowledge with him?” he asked.

“I have not.”

“Excellent. Who knows that you are dining to-night with me?”

“No one.”

There was a glitter in his eyes for a moment. He pushed the bowl of roses which stood between them on one side. He looked straight into her eyes.

“There is no one, then, in the world who knows that you dine at the Hobgoblin Club to-night?”

“Not a soul.”

Regnier leaned back in his chair. One searched in vain for a smile upon his face, and yet one felt that it was there. For those few moments he was perhaps at his best.

“You have made your advances in this matter, Miss Rooke,” he said, “with

almost uncanny skill. As a distinguished ancestor of mine would have remarked, you have created an amazing and intriguing situation. I will relieve you of further banalities as to the danger of your position. Your genius told you from the first that you were running no risk. I cannot always control my subordinates, but to-night you have saved the parents their child and the father his banking account, for what that is worth. I propose that you forget the name of the purchaser of the storybook. I propose also that you forget the number of the Moth aeroplane.”

“And in return?” she asked softly.

He glanced lazily at his watch.

“The child will arrive, in the best of health I can assure you, at Durham House within an hour. There will be no question of a ransom.”

“And this poor caged bird?” Ann asked, rising to her feet.

“Can flutter her wings whither she will,” Regnier replied, rising with a little bow, moving towards the door and throwing it open. “You will allow me to call you a taxicab? I presume that my bargain is accepted?”

“A gentleman’s agreement?” she asked.

“A gentleman’s agreement,” he replied, bowing over her finger-tips as they passed out to the corridor.

There were many gay parties in the dining-room downstairs and from the bar came the sound of a hubbub of voices. They passed to the exit by a different route.

“There is only one more thing to add, Miss Ann Rooke,” Regnier concluded as the taxicab, for which the commissionaire had whistled, rolled up. “By your criminal suppression of knowledge, which should have at once been communicated to the police, regardless of the possible results, you have qualified for membership of the Hobgoblin Club. It will give me great pleasure to propose you myself.”

“I shall be delighted,” she told him smiling, “to become a member. Will you tell the driver to take me to the Embassy in Bond Street? A charming dinner, Sir Walter.”

“A very modest meal,” he answered. “You see I remembered your supper afterwards.”

At ten-thirty that evening the telephone by the side of which Colin had been seated for the last hour rang. He seized the receiver and an unfamiliar voice spoke.

“Is that Mr. Colin Rooke?”

“Speaking.”

“This is the Embassy Club, sir. A telephone message has been waiting for you for some time. Our instructions were to ring you up at precisely half-past ten and tell you its contents.”

“Go ahead,” Colin demanded.

There was a moment’s pause, then the man’s voice again.

“‘Expect you here to supper at eleven o’clock. Please take small table on right, and remember that for celebrations I prefer Clicquot.’ We have reserved the table, sir,” the man concluded. “Louis has put a bottle of the ’19 Clicquot in the ice.”

“I shall be round in twenty minutes,” was Colin’s breathless response—rather an indistinct response. . . .

They met in the broad covered arcade leading into the Club. Her feet seemed scarcely to touch the covered pavement, the light he prayed for was in her eyes. She came with perfect naturalness into that brief but perfect embrace, then she thrust her hand under his arm.

“I have had my adventure,” she told him. “I am happy.”

“And the greater one?” he asked fervently.

“I am ready for that.”

Just before they left the Club two hours later, flushed with dancing and idiotically happy, the suave maître d’hôtel, who had been hurrying about in every direction, paused at their table.

“Great news for us all to-night, sir,” he announced. “I have just received a telephone message. The Chester child was returned to her parents to-night unharmed, and in perfect health. Her ladyship has so many friends here that I am busy spreading the good news.”

He hurried off. Ann and Colin raised their glasses.

“To your first exploit, dearest,” he whispered.

Ann’s glass remained at her lips a few seconds longer. Perhaps she added a silent toast of her own.

VII

PERCY SKIRTS THE MORASS

It must have been some latent instinct of devilment lurking behind his somewhat smug demeanour which induced Percy Rooke, who had heard of that famous Bohemian resort only the night before, to lean out of the window of his car during a block in Piccadilly and instruct his chauffeur to put him down at the Café Royal. He was not in the habit of paying fortuitous visits to cocktail bars and places where artists and their like are wont to congregate, but he was at that moment a little weary of his sedate life.

He pushed open the swing doors which led into an unknown world without any visible hesitation. His first impressions were indeterminate. There was a sprinkling of smartly dressed young women engaged for the most part, with the aid of small mirrors, in dealing more or less successfully with any imperfections of their make-up. Others were leaning back in their chairs scrutinising with an air of pleased interest any chance newcomer. There was a handful of young women dressed in another fashion, the ultra-artistic outfit, mostly with a complexion of ghastly pallor to match, lips of flaming scarlet and assuming a real but not impregnable air of aloofness. The men were mostly dressed as he was, but not so well, and a few in a manner which he would never have dared to affect, with drooping collars and flopping ties. All very interesting and very much what he had expected.

A waiter relieved him of his hat and stick. A young woman, seated with an elderly man upon one of the settees which lined the room, moved her bag courteously from the adjoining table. Percy Rooke, with a bow of acknowledgment, occupied the place, demanded a whisky-and-soda from a waiter, lit a cigarette and endeavoured to cultivate the air of a man entirely at ease amongst familiar surroundings. A passer-by, obviously mistaking him for someone else, nodded, which gave him confidence. A lady opposite, with very rosy fingernails, favoured him with a tentative smile and tapped the chair by her side. He pretended not to notice and picked up a menu. The girl with the elderly companion who had moved her bag from his table leaned slightly towards him. She too smiled, but in a different fashion.

“You find that it is very much changed, this place—yes?” she asked.

He accepted the cue at once.

“Unrecognisable,” he declared. “Too modern.”

He shook his head in disappointment. The girl sighed. He ventured to look at her. She was apparently of any age between twenty and thirty. Her face was long

and oval and her make-up, with which she had been only moderately lavish, was, at any rate, skilful. She was quietly dressed, although her small hat was set at a coquettish angle and her eyes were not empty of invitation.

“You are right,” she said, and he was more than ever conscious of the pleasantness of her voice, notwithstanding its foreign accent. “I come here but rarely now. My old friends seem to have found another home and they have taken the atmosphere with them. You are perhaps an artist, monsieur?”

Percy Rooke shook his head regretfully, with the air of one who had started life with that idea, but had been driven by grim fate to the narrower channels.

“I am very fond of pictures and music,” he confided, “but I am only an amateur. I am in the insurance business.”

“You make good money at that—yes?” the girl asked sympathetically.

“I make a sufficient income,” he replied. “You see, I am a bachelor and I have simple tastes.”

She laughed softly. She had certainly very beautiful teeth.

“You must have a strong will,” she said, “or the ladies you have met have not been very enterprising. Perhaps you are one who does not like my sex, monsieur?”

“There is no one admires them more than I do,” he assured her bravely. “In my life, however, I meet very few.”

She made a little gesture with her hand towards her companion.

“You permit that I present you to my father?” she asked. “The Count Heckerness. This gentleman’s conversation has interested me very much, Father. Your name if you please, monsieur?”

Percy Rooke produced his cardcase and laid a beautifully-engraved specimen upon the table in front of her. The girl read it out and passed it on.

“Mr. Percy Rooke,” she said. “Percy is a very pretty name.”

The elderly gentleman rose to his feet. He was very tall, he possessed an air of undeniable distinction, and he was decidedly dirty. Even the fingernails of the hand which Percy Rooke clutched gravely needed attention.

“I am very charmed to meet you, sir,” he said. “It is seldom that my daughter admits herself amused by an Englishman. I congratulate you.”

He sat down, and it was perhaps by accident that his fingers as he did so pushed away an empty glass in front of him. At any rate, he provided his new acquaintance with an opportunity.

“Perhaps,” the latter suggested, “I may be permitted to ask you and your daughter to join me in some refreshment?”

There was a dual and enthusiastic consent. Mademoiselle, it seemed, drank

mixed vermouth; the Count preferred Kirsch.

“Vodka,” he explained as the glasses were being filled, “is not good here. I drink the Kirsch, which reminds me somewhat of it. The vodka of the old days is no more.”

He filled up his glass from the bottle which the waiter had left upon the table and withdrew from the conversation.

“You are, I am sure, an artist, mademoiselle,” her companion ventured.

She laughed.

“People would not recognise my work as a branch of the arts, I fear,” she said. “Still, I do work, and very, very hard. I come to these places for the business.”

“Tell me what you do?” he begged.

“Would you really like to know?”

“I should,” he assured her fervently.

“Well,” she explained, “there are in my family quite a number of sisters, three brothers and two cousins. I keep a dancing-academy; that is to say, I teach dancing with the help of these others. When I am busy they take pupils or they dance with those who wish to dance for pleasure. You understand?”

“I think so,” he assented with some hesitation.

“Well, you see, what might happen is like this,” she explained. “You are in London alone. You would like to have dinner, you would like to dance. My name is known to you. You look up my telephone number—Countess Heckerness, 1789 Hampstead. You ring up and explain the situation. You ask if I will come and dance. Alas, I am distressed, but I am engaged for the evening; shall I send you one of my sisters or my cousin, I ask. And so it is. You have a partner, you dine pleasantly, you pay a fee, and we live. *Voilà!*”

“I think it is a wonderful idea,” he pronounced.

She shrugged her shoulders. She laughed gaily.

“Scarcely that,” she protested. “But there are a great many of us and we must live. Monsieur will pardon us now? There is a client of the establishment who has just arrived, and I would like to make an appointment with him.”

A grasp of the hand from Monsieur le Comte, a subtle smile, a momentary glimpse of mademoiselle’s graceful figure as she threaded her way amongst the chairs, and it was all over. Percy Rooke a few minutes later finished his drink and took his leave. He had the pleasant sense of having broken through the bondage of the level hours. He still held tightly the card which mademoiselle had thrust into his hand at the last moment. It was discreet and elegant. “La Comtesse Heckerness, 17, Rochfort Gardens,” and in small letters on the other side, “Telephone No. 1789

Hampstead.” The whole thing savoured of adventure.

Percy Rooke, as became his forty-seven years and his serious profession of insurance agent, was not a man of swift or passionate impulses. It was a week before he presented himself at 17, Rochfort Gardens and entered upon the second stage of his adventure. His first impression of his new surroundings, even as he handed his hat and umbrella to a moderately tidy but somewhat flushed serving-maid, was that the very atmosphere seemed charged with musical discords, proceeding from every corner of the house. There was jazz music to the left of him, there was jazz music to the right of him; the melody of a waltz floated down the stairs and the clanging of a one-step from somewhere in the back regions. It was a relief to be ushered into a crowded room and exchange the pandemonium of instrumental discord for the shrill chatter of human voices. His hostess rose from her place at a round table, where she had been seated behind an apparatus which seemed to him like a gigantic tea-urn, and welcomed him with outstretched hands.

“My dear Mr. Rooke!” she exclaimed. “How charming of you! We have been hoping to see you every afternoon.”

“I have been looking forward to this pleasure, mademoiselle,” he replied in somewhat stilted fashion.

“Can I offer you some tea?” she enquired, touching the monumental edifice in front of her.

“Thank you, no,” he replied. “I take a cup of tea always at my office at four o’clock.”

“Well, we have finished,” the Countess told him. “I will not introduce you to everyone. You would only forget their names. But these are all my sisters which you see at the table. I start from the left—yes? That is Anna with the copper-coloured hair. You must be careful of her, Mr. Rooke. She is a nice girl, but she—I forget the word for the moment—she will flirt with you if you give her the chance. Then there is Catherine, better behaved, almost as demure as myself. And next is little Sonia. It is so convenient to have one small one, because she can dance with the small men. Then here on the other side are my two brothers, George and Andrew, and my stepbrother, Nicholas.”

The young women acknowledged the introduction with a murmured chorus of friendly platitudes. The young men, who were all three similarly attired in pullovers and flannel trousers, bowed with great formality.

“Now I shall take you away,” his hostess continued, “and if you really intend to become a patron, I shall see how you dance and who would be your best

partner. . . . The first thing we have to do is to find an empty room,” she went on. “I rather fancy——”

She opened a door. A young man in tights and a girl in the scantiest of costumes were facing one another with the air of prize-fighters. A man with a violin was just starting to play. The Countess waved her hand and drew her companion back into the passage.

“We must not interrupt them,” she said. “The violinist is Marko. He is a great friend of the family and oh, so marvellous! They are practising a new dance for the Palladium to-night. They are the two who always bring money to the family. I expect you have seen them advertised—Arnold and Betty, they call themselves. Betty’s real name is Nadine, but alas, we Austrians are not very popular just now. . . . Hurrah! An empty room and a gramophone. Any particular choice, Mr. Rooke?”

“Just an ordinary fox-trot,” he suggested. “I’m not very good, you know.”

“If you were very good, it would not be worth your while to come here,” she said. “If you dance badly—*eh bien!* We will try to make you dance better.”

Mademoiselle slipped on a gramophone record, lifted her skirt a little and held out her hands. Her partner, with an air of great solemnity, lent himself to the music. For a man without any sense of rhythm or graceful freedom of the limbs he danced very correctly. The Countess patted him on the back at the conclusion of the performance.

“But you dance very well,” she exclaimed. “You need one thing, and one thing only, but oh, how you need that!”

“Tell me, if you please, what it may be,” he begged.

“Practice, my dear Mr. Rooke. Constant, indefatigable practice.”

“I must substitute the dance for my exercises in the bathroom every morning,” he suggested with heavy jocularity.

“Useless,” she told him. “You must dance with a partner whom you can hold in your arms and who will move with you to the rhythm of the music—that is the secret of real dancing.”

“Then I must dance with you,” he declared.

“You had better not let my father hear you make speeches like that,” she laughed. “He is so strict with all of us. He expects us to dance and earn all the money and not even to listen to a compliment. That is not possible, is it, Mr. Rooke?”

“Certainly not,” he agreed.

“Shall I select one more record?”

The record was selected and danced. She led him to a divan set against the wall.

“That was even better than the first,” she declared. “You will have to dance with Anna whenever I am occupied, Mr. Rooke. She has just that swaying step which will help you to move more freely. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” he admitted.

“And now we must talk business,” the Countess continued. “You can come here as often as you like, Mr. Rooke, on your way home from the City, and you can dance with whichever one of us is free, and you will pay each time a guinea—yes?”

“It will suit me admirably,” he assented.

The Countess, who had confided to him that her name was Gertrude, was relieved. She watched with frank interest the pound and the shilling which her new client had produced from his pocket, and to save him embarrassment took it from him and slipped it into her own bag.

“Receipts are not necessary,” she said. “You pay every time you come. If you take one of us out for the evening it is two guineas and we must be fetched and brought home. With my sisters perhaps a little present as well would be acceptable. I am supposed to be the head of the establishment so it is not necessary. The situation is clear to you, Mr. Percy?”

“Perfectly,” he answered.

“You like us? You find it agreeable to come here?”

“Extraordinarily so,” he assured her.

“Then we shall dance one more,” Gertrude decided, springing lightly to her feet, “and after that if Anna is free you shall dance with her.”

The evening finished in the most satisfactory fashion. The new patron, who found it was possible to obtain refreshments upon the premises, stood cocktails to a small but very thirsty crowd, augmented by the sudden arrival from the lower regions of the Count himself. It was, in Percy Rooke’s own opinion as he stepped into his car, a slightly disreputable, but exceedingly agreeable afternoon.

Three weeks later, Mr. Percy Rooke sat in the private sitting-room of his cousin, the proprietress of the Cedarwood Guest-House, waiting for an interview which he had shirked and which he disliked more than anything else in life. An unfortuitous combination of circumstances seemed every moment to render that interview more distasteful. It was a sunny spring morning and a faintly stirring breeze brought through the open French windows the delicate odour of early lilac and late hyacinths—something of the freshness and sweetness of the little garden of which his cousin was so proud. The room was plainly but very tastefully furnished. The etchings upon the grey walls were few but well chosen. The furniture was old-fashioned, but possessed an air of dignity. A bowl of richly red tulips stood upon a *secretaire*. There was a

purity and fragrance about the atmosphere of the little apartment very far removed from the atmosphere in which this wandering sheep of his cousin's cultured and highly refined guest-house had been lately misspending his time.

The entrance of the lady of the house herself did little to quell his growing sense of discomfort. She was wearing a black skirt and black blouse, very high-necked, and a touch of white cambric at her throat. Her hair was becomingly waved and parted, and notwithstanding a certain look of anxiety, of which her errant relative was the principal cause, she looked well and cheerful, and her apologetic smile was in itself charming.

"You will forgive me, Percy," she begged. "These tradespeople, they argue so, and Annette, although she's such a wonderful cook, is almost too eager. By the by, you have missed many of her latest efforts. Getting quite a gadabout, aren't you?"

The great occasion had arrived and the man, as so often happens, found himself pitifully at a loss. He had his cue but he missed it.

"I do seem to have dined out a great deal lately," he murmured.

"Quite a man about town," she smiled. "However, so long as you are amused. That's the great thing in life, isn't it? Now tell me what it is you wanted to see me about."

His courage failed him completely. The few plain, dignified words which he had learnt by heart and which sounded perfectly natural when spoken in the privacy of his chamber, had gone from his mind. He suddenly ceased even to believe in the situation which had arisen. It wasn't possible that he, Percy Rooke, had been spending all these evenings dancing and whispering all sorts of amorous amenities to some other woman—a foreigner, an Austrian Countess—it was ridiculous. There was only one woman whom he had really ever cared for and there she sat waiting for him to speak. He just felt he couldn't do it.

"Grace," he faltered desperately, "it wasn't anything really. Another time, or perhaps I'll write."

"Don't be an idiot," she exclaimed, trying hard to conceal her own agitation. "If you have anything to say, say it."

"Perhaps—well!"

"Perhaps you want to make a change—to leave me?"

"You have said it," he muttered. "I couldn't. I'll have to make a move, Grace."

Now that he had said it he was stupefied.

"You are going to leave me?" she said quietly. "Is there anything wrong, anything you don't like?"

He closed his eyes.

"I am going to be married," he announced.

Then there was silence. They neither of them heard any longer the humming of the bees outside, the soft rustle of the wind in the tall elm trees. Percy was loathing the feeble spark of courage which had enabled him to say those words to her. Her cheerful world, through which she had been moving so blithely, seemed suddenly to have become an impossible place, her life until then so brimful of interests and content—a dreary wilderness.

"Why didn't you tell me before?" she asked at last.

"I wasn't sure," he answered drearly. "I didn't believe in it myself."

"When can I see her and who is she?"

Percy Rooke coughed. It was not a meeting to which he was looking forward with any pleasure, in fact the more he thought of it the less he liked it.

"She's an Austrian," he confided. "She has a great many relatives. You won't like her. You won't like them. Oh damn!"

Perhaps that was the most encouraging thing he could have said. She showed some faint signs of recovery.

"Don't be stupid," she enjoined. "Of course I must see her and her relations, and I assure you I'll do my best to like them. Austrians have been having a terrible time lately, haven't they?"

He thought of the three sisters in their cheap frocks, their ceaseless chatter, their hungry chase of life. He thought of the three young men in pullovers and slacks throughout the day and carefully preserved evening clothes at night. Young men who bowed from the middle, made flowery speeches, drank everything they were offered and borrowed half-crowns. No, there wasn't the faintest chance that she would like them.

"I'll bring Gertrude to dinner one night if I may," he proposed.

"Whenever you like," she agreed. "I can't pretend, Percy," she went on, her head turned a little away from him, "that I shall be very pleased to see her, but your happiness is the great thing and if you really care—well, that is everything. I hope you are sure about that, Percy. It's the great thing, you know."

"Of course, of course," he assented. "Well, we will see. She has a great many engagements. Perhaps one night later in the week. I'll let you know."

"I wish you looked a little more happy about it, Percy," she told him frankly.

"Haven't got used to the idea yet," he muttered. "That'll come all right."

He hurried away. She watched him wistfully, had half a mind to call him back but let him go. Perhaps there was after all a glimmering of hope.

Never, Percy Rooke reflected as he descended from his neat and prosperous-looking automobile, crossed the few yards of pavement, pushed open the crazily hung gate and made his way up to the front door of No. 17, Rochfort Gardens on that particular evening, had the clatter down in the basement seemed more disturbing, the pile of half emptied receptacles, fragments of vegetables and dustman's litter more hideously apparent. With the licence of a privileged client he pushed open the door and entered. There was the same crazy din of gramophones, peals of staccato laughter from the sirenlike sisters, and mingled odours of rancid tobacco-smoke and countless meals eaten in unventilated rooms. Scales seemed to fall from his eyes as he wandered round the place. In one small room he found Gertrude being bounced around by a man who had so much the appearance of a bookmaker that one glanced at him in involuntary surprise at the absence of his satchel. She was holding her head back very much in the way she affected when she danced with him. Her very beautiful eyes seemed to be asking almost the same questions. She was a little more tired, there was slightly more powder upon her cheeks, she looked a little older. The smile with which she greeted him was obviously forced.

"See you later, Percy dear," she called out. "I had to keep Mr. Bolt waiting and we have only just begun. One of my most promising pupils, too, are you not, James?"

The big man pirouetted on one foot and glanced condescendingly down at Percy.

"I'll say so," he declared. "Mind closing that door?" he went on. "I'm all in a stew and there's a regular draught coming up the stairs."

Percy Rooke accepted the hint, descended the stairs and made his way unobtrusively in the direction of the front door. One of the lanky young men, who appeared to have been waiting for him, touched him on the shoulder in friendly fashion. He was tall and well enough built, but he was an unpleasant-looking youth with overpallid complexion, suspicious-looking flaxen hair and weak eyes.

"Could I speak with you for a moment, Mr. Rooke?" he begged.

"Presently," was the hasty reply. "I have to go out. I'm coming back in half an hour."

"It is unfortunate," the young man pleaded, "as it is a matter of business."

"Yours or mine?" Percy Rooke asked with rare cynicism. "Anyway, you must excuse me for a few minutes," he added.

There was no escaping Anna, however. She was walking up and down the shabby hall waiting for him.

"I find it necessary——" he began to explain.

She cut him short, thrust her arm through his, and disregarding utterly his faint efforts at resistance, dragged him into one of the smaller rooms on the ground floor. She listened for a moment after she had closed the door.

"Here is Dad coming upstairs from the kitchen," she muttered. "Do not be scared."

She turned the key in the lock, heedless of her companion's protests.

"Mr. Rooke," she went on, "I am going to speak to you for two minutes. None of the others will let me if they can prevent it. Look at me. Am I changed?"

He studied her in puzzled fashion.

"Well, as a matter of fact," he admitted, "yes, in a way you are changed."

"You find me improved—yes?"

"Very much."

She smoothed out her really beautiful auburn hair. It was brushed tightly back from her forehead and drooped from her neck in a little chignon. It had lost the frizziness he hated and was in its way almost distinguished. She was wearing a black gown, and the make-up of weeks of various sorts seemed to have been washed from her face. She was a little pallid, perhaps, but entirely presentable.

"You like me better like this?"

"I certainly do."

"You were not happy the other night when you took me out instead of Gertrude," she said. "I could tell that by your behaviour. I have tried to make myself more what you like."

"I am sure that is very considerate of you," he admitted.

"Now listen, please," she continued. "You were taking out Gertrude to-night to the Savoy to dine and dance."

"Well?"

"Will you take me instead?"

"Does she wish it?" he asked.

"She is tired out, she is ill," Anna confided. "She supports the whole family—this sister of mine. Soon she will be in the hospital, and then what will there be left of us? If you please, Mr. Rooke. I will be as agreeable in every way as I know how. Already I have done what I could. You were to have met Gertrude at eight o'clock in the foyer of the Savoy. May I be there instead, please?"

"There was something I particularly wanted to say to Gertrude," Percy Rooke observed.

"You can say it to me," Anna told him firmly. "I am going to take over my share

of the responsibility which this terrible family of ours demands.”

“You will arrange it with Gertrude?”

“I promise, and I promise you this, too,” she answered as she unlocked the door, the handle of which had been twice softly turned. “You may not think me attractive. You may not like to dance with me as you do with Gertrude, but you will not be ashamed of me.”

“There was never any question of that, Anna,” Percy Rooke assured her, with the faint flush of the unaccustomed liar in his cheeks.

It really was an unexpectedly pleasant evening. Anna, with her beautiful hair under proper control, in a simple black frock, and with scarcely any cosmetics, presented a quiet and distinguished appearance. She danced almost as well as Gertrude, and although her English was scarcely so fluent, it was sufficiently intelligible. About halfway through the evening she asked for more coffee and settled herself back in her chair. They had a divan table in the corner and she made room for him to sit nearer to her.

“I ask now a great thing,” she said, “but you are a generous man.”

Percy Rooke groaned inwardly. Every other one of the family was already in his debt. Now it was to be Anna.

“You wish to marry my sister Gertrude,” she continued. “You know that we are in trouble. She consents. She marries you. And that thousand pounds we need to set us straight again you will pay. That is so—yes?”

“A little crudely put,” he ventured, “but it is true. I am very fond of your sister, though,” he added bravely, “and I think she is fond of me.”

Anna shook her head vigorously.

“Oh no,” she assured him. “She is not fond of you. She is fond of one person. You know—Marko.”

“Marko the violinist?” he exclaimed.

“Marko is an artist,” Anna declared firmly. “We will not speak of him much, but he loves Gertrude and Gertrude loves him. Because of him she says ‘No’ to many men who would like to flirt with her. Now he breaks his heart, she breaks her heart—because she must marry you.”

“God bless my soul!” Percy Rooke stammered. “Why couldn’t she tell me that herself?”

“Because she is honourable,” was the quiet reply. “She has already had two hundred pounds of that thousand pounds. I asked you here to speak of this. I propose something.”

“Well, go on,” he invited.

“I have no Marko,” Anna continued, patting his hand. “I am a nice girl—yes? I do what you ask. I marry you if you will. Take me instead and give the rest of the money. I will go on working if you wish. I will earn money. I do not love you yet, but if you wish to have me you can, and if you are good to me I will be good to you. There! What is it that you say, Mr. Percy?”

The bottle of liqueur brandy had been left upon the table. He helped himself.

“I’m fond of Gertrude,” he confided, “but for the last few weeks I have noticed some things which have troubled me—little things, but they point. You understand?”

“You would be stupid if you had not noticed,” she declared. “She loves Marko and she is in despair.”

“Well, she need despair no longer,” he said. “I give her up.”

“You will not be too miserable?” she pleaded. “I may tell her that?”

“I will not be miserable at all,” he promised.

“And you will have me instead?”

“Do you want me to?”

“I am willing,” she said. “I have thought this all out. I will make you a good wife or a good companion. I am a good girl.”

“Do you care for me?”

“No,” she admitted. “That is the truth.”

“Why not?”

“You are too old,” she answered, “and you have stiff ways. I am a good girl but I am a Bohemian. Still, I will change.”

“You don’t need to,” he told her. “I shall forget the two hundred pounds your sister has had. You shall have the whole thousand pounds to-morrow, and to tell you the truth, Anna, although you are a nice girl and I am sure a good girl, I want to marry someone else.”

The sullen look which had brooded more than once during the evening upon her face slowly disappeared. She leaned back in her chair and laughed. She rocked with laughter. She swallowed some coffee.

“Give me some brandy,” she begged. “Oh, I am happy! It is settled?”

“On my word of honour,” he promised.

“I may wait until I find a young man of my own. You will give Gertrude up,” she persisted, “and you will lend the money?”

“I will give Gertrude up,” he assured her. “I shall be delighted to have you as my friend but I don’t wish to marry you, and I will lend the money.”

She drank off her brandy with ecstasy.

“It is a good world,” she pronounced. “Gertrude will marry Marko. Our debts will be paid. I shall find for myself a husband. We dance once more—yes? Then I go home and make Gertrude happy too.”

He smiled a little ruefully yet his heart was light as he rose to his feet. He deemed it perhaps in the best of taste to keep his feelings to himself.

Only a few evenings later the small company of the Rooke Legatees gathered together for their customary dinner. Everyone remarked upon Mrs. John Rooke’s appearance. She had always been a somewhat distinguished figure, but this time she looked ten years younger.

“Something has happened,” Ann declared.

“My dears,” Mrs. Rooke confided. “Last time we met I was complaining. Tonight I am happy. My adventure has arrived.”

“Your adventure?” Ann exclaimed. “Quickly! Tell us all about it.”

“Mine is, perhaps, not quite so thrilling as the amazing scrapes you others seem to get into,” she confided with a smile. “But it is thrilling enough for me. I am going to marry Percy.”

VIII

MIRACLE AT MONTE CARLO

Colin Rooke stood in the comfortable little hall of the Brancaster Dormy House Club, his pipe in his mouth and his hands in the loose pockets of his tweed knickerbockers, gazing disconsolately at the letter-rack. There was a hopeless chasm in the aperture marked with an R.

“That’s the last post of the day, is it, Large?” he asked the porter.

“Nothing more till to-morrow morning, sir,” the man replied.

Colin turned away frowning. His rough clothes were still heavy with the moisture of the driving mist and the sting of the north wind roaring across the marshes was on his cheeks. A hot bath, tea and toast, and a rubber of bridge were clearly indicated. All the same it wasn’t like Ann to leave him for a week without a letter. On the landing a giant of a man in a flaming orange-coloured dressing-gown greeted him amicably—Dunrobin, the scratch golfer and a mighty hitter.

“Hello, Rooke! Down for the week-end?”

“Might stay a little longer if it doesn’t get too infernally cold,” Colin answered. “I’m supposed to be finishing up Marley’s duck shoot. Not much good if the wind doesn’t change. When did you turn up?”

“Last night, but I was dining over at Hunstanton,” the other replied. “I heard you were here. By the by, I ran across a very charming young woman—a Miss Rooke—down at Monte Carlo. Any connection?”

“Don’t think so.”

“An uncommon name rather. This was a Miss Ann Rooke. A very smart young lady with beautiful brown hair and hazel eyes—quite a beauty. Christian name Ann.”

For a moment Colin stared at his acquaintance in bewildered silence.

“That sounds rather like a second cousin of mine, but I hadn’t heard she was going away. I thought she was in London.”

“She arrived in Monte Carlo by the *Train Bleu* on Thursday,” Dunrobin confided. “She was dining the same night with some of the musical crowd I know slightly.”

“You didn’t meet her, I suppose?” Colin enquired.

The other shook his head.

“I wish I had,” he admitted. “I didn’t know the people she was with well enough to butt in. Going out after the duck to-night?”

Colin was feeling a little dazed.

“Don’t think so. We did pretty well last evening. I’ve had two rounds of golf and I’m pretty well wet through. I’m going to have a bath and change.”

“Sound idea,” his friend observed as he made his way along the corridor.

Mechanically Colin turned on the bath, stripped and disappeared for a time in a cloud of steaming vapour. Afterwards he donned the informal dinner costume which the valet had prepared and descended into the lounge. He ordered tea and toast but found himself without his usual appetite. The toast seemed burnt and the tea flavourless. There could scarcely be another Ann Rooke who was remarkable for her brown hair and hazel eyes, but what was she doing in Monte Carlo? It seemed incredible that she should have gone there without a word to him. When he had left town it had been arranged that she should go down to Somersetshire to a country house-party and they were both to return to London on the same day. Monte Carlo without a word to him! It was incredible. He lit his pipe after tea, strolled across to the hall-porter’s small bureau and demanded London on the telephone. In a few minutes he found himself speaking to the commissionaire of the building in which Ann had her small flat.

“Miss Rooke, sir?” the former replied. “Not here at present. She went away last Wednesday.”

“Have you any idea where she went?” Colin asked. “This is Mr. Rooke speaking.”

“I recognised your voice, sir,” the man acknowledged. “I know where she went because I took her place for her on the *Train Bleu*. She went to Monte Carlo.”

“Did she take the maid with her—Mrs. Holmes?”

“No, sir. Mrs. Holmes is in the flat. Would you like to speak to her?”

“If you please.”

“I’ll put you through, sir.”

Mrs. Holmes was difficult—a little disturbed, Colin fancied. Her mistress’s departure was entirely unexpected, she confessed. They had been going to Somersetshire on Tuesday but Miss Rooke had suddenly changed her mind and sent for a ticket for Monte Carlo. Mrs. Holmes had no idea of the reason. Miss Rooke had received no special visitors. The telephone she couldn’t answer for.

“I don’t suppose there’s any harm in telling you this, sir,” she wound up diffidently. “Miss Rooke did seem a little worried before she left and she wrote you a letter, sir, but told me not to post it. It is here at the flat and nothing was to be done about it unless you came here yourself or seemed in any way upset at her sudden departure.”

“Did your mistress say when she would be returning?” Colin asked.

“She didn’t seem to know herself, sir,” the woman confided. “The whole thing seemed to have been decided upon all at once. There was one telephone message,” the woman added reluctantly, “which seemed to have something to do with it but I can’t tell you for certain who it was from.”

“Have a shot at it, Mrs. Holmes,” Colin begged. “It may be important.”

“Well, I did hear something about the telephone message being from a Lady Kennard. Something was said, I remember, about the Directors’ Room at Covent Garden and a Mr. Regnier,” the woman confessed.

“Hold the letter for me,” Colin snapped. “Stay in all the morning, Mrs. Holmes. I shall be with you before lunch.”

“Very good, sir,” the woman assented meekly. . . .

Colin made his way back to the lounge, drank two whisky-and-sodas instead of one, revoked twice in the only rubber of bridge he played, and departed soon after dinner for Norwich to sleep at the Maid’s Head Hotel and catch the early morning train for London.

The contents of the note which Colin found awaiting him in Ann’s tiny flat brought him little consolation.

COLIN, MY DEAR, [he read, in Ann’s scrawly handwriting] Don’t be angry with me, please. This is the last time, I promise you, unless we are working together, but I just couldn’t refuse to help in—well, a certain little matter. You shall be the first to know all about it.

I am hoping that I will get back before you discover that I am playing truant for a day or two, but if not, don’t worry and don’t be cross with me.

Ever yours,

ANN

“Tell me about the telephone message,” Colin said as he thrust the letter into his pocket.

“The bell rang on Monday night, sir. I answered it. I understood the gentleman to say that he was speaking from some office in connection with Covent Garden on behalf of Lady Kennard, and when Miss Ann spoke I did hear her say ‘Is that Mr. Regnier?’ That’s all I can tell you, sir. Miss Ann seemed quite excited afterwards. I had to unpack all her things for Somersetshire and she’s gone off. I can’t tell you any more, sir.”

“Thank you,” Colin said. “I’ll find out the rest for myself.”

Inspector Deanes Seymour was preparing to leave his room to keep a luncheon engagement when Colin Rooke’s card was brought to him. He glanced at it with uplifted eyebrows.

“I’d like to see Mr. Rooke by appointment,” he said, “but just now——”

There was no time to finish his sentence. Colin Rooke was there, grim and furious. Seymour’s first impulse was of irritation.

“What the dickens is the matter with you, Rooke?” he demanded.

“You are going to find out,” was the swift reply. “Where have you sent Ann Rooke?”

“I don’t know what you are talking about,” Seymour declared. “I haven’t seen or heard anything of her for weeks.”

Colin Rooke checked the expletive which would have ended the conversation. He remained silent for a moment. The inspector realised that he was in deadly earnest.

“Sit down, Rooke,” he enjoined. “Pull yourself together. Get this into your head. I promised you I wouldn’t make use of Miss Rooke’s services any more without giving you warning. I have kept my word. I haven’t corresponded with or approached her in any way. Now tell me what’s happened to her?”

Rooke told his story. Seymour listened and his expression became grave.

“This sounds to me like a put-up job, Rooke,” he said. “I have neither rung up Miss Rooke nor approached her in any way. How did you know that she was at Monte Carlo?”

“A friend of mine at Brancaster told me the night before last that she was there. She arrived just before he left. I hadn’t heard a word from her, so I rang up her apartment last night. The hall-porter told me that he had booked her place on the *Train Bleu*. I shall charter a plane this afternoon and try and get through as far as Cannes.”

“Steady on,” the inspector replied. “Don’t make up your mind quite so quickly.”

“What the devil else is there to do?” Colin demanded.

“Use a little common sense,” was the blunt reply. “We’ll take it for granted, especially if this fellow Regnier is mixed up in it, that this may be a criminal attempt to abduct Miss Rooke. There’s one thing very certain, though. You have been asked, absolutely invited, to follow Miss Rooke to Monte Carlo. Your friend having seen her there—that part of it is helpful. On the other hand, if you do the obvious thing and go there after her, it’s a box of cigars to a packet of halfpenny squiffs that she won’t be there. She’ll be where you least expect to find her.”

“Where do you mean?” Colin demanded.

Seymour glanced at his watch.

“No use getting panicky, young fellow,” he said. “We’ll discuss that over lunch.”

Luncheon produced very little in the way of inspiration. The only common conclusions the two men were able to arrive at were firstly that the person who was responsible for Ann’s disappearance had taken not the slightest trouble to induce her to conceal her movements, and that being so, it was obvious that they were either indifferent as to Colin’s following her to Monte Carlo, or that they believed Ann’s interest in her mission was sufficiently strong to weigh against any influence which Colin might bring to bear. As for Lady Kennard, she was reported to be in her flat in Paris, which she had not left for three weeks.

“Personally,” Seymour summed up, “I have arrived at only one conclusion. You say you have already wired Miss Rooke to ask for an explanation of this change in her plans. I should wait till you get a reply before you start out to follow her.”

“That’s all very well, but she may not get the telegram,” Colin protested.

“Give her time to reply before you do what it seems the person who is responsible for her journey is inviting you to do—to rush off to Monte Carlo after her,” Seymour said bluntly. “I don’t mind telling you, Rooke, that the first move, after all, is ours. Whilst you were waiting for the taxi I slipped down to our Overseas Department and I ordered our telephone operator to put a call through to Howes, one of our agents in Paris—the best we have, as a matter of fact. He poses as correspondent to a London daily, but he’s done a lot of fine work for us. I instructed him first to call on Lady Kennard and ascertain what her movements had been for the last few weeks, then to hire a plane and get to Cannes to-night, motor over to Monte Carlo and report as to the doings of Miss Ann Rooke. That is a little quicker than anyone who is up to mischief could expect to be disturbed.”

Colin smiled for the first time.

“That was a damned good idea,” he said. “I know Howes, although I didn’t know he worked for you. He’s a clever fellow.”

“He’s a quick worker, anyhow,” Seymour continued. “The message will catch him before he goes out. We have our fixed hours for telephone conversations, and I shouldn’t be surprised if he wasn’t on his way to Le Bourget by now. My advice to you, Colin, is not to walk into such a clumsily baited trap. You have been practically invited to go to Monte Carlo. If you take my advice, you will stay here and await Howes’s report.”

“I’ll do it,” Colin promised disconsolately.

“And meantime,” Seymour enjoined as he turned round to ask the waiter for the

bill, “do you mind looking at the gentleman in neat tweeds and pince-nez who is seated at the table near the door, reading a newspaper? I should be interested to know if you ever saw him before.”

Colin glanced carelessly at the stranger and paused to light a cigarette. A moment or two later he leaned across the table.

“I am almost certain,” he confided, “that he travelled up from Norwich with me this morning.”

“I should think it highly probable,” Seymour said dryly. “If you tried to catch the two-twenty or took a taxi down to Croydon, you would probably see quite a great deal more of him.”

Seymour paid the bill, the two men rose to their feet and strolled towards the door. The man in the pince-nez took no notice of them. He did not even raise his head from the paper. Outside, on the pavement, the commissioner threw open the door of the taxicab which he had summoned.

“Where to, sir?” he asked.

“Heston Aerodrome,” Seymour replied.

The chauffeur was occupied for a minute or two in backing his taxicab in order to turn round.

“I only wanted to make sure of that fellow,” Seymour explained. “He goes on to our black list this afternoon. Don’t turn your head but just glance through the window as we pass.”

Colin did as he was bidden. The commissioner had entered the restaurant and they could see his tall form bending over the table near the door at which the man with the pince-nez was seated.

“An amateur’s trick,” Seymour remarked as he redirected the driver a little later on. “It may be that he is off your track for half an hour, though.”

Colin Rooke spent an unusual afternoon reading up the geography where the next war was likely to take place, and telephoned to one or two acquaintances. At about five o’clock a uniformed inspector brought him an official note from Scotland Yard. He broke open the seal and read:

Sorry, Colin—Things aren’t going quite our way. Howes’s car was run into by a lorry on his way to Le Bourget. Howes is in hospital and will be off the map for a week. Stay where you are till you see me. I have a conference with the Chief in half an hour.

That period of waiting was not one of the pleasantest in Colin’s young life.

The curtain of the opera house in Monte Carlo had fallen upon the first act of a well-known popular opera. Hand in hand the artistes had made their bows. The applause died away, the lights glowed with an increased radiance, there was a rustle of programmes, the murmur of voices. In a moment or two the exodus to the forum outside began. In Monte Carlo the women as well as the men join in that friendly little parade. It is not perhaps the occasion on which the most wonderful toilettes are worn. Those are reserved for the semiroyal banquets on gala nights at the Sporting Club. Here, however, congregate the lovers of music, and the people who love music have always their particular niche in the world.

Ann Rooke was seated in the front row of the last amphitheatre of stalls, a little raised above the others and usually much sought after. By her side throughout the act had been the only vacant seat in the place. Ann was looking her best, although there was an air of detachment about her, which showed that she was living in a world where such matters as a successful toilette are not the greatest things that count. A psychologist who had studied her throughout the evening would probably have decided that it was not the very beautifully rendered music but the empty seat by her side which was responsible for her aloofness. She had the air of a woman who was suffering at the same time from the strain of a great anticipation and a poignant fear. On their way out there was scarcely one of the chattering, gossiping crowd who did not look twice at this young woman seated alone, a stranger to nearly everybody, yet in her way remarkable. She was still there when they came back again. She seemed to be looking nowhere in particular. Her eyes sought no recognition from the few friends she might have had. A great novelist, who lived on one of the Caps a few miles away, summed up her attitude best perhaps when he remarked to his companion on his way back to his seat:

“That young woman is waiting.”

“For what?” the other asked.

The novelist shrugged his shoulders.

“For something to happen,” he said. “I don’t even myself know yet whether it is to be a tragedy or a comedy.”

“The worst of our host is,” one of the others in the party remarked, “that he looks at everyone with a coldly professional eye.”

“And the worst of you, my dear philanderer,” the novelist rejoined, “is that you see nothing but mere sex in every beautiful woman you glance at. Their passions and moods mean nothing to you. I tell you that that girl is either suffering, or hoping, or fearing more intensely than you will ever be able to do in your butterfly life. . . .”

The lights went out. The overture, a very short one, commenced, and the curtain rose. Almost from the first the wonder began. There were some who in the first act had criticised in casual but friendly fashion the singing of the tenor, but the first notes of his marvellous song, stealing out from a hidden place at the back of the stage, brought with them perplexity and wonder. Then the whole house thrilled to what was happening. No one understood. They only listened. The voice grew in volume and beauty. It became inhuman. There were many who were more than slightly baffled, who thought that their favourite was strangely excelling himself, but there were others who refused to believe their senses, whom nothing could convince that it was indeed the man whose name was printed upon the programme or any other man whom they had ever heard, who was filling the strange, electrified atmosphere of the place with those strains of marvellous, soul-racking melody. The silence of an audience thrilled to the very core by something which appeals to the senses is a thing one rarely hears. Even their breathing seemed suspended. There was not a cough, not once the movement of an impatient foot, the flutter of a single programme. There was a silence which had in it something almost awful. . . .

The flood of melody died away. The song had come to an end. Nevertheless, that curious silence continued—even those shadowy figures on the stage seemed to be waiting for something which never came. There was scarcely a soul in the great audience who was not spellbound. Applause would have appeared incongruous. In silence everyone waited until the burden of the opera was taken up, then there was a dim murmur of voices, a sort of sigh, as of pent-up emotions. The orchestra bent over their instruments, the routine of producing a famous work passed on. It was doubtful whether a single member of the audience was still following the story towards its climax. They were obsessed by the idea that a miracle had happened, but of that miracle there came no explanation. The act passed to its end. There was a little more than the customary applause but there were loud and indistinguishable calls from the back of the auditorium. The performers bowed their acknowledgment from the front. Presently, as the voices swelled in volume, the baritone stepped forward.

“*Mesdames et messieurs,*” he said. “I have to offer you the apologies of Signor Catti who is temporarily unwell. He hopes to make his acknowledgments to you after the last curtain.”

That was all. People rose slowly and unwillingly to their feet. Everyone was talking, it seemed, at the top of their voices, and it was just at that moment that Ann, still seated in the same place, still with the empty seat by her side, looked across at the crowd who were wedged in against the wall and met the fierce, demanding eyes

of the man who had stepped out of his plane only an hour ago. With a little less than his usual courtesy of manner he struggled through the mass of people till he stood by her side. They both seemed to recognise the futility of empty words. Whilst he paused for a minute to recover his breath she spoke first.

“I hoped so much that you would not come, Colin,” she said.

“And since I am here?”

“I shall only pray that you will go away,” she went on. “These may be our final words, Colin, if you will not do as I ask.”

“For whom are you guarding that seat?” he demanded.

“That is above all the one thing I shall not tell you,” she replied.

Colin was passionately angry, but passionately quiet.

“Then I will occupy it until your friend arrives,” he said.

He leaned forward and suddenly became conscious of the presence of two of the black-liveried attendants of the place. A firm, almost threatening voice was in his ear.

“Pardon, monsieur. Cette place est réservée.”

Colin made what was almost the effort of his life. He kept his temper and his presence of mind.

“In that case,” he said calmly, “I will listen to the finish of the opera from the gangway.”

The usher fell back. Ann, although she was conscious of the menace in Colin’s voice, felt curiously helpless. She watched him resume his place against the wall, where he stood with folded arms. Her little gesture of appeal passed unnoticed. He remained there sullenly waiting. Ann, clasping the programme in her hand, also waited.

No one saw it happen—not even Colin. He glanced towards the stage as the curtain rose on the final act of the opera, and when he looked back again there was a man seated in the vacant place by Ann’s side. Taking stock of him with a kind of critical fury, Colin found him hard to place. He was obviously a foreigner, with that peculiar pallor which only Italians appear to achieve. He was unusually short and stocky of build, with broad shoulders and legs which scarcely reached the floor. His eyes were large and deep-set. They seemed to wander everywhere and see nothing. He had the air of a man who was nervous and ill at ease and yet he gave one the impression of a man whose soul was at rest, who had achieved something which had been his life’s desire. The music of the opera flowed on. The tenor took the stage, greeted on his appearance by a roar of long-repressed applause. His attitude

seemed curiously unconvincing. His brows were jerky, his disclaiming gestures almost the gestures of an irritated man. When there was silence and he sang, something akin to consternation seemed to seize upon the audience. It was the same artist, but never the same music. His voice seemed to have lost value and quality. People began to shuffle their feet and Colin, himself puzzled, glanced towards Ann. There was a smile of understanding at the corners of her lips. Her companion sat with folded arms. His manner had lost its uneasiness, his pallor was almost unearthly, his eyes—half closed—were fixed upon the stage, his head moved slightly to the rhythm. Again that smile of content played about his lips, more meaningless now than ever.

The final curtain fell amidst rounds of somewhat dubious applause. Colin, wedged in with the crowd who were struggling towards the exit, found himself at a hopeless disadvantage. Two or three of the ushers busied themselves in making a clear way for Ann and her companion. They were already out of sight when Colin reached the atrium. It was thinly crowded and there was no sign of either of them. He made his way to the underground passage and took the lift into the Hôtel de Paris. He searched the lounge, still without success. Half mechanically he crossed the hall and took the passage into the Sporting Club. The Salles de Jeux were half empty, as was not unusual on opera nights. He passed on into the bar. In a distant corner, almost invisible, Ann and her companion of the opera were seated. The place was otherwise deserted. Colin hesitated. Ann broke off in the midst of what seemed to be an appeal to her companion and, rising to her feet, beckoned to him. Colin started eagerly forward. He had scarcely taken half a dozen steps when he felt himself pushed on one side. A man who had just entered—tall and burly, dressed in the dinner garb of the moment, but with a soft silk shirt and flowing black tie—pushed his way past him and strode across the floor towards the table. Colin caught sight of something concealed in his hand and took a quick step forward.

“Look out for this fellow!” he called out to Ann. “He’s carrying a gun or something.”

The man swung round and struck an ineffective blow with his left hand at Colin. In another moment his right wrist was gripped in a clutch of iron and the weapon which he had been holding clattered on to the carpet. Colin kicked it away under a neighbouring table. The newcomer, powerless in the younger man’s grasp, shouted furiously at Ann’s companion.

“Devil!” he cried. “Imp of hell! I am ruined forever!”

The man of small stature scowled.

“And I,” he rejoined bitterly, “have never faced ruin, because I have never

known success.”

“It was a foul plot this!” his aggressor thundered. “You meant to ruin me, Guido. You have succeeded. I shall never sing here again. The stage shall know me no more. I shall disappear.”

One of the managers of the room came hurrying up. Two of the valets were lurking behind him. The former recognised the two disputants and threw up his hands in consternation.

“Signor Catti!” he exclaimed. “What is all this?”

The famous tenor pointed to Ann’s companion.

“You have not heard what happened at the opera?” he cried.

“We have heard nothing.”

Ann leaned forward.

“Monsieur,” she begged, “do not alarm yourself. The trouble is over.”

“There shall be no disturbance,” Signor Catti promised. “If I could have met him alone,” he went on, pointing to the table, “when I left the stage to-night I would have killed him! The moment is past. What is the good?”

He sank into a chair. His face was still distorted with passion. Something very like tears dimmed his bulbous black eyes. The official drifted courteously into the background. Signor Catti was a great man, and if there had been trouble, it was obvious that a reconciliation was at hand.

“That andante passage,” the distracted singer groaned; “it was marvellous! I can never attempt it again. They would jeer at me.”

The man who was still seated with Ann smiled triumphantly.

“I knew that you would appreciate that,” he said. “What of the long notes at the end of the phrase?”

“You held them until I thought I should have screamed,” the other muttered, “and all the time the melody grew sweeter. I am ruined! I am nothing now but a shadow. No one will ever listen to me again.”

“This is only one audience,” the man who had drawn music down from heaven reminded him consolingly. “They will tell their story. The listeners will believe that they dreamed or that they had dined too well. They are very fortunate people. They have heard the Song of the Duke sung as no one else in the world will ever sing it.”

“That is the beginning of a campaign,” the other lamented. “What fault is it of mine? Am I to blame because God gave you the voice of an angel and the figure of a dwarf?”

The man addressed shivered.

“There will be no campaign,” he groaned. “I have pledged my word to the

authorities and those who stand behind them, those who know how I have suffered, that given this final opportunity, I would never again sing a note upon the stage.”

“I don’t want to seem to be butting in,” Colin observed helplessly, “but can I know something of what this is all about?”

Ann rose to her feet, passed an arm through his and an arm through her late companion’s. Colin had already made use of his opportunity to secure and conceal in a place of safety the villainous-looking poignard which the infuriated tenor had been brandishing.

“We are all going to have supper together—my cousin too,” Ann announced. “You must know my two friends, Colin—Signor Carlo Catti, the famous tenor, and Guido, his brother. You shall be told the story and understand everything.”

They moved off on their way through the rooms. Signor Catti mopped his face with a silk handkerchief and sighed with an air of content. It seemed impossible to believe that a few moments before he had been seriously contemplating the crime of fratricide.

“After I have sung,” he confided, “I starve. The thought of supper is good. I will drink a glass of wine with my brother. Notwithstanding all that lies between us in the past, I shall seek for a reconciliation.”

Colin led the way into the supper-room and selected a suitable table.

“And now?” he asked, having given Signor Catti carte blanche with the menu and listened to the ordering of a most amazing meal. “Perhaps I might——”

Ann interrupted him with a little pat on the hand. The strained expression had gone from her face. Nevertheless, when the sommelier made his welcome appearance, she drank her first glass of wine without a pause. The two brothers were talking vigorously together in Italian. She leaned towards Colin.

“You remember,” she said, “that I once spent six months at Milan, long before we met. I had my voice tried. It was useless. I met these two then. They were both finishing their training. Guido, as you have heard, has the heavenly voice—Carlo the presence.”

“It was Guido who sang the Duke’s Song to-night?” Colin exclaimed with sudden enlightenment.

She nodded.

“The stage was specially arranged for him,” she confided. “His heart was nearly broken when he found that there was no place where he could use that gorgeous voice of his, and three times he has fallen into a decline. Three times previously this has happened. It gives him the happiness which keeps him alive. It has happened at Covent Garden, Paris and in New York. At the Metropolitan, where they

understand the finer shades of music, there was an uproar. Here they marvel, but they accept. Each time Carlo, when he hears those notes sung as he could never sing them, goes crazy. Twice he has tried to kill his brother, then for days afterwards he weeps. This time it was more than ever difficult. I came because, although we seldom meet, Carlo is always at his best with me. When I am there he restrains himself. To-night he went mad. It is over. Look at them—the best of friends. There is no one in the world who worships Guido as Carlo does, yet I suppose no one could understand the fire of jealousy that drives him almost to madness when he hears that song and knows that Guido climbs into a world which he can never enter.”

Colin was holding Ann’s hand tightly.

“It is the queerest story I ever heard,” he acknowledged, “but, Ann, you don’t know how happy it has made me to hear it.”

“Wait,” she begged. “To-night may be a great night. This is the real explanation of why I am here.”

The brothers were seated arm in arm. Carlo rapped on the table with the handle of his knife. He was a famous man there and the maître d’hôtel hurried up.

“Supper!” Carlo demanded. “I starve.”

“In five minutes the *signor* shall be served,” the man promised. “May I be forgiven, but I heard the Duke’s Song to-night. No other in the world has ever sung it in such a fashion.”

Carlo indulged in a grimace. His brother poked him in the ribs. They were human and natural as two boys.

“There was also a love story,” Ann whispered, “and a misunderstanding. To-night it will be put right.”

She beckoned to someone across the room. A girl who was seated alone rose from her table. She was dressed plainly in black, her black hair was brushed from her forehead, her dark-blue eyes were soft as though with coming tears. She looked at one person—one person only—at Guido. Guido stumbled to his feet. Carlo, with a curious lightninglike instinct of chivalry, kept his place.

“I have made friends,” Ann explained, “with the *signorina* in London. She has been working very hard teaching singing. Perhaps if you ask her she will join us at supper.”

“I will stay,” the girl accepted, “if Guido invites me.”

His voice seemed to have sunk into tremulous music.

“You mean—if Carlo invites you.”

She took her place by his side, between him and Ann. She held his hand and looked into his eyes.

“It is for Guido and Guido only that I will stay. How foolish you have been all these years!”

He rose slowly to his feet. For once in his life, at any rate, he had the dignity of a great man.

“I earn a thousand a year as leader of an orchestra,” he told her. “I shall never earn any more.”

“And I,” she confided, “give singing lessons at one guinea a lesson!”

He resumed his seat and her hand was once more in his.

“Together,” he sighed peacefully, “we shall find heaven.”

Carlo had ceased to listen. He was looking over his shoulder for the maître d’hôtel.

“They are long with the salad dressing,” he complained impatiently.

Ann smiled across at him.

“Don’t disturb yourself, dear master. Everything comes in time to the man who knows how to wait.”

IX

AN OPPORTUNIST IN ARMS

The Duke—he looked every inch a duke, although he was lounging straddled with his back to the fire in the famous library of Muggatradore Castle, although his tweeds were muddy and his hair wind-tossed—stood with a list in his hand which he was studying through his eyeglass. The Duchess, seated in an easy chair a few yards away, was watching him with some anxiety.

“H’m,” His Grace remarked. “Mostly the old crowd, I see. One or two of them don’t know which end of a gun to shoot with! Jimmie, for instance, is no earthly good.”

“Everybody invites Jimmie, my dear,” his wife reminded him mildly. “Besides, he is your first cousin and his moors almost march.”

“That’s all right,” her husband agreed, “but there are one or two here I don’t seem to recognise. Who is Mr. James J. Bresson? Name seems familiar, but I can’t place him.”

“He is the man Eustace wanted invited, my dear. One of the most interesting men in Europe, they say. You remember that famous Greek who was supposed to own whole countries somewhere in the East—made great fortunes selling guns whenever there was a war——”

“Yes, I remember that chap,” the Duke interrupted, “but what has this fellow Bresson got to do with him?”

“Well, according to Eustace, he has made millions the same way,” the Duchess explained. “Anyhow, Eustace met him in town and telephoned to know if he might invite him. I can assure you, Gregory, all our guests will be delighted to meet him. He very seldom goes anywhere.”

“So long as he doesn’t want to shoot,” the Duke grunted.

“Of course he may shoot if he wants to,” his wife observed placidly. “Half the moors round here are owned by Americans nowadays, and I remember your saying yourself that that man from Philadelphia who took your Argyllshire moor one season was the best man you had ever seen in the butts.”

“Yes, yes, that’s all right,” His Grace agreed. “But here’s another name I don’t know. A fellow of the name of Rooke apparently. Colin Rooke. Who is he?”

“Well, he is acting for the moment as Bresson’s secretary. He is a war correspondent and quite a friend of Eustace’s.”

The Duke thrust the list into the pocket of his loose coat.

“Well, my dear, I suppose it’s all right,” he said. “That chap Bresson ought to be interesting, at any rate. They say that if he were ever to write his memoirs several governments would have to resign. Where are the crowd?”

“There’s no one here yet, my dear,” the Duchess told him. “None of the cars are back from the station, and Eustace has been out with McGregor to look at the butts.”

“I’ll have my bath and change early, then,” the Duke decided. “Don’t let anyone open *The Times* till I come down.”

“There will be several copies,” his wife assured him. “I will put one away especially for you.”

“Kilts, I suppose?” the Duke asked, looking back from the door.

“Of course,” she answered. “The McGregors are coming and the Macraes.”

The Duke took his leave. His spouse drew a little sigh of relief. Sometimes when there were unexpected visitors the master of Muggatradore was not quite so amenable. She took up her novel, but put it down again almost at once. There was a call of bagpipes from the terrace, the signal that the expected guests were coming through the pass.

Lord Eustace, freckled, sandy-haired, typically Scotch except for the really humorous mouth and deep-set blue eyes, led his mother away as soon as he found a chance.

“Tell me about the governor,” he begged. “Is he all right?”

The Duchess smiled.

“He seemed rather interested to have this mysterious Mr. Bresson here,” she confided. “He didn’t seem to understand why he brought a secretary, but anyhow he is quite all right. Your father is peculiar, but after all, he is not unreasonable. Mr. Bresson is quite a distinguished looking person, and I rather like the look of the young man. How did you get to know him?”

“I met him years ago down in Kenya,” Eustace replied, “and I came across him the other day again really through this fellow Bresson.”

The Duchess wrinkled her forehead. She was a good-looking woman, but, as she often remarked, she had rather a troublesome family.

“You haven’t one of your wild schemes on, have you, Eustace?” she asked anxiously.

“Don’t you worry,” he laughed.

“No, but seriously,” she begged.

The young man looked out from the alcove in which he and his mother were seated across the lounge to a distant bridge table. His father, who had the mysterious

Mr. Bresson for a partner, was smoking a cigar and had the air of a man perfectly content with life. Amongst his other accomplishments, Eustace recollected with satisfaction, Bresson had the reputation of being an exceptionally good bridge player.

“There’s no question of any wild scheme at all, Mother,” he said thoughtfully. “Bresson has always been a keen big-game shot and a great collector of heads. There are just two he is short of and he had fitted out an expedition to go after them very near the northwestern frontier of North Kenya where my surveying job is. Things in Europe are so disturbed just now, however, that he doesn’t want to leave, and he has as good as offered me the job of using his outfit, collecting some stuff he has left out there and going after those heads for him.”

“I certainly don’t see anything to which your father could possibly object in that scheme,” the Duchess admitted.

“Of course he couldn’t,” her son agreed. “Old man Bresson wanted a bit of humouring, though, so I was anxious to have you ask him up here. I can show him some heads of my own here which are pretty rare, and he will meet one or two chaps to-morrow who can give me a boost up. I don’t say I am much good at these little brown birds with a shotgun, but I’ll back myself with a rifle against most of them.”

“Everyone knows how good you are, my dear,” the Duchess purred.

“Well, that’s all right, Mother,” he said. “Only, if anything comes of it and he offers me the job, don’t let the governor get awkward, will you?”

The Duchess looked across at her very handsome spouse and smiled.

“It seems to me,” she remarked, “that he has already taken a fancy to your friend. I cannot imagine that there would be the slightest difficulty. Now, Eustace, I think you ought to go and dance. Mary will be looking out for you, and the Macrae girls hate being left out.”

He rose with a little grimace.

“What a matchmaking mamma you are, old dear,” he smiled, gazing towards the distant ballroom. “I warn you, though girls are all very well in their place, that the fun of the evening is going to commence for me when you other people are getting your beauty sleep.”

The fun of the evening duly commenced at a little before midnight in Lord Eustace’s sitting-room. A footman had seen to it that there was an ample supply of anything likely to be needed in the way of whisky, cigars and cigarettes. Mr. James J. Bresson, a tall, thin man, handsome in a somewhat ascetic fashion, was comfortably established in an easy chair with his favourite drink—whisky and water—by his side,

and his pipe in his mouth. Colin Rooke, who could scarcely conceal his eagerness, was seated a few feet in the background, and the host himself was sprawling over the table upon which a large map was spread open. Mr. Bresson looked speculatively at his two companions.

“I wonder how much you two young men know about me?” he said. “I mean, apart from these silly stories in the newspapers.”

“I don’t know much,” Eustace confessed frankly.

“I know the usual tosh about your being the mystery man of the world, that you are able when it pleases you to finance governments, that in many of the smaller wars you have supplied both sides with all the arms and munitions they required, and that you have built up a gigantic fortune chiefly by being in the position to supply armaments and sometimes even an odd battleship just at the moment it was required.”

Mr. Bresson smiled slightly.

“I never meddle much with battleships,” he observed, glancing for a moment at one of his fingernails which seemed to displease him. “Of course, there was that Greek cruiser——But I forget, we are not here to gossip. I need the help of two young men, one of whom should be a journalist and have the necessary qualifications to become a war correspondent, and the other with connections in Kenya. It is possible that you two might serve my purpose.”

“Down to the ground, I should think,” Eustace observed. “I have a job in Kenya at the present moment, and Rooke here has been a journalist all his life, and has his papers for Abyssinia in case there is any trouble there.”

“Sounds all right,” Bresson assented. “Now listen, you two, and I will talk about myself for a moment or two—a thing I don’t often do. There isn’t anything very mysterious about James J. Bresson except that sometimes I can scarcely realise how much money I have actually made in a queer sort of way. But let that go. What I have done is to travel almost without ceasing and to watch the politics of the different countries I have visited. I can nearly always spot a country where a war is likely to take place. I then buy guns, rifles, Maxims, ammunition in different countries, and have them consigned to different ports. I then concentrate them and find a hiding-place—perhaps I should say a secret store—if possible in a neutral country, but quite close to where the fighting is likely to take place. Then when war breaks out I am there with the goods, and three hundred per cent profit is a trifle to what I have cleared once or twice. I am not going to give away too much of my business, but the whole world was wondering a few years ago where Japan got those marvellous rifles of hers and all those field-guns. I knew, because I had had them stored up for her

some five or six years in a couple of old battleships I bought for a song. Are you boys interested?"

"I should say we are," Lord Eustace declared.

Bresson helped himself to whisky, poured in the requisite amount of water, knocked out his pipe and slowly refilled it.

"Well, I am going to talk to you now only about the case in which we are interested. After Adowa I took care to pay a visit to Abyssinia. I did a little business there—nothing to speak of, but I got rid of some old stuff I had lying about in Turkey. Not so very long ago I paid another visit there and since then I have been pretty busy. Do you happen to know anything about Lake Rudolf, Lord Eustace?"

"Of course I do," the latter replied. "It is up in the northwest corner of Kenya."

"Well, there are very few people outside Kenya who have ever heard of it," Bresson continued. "It is a dreary stretch of water and as hot as hell. The top part of the lake, though, is in Abyssinian territory, and somewhere near that territory, either on the lake or hidden near it, there are enough arms and Maxim guns to keep the Abyssinians in good shape for a time."

"My God!" Eustace exclaimed. "Where did they come from?"

"Well, some of them came from the Germans," Bresson confided. "That's a chapter of secret history for you that scarcely a living man except myself knows, but when the Germans gave up the fight in their little bit of East Africa they sold the whole of their reserve stock of guns and munitions, and as I am the only man alive in that sort of business, they sold it to me. It took some getting through and round Kenya and up to the lake, but we managed it somehow. Then, of course, those were not all stores that we had to have four hundred natives for when I crossed Kenya from the sea. There were other ways, too——"

"Those legends of the mammoth bats in the sky," Eustace interrupted. "We used to put all that native talk down to their priests."

"If you were to drain Lake Rudolf," Bresson told them, "you would find half a dozen derelicts. All the same, for half a dozen we lost—and they were heavyweight carriers, too—thirty or forty of them did the trick. Anyway, the stuff's there, and I'm going to sell it to Abyssinia."

"Are we coming into this?" Colin Rooke asked eagerly.

"You are if you want to take it on," Bresson promised, speaking a little more seriously. "I don't mind telling you it will take hours to give you all the details of what has to be done—and there are risks. The country where the stuff is hidden is, for one thing, scarcely habitable for human beings. I have been there and I know. There's only one way of moving that stuff up to the north end of the lake, and that is

on a kind of raft I have had made with an outboard motor. When you are once up the north end of the lake the native Abyssinians can take care of the rest. It is only a few hundred miles to the capital.”

“Tell me,” Colin Rooke asked, “supposing you bring it off and deliver the goods, how do you know Abyssinia will ever be able to pay for them?”

Bresson’s eyes twinkled.

“That’s a good Anglo-Saxon question,” he observed. “You don’t need to trouble about that, though. That’s my little secret. All I need say to you two is—if Lord Eustace here helps me to get one more of my sporting expeditions through the colony, and you, Mr. Rooke, keep in touch with the Abyssinian government through your job as war correspondent, you will get your money whether I am paid or not.”

“How much?” Eustace asked pleasantly but bluntly.

Mr. Bresson smiled. He glanced at the clock, finished his whisky and water and knocked out his pipe.

“You may be a Duke’s son all right, Lord Eustace,” he said, “but you are a good Scotchman all the same. Thirty thousand each is what you will touch—and you will get most of your instructions from me, never mind how. If you are on, you must arrange somehow or other to give me an hour or two in London not later than Wednesday. I’ve got to have a little conversation with the government at Addis Ababa before the fun starts, and I have planned to take Thursday’s plane to Khartoum. Like to sleep on it, my young friends?”

“No need,” Eustace declared. “I’m on.”

“So am I,” Colin Rooke echoed heartily.

Bresson looked at the two young men with keen, steely eyes.

“Remember,” he warned them, “at the best there’s risk. I am going up with the expedition as far as Lake Rudolf myself, so I shan’t be much better off than Lord Eustace here, but if our friends get a-swotting too soon and your share in this business gets out, Mr. Rooke, you may be in worse trouble than either of us.”

Colin smiled. His silence was in itself eloquent.

Never before had a visitor appeared in the Hall of the Kings at Addis Ababa in such a condition. Colin Rooke, his clothes almost stripped from his back, his cheeks long and gaunt, his face unshaven, his steps feeble, was almost dragged by the two tall negroes in their magnificent uniforms to the steps of the small throne. Its occupant frowned.

“Who is this?” he demanded.

There was a confusion of voices. Colin, with trembling fingers, produced the

document he had been zealously guarding. The King motioned the guard to place him in the chair of audience and called to another servant. Then he turned to his visitor.

“One comes who English speaks,” he announced.

Again the babel of tongues. The King waved his hand and his entourage fell back. Colin Rooke touched his lips, opened his mouth. The King understood. The exhausted traveller began to wonder whether the whole thing was some fantastic dream when from a magnificent silver salver he was handed a bottle of White Label whisky, a common public-house tumbler and a siphon of soda-water! Colin forgot that he was seated in the presence of a monarch; he forgot everything except that raging thirst, that sinking inside. He half filled the tumbler with whisky, filled it to the brim with soda and drank.

“Where come?” the King asked.

“Lake Rudolf,” Colin answered.

The King looked at him as one might look at a madman. At that moment there was a disturbance at the door. A girl in European costume save for the shawl around her shoulders, followed by two women-in-waiting, presented herself. Colin half rose to his feet. The girl looked into his eyes. She was dark of complexion, but she had features which might have belonged to a high-class English Jewess. Her voice, when her lips moved, was like magic. She spoke English as though it were her own tongue, and to Colin it was almost as marvellous as the drink which had set life singing through his veins.

“Where are you from?” she asked. “My father is puzzled. How did you get here? We do not understand. There has been no train for two days.”

Colin felt his head swimming.

“Listen,” he begged. “I have eaten nothing for many days, and then I killed a man for what I stole. Now I have drunk. Some bread—anything! Can’t you see that I am starving?”

“You poor man,” she sympathised. “Food shall come. Wait for a few minutes before you try to speak.”

She gave orders. A file of servants disappeared. The King sat immovable. The girl talked to him. Then she turned to Colin.

“My father does not understand,” she explained. “He speaks a very little English, but he has never left our country. I have been to Paris and England. I understand. You shall have something to eat directly.”

For the first time in history food, bread and fruit chiefly, was served on the little table which stood in front of the visitor at audience. Colin Rooke ate and all the time

he watched the girl as she watched him. In ten minutes he rose and bowed. He drank more of the whisky.

“Your Majesty!” he said.

The King smiled. He waved his hand. The table was cleared.

“If you are the King’s daughter,” Colin asked the interpresstess, “may I call you Princess?”

“I am the Princess Zola,” she acknowledged simply.

“I am an emissary of that great man James J. Bresson,” Colin Rooke announced. “Within a hundred miles of the capital here we have a great store of guns of every sort and hundreds of boxes of ammunition. There are more behind on the rafts we have brought up from Lake Rudolf.”

The Princess looked at him with fixed eyes.

“You speak the truth?” she demanded.

“I speak the truth as God is my witness,” he answered.

She turned to the King and told him the news. Servants were running here and there. From across the square ministers came hurrying in, followed by men in uniform. All for a time was confusion.

“Tell me,” Rooke asked, clutching the Princess by the arm, “is it war yet?”

“No war has been declared,” she told him. “At the last moment they said that Italy was listening to words from America. We do not fear war if we have the means of defence. If we have those, we can at least fight in dignity. Sit and rest. These are members of the King’s Council whom you see taking their seats with my father. They will decide how best to deal with your message. They want to know—they are all asking—how near is the first convoy?”

Colin Rooke pointed out of the huge oval window.

“On the other side of the mountain,” he declared. “From there back to the north end of the lake is one long trail. We had a thousand mules, but half of them have perished. Once in the hills all was well, but down on the plain what water we brought from the lake soon went and the wells were dry. In an hour—two hours—I shall be ready to show you the place where my convoys are waiting for help. Plenty of mules—horses if you have them—there are a few motor lorries I saw on the outskirts of the city—everything that can bring merchandise.”

The King spoke and his daughter nodded gravely.

“My father,” she told Colin, “says that you must rest here in the Palace for some hours, then you must go back with the expedition which we are preparing. You can ride in a car for thirty miles and after that there shall be mules.”

Rooke staggered to his feet.

“To sleep will be Paradise,” he muttered.

He awoke into a world which it seemed to him must be one of sheer fantasy. He was lying on a low couch in a large and airy tent. A cool wind was blowing on to his face, his limbs were no longer hot. He was clad in soft underwear and linen riding-clothes. On either side of him was a tall Ethiopian soldier standing motionless. Through the opening of the tent was another slimmer figure standing as though on guard, and beyond a deep-blue sky, clear and starlit.

“Where am I?” he demanded.

At the sound of his voice the figure outside turned round. A big lantern was lit in front of the tent. It was the King’s daughter, in riding-clothes of European cut, with a shawl wrapped round her shoulders, bareheaded, with jet-black hair from which flashed many jewels, who smiled in upon him.

“You are already thirty miles upon the way southwards,” she told him. “We have a hospital in the capital where they took care of you and you have on clothes belonging to one of the young English attachés. No, you need not be afraid,” she added quickly; “they know nothing of your errand. Tell me—you feel better?”

“I’m hungry,” he confessed.

Servants gathered round. By the light of the lantern outside a feast was spread upon the rocks. She sat down opposite, served him and ate with him. There was wine which she drank—champagne of a well-known brand. He shook his head as the servant passed him the bottle.

“This air is getting a little heady for me,” he said. “I’ll stick to the whisky.”

“We have a trail of pack-mules now reaching for miles,” she recounted. “There are some lorries, too, but they are on ahead. We will ride with the dawn and by night we shall be up with some of your people. Shall we see that strange American—Mr. Bresson?”

“Who knows? Who cares?” he replied.

She laughed.

“He is a very nice man—Mr. Bresson,” she said. “It is he who will have saved my country.”

“Don’t you believe it,” Rooke protested. “If anyone saves you, it will be Geneva.”

“There were rumours yesterday,” she confided, “that America had sent a message to Italy. It will not matter now. If your guns are good and there is plenty of ammunition, perhaps it is better that we fight. I am to ride with the army. Did you know that I was a soldier?”

"I am not surprised," he answered. "Nothing will ever surprise me again after this supper with a Princess of Abyssinia on the edge of a precipice, in the midst of a silence which is almost like the silence of eternity."

"You would like me to sing to you?" she asked. "Ah, but look——"

She pointed eastward with her finger. He saw the long white shaft of light through the purple clouds.

"Soon the sun will come from there," she said; "then we must start. You wish for cigarettes? There are all makes here."

One of the soldiers of the expedition came and talked to the Princess. He addressed her with the deepest reverence, one knee bent. She waved him away with a word of approval.

"We ride in two hours," she announced. "Go back and sleep if you will. Tomorrow there are many things I have to ask you."

Colin staggered back to his couch.

"To-morrow will be another day," he muttered. . . .

There was no more sleep for him that night, only a troubled doze in a world of fantasies. The cool mountain breeze played around his head. Every now and then he caught the faint fragrance of strange plants and herbage growing out of the clefts of the volcanic mountains. His two guards, massive and imposing figures, stood motionless outside the tent. The girl had gone. Once in that doze he fancied that he heard soft footsteps upon the rush matting which had been strewn on the floor of the tent, he even fancied that through his flickering eyelids he caught a glimpse of a strong, fierce face with a woman's lips, soft yet passion-stirred black eyes. There might almost have been a sound of quick breathing. He closed his eyes a little tighter. The perfume must be coming from some flowers in the valley. He lay quite still, fighting in his doze against the urge of breathless curiosity. He kept them closed until it seemed to him that a puff of wind from outside had brought with it the faint murmur of a sigh.

Once again, in very different guise, Colin sat in the chair of audience on the other side of the round table. Black-bearded, dark, majestic, the King Emperor of Abyssinia sat upon his throne. In the background stood a strange interpreter, a young man who had served his days of scholarship at Harvard and Oxford, whose English was glib and whose speech was curiously punctuated with some of the affectations of the West.

"His Majesty desires me," he said, addressing Colin, "to offer you this thanks for your great work, the work of your colleague in Kenya, and the brains of your

master, the great American, Bresson, which have been of service to His Majesty and our distressed country. We have arms which we never hoped to possess. Our soldiers are cheered with a new confidence.”

“I am glad that all has turned out so well,” Colin declared. “You will explain to His Majesty, if you please, that as a neutral I must remain dumb, although I hope to see much of the fighting if fighting there be.”

The interpreter spoke for a moment to his august master, who answered him in several brief sentences. Then the former turned once more to Colin.

“The money for the arms,” he went on, “is deposited in the name of Mr. James J. Bresson in the Bank of England in London. There is also a sum of sixty thousand pounds to be divided, we understand, between you and your helper in Kenya. Beyond that, Mr. Rooke, what I have to say will, I fear, not be so pleasant. I regret to announce that His Majesty is not able to accept your position as war correspondent for your great English newspaper.”

Colin stared at the speaker, for a moment, wordless.

“His Majesty may have his own reasons,” the young man continued, “but he begs that you will accept them without demur. The railway is still running, accommodation has been reserved for you in the train. It only awaits your arrival at the depot to depart. He wishes you a safe and happy journey to England.”

The protest died away on Colin’s lips. He rose to his feet with bowed head.

“One moment,” the interpreter begged. “His Majesty speaks a few words of English. He desires to speak his farewell to you. Afterwards you will join me in the anteroom.”

The young man took his leave. Colin remained upon his feet, but his head was raised. He waited for the Emperor’s words. Soon they came—slowly spoken, chosen as though with difficulty from a very limited vocabulary.

“Young Englishman,” he said, “Abyssinia thanks you, its monarch thanks you for a great feat. Whether indeed this war comes or not you will have taken from it some of the nausea of massacre. You come of a race we have always honoured. From this hour forward I, the King, will honour it even more. You have shown the courage of a lion—our favourite beast—and the honour of a great gentleman. You will accept _____”

The King leaned forward, unfolded his clasped hands and whispered a single word. . . .

Colin found himself presently in the anteroom, found himself driving in a crazy Ford through that strange medley of streets with open shops and rancid smells, through a modern square, and back again through the semi-Oriental, semibarbaric

slough of the native quarter. Not until he found himself in a modern railway carriage of familiar type, with wine, fruit, cigarettes and flowers on the small table in front of him, not indeed until the train had started its long journey across the jolting way, did he remove his left hand from his right and realise that he was wearing the Emperor's signet ring.

X

WHO'S WHO AT THE PARTY

Ann, leaning forward in the boat and pulling in her line with vociferous exclamations of pleasure, was surprised at the sudden inertness of the boatman who was seated a few feet away with the helm under his arm. She glanced at him in surprise. His pale, vividly blue eyes were fixed on the summit of the rocky cliffs underneath which they were passing.

“Michael,” she exclaimed. “Look! A fish!”

Mechanically but with swift fingers the boatman pulled at the few remaining yards of line, unhooked the mackerel, threw it into the bucket, rearranged the bait and dropped the lead once more into the water. Then he looked back to the summit of the towering cliffs.

“This was the very spot,” he recounted softly. “This is where I did lie and see it all. I was sand-eeling. I see the big man come out of the bungalow and creep up to the other who was wandering about on the edge of the cliffs. I saw them struggling for a minute and I saw the body of one of ’em come down the cliffs there, bumping from ledge to ledge something cruel. I was sitting in a boat here and I did see that.”

Ann shivered. She looked around to where Colin was rebaiting his own hook.

“He’s quite right, Ann. That is the spot where it happened. The poor fellow was smashed to pieces.”

“Is that the bungalow behind?” she asked.

He nodded.

“That’s where we’re going this afternoon,” he confided. “I have the key in my pocket.”

“I was near upon the only one called,” the man at the helm muttered, “me that they always called half-witty. Coming down in the moonlight, I was, to look for them little sand-eels.”

“He’s telling the truth, he is,” the other boatman, who had been cleaning the fish, remarked, looking round from his task. “No one thought he would be able to answer a simple question—Michael there. He was half daft from the day he left school. He up and spoke then, though: been extra broody he has ever since.”

“Almost enough to drive anyone out of his senses,” Ann declared with a shiver. “It is a horrible fall.”

“It’s a cruel height, miss,” the man acknowledged. “Six hundred feet and nought to break the fall.”

“Did he live all alone up there?” she asked. “It seems a desolate place.”

“There was an elderly gentleman—a kind of secretary-servant—who looked after him, miss,” the boatman told her, “a man near upon his own age, I should say. They favoured one another so that I could never tell the one from the other. He went away only two days before. He got a passage on one of they French fishing boats that put in.”

“Anyone lived in the bungalow since?” Colin Rooke enquired.

The man shook his head doubtfully.

“Sark folk are a bit peculiar that way,” he confided. “We don’t have much in the way of quarrels and fighting on the island and a killing like this is a thing that has scarcely ever been known. No one ain’t had no liking for the bungalow. I’m fancying if it suited you the Dame would not be particular about the rent. Pretty clever of they police running the man down what did it. Did you ever read the case, sir?”

“Yes, I read it,” Colin admitted.

“He would have hung sure enough, would that man, but for Michael there,” the boatman went on.

“How was that?” Colin asked curiously.

“Why, when he gave his evidence,” the boatman recounted, “he spoke of seeing the two sway about on the edge of the cliff, and if it was that sort of a quarrel, why, either of them might have lost his footing and there was just enough of accident about it to make it manslaughter, but the doctor he fancied there were signs of the man having been shot in the head. There warn’t much left of his head but when Michael here was asked the question he said yes, he fancied he had heard a shot and then there was them in Court as had known him since he was a boy and they all told the tale that Michael was stone-deaf. They tried him in Court—fired off a revolver behind a screen and Michael he never heard it!”

“I could hear all right that night,” Michael muttered. “I can hear all right now.”

“Harken to ’im!” the other jeered. “It ain’t sense that you could hear one night and not another. Anyway, the Jurats didn’t think so. A quarrel was a likely enough affair seeing as the two had been together in business. Twenty years he got and that’s enough for most men—him being over forty. Shift a little more over towards they gulls, Michael.”

The man turned his helm obediently. Over his shoulder, however, he looked back at the towering cliff. For some short time his lips moved silently.

“Our second cousin twice removed, or whatever he may have been,” Colin remarked, as he stood with Ann’s arm through his at the edge of the grassy slope in front of the bungalow, “had an eye for beauty.”

“It’s too marvellous,” she murmured.

Behind them was a patchwork wilderness of common still aflush with yellow gorse and deep patches of heather. Below, at a giddy distance almost a sheer fall, the sea was booming into the caves and crevices and drenching the rocks with spray—deep blue, white-crested and heavy with the swirl of the incoming tide. The odour of it, strong and sweet, came to them with an almost intoxicating twang. They stood there for a moment or two almost breathless after their climb. The gulls floated lazily about their heads. The loneliness of the place was almost disturbing. Ann looked over her shoulder with a sigh.

“It’s funny, Colin, isn’t it?” she observed. “I rather hate the idea of going inside that bungalow.”

“It’s ugly enough,” he remarked carelessly. “So long as we’re here, though, we must have a look inside. Let’s get it over.”

It was a bungalow like all other bungalows with ordinary fittings and cheap timber. It was bare of any attempt at decoration, spotlessly clean, unsuggestive, depressing. They wandered from room to room listlessly.

“I’m glad the furniture is gone,” Ann shivered. “One cannot picture what it was like that night.”

“Not a thing left that belonged to the poor fellow,” Colin observed. “That’s natural enough, though. The lawyers had everything sold up—the few things there were. They went into our estate. About two hundred pounds’ worth of furniture I believe there was.”

They wandered into the scullery and out by the back door. Fixed close to the wall was a small zinc receptacle for rubbish. Colin, stirred by the idlest of curiosity, turned over the fragments of torn paper and cigarette-ends with his stick. Suddenly Ann pointed downwards.

“Isn’t that a letter there?” she exclaimed.

“Looks like it,” he admitted.

He stooped down and gingerly drew out an envelope. He rubbed it on the grass and held it up.

“It’s a letter all right,” he exclaimed, “and it’s never been opened.”

Ann leaned over his shoulder.

“It’s addressed to our benefactor, too,” she pointed out. “A foreign postmark. What is it?”

“Looks like Ecuador. To Mr. Desmond Rooke, The North Cliff Bungalow, Isle of Sark, Channel Islands!”

“Well, we have as much right to it as anyone else,” Ann observed. “We are two

of the Rooke legatees. Let's open it. I'm curious."

Colin hesitated.

"I'm not sure," he reflected. "If we sent it up to Eastman he would open it on behalf of all of us. Rather taking it upon ourselves, isn't it?"

"Don't be silly," she laughed. "It's probably only an advertisement. Come on—open it."

Colin did as he was bidden. There was an enclosure which he kept between his fingers. The letter was dated from an hotel in Quito. His tone, as he commenced to read, was only mildly interested. The note of tragedy crept into it later.

My dear Nathaniel,

I hope you are well, still enjoying the beautiful island of Sark and living in the dignified seclusion which belongs to your new personality. At any rate you are your own master now and if you have bought all the books you were talking about you must be getting quite a clever fellow.

This is a marvellous country and my luck seems to have held. Knowing what a careful fellow you are I am quite sure that you have not spent the money I left you, but I have sent you another cheque on Barclays which I expect you can cash at the branch in Sark.

If I were you I should buy a boat and take to fishing. The fishermen down in the port will put you in the way of it and it should keep you amused. You know I am a rich man and you can accept the cheque without any fear of robbing me.

I rather smile as I address this letter to myself but I suppose you are still living under my honoured name. I may be coming over on business before very long but I will give you plenty of notice and you can if you like come back to me again if your health permits. That doctor chap in Harley Street seemed to me a trifle gloomy but the rest may work wonders for you.

I hope none of those swine in the City have been bothering you in any way. I made money with them but I'm sorry I ever joined up.

You can write me if you like to the correspondent of Barclays Bank here. Don't forget the agreed-upon address.

Ever yours,

DESMOND ROOKE

Colin turned his head to find Ann staring up into his face with dilated eyes.

“What in God’s name is the meaning of that, Colin?” she exclaimed.

“I’m hanged if I know,” he replied.

He opened out the slip of paper. It was a cheque for five hundred pounds payable to Bearer and signed Desmond Rooke. The handwriting was without a doubt the same as the letter.

“There is just one thing—no, let me think it out——” Ann began.

“There’s one thing,” Colin interrupted grimly, “that doesn’t need much thinking out.”

“You mean?”

“I mean that Desmond Rooke isn’t dead. He is still alive and in Ecuador.”

“And what about the money we inherited?”

Colin drew a long breath. He threw open the door.

“Let’s go down to that rock and sit in the sunshine,” he proposed. “I’m dizzy.”

They sat outside in the warm sunshine and the sparkling aromatic air. Ann was suddenly a very practical person. She took no note of the sapphire sea below or the beauty of their surroundings. She asked grim and pertinent questions.

“What shall we have to do, Colin, about the money we inherited?”

“I imagine,” he admitted, “we may have to return it. In our case, remember, it won’t be so bad. I haven’t spent a penny of the thirty thousand pounds I got for the Abyssinian job. But what about the others? I can’t believe that Aunt Grace makes anything out of that guest-house. She’s lending money to the people all the time. And as for Percy, I don’t imagine his business is worth much. I should think Phillip will be all right,” he concluded. “Phillip is having fortnightly art sales now—cutting a great splash advertising.”

“He may be doing that on his capital, I suppose,” Ann observed. “I’m afraid that you and I are the only ones who really won’t be hurt. What are you going to do with that five hundred pounds?”

He placed it in his pocketbook.

“Give it up to Eastman,” he replied. “He can take care of it until we get to the bottom of this business. You haven’t minded being a Rooke legatee, have you, Ann?”

“I’ve loved it,” she answered. “If necessary we must help the others too. They have had a wonderful time even if they haven’t been as lucky as we have.”

The reception clerk at the offices of Messrs. Eastman & Pelligrew showed distinct signs of an unusual curiosity in his parchmentlike, expressionless face as he glanced at the cards which were handed to him a few mornings later. His manner, however, was suave and noncommittal.

“Sir George will see you at once,” he announced. “Will you be so good as to follow me?”

This time Colin and Ann were led straight upstairs to the very dignified apartment which was the headquarters of Sir George himself. The latter rose to his feet as the clerk announced them.

“Miss Ann Rooke and Mr. Colin Rooke, sir, by appointment.”

He departed, closing the door behind him. Sir George shook hands with his clients and motioned them to chairs. They looked at him curiously. This was a very different Sir George from the man, so benign and consequential, whom they remembered upon a former visit.

“Yes, yes,” he muttered as though talking to himself. “I remember you both, of course. Rooke. I don’t mind confessing,” he went on, “that the very name gives me—er—a sensation of bewilderment.”

“We have had a pretty bad shock ourselves,” Colin observed.

Sir George buried his face for a moment in his hands.

“Not so bad as I have had,” he groaned. “Even now I can’t see my way clearly. You look like nice pleasant ordinary young people. How on earth did you, I wonder, happen to be cursed with the name of Rooke?”

“Cursed!” Ann exclaimed.

“It has done us all right up till now, sir,” Colin ventured.

The lawyer rose to his feet and both his young visitors were conscious of a sense of shock. His dignified carriage had gone. He had acquired a stoop. There were faint indications of a pouch underneath his eyes. He was certainly thinner and his voice had lost that unctuous roll.

“Listen to me,” he begged. “I have just drafted a letter to you two and to the others. Would you like to see a copy?”

Colin pulled a wry face.

“I expect we can guess what you have to tell us, sir. Mr. Desmond Rooke who left us our money isn’t dead after all. My cousin and I have just come back from Sark,” he continued, laying down the letter and cheque upon the desk. “In a rubbish heap outside the bungalow where the murdered man had been living we found this communication. Considering ourselves as legatees we opened it. You will see it is written by Mr. Rooke himself and he encloses a cheque for the man whom he had left behind to impersonate him—the man who was thrown over the cliff and buried as Desmond Rooke.”

Sir George adjusted his spectacles and read the letter word by word. He examined the cheque and turned it over half a dozen times. Then he laid it a little

helplessly upon his desk.

“You have had your blow softened for you,” he observed.

“What do you know about our relative in Ecuador who isn’t dead?” Colin asked eagerly.

“And what about the man who is in prison doing twenty years for killing him?” Ann demanded.

“Well, the man killed someone or other, didn’t he?” the lawyer exclaimed irritably. “He helps to complicate things, of course. Killed the wrong man, that’s all he did, or the right man—I don’t know which.”

“Do you mean to say there’s a chance that Desmond Rooke is dead after all?” Ann broke in.

“I don’t know who’s dead and who isn’t,” Sir George snapped out. “I have had so many shocks about this affair that it has seriously affected my health. If I had anyone here whom I could trust I should like to close my doors to everyone whose name even began with an R and go up to the Hebrides for a month!”

“Has Rooke, or shall I say has the corpse, been here in person?” Colin demanded.

“Maybe,” Sir George assented drearily. “I have talked to someone who seems to have every right to the money—at least he would have if I didn’t know him to be someone else.”

The young man opened his lips to ask another question but the lawyer’s expression deterred him.

“This seems to be a matter which requires a little clear reflection,” he remarked instead.

Sir George’s long nervous fingers were playing with the ink bottle. For a single second Colin wondered whether to dodge the threatened missile.

“About that communication we are to receive,” Ann ventured smoothly.

“Don’t you Rooke legatees have monthly or weekly or half-yearly dinners or something?” the lawyer asked.

“We do,” Ann admitted. “At somewhat irregular intervals lately. One is due now. Would you like to come to it?”

Sir George glared at her.

“I am coming to it,” he said. “The corpse, as you allude to him, insists upon being host and explaining this affair—if any mortal man can explain it. You are to be at the Pinafore Room in the Savoy Saturday night at a quarter past eight.”

“That sounds better,” Ann declared cheerfully. “If he’s giving us a dinner perhaps he is not going to take our money back.”

"Sounds all right to me," Colin agreed. "Are you letting the others know?"

"They are receiving an official invitation," the lawyer confided. "Unofficially, kindly remember this. I am going out of town until a quarter past eight on Saturday night when I shall arrive at the Savoy Hotel. If you or any other persons bearing your name come here to ask me for explanations before then they will come on a useless errand. Thank heavens I am learning to control myself. That isn't what I should have said an hour ago!"

"Poor Sir George," Ann murmured with one of her wonderful glances. "What a shame you have been so bothered about us. Never mind, I expect it will all come right. I shouldn't wonder if you didn't get more costs out of the corpse!"

"In any case," Colin observed, "we have had a unique experience. I have never spent money before from a legacy left by a live man."

"And I have never proved the will of one or wound up his estate," Sir George remarked, a little more in his usual manner. "Now," he added, ringing the bell on his desk, "I am going to ask you to leave me. You must forgive me for having received you in somewhat informal fashion. As a matter of fact the supreme shock of all only arrived just before you came."

Ann moved a little nearer to his desk.

"You wouldn't like to tell us all about it, would you, Sir George?" she suggested.

"Go to ——. Hazelton, will you show Miss Rooke and Mr. Rooke out," the lawyer enjoined, changing his voice with an effort as the door opened. "Good morning to both of you."

"Till Saturday night at a quarter past eight," Ann said with a backward glance and a wave of the hand. "I hope I sit next to you, Sir George."

"To me," Colin declared as they walked down the dusty stairs arm in arm, "things seem to be looking a trifle brighter."

"For the love of Mike!" Colin exclaimed in a tone of blank astonishment as he came to a standstill halfway across the little reception room. "Why, it's Mr. Bresson! What on earth are you doing here, sir?"

Mr. James J. Bresson, very spruce in his well-cut evening clothes and wearing a white gardenia in the buttonhole of his tail-coat, shook his head.

"Not so much of that Mr. Bresson, if you please, young fellow," he begged, "and if this is another of my relations you have brought along—well, I'm glad I gate-crashed into the family!"

"Who are you, please?" Ann asked in bewilderment.

"On this occasion I am the late Mr. Desmond Rooke," was the calm reply.

“Hasn’t young Colin found that out yet?”

“What—the corpse?” she exclaimed.

“Well, I shouldn’t go so far as that,” the other protested, “although, unless our friend there in the white apron hands me a cocktail within the next few minutes I wouldn’t answer for what might happen. . . . More guests arriving I perceive. A cousinly salute, if you please, my dear.”

Ann, too bewildered to reply, submitted meekly to the kiss upon her cheek. Mr. and Mrs. Percy Rooke pressed forward.

“You are really Desmond Rooke?” they faltered almost in unison.

“Well, I was or am, whichever way you like to take it,” he assented. “Delighted to meet my relatives. You all took some finding, Sir George tells me. And you, sir.”

Phillip, who had brought up the rear, held out his hand.

“I’m shot if I understand matters,” he confessed cheerfully, taking a cocktail from the tray, “but this is the sort of environment I would always choose for an explanation.”

“I suppose,” the mysterious host reflected, “I have made matters a trifle complicated for some of you. Never mind, we’ll have the explanations over before we finish the caviare. Good health to all of us who are Rookes and to Sir George, who isn’t,” he went on with his dry little smile. “Never thought of meeting you in the flesh, but there it is.”

Mrs. Percy Rooke suddenly paused in the act of drinking her cocktail.

“What about that poor fellow who is doing twenty years for manslaughter?” she asked.

“Well, he’s getting what he deserved,” her new-found relative pointed out. “He threw someone over the cliff all right, only it wasn’t the man he thought.”

“Grace was always a sentimentalist,” Phillip Rooke declared, taking a second glass from the tray. “I’m jolly glad to see you, sir, even if you haven’t walked back from the grave. What I would like to know is this. We have been called the Rooke legatees for I don’t know how long, we have had dinners and drunk a silent toast to you and, damn it all, we have spent your money or a good part of it. Now——”

“If that matter is troubling any of you,” the host of the gathering interrupted, “wash it out. You see those five small caskets?”

He pointed to five very attractive boxes which stood upon the table, fashioned of walnut wood and tied up with ribbon.

“One for each of you. For the legal side of it you must trust to Sir George here. He has had a paper prepared which I have signed and you will find it inside setting the matter straight. Actually I am alive. Legally I am dead. Sir George has seen to

that all right. Your legacies are untouchable and, having found such a pleasant lot of relatives,” he concluded, “if any of you have had bad luck with your legacies, well, we will have a chat about it after dinner.”

“We haven’t got to return anything?” Mr. Percy Rooke faltered incredulously.

“Not a penny, my cousin,” the other assured him. “Get it well into your heads that I am still dead and you’ve got your legacy. By the time you have seen what a corpse can do to a spot of caviare and a drop of vodka you will understand the matter better. Sir George, what about moving in? Our friend the maître d’hôtel seems anxious.”

“One more question,” Ann begged. “Who was thrown into the sea?”

For a moment Desmond Rooke looked grave.

“His name was Nathaniel Watson,” he confided. “He had been my secretary for years. He was an idle, pleasant, shiftless sort of creature but he had one thing which made him the most wonderful secretary in the world for me. He and I were as much alike as twin peas. I could have sent him anywhere in my place and often did. When I received the cable to go out to Ecuador we had just settled down for a few months’ quiet living in Sark where I went to get away from certain complications in the City. I put it to him that he might have a call from a very angry man connected with ‘Investments Limited,’ all sorts of disagreeable things might happen to him until they discovered his real personality, but there was a thousand pounds for him if he liked to sit tight till I came back. I signed a will at my lawyers’, leaving all the money that stood in my name at ‘Investments Limited’ to such legatees as could be found, and although I never thought one of that black-coated, smug little gang of swindlers would ever have had the pluck to lay a hand upon him, I told him of the risk. He only laughed at that. Very likely he realised what I knew—that he had only a year to live anyway. What you have to get into your minds now is that so far as you people are concerned he actually was Desmond Rooke and it was he who got cracked on the skull and thrown over the cliff at Sark, poor devil . . . Mrs. Rooke, your arm. Louis calls us. Caviare and vodka cannot be kept waiting. Little Ann will sit on the other side of me. In view of the glass of vodka I am going to drink I have not drunk my second cocktail. In ten minutes I shall be ready to answer any further questions.”

They trooped into the dining-room. The usual wonderful staff of perfectly-trained servants, not one too many or one too few, were waiting for them. The chairs were comfortable, the roses were fresh and sweet and beautifully arranged, the caviare arrived as though by magic and the vodka came from the cellars where it had reposed for forty years. Mr. Percy Rooke was the first to voice the general sentiment.

“I accept our benefactor’s story,” he said, raising the glass of vodka to his lips. “To our friend and host—the corpse!”

The feeling that this was some fantastic dream was gradually fading away. They had drawn out the contents of their boxes and read the few brief words transmuting their legacy into a deed of gift. With the return of their courage the questions commenced. With his first glass of champagne Sir George felt his head clearer.

“Look here, Mr. Desmond Rooke,” he said, “you hadn’t any idea that one of those fellows from ‘Investments Limited’ would go so far as to murder you just to keep the money in the firm?”

“Not I,” the other replied. “I shouldn’t have thought one of them would have had the pluck.”

“Then why,” Sir George asked, “did you make that will leaving your money specifically to your family connections?”

“A cunning question, Sir George,” his client admitted as he too sampled the champagne approvingly. “I did it for this reason. Nathaniel was a sick man. Before we left London I took him to a specialist who called me back into the room for a word or two after he had cheered up his patient with a few platitudes. He told me that the man had valvular disease of the heart in a very advanced stage and could not live a year. Now you are going to call me a very hardhearted opportunist,” he went on, “and perhaps I was, but I did no one any harm. I have done some big deals in my life under the name of Bresson and a few under the name of Rooke, and whereas I have always come out on top as Bresson I made some enemies over two of my Rooke deals, and if a fellow whose name was believed to be Desmond Rooke had to die, it gave me a fresh start in several countries where I was not popular. So you see, although I didn’t know that Nathaniel stood a chance of being thrown over the cliff, I did know that he would be a dead man in a year.”

Sir George drank another glass of champagne. His head felt clearer still.

“I must confess,” he declared, “I cannot see that you did anyone any harm by leaving your name upon a tombstone in Sark churchyard. The relatives and friends of the poor fellow who does lie there have been made comfortable for the rest of their days. You yourself, Mr. Desmond Rooke, prevented one of those many fortunes you seem to have accumulated from being snatched away by a company of City sharks, and the money which came instead to our friends here present to-night doesn’t seem to have been without its good results.”

There was a murmured chorus of agreement rising to enthusiasm. Their host held out his glass to the sommelier and as soon as it was full rose to his feet.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “the only regret I feel at parting with my own

name and continuing my affairs in life as Mr. James J. Bresson is that I must nominally discard an attractive company of relatives. Never mind. Sometimes friends are better than relatives. I drink to the Rooke legatees. Sir George, I am sure, will join with me. I drink long life and happiness to you who have been known as the Rooke legatees and, without making any rash promises—Ann, my dear, you haven't a sister up your sleeve?"

She shook her head laughingly.

"My celibacy being then assured," the speaker concluded, "I will venture to drop a slight hint that someday you may have reason to call yourselves the Bresson legatees."

Tumult and good spirits, a kiss from Ann, a handshake from all the men. Bresson was on his feet again.

"I hear from Sir George," he said, "that even on the day you received my legacies and you adopted the name of the Rooke Legatees you decided upon an adventurous life. Of one of our young friend Colin's adventures I know already and it was undertaken quite in the proper spirit. Now let us pass our time—we have a lengthy meal to go through and a good many magnums of this wine to finish—let us pass our time listening to an account of your various enterprises. This feast shall be a sort of Decameron. I will hear what each of you has done with your legacy. Mrs. Percy—you seem the quietest."

She smiled.

"Before I had the money," she confided, "I let lodgings and found it very hard work to live. Afterwards I opened a beautiful guest-house in Hampstead and I married Percy."

The rest of the adventures took longer in the recounting. Even their lengthy dinner was drawing towards its close. Coffee was on the table and brandy had been served before Colin wound up by telling them with great skill of words and judicious camouflage the story of his night on the mountains of South Abyssinia. The hour came for farewell. Mr. Bresson had the last word.

"My young friend, Colin," he said, "has been trying to persuade me to tell you all some of my recent adventures. It is, I am sorry to say, a little too early for me to tell you of some very interesting episodes in which I have played a part within the last few years but instead I will, if you like, make you a promise. Let me join you in twelve months' time at one of your friendly dinners and I will tell you of my year's work. I have great schemes on hand with great people. I shall have made or lost millions before we meet again and in two cases, at least, I shall carry my life in my hands. As my many times removed young cousin, who knows more about me than

any of you, will tell you, for as a professional journalist he is often behind the scenes, I have been besieged by requests to grant interviews on various of the greater happenings of my life. I have always refused, but I promise you this—next time we meet, if you ask me to join that dinner, we will lock the doors and I will tell you where I have been and what I have been doing. The stage is already set for great events in three continents of the world. For years I have been called the mystery man of finance and the mystery man of armaments. I suppose this is because I can always produce an unlimited amount of arms and munitions on request or credits as great as any banking house in the world can manipulate. I will tell you about these the next time we meet.”

A man came hurrying in bearing a coat and hat. Another secretarial-looking person presented himself.

“The plane will be ready to start in half an hour, Mr. Bresson,” he announced. “If you are late in Vienna you will find it difficult to make your connections.”

It was a matter of seconds. Mr. Bresson dropped a box of cigarettes into his pocket. Once more he brushed Ann’s cheek lightly with his lips.

“Twelve months to-night,” he called out. “Six stories—every one of them an epic.”

He made a graceful little gesture of adieu and was gone.

THE END

BOOKS BY E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

Mr. Oppenheim's published books, including the four omnibus volumes, total 144. Some of them have never been published in the United States. All those which have been issued here (by Little, Brown and Company) are starred. Titles now in print in the United States, either in the regular editions or cheap editions, are double-starred. Some others are available in English editions. Dates refer to *first* publication in book form, whether in England or the United States.

NOVELS

Mr. Oppenheim has published in all 104 novels, of which 10 have not been published in the United States (unless in pirated editions). Five of his novels appeared under the pseudonym "Anthony Partridge"; these are marked †.

EXPIATION. 1887

A MONK OF CRUTA. 1894

THE PEER AND THE WOMAN. 1895

*A DAUGHTER OF THE MARIONIS. 1895

FALSE EVIDENCE. 1896

A MODERN PROMETHEUS. 1896

*THE MYSTERY OF MR. BERNARD BROWN. 1896

THE WOOING OF FORTUNE. 1896

THE POSTMASTER OF MARKET DEIGHTON. 1897

THE AMAZING JUDGMENT. 1897

*MYSTERIOUS MR. SABIN. 1898

A DAUGHTER OF ASTREA. 1898

*AS A MAN LIVES. 1898

*MR. MARX'S SECRET. 1899

*THE MAN AND HIS KINGDOM. 1899

*THE WORLD'S GREAT SNARE. 1900

*A MILLIONAIRE OF YESTERDAY. 1900

*THE SURVIVOR. 1901

*ENOCH STRONE. 1901 (English title A MASTER OF MEN.)

*A SLEEPING MEMORY. 1902 (English title THE GREAT AWAKENING.)

*THE TRAITORS. 1902

A PRINCE OF SINNERS. 1903

*THE YELLOW CRAYON. 1903

*THE BETRAYAL. 1904

- *ANNA THE ADVENTURESS. 1904
- *A MAKER OF HISTORY. 1905
- *THE MASTER MUMMER. 1905
- *A LOST LEADER. 1906
- THE TRAGEDY OF ANDREA. 1906
- *THE MALEFACTOR. 1906 (English title MR. WINGRAVE, MILLIONAIRE.)
- *BERENICE. 1907
- THE AVENGER. 1907 (English title THE CONSPIRATORS.)
- *THE GREAT SECRET. 1908 (English title THE SECRET.)
- *THE GOVERNORS. 1908
- †THE DISTRIBUTORS. 1908 (English title GHOSTS OF SOCIETY.)
- *THE MISSIONER. 1908
- *†THE KINGDOM OF EARTH. 1909 (English title THE BLACK WATCHER.)
- *JEANNE OF THE MARSHES. 1909
- *THE ILLUSTRIOUS PRINCE. 1910
- *†PASSERS BY. 1910
- *THE LOST AMBASSADOR. 1910 (English title THE MISSING DELORA.)
- *†THE GOLDEN WEB. 1911
- *THE MOVING FINGER. 1911 (English title A FALLING STAR.)
- *HAVOC. 1911
- *†THE COURT OF ST. SIMON. 1912
- *THE LIGHTED WAY. 1912
- *THE TEMPTING OF TAVERNAKE. 1912
- *THE MISCHIEF MAKER. 1913
- *THE DOUBLE LIFE OF MR. ALFRED BURTON. 1913
- *THE WAY OF THESE WOMEN. 1914
- *A PEOPLE'S MAN. 1914
- *THE VANISHED MESSENGER. 1914
- THE BLACK BOX. 1913 (Novelization of photoplay, published by Grosset & Dunlap.)
- *THE DOUBLE TRAITOR. 1913.
- *MR. GREX OF MONTE CARLO. 1913
- *THE KINGDOM OF THE BLIND. 1916
- *THE HILLMAN. 1917
- *THE CINEMA MURDER. 1917 (English title THE OTHER ROMILLY.)
- **THE PAWNS COUNT. 1918
- *THE ZEPPELIN'S PASSENGER. 1918 (English title MR. LESSINGHAM GOES HOME.)

- **THE WICKED MARQUIS. 1919
- **THE BOX WITH BROKEN SEALS. 1919 (English title THE STRANGE CASE OF MR. JOCELYN THEW.)
- *THE CURIOUS QUEST. 1919 (English title THE AMAZING QUEST OF MR. ERNEST BLISS.)
- **THE GREAT IMPERSONATION. 1920
- **THE DEVIL'S PAW. 1920
- *THE PROFITEERS. 1921
- *JACOB'S LADDER. 1921
- *NOBODY'S MAN. 1921
- **THE EVIL SHEPHERD. 1922
- **THE GREAT PRINCE SHAN. 1922
- *THE MYSTERY ROAD. 1923
- *THE WRATH TO COME. 1924
- *THE PASSIONATE QUEST. 1924
- STOLEN IDOLS. 1925
- **GABRIEL SAMARA, PEACEMAKER. 1925
- *THE GOLDEN BEAST. 1926
- *PRODIGALS OF MONTE CARLO. 1926
- **HARVEY GARRARD'S CRIME. 1926
- **THE INTERLOPER. 1927 (English title THE EX-DUKE.)
- **MISS BROWN OF X. Y. O. 1927
- **THE LIGHT BEYOND. 1928
- **THE FORTUNATE WAYFARER. 1928
- **MATORNI'S VINEYARD. 1928
- **THE TREASURE HOUSE OF MARTIN HEWS. 1929
- **THE GLENLITTEN MURDER. 1929
- **THE MILLION POUND DEPOSIT. 1930
- **THE LION AND THE LAMB. 1930
- **UP THE LADDER OF GOLD. 1931
- *SIMPLE PETER CRADD. 1931
- **THE MAN FROM SING SING. 1932 (English title MORAN CHAMBERS SMILED.)
- **THE OSTREKOFF JEWELS. 1932
- **MURDER AT MONTE CARLO. 1933
- **JEREMIAH AND THE PRINCESS. 1933
- **THE GALLOWS OF CHANCE. 1934
- **THE MAN WITHOUT NERVES. 1934 (English title THE BANK MANAGER.)
- **THE STRANGE BOARDERS OF PALACE CRESCENT. 1934

**THE SPY PARAMOUNT. 1934

**THE BATTLE OF BASINGHALL STREET. 1935

**FLOATING PERIL. 1936 (English title THE BIRD OF PARADISE.)

**THE MAGNIFICENT HOAX. 1936 (English title JUDY OF BUNTER'S BUILDINGS.)

**THE DUMB GODS SPEAK. 1937

**ENVOY EXTRAORDINARY. 1937

**THE MAYOR ON HORSEBACK. 1937

THE COLOSSUS OF ARCADIA. 1938

SHORT-STORY COLLECTIONS

Of these 35 collections of short stories, 24 of which have been issued in book form in the United States, most of the volumes are series with sustained interest in which one group of characters appear throughout the various stories.

- *THE LONG ARM OF MANNISTER. 1908 (English title THE LONG ARM.)
- **PETER RUFF AND THE DOUBLE-FOUR. (English title THE DOUBLE-FOUR.)
- *FOR THE QUEEN. 1912
- *THOSE OTHER DAYS. 1912
- MR. LAXWORTHY'S ADVENTURES. 1913
- THE AMAZING PARTNERSHIP. 1914
- *AN AMIABLE CHARLATAN. 1915 (English title THE GAME OF LIBERTY.)
- MYSTERIES OF THE RIVIERA. 1916
- AARON RODD, DIVINER. 1920
- AMBROSE LAVENDALE, DIPLOMAT. 1920
- HON. ALGERNON KNOX, DETECTIVE. 1920
- *THE SEVEN CONUNDRUMS. 1923
- **MICHAEL'S EVIL DEEDS. 1923
- **THE INEVITABLE MILLIONAIRES. 1923
- *THE TERRIBLE HOBBY OF SIR JOSEPH LONDE. 1924
- *THE ADVENTURES OF MR. JOSEPH P. GRAY. 1925
- THE LITTLE GENTLEMAN FROM OKEHAMPSTEAD. 1926
- *THE CHANNAY SYNDICATE. 1927
- **MR. BILLINGHAM, THE MARQUIS AND MADELON. 1927
- *MADAME AND HER TWELVE VIRGINS. 1927
- **NICHOLAS GOADE, DETECTIVE. 1927
- THE EXPLOITS OF PUDGY PETE. 1928
- CHRONICLES OF MELHAMPTON. 1928
- THE HUMAN CHASE. 1929
- JENNERTON & Co. 1929
- **WHAT HAPPENED TO FORESTER. 1929
- *SLANE'S LONG SHOTS. 1930
- **GANGSTER'S GLORY. 1931 (English title INSPECTOR DICKENS RETIRES.)
- **SINNERS BEWARE. 1931
- **CROOKS IN THE SUNSHINE. 1932
- **THE EX-DETECTIVE. 1933
- **GENERAL BESSERLEY'S PUZZLE BOX. 1935

**ADVICE LIMITED. 1936

**ASK MISS MOTT. 1936

**CURIOUS HAPPENINGS TO THE ROOKE LEGATEES. 1937

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****CLOWNS AND CRIMINALS: The Oppenheim Omnibus. 1931**

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****SHUDDERS AND THRILLS: The Second Oppenheim Omnibus. 1932**

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MATORNI'S VINEYARD

THE GREAT IMPERSONATION

GABRIEL SAMARA, PEACEMAKER

****SPIES AND INTRIGUES: The Oppenheim Secret Service Omnibus. 1936**

containing

THE WRATH TO COME

THE GREAT IMPERSONATION

MR. BILLINGHAM, THE MARQUIS AND MADELON

GABRIEL SAMARA, PEACEMAKER

TRAVEL

**THE QUEST FOR WINTER SUNSHINE. 1927

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *The Curious Happenings to the Rooke Legatees* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]