

PETER RUFF
AND THE
DOUBLE-FOUR

E. PHILIPS OPPENHEIM

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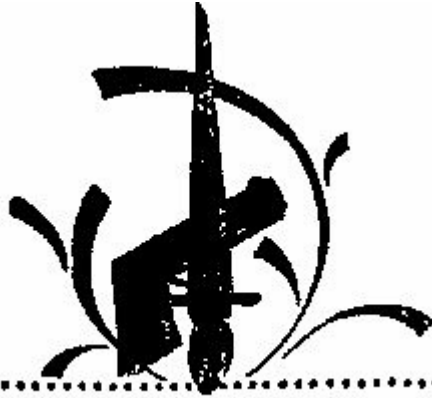
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PETER RUFF
AND THE
DOUBLE-FOUR

E. PHILIPS OPPENHEIM

The Oppenheim Omnibus
CLOWNS AND CRIMINALS

Peter Ruff and the Double- Four



E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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PETER RUFF AND THE DOUBLE-FOUR

CHAPTER I INTRODUCING MR. PETER RUFF

There was nothing about the supper party on that particular Sunday evening in November at Daisy Villa, Green Street, Streatham, which seemed to indicate in any way that one of the most interesting careers connected with the world history of crime was to owe its very existence to the disaster which befell that little gathering. The villa was the residence and also—to his credit—the unmortgaged property of Mr. David Barnes, a struggling but fairly prosperous coal merchant of excellent character, some means, and Methodist proclivities. His habit of sitting without his coat when carving, although deprecated by his wife and daughter on account of the genteel aspirations of the latter, was a not unusual one in the neighbourhood; and coupled with the proximity of a cold joint of beef, his seat at the head of the table, and a carving knife and fork grasped in his hands, established clearly the fact of his position in the household, which a somewhat weak physiognomy might otherwise have led the casual observer to doubt. Opposite him,

at the other end of the table, sat his wife, Mrs. Barnes, a somewhat voluminous lady with a high colour, a black satin frock, and many ornaments. On her left the son of the house, eighteen years old, of moderate stature, somewhat pimply, with the fashion of the moment reflected in his pink tie with white spots, drawn through a gold ring, and curving outwards to seek obscurity underneath a dazzling waistcoat. A white tuberose in his buttonhole might have been intended as a sort of compliment to the occasion, or an indication of his intention to take a walk after supper in the fashionable purlieu of the neighbourhood. Facing him sat his sister—a fluffy-haired, blue-eyed young lady, pretty in her way, but chiefly noticeable for a peculiar sort of self-consciousness blended with self-satisfaction, and possessed only at a certain period in their lives by young ladies of her age. It was almost the air of the cat in whose interior reposes the missing canary, except that in this instance the canary obviously existed in the person of the young man who sat at her side, introduced formally to the household for the first time. That young man's name was—at the moment—Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald.

It seems idle to attempt any description of a person who, in the past, had secured a certain amount of fame under a varying personality; and who, in the future, was to become more than ever notorious under a far less aristocratic pseudonym than that by which he was at present known to the inhabitants of Daisy Villa. There are photographs of him in New York and Paris, St. Petersburg and Chicago, Vienna and Cape Town, but there are no two pictures which present to the casual observer the slightest likeness to one another. To allude to him by the name under which he had won some part, at least, of the affections of Miss Maud Barnes, Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, as he sat there, a

suitor on probation for her hand, was a young man of modest and genteel appearance. He wore a blue serge suit—a little underdressed for the occasion, perhaps; but his tie and collar were neat; his gold-rimmed spectacles—if a little disapproved of by Maud on account of the air of steadiness which they imparted—suggested excellent son-in-lawlike qualities to Mr. and Mrs. Barnes. He had the promise of a fair moustache, but his complexion generally was colourless. His features, except for a certain regularity, were undistinguished. His speech was modest and correct. His manner varied with his company. Tonight it had been pronounced, by excellent judges—genteel.

The conversation consisted—naturally enough, under the circumstances—of a course of subtle and judicious pumping, tactfully prompted, for the most part, by Mrs. Barnes. Such, for instance, as the following:

“Talking about Marie Corelli’s new book reminds me, Mr. Fitzgerald—your occupation is connected with books, is it not?” his prospective mother-in-law enquired, artlessly.

Mr. Fitzgerald bowed assent.

“I am cashier at Howell & Wilson’s in Cheapside,” he said. “We sell a great many books there—as many, I should think, as any retail establishment in London.”

“Indeed!” Mrs. Barnes purred. “Very interesting work, I am sure. So nice and intellectual, too; for, of course, you must be looking inside them sometimes.”

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“I know the place well,” Mr. Adolphus Barnes, Junior, announced condescendingly,—“pass it every day on my way to

lunch.”

“So much nicer,” Mrs. Barnes continued, “than any of the ordinary businesses—grocery or drapery, or anything of that sort.”

Miss Maud elevated her eyebrows slightly. Was it likely that she would have looked with eyes of favour upon a young man engaged in any of these inferior occupations?

“There’s money in books, too,” Mr. Barnes declared with sudden inspiration.

His prospective son-in-law turned towards him deferentially.

“You are right, sir,” he admitted. “There is money in them. There’s money for those who write, and there’s money for those who sell. My occupation,” he continued, with a modest little cough, “brings me often into touch with publishers, travellers and clerks, so I am, as it were, behind the scenes to some extent. I can assure you,” he continued, looking from Mr. Barnes to his wife, and finally transfixing Mr. Adolphus—“I can assure you that the money paid by some firms of publishers to a few well-known authors—I will mention no names—as advances against royalties, is something stupendous!”

“Ah!” Mr. Barnes murmured, solemnly shaking his head.

“Marie Corelli, I expect, and that Hall Caine,” remarked young Adolphus.

“Seems easy enough to write a book, too,” Mrs. Barnes said.

“Why, I declare that some of those we get from the library—we

subscribe to a library, Mr. Fitzgerald—are just as simple and straightforward that a child might have written them. No plot whatsoever, no murders or mysteries or anything of that sort—just stories about people like ourselves. I don't see how they can pay people for writing stories about people just like those one meets every day!"

"I always say," Maud intervened, "that Spencer means to write a book some day. He has quite the literary air, hasn't he, mother?"

"Indeed he has!" Mrs. Barnes declared, with an appreciative glance at the gold-rimmed spectacles.

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Mr. Fitzgerald modestly disclaimed any literary aspirations.

"The thing is a gift, after all," he declared, generously. "I can keep accounts, and earn a fair salary at it, but if I attempted fiction I should soon be up a tree."

Mr. Barnes nodded his approval of such sentiments.

"Every one to his trade, I say," he remarked. "What sort of salaries do they pay now in the book trade?" he asked guilelessly.

"Very fair," Mr. Fitzgerald admitted candidly,—“very fair indeed."

"When I was your age," Mr. Barnes said reflectively, "I was getting—let me see—forty-two shillings a week. Pretty good pay, too, for those days."

Mr. Fitzgerald admitted the fact.

“Of course,” he said apologetically, “salaries are a little higher now all round. Mr. Howell has been very kind to me,—in fact I have had two raises this year. I am getting four pounds ten now.”

“Four pounds ten per week?” Mrs. Barnes exclaimed, laying down her knife and fork.

“Certainly,” Mr. Fitzgerald answered. “After Christmas, I have some reason to believe that it may be five pounds.”

Mr. Barnes whistled softly, and looked at the young man with a new respect.

“I told you that—Mr.—that Spencer was doing pretty well, Mother,” Maud simpered, looking down at her plate.

“Any one to support?” her father asked, transferring a pickle from the fork to his mouth.

“No one,” Mr. Fitzgerald answered. “In fact, I may say that I have some small expectations. I haven’t done badly, either, out of the few investments I have made from time to time.”

“Saved a bit of money, eh?” Mr. Barnes enquired genially.

“I have a matter of four hundred pounds put by,” Mr. Fitzgerald admitted modestly, “besides a few sticks of furniture. I never cared much about lodging-house things, so I furnished a couple of rooms myself some time ago.”

Mrs. Barnes rose slowly to her feet.

“You are quite sure you won’t have a small piece more of beef?” she enquired anxiously.

“Just a morsel?” Mr. Barnes asked, tapping the joint insinuatingly with his carving knife.

“No, I thank you!” Mr. Fitzgerald declared firmly. “I have done excellently.”

“Then if you will put the joint on the sideboard, Adolphus,” Mrs. Barnes directed, “Maud and I will change the plates. We always let the girl go out on Sundays, Mr. Fitzgerald,” she explained, turning to their guest. “It’s very awkward, of course, but they seem to expect it.”

“Quite natural, I’m sure,” Mr. Fitzgerald murmured, watching Maud’s light movements with admiring eyes. “I like to see ladies interested in domestic work.”

“There’s one thing I will say for Maud,” her proud mother declared, plumping down a dish of jelly upon the table, “she does know what’s what in keeping house, and even if she hasn’t to scrape and save as I did when David and I were first married, economy is a great thing when you’re young. I have always said so, and I stick to it.”

“Quite right, Mother,” Mr. Barnes declared.

“If instead of sitting there,” Mrs. Barnes continued in high good humour, “you were to get a bottle of that port wine out of the cellarette, we might drink Mr. Fitzgerald’s health, being as it’s his first visit.”

Mr. Barnes rose to his feet with alacrity. "For a woman with sound ideas," he declared, "commend me to your mother!"

Maud, having finished her duties, resumed her place by the side of the guest of the evening. Their hands met under the tablecloth for a moment. To the girl, the pleasure of such a proceeding was natural enough, but Fitzgerald asked himself for the fiftieth time why on earth he, who, notwithstanding his present modest exterior, was a young man of some experience, should from such primitive love-making derive a rapture which nothing else in life afforded him. He was, at that moment, content with his future,—a future which he had absolutely and finally decided upon. He was content with his father-in-law and his mother-in-law, with Daisy Villa, and the prospect of a Daisy Villa for himself,—content, even, with Adolphus! But for Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, these things were not to be! The awakening was even then at hand.

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The dining room of Daisy Villa fronted the street, and was removed from it only a few feet. Consequently, the footsteps of passers-by upon the flagged pavement were clearly distinguishable. It was just at the moment when Mrs. Barnes was inserting a few fresh almonds into a somewhat precarious tipsy cake, and Mr. Barnes was engaged with the decanting of the port, that two pairs of footsteps, considerably heavier than those of the ordinary promenader, paused outside and finally stopped. The gate creaked. Mr. Barnes looked up.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "What's that? Visitors?"

They all listened. The front-door bell rang. Adolphus, in response to a gesture from his mother, rose sulkily to his feet.

“Job I hate!” he muttered as he left the room.

The rest of the family, full of the small curiosity of people of their class, were intent upon listening for voices outside. The demeanour of Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, therefore, escaped their notice. It is doubtful, in any case, whether their perceptions would have been sufficiently keen to have enabled them to trace the workings of emotion in the countenance of a person so magnificently endowed by Providence with the art of subterfuge. Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald seemed simply to have stiffened in acute and earnest attention. It was only for a moment that he hesitated. His unfailing inspiration told him the truth!

His course of action was simple,—he rose to his feet and strolled to the window.

“Some people who have lost their way in the fog, perhaps,” he remarked. “What a night!”

He laid his hand upon the sash—simultaneously there was a rush of cold air into the room, a half-angry, half-frightened exclamation from Adolphus in the passage, a scream from Miss Maud—and no Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald! No one had time to be more than blankly astonished. The door was opened, and a police inspector, in very nice dark braided uniform and a peaked cap, stood in the doorway.

Mr. Barnes dropped the port, and Mrs. Barnes, emulating her daughter’s example, screamed. The inspector, as though

“You had a visitor here, Mr. Barnes,” he said quickly—“a Mr.

Spencer Fitzgerald. Where is he?"

There was no one who could answer! Mr. Barnes was speechless between the shock of the spilt port and the appearance of a couple of uniformed policemen in his dining room. John Dory, the detective, he knew well enough in his private capacity, but in his uniform, and attended by policemen, he presented a new and startling appearance! Mrs. Barnes was in hysterics, and Maud was gazing like a creature turned to stone at the open window, through which little puffs of fog were already drifting into the room. Adolphus, with an air of bewilderment, was standing with his mouth and eyes wider open than they had ever been in his life. And as for the honoured guest of these admirable inhabitants of Daisy Villa, there was not the slightest doubt but that Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald had disappeared through the window!

Fitzgerald's expedition was nearly at an end. Soon he paused, crossed the road to a block of flats, ascended to the eighth floor by an automatic lift, and rang the bell at a door which bore simply the number II. A trim parlourmaid opened it after a few minutes delay.

"Is Miss Emerson at home?" he asked.

"Miss Emerson is in," the maid admitted, with some hesitation, "but I am not sure that she will see any one to-night."

"I have a message for her," Fitzgerald said.

"Will you give me your name, sir, please?" the maid asked.

An inner door was suddenly opened. A slim girl, looking taller than she really was by reason of the rug upon which she stood, looked out into the hall—a girl with masses of brown hair loosely coiled on her head, with pale face and strange eyes. She opened her lips as though to call to her visitor by name, and as suddenly closed them again. There was not much expression in her face, but there was enough to show that his visit was not unwelcome.

“You!” she exclaimed. “Come in! Please come in at once!”

Fitzgerald obeyed the invitation of the girl whom he had come to visit. She had retreated a little into the room, but the door was no sooner closed than she held out her hands. 226

“Peter!” she exclaimed. “Peter, you have come to me at last!”

Her lips were a little parted; her eyes were bright with pleasure; her whole expression was one of absolute delight. Fitzgerald frowned, as though he found her welcome a little too enthusiastic for his taste.

“Violet,” he said, “please don’t look at me as though I were a prodigal sheep. If you do, I shall be sorry that I came.”

Her hands fell to her side, the pleasure died out of her face—only her eyes still questioned him. Fitzgerald carefully laid his hat on a vacant chair.

“Something has happened?” she said. “Tell me that all that madness is over—that you are yourself again!”

“So far as regards my engagement with Messrs. Howell &

Wilson,” he said, despondently, “you are right. As regards—Miss Barnes, there has been no direct misunderstanding between us, but I am afraid, for the present, that I must consider that—well, in abeyance.”

“That is something!” she exclaimed, drawing a little breath of relief. “Sit down, Peter. Will you have something to eat? I finished dinner an hour ago, but—”

“Thank you,” Fitzgerald interrupted, “I supped—extremely well in Streatham!”

“In Streatham!” she repeated. “Why, how did you get there? The fog is awful.”

“Fogs do not trouble me,” Fitzgerald answered. “I walked. I could have done it as well blindfold. I will take a whisky and soda, if I may.”

She led him to an easy-chair.

“I will mix it myself,” she said.

Without being remarkably good-looking, she was certainly a pleasant and attractive-looking young woman. Her cheeks were a little pale; her hair—perfectly natural—was a wonderful deep shade of soft brown. Her eyes were long and narrow—almost Oriental in shape—and they seemed in some queer way to match the room; he could have sworn that in the firelight they flashed green. Her body and limbs, notwithstanding her extreme slightness, were graceful, perhaps, but with the grace of the tigress. She wore a green silk dressing jacket, pulled together with a belt of lizard skin, and her neck was bare. Her

skirt was of some thin black material. She was obviously in deshabille, and yet there was something neat and trim about the smaller details of her toilette.

“Go on, please, Peter,” she begged. “You are keeping me in suspense.”

“There isn’t much to tell,” he answered. “It’s over—that’s all.”

She drew a sharp breath through her teeth.

“You are not going to marry that girl—that bourgeois doll in Streatham?”

Fitzgerald sat up in his chair.

“Look here,” he said, seriously, “don’t you call her names. If I’m not going to marry her, it isn’t my fault. She is the only girl I have ever wanted, and probably—most probably—she will be the only one I ever shall want. That’s honest, isn’t it?”

The girl winced.

“Yes,” she said, “it is honest!”

“I should have married her,” the young man continued, “and I should have been happy. I had my eye on a villa—not too near her parents—and I saw my way to a little increase of salary. I should have taken to gardening, to walks in the Park, with an occasional theatre, and I should have thoroughly enjoyed a fortnight every summer at Skegness or Sutton-on-Sea. We should have saved a little money. I should have gone to church regularly, and if possible I should have filled some minor public

offices. You may call this bourgeois—it was my idea of happiness.”

“Was!” she murmured.

“Is still,” he declared, sharply, “but I shall never attain to it. Tonight I had to leave Maud—to leave the supper table of Daisy Villa—through the window!”

She looked at him in amazement.

“The police,” he explained. “That brute Dory was at the bottom of it.”

“But surely,” she murmured, “you told me that you had a bona-fide situation—”

“So I had,” he declared, “and I was a fool not to be content with it. It was my habit of taking long country walks, and their rotten auditing, which undid me! You understand that this was all before I met Maud? Since the day I spoke to her, I turned over a new leaf. I have left the night work alone, and I repaid every penny of the firm’s money which they could ever have possibly found out about. There was only that one little affair of mine down at Sudbury.”

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“Tell me what you are going to do?” she whispered.

“I have no alternative,” he answered. “The law has kicked me out from the respectable places. The law shall pay!”

She looked at him with glowing eyes.

“Have you any plans?” she asked, softly.

“I have,” he answered. “I have considered the subject from a good many points of view, and I have decided to start in business for myself as a private detective.”

She raised her eyebrows.

“My dear Peter!” she murmured. “Couldn’t you be a little more original?”

“That is only what I am going to call myself,” he answered. “I may tell you that I am going to strike out on somewhat new lines.”

“Please explain,” she begged.

He recrossed his knees and made himself a little more comfortable.

“The weak part of every great robbery, however successful,” he began, “is the great wastage in value which invariably results. For jewels which cost—say five thousand pounds, and to procure which the artist has to risk his life as well as his liberty, he has to consider himself lucky if he clears eight hundred. For the Hermitage rubies, for instance, where I nearly had to shoot a man dead, I realised rather less than four hundred pounds. It doesn’t pay.”

“Go on,” she begged.

“I am not clear,” he continued, “how far this class of business will attract me at all, but I do not propose, in any case, to enter

into any transactions on my own account. I shall work for other people, and for cash down. Your experience of life, Violet, has been fairly large. Have you not sometimes come into contact with people driven into a situation from which they would willingly commit any crime to escape if they dared? It is not with them a question of money at all—it is simply a matter of ignorance. They do not know how to commit a crime. They have had no experience, and if they attempt it, they know perfectly well that they are likely to blunder. A person thoroughly experienced in the ways of criminals—a person of genius like myself—would have, without a doubt, an immense clientèle, if only he dared put up his signboard. Literally, I cannot do that. Actually, I mean to do so! I shall be willing to accept contracts either to help nervous people out of an undesirable crisis; or, on the other hand, to measure my wits against the wits of Scotland Yard, and to discover the criminals whom they have failed to secure. I shall make my own bargains, and I shall be paid in cash. I shall take on nothing that I am not certain about.”

“But your clients?” she asked, curiously. “How will you come into contact with them?”

He smiled.

“I am not afraid of business being slack,” he said. “The world is full of fools.”

“You cannot live outside the law, Peter,” she objected. “You are clever, I know, but they are not all fools at Scotland Yard.”

“You forget,” he reminded her, “that there will be a perfectly

legitimate side to my profession. The other sort of case I shall only accept if I can see my way clear to make a success of it. Needless to say, I shall have to refuse the majority that are offered to me.”

She came a little nearer to him.

“In any case,” she said, with a little sigh, “you have given up that foolish, bourgeois life of yours?”

He looked down into her face, and his eyes were cold.

“Violet,” he said, “this is no time for misunderstandings. I should like you to know that apart from one young lady, who possesses my whole affection—”

“All of it?” she pleaded.

“All!” he declared emphatically. “She will doubtless be faithless to me—under the circumstances, I cannot blame her—but so far as I am concerned, I have no affection whatever for any one else.”

She crept back to her place.

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“I could be so useful to you,” she murmured.

“You could and you shall, if you will be sensible,” he answered.

“Tell me how?” she begged.

He was silent for a moment.

“Are you acting now?” he asked.

“I am understudying Molly,” she answered, “and I have a very small part at the Globe.”

He nodded.

“There is no reason to interfere with that,” he said, “in fact, I wish you to continue your connection with the profession. It brings you into touch with the class of people among whom I am likely to find clients.”

“Go on, please,” she begged.

“On two conditions—or rather one,” he said, “you can, if you like, become my secretary and partner—and find the money we shall require to make a start.”

“Conditions?” she asked.

“You must understand, once and for all,” he said, “that I will not be made love to, and that I can treat you only as a working companion. My name will be Peter Ruff, and yours Miss Brown. You will have to dress like a secretary, and behave like one. Sometimes there will be plenty of work for you, and sometimes there will be none at all. Sometimes you will be bored to death, and sometimes there will be excitement. I do not wish to make you vain, but I may add, especially as you are aware of my personal feelings toward you, that you are the only person in the world to whom I would make this offer.”

She sighed gently.

“Tell me, Peter,” she asked, “when do you mean to start this new enterprise?”

“Not for six months—perhaps a year,” he answered. “I must go to Paris—perhaps Vienna. I might even have to go to New York. There are certain associations with which I must come into touch—certain information I must become possessed of.”

“Peter,” she said, “I like your scheme, but there is just one thing. Such men as you should be the brains of great enterprises. Don’t you understand what I mean? It shouldn’t be you who does the actual thing which brings you within the power of the law. I am not over-scrupulous, you know. I hate wrongdoing, but I have never been able to treat as equal criminals the poor man who steals for a living, and the rich financier who robs right and left out of sheer greed. I agree with you that crime is not an absolute thing. The circumstances connected with every action in life determine its morality or immorality. But, Peter, it isn’t worth while to go outside the law!”

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He nodded.

“You are a sensible girl,” he said, “I have always thought that. We’ll talk over my cases together, if they seem to run a little too close to the line.”

“Very well, Peter,” she said, “I accept.”

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CHAPTER II

A NEW CAREER

About twelve months after the interrupted festivities at Daisy Villa, that particular neighbourhood was again the scene of some rejoicing. Standing before the residence of Mr. Barnes were three carriages, drawn in each case by a pair of grey horses. The coachmen and their steeds were similarly adorned with white rosettes. It would have been an insult to the intelligence of the most youthful of the loungers-by to have informed them that a wedding was projected.

At the neighbouring church all was ready. The clerk stood at the door, the red drugget was down, the usual little crowd were standing all agog upon the pavement. There was one unusual feature of the proceedings: Instead of a solitary policeman, there were at least a dozen who kept clear the entrance to the church. Their presence greatly puzzled a little old gentleman who had joined the throng of sightseers. He pushed himself to the front and touched one of them upon the shoulder.

“Mr. Policeman,” he said, “will you tell me why there are so many of you to keep such a small crowd in order?”

“Bridegroom’s a member of the force, sir, for one reason,” the man answered good-humouredly.

“And the other?” the old gentleman persisted.

The policeman behaved as though he had not heard—a proceeding which his natural stolidity rendered easy. The little old gentleman, however, was not so easily put off. He tapped the man once more upon the shoulder.

“And the other reason, Mr. Policeman?” he asked insinuatingly.

“Not allowed to talk about that, sir,” was the somewhat gruff reply.

The little old gentleman moved away, a trifle hurt. He was a very nicely dressed old gentleman indeed, and everything about him seemed to savour of prosperity. But he was certainly garrulous. An obviously invited guest was standing upon the edge of the pavement stroking a pair of lavender kid gloves. The little old gentleman sidled up to him.

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“I beg your pardon, sir,” he said, raising his hat. “I am just back from Australia—haven’t seen a wedding in England for fifty years. Do you think that they would let me into the church?”

The invited guest looked down at his questioner and approved of him. Furthermore, he seemed exceedingly glad to be interrupted in his somewhat nervous task of waiting for the wedding party.

“Certainly, sir,” he replied cheerfully. “Come along in with me, and I’ll find you a seat.”

Down the scarlet drugged they went—the big best man with the red hands and the lavender kid gloves and the opulent-looking old gentleman with the gold-rimmed spectacles and the handsome walking stick.

“Dear me, this is very interesting!” the latter remarked. “Is it the custom, sir, always, may I ask, in this country, to have so many policemen at a wedding?”

The big man looked downward and shook his head.

“Special reason,” he said mysteriously. “Fact is, young lady was engaged once to a very bad character—a burglar whom the police have been wanting for years. He had to leave the country, but he has written her once or twice since in a mysterious sort of way—wanted her to be true to him, and all that sort of thing. Dory—that’s the bridegroom—has got a sort of an idea that he may turn up to-day.”

“This is very exciting—very!” the little old gentleman remarked. “Reminds me of our younger days out in Australia.”

“You sit down here,” the best man directed, ushering his companion into an empty pew. “I must get back again outside, or I shall have the bridegroom arriving.”

“Good-day to you, sir, and many thanks!” the little old gentleman said politely.

Soon the bridegroom arrived—a smart young officer, well thought of at Scotland Yard, well set up, wearing a long tail coat, a lilac and white tie, and shaking in every limb. He walked up the aisle accompanied by the best man, and the little old gentleman from Australia watched him genially from behind those gold-rimmed glasses. And, then, scarcely was he at the altar rails when through the open church door one heard the sounds of horses’ feet, one heard a rustle, the murmur of voices, caught a glimpse of a waiting group arranging

themselves finally in the porch of the church. Maud, on the arm of her father, came slowly up the aisle. The little old gentleman turned his head as though this was something upon which he feared to look. He saw nothing of Mr. Barnes, in a new coat, with tuberoses and spray of maidenhair in his coat, and exceedingly tight patent leather boots on his feet; he saw nothing of Mrs. Barnes, clad in a gown of the lightest magenta, with a bonnet smothered with violets.

It was in the vestry that the only untoward incident of that highly successful wedding took place. The ceremony was over! Bride, bridegroom and parents trooped in. And when the register was opened, one witness had already signed! In the clear, precise writing his name stood out upon the virgin page—

Spencer Fitzgerald

The bridegroom swore, the bride nearly collapsed. The clerk pressed into the hands of the latter an envelope.

“From the little old gentleman,” he announced, “who was fussing round the church this morning.”

Mrs. Dory tore it open and gave a cry of delight. A diamond cross, worth all the rest of her presents put together, flashed soft lights from a background of dull velvet. Her husband had looked over her shoulder, and with a scowl seized the morocco case and threw it far from him.

It was the only disturbing incident of a highly successful function!

At precisely the same moment when the wedding guests were

seated around the hospitable board of Daisy Villa, a celebration of a somewhat different nature was taking place in the more aristocratic neighbourhood of Curzon Street. Here, however, the little party was a much smaller one, and the innocent gaiety of the gathering at Daisy Villa was entirely lacking. The luncheon table around which the four men were seated presented all the unlovely signs of a meal where self-restraint had been abandoned—where conviviality has passed the bounds of licence. Edibles were represented only by a single dish of fruit; the tablecloth, stained with wine and cigar ash, seemed crowded with every sort of bottle and every sort of glass. A magnum of champagne, empty, another half full, stood in the middle of the table; whisky, brandy, liqueurs of various sorts were all represented; glasses—some full, some empty, some filled with cigar ash and cigarette stumps—an ugly sight!

The guest in chief arose. Short, thick-set, red-faced, with bulbous eyes, and veins about his temples which just now were unpleasantly prominent, he seemed, indeed, a very fitting person to have been the recipient of such hospitality. He stood clutching a little at the tablecloth and swaying upon his feet. He spoke as a drunken man, but such words as he pronounced clearly showed him to be possessed of a voice naturally thick and raspy. It was obvious that he was a person of entirely different class from his three companions.

“G—gentlemen,” he said, “I must be off. I thank you very much for this—hospitality. Honoured, I’m sure, to have sat down in such—such company. Good afternoon, all!”

He lurched a little toward the door, but his neighbour at the table—who was also his host—caught hold of his coat tail and

pulled him back into his chair.

“No hurry, Masters,” he said. “One more liqueur, eh? It’s a raw afternoon.”

“N—not another drop, Sir Richard!” the man declared. “Not another drop to drink. I am very much obliged to you all, but I must be off. Must be off,” he repeated, making another effort to rise.

His host held him by the arm. The man resented it—he showed signs of anger.

“D—n it all! I—I’m not a prisoner, am I?” he exclaimed angrily. “Tell you I’ve got—appointment—club. Can’t you see it’s past five o’clock?”

“That’s all right, Masters,” the man whom he had addressed as Sir Richard declared soothingly. “We want just a word with you on business first, before you go—Colonel Dickinson, Lord Merrier and myself.”

Masters shook his head.

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“See you to-morrow,” he declared. “No time to talk business now. Let me go!”

He made another attempt to rise, which his host also prevented.

“Masters, don’t be a fool!” the latter said firmly. “You’ve got to hear what we want to say to you. Sit down and listen.”

Masters relapsed sullenly into his chair. His little eyes seemed

to creep closer to one another. So they wanted to talk business! Perhaps it was for that reason that they had bidden him sit at their table—had entertained him so well! The very thought cleared his brain.

“Go on,” he said shortly.

Sir Richard lit a cigarette and leaned further back in his chair. He was a man apparently about fifty years of age—tall, well dressed, with good features, save for his mouth, which resembled more than anything a rat trap. He was perfectly bald, and he had the air of a man who was a careful liver. His eyes were bright, almost beadlike; his fingers long and a trifle over-manicured. One would have judged him to be what he was—a man of fashion and a patron of the turf.

“Masters,” he said, “we are all old friends here. We want to speak to you plainly. We three have had a try, as you know—Merries, Dickinson and myself—to make the coup of our lives. We failed, and we’re up against it hard.”

“Very hard, indeed,” Lord Merries murmured softly.

“Deuced hard!” Colonel Dickinson echoed.

Masters was sitting tight, breathing a little hard, looking fixedly at his host.

“Take my own case first,” the latter continued. “I am Sir Richard Dyson, ninth baronet, with estates in Wiltshire and Scotland, and a town house in Cleveland Place. I belong to the proper clubs for a man in my position, and, somehow or other—we won’t say how—I have managed to pay my way. There isn’t

an acre of my property that isn't mortgaged for more than its value. My town house—well, it doesn't belong to me at all! I have twenty-six thousand pounds to pay you on Monday. To save my life, I could not raise twenty-six thousand farthings! So much for me.”

The man Masters ground his teeth.

“So much for you!” he muttered.

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“Take the case next,” Sir Richard continued, “of my friend Merries here. Merries is an Earl, it is true, but he never had a penny to bless himself with. He's tried acting, reporting, marrying—anything to make an honest living. So far, I am afraid we must consider Lord Merries as something of a failure, eh?”

“A rotten failure, I should say,” that young nobleman declared gloomily.

“Lord Merries is, to put it briefly, financially unsound,” Sir Richard declared.

“What is the amount of your debt to Mr. Masters, Jim?”

“Eleven thousand two hundred pounds,” Lord Merries answered.

“And we may take it, I presume, for granted that you have not that sum, nor anything like it, at your disposal?” Sir Richard asked.

“Not a fiver!” Lord Merries declared with emphasis.

“We come now, Mr. Masters, to our friend Colonel Dickinson,” Sir Richard continued. “Colonel Dickinson is, perhaps, in a more favourable situation than any of us. He has a small but regular income, and he has expectations which it is not possible to mortgage fully. At the same time, it will be many years before they can—er—fructify. He is, therefore, with us in this somewhat unpleasant predicament in which we find ourselves.”

“Cut it short,” Masters growled. “I’m sick of so much talk. What’s it all mean?”

“It means simply this, Mr. Masters,” Sir Richard said, “we want you to take six months’ bills for our indebtedness to you.”

Masters rose to his feet. His thick lips were drawn a little apart. He had the appearance of a savage and discontented animal.

“So that’s why I’ve been asked here and fed up with wine and stuff, eh?” he exclaimed thickly. “Well, my answer to you is soon given. NO! I’ll take bills from no man! My terms are cash on settling day—cash to pay or cash to receive. I’ll have no other!”

Sir Richard rose also to his feet.

“Mr. Masters, I beg of you to be reasonable,” he said. “You will do yourself no good by adopting this attitude. Facts are facts. We haven’t got a thousand pounds between us.”

“I’ve heard that sort of a tale before,” Masters answered, with a sneer. “Job Masters is too old a bird to be caught by such chaff. I’ll take my risks, gentlemen. I’ll take my risks.”

He moved toward the door. No one spoke a word. The silence as he crossed the room seemed a little ominous. He looked over his shoulder. They were all three standing in their places, looking at him. A vague sense of uneasiness disturbed his equanimity.

“No offence, gents,” he said, “and good afternoon!”

Still no reply. He reached the door and turned the handle. The door was fast. He shook it—gently at first, and then violently. Suddenly he realised that it was locked. He turned sharply around.

“What game’s this?” he exclaimed, fiercely. “Let me out!”

They stood in their places without movement. There was something a little ominous in their silence. Masters was fast becoming a sober man.

“Let me out of here,” he exclaimed, “or I’ll break the door down!”

Sir Richard Dyson came slowly towards him. There was something in his appearance which terrified Masters. He raised his fist to strike the door. He was a fighting man, but he felt a sudden sense of impotence.

“Mr. Masters,” Sir Richard said suavely, “the truth is that we cannot afford to let you go—unless you agree to do what we have asked. You see we really have not the money or any way of raising it—and the inconvenience of being posted you have yourself very ably pointed out. Change your mind, Mr. Masters. Take those bills. We’ll do our best to meet them.”

“I’ll do nothing of the sort,” Masters answered, striking the door fiercely with his clenched fist. “I’ll have cash—nothing but the cash!”

There was a dull, sickening thud, and the bookmaker went over like a shot rabbit. His legs twitched for a moment—a little moan that was scarcely audible broke from his lips. Then he lay quite still. Sir Richard bent over him with the life preserver still in his hand.

“I’ve done it!” he muttered, hoarsely. “One blow! Thank Heaven, he didn’t want another! His skull was as soft as pudding! Ugh!”

He turned away. The man who lay stretched upon the floor was an ugly sight. His two companions, cowering over the table, were not much better. Dyson’s trembling fingers went out for the brandy decanter. Half of what he poured out was spilled upon the tablecloth. The rest he drank from a tumbler, neat.

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“It’s nervous work, this, you fellows,” he said, hoarsely.

“It’s hellish!” Dickinson answered. “Let’s have some air in the room. By God, it’s close!”

He sank back into his chair, white to the lips. Dyson looked at him sharply.

“Look here,” he exclaimed, “I hold you both to our bargain! I was to be the one he attacked and who struck the blow—in self-defence! Remember that—it was in self-defence! I’ve done it! I’ve done my share! I hope to God I’ll forget it some day.

Andrew, you know your task. Be a man, and get to work!”

Dickinson rose to his feet unsteadily.

“Yes!” he said. “What was it? I have forgotten, for the moment, but I am ready.”

“You must get his betting book from his pocket,” Sir Richard directed. “Then you must help Merries downstairs with him, and into the car. Merries is—to get rid of him.”

Merries shivered. His hand, too, went out for the brandy.

“To get rid of him,” he muttered. “It sounds easy!”

“It is easy,” Sir Richard declared. “You have only to keep your nerve, and the thing is done. No one will see him inside the car, in that motoring coat and glasses. You can drive somewhere out into the country and leave him.”

“Leave him!” Merries repeated, trembling. “Leave him—yes!”

Neither of the two men moved.

“I must do more than my share, I suppose,” Sir Richard said, contemptuously. “Come!”

They dragged the man’s body on to a chair, wrapped a huge coat around him, tied a motoring cap under his chin, fixed goggles over his eyes. Sir Richard strolled into the hall and opened the front door. He stood there for a moment, looking up and down the street. When he gave the signal they dragged him out, supported between them, across the pavement, into the car. Ugh!

His attitude was so natural as to be absolutely ghastly. Merries started the car and, sprang into the driver's seat. There were people in the Square now, but the figure reclining in the dark, cushioned interior looked perfectly natural.

“So long, Jimmy,” Sir Richard called out. “See you this evening.”

“Right O!” Merries replied, with a brave effort.

Peter Ruff, summoned by telephone from his sitting room, slipped down the stairs like a cat—noiseless, swift. The voice which had summoned him had been the voice of his secretary—a voice almost unrecognisable—a voice shaken with fear. Fear? No, it had been terror!

On the landing below, exactly underneath the room from which he had descended, there was a door upon which his name was written upon a small brass plate—*Mr. Peter Ruff*. He opened and closed it behind him with a swift movement which he had practised in his idle moments. He found himself looking in upon a curious scene.

Miss Brown, with the radiance of her hair effectually concealed, in plain black skirt and simple blouse—the ideal secretary—had risen from the seat in front of her typewriter, and was standing facing the door through which he had entered, with a small revolver—which he had given her for a birthday present only the day before—clasped in her outstretched hand. The object of her solicitude was, it seemed to Peter Ruff, the most pitiful-looking object upon which he had ever looked. The hours had dwelt with Merries as the years with some people, and

worse. He had lost his cap; his hair hung over his forehead in wild confusion; his eyes were red, bloodshot, and absolutely aflame with the terrors through which he had lived—underneath them the black marks might have been traced with a charcoal pencil. His cheeks were livid save for one burning spot. His clothes, too, were in disorder—the starch had gone from his collar, his tie hung loosely outside his waistcoat. He was cowering back against the wall. And between him and the girl, stretched upon the floor, was the body of a man in a huge motor coat, a limp, inert mass which neither moved nor seemed to have any sign of life. No wonder that Peter Ruff looked around his office, whose serenity had been so tragically disturbed, with an air of mild surprise.

“Dear me,” he exclaimed, “something seems to have happened! My dear Violet, you can put that revolver away. I have secured the door.”

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Her hand fell to her side. She gave a little shiver of relief. Peter Ruff nodded.

“That is more comfortable,” he declared. “Now, perhaps, you will explain—”

“That young man,” she interrupted, “or lunatic—whatever he calls himself—burst in here a few minutes ago, dragging—that!” She pointed to the motionless figure upon the floor. “If I had not stopped him, he would have bolted off without a word of explanation.”

Peter Ruff, with his back against the door, shook his head gravely.

“My dear Lord Merries,” he said, “my office is not a mortuary.”

Merries gasped.

“You know me, then?” he muttered, hoarsely.

“Of course,” Ruff answered. “It is my profession to know everybody. Go and sit down upon that easy-chair, and drink the brandy and soda which Miss Brown is about to mix for you. That’s right.”

Merries staggered across the room and half fell into an easy-chair. He leaned over the side with his face buried in his hands, unable still to face the horror which lay upon the floor. A few seconds later, the tumbler of brandy and soda was in his hands. He drank it like a man who drains fresh life into his veins.

“Perhaps now,” Peter Ruff suggested, pointing to the motionless figure, “you can give me some explanation as to this!”

Merries looked away from him all the time he was speaking. His voice was thick and nervous.

“There were three of us lunching together,” he began—“four in all. There was a dispute, and this man threatened us. Afterwards there was a fight. It fell to my lot to take him away, and I can’t get rid of him! I can’t get rid of him!” he repeated, with something that sounded like a sob.

“I still do not see,” Peter Ruff argued, “why you should have brought him here and deposited him upon my perfectly new carpet.”

“You are Peter Ruff,” Merries declared. “‘Crime Investigator and Private Detective,’ you call yourself. You are used to this sort of thing. You will know what to do with it. It is part of your business.”

“I can assure you,” Peter Ruff answered, “that you are under a delusion as to the details of my profession. I *am* Peter Ruff,” he admitted, “and I call myself a crime investigator—in fact, I am the only one worth speaking of in the world. But I certainly deny that I am used to having dead bodies deposited upon my carpet, and that I make a habit of disposing of them—especially gratis.”

Merries tore open his coat.

“Listen,” he said, his voice shaking hysterically, “I must get rid of it or go mad. For two hours I have been driving about in a motor car with—it for a passenger. I drove to a quiet spot and I tried to lift it out—a policeman rode up! I tried again, a man rushed by on a motor cycle, and turned to look at me! I tried a few minutes later—the policeman came back! It was always the same. The night seemed to have eyes. I was watched everywhere. The—the face began to mock me. I’ll swear that I heard it chuckle once!”

Peter Ruff moved a little further away.

“I don’t think I’ll have anything to do with it,” he declared. “I don’t like your description at all.”

“It’ll be all right with you,” Merries declared eagerly. “It’s my nerves, that’s all. You see, I was there—when the accident happened. See here,” he added, tearing a pocketbook from his coat, “I have three hundred and seventy pounds saved up in case

I had to bolt. I'll keep seventy—three hundred for you—to dispose of it!"

Ruff leaned over the motionless body, looked into its face, and nodded.

"Masters, the bookmaker," he remarked. "H'm! I did hear that he had a lot of money coming to him over the Cambridgeshire."

Merries shuddered.

"May I go?" he pleaded. "There's the three hundred on the table. For God's sake, let me go!"

Peter Ruff nodded.

"I wish you'd saved a little more," he said. "However—"

He turned the lock and Merries rushed out of the room. Ruff looked across the room towards his secretary.

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"Ring up 1535 Central," he ordered, sharply.

Peter Ruff had descended from his apartments on the top floor of the building, in a new brown suit with which he was violently displeased, to meet a caller.

"I am sorry to intrude—Mr. Ruff, I believe it is?" Sir Richard Dyson said, a little irritably—"but I have not a great deal of time to spare—"

"Most natural!" Peter Ruff declared. "Pray take a chair, Sir

Richard. You want to know, of course, about Lord Merries and poor Masters.”

Sir Richard stared at his questioner, for a moment, without speech. Once more the fear which he had succeeded in banishing for a while, shone in his eyes—revealed itself in his white face.

“Try the easy-chair, Sir Richard,” Ruff continued, pleasantly. “Leave your hat and cane on the table there, and make yourself comfortable. I should like to understand exactly what you have come to me for.”

Sir Richard moved his head toward Miss Brown.

“My business with you,” he said, “is more than ordinarily private. I have the honour of knowing Miss—”

“Miss Brown,” Peter interrupted quickly. “In these offices, this young lady’s name is Miss Violet Brown.”

Sir Richard shrugged his shoulders.

“It is of no importance,” he said, “only, as you may understand, my business with you scarcely requires the presence of a third party, even one with the discretion which I am sure Miss Brown possesses.”

“In these matters,” Ruff answered, “my secretary does not exist apart from myself. Her presence is necessary. She takes down in shorthand notes of our conversation. I have a shocking memory, and there are always points which I forget. At the conclusion of our business, whatever it may be, these notes are destroyed. I

could not work without them, however.”

Sir Richard glanced a little doubtfully at the long, slim back of the girl who sat with her face turned away from him.

“Of course,” he began, “if you make yourself personally responsible for her discretion—”

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“I am willing to do so,” Ruff interrupted, brusquely. “I guarantee it. Go on, please.”

“I do not know, of course, where you got your information from,” Sir Richard began, “but it is perfectly true that I have come here to consult you upon a matter in which the two people whose names you have mentioned are concerned. The disappearance of Job Masters is, of course, common talk; but I cannot tell what has led you to associate with it the temporary absence of Lord Merries from this country.”

“Let me ask you this question,” Ruff said. “How are you affected by the disappearance of Masters?”

“Indirectly, it has caused me a great deal of inconvenience,” Sir Richard declared.

“Facts, please,” murmured Peter.

“It has been rumoured,” Sir Richard admitted, “that I owed Masters a large sum of money which I could not pay.”

“Anything else?”

“It has also been rumoured,” Sir Richard continued, “that he

was seen to enter my house that day, and that he remained there until late in the afternoon.”

“Did he?” asked Ruff.

“Certainly not,” Sir Richard answered.

Peter Ruff yawned for a moment, but covered the indiscretion with his hand.

“Respecting this inconvenience,” he said, “which you admit that the disappearance of Job Masters has caused you, what is its tangible side?”

Sir Richard drew his chair a little nearer to the table where Ruff was sitting. His voice dropped almost to a whisper.

“It seems absurd,” he said, “and yet, what I tell you is the truth. I have been followed about—shadowed, in fact—for several days. Men, even in my own social circle, seem to hold aloof from me. It is as though,” he continued slowly, “people were beginning to suspect me of being connected in some way with the man’s disappearance.”

Ruff, who had been making figures with a pencil on the edge of his blotting paper, suddenly turned round. His eyes flashed with a new light as they became fixed upon his companion’s.

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“And are you not?” he asked, calmly.

Sir Richard bore himself well. For a moment he had shrunk back. Then he half rose to his feet.

“Mr. Ruff!” he said. “I must protest—”

“Stop!”

Peter Ruff used no violent gesture. Only his forefinger tapped the desk in front of him. His voice was as smooth as velvet.

“Tell me as much or as little as you please, Sir Richard,” he said, “but let that little or that much be the truth! On those terms only I may be able to help you. You do not go to your physician and expect him to prescribe to you while you conceal your symptoms, or to your lawyer for advice and tell him half the truth. I am not asking for your confidence. I simply tell you that you are wasting your time and mine if you choose to withhold it.”

Sir Richard was silent. He recognized a new quality in the man—but the truth was an awful thing to tell! He considered—then told.

Ruff briskly asked two questions. “In alluding to your heavy settlement with Masters, you said just now that you could not have paid him—then.”

“Quite so,” Sir Richard admitted. “That is the rotten part of the whole affair. Four days later a wonderful double came off—one in which we were all interested, and one which not one of us expected. We’ve drawn a considerable amount already from one or two bookies, and I believe even Masters owes us a bit now.”

“Thank you,” Ruff said. “I think that I know everything now. My fee is five hundred guineas.”

Sir Richard looked at him.

“What?” he exclaimed.

“Five hundred guineas,” Ruff repeated.

“For a consultation?” Sir Richard asked.

Peter Ruff shook his head.

“More than that,” he said. “You are a brave man in your way, Sir Richard Dyson, but you are going about now shivering under a load of fear. It sits like a devil incarnate upon your shoulders. It poisons the air wherever you go. Write your cheque, Sir Richard, and you can leave that little black devil in my wastebasket. You are under my protection. Nothing will happen to you.”

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Sir Richard sat like a man mesmerised. The little man with the amiable expression and the badly fitting suit was leaning back in his chair, his finger tips pressed together, waiting.

“Nothing will happen!” Sir Richard repeated, incredulously.

“Certainly not. I guarantee you against any inconvenience which might arise to you from this recent unfortunate affair. Isn’t that all you want?”

“It’s all I want, certainly,” Sir Richard declared, “but I must understand a little how you propose to secure my immunity.”

Ruff shook his head.

“I have my own methods,” he said. “I can help only those who trust me.”

Sir Richard drew a cheque book from his pocket. “I don’t know why I should believe in you,” he said, as he wrote the cheque.

“But you do,” Peter Ruff said, smiling. “Fortunately for you, you do!”

It was not so easy to impart a similar confidence into the breast of Colonel Dickinson, with whom Sir Richard dined that night tête-à-tête. Dickinson was inclined to think that Sir Richard had been “had.”

“You’ve paid a ridiculous fee,” he argued, “and all that you have in return is the fellow’s promise to see you through. It isn’t like you to part with money so easily, Richard. Did he hypnotise you?”

“I don’t think so,” Sir Richard answered. “I wasn’t conscious of it.”

“What sort of a fellow is he?” Dickinson asked.

Sir Richard looked reflectively into his glass.

“He’s a vulgar sort of little Johnny,” he said. “Looks as though he were always dressed in new clothes and couldn’t get used to them.”

Three men entered the room. Two remained in the background. John Dory came forward towards the table.

“Sir Richard Dyson,” he said, gravely, “I have come upon an unpleasant errand.”

“Go on,” Sir Richard said, fingering something hard in the inside pocket of his coat.

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“I have a warrant for your arrest,” Dory continued, “in connection with the disappearance of Job Masters on Saturday, the 10th of November last. I will read the terms of the warrant, if you choose. It is my duty to warn you that anything you may now say can be used in evidence against you. This gentleman, I believe, is Colonel Dickinson?”

“That is my name, sir,” Dickinson answered, with unexpected fortitude.

“I regret to say,” the detective continued, “that I have also a warrant for your arrest in connection with the same matter.”

Sir Richard had hold of the butt end of his revolver then. Like grisly phantoms, the thoughts chased one another through his brain. Should he shoot and end it—pass into black nothingness—escape disgrace, but die like a rat in a corner? His finger was upon the trigger. Then suddenly his heart gave a great leap. He raised his head as though listening. Something flashed in his eyes—something that was almost like hope. There was no mistaking that voice which he had heard in the hall! He made a great rally.

“I can only conclude,” he said, turning to the detective, “that you have made some absurd blunder. If you really possess the warrants you speak of, however, Colonel Dickinson and I will accompany you wherever you choose.”

Then the door opened and Peter Ruff walked in, followed by Job Masters, whose head was still bandaged, and who seemed to have lost a little flesh and a lot of colour. Peter Ruff looked round apologetically. He seemed surprised not to find Sir Richard Dyson and Colonel Dickinson alone. He seemed more than ever surprised to recognize Dory.

“I trust,” he said smoothly, “that our visit is not inopportune. Sir Richard Dyson, I believe?” he continued, bowing—“my friend, Mr. Masters here, has consulted me as to the loss of a betting book, and we ventured to call to ask you, sir, if by any chance on his recent visit to your house—”

“God in Heaven, it’s Masters!” Dyson exclaimed. “It’s Job Masters!”

“That’s me, sir,” Masters admitted. “Mr. Ruff thought you might be able to help me find that book.”

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Sir Richard swayed upon his feet. Then the blood rushed once more through his veins.

“Your book’s here in my cabinet, safe enough,” he said. “You left it here after our luncheon that day. Where on earth have you been to, man?” he continued. “We want some money from you over Myopia.”

“I’ll pay all right, sir,” Masters answered. “Fact is, after our luncheon party I’m afraid I got a bit fuddled. I don’t seem to remember much.”

He sat down a little heavily. Peter Ruff hastened to the table and took up a glass.

“You will excuse me if I give him a little brandy, won’t you, sir?” he said. “He’s really not quite fit for getting about yet, but he was worrying about his book.”

“Give him all the brandy he can drink,” Sir Richard answered.

The detective’s face had been a study. He knew Masters well enough by sight—there was no doubt about his identity! His teeth came together with an angry little click. He had made a mistake! It was a thing which would be remembered against him forever! It was as bad as his failure to arrest that young man at Daisy Villa.

“Your visit, Masters,” Sir Richard said, with a curious smile at the corners of his lips, “is, in some respects, a little opportune. About that little matter we were speaking of,” he continued, turning towards the detective.

“We have only to offer you our apologies, Sir Richard,” Dory answered.

Then he crossed the room and confronted Peter Ruff.

“Do I understand, sir, that your name is Ruff—Peter Ruff?” he asked.

“That is my name, sir,” Peter Ruff admitted, pleasantly. “Yours, I believe, is Dory. We are likely to come across one another now and then, I suppose. Glad to know you.”

The detective stood quite still, and there was no geniality in his face.

“I wonder—have we ever met before?” he asked, without removing his eyes from the other’s face. Peter Ruff smiled.

“Not professionally, at any rate,” he answered. “I know that at Scotland Yard you don’t think much of us small fry, but we find out things sometimes!”

“Why didn’t you contradict all those rumours as to his disappearance?” the detective asked, pointing to where Job Masters was contentedly sipping his brandy and water.

“I was acting for my client, and in my own interests,” replied Peter. “It was surely no part of my duty to save you gentlemen at Scotland Yard from hunting up mare’s nests!”

John Dory went out, followed by his men. Sir Richard took Peter Ruff by the arm, and, leading him to the sideboard, mixed him a drink.

“Peter Ruff,” he said, “you’re a clever scoundrel, but you’ve earned your five hundred guineas. Hang it, you’re welcome to them! Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Peter Ruff raised his glass and set it down again. Once more he eyed with admiration his client’s well-turned out figure.

“You might give me a letter to your tailors, Sir Richard,” he begged.

Sir Richard laughed outright—it was some time since he had laughed!

“You shall have it, Peter Ruff,” he declared, raising his glass
—“and here’s to you!”

CHAPTER III

VINCENT CAWDOR, COMMISSION AGENT

For the second time since their new association, Peter Ruff had surprised that look upon his secretary's face. This time he wheeled around in his chair and addressed her.

"My dear Violet," he said, "be frank with me. What is wrong?"

Miss Brown turned to face her employer. Save for a greater demureness of expression and the extreme simplicity of her attire, she had changed very little since she had given up her life of comparative luxury to become Peter Ruff's secretary. There was a sort of personal elegance which clung to her, notwithstanding her strenuous attempts to dress for her part, except for which she looked precisely as a private secretary and typist should look. She even wore a black bow at the back of her hair.

"I have not complained, have I?" she asked.

"Do not waste time," Peter Ruff said, coldly. "Proceed."

"I have not enough to do," she said. "I do not understand why you refuse so many cases."

Peter Ruff nodded.

“I did not bring my talents into this business,” he said, “to watch flirting wives, to ascertain the haunts of gay husbands, or to detect the pilferings of servants.”

“Anything is better than sitting still,” she protested.

“I do not agree with you,” Peter Ruff said. “I like sitting still very much indeed—one has time to think. Is there anything else?”

“Shall I really go on?” she asked.

“By all means,” he answered.

“I have an idea,” she continued, “that you are subordinating your general interests to your secret enmity—to one man. You are waiting until you can find another case in which you are pitted against him.”

“Sometimes,” Peter Ruff said, “your intelligence surprises me!”

“I came to you,” she continued, looking at him earnestly, “for two reasons. The personal one I will not touch upon. The other was my love of excitement. I have tried many things in life, as you know, Peter, but I have seemed to carry always with me the heritage of weariness. I thought that my position here would help me to fight against it.”

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“You have seen me bring a corpse to life,” Peter Ruff reminded her, a little aggrieved.

She smiled.

“It was a month ago,” she reminded him.

“I can’t do that sort of thing every day,” he declared.

“Naturally,” she answered; “but you have refused four cases within the last five days.”

Peter Ruff whistled softly to himself for several moments.

“Seen anything of our new neighbour in the flat above?” he asked, with apparent irrelevance.

Miss Brown looked across at him with upraised eyebrows.

“I have been in the lift with him twice,” she answered.

“Fancy his appearance?” Ruff asked, casually.

“Not in the least!” Violet answered. “I thought him a vulgar, offensive person!”

Peter Ruff chuckled. He seemed immensely delighted.

“Mr. Vincent Cawdor he calls himself, I believe,” he remarked.

“I have no idea,” Miss Brown declared. The subject did not appeal to her.

“His name is on a small copper plate just over the letter-box,” Ruff said. “Rather neat idea, by the bye. He calls himself a commission agent, I believe.”

Violet was suddenly interested. She realised, after all, that Mr.

Vincent Cawdor might be a person of some importance.

“What is a commission agent?” she asked.

Peter Ruff shook his head.

“It might mean anything,” he declared. “Never trust any one who is not a little more explicit as to his profession. I am afraid that this Mr. Vincent Cawdor, for instance, is a bad lot.”

“I am sure he is,” Miss Brown declared.

“Looks after a pretty girl, coughs in the lift—all that sort of thing, eh?” Peter Ruff asked.

She nodded.

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“Disgusting!” she exclaimed, with emphasis.

Peter Ruff sighed, and glanced at the clock. The existence of Mr. Vincent Cawdor seemed to pass out of his mind.

“It is nearly one o’clock,” he said. “Where do you usually lunch, Violet?”

“It depends upon my appetite,” she answered, carelessly. “Most often at an A B C.”

“To-day,” Peter Ruff said, “you will be extravagant—at my expense.”

“I had a poor breakfast,” Miss Brown remarked, complacently.

“You will leave at once,” Peter Ruff said, “and you will go to the French Café at the Milan. Get a table facing the courtyard, and towards the hotel side of the room. Keep your eyes open and tell me exactly what you see.”

She looked at him with parted lips. Her eyes were full of eager questioning.

“Mere skirmishing,” Peter Ruff continued, “but I think—yes, I think that it may lead to something.”

“Whom am I to watch?” she asked.

“Any one who looks interesting,” Peter Ruff answered. “For instance, if this person Vincent Cawdor should be about.”

“He would recognize me!” she declared.

Peter Ruff shrugged his shoulders.

“One must hold the candle,” he remarked.

“I decline to flirt with him,” she declared. “Nothing would induce me to be pleasant to such an odious creature.”

“He will be too busy to attempt anything of the sort. Of course he may not be there. It may be the merest fancy on my part. At any rate, you may rely upon it that he will not make any overtures in a public place like the Milan. Mr. Vincent Cawdor may be a curious sort of person, but I do not fancy that he is a fool!”

“Very well,” Miss Brown said, “I will go.”

“Be back soon after three,” Peter Ruff said. “I am going up to my room to do my exercises.”

“And afterwards?” she asked.

“I shall have my lunch sent in,” he answered. “Don’t hurry back, though. I shall not expect you till a quarter past three.”

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It was a few minutes past that time when Miss Brown returned. Peter Ruff was sitting at his desk, looking as though he had never moved. He was absorbed by a book of patterns sent in by his new tailor, and he only glanced up when she entered the room.

“Violet,” he said, earnestly, “come in and sit down. I want to consult you. There is a new material here—a sort of mouse-coloured cheviot. I wonder whether it would suit me?”

Violet was looking very handsome and a little flushed. She raised her veil and came over to his side.

“Put that stupid book away, Peter,” she said. “I want to tell you about the Milan.”

He leaned back in his chair.

“Ah!” he said. “I had forgotten! Was Mr. Vincent Cawdor there?”

“Yes!” she answered, still a little breathless. “There was some one else there, too, in whom you are still more interested.”

He nodded.

“Go on,” he said.

“Mr. Vincent Cawdor,” she continued, “came in alone. He looked just as objectionable as ever, and he stared at me till I nearly threw my wine glass at him.”

“He did not speak to you?” Peter Ruff asked.

“I was afraid that he was going to,” Miss Brown said, “but fortunately he met a friend who came to his table and lunched with him.”

“A friend,” Ruff remarked. “Good! What was he like?”

“Fair, slight, Teutonic,” Miss Brown answered. “He wore thick spectacles, and his moustache was positively yellow.”

Ruff nodded.

“Go on,” he said.

“Towards the end of luncheon,” she continued, “an American came up to them.”

“An American?” Peter Ruff interrupted. “How do you know that?”

Miss Brown smiled.

“He was clean-shaven and he wore neat clothes,” she said. “He talked with an accent you could have cut with a knife and

he had a Baedeker sticking out of his pocket. After luncheon, they all three went away to the smoking room.”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“Anything else?” he asked.

The girl smiled triumphantly.

“Yes!” she declared. “There was something else—something which I think you will find interesting. At the next table to me there was a man—alone. Can you guess who he was?”

“John Dory,” Ruff said, calmly.

The girl was disappointed.

“You knew!” she exclaimed.

“My dear Violet,” he said, “I did not send you there on a fool’s errand.”

“There is something doing, then?” she exclaimed.

“There is likely,” he answered, grimly, “to be a great deal doing!”

The two men who stood upon the hill, and Peter Ruff, who lay upon his stomach behind a huge boulder, looked upon a new thing.

Far down in the valley from out of a black shed—the only sign

of man's handiwork for many miles—it came—something grey at first, moving slowly as though being pushed down a slight incline, then afloat in the air, gathering speed—something between a torpedo with wings and a great prehistoric insect. Now and then it described strange circles, but mostly it came towards them as swift and as true as an arrow shot from a bow. The two men looked at one another—the shorter, to whose cheeks the Cumberland winds had brought no trace of colour, gave vent to a hoarse exclamation.

“He's done it!” he growled.

“Wait!” the other answered.

Over their heads the thing wheeled, and seemed to stand still in the air. The beating of the engine was so faint that Peter Ruff, from behind the boulder, could hear all that was said. A man leaned out from his seat—a man with wan cheeks but blazing eyes.

“Listen,” he said. “Take your glasses. There—due north —can you see a steeple?”

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The men turned their field glasses in the direction toward which the other pointed.

“Yes!” they answered.

“It is sixteen miles, as the crow flies, to Barnham Church—thirty-two miles there and back. Wait!”

He swung round, dived till he seemed about to touch the hillside, then soared upwards and straight away. Peter Ruff took

out his watch. The other two men gazed with fascinated eyes after the disappearing speck.

“If he does it—” the shorter one muttered.

“He will do it!” the other answered.

He was back again before their eyes were weary of watching. Peter Ruff, from behind the boulder, closed his watch. Thirty-two miles in less than half an hour! The youth leaned from his seat.

“Is it enough?” he asked, hoarsely.

“It is enough!” the two men answered together. “We will come down.”

The youth touched a lever and the machine glided down towards the valley, falling all the while with the effortless grace of a parachute. The shed from which his machine had issued was midway down a slope, with a short length of rails which ran, apparently, through it. The machine seemed to hover for several moments above the building, then descended slowly on to the rails and disappeared in the shed. The two men were already half-way down the hill. Peter Ruff rose from behind the boulder, stretched himself with a sense of immense relief, and lit a pipe. As yet he dared not descend. He simply changed his hiding place for a spot which enabled him to command a view of the handful of cottages at the back of the hill. He had plenty to think about. It was a wonderful thing—this—which he had seen!

The youth, meanwhile, was drinking deep of the poisonous cup. He walked between the two men—his cheeks were flushed, his

eyes on fire.

“If all the world to-day had seen what we have seen,” the older man was saying, “there would be no more talk of Wilbur Wrights or Farmans. Those men are babies, playing with their toys.”

“Mine is the ideal principle,” the youth declared. “No one else has thought of it, no one else has made use of it. Yet all the time I am afraid—it is so simple.”

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“Sell quick, then,” the fair-headed man advised. “By to-morrow night I can promise you fifty thousand pounds.”

The youth stopped. He drew a deep breath.

“I shall sell,” he declared. “I need money. I want to live. Fifty thousand pounds is enough. Eleven weary months I have slept and toiled there in the shed.”

“It is finished,” the older man declared. “To-night you shall come with us to London. To-morrow night your pockets shall be full of gold. It will be a change for you.”

The youth sobbed.

“God knows it will,” he muttered. “I haven’t two shillings in the world, and I owe for my last petrol.”

The two men laughed heartily. The elder took a little bundle of notes from his pocket and handed them to the boy.

“Come,” he said, “not for another moment shall you feel as poor

as that. Money will have no value for you in the future. The fifty thousand pounds will only be a start. After that, you will get royalties. If I had it, I would give you a quarter of a million now for your plans; I know that I can get you more.”

The youth laughed hysterically. They entered the tiny inn and drank home-made wine—the best they could get. Then a great car drew up outside, and the older—the clean-shaven man, who looked like an American—hurried out, and dragging a hamper from beneath the seat returned with a gold-foiled bottle in his hand.

“Come,” he said, “a toast! We have one bottle left—one bottle of the best!”

“Champagne!” the youth cried eagerly, holding out his hand.

“The only wine for the conquerors,” the other declared, pouring it out into the thick tumblers. “Drink, all of you, to the Franklin Flying Machine, to the millions she will earn—to to-morrow night!”

The youth drained his glass, watched it replenished, and drained it again. Then they went out to the car.

“There is one thing yet to be done,” he said. “Wait here for me.”

They waited whilst he climbed up toward the shed. The two men watched him. A little group of rustics stood open-mouthed around the great car. Then there was a little shout. From above their heads came the sound of a great explosion—red flames were leaping up from that black barn to the sky. The two men looked at one another. They rushed to the hill and met

the youth descending.

“What the—”

He stopped them.

“I dared not leave it here,” he explained. “It would have been madness. I am perfectly certain that I have been watched during the last few days. I can build another in a week. I have the plans in my pocket for every part.”

The older man wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

“You are sure—that you have the plans?” he asked.

The youth struck himself on the chest.

“They are here,” he answered, “every one of them!”

“Perhaps you are right, then,” the other man answered. “It gave me a turn, though. You are sure that you can make it again in the time you say?”

“Of course!” the youth answered, impatiently. “Besides, the thing is so simple. It speaks for itself.”

They climbed into the car, and in a few minutes were rushing away southwards.

“To-morrow night—to-morrow night it all begins!” the youth continued. “I must start with ready-made clothes. I’ll get the best I can, eat the best I can, drink wine, go to the music halls. To-morrow night.”

His speech ended in a wail—a strange, half-stifled cry which rang out with a chill, ghostly sound upon the black silence. His face was covered with a wet towel, a ghastly odor was in his nostrils, his lips refused to utter any further sound. He lay back among the cushions, senseless. The car slowed down.

“Get the papers, quick!” the elder man muttered, opening the youth’s coat. “Here they are! Catch hold, Dick! My God! What’s that?”

He shook from head to foot. The little fair man looked at him with contempt.

“A sheep bell on the moor,” he said. “Are you sure you have everything?”

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“Yes!” the other muttered.

They both stood up and raised the prostrate form between them. Below them were the black waters of the lake.

“Over with him!” the younger said. “Quick!”

Once more his companion shrank away.

“Listen!” he muttered, hoarsely.

They both held their breaths. From somewhere along the road behind came a faint sound like the beating of an engine.

“It’s a car!” the elder man exclaimed. “Quick! Over with him!”

They lifted the body of the boy, whose lips were white and

speechless now, and threw him into the water. With a great splash he disappeared. They watched for a moment. Only the ripples flowed away from the place where he had sunk. They jumped back to their seats.

“There’s something close behind,” the older man muttered. “Get on! Fast! Fast!”

The younger man hesitated.

“Perhaps,” he said slowly, “it would be better to wait and see who it is coming up behind. Our young friend there is safe. The current has him, and the tarn is bottomless.”

There was a moment’s indecision—a moment which was to count for much in the lives of three men. Then the elder one’s counsels prevailed. They crept away down the hill, smoothly and noiselessly. Behind them, the faint throbbing grew less and less distinct. Soon they heard it no more. They drove into the dawn and through the long day.

Side by side on one of the big leather couches in the small smoking room of the Milan Hotel, Mr. James P. Rounceby and his friend Mr. Richard Marnstam sat whispering together. It was nearly two o’clock, and they were alone in the room. Some of the lights had been turned out. The roar of life in the streets without had ceased. It was an uneasy hour for those whose consciences were not wholly at rest!

The two men were in evening dress—Rounceby in dinner coat and black tie, as befitted his role of travelling American. The glasses in front of them were only half-filled, and had

remained so for the last hour. Their conversation had been nervous and spasmodic. It was obvious that they were waiting for some one.

Three o'clock struck by the little timepiece on the mantel shelf. A little exclamation of a profane nature broke from Rounceby's lips. He leaned toward his companion.

"Say," he muttered, in a rather thick undertone, "how about this fellow Vincent Cawdor? You haven't any doubts about him, I suppose? He's on the square, all right, eh?"

Marnstam wet his lips nervously.

"Cawdor's all right," he said. "I had it direct from headquarters at Paris. What are you uneasy about, eh?"

Rounceby pointed towards the clock.

"Do you see the time?" he asked.

"He said he'd be late," Marnstam answered.

Rounceby put his hand to his forehead and found it moist.

"It's been a silly game, all along," he muttered. "We'd better have brought the young ass up here and jostled him!"

"Not so easy," Marnstam answered. "These young fools have a way of turning obstinate. He'd have chucked us, sure. Anyhow, he's safer where he is."

They relapsed once more into silence. A storm of rain beat upon

the window. Rounceby glanced up. It was as black out there as were the waters of that silent tarn! The man shivered as the thought struck him. Marnstam, who had no nerves, twirled his moustache and watched his companion with wonder.

“You look as though you saw a ghost,” he remarked.

“Perhaps I do!” Rounceby growled.

“You had better finish your drink, my dear fellow,” Marnstam advised. “Afterwards—”

Suddenly he stiffened into attention. He laid his hand upon companion’s knee.

“Listen!” he said. “There is some one coming.”

They leaned a little forward. The swing doors were opened. A girl’s musical laugh rang out from the corridor. Tall and elegant, with her black lace skirt trailing upon the floor, her left hand resting upon the shoulder of the man into whose ear she was whispering, and whom she led straight to one of the writing tables, Miss Violet Brown swept into the room. On her right, and nearest to the two men, was Mr. Vincent Cawdor.

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“Now you can go and talk to your friends!” she exclaimed, lightly. “I am going to make Victor listen to me.”

Cawdor left his two companions and sank on to the couch by Rounceby’s side. The young man, with his opera hat still on his head, and the light overcoat which he had been carrying on the floor by his side, was seated before the writing table with his

back to them. Miss Brown was leaning over him, with her hand upon the back of his chair. They were out of hearing of the other three men.

“Well, Rounceby, my friend,” Mr. Vincent Cawdor remarked, cheerfully, “you’re having a late sitting, eh?”

“We’ve been waiting for you, you fool!” Rounceby answered. “What on earth are you thinking about, bringing a crowd like this about with you, eh?”

Cawdor smiled, reassuringly.

“Don’t you worry,” he said, in a lower tone. “I know my way in and out of the ropes here better than you can teach me. A big hotel like this is the safest and the most dangerous place in the world—just how you choose to make it. You’ve got to bluff ’em all the time. That’s why I brought the young lady—particular friend of mine—real nice girl, too!”

“And the young man?” Rounceby asked, suspiciously.

Cawdor grew more serious.

“That’s Captain Lowther,” he said softly—“private secretary to Colonel Dean, who’s the chief of the aëronaut department at Aldershot. He has a draft in his pocket for twenty thousand pounds. It is yours if he is satisfied with the plans.”

“Twenty thousand pounds!” Marnstam said, thoughtfully. “It is very little—very little indeed for the risks which we have run!”

Cawdor moved his place and sat between the men. He laid a

hand upon Marnstam's shoulder—another on Rounceby's knee.

“My dear friends,” he said, impressively, “if you could have built a model, or conducted these negotiations in the usual way, you might have asked a million. As it is, I think I am the only man in England who could have dealt with this matter—so satisfactorily.”

Rounceby glanced suspiciously at the young man to whom Miss Brown was still devoting the whole of her attention.

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“Why don't he come out and talk like a man?” he asked. “What's the idea of his sitting over there with his back to us?”

“I want him never to see your faces—to deal only with me,” Cawdor explained. “Remember that he is in an official position. The money he is going to part with is secret service money.”

The two men were beginning to be more reassured. Rounceby slowly produced a roll of oilskin from his pocket.

“He'll look at them as he sits there,” he insisted. “There must be no copying or making notes, mind.”

Cawdor smiled in a superior fashion.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “you are dealing with the emissary of a government—not one of your own sort.”

Rounceby glanced at his companion, who nodded. Then he handed over the plans.

“Tell him to look sharp,” he said. “It’s not so late but that there may be people in here yet.”

Cawdor crossed the room with the plans, and laid them down before the writing table. Rounceby rose to his feet and lit a cigar. Marnstam walked to the further window and back again. They stood side by side. Rounceby’s whole frame seemed to have stiffened with some new emotion.

“There’s something wrong, Jim,” Marnstam whispered softly in his ear. “You’ve got the old lady in your pocket?”

“Yes!” Rounceby answered thickly, “and, by Heavens, I’m going to use it!”

“Don’t shoot unless it’s the worst,” Marnstam counselled. “I shall go out of that window, into the tree, and run for the river. But bluff first, Jim—bluff for your life!”

There were swinging doors leading into the room from the hotel side, and a small door exactly opposite which led to the residential part of the place. Both of these doors were opened at precisely the same moment. Through the former stepped two strong-looking men in long overcoats, and with the unmistakable appearance of policemen in plain clothes. Through the latter came John Dory! He walked straight up to the two men. It spoke volumes for his courage that, knowing their characters and believing them to be in desperate straits, he came unarmed.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I hold warrants for your arrest. I will not trouble you with your aliases. You are known to-day, I believe, as James Rounceby and Richard Marnstam. Will you come

quietly?”

Marnstam’s expression was one of bland and beautiful surprise.

“My dear sir,” he said, edging, however, a little toward the window—“you must be joking! What is the charge?”

“You are charged with the wilful murder of a young man named Victor Franklin,” answered Dory. “His body was recovered from Longthorp Tarn this afternoon. You had better say nothing. Also with the theft of certain papers known to have been in his possession.”

Now it is possible that at this precise moment Marnstam would have made his spring for the window and Rounceby his running fight for liberty. The hands of both men were upon their revolvers, and John Dory’s life was a thing of no account. But at this juncture a thing happened. There were in the room the two policemen guarding the swing doors, and behind them the pale faces of a couple of night porters looking anxiously in. Vincent Cawdor and Miss Brown were standing side by side, a little in the background, and the young man who had been their companion had risen also to his feet. As though with some intention of intervening, he moved a step forward, almost in line with Dory. Rounceby saw him, and a new fear gripped him by the heart. He shrank back, his fingers relaxed their hold of his weapon, the sweat was hot upon his forehead. Marnstam, though he seemed for a moment stupefied, realised the miracle which had happened and struck boldly for his own.

“If this is a joke,” he said, “it strikes me as being a particularly bad one. I should like to know, sir, how you dare to come into

this room and charge me and my friend—Mr. Rounceby—with being concerned in the murder of a young man who is even now actually standing by your side.”

John Dory started back. He looked with something like apprehension at the youth to whom Marnstam pointed.

“My name is Victor Franklin,” that young man declared.
“What’s all this about?”

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Dory felt the ground give beneath his feet. Nevertheless, he set his teeth and fought for his hand.

“You say that your name is Victor Franklin?” he asked.

“Certainly!”

“You are the inventor of a flying machine?”

“I am.”

“You were in Westmoreland with these two men a few days ago?”

“I was,” the young man admitted.

“You left the village of Scawton in a motor car with them?”

“Yes! We quarrelled on the way, and parted.”

“You were robbed of nothing?”

Victor Franklin smiled.

“Certainly not,” he answered. “I had nothing worth stealing except my plans, and they are in my pocket now.”

There was a few moments’ intense silence. Dory wheeled suddenly round, and looked to where Mr. Vincent Cawdor had been standing.

“Where is Mr. Cawdor?” he asked, sharply.

“The gentleman with the grey moustache left a few seconds ago,” one of the men at the door said.

Dory was very pale.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I have to offer you my apologies. I have apparently been deceived by some false information. The charge is withdrawn.”

He turned on his heel and left the room. The two policemen followed him.

“Keep them under observation,” Dory ordered shortly, “but I am afraid this fellow Cawdor has sold me.”

He found a hansom outside, and sprang into it.

“Number 27, Southampton Row,” he ordered.

Rounceby and his partner were alone in the little smoking room. The former was almost inarticulate. The night porter brought them brandy, and both men drank.

“We’ve got to get to the bottom of this, Marnstam,” Mr.

Rounceby muttered.

Mr. Marnstam was thinking.

“Do you remember that sound through the darkness,” he said —“the beating of an engine way back on the road?”

“What of it?” Rounceby demanded.

“It was a motor bicycle,” Marnstam said quietly. “I thought so at the time.”

“Supposing some one followed us and pulled him out,” Rounceby said, hoarsely, “why are we treated like this? I tell you we’ve been made fools of! We’ve been treated like children—not even to be punished! We’ll have the truth somehow out of that devil Cawdor! Come!”

They made their way to the courtyard and found a cab.

“Number 27, Southampton Row!” they ordered.

They reached their destination some time before Dory, whose horse fell down in the Strand, and who had to walk. They ascended to the fourth floor of the building and rang the bell of Vincent Cawdor’s room—no answer. They plied the knocker—no result. Rounceby peered through the keyhole.

“He hasn’t come home yet,” he remarked. “There is no light anywhere in the place.”

The door of a flat across the passage was quietly opened. Mr. Peter Ruff, in a neat black smoking suit and slippers, and

holding a pipe in his hand, looked out.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” he said, “but I do not think that Mr. Cawdor is in. He went out early this evening, and I have not heard him return.”

The two men turned away.

“We are much obliged to you, sir,” Mr. Marnstam said.

“Can I give him any message?” Peter Ruff asked, politely. “We generally see something of one another in the morning.”

“You can tell him—” Rounceby began.

“No message, thanks!” Marnstam interrupted. “We shall probably run across him ourselves to-morrow.”

John Dory was nearly a quarter of an hour late. After his third useless summons, Mr. Peter Ruff presented himself again.

“I am afraid,” he said, “you will not find my neighbour at home. There have been several people enquiring for him to-night, without any result.”

John Dory came slowly across the landing.

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“Good evening, Mr. Ruff!” he said.

“Why, it’s Mr. Dory!” Peter Ruff declared. “Come in, do, and have a drink.”

John Dory accepted the invitation, and his eyes were busy in

that little sitting room during the few minutes which it took his host to mix that whisky and soda.

“Nothing wrong with our friend opposite, I hope?” Peter Ruff asked, jerking his head across the landing.

“I hope not, Mr. Ruff,” John Dory said. “No doubt in the morning he will be able to explain everything. I must say that I should like to see him to-night, though.”

“He may turn up yet,” Peter Ruff remarked, cheerfully. “He’s like myself—a late bird.”

“I fear not,” Dory answered, drily. “Nice rooms you have here, sir. Just a sitting room and bedroom, eh?”

Peter Ruff stood up and threw open the door of the inner apartment.

“That’s so,” he answered. “Care to have a look round?”

The detective did look round, and pretty thoroughly. As soon as he was sure that there was no one concealed upon the premises, he drank his whisky and soda and went.

“I’ll look in again to see Cawdor,” he remarked—“to-morrow, perhaps, or the next day.”

“I’ll let him know if I see him about,” Peter Ruff declared. “Sorry the lift’s stopped. Three steps to the left and straight on. Good-night!”

Miss Brown arrived early the following morning, and was disposed to be inquisitive.

“I should like to know,” she said, “exactly what has become of Mr. Vincent Cawdor.”

Peter Ruff took her upstairs. There was a little mound of ashes in the grate.

She nodded.

“I imagined that,” she said. “But why did you send me out to watch yourself?”

“My dear Violet,” Peter Ruff answered, “there is no man in the world to-day who is my equal in the art of disguising himself. At the same time, I wanted to know whether I could deceive you. I wanted to be quite sure that my study of Mr. Vincent Cawdor was a safe one. I took those rooms in his name and in his own person. I do not think that it occurred even to our friend John Dory to connect us in his mind.”

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“Very well,” she went on. “Now tell me, please, what took you up to Westmoreland?”

“I followed Rounceby and Marnstam,” he answered, “I knew them when I was abroad, studying crime—I could tell you a good deal about both those men if it were worth while—and I knew, when they hired a big motor car and engaged a crook to drive it, that they were worth following. I saw the trial of the flying machine, and when they started off with young Franklin, I followed on a motor bicycle. I fished him out of the tarn where they left him for dead, brought him on to London, and made my

own terms with him.”

“What about the body which was found in the Longthorp Tarn?” she asked.

“I had that telegram sent myself,” Peter Ruff answered.

She looked at him severely.

“You went out of your way to make a fool of John Dory!” she said, frowning at him.

“That I admit,” he answered.

“It seems to me,” she continued, “that that, after all, has been the chief object of the whole affair. I do not see that we—that is the firm—profit in the least.”

Peter Ruff chuckled.

“We’ve got a fourth share in the Franklin Flying Machine,” he answered, “and I’m hanged if I’d sell it for a hundred thousand pounds.”

“You’ve taken advantage of that young man’s gratitude,” she declared.

Peter Ruff shook his head.

“I earned the money,” he answered.

CHAPTER IV

THE INDISCRETION OF LETTY SHAW

Amidst a storm of whispered criticisms, the general opinion was that Letty Shaw was a silly little fool who ought to have known better. When she had entered the restaurant a few minutes before midnight, followed by Austen Abbott, every one looked to see a third person following them. No third person, however, appeared. Gustav himself conducted them to a small table laid for two, covered with pink roses, and handed his fair client the menu of a specially ordered supper. There was no gainsaying the fact that Letty and her escort proposed supping alone!

The Café at the Milan was, without doubt, the fashionable rendezvous of the moment for those ladies connected with the stage who, after their performance, had not the time or the inclination to make the conventional toilet demanded by the larger restaurants. Letty Shaw, being one of the principal ornaments of the musical comedy stage, was well known to every one in the room. There was scarcely a person there who within the last fortnight had not found an opportunity of congratulating her upon her engagement to Captain the Honourable Brian Sotherst. Sotherst was rich, and one of the most popular young men about town. Letty Shaw, although she had had one or two harmless flirtations, was well known as a self-respecting and hard-working young actress who loved her work, and against whom no one had ever had a word to say. Consequently, the shock was all the greater when, within a fortnight of her engagement, she was thus to be seen openly

supping alone with the most notorious woman hunter about town—a man of bad reputation, a man, too, towards whom Sotherst was known to have a special aversion. Nothing but a break with Sotherst or a fit of temporary insanity seemed to explain, even inadequately, the situation.

Her best friend—the friend who knew her and believed in her—rose to her feet and came sailing down the room. She nodded gaily to Abbott, whom she hated, and whom she had not recognized for years, and laid her hand upon Letty’s arm.

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“Where’s Brian?” she asked.

Letty shrugged her shoulders—it was not altogether a natural gesture.

“On duty to-night,” she answered.

Her best friend paused for a moment.

“Come over and join our party, both of you,” she said. “Dicky Pennell’s here and Gracie Marsh—just landed. They’d love to meet you.”

Letty shook her head slowly. There was a look in her face which even her best friend did not understand.

“I’m afraid that we can’t do that,” she said. “I am Mr. Abbott’s guest.”

“And to-night,” Austen Abbott intervened, looking up at the woman who stood between them, “I am not disposed to share Miss Shaw with anybody.”

Her best friend could do no more than shake her head and go away. The two were left alone for the rest of the evening. When they departed together, people who knew felt that a whiff of tragedy had passed through the room. Nobody understood—or pretended to understand. Even before her engagement, Letty had never been known to sup alone with a man. That she should do so now, and with this particular man, was preposterous!

“Something will come of it,” her best friend murmured, sadly, as she watched Austen Abbott help his companion on with her cloak.

Something did!

Peter Ruff rose at his accustomed time the following morning, and attired himself, if possible, with more than his usual care. He wore the grey suit which he had carefully put out the night before, but he hesitated long between the rival appeals of a red tie with white spots and a plain mauve one. He finally chose the latter, finding that it harmonised more satisfactorily with his socks, and after a final survey of himself in the looking-glass, he entered the next room, where his coffee was set out upon a small round table near the fire, together with his letters and newspapers.

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Peter Ruff was, after all, like the rest of us, a creature of habit. He made an invariable rule of glancing through the newspapers before he paid any regard at all to his letters or his breakfast. In the absence of anything of a particularly sensational character, he then opened his letters in leisurely fashion, and went back afterwards to the newspaper as he finished his meal. This

morning, however, both his breakfast and letters remained for some time untouched. The first paragraph which caught his eye as he shook open the *Daily Telegraph* was sufficiently absorbing. There it was in great black type:

TERRIBLE TRAGEDY IN THE FLAT OF A WELL-KNOWN ACTRESS!
AUSTEN ABBOTT SHOT DEAD! ARREST OF CAPTAIN SOTHERST

Beyond the inevitable shock which is always associated with the taking of life, and the unusual position of the people concerned in it, there was little in the brief account of the incident to excite the imagination. A policeman on the pavement outside the flat in which Miss Shaw and her mother lived fancied that he heard, about two o'clock in the morning, the report of a revolver shot. As nothing further transpired, and as the sound was very indistinct, he did not at once enter the building, but kept it, so far as possible, under observation. About twenty minutes later, a young gentleman in evening dress came out into the street, and the policeman noticed at once that he was carrying a small revolver, which he attempted to conceal. The constable thereupon whistled for his sergeant, and accompanied by the young gentleman who made no effort to escape—ascended to Miss Shaw's rooms, where the body of Austen Abbott was discovered lying upon the threshold of the sitting room with a small bullet mark through the forehead. The inmates of the house were aroused and a doctor sent for. The deceased man was identified as Austen Abbott—a well-known actor—and the man under arrest gave his name at once as Captain the Honourable Brian Sotherst.

Peter Ruff sighed as he laid down the paper. The case seemed to him perfectly clear, and his sympathies were altogether with the young officer who had taken the law into his

own hands. He knew nothing of Miss Letty Shaw, and, consequently, did her, perhaps, less than justice in his thoughts. Of Austen Abbott, on the other hand, he knew a great deal—and nothing of good. It was absurd, after all, that any one should be punished for killing such a brute!

He descended, a few minutes later, to his office, and found Miss Brown busy arranging a bowl of violets upon his desk.

“Isn’t it horrible?” she cried, as he entered, carrying a bundle of papers under his arm. “I never have had such a shock!”

“Do you know any of them, then?” Peter Ruff asked, straightening his tie in the mirror.

“Of course!” she answered. “Why, I was in the same company as Letty Shaw for a year. I was at the Milan, too, last night. Letty was there having supper alone with Austen Abbott. We all said that there’d be trouble, but of course we never dreamed of this! Isn’t there any chance for him, Peter? Can’t he get off?”

Peter Ruff shook his head.

“I’m afraid not,” he answered. “They may be able to bring evidence of a quarrel and reduce it to manslaughter, but what you’ve just told me about this supper party makes it all the worse. It will come out in the evidence, of course.”

“Captain Sotherst is such a dear,” Miss Brown declared, “and so good-looking! And as for that brute Austen Abbott, he ought to have been shot long ago!”

Peter Ruff seated himself before his desk and hitched up his

trousers at the knees.

“No doubt you are right, Violet,” he said, “but people go about these things so foolishly. To me it is simply exasperating to reflect how little use is made of persons such as myself, whose profession in life it is to arrange these little matters. Take the present case, for example. Captain Sotherst had only to lay these facts before me, and Austen Abbott was a ruined man. I could have arranged the affair for him in half-a-dozen different ways. Whereas now it must be a life for a life—the life of an honest young English gentleman for that of a creature who should have been kicked out of the world as vermin! . . . I have some letters to give you, Violet, if you please.”

She swung round in her chair reluctantly.

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“I can’t help thinking of that poor young fellow,” she said, with a sigh.

“Sentiment after office hours, if you please!” said Peter.

Then there came a knock at the door.

His visitor lifted her veil, and Peter Ruff recognized her immediately.

“What can I do for you, Lady Mary?” he asked.

She saw the recognition in his eyes even before he spoke, and wondered at it.

“You know me?” she exclaimed.

“I know most people,” he answered, drily; “it is part of my profession.”

“Tell me—you are Mr. Peter Ruff,” she said, “the famous specialist in the detection of crime? You know that Brian Sotherst is my brother?”

“Yes,” he said, “I know it! I am sorry—very sorry, indeed.”

He handed her a chair. She seated herself with a little tightening of the lips.

“I want more than sympathy from you, Mr. Ruff,” she warned him. “I want your help.”

“It is my profession,” he admitted, “but your brother’s case makes intervention difficult, does it not?”

“You mean—” she began.

“Your brother himself does not deny his guilt, I understand.”

“He has not denied it,” she answered—“very likely he will not do so before the magistrate—but neither has he admitted it. Mr. Ruff, you are such a clever man. Can’t you see the truth?”

Peter Ruff looked at her steadily for several moments.

“Lady Mary,” he said, “I can see what you are going to suggest. You are going on the assumption that Austen Abbott was shot by Letty Shaw and that your brother is taking the thing on his shoulders.”

“I am sure of it!” she declared. “The girl did it herself, beyond a doubt. Brian would never have shot any one. He might have horsewhipped him, perhaps—even beaten him to death—but shot him in cold blood—never!”

“The provocation—” Ruff began.

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“There was no provocation,” she interrupted. “He was engaged to the girl, and of course we hated it, but she was an honest little thing, and devoted to him.”

“Doubtless,” Ruff admitted. “But all the same, as you will hear before the magistrates, or at the inquest, she was having supper alone with Austen Abbott that night at the Milan.”

Lady Mary’s eyes flashed.

“I don’t believe it!” she declared.

“It is nevertheless true,” Peter Ruff assured her. “There is no shadow of doubt about it.”

Lady Mary was staggered. For a few moment she seemed struggling to rearrange her thoughts.

“You see,” Ruff continued, “the fact that Miss Shaw was willing to sup with Austen Abbott tête-à-tête renders it more improbable that she should shoot him in her sitting room, an hour or so later, and then go calmly up to her mother’s room as though nothing had happened.”

Lady Mary had lost some of her confidence, but she was not daunted.

“Even if we have been deceived in the girl,” she said, thoughtfully—“even if she were disposed to flirt with other men—even then there might be a stronger motive than ever for her wishing to get rid of Abbott. He may have become jealous, and threatened her.”

“It is, of course, possible,” Ruff assented, politely. “Your theory would, at any rate, account for your brother’s present attitude.”

She looked at him steadfastly.

“You believe, then,” she said, “that my brother shot Austen Abbott?”

“I do,” he admitted frankly. “So does every man or woman of common sense in London. On the facts as they are stated in the newspapers, with the addition of which I have told you, no other conclusion is possible.”

Lady Mary rose.

“Then I may as well go,” she said tearfully.

“Not at all,” Peter Ruff declared. “Listen. This is a matter of business with me. I say that on the facts as they are known, your brother’s guilt appears indubitable. I do not say that there may not be other facts in the background which alter the state of affairs. If you wish me to search for them, engage me, and I will do my best.”

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“Isn’t that what I am here for?” the girl exclaimed.

“Very well,” Peter Ruff said. “My services are at your

disposal.”

“You will do your best—more than your best, won’t you?” she begged. “Remember that he is my brother—my favourite brother!”

“I will do what can be done,” Peter Ruff promised. “Please sit down at that desk and write me two letters of introduction.”

She drew off her gloves and prepared to obey him.

“To whom?” she asked.

“To the solicitors who are defending your brother,” he said, “and to Miss Letty Shaw.”

“You mean to go and see her?” Lady Mary asked, doubtfully.

“Naturally,” Peter Ruff answered. “If your supposition is correct, she might easily give herself away under a little subtle cross-examination. It is my business to know how to ask people questions in such a way that if they do not speak the truth their words give some indication of it. If she is innocent I shall know that I have to make my effort in another direction.”

“What other direction can there be?” Lady Mary asked dismally.

Peter Ruff said nothing. He was too kind-hearted to kindle false hopes.

“It’s a hopeless case, of course,” Miss Brown remarked, after Lady Mary had departed.

“I’m afraid so,” Peter Ruff answered. “Still I must earn my money. Please get some one to take you to supper to-night at the Milan, and see if you can pick up any scandal.”

“About Letty?” she asked.

“About either of them,” he answered. “Particularly I should like to know if any explanation has cropped up of her supping alone with Austen Abbott.”

“I don’t see why you can’t take me yourself,” she remarked. “You are on the side of the law this time, at any rate.”

“I will,” he answered, after a moment’s hesitation. “I will call for you at eleven o’clock to-night.”

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He rose and closed his desk emphatically.

“You are going out?” she asked.

“I am going to see Miss Letty Shaw,” he answered.

He took a taxicab to the flats, and found a handful of curious people still gazing up at the third floor. The parlourmaid who answered his summons was absolutely certain that Miss Shaw would not see him. He persuaded her, after some difficulty, to take in his letter while he waited in the hall. When she returned, she showed him into a small sitting room and pulled down the blinds.

“Miss Shaw will see you, sir, for a few minutes,” she announced, in a subdued tone. “Poor dear young lady,” she continued, “she has been crying her eyes out all the morning.”

“No wonder,” Peter Ruff said, sympathetically. “It’s a terrible business, this!”

“One of the nicest young men as ever walked,” the girl declared, firmly. “As for that brute, he deserved all he’s got, and more!”

Peter Ruff was left alone for nearly a quarter of an hour. Then the door was softly opened and Letty Shaw entered. There was no doubt whatever about her suffering. Ruff, who had seen her only lately at the theatre, was shocked. Under her eyes were blacker lines than her pencil had ever traced. Not only was she ghastly pale, but her face seemed wan and shrunken. She spoke to him the moment she entered, leaning with one hand upon the sideboard.

“Lady Mary writes that you want to help us,” she said. “How can you? How is it possible?”

Even her voice had gone. She spoke hoarsely, and as though short of breath. Her eyes searched his face feverishly. It seemed cruelty not to answer her at once, and Peter Ruff was not a cruel man. Nevertheless, he remained silent, and it seemed to her that his eyes were like points of fire upon her face.

“What is the matter?” she cried, with breaking voice. “What have you come for? Why don’t you speak to me?”

“Madam,” Peter Ruff said, “I should like to help you, and I will do what I can. But in order that I may do so, it is necessary that you should answer me two questions—truthfully!”

Her eyes grew wider. It was the face of a terrified child.

“Why not?” she exclaimed. “What have I to conceal?”

Peter Ruff’s expression never changed. There was nothing about him, as he stood there with his hands behind him, his head thrown a little forward, in the least inspiring—nothing calculated to terrify the most timid person. Yet the girl looked at him with the eyes of a frightened bird.

“Remember, then,” he continued, smoothly, “that what you say to me is sacred. You and I are alone without witnesses or eavesdroppers. Was it Brian Sotherst who shot Abbott—or was it you?”

She gave a little cry. Her hands clasped the sides of her head in horror.

“I!” she exclaimed, “I! God help me!”

He waited. In a moment she looked up.

“You cannot believe that,” she said, with a calmness for which he was scarcely prepared. “It is absurd. I left the room by the inner door as he took up his hat to step out into the hall.”

“Incidentally,” he asked—“this is not my other question, mind—why did you not let him out yourself?”

“We had disagreed,” she answered, curtly.

Peter Ruff bent his head in assent.

“I see,” he remarked. “You had disagreed. Abbott probably hoped that you would relent, so he waited for a few minutes.

Brian Sotherst, who had escaped from his engagement in time, he thought, to come and wish you good night, must have walked in and found him there. By the bye, how would Captain Sotherst get in?"

"He had a key," the girl answered. "My mother lives here with me, and we have only one maid. It was more convenient. I gave him one washed in gold for a birthday present only a few days ago."

"Thank you," Peter Ruff said. "The revolver, I understand, was your property?"

She nodded.

"It was a present from Brian," she said. "He gave it to me in a joke, and I had it on the table with some other curiosities."

"The first question," Peter Ruff said, "is disposed of. May I proceed to the second?"

The girl moistened her lips.

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"Yes!" she answered.

"Why did you sup alone with Austen Abbott last night?"

She shrank a little away.

"Why should I not?" she asked.

"You have been on the stage, my dear Miss Shaw," Peter Ruff continued, "for between four and five years. During the whole

of that time, it has been your very wise habit to join supper parties, of course, when the company was agreeable to you, but to sup alone with no man! Am I not right?"

"You seem to know a great deal about me," she faltered.

"Am I not right?" he repeated.

"Yes!"

"You break your rule for the first time," Peter Ruff continued, "in favour of a man of notoriously bad character, a few weeks after the announcement of your engagement to an honourable young English gentleman. You know very well the construction likely to be put upon your behaviour—you, of all people, would be the most likely to appreciate the risk you ran. Why did you run it? In other words, I repeat my question. Why did you sup alone with Austen Abbott last night?"

All this time she had been standing. She came a little forward now, and threw herself into an easy-chair.

"It doesn't help!" she exclaimed. "All this doesn't help!"

"Nor can I help you, then," Peter Ruff said, stretching out his hand for his hat.

She waved to him to put it down.

"I will tell you," she said. "It has nothing to do with the case, but since you ask, you shall know. There is a dear little girl in our company—Fluffy Dean we all call her—only eighteen years old. We all love her, she is so sweet, and just like I was when I

first went on the stage, only much nicer. She is very pretty, she has no money, and she is such an affectionate little dear that although she is as good as gold, we are all terrified for her sake whenever she makes acquaintances. Several of us who are most interested made a sort of covenant. We all took it in turns to look after her, and try to see that she did not meet any one she shouldn't. Yet, for all our precautions, Austen Abbott got hold of her and turned her silly little head. He was a man of experience, and she was only a child. She wouldn't listen to us—she wouldn't hear a word against him. I took what seemed to me to be the only chance. I went to him myself—I begged for mercy, I begged him to spare the child. I swore that if—anything happened to her, I would start a crusade against him, I would pledge my word that he should be cut by every decent man and woman on the stage! He listened to what I had to say and at first he only smiled. When I had finished, he made me an offer. He said that if I would sup with him alone at the Milan, and permit him to escort me home afterwards, he would spare the child. One further condition he made—that I was to tell no one why I did it. It was the man's brutal vanity! I made the promise, but I break it now. You have asked me and I have told you. I went through with the supper, although I hated it. I let him come in for a drink as though he had been a friend. Then he tried to make love to me. I took the opportunity of telling him exactly what I thought of him. Then I showed him the door, and left him. Afterwards—afterwards—Brian came in! They must have met upon the very threshold!”

Peter Ruff took up his hat.

“Thank you!” he said.

“You see,” she continued, drearily, “that it all has very little to do with the case. I meant to keep it to myself, because, of course, apart from anything else, apart from Brian’s meeting him coming out of my rooms, it supplies an additional cause for anger on Brian’s part.”

“I see,” he answered. “I am much obliged to you, Miss Shaw. Believe me that you have my sincere sympathy!”

Peter Ruff’s farewell words were unheard. Letty had fallen forward in her chair, her head buried in her hands.

Peter Ruff went to Berkeley Square and found Lady Mary waiting for him. Sir William Trencham, the great solicitor, was with her. Lady Mary introduced the two men. All the time she was anxiously watching Ruff’s face.

“Mr. Ruff has been to see Miss Shaw,” she explained to Sir William. “Mr. Ruff, tell me quickly,” she continued, with her hand upon his shoulder, “did she say anything? Did you find anything out?”

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He shook his head.

“No!” he said. “I found nothing out!”

“You don’t think, then,” Lady Mary gasped, “that there is any chance—of getting her to confess—that she did it herself?”

“Why should she have done it herself?” Peter Ruff asked. “She admits that the man tried to make love to her. She simply left him. She was in her own home, with her mother and servant within call. There was no struggle in the room—we know that.

There was no necessity for any.”

“Have you made any other enquiries?” Lady Mary asked.

“The few which I have made,” Peter Ruff answered gravely, “point all in the same direction. I ascertained at the Milan that your brother called there late last night, and that he heard Miss Shaw had been supping alone with Austen Abbott. He followed them home. I have ascertained, too, that he had a key to Miss Shaw’s flat. He apparently met Austen Abbott upon the threshold.”

Lady Mary covered her face with her hands. She seemed to read in Ruff’s words the verdict of the two men—the verdict of common sense. Nevertheless, he made one more request before leaving.

“I should like to see Captain Sotherst, if you can get me an order,” he said to Sir William.

“You can go with me to-morrow morning,” the lawyer answered. “The proceedings this morning, of course, were simply formal. Until after the inquest it will be easy to arrange an interview.”

Lady Mary looked up quickly.

“There is still something in your mind, then?” she asked. “You think that there is a bare chance?”

“There is always the hundredth chance!” Peter Ruff replied.

Peter Ruff and Miss Brown supped at the Milan that night as

they had arranged, but it was not a cheerful evening. Brian Sotherst had been very popular among Letty Shaw's little circle of friends, and the general feeling was one of horror and consternation at this thing which had befallen him. Austen Abbott, too, was known to all of them, and although a good many of the men—and even the women—were outspoken enough to declare at once that it served him right, nevertheless, the shock of death—death without a second's warning—had a paralysing effect even upon those who were his severest critics. Violet Brown spoke to a few of her friends—introduced Peter Ruff here and there—but nothing was said which could throw in any way even the glimmerings of a new light upon the tragedy. It all seemed too hopelessly and fatally obvious.

About twenty minutes before closing time, the *habitués* of the place were provided with something in the nature of a sensation. A little party entered who seemed altogether free from the general air of gloom. Foremost among them was a very young and exceedingly pretty girl, with light golden hair waved in front of her forehead, deep blue eyes, and the slight, airy figure of a child. She was accompanied by another young woman, whose appearance was a little too obvious to be prepossessing, and three or four young men—dark, clean-shaven, dressed with the irritating exactness of their class—young stockbrokers or boys about town. Miss Brown's eyes grew very wide open.

“What a little beast!” she exclaimed.

“Who?” Peter Ruff asked.

“That pretty girl there,” she answered—“Fluffy Dean her name

is. She is Letty Shaw's *protégée*, and she wouldn't have dreamed of allowing her to come out with a crowd like that. Tonight, of all nights," she continued, indignantly, "when Letty is away!"

Peter Ruff was interested.

"So that is Miss Fluffy Dean," he remarked, looking at her curiously. "She seems a little excited."

"She's a horrid little wretch!" Miss Brown declared. "I hope that some one will tell Letty, and that she will drop her now. A girl who would do such a thing as that when Letty is in such trouble isn't worth taking care of! Just listen to them all!"

They were certainly becoming a little boisterous. A magnum of champagne was being opened. Fluffy Dean's cheeks were already flushed, and her eyes glittering. Every one at the table was talking a great deal and drinking toasts.

"This is the end of Fluffy Dean," Violet Brown said, severely. "I hate to be uncharitable, but it serves her right."

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Peter Ruff paid his bill.

"Let us go," he said.

In the taxicab, on their way back to Miss Brown's rooms, Ruff was unusually silent, but just before he said good night to her—on the pavement, in fact, outside her front door—he asked a question.

“Violet,” he said, “would you like to play detective for an hour or two?”

She looked at him in some surprise.

“You know I always like to help in anything that’s going,” she said.

“Letty Shaw was an Australian, wasn’t she?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“She was born there, and lived there till she was nearly eighteen—is that true?” he asked again.

“Quite true,” Miss Brown answered.

“You know the offices of the P. & O. line of steamers in Pall Mall?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Well?”

“Get a sailing list to Australia—there should be a boat going Thursday. Present yourself as a prospective passenger. See how many young women alone there are going out, and ask their names. Incidentally put in a little spare time watching the office.”

She looked at him with parted lips and wide-open eyes.

“Do you think—” she began.

He shook her hand warmly and stepped back into the taxicab.

“Good night!” he said. “No questions, please. I sha’n’t expect you at the office at the usual time to-morrow, at any rate. Telephone or run around if you’ve anything to tell me.”

The taxicab disappeared round the corner of the street. Miss Brown was standing still upon the pavement with the latchkey in her hand.

It was afternoon before the inquest on the body of Austen Abbott, and there was gathered together in Letty Shaw’s parlor a curiously assorted little group of people. There was Miss Shaw herself—or rather what seemed to be the ghost of herself—and her mother; Lady Mary and Sir William Trencham; Peter Ruff and Violet Brown—and Mr. John Dory. The eyes of all of them were fixed upon Peter Ruff, who was the latest arrival. He stood in the middle of the room, calmly taking off his gloves, and glancing complacently down at his well-creased trousers.

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“Lady Mary,” he said, “and Miss Shaw, I know that you are both anxious for me to explain why I ask you to meet me here this afternoon, and why I also requested my friend Mr. Dory from Scotland Yard, who has charge of the case against Captain Sotherst, to be present. I will tell you.”

Mr. Dory nodded, a little impatiently.

“Unless you have something very definite to say,” he remarked, “I think it would be as well to postpone any general discussion of this matter until after the inquest. I must warn you that so far

as I, personally, am concerned, I must absolutely decline to allude to the subject at all. It would be most unprofessional.”

“I have something definite to say,” Peter Ruff declared, mildly.

Lady Mary’s eyes flashed with hope—Letty Shaw leaned forward in her chair with white, drawn face.

“Let it be understood,” Peter Ruff said, with a slight note of gravity creeping into his tone, “that I am here solely as the agent of Lady Mary Sotherst. I am paid and employed by her. My sole object is on her behalf, therefore, to discover proof of the innocence of Captain Sotherst. I take it, however,” he added, turning towards the drooping figure in the easy-chair, “that Miss Shaw is as anxious to have the truth known.”

“Of course! Of course!” she murmured.

“In France,” Peter Ruff continued, “there is a somewhat curious custom, which, despite a certain theatricality, yet has its points. The scene of a crime is visited, and its events, so far as may be, reconstructed. Let us suppose for a moment that we are now engaged upon something of the sort.”

Letty Shaw shrank back in her chair. Her thin white fingers were gripping its sides. Her eyes seemed to look upon terrible things.

“It is too—awful!” she faltered.

“Madam,” Peter Ruff said, firmly, “we seek the truth. Be so good as to humour me in this. Dory, will you go to the front door, stand upon the mat—so? You are Captain Sotherst—you have just entered. I am Austen Abbott. You, Miss Shaw,

have just ordered me from the room. You see, I move toward the door. I open it—so. Miss Shaw,” he added, turning swiftly towards her, “once more will you assure me that every one who was in the flat that night, with the exception of your domestic servant, is present now?”

“Yes,” she murmured.

“Good! Then who,” he asked, suddenly pointing to a door on the left—“who is in that room?”

They had all crowded after him to the threshold—thronging around him as he stood face to face with John Dory. His finger never wavered—it was pointing steadily towards that closed door a few feet to the left. Suddenly Letty Shaw rushed past them with a loud shriek.

“You shall not go in!” she cried. “What business is it of his?”

She stood with her back to the door, her arms outstretched like a cross. Her cheeks were livid. Her eyes seemed starting from her head.

Peter Ruff and John Dory laid their hands upon the girl’s wrists. She clung to her place frantically. She was dragged from it, screaming. Peter Ruff, as was his right, entered first. Almost immediately he turned round, and his face was very grave.

“Something has happened in here, I am afraid,” he said. “Please come in quietly.”

On the bed lay Fluffy Dean, fully dressed—motionless. One hand hung down toward the floor—from the lifeless fingers a

little phial had slipped. The room was full of trunks addressed to—

MISS SMITH,
Passenger to Melbourne.

S. S. Caroline.

Peter Ruff moved over toward the bed and took up a piece of paper, upon which were scribbled a few lines in pencil.

“I think,” he said, “that I must read these aloud. You all have a right to hear them.”

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No one spoke. He continued:

Forgive me, Letty, but I cannot go to Australia. They would only bring me back. When I remember that awful moment, my brain burns—I feel that I am going mad! Some day I should do this—better now. Give my love to the girls.

FLUFFY

They sent for a doctor, and John Dory rang up Scotland Yard. Letty Shaw had fainted, and had been carried to her room. While they waited about in strange, half-benumbed excitement, Peter Ruff once more spoke to them.

“The reconstruction is easy enough now,” he remarked. “The partition between this sitting room and that little bedroom is only an artificial one—something almost as flimsy as a screen. You see,” he continued, tapping with his knuckles, “you can almost put your hand through it. If you look a little lower down, you will see where an opening has been made. Fluffy Dean was

being taken care of by Miss Shaw—staying with her here, even. Miss Dean hears her lover’s voice in this room—hears him pleading with Miss Shaw on the night of the murder. She has been sent home early from the theatre, and it is just possible that she saw or had been told that Austen Abbott had fetched Miss Shaw after the performance and had taken her to supper. She was mad with anger and jealousy. The revolver was there upon the table, with a silver box of cartridges. She possessed herself of it and waited in her room. What she heard proved, at least, her lover’s infidelity. She stood there at her door, waiting. When Austen Abbott comes out, she shoots, throws the revolver at him, closes her door, and goes off into a faint. Perhaps she hears footsteps—a key in the door. At any rate, Captain Sotherst arrives a few minutes later. He finds, half in the hall, half on the threshold of the sitting room, Austen Abbott dead, and Miss Shaw’s revolver by the side of him. If he had been a wise young man, he would have aroused the household. Why he did not do so, we can perhaps guess. He put two and two together a little too quickly. It is certain that he believed that the dead man had been shot by his *fiancée*. His first thought was to get rid of the revolver. At any rate, he walked down to the street with it in his hand, and was promptly arrested by the policeman who had heard the shot. Naturally he refused to plead, because he believed that Miss Shaw had killed the man, probably in self-defence. She, at first, believed her lover guilty, and when afterwards Fluffy Dean confessed, she, with feminine lack of common sense, was trying to get the girl out of the country before telling the truth. A visit of hers to the office of the steamship company gave me the clue I required.”

Lady Mary grasped both his hands.

“And Scotland Yard,” she exclaimed, with a withering glance at Dory, “have done their best to hang my brother!”

Peter Ruff raised his eyebrows.

“Dear Lady Mary,” he said, “remember that it is the business of Scotland Yard to find a man guilty. It is mine, when I am employed for that purpose, to find him innocent. You must not be too hard upon my friend Mr. Dory. He and I seem to come up against each other a little too often, as it is.”

“A little too often!” John Dory repeated, softly. “But one cannot tell. Don’t believe, Lady Mary,” he added, “that we ever want to kill an innocent man.”

“It is your profession, though,” she answered, “to find criminals—and his,” she added, touching Peter Ruff on the shoulder, “to look for the truth.”

Peter Ruff bowed low—the compliment pleased him.

CHAPTER V

DELILAH FROM STREATHAM

It was a favourite theory with Peter Ruff that the morning papers received very insufficient consideration from the majority of the British public. A glance at the headlines and a few of the spiciest paragraphs, a vague look at the leading article, and the sheets were thrown away to make room for more interesting literature. It was not so with Peter Ruff. Novels he very seldom read—he did not, in fact, appreciate the necessity for their existence. The whole epitome of modern life was, he argued, to be found among the columns of the daily press. The police news, perhaps, was his favourite study, but he did not neglect the advertisements. It followed, therefore, as a matter of course, that the appeal of “M” in the personal column of the *Daily Mail* was read by him on the morning of its appearance—read not once only nor twice—it was a paragraph which had its own peculiar interest for him.

Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, if still in England, is requested to communicate with “M,” at Vagali’s Library, Cook’s Alley, Ledham Street, Soho.

Peter Ruff laid the paper down upon his desk and looked steadily at a box of India-rubber bands. Almost his fingers, as he parted with the newspaper, had seemed to be shaking. His eyes were certainly set in an unusually retrospective stare. Who was this who sought to probe his past, to renew an acquaintance with a dead personality? “M” could be but one person! What

did she want of him? Was it possible that, after all, a little flame of sentiment had been kept alight in her bosom, too—that in the quiet moments her thoughts had turned towards him as his had so often done to her? Then a sudden idea—an ugly thought—drove the tenderness from his face. She was no longer Maud Barnes—she was Mrs. John Dory, and John Dory was his enemy! Could there be treachery lurking beneath those simple lines?

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Things had not gone well with John Dory lately.

Somehow or other, his cases seemed to have crumpled into dust. He was no longer held in the same esteem at headquarters. Yet could even John Dory stoop to such means as these?

He turned in his chair.

“Miss Brown,” he said, “please take your pencil.”

“I am quite ready, sir,” she answered.

He marked the advertisement with a ring and passed it to her.

“Reply to that as follows,” he said:

DEAR SIR:

I notice in the *Daily Mail* of this morning that you are enquiring through the “personal” column for the whereabouts of Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald. That gentleman has been a client of mine, and I have been in occasional communication with him. If you will inform me of the nature of your business, I may, perhaps, be able to put you in touch with Mr. Fitzgerald. You will understand, however, that, under the circumstances, I shall require proofs of your good faith.

Truly yours,

Miss Brown glanced through the advertisement and closed her notebook with a little snap.

“Did you say—‘Dear *Sir*’?” she asked.

“Certainly!” Peter Ruff answered.

“And you really mean,” she continued, with obvious disapproval, “that I am to send this?”

“I do not usually waste my time,” Peter Ruff reminded her, mildly, “by giving you down communications destined for the waste-paper basket.”

She turned unwillingly to her machine.

“Mr. Fitzgerald is very much better where he is,” she remarked.

“That depends,” he answered.

She adjusted a sheet of paper into her typewriter.

“Who do you suppose ‘M’ is?” she asked.

“With your assistance,” Peter Ruff remarked, a little sarcastically—“with your very kind assistance—I propose to find out!”

Miss Brown sniffed, and banged at the keys of her typewriter.

“That coal-dealer’s girl from Streatham!” she murmured to

herself. . . .

A few politely worded letters were exchanged. “M” declined to reveal her identity, but made an appointment to visit Mr. Ruff at his office. The morning she was expected, he wore an entirely new suit of clothes and was palpably nervous. Miss Brown, who had arrived a little late, sat with her back turned upon him, and ignored even his usual morning greeting. The atmosphere of the office was decidedly chilly! Fortunately, the expected visitor arrived early.

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Peter Ruff rose to receive his former sweetheart with an agitation perforce concealed, yet to him poignant indeed. For it was indeed Maud who entered the room and came towards him with carefully studied embarrassment and half doubtfully extended hand. He did not see the cheap millinery, the slightly more developed figure, the passing of that insipid prettiness which had once charmed him into the bloom of an over-early maturity. His eyes were blinded with that sort of masculine chivalry—the heritage only of fools and very clever men—which takes no note of such things. It was Miss Brown who, from her place in a corner of the room, ran over the cheap attractions of this unwelcome visitor with an expression of scornful wonder—who understood the tinsel of her jewellery, the cheap shoddiness of her ready-made gown; who appreciated, with merciless judgment, her mincing speech, her cheap, flirtatious method.

Maud, with a diffidence not altogether assumed, had accepted the chair which Peter Ruff had placed for her, and sat fidgeting, for a moment, with the imitation gold purse which she was carrying.

“I am sure, Mr. Ruff,” she said, looking demurely into her lap, “I ought not to have come here. I feel terribly guilty. It’s such an uncomfortable sort of position, too, isn’t it?”

“I am sorry that you find it so,” Peter Ruff said. “If there is anything I can do—”

“You are very kind,” she murmured, half raising her eyes to his and dropping them again, “but, you see, we are perfect strangers to one another. You don’t know me at all, do you? And I have only heard of you through the newspapers. You might think all sorts of things about my coming here to make enquiries about a gentleman.”

“I can assure you,” Peter Ruff said, sincerely, “that you need have no fears—no fears at all. Just speak to me quite frankly. Mr. Fitzgerald was a friend of yours, was he not?”

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Maud simpered.

“He was more than that,” she answered, looking down. “We were engaged to be married.”

Peter Ruff sighed.

“I knew all about it,” he declared. “Fitzgerald used to tell me everything.”

“You were his friend?” she asked, looking him in the face.

“I was,” Peter Ruff answered fervently, “his best friend! No one was more grieved than I about that—little mistake.”

She sighed.

“In some ways,” she remarked softly, “you remind me of him.”

“You could scarcely say anything,” Peter Ruff murmured, “which would give me more pleasure. I am flattered.”

She shook her head.

“It isn’t flattery,” she said, “it’s the truth. You may be a few years older, and Spencer had a very nice moustache, which you haven’t, but you are really not unlike. Mr. Ruff, do tell me where he is!”

Peter Ruff coughed.

“You must remember,” he said, “that Mr. Fitzgerald’s absence was caused by events of a somewhat unfortunate character.”

“I know all about it,” she answered, with a little sigh.

“You can appreciate the fact, therefore,” Peter Ruff continued, “that as his friend and well-wisher I can scarcely disclose his whereabouts without his permission. Will you tell me exactly why you want to meet him again?”

She blushed—looked down and up again—betrayed, in fact, all the signs of confusion which might have been expected from her.

“Must I tell you that?” she asked.

“You are married, are you not?” Peter Ruff asked, looking down at her wedding ring.

She bit her lip with vexation. What a fool she had been not to take it off!

“Yes! Well, no—that is to say—”

“Never mind,” Peter Ruff interrupted. “Please don’t think that I want to cross-examine you. I only asked these questions because I have a sincere regard for Fitzgerald. I know how fond he was of you, and I cannot see what there is to be gained, from his point of view, by reopening old wounds.”

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“I suppose, then,” she remarked, looking at him in such a manner that Miss Brown had to cover her mouth with her hands to prevent her screaming out—“I suppose you are one of those who think it a crime for a woman who is married even to want to see, for a few moments, an old sweetheart?”

“On the contrary,” Peter Ruff answered, “as a bachelor, I have no convictions of any sort upon the subject.”

She sighed.

“I am glad of that,” she said.

“I am to understand, then,” Peter Ruff remarked, “that your reason for wishing to meet Mr. Fitzgerald again is purely a sentimental one?”

“I am afraid it is,” she murmured; “I have thought of him so often lately. He was such a dear!” she declared, with enthusiasm.

“I have never been sufficiently thankful,” she continued, “that he

got away that night. At the time, I was very angry, but often since then I have wished that I could have passed out with him into the fog and been lost—but I mustn't talk like this! Please don't misunderstand me, Mr. Ruff. I am happily married—quite happily married!”

Peter Ruff sighed.

“My friend Fitzgerald,” he remarked, “will be glad to hear that.”

Maud fidgeted. It was not quite the effect she had intended to produce!

“Of course,” she remarked, looking away with a pensive air, “one has regrets.”

“Regrets!” Peter Ruff murmured.

“Mr. Dory is not well off,” she continued, “and I am afraid that I am very fond of life and going about, and everything is so expensive nowadays. Then I don't like his profession. I think it is hateful to be always trying to catch people and put them in prison—don't you, Mr. Ruff?”

Peter Ruff smiled.

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“Naturally,” he answered. “Your husband and I work from the opposite poles of life. He is always seeking to make criminals of the people whom I am always trying to prove worthy members of society.”

“How noble!” Maud exclaimed, clasping her hands and looking

up at him. “So much more remunerative, too, I should think,” she added, after a moment’s pause.

“Naturally,” Peter Ruff admitted. “A private individual will pay more to escape from the clutches of the law than the law will to secure its victims. Scotland Yard expects them to come into its arms automatically—regards them as a perquisite of its existence.”

“I wish my husband were in your profession, Mr. Ruff,” Maud said, with a sidelong glance of her blue eyes which she had always found so effective upon her various admirers. “I am sure that I should be a great deal fonder of him.”

Peter Ruff leaned forward in his chair. He, too, had expressive eyes at times.

“Madam,” he said—and stopped. But Maud blushed, all the same.

She looked down into her lap.

“We are forgetting Mr. Fitzgerald,” she murmured.

Peter Ruff glanced up at the clock.

“It is a long story,” he said. “Are you in a hurry, Mrs. Dory?”

“Not at all,” she assured him, “unless you want to close your office, or anything. It must be nearly one o’clock.”

“I wonder,” he asked, “if you would do me the honour of lunching with me? We might go to the Prince’s or the Carlton—

whichever you prefer. I will promise to talk about Mr. Fitzgerald all the time.”

“Oh, I couldn’t!” Maud declared, with a little gasp. “At least—well, I’m sure I don’t know!”

“You have no engagement for luncheon?” Peter Ruff asked quietly.

“Oh, no!” she answered; “but, you see, we live so quietly. I have never been to one of those places. I’d love to go—but if we were seen! Wouldn’t people talk?”

Peter Ruff smiled. Just the same dear, modest little thing!

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“I can assure you,” he said, “that nothing whatever could be said against our lunching together. People are not so strict nowadays, you know, and a married lady has always a great deal of latitude.”

She looked up at him with a dazzling smile.

“I’d simply love to go to Prince’s!” she declared.

“Cat!” Miss Brown murmured, as Peter Ruff and his client left the room together.

Peter Ruff returned from his luncheon in no very jubilant state of mind. For some time he sat in his easy-chair, with his legs crossed and his finger tips pressed close together, looking steadily into space. Contrary to his usual custom, he did not smoke. Miss Brown watched him from behind her machine.

“Disenchanted?” she asked calmly.

Peter Ruff did not reply for several moments.

“I am afraid,” he admitted, hesitatingly, “that marriage with John Dory has—well, not had a beneficial effect. She allowed me, for instance, to hold her hand in the cab! Maud would never have permitted a stranger to take such a liberty in the old days.”

Miss Brown smiled curiously.

“Is that all?” she asked.

Peter Ruff felt that he was in the confessional.

“She certainly did seem,” he admitted, “to enjoy her champagne a great deal, and she talked about her dull life at home a little more, perhaps, than was discreet to one who was presumably a stranger. She was curious, too, about dining out. Poor little girl, though. Just fancy, John Dory has never taken her anywhere but to Lyons’ or an A B C, and the pit of a theatre!”

“Which evening is it to be?” Miss Brown asked.

“Something was said about Thursday,” Peter Ruff admitted.

“And her husband?” Miss Brown enquired.

“He happens to be in Glasgow for a few days,” Peter Ruff answered.

Miss Brown looked at her employer steadily. She addressed him by his Christian name, which was a thing she very seldom

did in office hours.

“Peter,” she said, “are you going to let that woman make a fool of you?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Go on,” he said; “say anything you want to—only, if you please, don’t speak disrespectfully of Maud.”

“Hasn’t it ever occurred to you at all,” Miss Brown continued, rising to her feet, “that this Maud, or whatever you want to call her, may be playing a low-down game of her husband’s? He hates you, and he has vague suspicions. Can’t you see that he is probably making use of your infatuation for his common, middle-class little wife, to try and get you to give yourself away? Can’t you see it, Peter? You are not going to tell me that you are so blind as all that!”

“I must admit,” he answered with a sigh, “that, although I think you go altogether too far, some suspicion of the sort has interfered with my perfect enjoyment of the morning.”

Miss Brown drew a little breath of relief. After all, then, his folly was not so consummate as it had seemed!

“What are you going to do about it, then?” she asked.

Peter Ruff coughed—he seemed in an unusually amenable frame of mind, and submitted to cross-examination without murmur.

“The subject of Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald,” he remarked, “seemed, somehow or other, to drop into the background during our

luncheon. I propose, therefore, to continue to offer to Mrs. John Dory my most respectful admiration. If she accepts my friendship, and is satisfied with it, so much the better. I must admit that it would give me a great deal of pleasure to be her occasional companion—at such times when her husband happens to be in Glasgow!”

“And supposing,” Miss Brown asked, “that this is not all she wants—supposing, for instance, that she persists in her desire for information concerning Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald?”

“Then,” Peter Ruff admitted, “I’m afraid that I must conclude that her unchivalrous clod of a husband has indeed stooped to make a tool of her.”

“And in that case,” Miss Brown demanded, “what shall you do?”

“I was just thinking that out,” Peter Ruff said mildly, “when you spoke. . . .”

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The friendship of Peter Ruff with the wife of his enemy certainly appeared to progress in most satisfactory fashion. The dinner and visit to the theatre duly took place. Mr. Ruff was afterwards permitted to offer a slight supper and to accompany his fair companion a portion of the way home in a taxicab. She made several half-hearted attempts to return to the subject of Spencer Fitzgerald, but her companion had been able on each occasion to avoid the subject. Whether or not she was the victim of her husband’s guile, there was no question about the reality of her enjoyment during the evening. Ruff, when he remembered the flash of her eyes across the table, the touch of her fingers in the

taxi, was almost content to believe her false to her truant lover. If only she had not been married to John Dory, he realised, with a little sigh, that he might have taught her to forget that such a person existed as Spencer Fitzgerald, might have induced her to become Mrs. Peter Ruff!

On their next meeting, however, Peter Ruff was forced to realise that his secretary's instinct had not misled her. It was, alas, no personal and sentimental regrets for her former lover which had brought the fair Maud to his office. The pleasures of her evening—they dined at Romano's and had a box at the Empire—were insufficient this time to keep her from recurring continually to the subject of her vanished lover. He tried strategy—jealousy amongst other things.

“Supposing,” he said, as they sat quite close to one another in the box during the interval, “supposing I were to induce our friend to come to London—I imagine he would be fairly safe now if he kept out of your husband's way—what would happen to me?”

“You!” she murmured, glancing at him from behind her fan and then dropping her eyes.

“Certainly—me!” he continued. “Don't you think that I should be doing myself a very ill turn if I brought you two together? I have very few friends, and I cannot afford to lose one. I am quite sure that you still care for him.”

She shook her head.

“Not a scrap!” she declared.

“Then why did you put that advertisement in the paper?” Ruff asked, with smooth but swift directness.

She was not quick enough to parry his question. He read the truth in her disconcerted face. Knowing it now for a certainty, he hastened to her aid.

“Forgive me,” he said, looking away. “I should not have asked that question—it is not my business. I will write to Fitzgerald. I will tell him that you want to see him, and that I think it would be safe for him to come to London.”

Maud recovered herself quickly. She thanked him with her eyes as well as her words.

“And you needn’t be jealous, really,” she whispered behind her fan. “I only want to see him once for a few minutes—to ask a question. After that, I don’t care what becomes of him.”

A poor sort of Delilah, really, with her flushed face, her too elaborately coiffured hair with its ugly ornament, her ready-made evening dress with its cheap attempts at smartness, her cleaned gloves, indifferent shoes. But Peter Ruff thought otherwise.

“You mean that, after I have found him for you, you will still come out with me again sometimes?” he asked wistfully.

“Of course!” she answered. “Whenever I can without John knowing,” she added, with an unpleasant little laugh. “If you only knew how I loved the music and the theatres, and this sort of life! What a good time your wife would have, Mr. Ruff!” she added archly.

It was no joking matter with him. He had to remember that he was, in effect, her tool, that she was making use of him, willing to betray her former lover at her husband's bidding. It was enough to make him, on his side, burn for revenge! Yet he put the thought away from him with a shiver. She was still the woman he had loved—she was still sacred to him! That night he pleaded an engagement, and sent her home in a taxicab alone.

John Dory, waiting patiently at home for his wife's return, felt a certain uneasiness when she swept into their little sitting room in all her cheap splendour, with flushed cheeks—an obvious air of satisfaction with herself and disdain for her immediate surroundings. John Dory was a commonplace looking man—the absence of his collar, and his somewhat shabby carpet slippers, did not improve his appearance. He had neglected to shave, and he was drinking beer. At headquarters he was not considered quite the smart young officer which he had once shown signs of becoming.

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He looked at his wife with darkening face, and his wife, on her part, thought of Peter Ruff in his immaculate evening clothes.

“Well,” he remarked, grumblingly, “you seem to find a good deal of pleasure in this gadding about!”

She threw her soiled fan on the table.

“If I do,” she answered, “you are not the one to sit there and reproach me with it, are you?”

“It's gone far enough, anyway,” John Dory said. “It's gone further than I meant it to go. Understand me, Maud—it's finished! I'll find your old sweetheart for myself.”

She laughed heartily.

“You needn’t trouble,” she answered, with a little toss of the head. “I am not such a fool as you seem to think me. Mr. Ruff has made an appointment with him.”

There was a change in John Dory’s face. The man’s eyes were bright—they almost glittered.

“You mean that your friend Mr. Ruff is going to produce Spencer Fitzgerald?” he exclaimed.

“He has promised to,” she answered. “John,” she declared, throwing herself into an easy-chair, “I feel horrid about it. I wonder what Mr. Ruff will think when he knows!”

“You can feel how you like,” John Dory answered bluntly, “so long as I get the handcuffs on Spencer Fitzgerald’s wrists!”

She shuddered. She looked at her husband with distaste.

“Don’t talk about it!” she begged sharply. “It makes me feel the meanest creature that ever crawled. I can’t help feeling, too, that Mr. Ruff will think me a wretch—quite the gentleman he’s been all the time! I never knew any one half so nice!”

John Dory set down his empty glass.

“I wonder,” he said, looking at her thoughtfully, “what made him take such a fancy to you! Rather sudden, wasn’t it, eh?”

Maud tossed her head.

“I don’t see anything so wonderful about that,” she declared.

“Listen to me, Maud,” her husband said, rising to his feet.

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“You aren’t a fool—not quite. You’ve spent some time with Peter Ruff. How much—think carefully—how much does he remind you of Spencer Fitzgerald?”

“Not at all,” she answered promptly. “Why, he is years older, and though Spencer was quite the gentleman, there’s something about Mr. Ruff, and the way he dresses and knows his way about—well, you can tell he’s been a gentleman all his life.”

John Dory’s face fell.

“Think again,” he said.

She shook her head.

“Can’t see any likeness,” she declared. “He did remind me a little of him just at first, though,” she added, reflectively—“little things he said, and sort of mannerisms. I’ve sort of lost sight of them the last few times, though.”

“When is this meeting with Fitzgerald to come off?” John Dory asked abruptly.

She did not answer him at once. A low, triumphant smile had parted her lips.

“To-morrow night,” she said; “he is to meet me in Mr. Ruff’s office.”

“At what time?” John Dory asked.

“At eight o’clock,” she answered. “Mr. Ruff is keeping his office open late on purpose. Spencer thinks that afterwards he is going to take me out to dinner.”

“You are sure of this?” John Dory asked eagerly. “You are sure that the man Ruff does not suspect you? You believe he means that you shall meet Fitzgerald?”

“I am sure of it,” she answered. “He is even a little jealous,” she continued, with an affected laugh. “He told me—well, never mind!”

“He told you what?” John Dory asked.

She laughed.

“Never you mind,” she said. “I have done what you asked me, anyway. If Mr. Ruff had not found me an agreeable companion, he would not have bothered about getting Spencer to meet me. And now he’s done it,” she added, “I do believe he’s a little jealous.”

John Dory glared, but he said nothing. It seemed to him that his hour of revenge was close at hand!

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It was the first occasion upon which words of this sort had passed between Peter Ruff and his secretary. There was no denying the fact that Miss Violet Brown was in a passion. It was an hour past the time at which she usually left the office. For an hour she had pleaded, and Peter Ruff remained unmoved.

“You are a fool!” she cried to him at last. “I am a fool, too, that I

have ever wasted my thoughts and time upon you. Why can't I make you see? In every other way, heaven knows, you are clever enough! And yet there comes this vulgar, commonplace, tawdry little woman from heaven knows where, and makes such a fool of you that you are willing to fling away your career—to hold your wrists out for John Dory's handcuffs!"

"My dear Violet," Peter Ruff answered deprecatingly, "you really worry me—you do indeed!"

"Not half so much as you worry me," she declared. "Look at the time. It's already past seven. At eight o'clock Mrs. Dory—your Maud—is coming in here hoping to find her old sweetheart."

"Why not?" he murmured.

"Why not, indeed?" Miss Brown answered angrily. "Don't you know—can't you believe—that close on her heels will come her husband—that Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, if ever he comes to life in this room, will leave it between two policemen?"

Peter Ruff sighed.

"What a pessimist you are, my dear Violet!" he said.

She came up to him and laid her hands upon his shoulders.

"Peter," she said, "I will tell you something—I must! I am fond of you, Peter. I always have been. Don't make me miserable if there is no need for it. Tell me honestly—do you really believe in this woman?"

He removed her hands gently, and raised them to his lips.

“My dear girl,” he said, “I believe in every one until I find them out. I look upon suspicion as a vice. But, at the same time,” he added, “there are always certain precautions which one takes.”

“What precautions can you take?” she cried. “Can you sit there and make yourself invisible? John Dory is not a fool. The moment he is in this room with the door closed behind him, it is the end.”

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“We must hope not,” Peter Ruff said cheerfully. “There are other things which may happen, you know.”

She turned away from him a little drearily.

“You do not mind if I stay?” she said. “I am not working to-night. Perhaps, later on, I may be of use!”

“As you will,” he answered. “You will excuse me for a little time, won’t you? I have some preparations to make.”

She turned her head away from him. He left the room and ascended the stairs to his own apartments.

Eight o’clock was striking from St. Martin’s Church when the door of Peter Ruff’s office was softly opened and closed again. A man in a slouch hat and overcoat entered, and after feeling along the wall for a moment, turned up the electric light. Violet Brown rose from her place with a little sob. She stretched out her hand to him.

“Peter!” she cried. “Peter!”

“My name,” the newcomer said calmly, “is Mr. Spencer

Fitzgerald.”

“Oh, listen to me!” she begged. “There is still time, if you hurry. Think how many clever men before you have been deceived by the woman in whom they trusted. Please, please go! Hurry upstairs and put those things away.”

“Madam,” the newcomer said, “I am much obliged to you for your interest, but I think that you are making a mistake. I have come here to meet—”

He stopped short. There was a soft knocking at the door. A stifled scream broke from Violet Brown’s lips.

“It is too late!” she cried. “Peter! Peter!”

She sank into her chair and covered her face with her hands. The door was opened and Maud came in. When she saw who it was who sat in Peter Ruff’s place, she gave a little cry. Perhaps, after all, she had not believed that this thing would happen.

“Spencer!” she cried, “Spencer! Have you really come back?”

He held out his hands.

“You are glad to see me?” he asked.

She came slowly forward. The man rose from his place and came towards her with outstretched hands. Then through the door came John Dory, and one caught a glimpse of others behind him.

“If my wife is not glad to see you, Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald,” he

said, in a tone from which he vainly tried to keep the note of triumph, "I can assure you that I am. You slipped away from me cleverly at Daisy Villa, but this time I think you will not find it so easy."

Maud shrank back, and her husband took her place. But Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald looked upon them both as one who looks upon figures in a dream. Miss Brown rose hurriedly from her seat. She came over to him and thrust her arm through his.

"Peter," she said, taking his hand in hers, "don't shoot. It isn't worth while. You should have listened to me."

The little man in the gold-rimmed spectacles looked at her, looked at Mr. John Dory, looked at the woman who was shrinking back now against the wall.

"Really," he said, "this is the most extraordinary situation in which I ever found myself!"

"We will help you to realise it," John Dory cried, and the triumph in his tone had swelled into a deeper note. "I came here to arrest Mr. Fitzgerald, but I hear this young lady call you 'Peter.' Perhaps this may be the solution—"

The little man struck the table with the flat of his hand.

"Come," he said, "this is getting a bit too thick. First of all—you," he said, turning to Miss Brown—"my name is not Peter, and I have no idea of shooting anybody. As for that lady against the wall, I don't know her—never saw her before in my life. As for you," he added, turning to John Dory, "you talk about arresting me—what for?"

Mr. John Dory smiled.

“There is an old warrant,” he said, “which I have in my pocket, but I fancy that there are a few little things since then which we may have to enquire into.”

“This beats me!” the little man declared. “Who do you think I am?”

“Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald, to start with,” John Dory said. “It seems to me not impossible that we may find another
pseudonym for you.”

300

“You can find as many as you like,” the little man answered testily, “but my name is James Fitzgerald, and I am an actor employed at the Shaftesbury Theatre, as I can prove with the utmost ease. I never called myself Spencer; nor, to my knowledge, was I ever called by such a name. Nor, as I remarked before, have I ever seen any one of you three people before with the exception of Miss Brown here, whom I have seen on the stage.”

John Dory grunted.

“It was Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald,” he said, “a clerk in Howell & Wilson’s bookshop, who leapt out of the window of Daisy Villa two years ago. It may be Mr. James Fitzgerald now. Gentlemen of your profession have a knack of changing their names.”

“My profession’s as good as yours, anyway!” the little man exclaimed. “We aren’t all fools in it! My friend Mr. Peter Ruff said to me that there was a young lady whom I used to know who was anxious to meet me again, and would I step around

here about eight o'clock. Here I am, and all I can say is, if that's the young lady, I never saw her before in my life."

There was a moment's breathless silence. Then the door was softly opened. Violet Brown went staggering back like a woman who sees a ghost. She bit her lips till the blood came. It was Peter Ruff who stood looking in upon them—Peter Ruff, carefully dressed in evening clothes, his silk hat at exactly the correct angle, his coat and white kid gloves upon his arm.

"Dear me," he said, "you don't seem to be getting on very well! Mr. Dory," he added, with a note of surprise in his tone, "this is indeed an unexpected pleasure!"

The man who stood by the desk turned to him. The others were stricken dumb.

"Look here," he said, "there's some mistake. You told me to come here at eight o'clock to meet a young lady whom I used to know. Well, I never saw *her* before in my life," he added, pointing to Maud. "There's a man there who wants to arrest me—Lord knows what for! And here's Miss Brown, whom I have seen at the theatre several times, but who never condescended to speak to me before, telling me not to shoot! What's it all about, Ruff? Is it a practical joke?"

301

Peter Ruff laid down his coat and hat, and sat upon the table with his hands in his pockets.

"Is it possible," he said, "that I have made a mistake? Isn't your second name Spencer?"

The man shook his head.

“My name is James Fitzgerald,” he said. “I haven’t missed a day at the Shaftesbury Theatre for three years, as you can find out by going round the corner. I never called myself Spencer, I was never clerk in a bookshop, and I never saw that lady before in my life.”

Maud came out from her place against the wall, and leaned eagerly forward. John Dory turned his head slowly towards his wife. A sickening fear had arisen in his heart—gripped him by the throat. Fooled once more, and by Peter Ruff!

“It isn’t Spencer!” Maud said huskily. “Mr. Ruff,” she added, turning to him, “you know very well that this is not the Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald whom you promised to bring here to-night—Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald to whom I was once engaged.”

Peter Ruff pointed to the figure of her husband.

“Madam,” he said, “my invitation did not include your husband.”

John Dory took a step forward, and laid his hands upon the shoulders of the man who called himself Mr. James Fitzgerald. He looked into his face long and carefully. Then he turned away, and, gripping his wife by the arm, he passed out of the room. The door slammed behind him. The sound of heavy footsteps was heard descending to the floor below.

Violet Brown crossed the room to where Peter Ruff was still sitting with a queer look upon his face, and, gripping him by the shoulders, shook him.

“How dare you!” she exclaimed. “How dare you! Do you know

that I have nearly cried my eyes out?”

Peter Ruff came back from the world into which, for the moment, his thoughts had taken him.

“Violet,” he said, “you have known me for some years. You have been my secretary for some months. If you choose still to take me for a fool, I cannot help it.”

302

“But,” she exclaimed, pointing to Mr. James Fitzgerald—

Peter Ruff nodded.

“I have been practising on him for some time,” he said, with an air of self-satisfaction.

“A thin, mobile face, you see, and plenty of experience in the art of making up. It is astonishing what one can do if one tries.”

Mr. James Fitzgerald picked up his hat and coat.

“It was worth more than five quid,” he growled; “when I saw the handcuffs in that fellow’s hand, I felt a cold shiver go down my spine.”

Peter Ruff counted out two banknotes and passed them to his confederate.

“You have earned the money,” he said. “Go and spend it. Perhaps, Violet,” he added, turning towards her, “I have been a little inconsiderate. Come and have dinner with me, and forget it.”

She drew a little sigh.

“You are sure,” she murmured, “that you wouldn’t rather take Maud?”

CHAPTER VI

THE LITTLE LADY FROM SERVIA

Westward sped the little electric brougham, driven without regard to police regulations or any rule of the road: silent and swift, wholly regardless of other vehicles—as though, indeed, its occupants were assuming to themselves the rights of Royalty. Inside, Peter Ruff, a little breathless, was leaning forward, tying his white cravat with the aid of the little polished mirror set in the middle of the dark green cushions. At his right hand was Lady Mary, watching his proceedings with an air of agonised impatience.

“Let me tell you—” she begged.

“Kindly wait till I have tied this and put my studs in,” Peter Ruff interrupted. “It is impossible for me to arrive at a ball in this condition, and I cannot give my whole attention to more than one thing at a time.”

“We shall be there in five minutes!” she exclaimed. “What is the good, unless you understand, of your coming at all?”

Peter Ruff surveyed his tie critically. Fortunately, it pleased him. He began to press the studs into their places with firm fingers. Around them surged the traffic of Piccadilly; in front, the gleaming arc of lights around Hyde Park Corner. They had several narrow escapes. Once the brougham swayed dangerously as they cut in on the wrong side of an island lamp-

post. A policeman shouted after them, another held up his hand—the driver of the brougham took no notice.

“I am ready,” Peter Ruff said, quietly.

“My younger brother—Maurice,” she began, breathlessly—“you’ve never met him, I know, but you’ve heard me speak of him. He is private secretary to Sir James Wentley—”

“Minister for Foreign Affairs?” Ruff asked, swiftly.

“Yes! Maurice wants to go in for the Diplomatic Service. He is a dear, and so clever!”

“Is it Maurice who is in trouble?” Peter Ruff asked.

304

“Why didn’t he come himself?”

“I am trying to explain,” Lady Mary protested. “This afternoon he had an important paper to turn into cipher and hand over to the Prime Minister at the Duchess of Montford’s dance to-night. The Prime Minister will arrive in a motor car from the country at about two o’clock, and the first thing he will ask for will be that paper. It has been stolen!”

“At what time did your brother finish copying it, and when did he discover its loss?” Ruff asked, with a slight air of weariness. These preliminary enquiries always bored him.

“He finished it in his own rooms at half-past seven,” Lady Mary answered. “He discovered its loss at eleven o’clock—directly he had arrived at the ball.”

“Why didn’t he come to me himself?” Peter Ruff asked. “I like

to have these particulars at first hand.”

“He is in attendance upon Sir James at the ball,” Lady Mary answered. “There is trouble in the East, as you know, and Sir James is expecting dispatches to-night. Maurice is not allowed to leave.”

“Has he told Sir James yet?”

“He had not when I left,” Lady Mary answered. “If he is forced to do so, it will be ruin! Mr. Ruff, you must help us. Maurice is such a dear, but a mistake like this, at the very beginning of his career, would be fatal. Here we are. That is my brother waiting just inside the hall.”

A young man came up to them in the vestibule. He was somewhat pale, but otherwise perfectly self-possessed. From the shine of his glossy black hair to the tips of his patent boots he was, in appearance, everything that a young Englishman of birth and athletic tastes could hope to be. Peter Ruff liked the look of him. He waited for no introduction, but laid his hand at once upon the young man’s shoulder.

“Between seven-thirty and arriving here,” he said, drawing him on one side—“quick! Tell me, whom did you see? What opportunities were there of stealing the paper, and by whom?”

“I finished it at five and twenty past seven,” the young man said, “sealed it in an official envelope, and stood it up on my desk by the side of my coat and hat and muffler, which my servant had laid there, ready for me to put on. My bedroom opens out from my sitting room. While I was dressing, two men called for me—Paul Jermyn and Count von Hern. They walked through

to my bedroom first, and then sat together in the sitting room until I came out. The door was wide open, and we talked all the time.”

“They called accidentally?” Peter Ruff asked.

“No—by appointment,” the young man replied. “We were all coming on here to the dance, and we had agreed to dine together first at the Savoy.”

“You say that you left the paper on your desk with your coat and hat?” Peter Ruff asked. “Was it there when you came out?”

“Apparently so,” the young man answered. “It seemed to be standing in exactly the same place as where I had left it. I put it into my breast pocket, and it was only when I arrived here that I fancied the envelope seemed lighter. I went off by myself and tore it open. There was nothing inside but half a newspaper!”

“What about the envelope?” Peter Ruff asked. “That must have been the same sort of one as you had used or you would have noticed it?”

“It was,” the Honorable Maurice answered.

“It was a sort which you kept in your room?”

“Yes!” the young man admitted.

“The packet was changed, then, by some one in your room, or some one who had access to it,” Peter Ruff said. “How about your servant?”

“It was his evening off. I let him put out my things and go at seven o’clock.”

“You must tell me the nature of the contents of the packet,” Peter Ruff declared. “Don’t hesitate. You must do it. Remember the alternative.”

The young man did hesitate for several moments, but a glance into his sister’s appealing face decided him.

“It was our official reply to a secret communication from Russia respecting—a certain matter in the Balkans.”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“Where is Count von Hern?” he asked abruptly.

“Inside, dancing.”

306

“I must use a telephone at once,” Peter Ruff said. “Ask one of the servants here where I can find one.”

Peter Ruff was conducted to a gloomy waiting room, on the table of which stood a small telephone instrument. He closed the door, but he was absent for only a few minutes. When he rejoined Lady Mary and her brother they were talking together in agitated whispers. The latter turned towards him at once.

“Do you mean that you suspect Count von Hern?” he asked, doubtfully. “He is a friend of the Danish Minister’s, and every one says that he’s such a good chap. He doesn’t seem to take the slightest interest in politics—spends nearly all his time hunting or playing polo.”

“I don’t suspect any one,” Peter Ruff answered. “I only know that Count von Hern is an Austrian spy, and that he took your paper! Has he been out of your sight at all since you rejoined him in the sitting room? I mean to say—had he any opportunity of leaving you during the time you were dining together, or did he make any calls *en route*, either on the way to the Savoy or from the Savoy here?”

The young man shook his head.

“He has not been out of my sight for a second.”

“Who is the other man—Jermyn?” Peter Ruff asked. “I never heard of him.”

“An American—cousin of the Duchess. He could not have had the slightest interest in the affair.”

“Please take me into the ballroom,” Peter Ruff said to Lady Mary. “Your brother had better not come with us. I want to be as near the Count von Hern as possible.”

They passed into the crowded rooms, unnoticed, purposely avoiding the little space where the Duchess was still receiving the late comers among her guests. They found progress difficult, and Lady Mary felt her heart sink as she glanced at the little jewelled watch which hung from her wrist. Suddenly Peter Ruff came to a standstill.

“Don’t look for a moment,” he said, “but tell me as soon as you can—who is that tall young man, like a Goliath, talking to the little dark woman? You see whom I mean?”

Lady Mary nodded, and they passed on. In a moment or two she answered him.

“How strange that you should ask!” she whispered in his ear. “That is Mr. Jermyn.”

They were on the outskirts now of the ballroom itself. One of Lady Mary’s partners came up with an open programme and a face full of reproach.

“Do please forgive me, Captain Henderson,” Lady Mary begged. “I have hurt my foot, and I am not dancing any more.”

“But surely I was to take you in to supper?” the young officer protested, good-humouredly. “Don’t tell me that you are going to cut that?”

“I am going to cut everything to-night with everybody,” Lady Mary said. “Please forgive me. Come to tea to-morrow and I’ll explain.”

The young man bowed, and, with a curious glance at Ruff, accepted his dismissal. Another partner was simply waved away.

“Please turn round and come back,” Peter Ruff said. “I want to see those two again.”

“But we haven’t found Count von Hern yet,” she protested. “Surely that is more important, is it not? I believe that I saw him dancing just now—there, with the tall girl in yellow.”

“Never mind about him, for the moment,” Ruff answered. “Walk

down this corridor with me. Do you mind talking all the time, please? It will sound more natural, and I want to listen.”

The young American and his partner had found a more retired seat now, about three quarters of the way down the pillared vestibule which bordered the ballroom. He was bending over his companion with an air of unmistakable devotion, but it was she who talked. She seemed, indeed, to have a good deal to say to him. The slim white fingers of one hand played all the time with a string of magnificent pearls. Her dark, soft eyes—black as aloes and absolutely un-English—flashed into his. A delightful smile hovered at the corners of her lips. All the time she was talking and he was listening. Lady Mary and her partner passed by unnoticed. At the end of the vestibule they turned and retraced their steps. Peter Ruff was very quiet—he had caught a few of those rapid words. But the woman’s foreign accent had troubled him.

“If only she would speak in her own language!” he muttered.

308

Lady Mary’s hand suddenly tightened upon his arm.

“Look!” she exclaimed. “That is Count von Hern!”

A tall, fair young man, very exact in his dress, very stiff in his carriage, with a not unpleasant face, was standing talking to Jermyn and his companion. Jermyn, who apparently found the intrusion an annoyance, was listening to the conversation between the two, with a frown upon his face and a general attitude of irritation. As Lady Mary and her escort drew near, the reason for the young American’s annoyance became clearer

—his two companions were talking softly, but with great animation, in a foreign language, which it was obvious that he did not understand. Peter Ruff's elbow pressed against his partner's arm, and their pace slackened. He ventured, even, to pause for a moment, looking into the ballroom as though in search of some one, and he had by no means the appearance of a man likely to understand Hungarian. Then, to Lady Mary's surprise, he touched the Count von Hern on the shoulder and addressed him.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” he said, “but I fancy that we accidentally exchanged programmes, a few minutes ago, at the buffet. I have lost mine and picked up one which does not belong to me. As we were standing side by side, it is possibly yours.”

“I believe not, sir,” he answered, with that pleasant smile which had gone such a long way toward winning him the reputation of being “a good fellow” amongst a fairly large circle of friends. “I believe at any rate,” he added, glancing at his programme, “that this is my own. You mistake me, probably, for some one else.”

Peter Ruff, without saying a word, was actor enough to suggest that he was unconvinced. The Count good-humouredly held out his programme.

“You shall see for yourself,” he remarked. “That is not yours, is it? Besides, I have not been to the buffet at all this evening.”

Peter Ruff cast a swift glance down the programme which the Count had handed him. Then he apologised profusely.

“I was mistaken,” he admitted. “I am very sorry.”

The Count bowed.

“It is of no consequence, sir,” he said, and resumed his conversation.

Peter Ruff passed on with Lady Mary. At a safe distance, she glanced at him enquiringly.

309

“It was his programme I wanted to see,” Peter Ruff explained. “It is as I thought. He has had four dances with the Countess—”

“Who is she?” Lady Mary asked, quickly.

“The little dark lady with whom he is talking now,” Peter Ruff continued. “He seems, too, to be going early. He has no dances reserved after the twelfth. We will go downstairs at once, if you please. I must speak to your brother.”

“Have you been able to think of anything?” she asked, anxiously. “Is there any chance at all, do you think?”

“I believe so,” Peter Ruff answered. “It is most interesting. Don’t be too sanguine, though. The odds are against us, and the time is very short. Is the driver of your electric brougham to be trusted?”

“Absolutely,” she assured him. “He is an old servant.”

“Will you lend him to me?” Peter Ruff asked, “and tell him that he is to obey my instructions absolutely?”

“Of course,” she answered. “You are going away, then?”

Peter Ruff nodded. He was a little sparing of words just then. The thoughts were chasing one another through his brain. He was listening, too, for the sweep of a dress behind.

“Is there nothing I can do?” Lady Mary begged, eagerly.

Peter Ruff shook his head. In the distance he saw the Honourable Maurice come quickly toward them. With a firm but imperceptible gesture he waved him away.

“Don’t let your brother speak to me,” he said. “We can’t tell who is behind. What time did you say the Prime Minister was expected?”

“At two o’clock,” Lady Mary said, anxiously.

Peter Ruff glanced at his watch. It was already half an hour past midnight.

“Very well,” he said, “I will do what I can. If my theory is wrong, it will be nothing. If I am right—well, there is a chance, anyhow. In the meantime—”

“In the meantime?” she repeated, breathlessly.

“Take your brother back to the ballroom,” Peter Ruff directed. “Make him dance—dance yourself. Don’t give yourselves away by looking anxious. When the time is short—say at a quarter to two—he can come down here and wait for me.”

“If you don’t come!” she exclaimed.

“Then we shall have lost,” Peter Ruff said, calmly. “If you don’t see me again to-night, you had better read the newspapers carefully for the next few days.”

“You are going to do something dangerous!” she protested.

“There is danger in interfering at all in such a matter as this,” he answered, “but you must remember that it is not only my profession—it is my hobby. Remember, too,” he added, with a smile, “that I do not often lose!”

For twenty minutes Peter Ruff sat in the remote corner of Lady Mary’s electric brougham, drawn up at the other side of the Square, and waited. At last he pressed a button. They glided off. Before them was a large, closed motor car. They started in discreet chase.

Fortunately, however, the chase was not a long one. The car which Peter Ruff had been following was drawn up before a plain, solid-looking house, unlit and of gloomy appearance. The little lady with the wonderful eyes was already halfway up the flagged steps. Hastily lifting the flap and looking behind as they passed, her pursuer saw her open the door with a latchkey, and disappear. Peter Ruff pulled the check-string and descended. For several moments he stood and observed the house into which the lady whom he had been following had disappeared. Then he turned to the driver.

“I want you to watch that house,” he said, “never to take your eyes off it. When I reappear from it, if I do at all, I shall probably be in a hurry. Directly you see me be on your box

ready to start. A good deal may depend upon our getting away quickly.”

“Very good, sir,” the man answered. “How long am I to wait here for you?”

Peter Ruff’s lips twisted into a curious little smile.

“Until two o’clock,” he answered. “If I am not out by then, you needn’t bother any more about me. You can return and tell your mistress exactly what has happened.”

“Hadn’t I better come and try and get you out, sir?” the man asked. “Begging your pardon, but her Ladyship told me that there might be queer doings. I’m a bit useful in a scrap, sir,” he added. “I do a bit of sparring regularly.”

311

Peter Ruff shook his head.

“If there’s any scrap at all,” he said, “you had better be out of it. Do as I have said.”

The motor car had turned round and disappeared now, and in a few moments Peter Ruff stood before the door of the house into which the little lady had disappeared. The problem of entrance was already solved for him. The door had been left unlatched; only a footstool had been placed against it inside. Peter Ruff, without hesitation, pushed the door softly open and entered, replaced the footstool in its former position, and stood with his back to the wall, in the darkest corner of the hall, looking around him—listening intently. Nearly opposite the door of a room stood ajar. It was apparently lit up, but there was no sound of any one moving inside. Upstairs, in one of the rooms on the

first floor, he could hear light footsteps—a woman's voice humming a song. He listened to the first few bars, and understanding became easier. Those first few bars were the opening ones of the Servian national anthem!

With an effort, Peter Ruff concentrated his thoughts upon the immediate present. The little lady was upstairs. The servants had apparently retired for the night. He crept up to the half-open door and peered in. The room, as he had hoped to find it, was empty, but Madame's easy-chair was drawn up to the fire, and some coffee stood upon the hob. Stealthily Peter Ruff crept in and glanced around, seeking for a hiding place. A movement upstairs hastened his decision. He pushed aside the massive curtains which separated this from a connecting room. He had scarcely done so when light footsteps were heard descending the stairs.

Peter Ruff found his hiding place all that could have been desired. This secondary room itself was almost in darkness, but he was just able to appreciate the comforting fact that it possessed a separate exit into the hall. Through the folds of the curtain he had a complete view of the further apartment. The little lady had changed her gown of stiff white satin for one of flimsier material, and, seated in the easy-chair, she was busy pouring herself out some coffee. She took a cigarette from a silver box, and lighting it, curled herself up in the chair and composed herself as though to listen. To her as well as to Peter Ruff, as he crouched in his hiding place, the moments seemed to pass slowly enough. Yet, as he realised afterward, it could not have been ten minutes before she sat upright in a listening attitude. There was some one coming! Peter Ruff, too, heard a man's firm footsteps come up the flagged stones.

The little lady sprang to her feet.

“Paul!” she exclaimed.

Paul Jermyn came slowly to meet her. He seemed a little out of breath. His tie was all disarranged and his collar unfastened. The little lady, however, noticed none of these things. She looked only into his face.

“Have you got it?” she asked, eagerly.

He thrust his hand into his breast-coat pocket, and held an envelope out toward her.

“Sure!” he answered. “I promised!”

She gave a little sob, and with the packet in her hand came running straight toward the spot where Peter Ruff was hiding. He shrank back as far as possible. She stopped just short of the curtain, opened the drawer of a table which stood there, and slipped the packet in. Then she came back once more to where Paul Jermyn was standing.

“My friend!” she cried, holding out her hands—“my dear, dear friend! Shall I ever be able to thank you enough?”

“Why, if you try,” he answered, smiling, “I think that you could!”

She laid her hand upon his arm—a little caressing, foreign gesture.

“Tell me,” she said, “how did you manage it?”

“We left the dance together,” Jermyn said. “I could see that he wanted to get rid of me, but I offered to take him in my motor car. I told the man to choose some back streets, and while we were passing through one of them, I took Von Hern by the throat. We had a struggle, of course, but I got the paper.”

“What did you do with Von Hern?” she asked.

“I left him on his doorstep,” the young American answered. “He wasn’t really hurt, but he was only half conscious. I don’t think he’ll bother any one to-night.”

313

“You dear, brave man!” she murmured. “Paul, what am I to say to you?”

He laughed.

“That’s what I’m here to ask,” he declared. “You wouldn’t give me my answer at the ball. Perhaps you’ll give it me now?”

They sprang apart. Ruff felt his nerves stiffen—felt himself constrained to hold even his breath as he widened a little the crack in the curtains. This was no stealthy entrance. The door had been flung open. Von Hern, his dress in wild disorder, pale as a ghost, and with a great bloodstain upon his cheek, stood confronting them.

“When you have done with your love-making,” he called out, “I’ll trouble you to restore my property!”

The electric light gleamed upon a small revolver which flashed out toward the young American. Paul Jermyn never hesitated for a moment. He seized the chair by his side and flung it at Von

Hern. There was a shot, the crash of the falling chair, a cry from Jermyn, who never hesitated, however, in his rush. The two men closed. A second shot went harmlessly to the ceiling. The little lady stole away—stole softly across the room toward the table. She opened the drawer. Suddenly the blood in her veins was frozen into fear. From nowhere, it seemed to her, came a hand which held her wrists like iron!

“Madam,” Peter Ruff whispered from behind the curtain, “I am sorry to deprive you of it, but this is stolen property.”

Her screams rang through the room. Even the two men released one another.

“It is gone! It is gone!” she cried. “Some one was hiding in the room! Quick!”

She sprang into the hall. The two men followed her. The front door was slammed. They heard flying footsteps outside. Von Hern was out first, clearing the little flight of steps in one bound. Across the road he saw a flying figure. A level stream of fire poured from his hand—twice, three times. But Peter Ruff never faltered. Round the corner he tore. The man had kept his word—the brougham was already moving slowly.

“Jump in, sir,” the man cried. “Throw yourself in. Never mind about the door.”

314

They heard the shouts behind. Peter Ruff did as he was bid, and sat upon the floor, raising himself gradually to the seat when they had turned another corner. Then he put his head out of the window.

“Back to the Duchess of Montford’s!” he ordered.

The latest of the guests had ceased to arrive—a few were already departing. It was an idle time, however, with the servants who loitered in the vestibules of Montford House, and they looked with curiosity upon this strange guest who arrived at five minutes to two, limping a little, and holding his left arm in his right hand. One footman on the threshold nearly addressed him, but the words were taken out of his mouth when he saw Lady Mary and her brother—the Honorable Maurice Sotherst—hasten forward to greet him.

Peter Ruff smiled upon them benignly.

“You can take the paper out of my breast-coat pocket,” he said.

The young man’s fingers gripped it. Through Lady Mary’s great thankfulness, however, the sudden fear came shivering.

“You are hurt!” she whispered. “There is blood on your sleeve.”

“Just a graze,” Peter Ruff answered. “Von Hern wasn’t much good at a running target. Back to the ballroom, young man,” he added. “Don’t you see who’s coming?”

The Prime Minister came up the tented way into Montford House. He, too, wondered a little at the man whom he met on his way out, holding his left arm, and looking more as though he had emerged from a street fight than from the Duchess of Montford’s ball. Peter Ruff went home smiling.

CHAPTER VII

THE DEMAND OF THE DOUBLE-FOUR

It was about this time that Peter Ruff found among his letters one morning a highly scented little missive, addressed to him in a handwriting with which he had once been familiar. He looked at it for several moments before opening it. Even as the paper cutter slid through the top of the envelope, he felt that he had already divined the nature of its contents.

FRIVOLITY THEATRE
March 10th

MY DEAR MR. RUFF:

I expect that you will be surprised to hear from me again, but I do hope that you will not be annoyed. I know that I behaved very horridly a little time ago, but it was not altogether my fault, and I have been more sorry for it than I can tell you—in fact, John and I have never been the same since, and for the present, at any rate, I have left him and gone on the stage. A lady whom I knew got me a place in the chorus here, and so far I like it immensely.

Won't you come and meet me after the show to-morrow night, and I will tell you all about it? I should like so much to see you again.

MAUD.

Peter Ruff placed this letter in his breast-coat pocket, and withheld it from his secretary's notice. He felt, however, very little pleasure at the invitation it conveyed. He hesitated for some time, in fact, whether to accept it or not. Finally, after his modest dinner that evening, he bought a stall for the Frivolity and watched the piece. The girl he had come to see was there in the second row of the chorus, but she certainly did not look her best in the somewhat scant costume required by the part. She showed no signs whatever of any special ability—neither her dancing nor her singing seemed to entitle her to any consideration. She carried herself with a certain amount of self-consciousness, and her eyes seemed perpetually fixed upon the occupants of the stalls. Peter Ruff laid down his glasses with something between a sigh and a groan. There was something to him inexpressibly sad in the sight of his old sweetheart so transformed, so utterly changed from the prim, somewhat genteel young person who had accepted his modest advances with such ladylike diffidence. She seemed, indeed, to have lost those very gifts which had first attracted him. Nevertheless, he kept his appointment at the stage door.

316

She was among the first to come out, and she greeted him warmly—almost noisily. With her new profession, she seemed to have adopted a different and certainly more flamboyant deportment.

“I thought you'd come to-night,” she declared, with an arch look. “I felt certain I saw you in the stalls. You are going to take me to supper, aren't you? Shall we go to the Milan?”

Peter Ruff assented without enthusiasm, handed her into a hansom, and took his place beside her. She wore a very large

hat, untidily put on; some of the paint seemed still to be upon her face; her voice, too, seemed to have become louder, and her manner more assertive. There were obvious indications that she no longer considered brandy and soda an unladylike beverage. Peter Ruff was not pleased with himself or proud of his companion.

“You’ll take some wine?” he suggested, after he had ordered, with a few hints from her, a somewhat extensive supper.

“Champagne,” she answered, decidedly. “I’ve got quite used to it, nowadays,” she went on. “I could laugh to think how strange it tasted when you first took me out.”

“Tell me,” Peter Ruff said, “why you have left your husband?”

She laughed.

“Because he was dull and because he was cross,” she answered, “and because the life down at Streatham was simply intolerable. I think it was a little your fault, too,” she said, making eyes at him across the table. “You gave me a taste of what life was like outside Streatham, and I never forgot it.”

Peter Ruff did not respond—he led the conversation, indeed, into other channels. On the whole, the supper was scarcely a success. Maud, who was growing to consider herself something of a Bohemian, and who certainly looked for some touch of sentiment on the part of her old admirer, was annoyed by the quiet deference with which he treated her. She reproached him with it once, bluntly.

“Say,” she exclaimed, “you don’t seem to want to be so friendly

as you did! You haven't forgiven me yet, I suppose?"

Peter Ruff shook his head.

"It is not that," he said, "but I think that you have scarcely done a wise thing in leaving your husband. I cannot think that this life on the stage is good for you."

She laughed, scornfully.

"Well," she said, "I never thought to have you preaching at me!"

They finished their supper. Maud accepted a cigarette and did her best to change her companion's mood. She only alluded once more to her husband.

"I don't see how I could have stayed with him, anyhow," she said. "You know, he's been put back—he only gets two pounds fifteen a week now. He couldn't expect me to live upon that."

"Put back?" Peter Ruff repeated.

She nodded.

"He seemed to have a lot of bad luck this last year," she said. "All his cases went wrong, and they don't think so much of him at Scotland Yard as they did. I am not sure that he hasn't begun to drink a little."

"I am sorry to hear it," Peter Ruff said, gravely.

"I don't see why you should be," she answered, bluntly. "He was no friend of yours, nor isn't now. He may not be so

dangerous as he was, but if ever you come across him, you take my tip and be careful. He means to do you a mischief some day, if he can. I am not sure," she added, "that he doesn't believe that it was partly your fault about my leaving home."

"I should be sorry for him to think that," Peter Ruff answered. "While we are upon the subject, can't you tell me exactly why your husband dislikes me so?"

"For one thing, because you have been up against him in several of his cases, and have always won."

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"And for the other?"

"Well," she said, doubtfully, "he seems to connect you in his mind, somehow, with a boy who was in love with me once—Mr. Spencer Fitzgerald—you know who I mean."

Ruff nodded.

"He still has that in his mind, has he?" he remarked.

"Oh, he's mad!" she declared. "However, don't let us talk about him any more."

The lights were being put out. Peter Ruff paid his bill and they rose together.

"Come down to the flat for an hour or so," she begged, taking his arm. "I have a dear little place with another girl—Carrie Pearce. I'll sing to you, if you like. Come down and have one drink, anyhow."

Peter Ruff shook his head firmly.

“I am sorry,” he said, “but you must excuse me. In some ways, I am very old-fashioned,” he added. “I never sit up late, and I hate music.”

“Just drive as far as the door with me, then,” she begged.

Peter Ruff shook his head.

“You must excuse me,” he said, handing her into the hansom. “And, Maud,” he added—“if I may call you so—take my advice: give it up—go back to your husband and stick to him—you’ll be better off in the long run.”

She would have answered him scornfully, but there was something impressive in the crisp, clear words—in his expression, too, as he looked into her eyes. She threw herself back in a corner of the cab with an affected little laugh, and turned her head away from him.

Peter Ruff walked back into the cloakroom for his coat and hat, and sighed softly to himself. It was the end of the one sentimental episode of his life!

It had been the study of Peter Ruff’s life, so far as possible, to maintain under all circumstances an equable temperament, to refuse to recognize the meaning of the word “nerves”, and to be guided in all his actions by that profound common sense which was one of his natural gifts. Yet there were times when, like any other ordinary person, he suffered acutely from presentiments. He left his rooms, for instance, at five o’clock on the afternoon of the day following his supper with Maud,

suffering from a sense of depression for which he found it altogether impossible to account. It was true that the letter which he had in his pocket, the appointment which he was on his way to keep, were both of them probable sources of embarrassment and annoyance, if not of danger. He was being invited, without the option of refusal, to enter upon some risky undertaking which would yield him neither fee nor reward. Yet his common sense told him that it was part of the game. In Paris, he had looked upon his admittance into the order of the “Double-Four” as one of the stepping-stones to success in his career. Through them he had gained knowledge which he could have acquired in no other way. Through them, for instance, he had acquired the information that Madame la Comtesse de Pilitz was a Servian patriot and a friend of the Crown Prince; and that the Count von Hern, posing in England as a sportsman and an idler, was a highly paid and dangerous Austrian spy. There had been other occasions, too, upon which they had come to his aid. Now they had made an appeal to him—an appeal which must be obeyed. His time—perhaps, even, his safety—must be placed entirely at their disposal. It was only an ordinary return—a thing expected of him—a thing which he dared not refuse. Yet he knew very well what he could not explain to them—that the whole success of his life depended so absolutely upon his remaining free from any suspicion of wrong-doing, that he had received his summons with something like dismay, and proceeded to obey it with unaccustomed reluctance.

He drove to Cirey’s Café in Regent Street, where he dismissed the driver of his hansom and strolled in with the air of an *habitué*. He selected a corner table, ordered some refreshment, and asked for a box of dominoes. The place was fairly well filled. A few women were sitting about; a sprinkling of

Frenchmen were taking their *apéritifs*; here and there a man of affairs, on his way from the city, had called in for a glass of vermouth. Peter Ruff looked them over, recognizing the type—recognizing, even, some of their faces. Apparently, the person whom he was to meet had not yet arrived.

He lit a cigarette and smoked slowly. Presently the door opened and a woman entered in a long fur coat, a large hat, and a thick veil. She raised it to glance around, disclosing the unnaturally pale face and dark, swollen eyes of a certain type of Frenchwoman. She seemed to notice no one in particular. Her eyes travelled over Peter Ruff without any sign of interest.

Nevertheless, she took a seat somewhere near his and ordered some vermouth from the waiter, whom she addressed by name. When she had been served and the waiter had departed, she looked curiously at the dominoes which stood before her neighbor.

“Monsieur plays dominoes, perhaps?” she remarked, taking one of them into her fingers and examining it. “A very interesting game!”

Peter Ruff showed her a domino which he had been covering with his hand—it was a double four. She nodded, and moved from her seat to one immediately next him.

“I had not imagined,” Peter Ruff said, “that it was a lady whom I was to meet.”

“Monsieur is not disappointed, I trust?” she said, smiling. “If I talk banalities, Monsieur must pardon it. Both the waiters here are spies, and there are always people who watch. Monsieur is

ready to do us a service?”

“To the limits of my ability,” Peter Ruff answered. “Madame will remember that we are not in Paris; that our police system, if not so wonderful as yours, is still a closer and a more present thing. They have not the brains at Scotland Yard, but they are persistent—hard to escape.”

“Do I not know it?” the woman said. “It is through them that we send for you. One of us is in danger.”

“Do I know him?” Peter Ruff asked.

“It is doubtful,” she answered. “Monsieur’s stay in Paris was so brief. If Monsieur will recognize his name—it is Jean Lemaître himself.”

Peter Ruff started slightly.

“I thought,” he said, with some hesitation, “that Lemaître did not visit this country.”

“He came well disguised,” the woman answered. “It was thought to be safe. Nevertheless, it was a foolish thing.

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They have tracked him down from hotel to apartments, till he lives now in the back room of a wretched little café in Soho. Even from there we cannot get him away—the whole district is watched by spies. We need help.”

“For a genius like Lemaître,” Peter Ruff said, thoughtfully, “to have even thought of Soho, was foolish. He should have gone to Hampstead or Balham. It is easy to fool our police if you know how. On the other hand, they hang on to the scent like leeches

when once they are on the trail. How many warrants are there out against Jean in this country?"

"Better not ask that," the woman said, grimly. "You remember the raid on a private house in the Holloway Road, two years ago, when two policemen were shot and a spy was stabbed? Jean was in that—it is sufficient!"

"Are any plans made at all?" Peter Ruff asked.

"But naturally," the woman answered. "There is a motor car, even now, of sixty-horse-power, stands ready at a garage in Putney. If Jean can once reach it, he can reach the coast. At a certain spot near Southampton there is a small steamer waiting. After that, everything is easy."

"My task, then," Peter Ruff said, thoughtfully, "is to take Jean Lemaître from this café in Soho, as far as Putney, and get him a fair start?"

"It is enough," she answered. "There is a cordon of spies around the district. Every day they seem to close in upon us. They search the houses, one by one. Only last night, the Hôtel de Netherlands—a miserable little place on the other side of the street was suddenly surrounded by policemen and every room ransacked. It may be our turn to-night."

"In one hour's time," Peter Ruff said, glancing at his watch, "I shall present myself as a doctor at the café. Tell me the address. Tell me what to say which will insure my admission to Jean Lemaître!"

"The café," she answered, "is called the Hôtel de Flandres. You

enter the restaurant and you walk to the desk. There you find always Monsieur Antoine. You say to him simply—‘The Double-Four!’ He will answer that he understands, and he will conduct you at once to Lemaître.”

Ruff nodded.

“In the meantime,” he said, “let it be understood in the café—if there is any one who is not in the secret—that one of the waiters is sick. I shall come to attend him.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“As well that way as any other,” she answered. “Monsieur is very kind, *À bientôt!*”

She shook hands and they parted. Peter Ruff drove back to his rooms, rang up an adjoining garage for a small covered car such as are usually let out to medical men, and commenced to pack a small black bag with the outfit necessary for his purpose. Now that he was actually immersed in his work, the sense of depression had passed away. The keen stimulus of danger had quickened his blood. He knew very well that the woman had not exaggerated. There was no man more wanted by the French or the English police than the man who had sought his aid, and the district in which he had taken shelter was, in some respects, the very worst for his purpose. Nevertheless, Peter Ruff, who believed, at the bottom of his heart, in his star, went on with his preparations, feeling morally certain that Jean Lemaître would sleep on the following night in his native land.

At precisely the hour agreed upon, a small motor brougham pulled up outside the door of the Hôtel de Flandres, and its

occupant—whom ninety-nine men out of a hundred would at once, unhesitatingly, have declared to be a doctor in moderate practice—pushed open the swing doors of the restaurant and made his way to the desk. He was of medium height; he wore a frock coat—a little frayed; grey trousers which had not been recently pressed; and thick boots.

“I understand that one of your waiters requires my attendance,” he said, in a tone not unduly raised but still fairly audible. “I am Dr. Gillette.”

“Dr. Gillette,” Antoine repeated, slowly.

“And number Double-Four,” the doctor murmured.

Antoine descended from his desk.

“But certainly, Monsieur!” he said. “The poor fellow declares that he suffers. If he is really ill, he must go. It sounds brutal, but what can one do? We have so few rooms here, and so much business. Monsieur will come this way?”

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Antoine led the way from the café into a very smelly region of narrow passages and steep stairs.

“It is to be arranged?” Antoine whispered, as they ascended.

“Without a doubt,” the doctor answered. “Were there spies in the café?”

“Two,” Antoine answered.

The doctor nodded, and said no more. He mounted to the third

story. Antoine led him through a small sitting room and knocked four times upon the door of an inner room. It suddenly was opened. A man—unshaven, terrified, with that nameless fear in his face which one sees reflected in the expression of some trapped animal—stood there looking out at them.

““Double-Four’!” the doctor said, softly. “Go back into the room, please. Antoine will kindly leave us.”

“Who are you?” the man gasped.

““Double-Four’!” the doctor answered. “Obey me, and be quick for your life! Strip!”

The man obeyed.

Barely twenty minutes later, the doctor—still carrying his bag—descended the stairs. He entered the café from a somewhat remote door. Antoine hurried to meet him, and walked by his side through the place. He asked many questions, but the doctor contented himself with shaking his head. Almost in silence he left Antoine, who conducted him even to the door of his motor. The proprietor of the café watched the brougham disappear, and then returned to his desk, sighing heavily.

A man who had been sipping a liqueur close at hand, laid down his paper.

“One of your waiters ill, did I understand?” he asked.

Monsieur Antoine was at once eloquent. It was the ill fortune which had dogged him for the last four months! The man had been taken ill there in the restaurant. He was a Gascon—spoke

no English—and had just arrived. It was not possible for him to be removed at the moment, so he had been carried to an empty bedroom. Then had come the doctor and forbidden his removal. Now for a week he had lain there and several of his other *voyageurs* had departed. One did not know how these things got about, but they spoke of infection. The doctor, who had just left—Gilette of Russell Square, a most famous physician—had assured him that there was no infection—no fear of any. But what did it matter—that? People were so hard to convince. Monsieur would like a cigar? But certainly! There were here some of the best.

Antoine undid the cabinet and opened a box of Havanas. John Dory selected one and called for another liqueur.

“You have trouble often with your waiters, I dare say,” he remarked. “They tell me that all Frenchmen who break the law in their own country, find their way, sooner or later, to these parts. You have to take them without characters, I suppose?”

Antoine lifted his shoulders.

“But what could one do?” he exclaimed. “Characters, they were easy enough to write—but were they worth the paper they were written on? Indeed no!”

“Not only your waiters,” Dory continued, “but those who stay in the hotels round here have sometimes an evil name.”

Antoine shrugged his shoulders.

“For myself,” he said, “I am particular. We have but a few rooms, but we are careful to whom we let them.”

“Do you keep a visitors’ book?”

“But no, Monsieur!” Antoine protested. “For why the necessity? There are so few who come to stay for more than the night just now scarcely any one at all.”

There entered, at that moment, a tall, thin man dressed in dark clothes, who walked with his hands in his overcoat pockets, as though it were a habit. He came straight to Dory and handed him a piece of paper.

John Dory glanced it through and rose to his feet. A gleam of satisfaction lit his eyes.

“Monsieur Antoine,” he said, “I am sorry to cause you any inconvenience, but here is my card. I am a detective officer from Scotland Yard, and I have received information which compels me, with your permission, to examine at once the sleeping apartments in your hotel.”

Antoine was fiercely indignant.

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“But, Monsieur!” he exclaimed. “I do not understand! Examine my rooms? But it is impossible! Who dares to say that I harbor criminals?”

“I have information upon which I can rely,” John Dory answered, firmly. “This comes from a man who is no friend of mine, but he is well known. You can read for yourself what he says.”

Monsieur Antoine, with trembling fingers, took the piece of paper from John Dory’s hands. It was addressed:

MR. JOHN DORY, DETECTIVE:

If you wish to find Jean Lemaître, search in the upper rooms of the Hôtel de Flandres. I have certain information that he is to be found there.

PETER RUFF.

“Never,” Antoine declared, “will I suffer such an indignity!”

Dory raised a police whistle to his lips.

“You are foolish,” he said. “Already there is a cordon of men about the place. If you refuse to conduct me upstairs I shall at once place you under arrest.”

Antoine, white with fear, poured himself out a liqueur of brandy.

“Well, well,” he said, “what must be done, then! Come!”

He led the way out into that smelly network of passages, up the stairs to the first floor. Room after room he threw open and begged Dory to examine. Some of them were garishly furnished with gilt mirrors, cheap lace curtains tied back with blue ribbons. Others were dark, miserable holes, into which the fresh air seemed never to have penetrated. On the third floor they reached the little sitting room, which bore more traces of occupation than some of the rooms below. Antoine would have passed on, but Dory stopped him.

“There is a door there,” he said. “We will try that.”

“It is the sick waiter who lies within,” Antoine protested.

“Monsieur can hear him groan.”

There was, indeed, something which sounded like a groan to be heard, but Dory was obstinate.

“If he is so ill,” he demanded, “how is he able to lock the door on the inside? Monsieur Antoine, that door must be opened.”

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Antoine knocked at it softly.

“François,” he said, “there is another doctor here who would see you. Let us in.”

There was no answer. Antoine turned to his companion with a little shrug of the shoulders, as one who would say—“I have done my best. What would you have?”

Dory put his shoulder to the door.

“Listen,” he shouted through the keyhole, “Mr. Sick Waiter, or whoever you are, if you do not unlock this door, I am coming in!”

“I have no key,” said a faint voice. “I am locked in. Please break open the door.”

“But that is not the voice of François!” Antoine exclaimed, in amazement.

“We’ll soon see who it is,” Dory answered.

He charged at the door fiercely. At the third assault it gave way. They found themselves in a small back bedroom, and stretched on the floor, very pale, and apparently only half-conscious, lay

Peter Ruff. There was a strong smell of chloroform about. John Dory threw open the window. His fingers trembled a little. It was like Fate—this! At the end of every unsuccessful effort there was this man—Peter Ruff!

“What the devil are you doing here?” he asked.

Peter Ruff groaned.

“Help me up,” he begged, “and give me a little brandy.”

Antoine set him in an easy-chair and rang the bell furiously.

“It will come directly!” he exclaimed. “But who are you?”

Peter Ruff waited for the brandy. When he had sipped it, he drew a little breath as though of relief.

“I heard,” he said, speaking still with an evident effort, “that Lemaître was here. I had secret information. I thought at first that I would let you know—I sent you a note early this morning. Afterwards, I discovered that there was a reward, and I determined to track him down myself. He was in here hiding as a sick waiter. I do not think,” Peter Ruff added, “that Monsieur Antoine had any idea. I presented myself as representing a charitable society, and I was shown here to visit him. He was too clever, though, was Jean Lemaître—too quick for me.”

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“You were a fool to come alone!” John Dory said. “Don’t you know the man’s record? How long ago did he leave?”

“About ten minutes,” Peter Ruff answered. “You must have

missed him somewhere as you came up. I crawled to the window and I watched him go. He left the restaurant by the side entrance, and took a taxicab at the corner there. It went northward toward New Oxford Street.”

Dory turned on his heel—they heard him descending the stairs. Peter Ruff rose to his feet.

“I am afraid,” he said, as he plunged his head into a basin of water, and came into the middle of the room rubbing it vigorously with a small towel, “I am afraid that our friend John Dory will get to dislike me soon! He passed out unnoticed, eh, Antoine?”

Antoine’s face wore a look of great relief.

“There was not a soul who looked,” he said. “We passed under the nose of the gentleman from Scotland Yard. He sat there reading his paper; and he had no idea. I watched Jean step into the motor. Even by now he is well on his way southwards. Twice he changes from motor to train, and back. They will never trace him.”

Peter Ruff, who was looking amazingly better, sipped a further glass of liqueur. Together he and Antoine descended to the street.

“Mind,” Peter Ruff whispered, “I consider that accounts are squared between me and ‘Double-Four’ now. Let them know that. This sort of thing isn’t in my line.”

“For an amateur,” Antoine said, bowing low, “Monsieur commands my heartfelt congratulations!”

CHAPTER VIII

MRS. BOGNOR'S STAR BOARDER

In these days, the duties of Miss Brown as Peter Ruff's secretary had become multifarious. Together with the transcribing of a vast number of notes concerning cases, some of which he undertook and some of which he refused, she had also to keep his cash book, a note of his investments and a record of his social engagements. Notwithstanding all these demands upon her time, however, there were occasions when she found herself, of necessity, idle. In one of these she broached the subject which had often been in her mind. They were alone, and not expecting callers. Consequently, she sat upon the hearthrug and addressed her employer by his Christian name.

“Peter,” she said softly, “do you remember the night when you came through the fog and burst into my little flat?”

“Quite well,” he answered, “but it is a subject to which I prefer that you do not allude.”

“I will be careful,” she answered. “I only spoke of it for this reason. Before you left, when we were sitting together, you sketched out the career which you proposed for yourself. In many respects, I suppose, you have been highly successful, but I wonder if it has ever occurred to you that your work has not proceeded upon the lines which you first indicated?”

He nodded.

“I think I know what you mean,” he said. “Go on.”

“That night,” she murmured softly, “you spoke as a hunted man; you spoke as one at war with Society; you spoke as one who proposes almost a campaign against it. When you took your rooms here and called yourself Peter Ruff, it was rather in your mind to aid the criminal than to detect the crime. Fate seems to have decreed otherwise. Why, I wonder?”

“Things have gone that way,” Peter Ruff remarked.

“I will tell you why,” she continued. “It is because, at the bottom of your heart, there lurks a strong and unconquerable desire for respectability. In your heart you are on the side of the law and established things. You do not like crime; you do not like criminals. You do not like the idea of associating with them. You prefer the company of law-abiding people, even though their ways be narrow. It was part of that sentiment, Peter, which led you to fall in love with a coal-merchant’s daughter. I can see that you will end your days in the halo of respectability.”

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Peter Ruff was a little thoughtful. He scratched his chin and contemplated the tip of his faultless patent boot. Self-analysis interested him, and he recognized the truth of the girl’s words.

“You know, I *am* rather like that,” he admitted. “When I see a family party, I envy them. When I hear of a man who has brothers and sisters and aunts and cousins, and gives family dinner parties to family friends, I envy him. I do not care about the loose ends of life. I do not care about restaurant life, and ladies who transfer their regards with the same facility that they

change their toilettes. You have very admirable powers of observation, Violet. You see me, I believe, as I really am.”

“That being so,” she remarked, “what are you going to say to Sir Richard Dyson?”

Peter Ruff was frank.

“Upon my soul,” he answered, “I don’t know!”

“You’ll have to make up your mind very soon,” she reminded him. “He is coming here at twelve o’clock.”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“I shall wait until I hear what he has to say,” he remarked.

“His letter gave you a pretty clear hint,” Violet said, “that it was something outside the law.”

“The law has many outposts,” Peter Ruff said. “One can thread one’s way in and out, if one knows the ropes. I don’t like the man, but he introduced me to his tailor. I have never had any clothes like those he has made me.”

She sighed.

“You are a vain little person,” she said.

“You are an impertinent young woman!” he answered. “Get back to your work. Don’t you hear the lift stop?”

She rose reluctantly, and resumed her place in front of

her desk.

“If it’s risky,” she whispered, leaning round towards him, “don’t you take it on. I’ve heard one or two things about Sir Richard lately.”

Peter Ruff nodded. He, too, quitted his easy-chair, and took up a bundle of papers which lay upon his desk. There was a sharp tap at the door.

“Come in!” he said.

Sir Richard Dyson entered. He was dressed quietly, but with the perfect taste which was obviously an instinct with him, and he wore a big bunch of violets in his buttonhole. Nevertheless, the spring sunshine seemed to find out the lines in his face. His eyes were baggy—he had aged even within the last few months.

“Well, Mr. Ruff,” he said, shaking hands, “how goes it?”

“I am very well, Sir Richard,” Peter Ruff answered. “Please take a chair.”

Sir Richard took the easy-chair, and discovering a box of cigarettes upon the table, helped himself. Then his eyes fell upon Miss Brown.

“Can’t do without your secretary?” he remarked.

“Impossible!” Peter Ruff answered. “As I told you before, I am her guarantee that what you say to me, or before her, is spoken as though to the dead.”

Sir Richard nodded.

“Just as well,” he remarked, “for I am going to talk about a man who I wish were dead!”

“There are few of us,” Peter Ruff said, “who have not our enemies.”

“Have you any experience of blackmailers?” Sir Richard asked.

“In my profession,” Peter Ruff answered, “I have come across such persons.”

“I have come to see you about one,” Sir Richard proceeded.

“Many years ago, there was a fellow in my regiment who went to the bad—never mind his name. He passes to-day as Ted Jones—that name will do as well as another. I am not,” Sir Richard continued, “a good-natured man, but some devilish impulse prompted me to help that fellow. I gave him money three or four times. Somehow, I don’t think it’s a very good thing to give a man money. He doesn’t value it—it comes too easily. He spends it and wants more.”

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“There’s a good deal of truth in what you say, Sir Richard,” Peter Ruff admitted.

“Our friend, for instance, wanted more”, Sir Richard continued. “He came to me for it almost as a matter of course. I refused. He came again; I lost my temper and punched his head. Then his little game began.”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“He had something to work upon, I suppose?” he remarked.

“Most certainly he had,” Sir Richard admitted. “If ever I achieved sufficient distinction in any branch of life to make it necessary that my biography should be written, I promise you that you would find it in many places a little highly coloured. In other words, Mr. Ruff, I have not always adhered to the paths of righteousness.”

A faint smile flickered across Peter Ruff’s face.

“Sir Richard,” he said, “your candour is admirable.”

“There was one time,” Sir Richard continued, “when I was really on my last legs. It was just before I came into the baronetcy. I had borrowed every penny I could borrow. I was even hard put to it for a meal. I went to Paris, and I called myself by another man’s name. I got introduced to a somewhat exclusive club there. My assumed name was a good one—it was the name, in fact, of a relative whom I somewhat resembled. I was accepted without question. I played cards, and I lost somewhere about eighteen thousand francs.”

“A sum,” Peter Ruff remarked, “which you probably found it inconvenient to pay.”

“There was only one course,” Sir Richard continued, “and I took it. I went back the next night and gave cheques for the amount of my indebtedness—cheques which had no more chance of being met than if I were to draw to-night upon the Bank of England for a million pounds. I went back, however, with another resolve. I was considered to have discharged my liabilities, and we played again. I rose a winner of something

like sixty thousand francs. But I played to win, Mr. Ruff! Do you know what that means?"

"You cheated!" Peter Ruff said, in an undertone.

"Quite true," Sir Richard admitted. "I cheated! There was a scandal, and I disappeared. I had the money, and though my cheques for the eighteen thousand francs were met, there was a considerable balance in my pocket when I escaped out of France. There was enough to take me out to America—big game shooting in the far West. No one ever associated me with the impostor who had robbed these young French noblemen—no one, that is to say, except the person who passes by the name of Teddy Jones."

"How did he get to know?" Peter Ruff asked.

"The story wouldn't interest you," Sir Richard answered. "He was in Paris at the time—we came across one another twice. He heard the scandal, and put two and two together. I shipped him off to Australia when I came into the title. He has come back. Lately, I can tell you, he has pretty well drained me dry. He has become a regular parasite—a cold-blooded leech. He doesn't get drunk now. He looks after his health. I believe he even saves his money. There's scarcely a week I don't hear from him. He keeps me a pauper. He has brought me at last to that state when I feel that there must be an ending!"

"You have come to seek my help," Peter Ruff said, slowly.

"From what you say about this man, I presume that he is not to be frightened?"

"Not for a single moment," Sir Richard answered. "The law has

no terrors for him. He is as slippery as an eel. He has his story pat. He even has his witnesses ready. I can assure you that Mr. Teddy Jones isn't by any means an ordinary sort of person."

"He is not to be bluffed," Peter Ruff said, slowly; "he is not to be bribed. What remains?"

"I have come here," Sir Richard said, "for your advice, Mr. Ruff."

"The blackmailer," Peter Ruff said, "is a criminal."

"He is a scoundrel!" Sir Richard assented.

"He is not fit to live," Peter Ruff repeated.

"He contaminates the world with every breath he draws!" Sir Richard assented.

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"Perhaps," Peter Ruff said, "you had better give me his address, and the name he goes under."

"He lives at a boarding-house in Russell Street, Bloomsbury," Sir Richard said. "It is Mrs. Bognor's boarding-house. She calls it, I believe, the 'American Home from Home.' The number is 17."

"A boarding-house," Peter Ruff repeated, thoughtfully. "Makes it a little hard to get at him privately, doesn't it?"

"Fling him a bait and he will come to you," Sir Richard answered. "He is an adventurer pure and simple, though perhaps you wouldn't believe it to look at him now. He has grown fat on

the money he has wrung from me.”

“You had better leave the matter in my hands for a few days,” Peter Ruff said. “I will have a talk with this gentleman and see whether he is really so unmanageable. If he is, there is, of course, only one way, and for that way, Sir Richard, you would have to pay a little high.”

“If I were to hear to-morrow,” Sir Richard said quietly, “that Teddy Jones was dead, I would give five thousand pounds to the man who brought me the information!”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“It would be worth that,” he said—“quite! I will drop you a line in the course of the next few days.”

Sir Richard took up his hat, lit another of Peter Ruff’s cigarettes, and departed. They heard the rattle of the lift as it descended. Then Miss Brown turned round in her chair.

“Don’t you do it, Peter!” she said solemnly. “The time has gone by for that sort of thing. The man may be unfit to live, but you don’t need to risk as much as that for a matter of five thousand pounds.”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“Quite right,” he said; “quite right, Violet. At the same time, five thousand pounds is an excellent sum. We must see what can be done.”

Peter Ruff’s method of seeing what could be done was at first

the very obvious one of seeking to discover any incidents in the past of the person known as Teddy Jones likely to reflect present discredit upon him if brought to light. From the first, it was quite clear that the career of this gentleman had been far from immaculate. His researches proved, beyond a doubt, that the gentleman in question had resorted, during the last ten or fifteen years, to many and very questionable methods of obtaining a living. At the same time, there was nothing which Peter Ruff felt that the man might not brazen out. His present mode of life seemed—on the surface, at any rate—to be beyond reproach. There was only one association which was distinctly questionable, and it was in this one direction, therefore, that Peter Ruff concentrated himself. The case, for some reason, interested him so much that he took a close and personal interest in it, and he was rewarded one day by discovering this enemy of Sir Richard's sitting, toward five o'clock in the afternoon, in a café in Regent Street, engrossed in conversation with a person whom Peter Ruff knew to be a very black sheep indeed—a man who had been tried for murder, and concerning whom there were still many unpleasant rumours. From behind his paper in a corner of the café, Peter Ruff watched these two men. Teddy Jones—or Major Edward Jones, as it seemed he was now called—was a person whose appearance no longer suggested the poverty against which he had been struggling most of his life. He was well dressed and tolerably well turned out. His face was a little puffy, and he had put on flesh during these days of his ease. His eyes, too, had a somewhat furtive expression, although his general deportment was one of braggadocio. Peter Ruff, quick always in his likes or dislikes, found the man repulsive from the start. He felt that he would have a genuine pleasure, apart from the matter of the five thousand pounds, in accelerating Major Jones' departure from a world which he

certainly did not adorn.

The two men conducted their conversation in a subdued tone, which made it quite impossible for Peter Ruff, in his somewhat distant corner, to overhear a single word of it. It was obvious, however, that they were not on the best of terms. Major Jones' companion was protesting, and apparently without success, against some course of action or speech of his companion's. The conversation, on the other hand, never reached a quarrel, and the two men left the place together apparently on ordinary terms of friendliness. Peter Ruff at once quitted his seat and crossed the room toward the spot where they had been sitting. He dived under the table and picked up a newspaper—it was the only clue left to him as to the nature of their conversation. More than once, Major Jones, who had, soon after their arrival, sent a waiter for it, had pointed to a certain paragraph as though to give weight to his statements. Peter Ruff had noticed the exact position of that paragraph. He smoothed out the paper and found it at once. It was an account of the murder of a wealthy old woman, living on the outskirts of a country village not far from London. Peter Ruff's face did not change as he called for another vermouth and read the description slowly. Yet he was aware that he had possibly stumbled across the very thing for which he had searched so urgently! The particulars of the murder he already knew well, as at one time he had felt inclined to aid the police in their so far fruitless investigations. He therefore skipped the description of the tragedy, and devoted his attention to the last paragraph, toward which he fancied that the finger of Major Jones had been chiefly directed. It was a list of the stolen property, which consisted of jewellery, gold and notes to a very considerable amount. With the waiter's permission, he annexed the paper, cut

out the list of articles with a sharp penknife, and placed it in his pocketbook before he left the café.

In the course of some of the smaller cases with which Peter Ruff had been from time to time connected, he had more than once come into contact with the authorities at Scotland Yard, and he had several acquaintances there—not including Mr. John Dory—to whom, at times, he had given valuable information. For the first time, he now sought some return for his many courtesies. He drove straight from the café to the office of the Chief of the Criminal Investigation Department. The questions he asked there were only two, but they were promptly and courteously answered. Peter Ruff left the building and drove back to his rooms in a somewhat congratulatory frame of mind. After all, it was chance which was the chief factor in the solution of so many of these cases! Often he had won less success after months of untiring effort than he had gained during that few minutes in the café in Regent Street.

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Peter Ruff became an inmate of that very select boarding-house carried on by Mrs. Bognor at Number 17 Russell Street, Bloomsbury. He arrived with a steamer trunk, an elaborate travelling bag and a dressing case; took the best vacant room in the house, and dressed for dinner. Mrs. Bognor looked upon him as a valuable addition to her *clientèle*, and introduced him freely to her other guests. Among these was Major Edward Jones. Major Jones sat at Mrs. Bognor's right hand, and was evidently the show guest of the boarding-house. Peter Ruff, without the least desire to attack his position, sat upon her left and monopolised the conversation. On the third night it turned, by chance, upon precious stones. Peter Ruff drew a little

chamois leather bag from his pocket.

“I am afraid,” he said, “that my tastes are peculiar. I have been in the East, and I have seen very many precious stones in their uncut state. To my mind, there is nothing to be compared with opals. These are a few I brought home from India. Perhaps you would like to look at them, Mrs. Bognor.”

They were passed round, amidst a little chorus of admiration.

“The large one with the blue fire,” Peter Ruff remarked, “is, I think, remarkably beautiful. I have never seen a stone quite like it.”

“It is wonderful!” murmured the young lady who was sitting at Major Jones’ right hand. “What a fortunate man you are, Mr. Ruff, to have such a collection of treasures!”

Peter Ruff bowed across the table. Major Jones, who was beginning to feel that his position as show guest was in danger, thrust his hand into his waistcoat pocket and produced a lady’s ring, in which was set a single opal.

“Very pretty stones,” he remarked carelessly, “but I can’t say I am very fond of them. Here’s one that belonged to my sister, and my grandmother before her. I have it in my pocket because I was thinking of having the stone reset and making a present of it to a friend of mine.”

Peter Ruff’s popularity waned—he had said nothing about making a present to any one of even the most insignificant of his opals! And the one which Major Jones now handed round was certainly a magnificent stone. Peter Ruff

examined it with the rest, and under the pretext of studying the setting, gazed steadfastly at the inside through his eyeglass. Major Jones, from the other side of the table, frowned, and held out his hand for the ring.

“A very beautiful stone indeed!” Peter Ruff declared, passing it across the tablecloth. “Really, I do not think that there is one in my little collection to be compared with it. Have you many treasures like this, Major Jones?”

“Oh, a few!” the Major answered carelessly. “Family heirlooms, most of them.”

“You will have to give me the ring, Major Jones,” the young lady on his right remarked archly. “It’s bad luck, you know, to give it to any one who is not born in October, and my birthday is on the twelfth.”

“My dear Miss Levey,” Major Jones answered, whispering in her ear, “more unlikely things have happened than that I should beg your acceptance of this little trifle.”

“Sooner or later,” Peter Ruff said genially, “I should like to have a little conversation with you, Major. I fancy that we ought to be able to find plenty of subjects of common interest.”

“Delighted, I’m sure!” the latter answered, utterly unsuspecting. “Shall we go into the smoking room now, or would you rather play a rubber first?”

“If it is all the same to you,” Peter Ruff said, “I think we will have a cigar first. There will be plenty of time for bridge afterwards.”

“May I offer you a cigar, sir?” Major Jones enquired, passing across a well-filled case.

Peter Ruff sighed.

“I am afraid, Major,” he said, “that there is scarcely time. You see, I have a warrant in my pocket for your arrest, and I am afraid that by the time we got to the station—”

Major Jones leaned forward in his chair. He gripped the sides tightly with both hands. His eyes seemed to be protruding from his head.

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“For my what?” he exclaimed, in a tone of horror.

“For your arrest,” Peter Ruff explained calmly. “Surely you must have been expecting it! During all these years you must have grown used to expecting it at every moment!”

Major Jones collapsed. He looked at Ruff as one might look at a man who has taken leave of his senses. Yet underneath it all was the coward’s fear!

“What are you talking about, man?” he exclaimed. “What do you mean? Lower your voice, for heaven’s sake! Consider my position here! Some one might overhear! If this is a joke, let me tell you that it’s a d——d foolish one!”

Peter Ruff raised his eyebrows.

“I do not wish,” he said, “to create a disturbance—my manner of coming here should have assured you of that. At the same time, business is business. I hold a warrant for your arrest, and I

am forced to execute it.”

“Do you mean that you are a detective, then?” Major Jones demanded.

He was a big man, but his voice seemed to have grown very small indeed.

“Naturally,” Peter Ruff answered. “I should not come here without authority.”

“What is the charge?” the other man faltered.

“Blackmail,” Peter Ruff said slowly. “The information against you is lodged by Sir Richard Dyson.”

It seemed to Peter Ruff, who was watching his companion closely, that a wave of relief passed over the face of the man who sat cowering in his chair. He certainly drew a little gasp—stretched out his hands, as though to thrust the shadow of some fear from him. His voice, when he spoke, was stronger. Some faint show of courage was returning to him.

“There is some ridiculous mistake,” he declared. “Let us talk this over like sensible men, Mr. Ruff. If you will wait until I have spoken to Sir Richard, I can promise you that the warrant shall be withdrawn, and that you shall not be the loser.”

“I am afraid it is too late for anything of that sort,” Peter Ruff said. “Sir Richard’s patience has been completely exhausted by your repeated demands.”

“He never told me so,” Major Jones whined. “I quite thought

that he was always glad to help an old friend. As a matter of fact, I had not meant to ask him for anything else. The last few hundreds I had from him was to have closed the thing up. It was the end.”

Peter Ruff shook his head.

“No,” he said, “it was not the end! It never would have been the end! Sir Richard sought my advice, and I gave it him without hesitation. Sooner or later, I told him, he would have to adopt different measures. I convinced him. I represent those measures!”

“But the matter can be arranged,” Major Jones insisted, with a little shudder, “I am perfectly certain it can be arranged. Mr. Ruff, you are not an ordinary police officer—I am sure of that. Give me a chance of having an interview with Sir Richard before anything more is done. I will satisfy him, I promise you that. Why, if we leave the place together like this, every one here will get to know about it!”

“Be reasonable,” Peter Ruff answered. “Of course every one will get to know about it! Blackmailing cases always excite a considerable amount of interest. Your photograph will probably be in the *Daily Mirror* to-morrow or the next day. In the meantime, I must trouble you to pay your respects to Mrs. Bognor and to come with me.”

“To Sir Richard’s house?” Major Jones asked, eagerly.

“To the police station,” Peter Ruff answered.

Major Jones did not rise. He sat for a few moments with his

head buried in his hands.

“Mr. Ruff,” he said hoarsely, “listen to me. I have been fortunate lately in some investments. I am not so poor as I was. I have my cheque book in my pocket, and a larger balance in the bank now than I have ever had before. If I write you a cheque for, say, a hundred—no, two!—five!” he cried, desperately, watching Peter Ruff’s unchanging face—“five hundred pounds, will you come round with me to Sir Richard’s house in a hansom at once?”

Peter Ruff shook his head.

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“Five thousand pounds would not buy your liberty from me, Major Jones,” he said.

The man became abject.

“Have pity, then,” he pleaded. “My health is not good—I couldn’t stand imprisonment. Think of what it means to a man of my age suddenly to leave everything worth having in life just because he may have imposed a little on the generosity of a friend! Think how you would feel, and be merciful!”

Peter Ruff shook his head slowly. His face was immovable, but there was a look in his eyes from which the other man shrank.

“Major Jones,” he said, “you ask me to be merciful. You appeal to my pity. For such as you I have no pity, nor have I ever shown any mercy. You know very well, and I know, that when once the hand of the law touches your shoulder, it will not be only a charge of blackmail which the police will bring against you!”

“There is nothing else—nothing else!” he cried. “Take half my fortune, Mr. Ruff. Let me get away. Give me a chance—just a sporting chance!”

“I wonder,” Peter Ruff said, “what chance that poor old lady in Weston had? No, I am not saying you murdered her. You never had the pluck. Your confederate did that, and you handled the booty. What were the initials inside that ring you showed us tonight, Major Jones?”

“Let me go to my bedroom,” he said, in a strange, far-away tone. “You can come with me and stand outside.”

Peter Ruff assented.

“To save scandal,” he said, “yes!”

Three flights of stairs they climbed. When at last they reached the door, the trembling man made one last appeal.

“Mr. Ruff,” he said, “have a little mercy. Give me an hour’s start—just a chance for my life!”

Peter Ruff pushed him in the door.

“I am not a hard man,” he said, “but I keep my mercy for men!”

He took the key from the inside of the door, locked it, and with the key in his pocket descended to the drawing-room. The young lady who had sat on Major Jones’ right was singing a ballad. Suddenly she paused in the middle of her song. The four people who were playing bridge looked up. Mrs. Bognor screamed.

“What was that?” she asked quickly.

“It sounded,” Peter Ruff said, “very much like a revolver shot.”

“I see,” Sir Richard remarked, with a queer look in his eyes, as he handed over a roll of notes to Peter Ruff, “the jury brought it in ‘Suicide!’ What I can’t understand is—”

“Don’t try,” Peter Ruff interrupted briskly. “It isn’t in the bond that you should understand.”

Sir Richard helped himself to a drink. A great burden had passed from his shoulders, but he was not feeling at his best that morning. He could scarcely keep his eyes from Peter Ruff.

“Ruff,” he said, “I have known you some time, and I have known you to be a square man. I have known you to do good-natured actions. I came to you in desperation—but I scarcely expected this!”

Peter Ruff emptied his own tumbler and took up his hat.

“Sir Richard,” he said, “you are like a good many other people. Now that the thing is done, you shrink from the thought of it. You even wonder how I could have planned to bring about the death of this man. Listen, Sir Richard. Pity for the deserving, or for those who have in them one single quality, one single grain, of good, is a sentiment which deserves respect. Pity for vermin, who crawl about the world leaving a poisonous trail upon everything they touch, is a false and unnatural sentiment. For every hopelessly corrupt man who is induced to quit this life there is a more deserving one, somewhere or other, for whom

the world is a better place.”

“So that, after all, you are a philanthropist, Mr. Ruff,” Sir Richard said, with a forced smile.

Peter Ruff shook his head.

“A philosopher,” he answered, buttoning up his notes.

CHAPTER IX

THE PERFIDY OF MISS BROWN

Peter Ruff came down to his office with a single letter in his hand, bearing a French postmark. He returned his secretary's morning greeting a little absently, and seated himself at his desk.

"Violet," he asked, "have you ever been to Paris?"

She looked at him compassionately.

"More times than you, I think, Peter," she answered.

He nodded.

"That," he exclaimed, "is very possible! Could you get ready to leave by the two-twenty this afternoon?"

"What, alone?" she exclaimed.

"No—with me," he answered.

She shut down her desk with a bang.

"Of course I can!" she exclaimed. "What a spree!"

Then she caught sight of a certain expression on Peter Ruff's face, and she looked at him wonderingly.

"Is anything wrong, Peter?" she asked.

“No,” he answered, “I cannot say that anything is wrong. I have had an invitation to present myself before a certain society in Paris of which you have some indirect knowledge. What the summons means I cannot say.”

“Yet you go?” she exclaimed.

“I go,” he answered. “I have no choice. If I waited here twenty-four hours, I should hear of it.”

“They can have nothing against you,” she said. “On the contrary, the only time they have appealed for your aid, you gave it—very valuable aid it must have been, too.”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“I cannot see,” he admitted, “what they can have against me. And yet, somehow, the wording of my invitation seemed to me a little ominous. Perhaps,” he added, walking to the window and standing looking out for a moment, “I have a liver this morning. I am depressed. Violet, what does it mean when you are depressed?”

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“Shall you wear your grey clothes for travelling?” she asked, a little irrelevantly.

“I have not made up my mind,” Peter Ruff answered. “I thought of wearing my brown, with a brown overcoat. What do you suggest?”

“I like you in brown,” she answered, simply. “I should change, if I were you.”

He smiled faintly.

“I believe,” he said, “that you have a sort of superstition that as I change my clothes I change my humours.”

“Should I be so very far wrong?” she asked. “Don’t think that I am laughing at you, Peter. The greatest men in the world have had their foibles.”

Peter Ruff frowned.

“We shall be away for several days,” he said. “Be sure that you take some wraps. It will be cold, crossing.”

“Are you going to close the office altogether?” she asked.

Peter Ruff nodded.

“Put up a notice,” he said—“‘Back on Friday.’ Pack up your books and take them round to the Bank before you leave. The lift man will call you a taxicab.”

He watched her preparations with a sort of gloomy calm.

“I wish you’d tell me what is the matter with you?” she asked, as she turned to follow her belongings.

“I do not know,” Peter Ruff said. “I suppose I am suffering from what you would call presentiments. Be at Charing Cross punctually.”

“Why do you go at all?” she asked. “These people are of no further use to you. Only the other day, you were saying that you

should not accept any more outside cases.”

“I must go,” Peter Ruff answered. “I am not afraid of many things, but I should be afraid of disobeying this letter.”

They had a comfortable journey down, a cool, bright crossing, and found their places duly reserved for them in the French train. Miss Brown, in her neat travelling clothes and furs, was conscious of looking her best, and she did all that was possible to entertain her travelling companion. But Peter Ruff seemed like a man who labours under some sense of apprehension. He had faced death more than once, during the last few years—faced it without flinching, and with a certain cool disregard which can only come from the highest sort of courage. Yet he knew, when he read over again in the train that brief summons which he was on his way to obey, that he had passed under the shadow of some new and indefinable fear. He was perfectly well aware, too, that both on the steamer and on the French train he was carefully shadowed. This fact, however, did not surprise him. He even went out of his way to enter into conversation with one of the two men whose furtive glances into their compartment and whose constant proximity had first attracted his attention. The man was civil but vague. Nevertheless, when they took their places in the dining car, they found the two men at the next table. Peter Ruff pointed them out to his companion.

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““Double-Fours’!” he whispered. “Don’t you feel like a criminal?”

She laughed, and they took no more notice of the men. But as the train drew near Paris, he felt some return of the depression

which had troubled him during the earlier part of the day. He felt a sense of comfort in his companion's presence which was a thing utterly strange to him. On the other hand, he was conscious of a certain regret that he had brought her with him into an adventure of which he could not foresee the end.

The lights of Paris flashed around them—the train was gradually slackening speed. Peter Ruff, with a sigh, began to collect their belongings.

“Violet,” he said, “I ought not to have brought you.”

Something in his voice puzzled her. There had been very few times, during all the years she had known him, when she had been able to detect anything approaching sentiment in his tone—and those few times had been when he had spoken of another woman.

“Why not?” she asked, eagerly.

Peter Ruff looked out into the blackness, through the glittering arc of lights, and perhaps for once he suffered his fancy to build for him visions of things that were not of earth. If so, however, it was a moment which swiftly passed. His reply was in a tone as matter of fact as his usual speech.

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“Because,” he said, “I do not exactly see the end of my present expedition—I do not understand its object.”

“You have some apprehension?” she asked.

“None at all,” he answered. “Why should I? There is an unwritten bargain,” he added, a little more slowly, “to which I

subscribed with our friends here, and I have certainly kept it. In fact, the balance is on my side. There is nothing for me to fear.”

The train crept into the Gare du Nord, and they passed through the usual routine of the Customs House. Then, in an omnibus, they rumbled slowly over the cobblestones, through the region of barely lit streets and untidy cafés, down the Rue Lafayette, across the famous Square and into the Rue de Rivoli.

“Our movements,” Peter Ruff remarked drily, “are too well known for us to attempt to conceal them. We may as well stop at one of the large hotels. It will be more cheerful for you while I am away.”

They engaged rooms at the Continental. Miss Brown, whose apartments were in the wing of the hotel overlooking the gardens, ascended at once to her room. Peter Ruff, who had chosen a small suite on the other side, went into the bar for a whisky and soda. A man touched him on the elbow.

“For Monsieur,” he murmured, and vanished.

Peter Ruff turned and opened the note. It bore a faint perfume, it had a coronet upon the flap of the envelope, and it was written in a delicate feminine handwriting.

DEAR MR. RUFF:

If you are not too tired with your journey, will you call soon after one o'clock to meet some old friends?

BLANCHE DE MAUPASSIM.

Peter Ruff drank his whisky and soda, went up to his rooms, and

made a careful toilet. Then he sent a page up for Violet, who came down within a few minutes. She was dressed with apparent simplicity in a high-necked gown, a large hat, and a single rope of pearls. In place of the usual gold purse, she carried a small white satin bag, exquisitely hand-painted. Everything about her bespoke that elegant restraint so much a feature of the Parisian woman of fashion herself. Peter Ruff, who had told her to prepare for supping out, was at first struck by the simplicity of her attire. Afterwards, he came to appreciate its perfection.

They went to the Café de Paris, where they were the first arrivals. People, however, began to stream in before they had finished their meal, and Peter Ruff, comparing his companion's appearance with the more flamboyant charms of these ladies from the Opera and the theatres, began to understand the numerous glances of admiration which the impressionable Frenchmen so often turned in their direction. There was between them, toward the end of the meal, something which amounted almost to nervousness.

“You are going to keep your appointment to-night, Peter?” his companion asked.

Peter Ruff nodded.

“As soon as I have taken you home,” he said. “I shall probably return late, so we will breakfast here to-morrow morning, if you like, at half-past twelve. I will send a note to your room when I am ready.”

She looked him in the eyes.

“Peter,” she said, “supposing that note doesn’t come!”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“My dear Violet,” he said, “you and I—or rather I, for you are not concerned in this—live a life which is a little different from the lives of most of the people around us. The million pay their taxes, and they expect police protection in times of danger. For me there are no such resources. My life has its own splendid compensations. I have weapons with which to fight any ordinary danger. What I want to explain to you is this—that if you hear no more of me, you can do nothing. If that note does not come to you in the morning, you can do nothing. Wait here for three days, and after that go back to England. You will find a letter on your desk, telling you there exactly what to do.”

“You have something in your mind,” she said, “of which you have not told me.”

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“I have nothing,” he answered, firmly. “Upon my honour, I know of no possible cause of offence which our friends could have against me. Their summons is, I will admit, somewhat extraordinary, but I go to obey it absolutely without fear. You can sleep well, Violet. We lunch here to-morrow, without a doubt.”

They drove back to the hotel almost in silence. Violet was looking fixedly out of the window of the taxicab, as though interested in watching the crowds upon the street. Peter Ruff appeared to be absorbed in his own thoughts. Yet perhaps they were both of them nearer to one another than either surmised. Their parting in the hall of the Continental Hotel was

unemotional enough. For a moment Peter Ruff had hesitated while her hand had lain in his. He had opened his lips as though he had something to say. Her eyes grew suddenly softer—seemed to seek his as though begging for those unspoken words. But Peter Ruff did not say them then.

“I shall be back all right,” he said. “Good night, Violet! Sleep well!”

He turned back towards the waiting taxicab.

“Number 16, Rue de St. Quintaine,” he told the man.

It was not a long ride. In less than a quarter of an hour. Peter Ruff presented himself before a handsome white house in a quiet, aristocratic-looking street. At his summons, the postern door flew open, and a manservant in plain livery stood at the second entrance.

“Madame la Marquise?” Peter Ruff asked.

The man bowed in silence, and took the visitor’s hat and overcoat. He passed along a spacious hall and into a delightfully furnished reception room, where an old lady with grey hair sat in the midst of a little circle of men. Peter Ruff stood, for a moment, upon the threshold, looking around him. She held out her hands.

“It is Monsieur Peter Ruff, is it not? At last, then, I am gratified. I have wished for so long to see one who has become so famous.”

Peter Ruff took her hands in his and raised them gallantly

to his lips.

“Madame,” he said, “this is a pleasure indeed. At my last visit here, you were in Italy.”

“I grow old,” she answered. “I leave Paris but little now. Where one has lived, one should at least be content to die.”

“Madame speaks a philosophy,” Peter Ruff answered, “which as yet she has no need to learn.”

The old lady turned to a man who stood upon her right:

“And this from an Englishman!” she exclaimed.

There were others who took Peter Ruff by the hand then. The servants were handing round coffee in little Sèvres cups. On the sideboard was a choice of liqueurs and bottles of wine. Peter Ruff found himself hospitably entertained with both small talk and refreshments. But every now and then his eyes wandered back to where Madame sat in her chair, her hair as white as snow—beautiful still, in spite of the cruel mouth and the narrow eyes.

“She is wonderful!” he murmured to a man who stood by his side.

“She is eighty-six,” was the answer in a whisper, “and she knows everything.”

As the clock struck two, a tall footman entered the room and wheeled Madame’s chair away. Several of the guests left at the same time. Ruff, when the door was closed, counted those who

remained. As he had imagined would be the case, he found that there were eight.

A tall, grey-bearded man, who from the first had attached himself to Ruff, and who seemed to act as a sort of master of ceremonies, now approached him once more and laid his hand upon his shoulder.

“*Mon ami*,” he said, “we will now discuss, if it pleases you, the little matter concerning which we took the liberty of asking you to favour us with a visit.”

“What, here?” Peter Ruff asked, in some surprise.

His friend, who had introduced himself as Monsieur de Founcelles, smiled.

“But why not?” he asked. “Ah, but I think I understand!” he added, almost immediately. “You are English, Monsieur Peter Ruff, and in some respects you have not moved with the times. Confess, now, that your idea of a secret society is a collection of strangely attired men who meet in a cellar, and build subterranean passages in case of surprise. In Paris, I think, we have gone beyond that sort of thing. We of the ‘Double-Four’ have no headquarters save the drawing room of Madame; no hiding places whatsoever; no meeting places save the fashionable cafés or our own reception rooms. The police follow us—what can they discover?—nothing! What is there to discover?—nothing! Our lives are lived before the eyes of all Paris. There is never any suspicion of mystery about any of our movements. We have our hobbies, and we indulge in them. Monsieur the Marquis de Sogrange here is a great sportsman.”

Monsieur le Comte owns many racehorses. I myself am an authority on pictures, and own a collection which I have bequeathed to the State. Paris knows us well as men of fashion and mark—Paris does not guess that we have perfected an organisation so wonderful that the whole criminal world pays toll to us.”

“Dear me,” Peter Ruff said, “this is very interesting!”

“We have a trained army at our disposal,” Monsieur de Fouvelles continued, “who numerically, as well as in intelligence, outnumber the whole force of gendarmes in Paris. No criminal from any other country can settle down here and hope for success, unless he joins us. An exploit which is inspired by us cannot fail. Our agents may count on our protection, and receive it without question.”

“I am bewildered,” Peter Ruff said, frankly. “I do not understand how you gentlemen—whom one knows by name so well as patrons of sport and society, can spare the time for affairs of such importance.”

Monsieur de Fouvelles nodded.

“We have very valuable aid,” he said. “There is below us—the ‘Double-Four’—the eight gentlemen now present, an executive council composed of five of the shrewdest men in France. They take their orders from us. We plan, and they obey. We have imagination, and special sources of knowledge. They have the most perfect machinery for carrying out our schemes that it is possible to imagine. I do not wish to boast, Mr. Ruff, but if I take a directory of Paris and place after any man’s

name, whatever his standing or estate, a black cross, that man dies before seven days have passed. You buy your evening paper—a man has committed suicide! You read of a letter found by his side: an unfortunate love affair—a tale of jealousy or reckless speculation. Mr. Ruff, the majority of these explanations are false. They are invented and arranged for by us. This year alone, five men in Paris, of position, have been found dead, and accounted, for excellent reasons, suicides. In each one of these cases, Monsieur Ruff, although not a soul has a suspicion of it, the removal of these men was arranged for by the ‘Double-Four.’”

“I trust,” Peter Ruff said, “that it may never be my ill-fortune to incur the displeasure of so marvellous an association.”

“On the contrary, Monsieur Ruff,” the other answered, “the attention of the association has been directed towards certain incidents of your career in a most favourable manner. We have spoken of you often lately, Mr. Ruff, between ourselves. We arrive now at the object for which we begged the honour of your visit. It is to offer you the presidency of our Executive Council.”

Peter Ruff had thought of many things, but he had not thought of this! He gasped, recovered himself, and realised at once the dangers of the position in which he stood.

“The Council of Five!” he said thoughtfully.

“Precisely,” Monsieur de Fouvelles replied. “The salary—forgive me for giving such prominence to a matter which you doubtless consider of secondary importance—is ten thousand pounds a year, with a residence here and in London—also

servants.”

“It is princely!” Peter Ruff declared. “I cannot imagine, Monsieur, how you could have believed me capable of filling such a position.”

“There is not much about you, Mr. Ruff, which we do not know,” Monsieur de Fouvelles answered. “There are points about your career which we have marked with admiration. Your work over here was rapid and comprehensive. We know all about your checkmating the Count von Hern and the Comtesse de Pilitz. We have appealed to you for aid once only—your response was prompt and brilliant. You have all the qualifications we desire. You are still young, physically you are sound, you speak all languages, and you are unmarried.”

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“I am what?” Peter Ruff asked, with a start.

“A bachelor,” Monsieur de Fouvelles answered. “We who have made crime and its detection a life-long study, have reduced many matters concerning it to almost mathematical exactitude. Of one thing we have become absolutely convinced it is that the great majority of cases in which the police triumph are due to the treachery of women. The criminal who steers clear of the other sex escapes a greater danger than the detectives who dog his heels. It is for that reason that we choose only unmarried men for our executive council.”

Peter Ruff made a gesture of despair.

“And I am to be married in a month!” he exclaimed.

There was a murmur of dismay. If those other seven men had not

once intervened, it was because the conduct of the affair had been voted into the hands of Monsieur de Fouvelles, and there was little which he had left unsaid. Nevertheless, they had formed a little circle around the two men. Every word passing between them had been listened to eagerly. Gestures and murmured exclamations had been frequent enough. There arose now a chorus of voices which their leader had some difficulty in silencing.

“It must be arranged!”

“But it is impossible—this!”

“Monsieur Ruff amuses himself with us!”

“Gentlemen,” Peter Ruff said, “I can assure you that I do nothing of the sort. The affair was arranged some months ago, and the young lady is even now in Paris, purchasing her trousseau.”

Monsieur de Fouvelles, with a wave of the hand, commanded silence. There was probably a way out. In any case, one must be found.

“Monsieur Ruff,” he said, “putting aside, for one moment, your sense of honour, which of course forbids you even to consider the possibility of breaking your word supposing that the young lady herself should withdraw—”

“You don’t know Miss Brown!” Peter Ruff interrupted.

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“It is a pleasure to which I hope to attain,” Monsieur de Fouvelles declared, smoothly. “Let us consider once more my proposition. I take it for granted that, apart from this threatened

complication, you find it agreeable?”

“I am deeply honoured by it,” Peter Ruff declared.

“Well, that being so,” Monsieur de Fouvelles said, more cheerfully, “we must see whether we cannot help you. Tell me, who is this fortunate young lady this—Miss Brown?”

“She is a young person of good birth and some means,” Peter Ruff declared. “She is, in a small way, an actress; she has also been my secretary from the first.”

Monsieur de Fouvelles nodded his head thoughtfully.

“Ah!” he said. “She knows your secrets, then, I presume?”

“She does,” Peter Ruff assented. “She knows a great deal!”

“A young person to be conciliated by all means,” Monsieur de Fouvelles declared. “Well, we must see. When, Monsieur Ruff, may I have the opportunity of making the acquaintance of this young lady?”

“To-morrow morning, or rather this morning, if you will,” Peter Ruff answered. “We are taking breakfast together at the Café de Paris. It will give me great pleasure if you will join us.”

“On the contrary,” Monsieur de Fouvelles declared, “I must beg of you slightly to alter your plans. I will ask you and Mademoiselle to do me the honour of breakfasting at the Ritz with the Marquis de Sogrange and myself, at the same hour. We shall find there more opportunity for a short discussion.”

“I am entirely at your service,” Peter Ruff answered.

There were signs now of a breaking-up of the little party.

“We must all regret, dear Monsieur Ruff,” Monsieur de Fouvelles said, as he made his adieux, “this temporary obstruction to the consummation of our hopes. Let us pray that Mademoiselle will not be unreasonable.”

“You are very kind,” Peter Ruff murmured.

Peter Ruff drove through the grey dawn to his hotel, in the splendid automobile of Monsieur de Fouvelles, whose homeward route lay in that direction. It was four o'clock when he accepted his key from a sleepy-looking clerk, and turned towards the staircase. The hotel was wrapped in semi-gloom. Sweepers and cleaners were at work. The palms had been turned out into the courtyard. Dust sheets lay over the furniture. One person only, save himself and the untidy-looking servants, was astir. From a distant corner which commanded the entrance, he saw Violet stealing away to the corridor which led to her part of the hotel. She had sat there all through the night to see him come in—to be assured of his safety! Peter Ruff stared after her disappearing figure as one might have watched a ghost.

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The luncheon party was a great success. Peter Ruff was human enough to be proud of his companion—proud of her smartness, which was indubitable even here, surrounded as they were by Frenchwomen of the best class; proud of her accent, of the admiration which she obviously excited in the two Frenchmen. His earlier enjoyment of the meal was a little clouded from the fact that he felt himself utterly outshone in the matter of general

appearance. No tailor had ever suggested to him a coat so daring and yet so perfect as that which adorned the person of the Marquis de Sogrange. The deep violet of his tie was a shade unknown in Bond Street—inimitable—a true education in colour. They had the bearing, too, these Frenchmen! He watched Monsieur de Fouvelles bending over Violet, and he was suddenly conscious of a wholly new sensation. He did not recognize—could not even classify it. He only knew that it was not altogether pleasant, and that it set the warm blood tingling through his veins.

It was not until they were sitting out in the winter garden, taking their coffee and liqueurs, that the object of their meeting was referred to. Then Monsieur de Fouvelles drew Violet a little away from the others, and the Marquis, with a meaning smile, took Peter Ruff's arm and led him on one side. Monsieur de Fouvelles wasted no words at all.

“Mademoiselle,” he said, “Monsieur Ruff has doubtless told you that last night I made him the offer of a great position among us.”

She looked at him with twinkling eyes.

“Go on, please,” she said.

“I offered him a position of great dignity—of great responsibility,” Monsieur de Fouvelles continued. “I cannot explain to you its exact nature, but it is in connection with the most wonderful organisation of its sort which the world has ever known.”

“The ‘Double Four’,” she murmured.

“Attached to the post is a princely salary and but one condition,” Monsieur de Fouvelles said, watching the girl’s face. “The condition is that Mr. Ruff remains a bachelor.”

Violet nodded.

“Peter’s told me all this,” she remarked. “He wants me to give him up.”

Monsieur de Fouvelles drew a little closer to his companion. There was a peculiar smile upon his lips.

“My dear young lady,” he said softly, “forgive me if I point out to you that with your appearance and gifts a marriage with our excellent friend is surely not the summit of your ambitions! Here in Paris, I promise you, here—we can do much better than that for you. You have not, perhaps, a *dot*? Good! That is our affair. Give up our friend here, and we deposit in any bank you like to name the sum of two hundred and fifty thousand francs.”

“Two hundred and fifty thousand francs!” Violet repeated, slowly.

Monsieur de Fouvelles nodded.

“It is enough?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“It is not enough,” she answered.

Monsieur de Fouvelles raised his eyebrows.

“We do not bargain,” he said coldly, “and money is not the chief thing in the world. It is for you, then, to name a sum.”

“Monsieur de Fouvelles,” she said, “can you tell me the amount of the national debt of France?”

“Somewhere about nine hundred million francs, I believe,” he answered.

She nodded.

“That is exactly my price,” she declared.

“For giving up Peter Ruff?” he gasped.

She looked at her employer thoughtfully.

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“He doesn’t look worth it, does he?” she said, with a queer little smile. “I happen to care for him, though—that’s all.”

Monsieur de Fouvelles shrugged his shoulders. He knew men and women, and for the present he accepted defeat. He sighed heavily.

“I congratulate our friend, and I envy him,” he said. “If ever you should change your mind, Mademoiselle—”

“It is our privilege, isn’t it?” she remarked, with a brilliant smile. “If I do, I shall certainly let you know.”

On the way home, Peter Ruff was genial—Miss Brown silent. He had escaped from a difficult position, and his sense of gratitude toward his companion was strong. He showed her

many little attentions on the voyage which sometimes escaped him. From Dover, they had a carriage to themselves.

“Peter,” Miss Brown said, after he had made her comfortable, “when is it to be?”

“When is what to be?” he asked, puzzled.

“Our marriage,” she answered, looking at him for a moment in most bewildering fashion and then suddenly dropping her eyes.

Peter Ruff returned her gaze in blank amazement.

“What do you mean, Violet?” he exclaimed.

“Just what I say,” she answered, composedly. “When are we going to be married?”

“What nonsense!” he said. “We are not going to be married. You know that quite well.”

“Oh, no, I don’t!” she declared, smiling at him in a heavenly fashion, “At your request I have told Monsieur de Fouvelles that we were engaged. Incidentally, I have refused two hundred and fifty thousand francs and, I believe, an admirer, for your sake. I declared that I was going to marry you, and I must keep my word.”

Peter Ruff began to feel giddy.

“Look here, Violet,” he said, “you know very well that we arranged all that between ourselves.”

“Arranged all that?” she repeated, with a little laugh. “Perhaps we did. You asked me to marry you, and you have posed as my *fiancé*. You kept it up just as long as it suited you—it suits me to keep it up a little longer.”

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“Do you mean to say—do you seriously mean that you expect me to marry you?” he asked, aghast.

“I do,” she admitted. “I have meant you to for some time, Peter!”

She was very alluring, and Peter Ruff hesitated. She held out her hands and leaned towards him. Her muff fell to the floor. She had raised her veil, and a faint perfume of violets stole into the carriage. Her lips were a little parted, her eyes were saying unutterable things.

“You don’t want me to sue you, do you, Peter?” she murmured.

Peter Ruff sighed—and yielded.

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CHAPTER X

WONDERFUL JOHN DORY

The woman who had been Peter Ruff's first love had fallen upon evil days. Her prettiness was on the wane—powder and rouge, late hours, and excesses of many kinds, had played havoc with it, even in these few months. Her clothes were showy but cheap. Her boots themselves, unclean and down at heel, told the story. She stood upon the threshold of Peter Ruff's office, and looked half defiantly, half doubtfully at Violet, who was its sole occupant.

“Can I do anything for you?” the latter asked, noticing the woman's hesitation.

“I want to see Mr. Ruff,” the visitor said.

“Mr. Ruff is out at present,” Violet answered.

“When will he be in?”

“I cannot tell you,” Violet said. “Perhaps you had better leave a message. Or will you call again? Mr. Ruff is very uncertain in his movements.”

Maud sank into a chair.

“I'll wait,” she declared.

“I am not sure,” Violet remarked, raising her eyebrows,

“whether that will be convenient. There may be other clients in. Mr. Ruff himself may not be back for several hours.”

“Are you his secretary?” Maud asked, without moving.

“I am his secretary and also his wife,” Violet declared.

The woman raised herself a little in her chair.

“Some people have all the luck,” she muttered. “It’s only a few months ago that Mr. Ruff was glad enough to take me out. You remember when I used to come here?”

“I remember,” Violet assented.

“I was all right then,” the woman continued, “and now—now I’m down and out,” she added, with a little sob. “You see what I am like. You look as though you didn’t care to have me in the office, and I don’t wonder at it. You look as though you were afraid I’d come to beg, and you are right—I have come to beg.”

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“I am sure Mr. Ruff will do what he can for you,” Violet said, “although—”

“I see you know all about it,” Maud interrupted, with a hard little laugh. “I came once to wheedle information out of him. I came to try and betray the only man who ever really cared for me. Mr. Ruff was too clever, and I am thankful for it. I have been as big a fool as a woman can be, but I am paying—oh, I am paying for it right enough!”

She swayed in her chair, and Violet was only just in time to

catch her. She led the fainting woman to an inner room, made her comfortable upon a sofa, and sent out for some food and a bottle of wine. Down in the street below, John Dory, who had tracked his wife to the building, was walking away with face as black as night. He knew that Maud had lost her position, that she was in need of money—almost penniless. He had waited to see to whom she would turn, hoping—poor fool as he called himself—that she would come back to him. And it was his enemy to whom she had gone! He had seen her enter the building; he knew that she had not left it. In the morning they brought him another report—she was still within. It was the end, this, he told himself! There must be a settlement between him and Peter Ruff!

Mr. John Dory, who had arrived at Clenarvon Court in a four-wheel cab from the nearest railway station, was ushered by the butler to the door of one of the rooms on the ground floor, overlooking the Park. A policeman was there on guard—a policeman by his attitude and salute, although he was in plain clothes. John Dory nodded, and turned to the butler.

“You see, the man knows me,” he said. “Here is my card. I am John Dory from Scotland Yard. I want to have a few words with the sergeant.”

The butler hesitated.

“Our orders are very strict, sir,” he said. “I am afraid that I cannot allow you to enter the room without a special permit from his lordship. You see, we have had no advice of your coming.”

John Dory nodded.

“Quite right,” he answered. “If every one were to obey his orders as literally, there would be fewer robberies. However, you see that this man recognizes me.”

The butler turned toward an elderly gentleman in a pink coat and riding breeches, who had just descended into the hall.

“His lordship is here,” he said. “He will give you permission, without a doubt. There is a gentleman from Scotland Yard, your lordship,” he explained, “who wishes to enter the morning room to speak with the sergeant.”

“Inspector John Dory, at your lordship’s service,” saluting. “I have been sent down from town to help in this little business.”

Lord Clenarvon smiled.

“I should have thought that, under the circumstances,” he said, “two of you would have been enough. Still, it is not for me to complain. Pray go in and speak to the sergeant. You will find him inside. Rather dull work for him, I’m afraid, and quite unnecessary.”

“I am not so sure, your lordship,” Dory answered. “The Clenarvon diamonds are known all over the world, and I suppose there isn’t a thieves’ den in Europe that does not know that they will remain here exposed with your daughter’s other wedding presents.”

Lord Clenarvon smiled once more and shrugged his shoulders. He was a man who had unbounded faith in his fellow creatures.

“I suppose,” he said, “it is the penalty one has to pay for

historical possessions. Go in and talk to the sergeant, by all means, Mr. Dory. I hope that Graves will succeed in making you comfortable during your stay here.”

John Dory was accordingly admitted into the room which was so jealously guarded. At first sight, it possessed a somewhat singular appearance. The windows had every one of them been boarded up, and the electric lights consequently fully turned on. A long table stood in the middle of the apartment, serving as support for a long glass showcase, open at the top.

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Within this, from end to end, stretched the presents which a large circle of acquaintances were presenting to one of the most popular young women in society, on the occasion of her approaching marriage to the Duke of Rochester. In the middle, the wonderful Clenarvon diamonds, set in the form of a tiara, flashed strange lights into the sombrely lit apartment. At the end of the table a police sergeant was sitting, with a little pile of newspapers and illustrated journals before him. He rose to his feet with alacrity at his superior’s entrance.

“Good morning, Saunders,” John Dory said. “I see you’ve got it pretty snug in here.”

“Pretty well, thank you, sir,” Saunders answered. “Is there anything stirring?”

John Dory looked behind to be sure that the door was closed. Then he stopped for a moment to gaze at the wonderful diamonds, and finally sat on the table by his subordinate’s side.

“Not exactly that, Saunders,” he said. “To tell you the truth, I came down here because of that list of guests you sent me.”

Saunders smiled.

“I think I can guess the name you singled out, sir,” he said.

“It was Peter Ruff, of course,” Dory said. “What is he doing here in the house, under his own name, and as a guest?”

“I have asked no questions, sir,” Saunders answered. “I underlined the name in case it might seem worth your while to make enquiries.”

John Dory nodded.

“Nothing has happened, of course?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Saunders answered. “You see, with the windows all boarded up, there is practically only the ordinary door to guard, so we feel fairly secure.”

“No one hanging about?” the detective asked. “Mr. Ruff himself, for instance, hasn’t been trying to make your acquaintance?”

“No sign of it, sir,” the man answered. “I saw him pass through the hall yesterday afternoon, as I went off duty, and he was in riding clothes all splashed with mud. I think he has been hunting every day.”

John Dory muttered something between his lips, and turned on his heel.

“How many men have you here, Saunders?” he asked.

“Only two, sir, beside myself,” the man replied.

The detective went round the boarded windows, examining the work carefully until he reached the door.

“I am going to see if I can have a word with his lordship,” he said.

He caught Lord Clenarvon in the act of mounting his horse in the great courtyard.

“What is it, Mr. Dory?” the Earl asked, stooping down.

“There is one name, your lordship, among your list of guests, concerning which I wish to have a word with you,” the detective said—“the name of Mr. Peter Ruff.”

“Don’t know anything about him,” Lord Clenarvon answered, cheerfully. “You must see my daughter, Lady Mary. It was she who sent him his invitation. Seems a decent little fellow, and rides as well as the best. You’ll find Lady Mary about somewhere, if you’d like to ask her.”

Lord Clenarvon hurried off, with a little farewell wave of his crop, and John Dory returned to the house to make enquiries respecting Lady Mary. In a very few minutes he was shown into her presence. She smiled at him cheerfully.

“Another detective!” she exclaimed. “I am sure I ought to feel quite safe now. What can I do for you, Mr. Dory?”

“I have had a list of the guests sent to me,” Dory answered, “in which I notice the name of Mr. Peter Ruff.”

Lady Mary nodded.

“Well?” she asked.

“I have just spoken to his lordship,” the detective continued, “and he referred me to you.”

“Do you want to know all about Mr. Ruff?” Lady Mary asked, smiling.

“If your ladyship will pardon my saying so, I think that neither you nor any one else could tell me that. What I wished to say was that I understood that we at Scotland Yard were placed in charge of your jewels until after the wedding. Mr. Peter Ruff is, as you may be aware, a private detective himself.”

“I understand perfectly,” Lady Mary said. “I can assure you, Mr. Dory, that Mr. Ruff is here entirely as a personal and very valued friend of my own. On two occasions he has rendered very signal service to my family—services which I am quite unable to requite.”

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“In that case, your ladyship, there is nothing more to be said. I conceive it, however, to be my duty to tell you that in our opinion—the opinion of Scotland Yard—there are things about the career of Mr. Peter Ruff which need explanation. He is a person whom we seldom let altogether out of our sight.”

Lady Mary laughed frankly.

“My dear Mr. Dory,” she said, “this is one of the cases, then, in which I can assure you that I know more than Scotland Yard. There is no person in the world in whom I have more confidence, and with more reason, than Mr. Peter Ruff.”

John Dory bowed.

“I thank your ladyship,” he said. “I trust that your confidence will never be misplaced. May I ask one more question?”

“Certainly,” Lady Mary replied, “so long as you make no insinuations whatever against my friend.”

“I should be very sorry to do so,” John Dory declared. “I simply wish to know whether Mr. Ruff has any instructions from you with reference to the care of your jewels?”

“Certainly not,” Lady Mary replied, decidedly. “Mr. Ruff is here entirely as my guest. He has been in the room with the rest of us, to look at them, and it was he, by the bye, who discovered a much more satisfactory way of boarding the windows. Anything else, Mr. Dory?”

“I thank your ladyship, nothing!” the detective answered. “With your permission, I propose to remain here until after the ceremony.”

“Just as you like, of course,” Lady Mary said. “I hope you will be comfortable.”

John Dory bowed, and returned to confer with his sergeant. Afterwards, finding the morning still fine, he took his hat and went for a walk in the park.

As a matter of fact, this, in some respects the most remarkable of the adventures which had ever befallen Mr. Peter Ruff, came to him by accident. Lady Mary had read the announcement of his

marriage in the paper, had driven at once to his office with a magnificent present, and insisted upon his coming with his wife to the party which was assembling at Clenarvon Court in honour of her own approaching wedding. Peter Ruff had taken few holidays of late years, and for several days had thoroughly enjoyed himself. The matter of the Clenarvon jewels he considered, perhaps, with a slight professional interest; but so far as he could see, the precautions for guarding them were so adequate that the subject did not remain in his memory. He had, however, a very distinct and disagreeable shock when, on the night of John Dory's appearance, he recognized among a few newly arrived guests the Marquis de Sogrange. He took the opportunity, as soon as possible, of withdrawing his wife from a little circle among whom they had been talking, to a more retired corner of the room. She saw at once that something had happened to disturb him.

“Violet,” he said, “don't look behind now—”

“I recognized him at once,” she interrupted. “It is the Marquis de Sogrange.”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“It will be best for you,” he said, “not to notice him. Of course, his presence here may be accidental. He has a perfect right to enter any society he chooses. At the same time, I am uneasy.”

She understood in a moment.

“The Clenarvon diamonds!” she whispered.

He nodded.

“It is just the sort of affair which would appeal to the ‘Double-Four’,” he said. “They are worth anything up to a quarter of a million, and it is an enterprise which could scarcely be attempted except by some one in a peculiar position. Violet, if I were not sure that he had seen me, I should leave the house this minute.”

“Why?” she asked, wonderingly.

“Don’t you understand,” Peter Ruff continued, softly, “that I myself am still what they call a corresponding member of the ‘Double Four’, and they have a right to appeal to me for help in this country, as I have a right to appeal to them for help or information in France? We have both made use of one another, to some extent. No doubt, if the Marquis has any scheme in his mind, he would look upon me as a valuable ally.”

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She turned slowly pale.

“Peter,” she said, “you wouldn’t dream—you wouldn’t dare to be so foolish?”

He shook his head firmly.

“My dear girl,” he said, “we talked that all out long ago. A few years since, I felt that I had been treated badly, that I was an alien, and that the hand of the law was against me. I talked wildly then, perhaps. When I put up my sign and sat down for clients, I meant to cheat the law, if I could. Things have changed, Violet. I want nothing of that sort. I have kept my hands clean and I mean to do so. Why, years ago,” he continued, “when I was feeling at my wildest, these very jewels were within my grasp one foggy night, and I never touched them.”

“What would happen if you refused to help?”

“I do not know,” Peter Ruff answered. “The conditions are a little severe. But, after all, there are no hard and fast rules. It rests with the Marquis himself to shrug his shoulders and appreciate my position. Perhaps he may not even exchange a word with me. Here is Lord Sotherst coming to talk to you, and Captain Hamilton is waiting for me to tell him an address. Remember, don’t recognize Sogrange.”

Dinner that night was an unusually cheerful meal. Peter Ruff, who was an excellent *raconteur*, told many stories. The Marquis de Sogrange was perhaps the next successful in his efforts to entertain his neighbours. Violet found him upon her left hand, and although he showed not the slightest signs of having ever seen her before, they were very soon excellent friends. After dinner, Sogrange and Peter Ruff drifted together on their way to the billiard room. Sogrange, however, continued to talk courteously of trifles until, having decided to watch the first game, they found themselves alone on the leather divan surrounding the room.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, my friend,” Sogrange said, watching the ash of his cigar. “Professional?”

Peter Ruff shook his head. “Not in the least,” he answered. “I have had the good fortune to render Lady Mary and her brother, at different times, services which they are pleased to value highly. We are here as ordinary guests—my wife and I.”

The Marquis sighed.

“Ah, that wife of yours, Ruff!” he said. “She is charming, I admit, and you are a lucky man; but it was a price—a very great price to pay.”

“You, perhaps, are ambitious, Marquis,” Peter Ruff answered. “I have not done so badly. A little contents me.”

Sogrange looked at him as though he were some strange creature.

“I see!” he murmured. “I see! With you, of course, the commercial side comes uppermost. Mr. Ruff, what do you suppose the income from my estate amounts to?”

Peter Ruff shook his head. He did not even know that the Marquis was possessed of estates!

“Somewhere about seven millions of francs,” Sogrange declared. “There are few men in Paris more extravagant than I, and I think that we Frenchmen know what extravagance means. But I cannot spend my income. Do you think that it is for the sake of gain that I have come across the Channel to add the Clenarvon diamonds to our coffers?”

Peter Ruff sat very still.

“You mean that?” he said.

“Of course!” Sogrange answered. “Didn’t you realise it directly you saw me? What is there, do you think, in a dull English house party to attract a man like myself? Don’t you understand that it is the gambler’s instinct—the restless desire to be playing pitch-and-toss with fate, with honour, with life and death, if you will

—that brings such as myself into the ranks of the ‘Double-Four?’ It is the weariness which kills, Peter Ruff. One must needs keep it from one’s bones.”

“Marquis,” Peter Ruff answered, “I do not profess to understand you. I am not weary of life, in fact I love it. I am looking forward to the years when I have enough money and it seems as though that time is not far off—when I can buy a little place in the country, and hunt a little and shoot a little, and live a simple out-of-door life. You see, Marquis, we are as far removed as the poles.”

“Obviously!” Sogrange answered.

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“Your confidence,” Peter Ruff continued, “the confidence with which you have honoured me, inspires me to make you one request. I am here, indeed, as a friend of the family. You will not ask me to help in any designs you may have against the Clenarvon jewels?”

Sogrange leaned back in his chair and laughed softly. His lips, when they parted from his white teeth, resolved themselves into lines which at that moment seemed to Peter Ruff more menacing than mirthful. Sogrange was, in many ways, a man of remarkable appearance.

“Oh, Peter Ruff,” he said, “you are a bourgeois little person! You should have been the burgomaster in a little German town, or a French mayor with a chain about your neck. We will see. I make no promises. All that I insist upon, for the present, is that you do not leave this house party without advising me—that is to say, if you are really looking forward to that pleasant life in

the country, where you will hunt a little and shoot a little, and grow into the likeness of a vegetable. You, with your charming wife! Peter Ruff, you should be ashamed to talk like that! Come, I must play bridge with the Countess. I am engaged for a table.”

The two men parted. Peter Ruff was uneasy. On his way from the room, Lord Sotherst insisted upon his joining a pool.

“Charming fellow, Sogrange,” the latter remarked, as he chalked his cue. “He has been a great friend of the governor’s—he and his father before him. Our families have intermarried once or twice.”

“He seems very agreeable,” Peter Ruff answered, devoting himself to the game.

The following night, being the last but one before the wedding itself, a large dinner party had been arranged for, and the resources of even so princely a mansion as Clenarvon Court were strained to their utmost by the entertainment of something like one hundred guests in the great banqueting hall. The meal was about halfway through when those who were not too entirely engrossed in conversation were startled by hearing a dull, rumbling sound, like the moving of a number of pieces of heavy furniture. People looked doubtfully at one another. Peter Ruff and the Marquis de Sogrange were among the first to spring to their feet.

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“It’s an explosion somewhere,” the latter cried. “Sounds close at hand, too.”

They made their way out into the hall. Exactly opposite now was the room in which the wedding presents had been placed,

and where for days nothing had been seen but a closed door and a man on duty outside. The door now stood wide open, and in place of the single electric light which was left burning through the evening, the place seemed almost aflame.

Ruff, Sogrange and Lord Sotherst were the first three to cross the threshold. They were met by a rush of cold wind. Opposite to them, two of the windows, with their boardings, had been blown away. Sergeant Saunders was still sitting in his usual place at the end of the table, his head bent upon his folded arms. The man who had been on duty outside was standing over him, white with horror. Far away in the distance, down the park, one could faintly hear the throbbing of an engine, and Peter Ruff, through the chasm, saw the lights of a great motor car flashing in and out amongst the trees. The room itself—the whole glittering array of presents—seemed untouched. Only the great centre-piece—the Clenarvon diamonds—had gone. Even as they stood there, the rest of the guests crowding into the open door, John Dory tore through, his face white with excitement. Peter Ruff's calm voice penetrated the din of tongues.

“Lord Sotherst,” he said, “you have telephones in the keepers' lodges. There is a motor car being driven southwards at full speed. Telephone down, and have your gates secured. Dory, should keep every one out of the room. Some one must telephone for a doctor. I suppose your man has been hurt.”

The guests were wild with curiosity, but Lord Clenarvon, with an insistent gesture, led the way back to the dining room.

“Whatever has happened,” he said, “the people who are in charge there know best how to deal with the situation. There is a

detective from Scotland Yard and his subordinates, and a gentleman in whom I also have most implicit confidence. We will resume our dinner, if you please, ladies and gentlemen.”

Unwillingly, the people were led away. John Dory was already in his greatcoat, ready to spring into the powerful motor car which had been ordered out from the garage. A doctor, who had been among the guests, was examining the man Saunders, who sat in that still, unnatural position at the head of the table.

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“The poor fellow has been shot in the back of the head with some peculiar implement,” he said. “The bullet is very long—almost like a needle—and it seems to have penetrated very nearly to the base of the brain.”

“Is he dead?” Peter Ruff asked.

The doctor shook his head.

“No!” he answered. “An inch higher up and he must have died at once. I want some of the menservants to help me carry him to a bedroom, and plenty of hot water. Some one else must go for my instrument case.”

Lord Sotherst took these things in charge, and John Dory turned to the man whom they had found standing over him.

“Tell us exactly what happened,” he said, briefly.

“I was standing outside the door,” the man answered. “I heard no sound inside—there was nothing to excite suspicion in any way. Suddenly there was this explosion. It took me, perhaps

thirty or forty seconds to get the key out of my pocket and unlock the door. When I entered, the side of the room was blown in like that, the diamonds were gone, Saunders was leaning forward just in the position he is in now, and there wasn't another soul in sight. Then you and the others came."

John Dory rushed from the room; they had brought him word that the car was waiting. At such a moment, he was ready even to forget his ancient enmity. He turned towards Peter Ruff, whose calm bearing somehow or other impressed even the detective with a sense of power.

"Will you come along?" he asked.

Peter Ruff shook his head.

"Thank you, Dory, no!" he said. "I am glad you have asked me, but I think you had better go alone."

A few seconds later, the pursuit was started. Saunders was carried out of the room, followed by the doctor. There remained only Peter Ruff and the man who had been on duty outside. Peter Ruff seated himself where Saunders had been sitting, and seemed to be closely examining the table all round for some moments. Once he took up something from between the pages of the book which the Sergeant had apparently been reading, and put it carefully into his own pocketbook. Then he leaned back in the chair, with his hands clasped behind his head and his eyes fixed upon the ceiling, as though thinking intently.

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"Hastings," he said to the policeman, who all the time was pursuing a stream of garrulous, inconsequent remarks, "I wonder whether you'd step outside and see Mr. Richards, the butler.

Ask him if he would be so good as to spare me a moment.”

“I’ll do it, sir,” the man answered, with one more glance through the open space. “Lord!” he added, “they must have been in through there and out again like cats!”

“It was quick work, certainly,” Peter Ruff answered, genially, “but then, an enterprise like this would, of course, only be attempted by experts.”

Peter Ruff was not left alone long. Mr. Richards came hurrying in.

“This is a terrible business, sir!” he said. “His lordship has excused me from superintending the service of the dinner. Anything that I can do for you I am to give my whole attention to. These were my orders.”

“Very good of you, Richards,” Peter Ruff answered, “very thoughtful of his lordship. In the first place, then, I think, we will have the rest of this jewellery packed in cases at once. Not that anything further is likely to happen,” he continued, “but still, it would be just as well out of the way. I will remain here and superintend this, if you will send a couple of careful servants. In the meantime, I want you to do something else for me.”

“Certainly, sir,” the man answered.

“I want a plan of the house,” Peter Ruff said, “with the names of the guests who occupy this wing.”

The butler nodded gravely.

“I can supply you with it very shortly, sir,” he said. “There is no difficulty at all about the plan, as I have several in my room; but it will take me some minutes to pencil in the names.”

Peter Ruff nodded.

“I will superintend things here until you return,” he said.

“It is to be hoped, sir,” the man said, as he retreated, “that the gentleman from Scotland Yard will catch the thieves. After all, they hadn’t more than ten minutes’ start, and our Daimler is a flyer.”

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“I’m sure I hope so,” Peter Ruff answered, heartily.

But, alas! no such fortune was in store for Mr. John Dory. At daybreak he returned in a borrowed trap from a neighbouring railway station.

“Our tyres had been cut,” he said, in reply to a storm of questions. “They began to go, one after the other, as soon as we had any speed on. We traced the car to Salisbury, and there isn’t a village within forty miles that isn’t looking out for it.”

Peter Ruff, who had just returned from an early morning walk, nodded sympathetically.

“Shall you be here all day, Mr. Dory?” he asked. “There’s just a word or two I should like to have with you.”

Dory turned away. He had forced himself, in the excitement of the moment, to speak to his ancient enemy, but in this hour of his humility the man’s presence was distasteful to him.

“I am not sure,” he said, shortly. “It depends on how things may turn out.”

The daily life at Clenarvon Court proceeded exactly as usual. Breakfast was served early, as there was to be a big day’s shoot. The Marquis de Sogrange and Peter Ruff smoked their cigarettes together afterwards in the great hall. Then it was that Peter Ruff took the plunge.

“Marquis,” he said, “I should like to know exactly how I stand with you—the ‘Double-Four’, that is to say—supposing I range myself for an hour or so on the side of the law?”

Sogrange smiled.

“You amuse yourself, Mr. Ruff,” he remarked genially.

“Not in the least,” Peter Ruff answered. “I am serious.”

Sogrange watched the blue cigarette smoke come down his nose.

“My dear friend,” he said, “I am no amateur at this game. When I choose to play it, I am not afraid of Scotland Yard. I am not afraid,” he concluded, with a little bow, “even of you!”

“Do you ever bet, Marquis?” Peter Ruff asked.

“Twenty-five thousand francs,” Sogrange said, smiling, “that your efforts to aid Mr. John Dory are unavailing.”

Peter Ruff entered the amount in his pocketbook.

“It is a bargain,” he declared. “Our bet, I presume, carries immunity for me?”

“By all means,” Sogrange answered, with a little bow.

The Marquis beckoned to Lord Sotherst, who was crossing the hall.

“My dear fellow,” he said, “do tell me the name of your hatter in London. Delions failed me at the last moment, and I have not a hat fit for the ceremony to-morrow.”

“I’ll lend you half a dozen, if you can wear them,” Lord Sotherst answered, smiling. “The governor’s sure to have plenty, too.”

Sogrange touched his head with a smile.

“Alas!” he said. “My head is small, even for a Frenchman’s. Imagine me—otherwise, I trust, suitably attired—walking to the church to-morrow in a hat which came to my ears!”

Lord Sotherst laughed.

“Scotts will do you all right,” he said. “You can telephone.”

“I shall send my man up,” Sogrange determined. “He can bring me back a selection. Tell me, at what hour is the first drive this morning, and are the places drawn yet?”

“Come into the gun room and we’ll see,” Lord Sotherst answered.

Peter Ruff made his way to the back quarters of the house. In a

little sitting room he found the man he sought, sitting alone. Peter Ruff closed the door behind him.

“John Dory,” he said, “I have come to have a few words with you.”

The detective rose to his feet. He was in no pleasant mood. Though the telephone wires had been flashing their news every few minutes, it seemed, indeed, as though the car which they had chased had vanished into space.

“What do you want to say to me?” he asked gruffly.

“I want, if I can,” Peter Ruff said earnestly, “to do you a service.”

Dory’s eyes glittered.

“I think,” he said, “that I can do without your services.”

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“Don’t be foolish,” Peter Ruff said. “You are harbouring a grievance against me which is purely an imaginary one. Now listen to the facts. You employ your wife—which after all, Dory, I think, was not quite the straight thing—to try and track down a young man named Spencer Fitzgerald, who was formerly, in a small way, a client of mine. I find your wife an agreeable companion—we become friends. Then I discover her object, and know that I am being fooled. The end of that little episode you remember. But tell me why should you bear me ill-will for defending my friend and myself?”

The detective came slowly up to Peter Ruff. He took hold of the lapel of the other’s coat with his left hand, and his right hand

was clenched. But Peter Ruff did not falter.

“Listen to me,” said Dory. “I will tell you what grudge I bear against you. It was your entertainment of my wife which gave her the taste for luxury and for gadding about. Mind, I don’t blame you for that altogether, but there the fact remains. She left me. She went on the stage.”

“Stop!” Peter Ruff said. “You must still hold me blameless. She wrote to me. I went out with her once. The only advice I gave her was to return to you. So far as I am concerned, I have treated her with the respect that I would have shown my own sister.”

“You lie!” Dory cried, fiercely. “A month ago, I saw her come to your flat. I watched for hours. She did not leave it—she did not leave it all that night!”

“If you object to her visit,” Peter Ruff said quietly, “it is my wife you must blame.”

John Dory relaxed his hand and took a quick step backwards. “Your wife?” he muttered.

“Exactly!” Peter Ruff answered. “Maud—Mrs. Dory—called to see me; she was ill—she had lost her situation—she was even, I believe, faint and hungry. I was not present. My wife talked to her and was sorry for her. While the two women were there together, your wife fainted. She was put to bed in our one spare room, and she has been shown every attention and care. Tell me, how long is it since you were at home?”

“Not for ten days,” Dory answered, bitterly. “Why?”

“Because when you go back, you will find your wife there,” Peter Ruff answered. “She has given up the stage. Her one desire is to settle down and repay you for the trouble she has caused you. You needn’t believe me unless you like. Ask my wife. She is here. She will tell you.”

Dory was overcome. He went back to his seat by the window, and he buried his face for a moment in his hands.

“Ruff,” he said, “I don’t deserve this. I’ve had bad times lately, though. Everything has gone against me. I think I have been a bit careless, with the troubles at home and that.”

“Stop!” Peter Ruff insisted. “Now I come to the immediate object of my visit to you. You have had some bad luck at headquarters. I know of it. I am going to help you to reinstate yourself brilliantly. With that, let us shake hands and bury all the soreness that there may be between us.”

John Dory stared at his visitor.

“Do you mean this?” he asked.

“I do,” answered Peter. “Please do not think that I mean to make any reflection upon your skill. It is just a chance that I was able to see what you were not able to see. In an hour’s time, you shall restore the Clenarvon diamonds to Lord Clenarvon. You shall take the reward which he has just offered, of a thousand pounds. And I promise you that the manner in which you shall recover the jewels shall be such that you will be famous for a long time to come.”

“You are a wonderful man!” said Dory, hoarsely. “Do you mean,

then, that the jewels were not with those men in the motor car?"

"Of course not!" Peter Ruff answered. "But come along. The story will develop."

At half-past ten that morning, a motor car turned out from the garage at Clenarvon Court, and made its way down the avenue. In it was a single passenger—the dark-faced Parisian valet of the Marquis de Sogrange. As the car left the avenue and struck into the main road, it was hailed by Peter Ruff and John Dory, who were walking together along the lane.

"Say, my man," Peter Ruff said, addressing the chauffeur, "are you going to the station?"

"Yes, sir!" the man answered. "I am taking down the Marquis de Sogrange's servant to catch the eleven o'clock train to town."

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"You don't mind giving us a lift?" Peter Ruff asked, already opening the door.

"Certainly not, sir," the man answered, touching his hat.

Peter Ruff and John Dory stepped into the tonneau of the car. The man civilly lifted the hatbox from the seat, and made room for his enforced companions. Nevertheless, it was easy to see that he was not pleased.

"There's plenty of room here for three," Peter Ruff said, cheerfully, as they sat on either side of him. "Drive slowly, please, chauffeur. Now, Mr. Lemprise," Peter Ruff added, "we will trouble you to change places."

“What do you mean?” the man called out, suddenly pale as death.

He was held as though in a vice. John Dory’s arm was through his on one side, and Peter Ruff’s on the other. Apart from that, the muzzle of a revolver was pressed to his forehead.

“On second thoughts,” Peter Ruff said, “I think we will keep you like this. Driver,” he called out, “please return to the Court at once.”

The man hesitated.

“You recognize the gentleman who is with me?” Peter Ruff said. “He is the detective from Scotland Yard. I have full authority from Lord Clenarvon over all his servants. Please do as I say.”

The man hesitated no more. The car was backed and turned, the Frenchman struggling all the way like a wild cat. Once he tried to kick the hatbox into the road, but John Dory was too quick for him. So they drove up to the front door of the Court, to be welcomed with cries of astonishment from the whole of the shooting party, who were just starting. Foremost among them was Sogrange. They crowded around the car. Peter Ruff touched the hatbox with his foot.

“If we could trouble your Lordship,” he said, “to open that hatbox, you will find something that will interest you. Mr. Dory has planned a little surprise for you, in which I have been permitted to help.”

The women, who gathered that something was happening, came hastening out from the hall. They all crowded round

Lord Clenarvon, who was cutting through the leather strap of the hatbox. Inside the silk hat which reposed there, were the Clenarvon diamonds. Monsieur le Marquis de Sogrange was one of the foremost to give vent to an exclamation of delight.

“Monsieur le Marquis,” Peter Ruff said, “this should be a lesson to you, I hope, to have the characters of your servants more rigidly verified. Mr. Dory tells me that this man came into your employ at the last moment with a forged recommendation. He is, in effect, a dangerous thief.”

“You amaze me!” Sogrange exclaimed.

“We are all interested in this affair,” Peter Ruff said, “and my friend John Dory here is, perhaps, too modest properly to explain the matter. If you care to come with me, we can reconstruct, in a minute, the theft.”

John Dory and Peter Ruff first of all handed over their captive, who was now calm and apparently resigned, to the two policemen who were still on duty in the Court. Afterwards, Peter Ruff led the way up one flight of stairs, and turned the handle of the door of an apartment exactly over the morning room. It was the bedroom of the Marquis de Sogrange.

“Mr. Dory’s chase in the motor car,” he said, “was, as you have doubtless gathered now, merely a blind. It was obvious to his intelligence that the blowing away of the window was merely a ruse to cover the real method of the theft. If you will allow me, I will show you how it was done.”

The floor was of hardwood, covered with rugs. One of these, near the fireplace, Peter Ruff brushed aside. The seventh square

of hardwood from the mantelpiece had evidently been tampered with. With very little difficulty, he removed it.

“You see,” he explained, “the ceiling of the room below is also of panelled wood. Having removed this, it is easy to lift the second one, especially as light screws have been driven in and string threaded about them. There is now a hole through which you can see into the room below. Has Dory returned? Ah, here he is!”

The detective came hurrying into the room, bearing in his hand a peculiar-shaped weapon, a handful of little darts like those which had been found in the wounded man’s head, and an ordinary fishing rod in a linen case.

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“There is the weapon,” Peter Ruff said, “which it was easy enough to fire from here upon the man who was leaning forward exactly below. Then here, you will see, is a somewhat peculiar instrument, which shows a great deal of ingenuity in its details.”

He opened the linen case, which was, by the bye, secured by a padlock, and drew out what was, to all appearance, an ordinary fishing rod, fitted at the end with something that looked like an iron hand. Peter Ruff dropped it through the hole until it reached the table, moved it backwards and forwards, and turned round with a smile.

“You see,” he said, “the theft, after all, was very simple. Personally, I must admit that it took me a great deal by surprise, but my friend Mr. Dory has been on the right track from the first. I congratulate him most heartily.”

Dory was a little overcome. Lady Mary shook him heartily by

the hand, but as they trooped downstairs she stooped and whispered in Peter Ruff's ear.

"I wonder how much of this was John Dory," she said, smiling.

Peter Ruff said nothing. The detective was already on the telephone, wiring his report to London. Every one was standing about in little knots, discussing this wonderful event. Sogrange sought Lord Clenarvon, and walked with him, arm in arm, down the stairs.

"I cannot tell you, Clenarvon," he said, "how sorry I am that I should have been the means of introducing a person like this to the house. I had the most excellent references from the Prince of Strelitz. No doubt they were forged. My own man was taken ill just before I left, and I had to bring some one."

"My dear Sogrange," Lord Clenarvon said, "don't think of it. What we must be thankful for is that we had so brilliant a detective in the house."

"As John Dory?" Sogrange remarked, with a smile.

Lord Clenarvon nodded.

"Come," he said, "I don't see why we should lose a day's sport because the diamonds have been recovered. I always felt that they would turn up again some day or other. You are keen, I know, Sogrange."

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"Rather!" the Marquis answered. "But excuse me for one moment. There is Mrs. Ruff looking charming there in the corner. I must have just a word with her."

He crossed the room and bowed before Violet.

“My dear lady,” he said, “I have come to congratulate you. You have a clever husband—a little cleverer, even, than *I* thought. I have just had the misfortune to lose to him a bet of twenty-five thousand francs.”

Violet smiled, a little uneasily.

“Peter doesn’t gamble as a rule,” she remarked.

Sogrange sighed.

“This, alas, was no gamble!” he said. “He was betting upon certainties, but he won. Will you tell him from me, when you see him, that although I have not the money in my pocket at the moment, I shall pay my debts. Tell him that we are as careful to do that in France as we are to keep our word!”

He bowed, and passed out with the shooting party on to the terrace. Peter Ruff came up, a few minutes later, and his wife gave him the message.

“I did that man an injustice,” Peter Ruff said with a sigh of relief. “I can’t explain now, dear. I’ll tell you all about it later in the day.”

“There’s nothing wrong, is there?” she asked him, pleadingly.

“On the contrary,” Peter Ruff declared, “everything is right. I have made friends with Dory, and I have won a thousand pounds. When we leave here, I am going to look out for that little estate in the country. If you come out with the lunch, dear, I

want you to watch that man Hamilton's coat. It's exactly what I should like to wear myself at my own shooting parties. See if you can make a sketch of it when he isn't looking."

Violet laughed.

"I'll try," she promised.

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[The end of *Peter Ruff and the Double-Four* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]