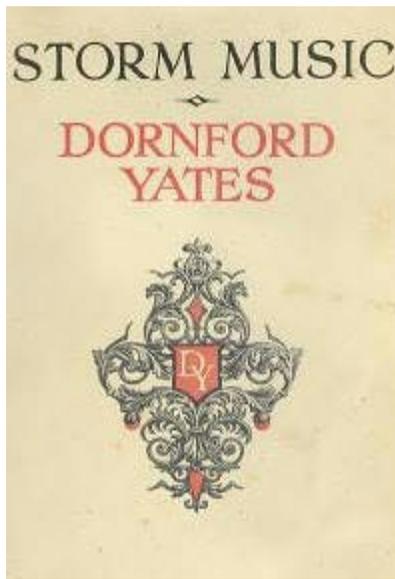


STORM MUSIC

DORNFORD  
YATES





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*BY THE SAME AUTHOR*

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BERRY AND CO.  
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AND BERRY CAME TOO  
ANTHONY LYVEDEN  
VALERIE FRENCH  
THE BROTHER OF DAPHNE  
THE COURTS OF IDLENESS  
AND FIVE WERE FOOLISH

AS OTHER MEN ARE  
THE STOLEN MARCH  
MAIDEN STAKES  
BLIND CORNER  
PERISHABLE GOODS  
BLOOD ROYAL  
FIRE BELOW  
SAFE CUSTODY  
STORM MUSIC  
SHE FELL AMONG THIEVES  
SHE PAINTED HER FACE  
THIS PUBLICAN  
GALE WARNING  
SHOAL WATER  
PERIOD STUFF  
AN EYE FOR A TOOTH

# STORM MUSIC

BY  
DORNFORD YATES

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED  
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

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*To  
MY SON.*

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If my cousin, Geoffrey Bohun, had had to work for his living, he would, as a painter of portraits, have made his mark, for he was able not only to catch a likeness, but to render the spirit of his subject in a remarkable way: but work within doors he would not, and since he cared nothing at all for riches or fame, he painted old buildings and landscapes and lazy streams, and though I think that he painted these very well, the public would not have them, but clamoured for portraits instead.

Whether Geoffrey was right or wrong, I cannot pretend to say, but I must confess that I was glad of his choice, for since my parents' death I had lived with him, and the work he preferred made us free of the countryside. Indeed, of the four years preceding the matters which I am to tell we had not spent six months at his London house, but had travelled winter and summer, at home and abroad, not at all as tourists, but wandering hither and thither according to Geoffrey's whim. We visited many places which, if one may trust the guide-books, are scarcely known, and we saw all manner of beauties that few men see, for often enough my cousin would paint at dawn, when the dew lay thick upon the meadows and the mountains stood up like a rood-screen against the sky.

Of such was my education, after I left my school, and though I might have done better to go to Oxford instead, I learned to speak German and French with a pretty good grace and to share with the peasants of Europe their several hopes and fears.

Since our habits were very healthy, I was in as fine a condition as a man of two-and-twenty may be, and my only care was the knowledge that very soon now the agreeable life I was leading must come to an end. This by my cousin's decree, for Geoffrey was trustee of my fortune, and though he was only some twelve years older than I, I had to a great extent to do as he said. And at twenty-three, he declared, I must take to work: "and from then," said he, "till you're thirty your allowance will be exactly as much as you earn. Earn five pounds a week, and I'll give you another five. No more and no less, my son. You've got to make good."

I was brooding on this one morning—for my birthday was the first of October, and June was very near out—when I heard the sound of voices a little way off.

This was unusual enough, for, save for the birds and beasts, an Austrian forest at dawn is a lonely place: but what was stranger still was that the voices were English, and coarse at that.

Geoffrey was painting a vista two furlongs away, and Barley, his man, was half a mile off with the Rolls. It was, therefore, plain that no one was talking with them, and I made my way quietly forward to see and hear what I could.

Almost at once I saw bushes which seemed to me to be screening the edge of some bluff, and though by now the conversation had ceased, as I approached, I could hear the sound of labour and the sob of a man as he wielded some heavy tool.

Then a spout of oaths startled the silence, and two men were cursing each other, the one alleging that the other would be his death and the other insisting that the one had got in his way.

A third man spoke.

“Suppose you go on now.”

“But he’ll do me in in a minute, layin’ about with that pick.”

“The world will be the cleaner,” said the other, and stifled a yawn. “Till then, get on with your work. I say, *get on.*”

His voice was deadly. Thin and quiet and icy, it seemed to cut like a lash, and I know that I winced to hear it, as though indeed a whip had been laid to my back. And so, I suppose, did the others, for without a word they fell to working again.

More curious than ever, I laid myself down on the ground and, wriggling cautiously forward, made my way into the bushes which screened the men from my view.

I shall never forget the scene.

Directly below me, in the midst of a sparkling dell, were five grown men. Two, with pickaxe and shovel, were digging a hasty grave: the sods had been piled to one side, but a third man was taking the earth and casting it into a brook which watered the dell for a little and then ran into a wood. A fourth man was leaning against the trunk of a tree, musingly regarding the others and smoking a cigarette. And the fifth lay dead beside him, with his mouth and his eyes wide open and his pitiful head on one side.

This spectacle shocked me so much that a moment or two went by before I had collected my wits: then I knew that the man had been murdered, for his gay, green, belted smock was heavily stained with blood.

As the porter came back from the brook—

“That’s enough earth away, Dewdrop,” said the man who had spoken last. “Take another stroll in the country and see there’s nobody up.”

The man who was shovelling stopped and straightened his back.

“Lemme do that, Pharaoh. I’m sick of this —— spade.”

The man addressed as Pharaoh wrinkled his brow.

“I’ve never liked you,” he said. “And when you question my orders, I like you less. There’s food for thought there, Rush. . . .”

I despair of describing the coldness with which he spoke: it lent to his words an inhumanity which made my blood run cold, and I was not surprised to see Rush pale before them and stoop to his labour again with goggling eyes.

An instant later Dewdrop was out of sight.

That I was now in some danger was perfectly clear, for Dewdrop had been charged to make sure that no one was doing exactly what I had done, and it seemed unpleasantly likely that if he should happen upon me, the four would spare no effort to

take my life. I was, however, determined not to withdraw, for the corpse cried out for vengeance, and if once I lost touch with the rogues, my chance of bringing them down might be gone for good.

And here I should say that I had the strangest feeling that the dead was calling on me, for his head was so turned that his eyes looked full into mine, and his lips might well have been framing some frantic appeal. 13

I, therefore, decided to try and ‘pick up’ Dewdrop without delay, for, once I knew where he was, my woodcraft would probably beat him, and I could, as they say, bite the biter without being bitten myself.

Without more ado I therefore abandoned my covert and thirty seconds later I swung myself into a tree. . . .

Now though, because of the leaves, I could not look out for Dewdrop, I had a good hope that his movements would give him away, for the others were now out of earshot and, but for the piping of birds, the forest was still.

And so it fell out.

Almost at once I heard the fellow stumble over the root of some tree and two minutes later I was afoot behind him, some thirty paces away.

Now I had hoped that after a casual survey the man would return to the dell, for then I could reach my cousin and tell him my news. Whilst he was fetching Barley, I could then go back to my covert to keep an eye on the rogues, and when the others

came up, we could decide together what action to take. Moreover, in the Rolls were two pistols, ready for use—for we had been robbed in Spain some three years before, and, having learned our lesson, had ever since carried arms. But Dewdrop stayed on.

To and fro he cast, patrolling the ground all about with the greatest care, till at last I saw that he would not return until summoned or until he knew that the sods were back in their place. This was disconcerting, for though, to be sure, he was noisy, he was doing his work too well for me to bring up the others until he was out of the way: indeed, I was inwardly cursing, when under my eyes the fat fell into the fire.

14

Dewdrop was passing the covert in which I had lain, when he stopped and peered at the bushes and then glanced round—this to my great surprise, for I could have sworn that only a forester's eye would have detected such traces as I had left.

From behind a tangle of briars, I watched the man anxiously. . . .

Satisfied that no one was looking, he went on his hands and knees, to pluck from the heart of the bushes a paper some four inches long.

I shall never forget that moment—I think that my heart stood still: for, as my hand flew to my pocket, I knew what that paper was . . . a shoemaker's bill, which had followed me out from London . . . complete with its envelope bearing my name and address—the address of the inn at which Geoffrey and I were lodging some five miles off.

It is my habit never to pocket such things: I do not pocket a letter once a year: but the day before, the post had arrived as we were leaving the house, so I read my bill in the car and then thrust it into a pocket for lack of a table on which I could lay it down. And I had forgotten the thing . . . God knows how it left my pocket, but, as I wormed my way forward, it must have made its way out, and when I crawled back, have stayed caught in the midst of the thorns.

I saw Dewdrop finger the letter and find it dry. Then he looked from his find to the spot at which it had lain. Then he lay down and drew himself forward, parting the bushes before him exactly as I had done. Plainly, the man was no fool. He wished to be sure how much John Spencer had seen—*John Spencer, of The Three Kings, Lass.*

15

The next moment he was up and was whipping back to the dell.

The murder was out.

\* \* \* \* \*

As we hurried back to the Rolls, I told my cousin my tale, and though he made no comment, I saw that he was perturbed.

Arrived at the car, he bade me take the wheel and drive to our lodging at Lass as fast as I could: as I let in the clutch, I saw him take out a pistol and slip it into his coat.

Ten minutes later we slid up a cobbled street, under an aged archway and into the yard of the inn.

As we stepped out, my cousin turned to his man.

“Put her away,” he said. “Then take the other pistol and come to our rooms.”

“Very good, sir.”

As we entered the inn, I heard him order our breakfast to be served in a quarter of an hour.

Our sitting-room was directly above the archway which led to the yard, and its old bay-window commanded the street below.

My cousin strolled to the bay and stood looking out.

“When Barley comes up,” he said, “I want you to tell your story all over again. Six eyes are better than four in a matter like this.”

I was glad of his words, for Barley was a very good man. He was young and strong and handy and very quiet: he did much more than his duty and used his brain: though he spoke no tongue but English, he never failed to make himself understood, and, as this tale will show, he was true as steel.

16

The door was opened and Barley came into the room.

My cousin spoke over his shoulder.

“Mr. Spencer has had an adventure. I want you to hear it, Barley, so he’s going to tell it again.”

I took my seat on a table and repeated my tale.

When I had done—

“Well, Barley,” said my cousin, “what do you think?”

“It’s a pity about that letter, sir, bearing the name and address.”

“A very great pity,” said Geoffrey. “Anything else?”

“If you ask me, sir, Mr. Spencer should have police protection.”

“He should,” said Geoffrey. “Go on.”

Barley hesitated. Then—

“If Mr. Spencer, sir, could describe the men . . . I’d like to hear what they look like. ‘Dewdrop’s’ a nickname, for sure. I take it he’s got a drop on the end of his nose.”

“That’s right,” said I. “I marked it. He’s a little dark man, very wiry. I think he’s a Jew. He wears a mournful expression and he’s very big hands. Pharaoh is tall and slight—much better class than the others and well turned out. His hair is fair, and he’s rather protruding eyes. Rush looks an awful blackguard. A very low forehead, and his ears stick out from his head. Very dark he is, and a scar runs down from the edge of his mouth to his chin. The fourth man looked the best of the lot. He was very broad and had rather an open face: rough, you know, but cheerful. Not very tall, but I’d say he was very strong.”

17

“Good,” said Geoffrey. He turned to Barley. “And now come and take my place. I mean, if they should mean business . . .”

As Barley stepped to the window, he flung himself into a chair

and lighted a cigarette.

“These things happen,” he said. “It wasn’t your fault, my dear John, but if we don’t look out, it may be your great misfortune. In plain words, as you probably know, you stand in danger of death. You viewed at your leisure certain terrible rites which no one was meant to see. If you’d seen the murder committed, it wouldn’t have been so bad. But you can produce the body, to bear out your tale. You, therefore, know more than enough to send four men to the gallows—four desperate men. And those four know that you know it, and they know who and where you are. Well, there’s an old saying, ‘A man may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb’.”

“I can’t help that,” said I. “I’m sorry about that letter, but I’m not going to hold my tongue. They’d murdered that poor devil and they damned well ought to be hung.”

“‘Hanged’,” said Geoffrey. “‘Hanged.’ Never mind. I quite agree. They must be brought to justice—I’m inclined to think Fate sent you with that intent. But Fate works in a curious way, and at the present moment I’m thinking much less of their lives than I’m thinking of yours. You do see the point, don’t you? As long as you live and move, *they* go in danger of death: and they’re four to—three.”

18

“Yes, I see that,” said I. “We’ll have to go carefully, of course.”

“If we were at home,” said Geoffrey, “we should go straight to Scotland Yard. They’d give you armed protection and turn out the Flying Squad. But we are not at home. We are in the depths

of Austria, at a curious old-world townlet, where Time stands remarkably still. I've hardly seen a policeman since I've been here, and I find it hard to believe that if we went to the police you would be given protection in any sense of the term. More. Give those four reason to think that you've been to the police, and they'll strike out of hand. Your action, you see, would amount to a declaration of war."

"But how can we bring them to justice, unless we go to the police?"

"I've no idea," said my cousin. "I don't like murder and I'm just as anxious as you to put the rope round their necks: but we've got to sit tight for the moment—extremely tight."

"Meanwhile they'll clear out of the country."

"No, they won't," said Geoffrey. "I'll tell you why. Those four didn't come out here to do in somebody's servant—for that's who their victim was. What he had on was a tunic, and some of the old houses here still dress their people like that. Boots to the knee?"

"Undressed, brown leather," said I.

Geoffrey nodded.

"He was wearing livery. Very well. Those four are here on some job, and the murdered man got in their way. He may have surprised them—as *you did*: and so they just bumped him off. But, unless I'm much mistaken, the job remains to be done. Otherwise, they wouldn't have buried him. They might have hidden the body but, if they were leaving the country, they

wouldn't have taken the trouble to hide it like that.”

And here for the first time, I think, the thought came into my head that we stood all three on the edge of some grave adventure and that what had occurred that morning was but the prologue to some drama in which we must play our parts, in which rein would be given to instincts that knew no law and the bridge between life and death would be trodden again and again.

As though I had spoken aloud—

“And now,” said Geoffrey, rising, “I'll lay before you the card that I've had up my sleeve. It's not a very nice card, but it's going to count quite a lot in this little game.

“I was staying with the Lyvedens in Hampshire a few years back. It was a Goodwood party, and the jewels in the house were worth a hell of a lot. Well, they were stolen all right. Barley wasn't with me, but he'll remember the case.”

“The Bell Hammer murders, sir?”

“Exactly. Three servants and a policeman were murdered by the fellows who took those jewels. They could have laid them out or tied them up: but they preferred to kill them, because then they knew where they were.

“They never got the thieves, but Anthony Lyveden told me as much as he knew: and amongst other things he told me that the moment they heard of the matter the police knew who'd done the job. Not the local police—Scotland Yard. Only one man, they said, was ruthless and daring enough to go such

lengths. And the man was known as ‘Pharaoh.’ As I say, they never got him. You don’t get people like that.

“Now that’s all I know. This may or may not be the man. But if it is—well, from what I’ve just told you, you’ll gather that he doesn’t like witnesses.”

Here our breakfast was served, and whilst we ate, Barley stayed at the window to watch the street.

To my great dismay my cousin then announced that we must be gone from the inn as soon as we could, and when I protested that this would be running away, he desired me not to be foolish, but face the facts.

“It’s a question of tactics,” he said. “We’re out to fight these men. Well, the first thing to do is to vanish, for until we are out of their ken, we cannot attack, but must waste our time taking precautions against an attempt on your life. More. At the moment not one of those wallahs knows you by sight, and that’s a card which must not be thrown away. In fact, if I’d thought of it sooner, I wouldn’t have brought you back. And now you go out and lose yourself in the town. Barley and I will pack, and I’ll pick you up at nine in front of St. Jacques’. I shall give out we’re going to Salzburg, and Barley can go to the station and point the lie.”

“Where are we going?” said I.

“To Annabel,” said my cousin. “I liked the look of the village and I’m sure they’ll do us proud at *The Reaping Hook*. And now you pop off, my son. Every minute is precious, as you must see.”

Now, fool or no, I am sure that no man would have cared to be sent, like some woman or child, from the danger zone, but when I began to demur, my cousin showed a sudden impatience and, cutting my arguments short, thrust my hat into my hands and hustled me out of the room.

This took me so much by surprise—for I had not believed that Geoffrey knew how to be brusque—that, without thinking what I did, I made my way out of the inn, and when some servant or other ran after me, letter in hand, I took the missive from him as a man in a dream. Indeed, I was out of the street before I thought of looking to see what the letter might be. But when I did look, I had the shock of my life.

I did not open the letter—I had no need: for, for one thing, it was already open, and, for another, I knew what the envelope held. And that was a shoemaker's bill.

\* \* \* \* \*

That I now felt far from easy, I frankly confess, for this return of my letter seemed like the service of some warrant that gave me formal notice of trouble to come. This, of course, was idle, as I very soon saw, but I could not get away from the fact that the enemies that I had made were no ordinary men.

First, they had frustrated the watch we had kept: then, they had gained their end, which was, of course, to get to know me by sight—for someone, no doubt, was in waiting, to see me come out of the inn: and, lastly, they had informed me in unmistakable terms that they were fully aware that I had seen them at work. All this, I may say, in a little more than an hour,

for the clocks were striking seven, and Dewdrop had picked up the letter at about a quarter to six.

As I entered the bustling market, I wondered what Geoffrey would say. . . .

My cousin was a tall man, with handsome, clean-cut features and fine, gray eyes. His brain was swift and his judgment was very good, while his easy, gentle manner made him a host of friends. Yet this very manner concealed a strength of will as unbending as iron itself, and the smile which was so disarming could on occasion fade into a level stare that made an opponent falter and the words which he was using die on his lips.

It was, I believe, my thinking of my cousin and his efficiency that pricked me to take thought for myself, for it suddenly came to my mind that as like as not I now was being followed by whoever it was that had watched me come out of the inn. At once I determined to see if this was the case and if it was, to endeavour to turn the tables on the man who was so engaged.

Now a very little thought should have shown me that I stood no chance at all of beating one of the rogues at his particular game, but the efforts I made were, I suppose, good practice, and, as I shall show, the exercise bore me fruit.

I made my way out of the market and into an alley too narrow for carts to use. . . .

And here, perhaps, I should say something of Lass—that tiny, exquisite town, built in the lap of those mountains which make it the closest borough that ever was seen. The march of progress seems to have passed it by: because it is so

fast land-locked, it cannot grow: and its stones were laid so truly as to make unprofitable the labour of pulling them down. So Lass has been spared—with its cobbles and closes and courts and its crooked ways, and its folk live much as their grandfathers lived before them, content with their miniature city and caring but little for the world. A good-looking car is still stared at, and I doubt if there is a bathroom in all the town: but I well remember that when the Mayor's daughter was wed, for two hours one pretty old fountain was running with wine.

For more than an hour I wandered the curious streets, crossing and stopping and idling and turning back, but I never set eyes upon any one of the four or on anyone else that I could fairly suspect: and at last I knew that either I had not been followed, or, if I had, I had given my enemy the slip. Since this was so, I had only to meet my cousin at nine o'clock, and because my efforts had tired me and the sun was already hot, I decided to rest and drink before making my way to St. Jacques'.

I was now in a quarter of Lass that I did not know.

A crooked alley which I had believed to be blind had led me into a circus where five ways met. One of these ways, it was clear, led out of the town, for the peasants were trooping down it, because it was market-day. Not wishing to mix with the crowd, I bore to the left, only to find to my horror that I had selected the street in which the police-station stood. Perceiving a corner before me, I took it as fast as I could, and two minutes later I found myself in a square, with grass and old trees in its midst and sober-looking houses on every side. At one corner there stood a small café, as empty and clean as the square, and since this was just what I wanted, I sat down beneath its

awning and called for beer.

I was sitting, drinking my liquor and thanking my stars that I had observed the police-station before I came up to its doors, when I saw a car going by on the opposite side of the square. 24

For a moment I sat spell-bound. Then I was up and was running as hard as I could.

The car was a cabriolet, very long and handsome and painted green. Its hood was raised, so that whoever was in it was not to be seen, but in front were sitting two chauffeurs—in curious livery. In a word, they were wearing green tunics, exactly like that of the man whom I had seen lying that morning, awaiting his grave.

I should not have come up with my quarry, for there was no other traffic and I was still thirty yards off when the driver swung the car out to turn out of the square, but because the way was narrow and her wheelbase unusually long, he had to mount the pavement in order to get her round. And this delay just gave me the grace I required.

The car was gathering speed when I flung myself on to the step.

As someone within exclaimed, I thrust my head over the door.

“Forgive me,” I said, using German, “but I have most urgent news. Of the very gravest import. I don’t know who you are, but you’re deeply concerned.”

A girl was regarding me as though I were less than the

dust, and as the car came to rest, a hand was laid on my arm.

“How can your news concern me, if you don’t know who I am?”

The words were spoken in English, with the faintest American touch, and the tone was less cold than imperious—the tone of a lady accustomed to be obeyed.

The pressure upon my arm became very strong.

“I recognized your livery,” I said. “Hasn’t one of your men disappeared?”

The girl never moved, but her eyes looked straight into mine.

Then—

“Stand back, Franz,” she said quietly.

As the chauffeur let go my arm—

“What do you know,” she added, “of one of my men?”

“I know that he’s dead,” said I.

I saw her start at the word, and a hand went up to her mouth.

“And I know who killed him,” I said, “and I’ll help you to rope them in. But we’ll have to go carefully, because they’re a gang of four, and they’re pretty hot stuff. Besides, they didn’t kill him for nothing. I mean, I rather think there’s a good deal

behind the crime.”

The girl looked at me curiously. Then she sat back on the cushions and glanced at her watch.

“I expect the police,” she said coldly, “will be glad to hear any facts. The station is in the next street.”

My speech was impetuous, I know, and never would have been spoken if I had had but a moment to choose my words: but to whip me so was monstrous, and the blood came into my face. 26

“On the other hand,” I said thickly, “the police may agree with you.”

“Agree with me—what do you mean?”

“That it’s none of my business,” said I.

With that, I made her a bow—for I had no hat to take off—and, inwardly raging at my treatment, turned on my heel and sauntered back to my café on the opposite side of the square.

As I gained the pavement, I heard a step at my side.

Then a chauffeur was speaking, hat in hand.

“Her ladyship, sir, would be glad of your name and address.”

“Tell her ladyship this. My name does not matter, and my address is this café—until I have finished my beer.”

The man withdrew, and, more enraged than ever, I sat myself down at my table and mopped my face.

I had been used with contumely, as though I had been some peasant, the worse for drink. This by a girl whom I was seeking to serve—a girl who was younger than I was, whose looks alone were insisting that she should know how to behave. . . .

As I glared at the grass before me, I could see the pride of her mouth and the lift of her delicate chin: when I shut my eyes, I saw her lovely temples and the sweep of her blue-black hair: when I frowned at my watch, I saw her aquiline nose and her great gray eyes: and when at last I looked up, there was the car before me with my lady's face framed in its window and the second chauffeur standing beside the door.

“If you will forgive me, perhaps I can give you a lift.”

27

This unadorned apology acted on me as a charm. All my resentment vanished, as though it had never been, and I know that my heart leaped up at the sight of her eager beauty and the friendly light in her eyes.

I got to my feet, laid a coin on the table and picked up my hat. . . .

As I took my seat beside her—

“I'm to blame,” I said, “and I've nothing at all to forgive. I'm afraid I shook you up. But I—I hadn't rehearsed this meeting and I guess I went off half-cocked. I shall do it again in a minute, so I'd better just tell you my tale.”

“One moment—where shall I take you?”

“If you please, to the church of St. Jacques.”

As the car moved off—

“I’m Helena Yorick,” said the girl, “and Yorick is the name of my home, some seven miles off.”

I gave her my name at once and then, without waiting longer, plunged into my tale.

When I had done—

“Are you sure you weren’t followed?” she said. “I mean, if you were, they now know you’re in touch with me.”

“I’m sure I wasn’t,” said I.

With my words the car stopped at the church.

“Well, you can’t get out here,” said the girl. “We must find a much quieter place. Besides, you must hear my story. Sit back in the car and don’t move. It’s only a quarter of nine.”

She gave some direction to the chauffeur and then sat back in her seat.

“My father died last November, leaving my brother and me. We’re Austrian, you know: but my mother taught me my English—she was American. My brother is younger than I am, and he’s away just now: so I rather run the castle, although, of course, he’s the Count. This duty takes me to Salzburg once a month. I

made the journey by car four days ago. On the way an attempt was made to waylay me, and when I got through—I was driving—they chased me for thirty miles. I had a man with me called Florin. . . . Three generations of Florins have served our house. His father's my warden—has charge of all the keys. Well, six men act as night-watchmen, taking the duty by turns. Old Florin chooses the men, and his son was one of the six. He was on duty last night, and this morning he couldn't be found." Her voice began to quaver, and I heard her smother a sob. "He was the finest fellow, and in his sight I think I could do no wrong. If I'd asked for his eyes, he'd have plucked them out of his head. I don't know how to tell old Florin, and that's the truth."

To see her so near to weeping must have wrung anyone's heart.

"I'm most dreadfully sorry," I said. "And if you'll let me help you, we'll bring the blackguards to book. But you see my cousin was right. Florin was nothing to them, but he got in their way."

"Yes," said the girl, "that's clear. The night-watchman got in their way." With a sudden movement she turned. "But you must keep out of this. I don't like Annabel much. Can't you go home?"

"I'm not going home," said I, "till I've seen this through."

29

The girl laid a hand on my arm.

"Don't be foolish," she said. "This quarrel is mine—not yours. Young Florin was not your man. Besides, you can do no good because they've got your number: lift a finger against them, and

they won't do another thing till they've put you out."

"The point is this," said I. "That you don't want to fight them with me is natural enough. I fancy you're shy of strangers and you know nothing of me. But if I like to take on the brutes that's my affair. I've given you information which it was right you should have, and that, I frankly admit, is the end of my duty to you: but I owe that dead man a duty, and, by God, I'm going to do it. If you'd seen him dead, as I did, you'd feel the same. I tell you, he called upon me. . . . Why, if I cleared out to England, I'd never sleep sound again." I broke off to mop my face. "My cousin's with me," I added, "and so is his man."

There was a little silence.

Then—

"I wish," said the girl, "I could have a word with your cousin. Do you think he could meet me this evening at—at a farm that I know?"

"I'll bring him with me," said I, "wherever you please."

Lady Helena looked away.

"You can come if you like," she said. "But I want to see him."

Then she took up a large-scale map and showed me the farm. This went by the name of Plumage and lay some four miles from Annabel, quite by itself.

"At five o'clock, then?" says she.

I nodded.

“We shall be there.”

“And now,” she said, “I must drop you. Do you know where you are?”

I glanced about me.

“Yes,” said I. “We’re five minutes’ walk from St. Jacques’.”

“That’s right.” She peered at the street. “And it seems quiet enough about here.” She touched a switch, and the car began to slow down. “Please don’t stand still when you’re out: start walking at once. And thank you very much for doing your duty to me. And—and don’t forget that that’s ended.”

As I took her slim hand, her steady gray eyes met mine.

“True,” said I. “But my duty to Florin remains: and I’m not so sure as I was that he called upon me for vengeance.”

“What else?” said the girl.

“He loved his mistress,” I said. “As he died, he may have been thinking that she would be short of a man.”

And then I was out of the car and was sauntering down the pavement as though I had strolled for an hour.

Except for a crone with a bucket, there seemed to be no one in sight.

As the Rolls swept over a crossing and on to the Salzburg road

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“I’m almost sure,” said Geoffrey, “that we’ve stolen a march on our friends. They may have been watching the inn, but I can’t believe they expected a movement like this. Of course they may stick to Barley, but that I doubt. And in any event he’ll give them the slip at Salzburg.”

31

“At Salzburg?” I cried.

“That’s right,” said my cousin. “He’ll be in that city to-night. To-morrow he’ll come back to Villach, and there we shall pick him up as soon as it’s dusk.”

“You’re taking no chances,” said I.

“D’you blame me, John? I mean, the return of your letter was pretty good work. Talk about a riposte. . . . And you may have been seen with my lady; in which case, as she observed, the job, whatever it is, will go by the board, and Pharaoh and Co.’s one idea will be to do you in. She’s no damned fool, this gray-eyed goddess of yours. That’s probably her American blood. And her Austrian made her standoffish. These old Austrian families are terribly strict.”

“She made amends,” said I. “No one could have been more—more gracious.”

My cousin laughed.

“Goddesses are gracious,” he said. “And now please look behind you and keep your eyes on the road. If there’s nothing whatever in sight, in three or four minutes I’m going to turn off to the left.”

Five minutes later we were in the depths of a beech-wood, and the main road was half a mile off.

We now made no more haste and since my cousin took us a roundabout way, it was long past noon when we stole into Annabel.

The hamlet might have been sleeping, for the men were abroad in the fields, and the women were keeping house, and the children were gone to their fathers, to take them their midday meal.

32

Geoffrey berthed the car in the shade of some limes which grew fifty yards from the inn, on the opposite side of the way.

“You go in,” he said, “and have a look at the rooms. I imagine they’re quite all right, but you never can tell.”

I left him filling a pipe and walked to *The Reaping Hook*.

This was a pleasant inn, standing back from the road. The house was old and well built of stone and oak, and though, I fancy, its custom must have been slight, there was nothing mean about it, within or without. We had supped there some three weeks back and had found the service eager and the kitchen uncommonly good, but, while I had not much doubt that the rooms which the host had to offer would do very well, good board does not warrant good lodging, as every traveller

knows.

The day seemed destined to be a day of surprise.

As I entered the great, stone tap-room, it was clear that all was not well. The room was not swept and garnished as when I had seen it last, a settle was lying on its back, with its chest disgorging a medley of household stuff, and a sordid stain on a wall led down to a puddle of beer and a broken glass. As I stood, frowning, the maid that had served us so blithely brushed by me, blowsed and sullen, without a word, and when I passed on to the kitchen, in search of the host, I found his wife railing at a scullion, with tears running down her cheeks.

It now seemed clear that some brawl or other had lately disordered the house and I began to wonder whether the host was absent because he had suffered some hurt. The poor woman's state, however, forbade my questioning her, and indeed as soon as she saw me, she threw her apron over her head and abandoned herself to her grief. I, therefore, turned to the scullion and asked him where his master might be, but the man seemed dull of comprehension and I had to shake him by the shoulder before at last he muttered that the host was upstairs.

33

I was now quite certain that the man was lying abed because he had been hurt in some fray, but when I asked the scullion, he only stared, and I made up my mind to go up and see for myself.

I made my way to the staircase which rose from the hall, and a moment later had gained a fine, broad passage which ran the

length of the house. Since the stairs rose again, I was about to go higher, when the door of a room was opened, and the maid who had passed me came out, wide-eyed and breathless and trembling as though some terror or other had teased her and let her go.

Again she would have gone by, but I caught her arm.

“What’s the matter?” I cried. “Where’s your master?”

She pointed to the room she had left and fled downstairs.

I now began to think that the man must be dead, for he was a mild old fellow and not at all the sort that drinks himself into a fury and puts his household in fear. However, I made up my mind that, having come so far, I had better go on and I walked to the door and stood listening before I knocked.

For a quarter of a minute I listened, but heard no sound, and my hand was raised, ready to knock, when somebody spoke—and before he had spoken three words, I knew the answers to the riddles which I had been trying to solve.

34

I knew why the house was disordered and why I had not been received: I knew why the maid was trembling and why the goodwife was in tears: and I knew that, be they never so pleasing, the rooms at *The Reaping Hook* were not for Geoffrey and me . . . for the voice was the voice of Pharaoh, who was speaking pretty fair German and was recommending the landlord to do as he said.

35

As I stole away from that door, I know that my knees were loose. I am not proud of this truth, but I do not think it is surprising, and, if I am to be honest, so often as I remember that my hand was raised, ready to knock, the sweat will start upon my forehead and the palms of my hands grow wet.

I passed down the passage a-tiptoe, as well I might, wondering if ever before two men had been at such pains to avoid the foe, only to choose for their harbour the enemy's camp, for that, of course, was the use to which he was putting the inn. My cousin had chosen the village because it was not too distant, yet out of the way. And so had Pharaoh. It occurred to me suddenly that if Geoffrey and I could be gone without being seen we should at least have won some valuable news. . . .

I was halfway down the stairs, which rose in two flights, and the doorway of the inn was before me, framing a slice of the forecourt ablaze with the midday sun, when there came to my ears the slam of the door of a car. It was not a door of the Rolls, but that of some car in the forecourt, quite close to the inn. I believe that I stopped instinctively, but almost before I could think, a figure was in the doorway—a little, wiry figure—and was heading straight for the stairs.

It was my old friend, Dewdrop.

Now I saw in a flash that unless of the four it was he that had been lying in wait to identify me at Lass, I stood a very fair chance of being no more than suspected as I went by.

And once I was in the forecourt and clear of the inn. . . .

I, therefore, held on my way, and since he was looking down, Dewdrop did not perceive me until he was three steps off. And then our eyes met—for an instant.

His surprise was his undoing.

As plain as though he had said so, I knew that he knew who I was and the second he spent in staring served my turn. As his fingers flew to his mouth, I hit him under the jaw and leaped for the door.

Now all would have been very well if I had not made one mistake: yet I sometimes think that it was as well that I made it; for the lesson it taught me was such that I never made it again.

I had had the advantage of Dewdrop, for he had been standing below me and I was the heavier man. But the hall below us was flagged and I was afraid to hit hard lest he should topple backwards and split his skull on the stone. And so, though the blow was heavy, it was not heavy enough. Lay hold of me he could not, for his balance was gone, but as I gained the forecourt his piercing whistle rang out.

My cousin heard it—I saw him. He had his back to the inn, and the bonnet of the Rolls was open and he was making some adjustment, spanner in hand. I saw him look up and round, with his pipe in his mouth. For an instant he stared. And then the bonnet was shut, and the spanner was in his pocket and a pistol was in his hand.

Before I could speak—

“Take the wheel,” said Geoffrey, “and back her the way we came. There’s a corner a hundred yards back. Turn her round there and wait. Is that their car?”

“Yes, but——”

“Quick,” cried my cousin, and started to stroll to the inn.

What then happened happened so quickly that no account I can give can render the scene.

As I flung myself into the Rolls, I saw Dewdrop, running towards us, stop in his tracks. As Geoffrey fired, the fellow turned and doubled, dodging from side to side: to my amazement my cousin began to give chase.

The engine of the Rolls was running and I let in the clutch. Then I lifted the car towards Geoffrey across the road.

A closed car was standing in the forecourt beside the door of the inn. As Dewdrop whipped behind it, my cousin fired again. Then he turned to see me waiting six paces away. . . .

Pharaoh was standing in the doorway, with a hand to his hip: as he drew arms, Rush thrust out from behind him and sent him against the jamb. I shall always believe that this blunder saved Geoffrey’s life.

I had never stopped the Rolls and as Geoffrey leaped for the step I let her go. In that instant two shots were fired, and a bullet went by my face to splinter the driving mirror twelve inches away. And then we were flashing through the village, and a dog was barking in a doorway and a woman was

standing in a garden, gaping and staring, with a dripping spoon in her hand.

Geoffrey was speaking.

38

“I’m much obliged, my son. But another time you simply must do as I say. It’s you they’re after, not me. And now please put her along. I’ve holed their petrol-tank, so I hardly think they’ll start: all the same I believe in distance. I’m glad to have met your friends, but I didn’t like the look in their eyes.”

Twenty minutes later we glided out of a by-road on to a grass-grown track: where this curled into a thicket, I threw out the clutch.

“My God,” said Geoffrey, and wiped the sweat from his face. “And after all that trouble to cover our tracks. Fate beats the band sometimes. And now tell me exactly what happened. I’ve a pretty good idea, but I may as well know.”

I told him the truth.

“Colossal,” says he. “Colossal. There’s no other word. However, there’s no harm done—except, of course, that they’ll think you’re out for blood. They’ll never believe that this was an accident. They’ll think we trailed them. Funny I never heard Dewdrop come up with the car: he must have backed her out of the yard. That’s why he never saw me. Fluke upon fluke. Never mind. That tank should hold them up for twenty-four hours.”

“They’ll shift their quarters,” said I.

“Without a doubt,” said Geoffrey. “So we’ve done *The*

*Reaping Hook* a very good turn.” He pulled out a map. “And now let’s see where we are. We ran through a village called Wagen some four miles back.”

We were twenty-two miles from Plumage, and the hour was just one o’clock.

My cousin fingered his chin.

“Tea with the goddess,” he said, “at five o’clock. What could be better? But I don’t want to wait till then. Besides, we must find a lodging.” He broke off to stare at the dash. “Oh, hell,” he murmured, “why does one do these things?”

“What things?” said I.

My cousin sighed.

“You spared little Dewdrop—and damned near cost us our lives.”

“I know,” I said uneasily. “I—I won’t be such a mug again.”

“Neither will I,” said my cousin violently. He slammed the arm-rest with his hand. “Damn it, I had him cold—and I fired at his feet.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Plumage lay more than two miles from the high road that bounded its meadows and welcomed the shade of its woods. The lane that served it was little more than a track and till we rounded the last of a dozen bends, we were by no means sure

that we had not mistaken our way: then all of a sudden the lane became a view-point, and there was Plumage before us, making as lovely a picture as ever I saw.

Instinctively, I set a foot on the brake. . . .

The farm was set on the floor of a fair-sized valley that ran due west. This was full of sunlight and the shadows lay black as jet on the vivid green. To north and east and south were rising woods, closing the head of the valley and fencing Plumage with magic, as the woods of the fairytales. Indeed, the peace was absolute and seemed to be that of some painting, touched into life: for cows were moving in the meadows, and the smoke from some chimney was rising straight as a spire, and a decent stream was lacing the fields with silver and threading the aged eye of a gray stone bridge.

40

The dwelling itself was handsome, white and gray and low, with shutters of olive green. Its windows were large and its doorway was flanked by stone benches on either side, and a fountain was welling in the midst of the broad paved apron which ran the length of the house. Beyond and behind rose the stables and barns and byres; and the whole seemed matter for Æsop and to argue the vanity of progress, when man might have of Nature so fair a heritage.

After a long look—

“I must try and paint that,” said Geoffrey. “The world will say it’s unnatural, but never mind. Besides, in a way it is. Look at that barn with the oak-trees on either side. That wasn’t built by men’s hands: it grew—grew up with the oaks.”

We stole down the lane in silence and over the old stone bridge.

As I brought the car to rest, Lady Helena Yorick came out of the house, and, behind her, a great Alsatian, a very beautiful hound.

Here for the first time I saw how truly lovely she was, for now she was standing in a sunshine that raked her from head to toe.

She was dressed for riding astride in a silk shirt and breeches and boots: her head was bare, and her figure was very slim. She was tall for a woman, and straight, and bore herself very well, yet she seemed very dainty and nothing about her suggested the way of a man. There were lights in her soft black hair and her colour was high, but though she looked very healthy the sun had not touched her skin which was very white. Her eyes were grave, and her gaze was deep and fearless and very quiet. If her exquisite mouth was proud, her smile was swift, and her eager parted lips were friendly as those of a child: indeed, her charm was dazzling, and though her manner was high, this was in a way but the purple to which she seemed to be born. In a word, she was royal by nature—the thing stood out: she continually commanded admiration, yet of this she was as unconscious as Eve herself.

Indeed, as she stood there, waiting, whilst we climbed out of the car, I remember thinking that the path which young Florin had trodden was not a hard path to tread, and that, though it led to his destruction, many a man would have been content to take it for the sake of the light in her eyes.

I introduced my cousin and the lady gave him her hand.

“I know your work,” she said. “You painted my mother’s brother six years ago.”

Geoffrey put a hand to his head and stared at the sky. Then—

“In Philadelphia,” he said. “He carried his head as you do and he had the same blue-black hair.”

For a moment they spoke of her mother’s American home, whilst I caressed the Alsatian and marked the strength and beauty with which the dog was endowed. His name, I soon learned, was Sabre, but though he suffered my kindness, he did not respond, but only regarded me gravely and then glanced up at the lady that filled his eyes.

42

At length—

“Plumage,” said Geoffrey, “deserves its beautiful name. Will you let me paint it one day, when the battle is done?”

Lady Helena laughed.

“I see,” she said, “that you have been reading the map.”

For a moment I stared. Then—

“This isn’t Yorick?” I cried.

“No,” said Geoffrey. “But it’s on the Yorick estate. Yorick itself is three miles beyond these woods.”

“And six miles from Annabel,” said Lady Helena.

“Remembering that, Mr. Bohun, do you still propose to stay there?”

“No,” said Geoffrey, “we don’t. We’ve—er—changed our minds.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” said the girl. “Mr. Spencer is rather headstrong, and he doesn’t seem to consider that he’s rather too young to die.”

“That’s very true,” said Geoffrey. “He’s only got one idea. But let me be frank with you. I’ve only got two myself.”

Lady Helena opened her eyes.

“May I hear them?”

My cousin nodded.

“The first is the same as his: and the second is to save his life.”

“You consider the two compatible?”

“Oh, I think so,” said Geoffrey. “And in any event he’s of age. If I ordered him home to-morrow, he wouldn’t go.”

43

Lady Helena stood very still. Then she turned to the bench on the left of the door.

“Let’s thrash this out,” she said.

She took her seat in the middle and we sat one on each side.

“You may take it from me,” she said, “that this is no ordinary case. I know what these men are out for, and they’re not going to stand any rot. Now I really mean that. And I can do nothing to appease them. If it was my jewels, they could have them— young Florin was above rubies. But they are not after my jewels: they’re after something which isn’t mine to give them and which they will never get.

“Now, how d’you think they feel about Mr. Spencer? They know that he has the power not only to ruin their game but to send them to prison and death. Of course I can’t answer for them, but if I were in their position, I’ll tell you how I should feel. *I should not rest until Mr. Spencer was dead.* And please remember this isn’t England. The country is very wild and hopelessly policed: and if you want to do murder, it’s fifty to one on your getting away with the crime.”

There was a little silence.

Then—

“I’m inclined to agree,” said Geoffrey. “If you’d said as much this morning, I should have said you were wrong, for I think the return of his letter was an order to him to clear out. But now the case is altered. Through no fault of his own he’s given them reason to think that he means to treat that order with all the contempt it deserves. Now, mark you, it wasn’t his fault. We bumped into them at Annabel. They’d made the inn there their headquarters, and John walked into their arms.”

“My God,” said the girl.

“But, as you see,” said Geoffrey, “he also walked out. To tell

you the truth, we had the best of the brush. But, speaking perfectly frankly, I fear that the damage is done. *They believe that he's out to get them*, and if he leaves the country I give you my word I think they'll follow him out."

Lady Helena stared at the lane by which we had come.

"You say," she said, "that you had the best of the brush."

"We put their car out of action. They won't be able to move for twenty-four hours."

"That's a start worth having. He could be in London to-morrow if you left Salzburg to-night."

My cousin sighed.

"My lady," he said, "for one thing, he wouldn't go: and, for another, it wouldn't be any use. Their finding that letter was deadly: it bore his London address."

"Then what's to be done?"

"He must have his wish," said Geoffrey. "Fate has played into his hands, and the only thing he can do is to stand and fight."

Lady Helena rose.

As Geoffrey and I stood up—

"I'm sorry," she said coldly. "From what Mr. Spencer told me, I fully believed I could count upon your support. He's very young and downright, and he can see nothing but red.

But I fully believed you would see that my consent must be given before you took on these men. The man who is dead was my servant, and the men are after my goods. If you stand and fight you will therefore be fighting my battle, and that gives me the clear right to decline your help. And I do decline it, Mr. Bohun. You cannot enter this quarrel without helping me: and I do not desire your assistance. If London's not safe, then leave for Paris to-night. And go to Spain or Norway. Don't try and make me believe that if Mr. Spencer lies low for a month or six weeks, he can't walk down Piccadilly for fear of losing his life."

My cousin raised his eyebrows.

"Piccadilly, yes," he said quietly. "They wouldn't do him in there. But he is a dangerous witness: and he'll still be a dangerous witness in ten years' time. Supposing——"

"I'm damned if I'm going," said I.

Lady Helena turned upon me with blazing eyes.

"I beg your pardon."

My blood was up and I gave her back look for look.

"I said 'I'm damned if I'm going.' And I'll tell you another thing. I'm damned if I'm going to be treated as though I were seven years old. I've sat here and let you argue as if I were a horse or a dog—dispute as to what I should do and where I should go: why I must do this or do that and whether London would suit me or whether I'd do better in Spain. I've seen a good man murdered: because he was your servant, you say that

it rests with you what action I take—that I must do as you say, because you've the right to decide. With respect, I deny your right. I say it's a matter for me. Geoffrey says I've no choice but to take on these men. I daresay he's right: but, choice or no, I'd have done it—he knows I would. If I'm cramping your style, I'm sorry. If my help is so distasteful——”

“I never said that.”

46

“You said you declined it,” I said. “I suppose that means you don't want to be under an obligation. Well, please believe you won't be. This is *my* show. If it helps you at all. I'm happy—you can't mind that. But I don't expect favourable treatment because by the merest chance I happen to be rolling your log.”

The girl looked me up and down. Then she turned to Geoffrey.

“Is he often like this?” she said.

“Never,” said Geoffrey gravely. “I think he must be annoyed.”

Lady Helena did not reply. Instead she stepped to the fountain and stood looking into the basin with one of her hands to her mouth.

Looking upon her slight figure, I suddenly felt ashamed. She was only a girl, yet alone she was carrying the burdens no woman was meant to bear. *I rather run the castle. . . .* She had lost her favourite servant in the hour when she needed him most, when she was beset by such evil as would have sent most women into a nursing-home. And I had spoken to her roughly, made no allowance for strain, dealt with her as with an equal and thrown her glove in her face. A dreadful fear came upon

me that there might be tears in her eyes. . . .

Uneasily I turned to my cousin, but he had strolled down the apron and was regarding his barn. For a moment I hesitated. Then I made my way to the farther side of the Rolls. . .

47

And there I was sitting, on the running-board, staring on the beauty before me and cursing my unruly tongue, when I heard a step on the pavement and before I could move my lady sat down by my side.

“Where are you staying?” she said.

I swallowed.

“I don’t quite know,” I answered. “We haven’t found anywhere yet. We’ve looked at one or two inns, but they weren’t any good.”

The girl gazed into the distance.

“I hope you’ll stay here.”

I could hardly believe my ears.

“Here? At Plumage?” I cried.

“I hope so. I can answer for the man and his wife: and you’ll have a privacy here that you wouldn’t get at an inn.”

“It’s ideal,” I heard myself saying. “Simply ideal. We’ll be on the spot, yet in hiding. But why—I don’t understand.”

“If you insist on fighting my battle, the least I can do is to billet you. Don’t you agree?”

I turned and looked at her, but though I think she knew it, she did not turn.

“You’re very generous,” I said. “Twice to-day I’ve crossed you, and each time you’ve——”

“Made it up.”

“Far more than that,” said I. “I have my way, and then you—you make me a present.”

Slowly she turned till her steady gray eyes met mine.

“What present did I make you this morning?”

“You smiled,” I said, “and took me into your car.”

Her eyes left mine—to light on the driving mirror, all splintered and starred.

48

After a long look, they returned to me.

“Was that,” she said nodding, “a present from Annabel?”

“Yes.”

“And you were driving?”

“I was.”

“And you’ve not had enough?”

I laughed.

“I don’t propose to drop in on the brutes again. And you must admit it was the most shocking luck.”

“I’ll give you that,” said the girl. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

When I had told the story, she drew a deep breath.

“If you’d knocked on that door. . . .” She shivered. “May I look at that letter of yours?”

I took it out of my pocket and put it into her hand.

She examined the envelope carefully. Then—

“Have you looked inside,” she said, “since you got it back?”

I raised my eyebrows.

“As a matter of fact I haven’t. I never gave it a thought.”

She pushed aside the torn edges and drew out the shoemaker’s bill. . . .

The note on its back was printed and easy to read.

*Dear Mr. Spencer,*

*The gentleman in green had done something which he must have known I should not like. That is why he was being buried. Verbum sap.*

We read the words together, her face two inches from mine. Then we turned and looked at each other. But I had no thought for the note. Her hair had stung my temples, and I could only wonder whether she knew how terribly attractive she was. Her perfume was in my nostrils. Almost—almost I could see myself in her eyes. The blood in my veins seemed suddenly turned to wine. . . .

She looked away suddenly.

“What did I say?” she breathed. “I wonder if I’m a hoodoo, and bring bad luck.”

“That’s rot,” I said thickly.

She did not seem to hear me, but sat very still, with her eyes on the glowing landscape, and her underlip caught in her teeth. So for a long moment. And then she was up and was pushing her hair from her temples as though to be rid of her thoughts.

“Come. Let’s talk to your cousin and then we can look at your rooms.” Over her shoulder she threw me a dazzling smile. “To tell you the truth, they’re ready. If you insisted on staying, I hoped you’d stay here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“We must go to bed,” said my cousin. “We’ve had an Arabian day. I suppose it has all happened: or when we wake up tomorrow shall we be at *The Three Kings, Lass?*”

We had bathed and changed and eaten and now we were strolling on the apron under the stars. The Rolls was safe in a coach-house, and our belongings were scattered about two excellent rooms. The farmer's wife had cooked us a pleasant dinner, and a servant from Yorick had served us without a fault. And Barley was yawning at Salzburg, and Pharaoh was scourging Rush at some wayside inn, and Helena Yorick was sitting alone in her castle, mourning with Florin the death of his only son.

These things were indeed 'such stuff as dreams are made on': yet, as I paced beside Geoffrey, I found them real: but our sojourn at Lass seemed distant, and my brain recoiled from the truth that it was not yet fifteen hours since I had looked on young Florin, dead in the dell.

Before I could say so, Geoffrey threw up his head.

"Never fight Fate," he said. "My one idea this morning was to get you out of the way. To say so would have been foolish, for the blood was up in your head and you wouldn't have gone. But I meant to cool you at Annabel—let you flirt with the hope of finding your men: then Barley was going to report that he'd seen Pharaoh in Salzburg: when we meet him at Villach tomorrow, you'll see it's the first thing he'll say. So we should have left for Salzburg. . . . And after a week or two there, young Florin's face would have faded and you'd have come home. Very dishonest, of course. But put yourself in my place, and you would have done the same."

"I don't think I should," I said, frowning.

“Yes, you would,” said Geoffrey. “I’m your keeper, you know: and when people like Pharaoh get going, ordinary people like us must pass by on the other side. Don Quixote was very charming, but Cervantes took jolly good care that he never met a wallah like Rush. Never mind. As I was saying, I fought against Fate. I pushed you out of that inn—and into my lady’s arms. And then Annabel. . . . Well, I’ve done my best. I don’t like the shape of the game, but we’ve clearly got to play it as best we can. The moment Barley comes back, we’ve got to locate these blackguards. First come, first served, you know.” He drew in his breath. “We simply must find them, John, *before they find us.*”

With that, he insisted that we should retire for the night, and, though I would have stayed talking, I was too tired to argue and did as he said.

And that was the end of that astonishing day, upon which by the merest chance my fortune was joined with those of the finest lady that ever I saw and one of the deadliest ruffians that ever drew arms. The one sought to preserve, the other to take my life: and I was of consequence to neither.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sharp at eleven next morning Lady Helena Yorick rode up to the farm. Her groom led two spare horses, for after we had consulted, Geoffrey and I were to ride to Yorick for lunch.

As I stepped to her side—

“Nothing new?” says she.

“Nothing,” said I. “And you?”

She shook her head.

“Except that my brother’s returning. I wish he wasn’t just now, but it can’t be helped. At least he’s coming alone. He’s very young, you know: and people spoil him, and—and sometimes he makes the wrong friends. He brought two back last time . . . One was French. He took to me at once. I think he’d have gone very well in some servants’ halls.” She laughed at the look in my eyes and swung herself off her bay. “Worries of a *châtelaine*,” she added. “If only I’d been the boy, and my brother the girl . . . Where’s Mr. Bohun?”

52

“Map-reading,” said I. “His man, with our big baggage, will get to Villach to-night. He’s got to be met, of course. What Geoffrey is trying to do is to work out how we can fetch him without fetching Pharaoh, too. That show at Annabel’s eaten into his brain.”

“I wish it would eat into yours. Rush mayn’t be there next time, to jog his superior’s arm.”

Here Geoffrey walked out of the house and gave her good day.

“And now tell me this,” said he. “When you’re at Yorick, can you get a message to Plumage except by sending a man?”

Lady Helena shook her head.

“Never mind,” said Geoffrey. “I only wanted to know. And one other thing. Had young Florin keys upon him?”

“No,” said the girl. “While he’s within the castle, the night-watchman carries keys: but before he goes out, he leaves his keys with his mate. The posterns have spring locks, so when the night-watchman comes back, he has to ring for his mate to let him in. And his mate brings down his keys. Young Florin was never missed until six o’clock. And then his mate woke up, to find the keys still in his hand. By rights, of course, his mate should have stayed awake till young Florin came in: but, except that we’d have known sooner, I don’t know what good it would have done.”

“Well, you beat them there,” said Geoffrey. “Young Florin was killed for the keys which he hadn’t got.”

“I think you’re wrong,” said the girl. “To enter Yorick won’t help them. I’m the person that matters. They’ve got to bring me to my knees.”

53

Geoffrey looked at her very hard. Then—

“Lady Helena versus Pharaoh and others. You know I can’t help feeling that you ought to go to the police.”

My lady pulled off her gloves.

“Let’s walk in the meadows,” she said, “and I’ll tell you one or two facts.”

In silence we left the apron and took to the fields. . . .

The heat of the sun was furious, and I was glad when the girl led us up to a chestnut and threw herself down in the shade.

As we sat down beside her—

“My father,” she said, “had vision. He knew the great war was coming and he saw that after the war the world itself would fall upon evil times. Mother had a very great fortune, and father was rich, and his one idea was so to invest this money that, while the lean years were passing, it would be perfectly safe. I think he really wanted it for Yorick. Our motto is *All things pass, but Yorick endures*. And he wanted to insure that Yorick would always be maintained as it has been maintained for about five hundred years. Well, this idea obsessed him, and I think that my mother’s death affected his brain. He threw back to his ancestors, and he put his whole fortune in gold. Golden sovereigns, mostly.” She put her hands to her eyes. “I tell you it’s the curse of my life.”

“You don’t mean—” began my cousin.

“Yes, I do,” said the girl. “Lying in the cellars at Yorick is the best part of two million pounds. It’s going, of course. We live upon capital. But even so it’ll last for a hundred and fifty years. And long before that, of course, the idea was to change it back.”

54

“Good God,” said Geoffrey. And then, “But what astonishing foresight your father had.”

“He was wise—in theory. But how would you like to have charge of two million pounds in gold? The only people who know are old Florin and I. I said it was in the cellars, but it’s not as easy as that. It’s in a private cellar, the way to which nobody knows. Once a month I take what I need to Salzburg:

there's an old firm of lawyers there that sees me through. But of course it was bound to come out. I've done my very best, but there's been a leakage somewhere, and Pharaoh knows.

“Well, there you are. He obviously can't get away with a million pounds. He could never transport it, for one thing. Very well, what's his object? I imagine to levy blackmail. Of course I shan't submit, but I can't afford to let the position be known. That's why I can't go to the police.” She struck the turf with her palm. “You know what gold means to-day. Its possession was always dangerous. Men buried it in the ground and misers counted it over at dead of night. But to-day they wouldn't dare count it. I'd be an outlaw to-morrow if people knew. Everyone's hand would be against me and half the thieves in Europe would be camping outside my gates.”

“The remedy's too obvious,” said Geoffrey. “Why don't you get rid of the stuff?”

A weary look came into the great gray eyes.

“Because I have passed my word. My father made me swear that until the world was settled I'd keep our fortune in gold.” She shrugged her shoulders. “He was wise in theory, you know. You can't get away from that. How many people that had two million invested, could raise one million to-day?”

55

There was a little silence.

Men were making hay in the distance and two bull-calves were sporting on the farther side of the stream: a lark was singing in the heaven, and the steady hum of insects argued the summer heat. Pharaoh and all his works seemed suddenly absurd and

fantastic in such a world.

“And you’ve no idea,” said I, “how Pharaoh will go to work?”

“I wish I had,” said the girl. “To give me away would be futile. I mean, it would kill the goose. He can rob me between here and Salzburg—I told you I go once a month. But he can’t do that once a month for the rest of his life. I imagine he’ll try next time, for a thousand pounds would be useful—the sinews of war: and I think his failure last week may have had something to do with young Florin’s death. But what’s a thousand to Pharaoh, when he knows that there’s more than a million lying to hand?”

I made no answer because there seemed none to make, and when I looked at my cousin he was frowning upon the bull-calves, as though their sport was untimely and their antics against the rules.

Lady Helena laced her fingers about a delicate knee.

“Well, now you know why Pharaoh the Great is here. He may prove hard to deal with, but I’m in no personal danger—I think that’s clear.”

This was too much.

“Clear?” I cried. “I don’t think it’s clear at all. I think you’re in very great danger, by day and night. The man is ruthless—you know it. And you know that he’s on a good thing. The best thing he’s ever dreamed of. Thirty thousand a year for life, if he brings it off. And you hold the key in your hand. . . .”

“I entirely agree,” said Geoffrey. “And I’ll tell you another thing. In view of what you’ve told us this morning, I think it was no mere chance that sent John down to that dell.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Yorick was like no castle that I have seen, for though it was moated, the moat was not under its walls, and the pile seemed to rise from an island which Nature had brought from a distance and set in a fold of the hills. And this, of course, was Time’s doing, for the moat had been made by men’s hands and the water that filled it ran in by two aged conduits and out by two more: but the work had come to seem natural after so many years. The building stood high, with forest rising behind it and falling away in front, and it looked what it was—a stronghold whose work was done. Its walls were bright with creepers, its battlements gay with flowers, and its ramparts made a fine terrace on which a mighty awning was throwing a grateful shade.

We crossed the moat by a drawbridge that could no longer be moved, and a gravel road brought us up to the castle gateway, which must have been twenty feet high. This was now shut by vast curtains of silver-gray, and to my surprise, my lady rode straight between them, her horse’s head and shoulders parting them as she went. We followed her under an archway and into a small courtyard. The light was dim, for an awning like the curtains was slung some forty feet up, and the place had the cool of a grotto, for a fountain was playing in a basin and the walls and the flags were wet. Doors and windows were open on every side, and I afterwards learned that when the weather was hot, cool air was drawn from the

courtyard to freshen the principal rooms.

In the hall my lady left us, to go and change, and, when we had washed our hands, a servant led us to the terrace where a table was laid.

The view from here was astounding, for we looked clean over the forest, which seemed spread out like a fan, on to the foothills and mountains which stood in their ancient order, the nearest some seven miles off. The air being clear, we could see all the lovely detail of every tier, the woods that were hanging upon them and the lawns that lay like hammercloths over their heights and even the white of more than one great cascade, a sturdy cord that did not seem to be moving because it was so far off. Yet that was not all, for right in the midst of this background, peering from between two shoulders was a bevy of tiny gables and miniature spires, gray against green in the sunshine, as soft as a tapestry town.

“My weather-glass,” said a voice: and there was the girl beside us, wearing a black and white dress, which I fear that I cannot describe beyond saying that though it seemed simple, it looked very smart. “I can tell from the look of Lass what the weather will be. Now, of course, it’s only our nearest town, but Lass used to look to Yorick in years gone by. If the townspeople were in trouble they used to light a beacon which we could see—the cage is still there, at the foot of one of those spires: and when the watchman saw it, the riders of Yorick turned out and went down to their aid.”

58

“Oh, call back Time,” said Geoffrey. “If the riders of Yorick were here . . . I think you’ll have to revive them—raise a troop

of horse. John can lead it and I'll work out the patrols."

"And I could be the hospital nurse. I can't help feeling my hands would be very full."

Here an Austrian lady joined us, a Madame Olave, who plainly lived at the castle for Lady Helena's sake. But though in this way convention was doubtless observed, as I have shown, my lady went unattended wherever she chose. Indeed, the idea of a duenna had never entered my head, for she did not need the protection that any such woman could give, and I can think of no protest that would not have died unspoken before the look in her eyes.

When luncheon was done, my cousin went off with this lady to see the gallery of pictures, while the sun was still in the South, but Lady Helena walked with me round the ramparts, showing me certain landmarks and telling me the lie of the land.

After a little—

"And now where's Plumage?" she said.

"That way," said I, pointing. "You take that ride over there and bear to the left when you come to the stricken oak."

"And Annabel?"

"More to the right. Straight on till you come to the stream: then follow the water down."

"And Villach?"

For a moment I searched the distance, shading my eyes.

Then—

“I think, beyond that mountain with the tuft of trees on its head.”

Lady Helena nodded.

“Full marks,” she said. “I won’t trouble you any more. Was that gray all right this morning?”

“Yes,” said I. “He gave me a lovely ride.”

“I thought he would. You shall have him to take you back. I shall keep three horses at Plumage as long as you’re there. With a groom, of course. You may have news any moment which I should hear. But please don’t think they can only be ridden this way. They’re for you and your cousin to use whenever you please.”

“I shall ride to Yorick,” said I, “to see how you are.”

“But not too early,” says she. “Yorick wakes up at six, but its eyes aren’t properly open till eight o’clock. So don’t ride before then, if you please, either in this direction or anywhere else. Or are you damned if you’re going to be treated as though you were seven years old?”

“No,” said I, laughing. “I’ve too much to thank you for.”

Lady Helena tilted her chin.

“Please don’t talk like that. I don’t like it. I’ve come up against Pharaoh and so have you: and we’ll clearly do better together

than working apart. I tried to make you withdraw, but you wouldn't go: so from now on we'll fight him together as best we can. If you shoot him, we'll dance all night, but I'm not going to give you thanks."

"I'm a man," said I.

60

"That makes no difference at all."

"It does for me," said I. "But if you don't want me to thank you, I won't say the words."

"That's better than nothing, I suppose. But I wish you could get it straight. I know I'm the weaker vessel: but don't ram it down my throat. By way of a start I think you might drop the 'Lady.' You'll find that I answer to 'Helena' just as well. May I call you 'John,' please?"

"Yes, Helena."

As I spoke, my heart leaped up, as I think any man's would have done, for she seemed to have handed me up to the dais on which she stood: and I still remember the thrill of that dancing moment and can see her standing beside me, straight and slim, with her lovely hands on a merlon and a smile on her parted lips.

But when at length she turned, her face was grave.

"John, I'm going to ask you to do a difficult thing. It concerns old Florin. You see, it's so awful for him. He knows I can take no action, and what can he do? He's got to sit down helpless under this shattering blow, while the men that dealt it go free—

and smoke and drink and sleep as they always have, as if they had stamped on some cockroach, instead of taking the life of his only son. And so I want you to see him and tell him what you told me—that you are out to get them and to see that justice is done.”

“With all my heart,” said I. “Let me see him at once.”

Without a word she led me across the terrace and into a library. Then she summoned a servant and bade him ask the warden to come to her there.

Two minutes later a man of some sixty summers was ushered into the room.

61

He was dressed as his son had been dressed and must have stood six feet four: his head was high and his hair was thick and gray, and his eyes were set very wide in his rugged face: if his look was tired, he gave no sign of emotion of any kind, but only bowed to his mistress and then stood waiting like a hound with his eyes on her face.

Helena spoke in German.

“John, this is my warden. Florin this is the gentleman of whom I spoke.”

The warden bowed to me, and I went forward directly and took his hand.

“I can’t bring back your son, Florin, but one day I’ll show you his grave. It’s a pretty place, far better than any churchyard, fit for a king. But before I take you there, I’ve some work to do.

I'm going to find the fellows that took his life. And they're going to pay for it, Florin. I'll never rest till they're taken, alive or dead."

The warden lifted his head and looked me full in the eyes. Then he turned his head to his mistress and looked at her. Though he never spoke, he seemed to ask her some question, for after a moment she nodded and looked away.

With his hand still in mine, the warden went down on one knee.

...

"Your servant, sir," he said quietly. And then, "I am very grateful, sir. I cannot say more. But I beg that you will be careful. My son will not rest in his grave if you come to hurt."

Then he rose and turned to his mistress, and when she had smiled and nodded, he bowed to her and to me and left the room.

62

As the door closed behind him—

"He shouldn't have knelt," said I.

Helena shrugged her shoulders.

"That's his affair. But please tell no one he did so. You and he and I know, and that's enough."

Upon a sudden impulse I put out my hand for hers. She gave it me gravely enough. Then I went down on one knee and put the cool, slight fingers up to my lips. . . .

As she caught her breath—

“Your servant,” I said quietly, “and you may tell whom you please.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Eight hours had gone by, and I was sitting at Villach, in the driver’s seat of the Rolls. My cousin was on the platform, but the car was berthed in the shadows, perhaps a hundred yards from the station’s door.

The train from Salzburg steamed out. . . .

As its rumble faded, I saw a flash from a lamp, and thirty seconds later I drew up beside the pavement where Geoffrey and Barley stood.

Without a word being spoken our baggage was lifted aboard, and as Barley climbed in among it, my cousin sat down by my side.

“Let her go, John.”

Two minutes later the Rolls stole out of the town. . . .

Ten miles on we pulled up by the side of the road.

The night was perfect and all the winds were still. The heaven was one great hatchment flaunting in all its splendour that lovely mystery of bearings we call the stars. The countryside was sleeping, and, but for a sentinel owl, we might have had the world to ourselves.

I felt my cousin nudge me. Then he lifted his voice.

“Anything to report, Barley?”

The answer came pat.

“No, sir. Nothing at all.”

My cousin sat very still. Then he slewed himself round in his seat.

“That’s strange,” he said. “I’d half an idea that you might perhaps have seen someone—someone you thought you knew.”

“No, sir,” said Barley, firmly. “No one at all.”

There was a little silence.

Then—

“Look here,” said Geoffrey, “before you left——”

A desperate voice cut him short.

“Could I see you alone, sir, a moment?”

“You can speak the truth here and now. Mr. Spencer isn’t going. We’re all three going to stay.”

“Very good, sir. Then I seen Pharaoh. And Dewdrop beside. I’ll swear it was them. In Salzburg: this afternoon. Come out of the station, they did, as I walked in.”



If Barley's news had given us something to go on, it pointed the wisdom of acting without delay. This for two very good reasons. In the first place, Salzburg for Pharaoh was dangerous ground, for anyone moving in Salzburg must plainly be under the hand of the Salzburg police: if, therefore, we could find him and then arouse suspicion sufficient to have him detained, although he might put up a fight, his race was as good as ran. Secondly, it seemed pretty certain that Pharaoh had split his force and that Rush and the fourth of the rogues were yet in the countryside: and that meant that if we could find them, we should only have two men to deal with, and those very ordinary thieves. (And here I will say that since I afterwards learned that the fourth rogue was known as Bugle, from now it will be convenient to give him his name.)

I will not set out our discussion of these very obvious points, for fully three hours had gone by before with many misgivings our plans were laid. This may seem something foolish, but it must be remembered that we had a great deal at stake, and the fear of abusing a chance which might not return continually haunted our efforts to make up our minds. In the end, however, we came to certain decisions, and since we stuck to these, I will say what they were.

Early the following morning, Geoffrey and Barley and I were to visit *The Reaping Hook*: that Bugle and Rush would be gone, we had no doubt, but we had some hope of tracing the damaged car. If this should lead, us up to the men we sought, we should at once give battle and do our best to lay

the two by the heels: but unless by midday we had picked up some definite clue, then Geoffrey and Barley would leave for Salzburg by train, whilst I remained at Plumage, lying low during the daytime and patrolling the roads about Yorick from dusk to dawn. “And I give you my word,” said Geoffrey, “if only you’ll mind your step, I think you’re more likely to get there than Barley and I. We’ve got to search a city, and we don’t know where to begin, for until we’ve placed our men, it would be asking for trouble to go to the police. But your field is much more narrow. In the first place, Yorick’s a loadstone, and Bugle and Rush will naturally turn that way: then again, to get to Yorick they’ll have to make use of a car, but they won’t dare drive any nearer than the edge of the Yorick estate: thirdly, you’ve got a car, too—that’s a great deal more swift and more silent than anything they can produce. . . . But you simply must watch your step. You’re out to get information, not to attack. If you find them, *you must not strike*: lie low and see them home, and then drive all out for Salzburg and Barley and me. Will you give me your word to do that? And always to be back at Plumage before it’s light?”

I gave him my solemn word, but I knew in my heart that he would never have left me if he had thought it likely that I should find Bugle and Rush, and that, though he disliked the idea of my working alone, he was doing his best to choose the lesser evil and to keep me away from Pharaoh at any price. And there you have Geoffrey Bohun. He was a famous painter and I was an unknown boy: but the unknown boy was his ward, and because of that he must cover me with his body and, if the occasion arose, must offer his life for mine. He had done it at Annabel: and now he was going to Salzburg to do it again. Still, to argue would have been useless: besides, it was

perfectly clear that someone must stay at Plumage for Helena's sake: and since Geoffrey was far better fitted to deal with the police of Salzburg—to say nothing of 'combing' a city with which he was familiar, which I hardly knew—and since, to be honest, to be out of touch with Helena would have worried me out of my life, I accepted the plan without murmur and silently made up my mind by hook or by crook to run my two men to earth: for then, as I saw it, we had only to pick our position and sit down and wait, because, sooner or later, Pharaoh would come to join them, and the four would be at our mercy for what that was worth.

Thanks to my lady's foresight, we could now send word to Yorick without any waste of time, and before we left the next morning our groom was on his way to the castle, bearing a note from my cousin in which he had set out our plan. As the fellow swung into the greenwood, I drove the Rolls off the apron and turned to go down to the bridge. . . .

It was barely eight o'clock when we ran into Annabel.

By Geoffrey's direction I stopped the car at cross roads out of sight of *The Reaping Hook*: then he and Barley descended and walked as far as the forge which was walling one side of the forecourt that graced the inn: and there Geoffrey stood by the corner while Barley walked up to the house.

67

As luck would have it, a servant was washing the steps, and a word from Barley brought him to Geoffrey's side.

Then my cousin turned and waved, and I brought up the Rolls, for, as we had fully expected, the birds were flown. One

minute later we were speaking the host and his wife. . . .

Now we had had no doubt that the moment we mentioned their late undesirable guests, the two would be only too ready to talk themselves hoarse: but we were not prepared for the spate of incoherence which our casual inquiry unloosed. The two were simply bursting to vent such a volume of grievance as I can only compare to the burden of Christian's sins: and we, so to speak, had opened the safety-valve. Interrupt them we could not, for they had no ears to hear: but they raved and shrilled and wept, like a couple of lunatics, now contradicting each other, now bearing each other out, now calling each other to witness and now disputing fiercely some wholly irrelevant fact, but generally outbidding each other in their efforts to record the failings which Pharaoh and his brethren had betrayed. Since we were there to listen, there was clearly nothing to do but let the storm blow itself out, and when we had heard them in silence for what seemed a quarter of an hour and had inspected the spots at which violence had been committed or damage done, we ventured to put the questions which we had come to ask.

The strangers were gone. What was the order of their going and what had become of their car?

Our words might have been a spell.

68

I have never seen human beings so suddenly change their tune. As though we had turned some tap, the fountain of talk stopped dead: all their excitement died an immediate death, and the two became as crafty and sullen as though we had come to trap them and do them some evil turn.

They had seen nothing at all. One minute the strangers were there, and the next they were gone. They had not seen them go: they knew nothing of any car: when we spoke of its being disabled, they glanced at one another and shook their heads.

“Scared stiff,” said Geoffrey shortly, and went off to prove the servants—to no avail.

And here for the first time, I think, I felt an admiration for Pharaoh against my will. I do not know how he had spoken or what were the threats he used: but, though he was gone, he had left a fear behind him which nothing we could do could resolve. Though they would, I believe, have abused him until the sun went down, not one word would those people breathe which might help our quest. We had used them well, and Pharaoh had used them ill. But not all our kindness could open the mouths which Pharaoh had shut.

In silence we returned to the Rolls.

As we took our seats—

“One to Pharaoh,” said Geoffrey. “I admit they’re a shade Bœotian, but I’m damned if I could have muzzled them half so tight. And now for Plumage and Villach. At least, this means we can catch an earlier train.”

Four hours later I bade my cousin farewell.

“I trust you,” he said, “to play the part of Odysseus, and not the part of a fool. Carry that pistol by night and never put down the catch unless and until you’ve made up your mind to fire. And the torch in your other pocket. Don’t use the torch

without thinking: its light may be convenient, but it's apt to give you away. Wire me each morning from Yorick, and don't try and do without sleep—this air's too strong. And if you should light on our friends, for the love of God don't rush it. A waiting game isn't easy, but the fellow that plays it best will always win. And now you get back to Plumage. If on the way you should see a car you suspect, show them the way to shift, but on no account go straight home. I needn't stress the importance of keeping our quarters hid."

I made my way back to the car, where Barley was playing watchman until I should come.

As I took my seat—

"Goodbye and good luck, Barley."

"The same to you, sir, I'm sure."

"Don't let Mr. Bohun get hurt. He talks about me, but he doesn't know what fear is. If you'd seen him at Annabel. . . ."

Barley sucked in his breath.

"I wish I 'ad," he said, grimly. "There'd 'ave been one less of them thieves."

\* \* \* \* \*

Helena glanced at her wrist and folded the map.

We were sitting by the water at Plumage, and had been for half an hour, for when I got back from Villach, a note from

my lady was waiting to say that I might expect her at five o'clock.

“Do you think you can find your way?”

“I think so,” said I.

“By night, without lights, upon roads that you’ve never seen?”

I swallowed.

“If I make mistakes, it won’t matter. When I’ve felt my way round twice, I’ll know where I am.”

“And then?”

“I propose to watch certain points—the turning to Lass, for instance, and the coppice that you call Starlight: that’s where the road runs closest to Yorick itself.”

“And the car?”

“I’ll find some track or other and park her there.”

Helena drew in her breath.

“And supposing they’re there before you and watch you arrive. . . . They’ll let you park the car and steal back to the road. They’ll let you pick your position and settle down. . . . And tomorrow at dawn they’ll be digging another grave.”

“Be honest,” said I, laughing. “Why on earth should Rush and his fellow be watching these roads?”

“I don’t care,” said Helena swiftly. “It isn’t a one-man job. Mr. Bohun must be out of his mind. Will you take Sabre with you? at least, he’ll give you warning if anyone else is at hand.”

“I will, indeed,” said I, “if you think he’ll come. But why should he stay with me?”

Helena tilted her chin.

“He does as I tell him,” she said.

She called, and the dog came bounding. Then she put an arm round his neck and pointed to me.

71

“John,” she said. “That’s John.”

Sabre regarded me straitly: then he lifted his muzzle and touched her hair.

“Go to him, Sabre. John, sit perfectly still.”

Slowly the dog left her and moved to my side.

Helena got to her knees. Then she took my arm and set it about the dog’s neck.

“Now speak to him, John.”

“Sabre,” I said. “Sabre.”

The dog’s muzzle fell to my knee: then he sniffed my body and moved his tail: then he licked my hand and lay down by my side.

As I stroked his splendid shoulders, my lady sat back on the grass.

“He’s your friend for life now,” she said. “But he must come back for his dinner, before he goes out with you. What time are you leaving here?”

“About ten o’clock,” said I.

“D’you think you can find the mouth of the entrance drive?”

“I can hardly miss that,” said I.

“Sabre shall be there to-night at a quarter past ten.”

I laid myself back on the turf.

“And I’m not to thank you,” I said. “I stay at your house: I ride your horses: and now I’m to have your dog. As partnerships go, it seems to be rather one-sided.”

“That,” said my lady, “is foolish. What am I doing that, if you were placed as I am, you wouldn’t be glad to do?”

“That ought to be the answer,” said I, “but when I add everything up—well, I don’t get that answer at all.”

72

“What answer do you get?”

For a moment I stared at the sky. Then—

“You’re treating us royally, aren’t you? Well, that, my addition says, is because your nature is royal. Yesterday under the

chestnut you said that your father'd thrown back. Well, so have you, Helena. Years ago, if the king liked the look of a beggar, he didn't give him a penny—he threw him his purse. But if he didn't like him, he rode him down. I—I think you quite like us, you know. . . .”

“I see. And if I didn't . . . ?”

“We shouldn't last long. I didn't last long on Monday, when I put my head into your car. I don't think you liked my manner, and so you just—rode me down.”

There was a little silence. Then—

“Go on,” said Helena gravely. “I could listen to your—theories all day.”

“Are they wrong?”

“Of course. Never mind. After all, it's the effort that counts. I admit I quite like you both. You're simple and clean and honest, and—and I haven't got many friends.”

Her words seemed to switch on some current—to set playing some emotion that I had not known before.

I sat up and looked at her.

She was sitting sideways, propping herself on an arm: and either because of her pose or because her hair was tumbled, she seemed no more the fine lady, but only a beautiful child.

Suddenly I wanted to protect her, to put my arms about

her and hold her close, to tell her I would not leave her, to lift up her precious heart.

Yesterday I had done homage, called myself her servant and kissed the hand of a queen: but now I felt no reverence—only a wild desire to comfort a lonely child. But I must hold her, to do it: I could not say what I wanted, unless she was in my arms.

And then in one blinding flash I knew that I was in love.

I have tried to set down my feelings as plainly as ever I can: and if they seem crude and foolish, it cannot be helped. I think that I had loved her from the moment I left the café to take my seat in her car, but till now I had not known it, but had supposed my love admiration and the pleasure that I found in her presence such as one finds in the contemplation of some ideal.

Be that as it may, I know that my discovery shocked me, for it was, I knew, a presumption which she would never forgive. The bare thought of her finding me out made me feel weak and sick, for the moment she so much as suspected my state of heart, our friendship was bound to vanish as though it had never been. Pharaoh or no, John Spencer would be dismissed, her majesty having no further use for his services: for the beautiful child beside me was not what she seemed: she was the Countess Helena of Yorick, that threw her purse to a beggar or rode him down.

Now at this alarming juncture, to betray any kind of emotion was the last thing I wanted to do: but as I sat there beside her, thrilled and appalled and insisting that she

must never suspect me of such an offence, to my horror I felt the blood rising to flood my face. And whilst I was sitting before this new misfortune, as they say in the Bible, as the sheep before her shearers is dumb, Helena turned and saw me, and looked away.

I shut my eyes and I think that I prayed for death.

Then—

“Sabre,” said Helena, “John’s blushing. What have I said?”

\* \* \* \* \*

That night was very dark, and I would have given a lot to have seen but once by daylight the roads that I was to patrol: quite apart from picking my way, I could see no track or turning until I was actually there, and since it was these points which I wished most of all to locate, it was immediately apparent that what for two would have been easy, was going to be the devil for one.

Though I ran with the windscreen raised, I could only just see my way and I dared not look round for an instant for fear of leaving the road: yet I had to pick up my bearings and to watch the speedometer, too, and to be on the constant look-out for another car. I had learned from the map the distances which I must cover from point to point: if, therefore, I watched my mileage, I could tell when I was approaching some turning I wished to survey: but I had forgotten that each time I glanced at the dash, its light must blacken the darkness when my eyes returned to the road.

It follows that after ten minutes the only idea I had left was to get to where Sabre was waiting at the mouth of the castle drive: and this, after great tribulation, I found about half-past ten. I overran it, of course. However, I knew I was right, so I stopped the engine and listened and then stepped into the road.

I was hastening back in the shadows when I suddenly found that something was moving beside me, and then, before I could think, the Alsatian was licking my hand.

At once I turned, to make my way back to the car, but the dog did not turn with me and when I put my hand on his collar, he would not move. When I spoke him he took no notice, except that he moved his tail, and when I sought to urge him, he stood like a rock.

I leaned against the bank and smothered an oath.

I had not begun my patrol: the Rolls was out in the open: and Sabre refused to move. If he would not come. . . .

I perceived that the first thing to do was to get the Rolls off the road. If Rush and Bugle were out—

Far in the distance I heard the drone of a car.

For an instant I stood spell-bound. Then I was out in the road and was whipping back to the Rolls. . . .

Before I started the engine, I listened again, to hear on the road behind me the footfalls of somebody running, but lightly shod. Then—

“In you go, Sabre,” said Helena, opening a door.

As the dog leaped in, she took the seat by my side.

“A hundred yards on,” she panted. “As quick as you can. There’s a track on the right. I’ll show you.”

There was no time to argue. The drone of the car was louder—some car on the road ahead. If this was straight, and the driver was using his headlights. . . .

As the Rolls gathered speed—

“Now,” said Helena. “Steady.” I set a foot on the brake. “Put on your lights for an instant. . . . There you are.”

76

As I left the road for the track, the drone of the car approaching turned into a snarl.

I stopped the engine and flung myself out of the Rolls.

“Stay here,” I cried, and darted back to the bushes that were edging the side of the road.

The car was close now, and her headlights were on: but even as she passed me, her driver lowered his lights and slackened his speed.

Feverishly I watched his tail-light. This seemed to be moving more slowly: and the engine sounded as though it were slowing down.

I started to run down the road with Sabre loping beside me,

two inches away from my knee. . . .

The car had stopped now, quite close to the entrance drive: I could hear that her engine was running, but I could see no movement against the glow of her lights.

Cautiously I made my way forward. . . .

I was almost abreast of the tail-light, when Bugle spoke.

“Two ’undred miles a day was what he said. And he took the speedometer reading before he went.”

“’E would,” said Rush warmly.

“’Cause he ain’t no fool,” said Bugle. “He’s seen your shape before.”

“Now look ’ere, Bugle,” said Rush. “I’ll work the —— night through, if I’m doin’ good. But we ain’t goin’ to find little Arthur by rakin’ these —— roads.”

“Who’s rakin’ roads?” said Bugle. “Pharaoh says ‘Watch that castle,’ an’ Pharaoh’s right. That —— livery’s known. An’ once he’s found the lady, he’ll find her good. ‘Where the carcass is,’ says Pharaoh,” and, with that, he laughed fatly, as though he relished the jest.

77

“Gimme the pumps,” said Rush. “He’s got to take in petrol, and ’ow many Rolls d’you see?”

“Pumps,” said Bugle contemptuously. “An’ when Pharaoh asks if we’ve got him, what do we say? ‘Well, we ain’t exactly got

him, but 'ere's a list o' the petrol-pumps he's used'." He let out a bitter laugh. "You know, you'll buy it yet. Maybe you can open a door, but——"

"'E's a nasty mind," said Rush. "That's Gawd's truth, an' you know it. Look at that voice. Off to Salzburg first-class, but no one else must let up. 'E's in some night-club now—you can lay to that. But we've got to work, we 'ave, combin' the —— country, to pick up the squirt he missed."

"Ow far 'ave we done?" said Bugle.

After an audible struggle with the tale the speedometer told—

"Ninety-four," said Rush.

"Gawd 'elp," said Bugle. "An' he said two hundred a day."

"Well, we can't do both," said Rush. "If 'e said to watch the castle——"

"Figures is proof," said Bugle. "Anyways young Arthur ain't here," and, with that, he let in his clutch.

I ran for the Rolls like a madman and, panting incoherence to Helena, started the engine and backed the car on to the road. An instant later we were flying in pursuit of Bugle and Rush, but I dared not use my headlights, which threw a tremendous beam, and before we had covered a furlong I very near fouled a bend. Cost what it might, therefore, I had to reduce my speed: and this, of course, was fatal, for the rogues must have had a start of nearly a mile. After a frantic ten minutes I knew that my quarry was lost, but I went on in

desperation for half an hour: then at last I threw in my hand, switched off the lights I was using and stopped by the side of the road.

“Before you begin,” said my lady, “tell me one thing. Do you still think this patrolling a one-man job?”

“I never did,” said I. “I never——”

“You said you’d get on all right. If I hadn’t been there this evening, Rush and his friend would have blundered into the Rolls.”

“That’s perfectly true,” said I.

“Thank me nicely,” said Helena.

“I won’t,” said I. “It’s wicked your being here. Anything might have gone wrong. Supposing they’d parked their car and chosen our track.”

“The point is they didn’t,” said Helena. “What did they say?”

“They’re out to find me,” I said, and told her what I had heard. But some I suppressed.

“Why did they stop at the mouth of the entrance drive?”

I swallowed.

“They seemed to think that I might be in touch with you.”

“Ah,” said Helena. “What were the words they used?”

“I don’t remember,” I lied. “But Pharaoh apparently guessed that the livery Florin was wearing would lead me to you. But they’ll never get me,” I added. “You see the way they were working. They never stopped their engine and they never put out their lights. That lazy blackguard Rush is fed to the teeth, and Bugle’s one idea is somehow to satisfy Pharaoh that they’ve been doing their job. So they’re going to make up their mileage and leave it at that.”

“Well, you can’t complain,” said Helena. “Before you’ve been out an hour on your very first night——”

“‘Complain’?” I cried. “‘Complain’? I’ve lost a chance in a million—thrown it away. If only I’d left them talking and got the Rolls on to the road. Their lights would have shown us the way and we’d have had nothing to do but follow them home.”

“John, they missed you by inches—remember that. If they’d met you full in the fairway, you’d have been done. I tell you frankly, I’ve learned quite a lot to-night. And if they come out to-morrow, I bet we follow them home.”

“‘We’?” said I. “You’re not coming out again.”

“I certainly am,” said Helena. “For one thing I simply love it, and you’re not going to say after this that you can do it alone?”

“Give me a man,” I said weakly. “I only want someone to watch while I’m driving the car.”

“I’m coming myself,” said Helena. “Every night. If you don’t want me, John, I shall go out alone.”

“My God,” said I. A hideous thought came bounding into my mind. “Did you drive down alone to-night to the mouth of the entrance drive?”

“I did.”

“Helena!” I caught her arm. “S-supposing you’d come down later . . . when Rush and Bugle were there.”

80

Helena sat very still.

“Your imagination,” she said, “is more vivid than your memory. Why won’t you tell me what were the words they used?”

“I can’t,” I said. “They’re not fit.”

“Then give me a paraphrase.”

“Helena, I beg of you——”

“Give me a paraphrase.”

The night seemed suddenly close. With the back of my hand I wiped the sweat from my brow.

Then—

“They were to watch the castle, because Pharaoh said once I’d found you, I’d—I’d find you so attractive that I’d . . . hang around.”

Helena laughed.

“Which shows,” she said, “that Pharaoh can make mistakes. And now let’s get on, John. You drive and I’ll watch and listen: and if we hear a car coming, do as I say.”

\* \* \* \* \*

We saw no more of Bugle and Rush that night, but it worried me greatly to let her drive back alone from the mouth of the entrance drive, and since she was set upon coming with me the next night, I made her promise to start with me from Plumage and to let me ride up and fetch her at half past nine. This I accordingly did, taking a spare horse with me for her to ride.

I did not ride up to the castle, but waited at the edge of the forest a furlong away, and I think that she left by a postern, so that no one knew she was with me, but Axel the groom. I had no side-saddle for her, and she never wore riding things, but she was a beautiful rider and, once she was up in her seat, I do not think that she gave the matter a thought.

81

To my horrid disappointment, we kept a fruitless vigil the next two nights, and I came to the bitter conclusion that Rush had corrupted Bugle and that all that the two were doing was to cover the requisite mileage and make up a budget of lies against Pharaoh’s return. By now, of course, I had come to know the roads, and the two of us, working together, were continually ready to cope with whatever befell. But, as I have said, we were given no chance of proving what we could do, and though more than once the sound of an oncoming car was to raise our hopes, its tail-light always told me that it was not the car we sought. And there, I confess, we were lucky, for but for this distinction we certainly must have followed some other

car: there was no mistaking, however, the car by which I had stood, for the beam of its tail-lamp did not illuminate the plate, but fell instead on a reflector which was fixed to a bumper-bar.

So two days and two nights went by, and I had no news for Geoffrey, and, to judge from the wires which he sent, he had none for me.

Our third patrol was over, and my lady and I were riding back from Plumage as the dawn was peering over the eastern woods.

Helena turned to me.

“Will you come and dine this evening? I’m not going to dress.”

“I’d love to, Helena.”

“Then you ride up by yourself at a quarter to eight and tell Axel to bring up the roan and be at the edge of the forest at half past nine.”

82

I hesitated. Then—

“I wish,” I said, “you’d give it a miss to-night.”

“Aren’t you going out?”

“Oh, yes. But I’ve found my feet now. I’m terribly glad to have you, but it’s all out of order, you know. It’s not fit work for you, and being up night after night——”

“It won’t be for ever, and I’m going to sleep till midday.”

“I don’t care,” said I. “It’s all wrong. If it got about that the Lady Helena Yorick——”

“Old Florin knows and Axel, and nobody else. And what am I doing that’s wrong? I’m trying to find the brutes that murdered my man.”

“Oh, it sounds all right,” said I. “But if we had a smash or something, what of your name?”

Helena sighed.

“D’you want me to bring Madame Olave?”

I could not but laugh. The thought of Madame Olave riding astride to Plumage and lying in wait until dawn for Bugle and Rush was enough to make a mute grin on a snowy day.

“Well, then,” said my lady, “why argue? I don’t do this as a rule, but it isn’t every day that I fall foul of people like Pharaoh and Pharaoh’s crowd. The time’s out of joint, my dear John; and if I’m to help to reduce it, I’ve got to step out of my beat. And here we are. Don’t look. I’m going to get off.”

As she gave me the reins, I had the maddest impulse to throw myself off my horse and take her into my arms, for her charm was so natural and eager that our fellowship seemed that of playmates, and my clumsy efforts to patrol some great adventure which she and I were pursuing hand in hand.

83

As I pulled myself together—

“You’re trembling, John. Are you cold?”

“No,” said I. “I’m dreaming. You know how dogs shake and quiver when they’re dreaming some curious dream.”

“What are you dreaming?” said Helena.

“That you and I have ridden up through the forest to the castle to which you belong: that the dawn’s coming up, like the frost on a glass of cold water to wake a workaday world: that you’re standing there with Sabre, looking at me and smiling, with the long grass soaking your stockings, with one of your hands in a pocket and the other one up to your hair.”

Her smile deepened into a laugh.

“Am I so unreal?”

“Oh no. You’re wonderfully real. But all the rest is fantastic—the hour, the setting, our having the world to ourselves. And you’ve done it all, Helena. You’ve made the magic, created the atmosphere. When you go, it’s going to go, too. . . . It’s terribly hard to explain,” I concluded feebly enough: “but I think you’ve a power you don’t know of, and that’s the truth.”

“I shall have to be careful,” said Helena. “And now I think you’ve talked enough in your sleep. Shall I wire to your cousin as usual?”

“If you please.”

“Till a quarter to eight, then. Goodbye.”

I watched till the shadows veiled her and then rode back to the farm.

It was twelve hours later that I opened a door of the Rolls and regarded the petrol-gauge. This was disconcerting. There was fuel enough for us to do our patrol: but if our quarry appeared there was not enough fuel for pursuit. There was nothing for it. Before we did anything else we must drive to some petrol-pump. For a long time I hesitated, considering whether or no I should not go out forthwith and fetch it alone. But in the end I decided that, though it was most inconvenient, I had not sufficient warrant for breaking my promise not to leave Plumage by day. Helena, too, would know to which of the petrol-stations it would be wisest to go, and she could wait somewhere with Sabre whilst I drew up to the pump.

I, therefore, contented myself with cleaning and oiling the engine, while Axel was polishing the coach-work which he had already washed with the greatest care.

When these rites were over, I drove the car on to the apron in front of the house, for the evening promised, as usual, to be very fine, and in this way the car was all ready, and when the time came, we should have but to leave our saddles and take our seats.

Then I washed my hands and sat down to write to my cousin: but he never had his letter, for before I had written a page the farmer's wife came smiling to serve my tea. . . .

What that good woman thought of Helena will hardly go into words. All her talk was of the Countess—of her wisdom and understanding, of her lively beauty and charm, and

since she had seen her christened, she had memories by the hundred to illustrate all she said.

That day she spoke of Helena's excellent rule which was lighter than that of her father, and yet most just. She could strike, too, if need be—if a lesson had to be taught. A year ago from a distance she had seen a man in the meadows ill-using a horse. . . .

“I can see her now,” said the dame. “It seemed that her face was frozen, and when she spoke her voice was as cold as death. By her orders the bell was rung to summon the hands, and she waited in silence on the apron, with my man standing beside her and knowing no more than did I what the matter might be. There she sat on her grey, till all that could be spared had come in. Then she pointed with her whip to the man that had done the mischief and bade him stand out.

“Very quietly then she recounted what she had seen. . . . And when she had done, she turned to my man and asked him whether the knave was worth keeping or whether his work was poor. My husband gave her the truth—that the man was a decent workman and up to then had given no cause for complaint. When he had spoken, she turned to the man concerned.

“‘I will have no cruelty,’ she said. ‘You will either be flogged or dismissed. You may take your choice.’”

“The man chose to be flogged.

“‘Very well,’ says my lady, and gives my husband her whip. ‘Flog him now,’ she says, ‘and soundly, before

them all,' and, with that, she turned and rode off by the way she had come.

“And the man was horsed and flogged—I saw it done.

“But ever since then she will always look for that man and speak him kindly and ask if he is happy and how the world goes for him, lest he should think his offence is not purged and forgotten and that he has a mark for ever against his name.”

And she told me tales of her childhood and how sometimes now she would stay for two nights at Plumage and live the life of the farm, as though she were weary of Yorick and all its state.

Of the Count, however, the woman said nothing at all.

That evening I strolled in the meadows, until it was time to change, and I shall always remember the stillness that hung like a mantle about the meadows and woods. Not that the air was heavy: there was no sign of thunder: the sky was clear. Yet the calm was that which sometimes precedes the tempest—a strange, unnatural condition that was not peace.

\* \* \* \* \*

When I rode into sight of Yorick, I saw that a flag had been hoisted on one of the towers. I could not see the device, for the breeze had fallen to nothing, and the bunting was lying lifeless against the staff. No flag had been flying on Tuesday, when Geoffrey and I had visited Yorick for lunch, but I supposed that to-day was some festival which it was the custom to honour throughout the land.

My supposition was wrong.

As I was ushered into the library, Helena rose from a table to take my hand.

“My brother’s arrived,” she said. “He’s only been here twenty minutes, and, as he’s brought a friend with him, I’ve had to put off dinner till half past eight. But that’s nothing. What really matters is that he’s rather a handful. . . .” With a gesture of discomposure, she pushed back her lovely hair. “Come and sit down,” she added, “and I’ll explain what I mean.”

I took my seat beside her on a sofa that faced a fireplace which must have been eight feet square.

“John,” she continued, “I ought to have told you before, but I thought that he’d give me more notice. I’d only time to send the car to the station to meet his train.”

Remembering what she had told me of other guests—

“And his friend?” said I.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Oh, the usual sort, I suppose. I haven’t even seen him. He’s brought a servant, I hear. I hope I shall know which is which. Never mind. The point is this. Valentine must know nothing of what is afoot. He doesn’t know of the gold, *and he must not know*. He mustn’t know about young Florin, except that he’s dead. I’ve told him I’ve lent you Plumage—you and your cousin, of course: that your cousin painted our uncle is reason enough. But what makes things difficult is this. He is the Count

of Yorick, and, as such, when he's here in the castle he has absolute say. I simply do not count. I can't countermand his orders, but he can countermand mine. I can stand up to him in private—I have, to-night. But if he gets going in public, I've simply got to withdraw. What he says goes in Yorick, because he's the Count. It's a survival, of course. But Yorick is a survival of bygone days.

“My father did what he could. He left me ‘the contents of the castle’ and everything else that he had, except the estate. He hadn't the power to leave that away from his son and heir. And so I've a definite hold on Valentine—which he most deeply resents. But I give him a big allowance, and we get along fairly well. Happily Yorick bores him, and he never stays here very long. But sometimes when he is here the knowledge that he is all-powerful goes to his head.”

88

“I'm bound to tell you all this. He'll probably be quite all right: but if he should show off this evening you'll understand. As I say. I've not seen his friend. If he's no good, I'll soon have him out of the place. But whatever he's like, remember that he is my brother's guest. And Valentine's Count of Yorick. Don't forget that.”

“I'll be very careful,” I said. “If it comes to the worst, I can always take my leave.”

Helena clasped her hands.

“It won't come to that, but I simply had to prepare you. I nearly stopped you coming: and then I felt I'd like you . . . to help me out.”

I was so pleased when she said this, that I had no answer to make, for it seemed she was turning to me, a thing which up to this moment she never had done. But I had a premonition of trouble. She had not told me the half—of that I was very sure. And I saw her brother a spoiled and insolent wastrel, like a millstone about her neck.

Then we talked of other things and wondered how Geoffrey and Barley were getting on and whether Rush and Bugle would give us our chance to-night. There seemed to be no reason for cancelling the plans we had made. As soon as dinner was over, Helena would withdraw: and, once she was gone, I could very well ask for my horse.

89

Presently cocktails were served. . . .

Five minutes later the castle clock chimed the half-hour.

Half past eight.

It was twenty minutes to nine when we heard a burst of laughter, and the library doors were opened by the servant that stood without.

Then the Count came in, still laughing, with his arm about Pharaoh's shoulders and a challenging look in his eyes.

90

How Helena knew that it was Pharaoh, I cannot tell. I had, of course, described him as best I could; but many men are fair, with protruding eyes. Be that as it may, she knew him the instant she saw his face, for I felt her stiffen beside me before she got to her feet. For Pharaoh himself, I can only say that his address was as perfect as mine was mean. He might have been invited to meet me that summer eve.

The Count of Yorick was speaking.

“Helena, this is Captain Fanning.”

Pharaoh came to her quickly and took her hand. As he looked into her eyes, he spoke very low.

“What a good thing I missed Mr. Spencer. Had I hit him, I should have discarded my ace of trumps.”

Before she could answer, he laid his left hand on my arm.

“Mr. Spencer and I,” he said, turning, “have met before. In fact, I left his cousin at Salzburg—in excellent health. He was very busy when I saw him. I think he was seeking some subject. . . . I find all his work delightful—he takes such pains.”

What immediately followed I cannot clearly remember, because, I suppose, my wits were all over the place.

I know that I stood like some convict, listening to the formality of judgment and finding the grave occasion a

hideous dream. I know that Helena introduced me and that I shook hands with the Count—a very good-looking boy, with an overbearing manner and the signs of drink in his face. And I know that while Pharaoh was speaking, he kept a hand under his jacket upon his hip. He might have spared the gesture: my pistol was in the Rolls.

All the time my brain was rampant, darting hither and thither, as a beast accustomed to freedom that has been clapped into a cage.

In a flash we had been confounded, and Pharaoh had the ball at his feet. My cousin and Barley were at Salzburg, but Pharaoh was here in the castle, *the guest of the Count*. And Dewdrop was here as his servant, and Bugle and Rush were at hand. Though the castle was full of servants, the Countess was powerless as long as her brother was there: besides, my life was forfeit, if Helena lifted a hand. If she sought to disillusion her brother, Pharaoh had only to whisper the secret his sister kept. As for direct action, we had not the faintest chance: Pharaoh, with Dewdrop behind him, held havoc, so to speak, in the slips.

That nothing might be wanting to seal our discomfiture—

“My sister tells me you’re at Plumage,” said the Count. “I hope you’ve got all you want. I was sent there to shake off measles and I’ve never liked the place since.”

Before I could answer—

“Where’s Plumage?” said Pharaoh, quietly.

The Count told him exactly, whilst I stood dumb.

“Very attractive,” said Pharaoh, and tossed his cocktail off.  
“May I speak to my servant a minute?”

The fellow’s audacity shook me. For some reason I did not fear him: but his monstrous impertinence hit me over the heart.

His intention was clear. Whilst we dined, Dewdrop would seek Rush and Bugle, and the two would be waiting at Plumage when I returned.

And Helena and I could do nothing. . . .

I heard the Count send for ‘Captain Faning’s servant.’ Before he arrived, however, the doors were opened again and a butler entered the room.

“My lady is served.”

As we passed through the hall, the curtains of an archway were parted and Dewdrop appeared. Helena saw him, as I did, and quickened her pace. Instinctively I did the same: but Pharaoh was waiting for Dewdrop, and his host was waiting for Pharaoh, before he passed on himself. . . .

My lady and I were within the dining-room. Except for the servants we had the room to ourselves.

I heard her speak to the butler.

“Ask the Count to begin,” she said. Then she turned to me.

“Come,” she breathed.

In a flash she was out on the ramparts, with me behind. There she turned to the left and ran like the wind. . . .

The door of a tower was open, and Helena whipped inside. She fled upstairs and into the pleasantest bedroom I ever saw. As I followed her in, she pressed a key into my hand.

“There’s a door behind that curtain.”

Whilst I was unlocking this, she twitched a coat from a cupboard and rushed to the painted table on which were combs and brushes and all things that women use.

93

“Have you money, John?”

“About fifty pounds,” said I.

“Good.”

Without waiting to fasten her coat, she thrust some things into her pockets and picked up a pair of shoes. As she came to the door, she gave these into my hand. Then she threw one look round and slipped out of the room.

“Lock it behind us, John.”

I did so thankfully.

A short stone stairway brought us into a little hall which was very dimly lighted and was shut by three massive doors.

“The right-hand one,” said Helena. “Quick. That’s a master key.”

We now encountered a winding flight of steps, and I think that I must have fallen if she had not held me up, for the place was as dark as pitch and, while I could find no handhold, the steps were worn.

At the foot of this flight we came to another door, but I could not see to unlock it, so Helena took the key.

And then we were out in some passage, and there on our right was a postern that gave to the outside world. But Helena turned instead to a very much smaller door, sunk deep in the wall. . . .

A man was coming. I could hear his steps on the stone. He was out of sight, round some corner, but he was not twelve paces away.

Helena’s fingers were shaking, as she fitted the master key. The lock was stiff and defied the efforts she made. As I put out my hand, I heard the man stop and swear. Then he turned on his heel and began to retrace his steps.

94

An instant later the door was locked behind us and we were alone in the dark.

Helena was trembling, and I put my arm about her and held her close.

“Reaction,” she murmured. “I’ll be all right directly. You see, we’re safe for the moment. I—I’d like to sit down.”

With my arm about her, we sat ourselves down on a step.

I glanced at my watch—and could hardly believe its tale: but as I stared, the castle clock confirmed this. Only five minutes had passed since the Count of Yorick and Pharaoh had entered the library.

“I’m all right now,” breathed Helena, lifting her head.

I let her go, and she sat back against the wall.

“Listen, John. We couldn’t have crossed the drawbridge without being seen. And that would have been ruination. . . . But now we’ve just disappeared. The doors that were open are open: and the doors that were locked are locked. But we have vanished. This stairway leads to a grating in the wall of the moat. It’s just above the water. Directly below it, under the water and, therefore, out of sight, is a footbridge of stone. That leads across the moat to another grating set in the opposite wall. The gratings are barred—not locked, and each of them’s barred on this side. The farther grating admits to an old brick tunnel that will lead us under the meadows and into the woods.” She got to her feet. “And now we must go. We’ve not a moment to lose. The ramparts don’t overlook this part of the moat, and we simply must get to Plumage before Bugle and Rush.”

A question rose to my lips, but I left it there.

“When I’ve opened the grating,” I said, “you must let me cross. Then I’ll open the other grating and come back for you. It’s no good our both getting wet, and I can change.”

“Very well, John.”

Carefully we descended the stair, which was very damp. . . .

The water was cold and the iron of the gratings was rusted and very harsh, but the footbridge gave good foothold and our passage was made with an ease for which I had not dared hope. Since the water came up to my loins, I made Helena lie across my shoulders and carried her over like that.

As I set her on her feet in the tunnel, I heard the Count calling her name.

“Helena! *Helena!*”

I hauled myself out of the water to stand by her side.

“Helena, where are you?”

Gently I closed the grating.

Again the Count lifted his voice.

“Faning!” he bawled. “Faning!”

Helena touched my arm.

“I could tell him where Faning is. He’s gone to the bridge. Nobody knows of this exit, but Florin and me.”

She was right, of course. As soon as he could decently do so, Pharaoh had made for the drawbridge as fast as he could: but, as ‘Captain Faning,’ he could hardly have left

forthwith, but must have made some excuse before he withdrew, and I like to think that when he came into the room to find his birds flown, he was for a moment hard put to it to adapt the rôle he was playing to the instant demand which his lightning instinct made.

The tunnel seemed without end. It was dark and damp and noisome and ran uphill, and I was more than thankful when after five or six minutes I saw the faint light of the evening and found the air more fresh. The mouth of the tunnel was masked by a riot of undergrowth, but when we were clear of this screen, I saw at once that we stood due north of the castle, a biscuit's throw from the meadows from which it rose.

“And now for Axel,” said Helena. “And Sabre, I hope. When he can't find me, he'll remember the last two nights and come to the Plumage ride.”

It was now ten minutes past nine, and dusk had come in. We had, therefore, no fear of skirting the edge of the forest, for the going was better in the meadows and we were at least half a mile from where Axel would be.

As we came to the last of the woodland—

“Let me change your shoes, Helena.”

She hesitated. Then—

“You're right,” she said, stopping. “But I wish you could change your clothes. Poor John, you must be so wretched—soaked to the waist.”

“It’s not the first time,” said I.

She leaned against a tree, and I kneeled down and shod her as best I could. Then we took to the fringe of the meadows and hastened south.

The castle was lighted now as I had never seen it, but of course we could see no movement and hear no sound. The lights suggested that the building was being searched, and we had no fear of pursuit, for the porter would swear that we had not gone over the drawbridge, and the other exit was known to the warden alone. Still, we could not be at Plumage too soon, for Dewdrop had had his orders and it seemed unpleasantly likely that Bugle and Rush had been told to be in waiting at the mouth of the entrance drive.

97

We pushed on breathlessly. . . .

We had covered half the distance when Helena caught my arm and stopped in her tracks.

Somebody was whistling—not very far away: whistling as though to bring a dog to his heels. . . .

Then we heard Pharaoh’s voice.

“Good dog,” he cried. “Good dog.”

The man was out in the meadows, somewhere between the bridge and the Plumage ride.

In a flash I saw what had happened.

Sabre had left the castle, and Pharaoh had seen him go. The porter, no doubt, had told him that that was the Countess' dog, and the fellow had guessed in an instant that Sabre's instinct was leading him to his mistress, wherever she was. And so he had followed Sabre, but had lost him because it was dark. . . .

"Come on," said I. "Now that he's lost Sabre, he hasn't a chance."

"If he hears the horses," breathed Helena. . . .

We were nearly there now, but when Pharaoh whistled again, he was not so far off as before. It seemed unhappily clear that he was also approaching the Plumage ride. This, of course, was natural. He was following Sabre's direction as best he could.

As we stumbled into the ride, I found the dog padding beside us. He may have been there for five minutes for all I know. And there was Axel waiting, ten minutes before his time.

98

"Good dog," cried Pharaoh. "Good dog."

I judged the man to be fifty paces away.

In a flash I had Helena up on the lively gray.

As she stooped to whisper to Axel, I turned to the other horse, but, perhaps because he was startled, he would not stand. As I swung myself up, he backed sideways against the gray, and before I could find my right stirrup, its dangling iron had clashed with that of Helena, making a ringing sound.

The whistle which Pharaoh was letting suddenly stopped.

I heard the man running towards us as we turned the horses about.

And then we were both sitting down and riding for Plumage as hard as ever we could.

We dared not spare the horses—the hunt was up.

Pharaoh would run to the castle, find the Count and induce him to order a car: and we had to ride to Plumage and drive from there to the high road before that car could reach the mouth of the private lane. That was the winning-post—the mouth of the private road which led to the farm. We knew it, and so did Pharaoh, for the Count had told him plainly the way to go. The mouth of the private road. . . . And the stakes were high.

The odds were in Pharaoh's favour—of that there can be no doubt. The Count might hesitate to follow his sister to Plumage and so interfere with the action which she had chosen to take: but that action had been so strange that Pharaoh could twist it into what shape he pleased. He had, for instance, only to cry 'Abduction!' for the Count to catch his infection and shout for a car. And even if Pharaoh failed, there were Bugle and Rush. . . .

99

We rode down that ride at a pace which I like to forget.

The going was perfect and both of us knew the course, but to ride so fast was taking a fearful risk, for we could see nothing at all, except that the darkness seemed denser on either side. And we had to depend on that difference to keep us straight.

Then at last the stars were above us and we were out in the meadows, three furlongs away from the farm.

As we came to the apron—

“I’ll take the horses,” said Helena. “You go and get your things.”

As she caught my bridle, I flung myself off the bay. . . .

In my bedroom I wasted no time, but snatched up a razor and seized the first clothes I found; yet, ere I was back, the horses were fast in the stables and Helena was returning to take her seat in the Rolls.

As I started the engine—

“And Sabre?” I said.

“We can’t wait. It—it can’t be helped.”

Desperately I switched on the headlights, to see the Alsatian some twenty-five paces away. With a sob of relief my lady flung open a door. . . .

Thirty seconds later the Rolls slid over the bridge.

\* \* \* \* \*

I had often read and heard speak of ‘an agony of apprehension’, but never until that evening, when our headlights sent darkness packing out of that lovely lane, had I understood that terrible state of mind. Then all at once the truth stood clear before me,

and something more sinister than fear took hold of my heart.

*The lane was no lane, but a trap—full two miles long.* Once we were in, we could no more turn the Rolls round than a man that was buried could turn himself round in his grave: only the smallest of cars could ever have passed each other, and if Pharaoh arrived at its mouth whilst we were yet in its straits, our case from being desperate would be past hope.

The risk was, of course, no new one. From the moment our flight began it was always there. But now that it was upon us, I saw for the first time the terror that loomed behind.

If only we had stuck to the horses and ridden away across country to take some train. . . . But it was too late now. For better or worse we had chosen this dreadful way. Our only chance was to drive for the open road as though the devil himself were hard on our heels.

I set my teeth, and we took the rise before us with the rush of a lift.

As the Rolls swept over the crest, for an instant I lifted my foot—and then in a flash all my suspense was over and its grip was torn from my heart.

*Two miles ahead a car had turned into the lane.*

The night was still as death, and I heard the song of her third gear rise to a scream and then the sudden silence as her driver changed into top.

Helen caught my arm.

“That’s the Carlotta. I know it. What can we do?”

For some extraordinary reason my senses were now as lively as they had been lately dull. I knew no hesitation: my confidence was sublime. I suppose that I rose to the occasion, that the crisis had kicked me out of the slough of slow-thinking in which I usually moved.

101

“We back,” I said quietly. “What a mercy we hadn’t got further. As it is, we’ve plenty of time. They can’t do a mile a minute along this lane.”

“But, John——”

I patted her blessed hand.

“Don’t worry, my dear. It’s all right. Little Arthur has got an idea,” and, with that, I put out my headlights and started to take the Rolls back by the glow which her tail-lamp threw.

Two minutes later I backed her over the bridge.

“Can you see their headlights?” I asked.

“Not yet.”

I began to swing round to the right, leaving the roadway and backing on to the turf. When I had gone thirty paces, I threw out the clutch.

At once we heard the Carlotta and a moment later we saw the glow of her lights.

“Well done,” said Helena quietly.

“Please don’t say that,” said I, and switched off what lights we had. “I’ve only repaired my mistake. To have entered that lane was madness. If I wasn’t sure Pharaoh’d look round, I’d wait here for Bugle and Rush. But somehow I think we’ll beat them. They don’t know there’s any hurry and they haven’t a chauffeur to drive them that knows the way.”

Helena made no answer, and the two of us sat in silence, listening and watching, while Pharaoh ‘came down like the wolf on the fold.’

102

I do not think we were excited—the danger was past. We now were simply waiting for a car to get out of our way.

And so she did.

Well clear of the beam of her headlights, we watched her sweep down the slope and over the bridge: and as she went by to the apron, I let the Rolls leap forward and take her place on the road.

My lights were dimmed and I do not think that they saw us, for their eyes, of course, were looking the opposite way: but in any event the start which we had was deadly, for they must turn the Carlotta and we had the faster car.

We never saw Rush and Bugle, but some car or other was coming as we swung out of the lane and on to the open road. It was travelling east, as we were, and I always like to think it was carrying Pharaoh’s men, for in that case, as like as not, it met the Carlotta full in the midst of the lane—an encounter

which cannot have been cordial and must have set Pharaoh on the gridiron of impotent rage.

As we floated into the silence, I touched my companion's sleeve.

“And now where?” said I. “And why? And what does this mean? I'm thankful that you've come with me, but don't say you're going back. Because if you do, I go with you.”

Helena gave a little laugh.

“No, my dear,” she said. “I'm not going back. Pharaoh is in possession, and there he can stay. I don't like leaving the castle, but Axel will speak to old Florin and all will go on all right. And without me Pharaoh can do nothing. It's no good his being there. He can't find the way to the cellar, neither can he levy blackmail. But I don't think he'll go just yet. At least, I hope he doesn't—before we come back with your cousin and Barley too. Three strong men armed . . . on the ramparts . . . while Pharaoh is still at my table, sipping my port. . . .”

103

“I give you best,” said I. “It's a perfect scheme. I wish my brain moved like that. Pharaoh puts it across you, and while you're taking the count you're working out Pharaoh's doom.”

“Your brain moved quick enough when we heard the Carlotta first. Besides, I'm simply reversing the process we followed to-night. As we disappeared this evening, so we shall reappear. As I told you, except for Florin, nobody knows of the footbridge: and no one would ever suspect it, for the moat has eighteen gratings, and all but those two are shams. So Pharaoh will be forced to the conclusion that you and I crossed the

drawbridge before he had time to get down. And Sabre has confirmed that impression. . . .”

“Then we’re for Salzburg?” said I.

“No,” said Helena, quickly. “I think that would be too obvious. Besides, I don’t want to be traced. We’ll go to my nurse at Pommers. Her husband’s a farmer there, and they’ll see us through. And we’ll wire to your cousin to join us and start from there.”

“Where’s Pommers?” said I.

“Across country. I’ll show you the way. We ought to be nearing cross roads. And there we must turn to the left.”

We had the ways all to ourselves, and, indeed, I believe that we were the only beings awake in that countryside.

104

Twice we sang through a village and now and again we could make out the form of a homestead beneath the trees: but for the most part we saw no habitations and, but for the roads and the meadows and the fences which shut these up, we might have been driving our way through a virgin land. The mountains and forests especially fostered this strange idea: these were more rich than wild, and the latter loaded the air with a perfume I cannot describe, but they seemed too fresh and scatheless to have suffered the foot of man.

So for some thirty-five miles.

Then the engine of the Rolls coughed twice, and the car slowed down.

As I frowned, the truth came pelting—to sear my brain.

I drew to the side of the road. Then I applied the brake and put my head in my hands.

“What is it, John? What is it?”

Twice I tried to tell her, and twice I failed.

At last—

“Petrol,” I said hoarsely. “I meant to fill up before we patrolled this evening: but with all this Pharaoh business. . . .”

Together we stared at the gauge. Then—

“I’m very sorry,” I said. “I’ve no excuse.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The map’s report was as bitter as that of the gauge. The nearest village lay roughly eleven miles off: and whether it boasted a pump we could not tell.

As I made to get out of the car—

“John dear,” said Helena gently, “please don’t take this to heart. You know as well as I that you’ve every excuse. When without any warning one’s called on to run the gauntlet, one’s apt to forget one’s chores.”

“You wouldn’t have forgotten,” said I.

“Of course I should. When I heard the Carlotta coming, my wits just scattered and fled: and, to tell you the truth, I haven’t rallied them yet.”

“No one would know it,” said I, and got out of the car.

Carefully I surveyed our surroundings.

The road was level and neither rose nor fell: on either side was woodland, dark and deep and silent, like the forests of fairytales. This was unfenced and offered excellent cover for any car. Had we had but one gill of petrol to carry us down some track. . . .

The road was a main highway. If I locked her switch and her bonnet, no man could take the Rolls: but, left on the road, she was bound to attract attention—the very sort of attention we wished so much to avoid. And if Pharaoh came by that way. . . . That he and the Count would seek us, I had no doubt. And in their search they would prove the main roads first: and these were few.

I began to walk down the road. . . .

Some forty-five paces ahead a track led into the forest—a decent track: what was more, it ran slightly downhill. If I could manhandle the Rolls as far as its mouth, her weight would help me to carry her out of sight. But the road, though level, was cambered, and the track, as luck would have it, lay on its opposite side.

“We can never do it,” said Helena, finger to lip.

“If we can’t find another track, we shall have to try.”

In silence we sought another, and sought in vain.

“There’s nothing for it,” said I, and led the way back to the car.

Whilst Helena steered and stood by to apply the brake, I moved the Rolls by the spokes of one of her wheels. The strain was great, for the car was very heavy, but so long as we held straight on, I had my way: the moment however, that Helena touched the steering to lead the car over the road, the camber made such a gradient as I could not overcome. Though I begged her not to, I know that my slight companion added her weight: but the ground was dead against us, and though I fought like a madman, I had not the strength of body to force the car up the rise. At last in desperation I moved her perhaps six inches towards the crown of the road, but then the weight of her beat me, and she began to return: and in my effort to hold her before I could cry for the brake I strained or tore some muscle in the small of my back.

I smothered a grunt of pain—too late for Helena’s ears, for before I had drawn myself up, my lady was standing beside me and asking me how I did.

“You’ve hurt yourself, John.”

“A muscle,” said I. “It’s nothing. As long as I don’t use it, I’ll be all right.” Ruefully I regarded the Rolls. “But we’ll have to leave her here. As far as shifting her goes, I’ve shot my bolt.”

“You are very strong,” she said, “and very patient. I know no other man that could have moved her so far, and

few would have tried with their hands all torn from forcing those rotten gratings down in the moat.”

I had not thought she had noticed the state of my hands.

“And you’re very lenient,” said I, and with that, I stepped to the bonnet and took out my keys.

The instant I stooped, however, my injured muscle stung me as though it were no muscle but a fragment of red-hot wire, and she had to lock the bonnet on either side.

If we were now in no peril, our case was sorry enough. Stay with the Rolls, we dared not, for the chance that some friend would come by before some enemy seemed to us very slight. (Here I sometimes think that our judgment was wrong, but when one has escaped some danger, one is apt to give its shadow a very wide berth.) Though we must find shelter of sorts, we knew not where to seek it, and though I could walk with ease, because of my back I could by no means hasten, but had to be continually careful in case I should make the hurt worse. Helena’s brilliant plan was back in the melting-pot, for her nurse would have kept her counsel, but we could not now summon Geoffrey until we were sure of our host. And the Rolls had to be recovered before we could move. . . . Over all, the knowledge that, until I was healed, I was not only out of action, but could not lift a finger if danger arose, hung like a thunder-cloud.

“Are you sure you can walk?” said Helena.

“Comfortably,” said I. “And if I saw Pharaoh coming, I quite expect I could run. But certain things I can’t do. I

can't open this door, for instance. Will you do it? And give me my pistol? And then the torch?"

"And you've never changed," cried Helena. "I suppose you can't do that now. Oh, John dear, I'm so upset. Are you sure it's only a muscle?"

"Certain," said I. "It's nothing. I'll have to rest a little: but once we've wired to Geoffrey, we've only to lie low and wait. The burning question is where to look for a lodging that's not by the side of this road. I mean, if they find the car, they're certain to visit all buildings that have any sort of frontage on this highway."

Together, by the light of the torch, we studied the map. Upon this there was shown a farm, called Holy Tree. So far as we could make out, it stood some seven miles off. That there were homesteads closer, we had no doubt, but we did not know how to find them or in which direction to turn. And so we set out to journey to Holy Tree. And since this lay to the east, but the road ran north and south, we took the track we had found and made our way through the forest as best we could.

Though I was tired and in pain, I shall always remember with pleasure our progress that summer night. A rarer dream had been added to those I had, for here were we two with Sabre, verily seeking our fortune hand in hand. But that was not all. As though in scorn of the unkindness which Fate had shown, Helena's talk was more gay than ever before, and she seemed to exult in our adventure and to glory in the leave she had taken of Yorick's cares. That I should dance to such piping was natural enough, and to hear us a man might have thought that we

had strolled out of some ball-room to saunter awhile in some park.

When I spoke of Madame Olave, my lady laughed.

109

“When Valentine threatens to come, Silvia Olave’s mother is taken ill. Poor dear, she simply can’t bear him. She’d stay, of course, if I asked her, but, as you may guess, they haven’t got much in common, and the only time she did stay, I think it shortened her life.” She turned to me suddenly. “What would you do if you had a brother like that?”

“By your leave,” said I, “break him in.”

“You couldn’t. His word is law.”

“Then I should withdraw, like Madame Olave. Yorick is pretty big, but it wouldn’t be big enough to hold us both.”

“Supposing you . . . loved him,” said Helena.

To that supposition I had no answer to make, and we walked for awhile in silence, from time to time employing the light of the torch. Had I known her brother’s ways as I later came to know them, I daresay I should have replied with considerable warmth, but I think it more than likely that I should have wasted my breath, for that blood is thicker than water is very true and that love is no respecter of reason is truer still.

We had walked for an hour and a half before the track we were using came to an end. This in the midst of a clearing, and we could only suppose that the way had been made for the trucks when the timber was felled. If we had been

110

moving east, Holy Tree was only some three miles off; but I was by no means certain that we had been moving east, and when I had found the pole-star, it seemed more likely that we had been walking south. We changed our direction at once, but after ten minutes we came again to the trees, and since these hid the heaven, we now had nothing to help us to keep our course. What was more, the going was rough and, in spite of the torch, because I was weary I stumbled, and every time I did so the muscle which I had injured protested with all its might.

“Lean on me,” said Helena quietly.

When I demurred, she took my arm and set it across her shoulders without a word, but I am a heavy man and the next time I missed my footing, I very near brought her down.

“It is useless,” said I, halting. “We must wait till the dawn comes in.” I stepped to a mighty beech and flung the clothes I was bearing down at its foot. “You must lie down here, my lady, and take some rest. And Sabre and I will watch.”

“I see,” said Helena, slowly. Then she put up her hands and slid my coat from my shoulders and drew it clear of my arms. “You’ve got to change,” she said shortly, “before you do anything else. If you don’t, these wet things of yours will simply finish your back.”

I had no doubt she was right: if I were to sit for four hours, still soaked to the skin, the muscle that I had injured was bound to grow worse.

“I can manage,” I said feebly.

“Can you take off your tie?”

I did so easily, but I could not put off my shirt, and it was she that stripped me and then put on me the dry one which I had brought.

“Sit down,” said Helena, firmly, “and try and believe I’m a nurse.”

111

To my helpless shame she took off my shoes and socks and then, very glad of the darkness, I fought my way into dry trousers as best I could: but the effort left me sweating, for now each movement I made seemed to involve the muscle which I had hurt.

“And now you lie still,” said Helena, lighting my torch. “I’m going to get some leaves.”

Though to watch her labour for my comfort made me feel sick at heart, I knew it was wiser to let her have her way, for until I was healed, I could not serve her, and when I lay still, my back did not pain me at all.

Three times she went and came with her pretty coat full of dry leaves. These she poured into a hollow by the side of the beech, and when we had turned out Sabre, who liked the look of the bed, I found there an ease of body which I had not expected that night. And she sat down behind me, with her back to the trunk, with her shoeless feet against Sabre, to keep them warm.

“I wish I could thank you,” I said.

“I don’t see why,” says she. “It’s very much to my interest to make you well.”

“I could have got my shoes off.”

“At a cost,” says she. “And in any event you changed mine an hour or two back.”

“I had the honour,” said I.

“And I the sense,” said Helena. “When we get to Holy Tree, I’m going to borrow some lotion and rub your back. I shall tell them we’re brother and sister, so remember to treat me rough. It’s really important, John, if you value my name. If you’re polite, they’ll know that you aren’t my brother and then my reputation will cease to exist.”

112

“It’s—it’s all wrong,” I said desperately.

“Would you rather I said ‘husband and wife’?”

It was a mischievous saying, but she put a sting in its tail.

I picked up the glove.

“I could do that all right,” said I.

“Well, I couldn’t,” said Helena, sharply. “I know. I’ll say ‘mistress and servant’.”

“What could be better?” said I, and got to my feet.

“What are you doing?” said Helena.

“Taking my place,” said I. “Servants don’t lie abed while their mistress sits up.”

“John, I beseech you. . . . Your back.”

“I shall be within call,” I said stiffly. “If you need me, call ‘John’ or ‘Spencer.’ I answer to either name.”

With that, I strode off and left her.

My dignity was short-lived, for before I had taken ten paces I stumbled over a root and fell to the ground.

As I sat up dazed and shaken, Helena’s arm went about me and a cool hand slid into mine.

“Don’t be silly, John dear. You see, you need someone to help you. And I’d be so proud of my brother. He’s very, very stupid, but there’s something about him I like.”

She seemed to be speaking from a distance, though I heard all the words she said.

“Oh, Nell,” I cried and held her hand to my heart.

Then the faintness passed and I was myself again.

As I let her go—

“We both know I’m your servant,” I said.

The fluting of a bird woke me, and a glance at the leaves above me showed that the dawn was up.

At once I rolled on to my side, but Helena's lodgment was empty and she and Sabre were gone.

Very much ashamed of my manhood, I got to my feet, but I could see her nowhere, and since I was very foul, I determined to find some water before she returned.

My back was stiff, as was natural, but to my relief I found I could walk with ease, so I set off towards the clearing, for there, the night before, I had heard the song of a rill.

When I had found this, I bathed my head and my hands, but before I had finished this very simple toilet, Sabre gave tongue beside me and then stood moving his tail and looking the way I had come.

A moment later my lady stepped out of the woods.

She had put off her coat and her beautiful head was bare, and the sight of her stepping towards me remembered the lovely stories the ancients told. If these are true, the birds and beasts must have watched her with bated breath, for I will swear that no dryad that ever stole out of her tree so graced that exquisite landscape or seemed so clearly to belong to that magical hour. The peculiar beauty of the day-spring seemed to be hers: and when she saw me and waved, I felt an exaltation that I never knew before. The moment was one to die on: all nature had seen this nonesuch declare her familiar friend.

“How's his back?” said Helena, taking her seat on a

tree-stump six paces away.

I wrung the water out of my hair.

“Stiff,” said I, “but better.”

“Rest is the medicine,” says she. “We simply must find a farm. Besides, I want my breakfast.”

Carefully I got to my feet.

“God send it you quick,” said I. “We must go on walking east: but if after half an hour we don’t strike a path or something \_\_\_\_\_”

“I’ve struck one,” says she. “I don’t know where it leads to, but I think we might try and find out.”

“Whilst your servant slept,” said I. “I’m not fit to be your brother.”

“But that’s just what a brother would have done: but a servant—never. You see, if you’ll only be natural, you’ll play the part very well.”

“I’m ashamed,” said I. “I should have watched while you slept.”

“Must we be on those terms?”

“Always,” said I. “We should be on those terms if we were husband and wife.”

Helena crossed her slim legs and set her chin in her palm.

“That’s very interesting,” she said. “You’ll have to write and tell me when you get engaged. I should like to see you at work. It might come off, of course. But for your sake I hope it won’t. If the girl allows you to serve her, she’ll make a rotten bad wife.”

“It’s a question of sex,” said I.

“With strangers, yes. But a wife shares things with her husband—the rough as well as the smooth. It’s her pleasure and pride, John. She doesn’t want to suffer—she’s not such a fool: but she’d rather suffer with you than let you suffer alone. Shut her out of that, and if she’s a wife worth having, you’d break her heart. Well, I’m not your wife, so next time we spend a night out, you can watch, if you like, while I sleep: but we are no longer strangers, and when I ask for bread don’t give me a stone. And now come and see the path which your little sister found. It’s only wide enough for one, so mind you let me go first.”

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“I’ll always do that,” said I: “but not out of courtesy.”

“Why then?” says Helena, rising.

“Because,” said I, “I’ve no eyes in the back of my head.”

Helena made no answer, but set her face to the forest with her chin in the air.

As she went, she glanced over her shoulder—with her eyebrows raised and the faintest of smiles on her mouth.

“You know, you’re not trying,” she said. “No brother would have said that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Nearly an hour had gone by when we saw before us no farm, but a little, time-honoured cottage, standing in a glade of the forest, with a garden of flowers about it and a hooded well to one side.

From ridge-pole to eaves its respectable roof of thatch was fully twice the height of the snow-white walls below, yet it did not overwhelm them, but only made me think of a hedgehog up on his feet. An open dormer-window shone from this jolly pelt and an old red chimney pierced it, to send up a wisp of smoke. A second casement and a doorway were set in the wall that we faced, and the fireplace plainly belonged to that on our right, for there the chimney ran down to a sturdy pent-house with a doll’s-house window high up in its lime-washed side. The borders of the path to the doorway were gay with blooms, and, the door itself standing open, the sunshine was bravely rendered by some pot or pan of copper that hung on the wall within.

“Bread and milk,” said Helena, turning a glowing face. “And honey, perhaps—there’s a beehive. When we left the Rolls, we stepped into a Nursery Rhyme.”

We quickened our steps—for my part, with something of an effort, for my back was aching to glory, walk how I would.

We were forty paces away, when a young woman entered the doorway and stood looking into the garden alight with the

sparkling flowers. For a moment she stared upon them. Then she leaned against the jamb, put her arm up to her eyes and began to weep.

Helena and I stopped dead.

Then—

“You stay here,” she said quietly, “and I’ll go on and see what the trouble is. Perhaps we can straighten it out in return for a meal.”

“Well, be quick,” said I. “I’m hungry,” and with that, I sat down in the bracken with infinite care.

When I looked up, Helena was regarding me furiously.

“I didn’t think you’d like it,” said I, and fingered my chin. “Men do know best sometimes. This brotherly business won’t do. And now go and comfort our friend. Don’t be surprised if she tries to do sacrifice. As for her tears, the sight of you would make a lost soul take hope.”

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Helena smiled.

“Men don’t know best—ever,” she said.

Then she turned and left me, with Sabre padding behind.

Twenty minutes went by before I saw her again, and then she came out of the garden with the lass that had stood at the door. The latter was smiling now, as she had been sad, and seemed as excited and eager as any child.

For a moment the two stood speaking.

Then the woman dropped a curtsey and started across the forest in evident haste.

Helena beckoned to me, and I got to my feet.

As I came towards her—

“The trick,” she said, “has been done. Our hostess has gone for petrol, and when she comes back in two hours, she’s going away for good—for three days, at least, to Salzburg. Our host, however, will remain: he’s inside now, in the very best of humours and finding our use of his cottage an excellent joke.”

“I hope he’s getting your breakfast.”

“It’s ready,” said Helena, turning. “Bread and milk and honey, just as I said.”

I followed her into the cleanest of tiny kitchens, all bright with old wood and copper and smelling of sweet wood-smoke. Beneath the open window a table was laid. On the fair linen cloth was our breakfast—a truly scriptural meal, with bowls for cups and saucers, a knife for the bread like a hanger and two jolly wooden spoons.

Sabre was lying on the flags in front of the hearth, and a pretty, fair-haired baby that might have been two years old was seated beside the Alsatian, trying to stuff a whistle into the great dog’s mouth. Sabre suffered him gently, moving his tail.

Helena sat down by the infant and drew him on to her lap.

“Max,” she, said, “this is my brother. He’s rather nice.”

Naturally the child ignored me: his eyes were on Helena’s face.

I glanced at the steep, stone stairway that led to the room above.

“And our host?” said I.

Helena looked up, laughing.

“This is our host,” she said. “If you had any manners, you’d come and give him a kiss.”

“Convention be damned,” said Helena. “Now who d’you think taught me to swear?”

I drank with some violence and set my bowl down on the cloth.

“All right,” I said. “I can’t help it. Do what you like. If the Countess Helena of Yorick is determined to dwell in a solitary, two-roomed cottage with an imitation brother, an infant-in-arms and a dog——”

“Till your cousin arrives, she is. Besides, he isn’t in arms: he can walk beautifully. And now listen to me. Freda’s man is in Salzburg: he’s lying in hospital there and gradually getting better of a fever which nearly carried him off. Yesterday she got a letter, saying that now she might visit him, but that on no account must she bring with her the child. I imagine there’s a risk of infection which a grown-up can safely take. Well, that provision tore it, for she’s no one to take the child. And that is why she was weeping. . . .

“I did the obvious deal. This place is just what we want. I offered to care for the baby and to give her a present as well, if my ‘brother’ and I might stay here until her return. She simply jumped at the bargain—could hardly believe her ears. As I told you, she’s gone for petrol—I thought we’d better have that: and when she leaves for Salzburg she’ll take a letter to your cousin, telling him what has happened and where we are. I need hardly say she’s promised to hold her tongue.

“Now if, to serve convention, you’d have thrown such a chance away, we’d better say good-bye here and now. You’re jealous of my honour. Well and good. If you weren’t, we shouldn’t be here. It is because you respect me, because you’re so very anxious that I shouldn’t put a foot wrong, because you’re ashamed that you couldn’t watch while I slept—it’s because of those things that I like you and trust you as I would trust no one else. Well, you must humour that trust. I know what I’m doing, John. The Yoricks are writhing in their graves—I’ll grant you that: but not the Fairleys—that was my mother’s name.”

I looked at her, sitting before me, with her lovely hands on the cloth. I looked round the little kitchen at the hearth and the tiny window, set in the chimney’s wall, at the wicker cradle in a corner, at the polished settle and the copper that glowed from beside the door: I looked at Sabre and the baby, together investigating a crack between two of the flags, at the dainty coat hanging over an arm of the settle and the little hat with a diamond brooch in its side. I looked out of the open casement, to see the green flood of bracken and the gorgeous curtains of foliage hanging behind. . . .

“All right,” I said slowly, and hardly knew my own voice. “I’ll play the pretty game. I’ve always had a weakness for fairytales, but I never thought I should own one—for thirty-six hours.”

Helena regarded me curiously.

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“Which one does this make you think of?”

“No particular one: but lump the lot together, and when you’d

distilled their essence, you might get this. You might, I say: but I doubt it." I broke off to stare at the green and gold of the tree-tops against the blue of the sky. "I suppose there is a world somewhere beyond those woods."

"Let it slip," said Helena, quietly. "To-morrow Mr. Bohun and Barley will bring it back. Till then—you're to take a rest-cure, to mend your back. Freda's some country lotion: she'll give it me when she returns. And now we'll take young Max and put him into his pen: it's just at the end of the garden and looks like a pound."

When we had done as she said, I sat down and wrote to Geoffrey, telling him what had happened and where we were. Retired though it was, the cottage was easy to find, for the path which Freda had taken led straight to cross roads in the forest some two miles off. The spot was known as Witchcraft, and was marked on the map.

After my letter was done, I must mind the child—a sinecure, of course, as Helena very well knew, for Sabre had taken this charge and was lying on his back by the pen, mouthing the wooden monkey of which his small companion had made him free. Still, I lay down on the turf and promised to take my ease till our hostess returned, while my lady went back to the cottage to clear our breakfast away and wash the platters and bowls.

And there, on that patch of greensward, I passed the most of that day: I only rose to shave and to bathe as well as I could in a neighbouring brook, for Helena brought out our meals and laid a cloth on the turf.

It was nearer ten than nine when Freda returned: she was heavy laden, for she bore two gallons of petrol which she had begged of the farmer that sold her milk: and as well she brought two chickens and a basket of new-laid eggs. What tale she had told I know not, but I think that it served her turn, for we were not once molested by curious eyes. She had little time to spare, if she was to catch the train which would bring her to Salzburg that night, but Helena talked with her whilst she was changing her clothes. And very fine she looked, when she was ready to go, in her fair white linen embroidered with blue and gold and a scarlet kerchief binding her pretty, fair hair.

When she held the baby close, she bowed her head. Then she set him down in his pen and whipped a tear from her cheek.

“The half of my heart,” she said simply, “I leave with you. And I am content, my lady, because of the look in your eyes. I will deliver your letter this very night, and all that I have here is yours until I come back.”

“Comfort your man,” said Helena.

“God send you as good a one, my lady.”

And with that, she smiled and curtsyed and turned away.

Two minutes later her kerchief was out of sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have said that I took my ease for the most of that day, but while I am sure the repose did much for my back, it was Helena’s use of the lotion that actually healed the strain. What

the liniment was, I know not, and I do not think Freda knew, but I think it came out of the country and that some wise woman had made it that knew no pharmacopœia. Be that as it may, by that evening I felt no pain when I stooped, and so far as I know from that time my back was well, for though, of course, I spared it for two or three days, it never hurt me again.

Now Freda had advised us that a lad brought her milk every evening at six o'clock, but that he was well accustomed to finding no one at home: we therefore put out our pitcher at half past five and, taking the baby with us, made our way into the forest and sat ourselves down out of view.

As I lighted my lady's cigarette—

“To-night,” I said, “I am going to get the Rolls. I'll fill her up at some pump and then find some place near Witchcraft and park her there. Her value apart, we simply must have that car. Without her we're tied by the leg.”

“I shall come, too,” said Helena. “Sabre can mind the baby and keep the house.”

“I think,” said I, “that you've done enough to-day. You've fetched and carried and nursed me and played with Max.”

“It's been one of the laziest days that I've spent for years. I've idled and dreamed over everything that I've done. But you'll only have eggs to-night. I'll have to think over those chickens before I start upon them.”

“I'm more than content,” said I. “I never felt so fit in my life. That bread . . .”

“It is good, isn’t it?” said Helena. “And it is so easy to make. I thought it was terribly hard, but Freda’s shown me the trick, and I don’t think I can go wrong. Of course I can cook a little: Mother was awfully good and she made me learn.” She lay back and looked at the sky. “Oh, John, why wasn’t I born to a life like this? The life I lead is a duty—and that’s the truth.”

“We’re not born to idylls,” said I. “We’ve no such luck.”

Helena crossed her ankles and laced her delicate fingers behind her head.

“D’you find it idyllic, too?”

“I tried to say so this morning.”

Helena knitted her brows.

“Then you said it very badly,” she said. “I thought you were jibbing at being here alone with me.”

“For me, that’s the idyll,” said I.

Helena turned her head and gave me a dazzling smile.

“John,” says she, “that’s very prettily put.”

“It happens,” said I, “to be true. You’ve a way of rounding pictures—I’ve told you before. And you make this the prettiest picture that I’ve ever seen or thought of in all my life.”

“That’s foolishness, John. Take me away—the cottage would be as charming, the flowers as gay in the garden, the lichen as

green on the well.”

“True,” said I. “But take the princess from the fairytale, and who would look at it twice?”

Helena put out a hand and picked up her cigarette.

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“Once upon a time,” she said, “there was a simple youth. He was really a sort of Don Quixote, seeking whom he might befriend. One day he befriended a maiden who immediately slapped his face. This surprised him so much that he went and sat all by himself and drank some beer. But the maiden hadn’t done with him yet, so she gave him a spot-light smile and the youth went down on his knees and ate out of her hand. Then she started to use him. And when she said ‘Who are you?’ he said ‘Your servant, of course.’ And she said ‘This is all right’, and used him the more. Then she made him take her into a forest and live like a husbandman. And when she said ‘Who am I?’ he said ‘A princess’. And she said ‘O.K., baby’, and wished she’d met him before.”

“I know a better one than that,” said I. “Once upon a time there was a princess who was the soul of pride. Her beauty made you think of the dawn, and the sight of the two together made old men young. One day when she was in trouble, a fool who was in trouble himself came up and offered to help. Now the princess’ impulse was to put him where he belonged—and that was down where the wines and spirits are kept: but because she had a kind heart, she said, ‘I’ll let you help, if you’ll do as I say.’ So the fool promised. So the princess gave him shelter and kept him out of the rain and pulled him out of the fire and watched while he slept and rubbed his back when he hurt it and

cooked his food: and the fool sat still at her feet and said, ‘I like helping you’: but in his heart he was ashamed, for he knew very well that the princess was only being kind to a fool.”

A frond of bracken flicked me across the face.

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Then—

“Stinking fish, oh!” cried Helena. “Who’s taken the action throughout—difficult, dangerous action, and never gone wrong? Who’s cared for me as though I were Dresden china, and a museum piece? Who carried me over the footbridge and wrenched those gratings open, when any servant I know would have cried for a tool? Who kept his nerve and saved us, when I began to whimper ‘What shall we do?’ Who’s more jealous of my reputation than I am myself?”

“Your brother,” said I. “The man you have delighted to honour by becoming his friend.”

“That’s more like it,” said Helena. “All the same, I don’t see \_\_\_\_\_”

“It’s true,” said I. “You’ve handed me up to your dais.”

“Rot,” cried she. “Just because I live in a castle——”

“You don’t at present,” said I. “But you carry your ‘presence’ with you wherever you go.”

Helena sat up straight.

“Am I really like that, John?”

“Yes,” said I. “It’s natural—one of the gifts that were made you when you were born. I think it’s the loveliest thing that I ever saw. That first day, in the Carlotta, when you treated me as though I were dirt——”

“Don’t, please. You hurt me. I was shaken. I can’t explain.”

As though in confusion, she clapped her hands to her face.

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“Helena,” I cried, “how can you? You’d no idea who I was and you’d every right.”

“I hadn’t, I hadn’t. I can’t explain, but I didn’t mean it, John.” Her eyes still hidden, she put out a little hand. “I was shaken,” she repeated. “You—you took me so much by surprise.”

I put her hand to my lips and got to my feet.

“Helena,” said I, “I’ll make you a present of this. I’d rather have your frown than anyone else’s smile.”

What she answered I do not know, for I strode away through the bracken, because I dared wait there no more: but I heard her murmur something as I went off. I walked to the little brook and laved my head and my hands: then I sat down by the water, and the sound of it calmed the emotions which the dreams thrust under my nose had begun to wake.

It was not, of course, her fault. She had no idea at all of the power of her natural charm. But this was so disturbing that to play out the part for which Fortune seemed to have cast me, demanded at times a control which I was not sure I possessed.

It must be remembered that whilst I was madly in love, our present familiar relation was, on the face of it, that of husband and wife. We were all alone in the forest which both of us seemed to love: there was our pretty homestead, breathing a peace and contentment which neither of us had known: and there—a marginal sketch—was a baby child. . . . My estate was dazzling—but it was only a dream. Yet the dream was not of the stuff of which dreams are made. I could touch and smell its fabric—but a moment ago I had touched a beautiful hand, and more than once that day I had smelled the maddening perfume that stole from her blue-black hair.

After a little I had myself in hand, and I made my way back with what nonchalance I could command. I saw her before she saw me. She was deep in talk with the baby, who was listening very gravely, finger in mouth.

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\* \* \* \* \*

It was when we had eaten our supper and the infant was fast asleep that Sabre was given his orders and we set out with the petrol to seek the Rolls. The dusk would come in, I judged, by the time we had crossed the clearing and gained the track, and that was just what we wanted, for so we could use the daylight, yet be wrapped in the cloak of darkness by the time we came to the road. For all that, I was none too easy, for if, by some evil chance, friend Pharaoh had found the Rolls, his instinct might well have suggested that we should return at nightfall to try to recover the car. And if he was lying there, waiting . . . The nearer we drew to the road, the more I wished for Sabre, for he at least would have saved us from walking into a trap.

At length, I could bear it no more.

“Helena,” said I, “when we see the road before us, I want you to let me go on. It isn’t very likely, but someone may be in the bushes, keeping an eye on the Rolls. And if they are, I must draw them, for touch that car I will not, till I know that the coast is clear. It isn’t as if we could start her and let her go. I’ve got to open the bonnet and fill up the vacuum tank.”

“When you say ‘draw them,’ John, just what do you mean?”

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“Make them declare their presence. I won’t let them see me or hear me—I promise you that.”

“You won’t fill up without me?”

“No,” said I, “I’ll leave the petrol with you.”

Five minutes later, perhaps, the darkness ahead was lightened, and I knew we were approaching the road.

Gently I set down the cans.

“Will you wait here, Helena?” I whispered.

“Tell me exactly what you are proposing to do.”

“It may be half an hour before I come back. I’m going to stand still and listen most of the time. When I move, I shall move in the shadows, always this side of the road. If I hear and see nothing at all, an acorn is going to fall from the oak-tree above the car. It’s going to fall on to the bonnet and it’s going to make

quite a noise. If anyone's there, that'll fetch them. . . . Acorns don't fall in June, but I'll bet Pharaoh doesn't know that."

Helena sighed.

"I wish we'd got Sabre. Never mind. I don't mind how long you're gone, if you'll only take care."

With my right hand upon my pistol, I moved like any shadow along the side of the track. . . .

Arrived at its mouth, I waited, straining my ears. So for perhaps three minutes. Then I stole round the corner and on to the edge of the road.

Since my eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness which reigned the track, now that I looked down the road I could see very well, for the trees stood back from its sides and the starlit heaven above was shedding a definite light.

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I could see the lovely indenture of the tree-tops against the sky: I could see the bulwarks of foliage, still as hangings of tapestry, walling the smooth highway: I could see the gray road, fading from substance to shadow and leading, it seemed, to the very realm of darkness, where even the stars were quenched.

And that was all I could see.

The Rolls was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Stretched on my pallet that night, with my feet to the hearth, I reviewed what facts I could find and tried my best to determine what action Pharaoh would take.

That the Rolls was in his possession I had no doubt, for no one else would have dared to steal such a car when the only way to remove her was to tow her away. That he should have done this surprised me, for though he could cut off her locks and use her himself, he had no great need of a car, but, by taking her off, he had plainly removed good ground-bait, which Fate had cast down all ready for him to use.

That Yorick was still his headquarters, I was equally sure, for his foot was now fast in the castle, and to take it out would be madness until he had had his way. And Bugle and Rush were at Plumage. . . . Pharaoh would not be Pharaoh if he could not convince the Count of the wisdom of lodging them there.

Our respective positions, therefore, had been exactly reversed—with, so far as I could see, no profit to either side. The enemy had the comfort that had been ours and he stood between us and the treasure he meant to share: but he could not find that treasure without pulling the castle down and all his gains were offset by our disappearance, which gave us the very advantage that had been his.

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The truth, of course, was this—that no battle had yet been joined: so far we had skirmished and manoeuvred, and that was all.

If Pharaoh would only sit still, content with his achievement—for such it undoubtedly was, Helena's plan might very well be

followed with all success. But I had an uneasy feeling that Pharaoh would not sit still. . . .

For the fiftieth time I asked myself what, in his place, I should do. And found no answer at all. Which goes to show that I was a poor adversary, for, as I shall presently show, before I had lunched that day, Pharaoh had taken such action as very near brought us down.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was up betimes the next morning and had shaved and bathed and dressed before Helena called to me to know if I was awake.

“I’m dressed,” said I, “and I’m just going to do my room.”

“And your back?”

“Is well,” said I.

“Can you carry Max into the garden?”

“I could carry you to Witchcraft,” said I.

“Well, wait a minute. I’ll call you.”

Two minutes later I climbed the little staircase and carried the cradle down.

I had warm water ready, but Helena wished for the brook, so I took a sheet from the settle, filled a pail with the water which I had made hot and led the way to the miniature pool I had used.

I spread the sheet on the bank, which now was alight with sunshine, and set the pail by its side: and there I left my lady to do what she could with a tube of my shaving-cream, for Freda's soap was not fit for her delicate skin.

I had swept the stairs and the kitchen, had set our breakfast in the garden and was staring uneasily at Max, who had thrown his bedding out of his cradle and had twice removed his nightshirt in my despite, when I heard a step behind me, and there was Helena dressed as a country girl.

I cannot attempt to describe the picture she made.

I can only say that her skirt was of pure white linen and her beautiful legs were bare: that her shirt was short-sleeved, embroidered very richly, cut low and round at the neck: that the flame of her kerchief was dulled by the lights in her hair.

“I had to change,” she said simply. “I shall wash my own things this morning and press them this afternoon.”

“I'm glad you did,” I said feebly. “You—you look very nice.”

“More in the picture, John?”

I shook my head.

“All you've done,” said I, “is to alter the picture's frame.” I turned to the child. “And now about this infant. What's biting him I don't know. I've let him out twice, but that isn't what he wants. And he's fed right up with that shirt. It seems all right to me, but he won't keep it on. And look at his bed-clothes.”

Helena crowed with laughter.

“You are stupid, John. Of course he wants to get up. If you’ll go and get some warm water, we’ll sluice him down on the grass.”

Before I was back with a bucket, she had fetched some things from the bedroom and among them a tiny smock. With Sabre in close attendance, I carried the naked urchin on to the neighbouring sward, and there we performed his ablutions—because, I think, the water was warm, to his great delight. He was a fine little boy, and stood up straight and smiling with Helena’s hands in his whilst I let the water trickle over his face and head. His drying was a great business, with which, of course, Sabre must help, and we were all three laughing before it was done. Then he stood up again to be dressed, and when that was done I held him, while Helena brushed his hair with her own pretty brush. By the time he had had his breakfast and was ready to enter his pen, I must confess that I could have eaten three meals, and poor Sabre was more than thankful for his portion of eggs and milk: but that such impatience was shameful I frankly admit, for few children, I think, that were not yet three years old, would have suffered two strangers so gladly—and one of the strangers a fool—or have found any lack of understanding but matter for mirth. I would say that Helena had charmed him, for her way with the child was that of a laughing angel, and his eyes lit up at her coming, as though each time she appeared she made him some gift, yet to me he was very civil from first to last: if I overruled his intentions he never cried, and when later that day I made him a chair and a table for the wooden monkey to use, he inspected them very gravely and then put his arms round my neck.

In my note I had asked my cousin to bring some food, but, in case he brought with him no bread, Helena decided to make some—a labour which kept us busy till nearly noon, for the oven had to be heated by burning wood, and I attended to this whilst she was making the batter and kneading the bread. Then a chicken had to be stewed in a pot hung over the fire, and again I was able to help by fetching and piling the fuel. To be honest, I would have hewed concrete, to be by Helena's side, and the morning went by much more swiftly than I could have wished, for I judged that my cousin would reach us by five o'clock. And that would be the end of my idyll: with his and Barley's coming, my present estate, my kingdom must be resigned: my lovely hour would be over, and never so long as I lived should I ever be given another that smelled so sweet.

In some impatience with myself, I thrust away this prospect, determined to make the most of that afternoon, but Fate is sometimes pleased to take away with the left hand what she has given with the right. . . .

Because of the very value I set upon the time that remained, I found in it no pleasure, but only a deep dejection because the shining moments were slipping away: and this, as was only natural, sent me half out of my mind, for here was I throwing away such hours of grace as were left. As though to reprove my distemper, Helena's spirits were lively as mine were low. She sang the baby to sleep with a Nursery Rhyme and she washed her clothes and mine as though this were as blithe a duty as ever had come her way: and when it was done, she took her seat on the settle and watched my carpentry, while she did so, telling me tales of Yorick which were better than any fiction because she told them so well.

At half past four Max awoke and was presently given his tea, and after a little while, we sat down and ate our own: but since at half past five my cousin had not appeared, we once again put out our pitcher and made ourselves scarce.

From the covert which we selected we could see the way to Witchcraft, yet could not be seen, for the ground rose up a little, to make a knoll, yet the bracken made us a breastwork through which we could see when we pleased, which no eye looking up from the path could ever have pierced.

As I turned to peer through the fronds—

“You are very impatient,” said Helena.

“That’s the wrong word,” said I. “I can’t tell you what’s the right one, but it’s rather like standing on a platform, seeing somebody off by train.”

Helena knitted her brows.

“I know the feeling,” she said, “but I don’t see how it applies.”

“You wouldn’t,” said I. “Never mind. The train will leave when Geoffrey and Barley arrive.”

Again I turned to glance at the shadowy way down which they must come.

“I like Mr. Bohun,” said Helena.

“He’s the best in the world,” I cried.

“Well, he’ll be here soon—if you don’t keep on watching that path. Watched pots never boil, you know.”

“You don’t understand,” I said, and lay back on the turf. “I don’t want Geoffrey at all. I’ll be glad to see him, of course. But if he was delayed or something, I—I shouldn’t mind.”

“Perhaps he’s coming to-morrow, instead of to-night.”

“So much the better,” said I, and pulled at the grass.

“And what of my name?”

I sat up sharply.

With her head on one side, my lady was gravely regarding a beautiful palm.

“What’s another twelve hours?” said I. “Your name stands or falls by last night.”

Helena raised her eyebrows.

“You’re getting quite reasonable.”

“Don’t you believe it,” said I.

“But——”

“I know. I take back what I said. As long as we’re here alone, we’re risking your name.”

“Then you do hope he’ll come?” said Helena.

“For your sake—yes,” I said shortly, and turned again to the path.

There was a little silence, broken at last by some woodpecker’s careless mirth.

Max was playing quietly, loading his table with viands for the monkey to eat. Helena’s dainty handkerchief made a fine cloth. Sabre was watching him gravely, monkey in mouth.

“You are not yourself,” said Helena. “You’ve not been yourself the whole of this afternoon.”

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“I know,” said I. “I’ve been standing on the platform ever since lunch.”

“You do talk in riddles,” she said, and pushed back her hair.

“I’m sorry. I’m all to bits. I’ve—rather enjoyed this time.”

“Sleeping in the kitchen?”

“Yes,” said I. “And fetching fuel and water and watching you make the bread. All that we’ve done together—I’ve loved it all. You see, I’ve never had a sister, and being with you like this has—has gone to my head.”

“You’ve behaved very well,” said Helena. “If Valentine was like you. . . . But I can’t see him rising at dawn to make water warm for my bath.”

“I wish to God,” I burst out, “I could do it every day. Can’t you see it’s my pleasure—my ineffable pride and pleasure to wait

upon you? You're—better than any sister."

"How do you know?"

"Instinct," said I, thickly. "That's how I know. And please don't argue the point, because I can't say any more. I've never been so happy as I have been alone here with you, and never in all my life shall I be so happy again. I told you, it was my idyll. And I'm not myself because, when Geoffrey comes, my idyll will go. And I don't want to let it go. I know I'm a fool, but I'm human. Adam and Eve—when they were pushed out of Eden, I'll bet it broke them down. Well, this is my paradise, and I—don't want to get out."

Helena knitted her brows.

138

"It was all I could do," she answered, "to get you in. Besides, I can't see——"

"You wouldn't," I cried. "How could you? You've made the best of the business, and because you belong to Nature, you've found it a pleasant game. And you've let me be your playmate—the highest, most shining honour that ever a man was done. But it's not been a game to me, Helena. It's been most real and vivid. . . . Have you ever seen those glasses that seem to be full of wine? It's really coloured water, locked up in the glass. And children pretend to drink it. Well, you've had a glass like that: but my glass was different. . . . It's been a very short drink, but the wine was there—the sort of wine you dream of, but never find."

Again I turned to stare at the way to Witchcraft, curling into the greenwood and seeming the very original of all those pretty

paths down which Golden Locks and Red Riding Hood and Goody Two Shoes came stepping so naïvely into the Kingdom of Hearts.

“I’ll watch the path,” said Helena. “You go on talking, John. We shan’t be alone much longer, and when Mr. Bohun comes, you’ll stop saying these pretty things.”

“I mean them,” I said slowly.

“I know,” said Helena, quietly. “That’s why I like them so well.”

I turned and looked at her.

She was sitting, as often, sideways, with one hand down on the sward. She had taken off her kerchief, and her head was bowed to the baby, who was lying flat on his back, playing with a plume of bracken which she had bent into his hands. Between the leaves of a chestnut, the evening sunshine was badging her lovely hair, and, though her eyes were veiled, there was beauty enough and to spare in the shape of her exquisite nose and the curve of her lips. Beside the white linen she wore, her skin seemed tinted with rose, and I cannot believe that her neck and her limbs were less perfect than those which belong to the statues of ancient Greece. Though she was wearing no stockings, her legs and ankles were as shapely as when they were clad with silk: and that, I think, could be said of very few women and goes to show how beautifully made she was.

As I watched her, she looked up and smiled, and the magic of her eyes and her mouth seemed to conspire together to set my

poor world rocking and to make my vision misty and out of this disorder to conjure up the siren philosophy of one of Shakespeare's songs.

*What is love? 'tis not hereafter;  
Present mirth hath present laughter:  
What's to come is still unsure:  
In delay there lies no plenty;  
Then come kiss me, sweet-and-twenty . . . .*

"I said 'Go on talking,'" said Helena. "I told you I'd watch the path."

With that, she peered through the bracken, sitting up and lifting her chin.

"I can't go on talking," I said. "I'd like to amuse you, but the—the fountain doesn't play after six."

Helena glanced at her wrist.

"It's only ten minutes to. . . . Never mind. There's something I wanted to ask you. The other night when you fell and I helped you up. I think you were faint for a moment, because of your pain. As I helped you, you called me 'Nell'."

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I nodded, with my eyes on her fingers, slim and cool and rosy, planted upon the turf.

"Why did you do that?" said Helena.

"Let me keep my secret," said I. "My head was going round, or I'd never have spoken aloud."

Her eyes returned to the path, and her chin went up.

“It seems you can only be nice when you’re not yourself.”

A hand went up to my head.

“You must think what you please,” said I. “I’ve tried to play your game, and a little while back you said I’d behaved very well. Well, that means a lot to me—far more than you think. You see, you must take it from me that I’m not very good at your game. In a way I’ve been handicapped: and to play it at all has taken me all I know.”

Helena opened her eyes.

“Handicapped?”

“Handicapped,” said I. “I said you must take it from me, and so you must. Explanation is out of the question—except, of course, that I’m not much of a lady’s man.”

Her eyes went back to the path.

“But, John, you are so confusing. You say all sorts of things that I can’t understand, and when I ask you their meaning, you say I must think what I please.”

“You—you drag them out of me,” I said desperately.

141

“All I did was to ask why you called me ‘Nell’.”

“Helena, I tell you——”

“I think it’s a natural question. But you seem so shy of the answer that I begin to wonder if we are really the friends that I thought we were. I suppose I remind you of someone—someone or other called ‘Nell’—that you used to love.”

“Good God, no!” I almost shouted.

My vehemence startled the baby and brought Sabre up to his feet.

With a hand about Max’s shoulders—

“Then what on earth is the matter? We’ve been very happy together, but now——”

“Please leave it there,” I pleaded. “I don’t want to smash our relation. I don’t want . . .”

Helena seemed to stiffen. Then she sat up very straight.

“‘Smash our relation?’” she said. She shrugged her shoulders. “You’ve said too much or too little. Either you must explain, or our relation . . .” She broke off to peer through the fronds. “At last,” she said. “Enter Mr. Bohun and Barley—with a suitcase in every hand. What do they think this is? The Majestic Hotel?” She turned a mocking face. “Mind you say good-bye nicely. The train’s going off.”

I think something snapped within me.

My beautiful dream was over, and now, through misunderstanding, our lovely, precious relation was going to come to an end. If I did not speak out, it was finished. If I did,

it was finished, too. But, at least, if I spoke, she would know that my ways were honest and though I should win her anger, I should not lose her respect. And what did anything matter, once Geoffrey was here? What was our relation worth, when the dream was gone? All the time the train was going. . . .

“‘Put out the light’,” I said quietly, “‘and then put out the light.’ First the dream, and then the relation. As Geoffrey’s here, you may as well know the truth. Handicap—secret—‘Nell’ . . . I think of you as ‘Nell’ deep down in my inmost heart. It’s the pretty name I’d call you, if we were engaged. You see, I’m mad about you. I love you—I’ve always loved you, from the moment I met your eyes. I love you walking and riding and sitting here on the grass. I love your head and your shoulders and that tiny vein in your ankle that looks like a thread of blue silk. I love everything about you and all you do. I love your voice and your laughter and the glorious light in your eyes. And I love your shining nature, as I love the smell of your hair and the breath of your lips. . . . And to be with you here like this—well, now perhaps you can see what it’s meant to me and why I clung to my secret and why I was handicapped in trying to play your game.” I got to my feet. “Good-bye, Nell,” I said gently.

I turned to the path and the smiling cottage below.

For a moment I stood, blinking. Then—

“Have they gone in?” I asked.

“I—I made a mistake,” said Helena. “It wasn’t them.”

I was sitting on the settle in the kitchen, with my head in my hands.

How I got there I do not know, for my case was like that of a man who plunges into some water to drown his cares, only to find that the bed of the river is dry, I doubt if such a man could tell how he got to the bank.

143

And I do not know how long I sat there, but all of a sudden I knew that I was not alone.

I could smell the faint perfume that Helena used.

As I started up, I found she was sitting beside me, looking very grave and gentle, with her precious hands in her lap.

“I tricked you,” she said. “I’m sorry. But it was the only way. You are very—reticent, John. And very, very humble—and rather blind. Old Florin knew in an instant, and Pharaoh, too.”

“Knew that I loved you?” I cried.

Helena rose to her feet.

“This comes,” she said, “of putting me up on a dais. I never was up on a dais, where you were concerned. If you stand up, you’ll find that I have to look up—to see myself in your eyes.”

I stood up, trembling.

“Nell,” I said hoarsely. “Nell.”

As her finger flew to her lips, I heard the sound of footsteps

approaching the door, which was shut.

Nearer and nearer they came. . . .

Someone was standing at the threshold.

Then milk was poured into our pitcher, waiting without on the flags.

As the footsteps receded——

“We must go back to Max,” said Helena.

“Not yet,” said I. I set my hands on her shoulders and looked her full in the eyes. “That day we lunched at Yorick. . . . Florin looked at you, and you nodded and looked away. Was he . . . asking you . . . if you loved me?”

144

She met my gaze squarely.

“He was asking me if I was to be your wife.”

“And you . . .”

My brain was reeling.

“I told him what I hoped was the truth.”

I was past all speaking.

As I drew her into my arms, her hands went up to my hair.

145

Twenty-four hours had gone by—and something was seriously wrong.

Of that there could be no doubt.

We had passed the day in a happiness such as, I think, is given to very few, but now the sun was sinking, yet Geoffrey had not appeared.

All that day we had fobbed off Apprehension, insisting that he would arrive before the shadows grew long: but now the truth had to be faced—that my cousin, who never was late, was twenty-four hours overdue.

The sunlit path we had been treading seemed to run into a gorge. . . .

One thing stood out most clear. Till Freda's return—and she would be back the next morning at eight o'clock—we could do nothing at all. This for two reasons. First, leave Helena alone I dared not, yet she must stay at the cottage because of the child: secondly, until we had learned what the forester's wife had to say, we could not begin to determine what action to take. Had she seen Geoffrey? Had she delivered the note? Had she a message to give us? . . . Her answers to these and such questions would be the straw with which we might hope to make bricks.

*When Freda comes . . .*

I dare not think how often we used that phrase. It prefaced a hundred speculations, a hundred rough-hewn plans: it governed hopes and fears, and indeed in the sea of our discussion it was the one buoy we had.

*When Freda comes . . .*

That evening, when Max was asleep, we ventured as far as Witchcraft, to find the cross roads sleeping and never a sign of a car. We had expected no more, but as we returned, the way seemed something darker and our forebodings more grim, and I know I was glad to see the cottage again, flood-lit with the courtly magic of a majestic moon.

Indeed, for some strange reason, the sight of our pretty heritage seemed to bring back our peace and to drive once more into the background the unruly pack of misgivings which had since sundown beset us, gaping like bulls of Basan on every side.

So we strolled upon the sward together, as though we were bride and groom, and looking upon my darling I saw again the splendour of my estate. Her slim arm in mine, we gathered those lovely moments, as though indeed they belonged to some fairytale, and I sometimes think that Fate made us that precious nosegay because of the wrath to come. Be that as it may, for that time we let the world slip, and when we were tired of strolling, I brought out a chair for my lady and sat myself down at her feet. And there we stayed, with her arm about my shoulders and my head against her knee, talking a little, but mostly content with silence, because our hearts were so full.

\* \* \* \* \*

That the forester's wife might be late had never entered our heads. We were up betimes the next morning and were ready and waiting for Freda at a quarter to eight. We might have spared our energy, for eight o'clock went by, yet she did not come.

And nine o'clock went by . . . and ten. . . .

147

Bad news is trying enough: but when the absence of news is so prolonged that only a fool would continue to hope against hope, it is, I think, a stout heart that will feel no alarm.

There was no longer any doubt in our minds. Somehow or other Pharaoh had put a spoke in our wheel.

We knew neither what had happened nor what to do: we only knew that we had to take some action and take it at once.

At eleven o'clock that Thursday I led the way into the kitchen, took my seat at the table and opened the map.

"I must leave you, Nell," I said quietly. "There's no other way."

Helena nodded, and a hand went up to her head.

"What will you do, John?"

"I must get a lift at Witchcraft and hire a car where I can." I considered the map. "I should think I'd get one at Sabbot. From there I must drive to Salzburg for all I'm worth." I drew some paper towards me and started to make some notes. "If I leave Sabbot at one, I ought to be at Salzburg by——"

An exclamation from Helena snapped the sentence in two.

I looked up sharply.

There was horror in her beautiful eyes—and these were fast on the paper on which I was making my notes.

“What is it, Nell?” I cried, rising.

She clapped her hands to her face.

“Oh, John,” she wailed, “that paper . . .”

For an instant I stared at the sheet—one of a cheap, gray packet which, when we had asked her for notepaper, the forester’s wife had produced. Then I stepped to my darling and put my arms about her, for the blood was out of her face and I thought she had seen some terror of second sight.

She strove to keep her voice steady.

“Listen, John. I think that paper has told me why Geoffrey isn’t here. You wrote to him in pencil: the pencil was blunt, and you pressed.” She pointed a trembling finger. “There on that sheet’s the impression of what you wrote.”

This was true. The sheet which I had been using bore the impression of the letter I had written three days before.

“That’s very true, my darling. But what of that? No one’s been here to——”

“D’you remember our last patrol—how, when we parted, I

offered to wire to your cousin? And you said yes, and I did. But I wrote out the wire on a pad of writing-paper—and the pencil was blunt.”

“You mean——”

“The pad was on the library table. If Pharaoh saw it *and read it*, it gave him your cousin’s address. Supposing he wired the next morning, while we were talking to Freda, here in this room. . . . Supposing he wired, as I did, using your name. . . . Supposing he said *Return*. . . .”

I let her go, took my seat on the settle and covered my eyes.

149

“One moment,” I said. “I must think.”

I thought very fast.

Hypothesis or no, here was a good explanation of my cousin’s failure to come. If Pharaoh had wired to Geoffrey, Geoffrey would have left Salzburg before my letter arrived.

I tried to weigh the chances of Pharaoh’s finding the pad. They seemed to me about even. But that once having found it, he should ignore its legend was not to be dreamed of. Such men do not reject weapons thrust into their hands.

So far as Pharaoh was concerned, my cousin and Barley were better away in Salzburg: but on their remaining there he could not possibly count. Either they would take action because I failed to report, or I should report in person and tell them the truth. If, then, he had noticed the pad, he had nothing whatever

to lose by sending a wire. I might very well reach Salzburg before it arrived: but if I did not, my cousin would act upon it—and Geoffrey and Barley would make a very good prize.

And in fact I had *not* reached Salzburg before his wire had arrived: nor had my letter. If Pharaoh had wired in the morning, my cousin had left the city, while Freda was still in the train. . .

The thing seemed terribly clear.

Desperately I lifted my head.

“You think you could have read the impression of what you wrote?”

Helena nodded.

“I’m afraid so. I always print my wires—write them in big block letters, so that the Post Office people shan’t make mistakes.”

150

“Then that’s what’s happened,” I said, and got to my feet.

*Return.* The word seemed to sear my brain. *Return*—to Plumage, of course.

The sweat came out on my forehead.

I could see them alighting on the apron—to be greeted by Bugle and Rush. . . .

“I must go at once,” I said, and picked up the map.

“To Plumage, John?”

I nodded.

“I must get a car somehow and drive there as fast as I can. I can hide the car near the high road and go through the woods to the farm. There’s not an instant to lose—we’re three days late. God knows where Freda is—I can only hope and pray that she’s missed her train.”

Together we studied the map.

From Sabbot to Plumage was roughly fifty-five miles.

I glanced at my watch.

“With average luck,” said I, “I ought to be there not later than half-past three.”

“And then,” said Helena quietly.

“My sweet, I don’t know. I’ve got to find out something and to act on what I find out. And now for you. You mustn’t stay in the cottage: you must spend the day in the forest and keep out of sight. And I’ll come back, my darling, as soon as ever I can.”

Helena cupped her face in her hands.

“Oh, John, must you go?”

151

“Yes, my sweet,” I said quietly. “In view of what *may* have happened, I can’t wait here. We banked on Freda’s coming—you know we did. And she’s more than three hours overdue. It

scares me stiff to leave you alone like this. It frightens me so much that if I knew that Freda'd be here this evening, I'd wait till then. But supposing the sun goes down, but she doesn't come. . . .”

Helena closed her eyes.

“You're right,” she said. “You must go. But, oh, for God's sake be careful. . . .”

Before I left, I saw her installed in the bower from which we had watched for my cousin two evenings before. I carried the cradle thither and all that she and the baby might need that day, and I made her give me her word that, even though Freda should come, she would not enter the cottage if she could avoid so doing by any possible means.

While I spoke she stood very quiet, with her eyes on the ground.

When I had done—

“Until you come back, you say. And supposing . . . you don't . . . come back.”

She was close in my arms and her cheek was tight against mine.

“I shall come back, my darling. You see, I've got to, because I belong to you. I mustn't be hurt or taken because I'm your man.”

Two minutes later I was treading the path to Witchcraft,

and the bracken which veiled my lady was out of my sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

At half past six that evening I made the woods behind Plumage, and five minutes later I was lying just clear of their foliage, surveying the back of the farm. The stars had fought against me, and my journey had taken far longer than I had hoped, but now I saw very clearly that all I could do was to watch, for that I must go no closer until it was dark.

That Bugle and Rush were at Plumage I had no doubt: leave the woods, therefore, I dared not, while it was day, for the shutters of the house were open and the valley was full of light.

Although I had seen it coming, this was a heavy blow, for though I looked on the farm, I saw the forester's cottage and Helena sitting, waiting, with only Sabre to help her if ill befell.

If I seem to have been wanting in courage, I have only two things to say. The first is that for some reason I never had any doubt that Bugle and Rush were there. Why I was so certain of this I cannot tell, for though they were living at Plumage, one or the other or both might have been abroad. But, as I say, for some reason, I had no doubt. The second is that, though I was armed and so stood as good a chance of killing as being killed, all that I did was now governed by a paramount duty of which I dared not lose sight: and that was that for Helena's sake I must not be put out of action, happen what would.

From where I now lay there was nothing at all to observe: I therefore re-entered the woods and cautiously

moved round their fringe, stopping from time to time to peer at the farm, but all I saw were the farm-hands about their business and a groom that was not Axel, cleaning a bit. Still moving south, I came to the sturdy stream which flowed in front of Plumage and watered the meadows beyond: if I was to view the apron, this water had to be crossed, but a hundred yards up I found a little footbridge which, since I could see no movement, I ventured to use. I then turned west and followed the water down till I saw before me the bushes that were squiring the last of the trees. A moment later I was parting the undergrowth.

I was now not far from the lane which led up to the farm, and for one who was content to observe I could not have been better placed, for while I was over the water and very well hid, I could see the stone bridge and the apron and all the front of the house and could hear every car that was coming a long time before it arrived. But from here I could not have approached as I could from the north, for the stream was an obstacle and the ground to be traversed was very much more exposed.

The apron was empty, and though doors and windows were open, there was no one at all to be seen: but since near two hours must go by before I could leave the woods, I decided to stay where I was till the sun went down.

So I picked a spot in the bushes and settled down to observe.

It was forty minutes later that Bugle came out of the house.

I think that he had been sleeping, for he yawned and

stretched and looked about him, as a man that has only just waked. Then he took his seat on a bench by the side of the door and a servant brought out a tankard and set it down by his side.

One thing, at least, was now clear—if I would have news of my cousin, I should have to do more than observe. If I could find the goodwife and hear what she had to tell. . . . The danger, of course, was that I should encounter some servant. I could trust the farmer's wife, but if Pharaoh had given them orders, I could not trust the servants to disobey. Still, something would have to be done. I had not come there to watch Bugle enjoying his ale.

It was eight o'clock and the light was beginning to fail when I heard the sigh of the Rolls on the road of approach.

A moment later the car swept over the bridge, and Bugle laid down his pipe and got to his feet.

I saw that Dewdrop was driving and that Pharaoh sat by his side.

It was strange to see our enemies standing so fast in our shoes, enjoying our car and our lodging and behaving, to all appearance, exactly as we had behaved. I noticed that Dewdrop had found the trick of turning the car: he brought her up just as I had and stopped where I used to stop: then he backed her round the fountain until she was facing west, all ready to leave. It was strange, I say, to see them, and stranger still to reflect that in all they were doing they had but the two ideas, which were, first, my own destruction and then the theft of the fortune my darling held.

Pharaoh stayed but two minutes.

For that time he spoke to Bugle, who listened with evident interest to what he said. Then he nodded to Dewdrop, who instantly let in his clutch. Bugle stood watching till Pharaoh was out of sight: then he turned on his heel and went into the house.

And that was all.

As I made my way back to the footbridge, I tried my best to believe that the visit which I had just witnessed was Pharaoh's evening call. He had been out scouring the country for news of my lady and me and was now returning to Yorick with empty hands. It was no doubt his practice to visit Plumage like this, to see that Rush and Bugle were doing as they had been told. And yet . . .

Pharaoh's manner had been urgent. He had not wasted a moment and the Rolls had not carried much dust. He might have been setting out, and not coming in—setting out on some sudden quest . . . to act on some information . . . some rumour of a forester's cottage and a lady of high degree.

I told myself not to be a fool and wrenched my mind back to the business of picking my way. For all that, I would gladly have given six months of my life to know which road Dewdrop had taken when he came to the end of the lane.

As a sop to Apprehension, I decided one thing out of hand. That was to learn, if I could, what Pharaoh had said. If this was of any importance, Bugle was pretty sure to discuss it with Rush, and if I could hear them talking, as once before . . .

I had crossed the water when I heard the sound of a car. This seemed to come from the farm. I heard the engine started and as I stood still, listening, I heard her move off in low gear. Almost at once she was stopped. Then another low gear was engaged and she moved again.

The sounds for me were pregnant. I had made them too often myself. Bugle or Rush was withdrawing their car from the coach-house and driving her on to the apron, ready for use. 156

Sure enough, after a moment the car came to rest.

At this I swore under my breath, for if Bugle and Rush were about to go off on some errand, my object must be defeated and most of my labour be lost. I might be able to speak with the farmer's wife, but that she would have news of my cousin was none too sure, and, indeed, since I had seen Pharaoh, I could see health in nothing at all but in sharing his underlings' counsels as soon as ever I could. The ruling passion is father to illegitimate thoughts.

I hastened on desperately. . . .

From the verge of the meadows I regarded the back of the house. The light, I have said, was failing, but dusk would not come in for another half hour. Yet to wait so long might well be to throw away a chance that was already passing. . . . Two minutes later I was flat against the trunk of a lime that was standing twelve feet from the window of what had been my bedroom four days before.

Now to enter the house was easy, for all the windows were

open and none of the shutters were shut. Still to enter a lion's den may be easy enough . . . I had no desire to climb into an occupied room. Then the sight of my sponge on a window-sill jogged my wits.

One of the lower windows belonged to the primitive bathroom which Geoffrey and I had used: and since this was sure to be empty at this time of day, here was as safe an entry as the faintest of hearts could desire.

I whipped from the lime to the window and swung myself over the sill.

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Now had the car left, I should have heard her, for she was by no means silent and the evening was very still: it was, therefore, clear that the rogues were somewhere at hand, and I wondered if they were at table, for Bugle had not eaten between seven and eight o'clock.

I made bold to open my door, which gave to the hall.

As I did so another door was opened—the door of the sitting-room.

“An' shut the shutters,” growled Rush. “Can you understand that, you ——? *Furmy*, you fool, *furmy*. *Furmy* the —— house.”

The man-servant answered something and closed the door. Then he set his tray on a table that stood in the hall and stepped to and opened the door immediately opposite mine.

His intention was plain: he was going to close the shutters of

every room: it was, I suppose, about ten thousand to one that the room which he entered next would be the primitive bathroom in which I stood.

I looked round frantically, to see no cover at all.

The next moment I heard his shutters close with a clack.

In a flash I was at my window and was pulling to its shutters and shutting the twilight out.

I had no time to close the casement itself. As the servant pushed open my door, I took my stand behind it, with my back to the wall.

When he found the room dark, he let out a grunt of surprise. For an instant he hung on the threshold: then he turned back to the passage and closed the door.

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As his steps died away, I turned the handle once more. . . .

It was half past eight now, and the hall was dim.

The front door was still wide open, and beyond, on the apron, I could see the rear of the car. Its engine was not running, but it was facing the bridge. I could hear no sound of talking, but I knew that Rush was yet in the sitting-room.

Then Bugle, pacing the apron, strolled into and out of my view.

It occurred to me that he was waiting for Rush to finish his meal: then the two would go off together and I should be left. Meanwhile Pharaoh was in action. . . . I very nearly decided to

let the reconnaissance go and return to my car. Unless I did that, there was nothing to do but wait as I had already waited—for more than two hours.

Rush was moving—I heard the scrape of his chair as he thrust it back. An instant later he opened the sitting-room door.

For a moment he stood in the doorway, lighting a cigarette. Then he let out a filthy belch, lounged to the head of the steps and made his way out of the house.

I heard him say something to Bugle and I saw him turn to the right.

As neither reappeared or started the car, it looked very much as though they were sitting down on the bench to the right of the steps. If I was right, then a man at the sitting-room window would be above and behind them and able, if they were talking, to overhear every word. . . .

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It seemed that my chance had come.

Trembling with excitement, I began to steal down the passage, over the flags. . . .

I had, I suppose, forgotten that the table would have to be cleared. The man-servant's memory was better. But for the lamp he was bearing, he must, I think, have seen me crouched against the wall of the passage, three paces away.

For thirteen leaden minutes that fellow held me in the slips. Half-mad with impatience, I hovered at the end of the hall, watching his goings and comings and marking the sounds he

made, as he leisurely cleared the table and ordered the room. And then at last he withdrew—and Fate that had used me so rudely, played suddenly into my hands.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Yes, I know that bit,” said Rush. “I’ve ’eard it before. But if he’s such a —— marvel, where’s Bohun gone? Bohun was boun’ to be here on Monday night. ’Cos why? ’Cos Pharaoh’d wired him—’cos Pharaoh desired ’is presence. . . . Well, that’s three days ago, an’ he ain’t here yet.”

“What’s Bohun matter?” said Bugle. “’Er grace the Duchess of Sheba is what we want.”

“Who said he mattered?” said Rush. “I never said he mattered. Wot I said was that Pharaoh knows ’ow to slip up. ‘Oh, don’t talk silly,’ you says. ‘Pharaoh’s a —— genius, and geniuses don’t slip up.’ ‘All right,’ I says. ‘Where’s Bohun?’” In manifest dudgeon he sucked at his cigarette. “Pharaoh said he’d be here on Monday night. He —— near told us the soot of clothes he’d ’ave on. Well, he isn’t here, is he? I don’t say Bohun matters, but I’d just as soon know where he is. He may be a —— artist, but he knows how to use a gun.”

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“Now look ’ere, Rush,” said Bugle, crossing his legs. “’Ow many you can mention could of done wot Pharaoh’s done. Beg an’ beggage into that Castle—the guest of the —— Count. Me an’ you here in the rooms wot the Willies ’ad. No more one-eyed pubs: no landlords with sweaty necks: no cottagers stoppin’ an’ starin’: no watchin’ out: but everything smooth an’ ship-shape, an’ nothin’ to do but wait.”

“Wait?” screeched Rush. “I’ve waited long enough on this job. You can talk as much as you like, but we ain’t no nearer now than when we begun. An’ who wants the —— rooms wot the Willies had. They ain’t good enough for Pharaoh. The castle’s more in his line. Scotches an’ sodas an’ sofas an’ a servant to turn down his bed. But a farm’s all right for his servants. Look at Dewdrop there, callin’ him ‘Sir’ an’ ‘Captin’ an’ standin’ behind his chair.”

“It’s all in the game,” said Bugle. “If——”

“Yes, I could play that game,” said Rush. “It’d suit me down to the socks. But who ever plays it but him? When he asks me in on this job he calls it ‘a change of air.’ ‘Soft as silk’, was his words, ‘an’ I mayn’t even need your ’elp. But you’d better be there,’ he says, ‘in case there’s a door wants openin’ before we’re through’.”

“Oh, ——,” said Bugle, and spat on the flags. “He crooked his finger at you, an’ you came to heel.”

The other sprang to his feet with a filthy oath, but before he could answer Bugle was standing, too.

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“Siddown,” he ordered. “You know why I was took on. If I was to hit you once, you wouldn’t open no doors for the nex’ three weeks.” Rush subsided, muttering, and Bugle resumed his seat. “Tell the tale if you like, but don’t try an’ tell it to me. You was took on as I was, an’ just as glad of the job. ‘I want you,’ says Pharaoh—that’s all.”

“All?” yelled Rush. “Why——”

“*All*,” barked Bugle. “Before we met him in Paris, he never spoke of the job: an’ then he spoke to us all.” As the other sought to protest, he let out a terrible oath. “Why try an’ put it across me, you —— fool? You yellow-skinned bag of maggots, wot’s the use? Pharaoh don’t ask: he takes. That was his way—always: an’ I’ve known him longer than you. You talk as if you was his equal: he ain’t got no equal alive. We’re in his employment, we are. An’ if we play his game, he’ll make us—look at Long John. Six hundred a year and a pub, and I know that’s true.”

“Who wants a pub?” snarled Rush. “An’ who’s Mr. —— Pharaoh to pick an’ choose? I’ve worn dress clothes, I’ve: an’ I’ll wear ’em again. An’ dine in the restaurongs an’ have me box at the shows. If you like to say he took me, I’ll let that go: but he —— well took me as partner, the same as you. He’s the boss, of course—that’s his job: but we’re not his —— servants.”

“All right, all right,” said Bugle, as though he were sick and tired of the other’s complaints. “Call it a game. Sign on with ’im, an’ you’ve got to take wot’s comin’—that’s all I meant.”

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Encouraged by this surrender——

“Yes, an’ wot is comin’?” said Rush. “That’s wot I want to know. I judge a man by results. Three weeks to-morrow we’ve been here, an’ wot’s your Napoleon done? I’ll tell you.” Bugle groaned. “In the firs’ place he’s been beat by a girl an’ a groom. He knew they was comin’, an’ he knew they was carryin’ gold: an’ they got away. If we’d roped the road, we’d of had them:

but when I made the suggestion he tells me to shut my face. An' wot else has he done—that counts? He's let us all in for murder—that's wot he's done. As long as young Arthur walks, there's a rope round each of our necks."

"He won't walk long," said Bugle.

"Says you," cried Rush. "Why we don't even know where he is. Nor the girl. Nor Bohun—that was comin' on Monday night. But we know where that groom is all right—*an' so do they.*"

"You make me sick," said Bugle. "You know just as well as me our luck's been rank. 'Ow many English narks would you look to find in a —— Austrian jungle at break o' day? An' another thing. Did you expec' that we'd pick up a quarter 'f a million by takin' a week-end trip?"

"In course I didn't," said Rush. "Wot I says is this. Up to date Pharaoh's failed. Dress it up 'ow you like, he's lost every game. He dropped that gold to start with, when a couple of women police could of picked it up. Then out of wicked spite he does in a groom—an' ropes the four of us in right over the knees. Then we're to meet young Arthur 'ere at this farm. 'Meet young Arthur'," he sneered. "Before we can even get 'ere, young Arthur's gone, an' Pharaoh ripe for more murder because we've come to meet him same as he said." He raised his eyes to heaven. "Gawd, wot a night! Wot's he go to the castle for? To have the Duchess of Sheba under his 'and. But he ain't been there an hour before *she* walks out. An' then Bohun. . . An' you talk of Napoleons. . . I tell you this straight, Bugle. I came in on this for profit—an' not to be hazed to hell by an over-bearin' —— that lets me down."

“You buy it,” said Bugle calmly. “Pharaoh don’t like bein’ crossed, an’ you tread on his toes. You ought to ’andle him, the same as Dewdrop an’ me.”

At this Rush let himself go. A jet of blasphemous filth seemed to spurt from his lips—to play on the absent Pharaoh and all his works, but I think all three of us knew that, for all its force and fury, if Pharaoh had stepped from the shadows, the fountain would have stopped dead. Their foulness apart, his sentiments did Rush no credit, and I found myself wondering why Pharaoh had chosen such a man. It was not till later that I learned that Rush was supposed to be able to pick any lock that was made. There seems to be no doubt that he had a remarkable gift. His sense of touch, I was told, was almost magical. With his eyes fast shut, he would probe his lock as a surgeon will probe a wound, and when he had done he knew the wards of that lock as the palm of his hand: he would then ‘build up’ his key from the delicate tools that he had, and the matter then was over, except for unlocking the door.

For the next twenty minutes they wrangled much as before, whilst I stood masked by a curtain that was not drawn. But for this curtain, though I could have listened, I could not have used my eyes, for the shutters, of the window were open and the lamp would have thrown my shadow on to the flags outside.

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At length Bugle got to his feet and crossed to the car. Then, to my great surprise, he opened a door and sat down in the driver’s seat. I watched him start the engine and switch on his lights, while Rush sat still below me, winding his watch. Bugle drove the car slowly forward, as though to go down to the

bridge. Then he brought her to rest and got out, leaving his engine running and both of his headlights on.

As he sat down again below me, I understood his action and saw why the car was there.

The stone bridge was bathed in brilliance. No one could possibly cross it without being seen.

I think this must show that while they may have been experts in the planning and execution of ordinary crimes, in a campaign such as this had become the rogues were clean out of their depth. I was standing three feet behind them, but I had not used the bridge: and how could they think that because the bridge was denied him, a man who proposed to approach would turn round and go back?

Rush yawned luxuriously.

“Ten minutes more,” he announced, “an’ I’m goin’ off. I’ve ’ad enough o’ late nights. When I’ve nothin’ to do, I like to do it in bed.”

“I should keep your boots on,” said Bugle. “He’s comin’ back.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then—

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“What?” screamed Rush. “Comin’ back?”

“That’s wot I said,” said Bugle.

“Wot for?”

Bugle shook his head.

“You wait an’ see,” he said. “If I was to tell you wot’s comin’ you’d only be rude.”

“No, I wouldn’t,” cried Rush. “Go on, Bugle. Wot is it? Are we touchin’ to-night?”

His eagerness was hideous: here was a filthy monster that spoke as a child.

““Touchin’ to-night’,” sneered Bugle. “All you’re fit for’s to shove your ’and in a till. This job’s like big-game ’untin’. You’ve got to work for positions: that’s strategy, that is. An’ when you’ve got your positions—but you wouldn’t understand.”

“Yes, I would. I’m ’asty—that’s all. ’As he gone and got his positions?”

“You wait an’ see,” said Bugle. “Seein’ ’s believin’, an’ I’ve had enough of your whinin’ because we ain’t had a clear run. Quarter’v a —— million, an’ you can’t sit still for five rounds. I suppose you expected a lackey to ’and you your share on a tray.”

“That’s all right,” said the other. “He gets me sore. He don’t seem to like me somehow, an’ that —— voice of his gets under my skin. But I know a man when I see one. Go on. Let’s ’ave it, Bugle. Wot does he know?”

With studied deliberation Bugle lighted his pipe. Then—

“Dewdrop’s back,” he said.

“Where from?” said Rush. “I didn’t know he was gone.”

“Of course you didn’t,” said Bugle. “When Bohun never showed up, you’d ’ave dropped that line. But that isn’t Pharaoh. That wire didn’t bring Bohun ’ere, but it fetched ’im out of his digs.” He paused to exhale luxuriously. “Dewdrop’s back from Salzburg—with a letter young Arthur’s wrote.”

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“Wot, not sayin’ where he is?”

“*An*’ the Duchess of Sheba,” said Bugle. “Pharaoh’s gone off this evenin’ to rope the two of them in.”

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The rogues were at my mercy, but I had no thought for that. Besides, while I might have shot the two of them dead, I had, I suppose, no stomach to kill them in such a way. I say 'I suppose,' for I cannot set down at all clearly what thoughts I had.

I was transfixed with horror, for the nightmare which I had rejected had become an accomplished fact.

Though Bugle and Rush were still speaking, I had no idea what they said, and when I looked at my watch I could not tell the time, because my wrist was shaking and the dial seemed a great way off.

Then the disorder passed, and my brain seemed to leap into life.

The car. I must get to the car. Pharaoh had had a start of an hour and a quarter or more, but I knew the way to the cottage better than he.

At once I saw that to thread the woods in the darkness would take me five times as long as to go by the lane. But the way to the lane was barred—barred by those cursed headlights that I had found so futile ten minutes ago. If I forded the stream without stripping, my wet clothes would so hamper me that after a little I should not be able to run: and I had no time to strip—and dress myself again on the farther side. If I used the bridge, Bugle and Rush could not possibly fail to see me, and

though they might not have time to bring me down, there was the car all ready—her engine actually running—for my pursuit.

*There was the car all ready. . . .*

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I almost cried out with delight.

For an instant I glanced about me. Then I picked up the lamp and hurled it into the grate.

The base of the lamp was of china and heavily built: the crash of its fall was frightful, and the flames leaped up like streamers, to lick the breast of the chimney within and without.

Now I had expected that Bugle and Rush would, both of them, make for the sitting-room door. And Bugle did. But Rush stood up on the bench, to look, instead, through the window which I was proposing to use.

I suppose the fellow was lazy, and laziness brings no luck. Be that as it may, I hit him between the eyes before he could think and vaulted out of the casement on to the flags. I landed so close to my victim, that had his wits been more ready, he might have caught my ankle and brought me down: but he was, I think, obsessed with his misfortune, for I heard the first words of the sentence with which he opened his comments on what had occurred.

And then I was in the closed car and was storming down to the bridge. . . .

I did not drive to Witchcraft. Instead I drove for the track which Helena and I had taken when we left the Rolls in

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the road. The mouth of the track was twenty miles closer than Witchcraft—by the only ways that I knew. From the mouth of the track to the cottage was nearer six miles than five, but for four of those miles I could drive, and that would leave less than two miles to be covered on foot.

My journey may be imagined—I drove in a mist of fear. At every bend of the road I could see the sinister shadow of some mishap. I feared to run out of petrol, I feared for my tires: I was frightened stiff, as they say, of losing my way: but I wrung from that car a pace that she had not been built to give.

Enough that I entered the track at five minutes past ten and that eight minutes later I was stumbling across the clearing, to find the path to the cottage by the light of my torch.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Do what you like,” said Freda. “I tell you she’s gone.”

“You know where she is,” said Pharaoh, and lighted a cigarette.

The man was sitting half on the table, swinging a leg: Freda was standing at the foot of the little staircase, with one of her hands behind her and the other one up to her breast: Max lay asleep in his cradle: and Dewdrop stood quiet and blinking with his back to the mighty grate. Stuck upon an arm of the settle, three candles with swaying flames were dispensing light.

“You know where she is,” said Pharaoh, quietly enough.

“That I do not,” said Freda, and flung up her head. “Her man was gone, and she was but waiting for me, to give over the child.”

“Did she take the path to Witchcraft?”

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“Nay,” said the forester’s wife, “she took the path that she knew.”

“Think again,” said Pharaoh smoothly, with his eyes upon Freda’s face.

Crouching without the casement, I saw the girl wince before the ice of his tone: but though she was now very pale, she gave him back look for look. As I drew my pistol, I heard her steady reply.

“I tell you she took that path,” and, as she spoke, she pointed out of the window, directly over my head. And, as she pointed, she looked in the same direction—and saw my face.

She started ever so slightly, but that was more than enough.

As I levelled my weapon, Pharaoh swung round *and fired*, but his pistol was yet in his pocket and his bullet went wide of my ear. And then in a flash he had flung himself off the table, and all the candles were out.

So I threw away a chance in a million. . . .

That the forester’s wife should have seen me was sheer bad luck, and Pharaoh’s lightning action would have beaten, I firmly believe, my cousin himself. Remembering his record, I

have no doubt that his life had often depended on his taking effective action before his opponent could think: for all that, if I had not seen it happen, I never would have believed that perception, decision and action could make but one blinding flash. And Dewdrop was a fine squire: it was he, of course, that had sent the candles flying. . . . But I should have shot Pharaoh at sight. That was the error I made, and I have no excuse to offer, save that I had been running as hard as I could and was waiting for my hand to grow steady, in case I should miss.

There was only one thing to be done, for the moonlight was all about me, and Pharaoh and Dewdrop could see me without being seen.

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I fell on my face, writhed my way into the shadows and darted across to a tree that stood some twelve paces off. And there, flat against the trunk, I took my stand, with my eyes on the door of the cottage which was full in the light.

I was ready now, at last, and the moment I saw the door move I fired at the latch. This had the effect I desired, for the door did not move again.

I was now as composed as I had been distracted, for the knowledge that my darling was safe had made me another man. My nerves were steady, my brain was clear, I felt like a giant refreshed: and I saw at once that my lady must be at Witchcraft, where she was waiting to stay me from hastening back to the cottage and so into Pharaoh's arms.

One minute later I was behind the cottage and was running as

fast as I could for the Witchcraft path.

I was more than halfway to the cross roads when Sabre touched my hand. With a leaping heart, I at once took hold of his collar and ran by his side. Thirty yards on he stopped.

“Nell,” I said quietly. “Nell.”

There was a rustle behind me. As I turned round, her arms went about my neck.

“I heard shots,” she breathed. “You’re not hurt?”

“Not a scratch, my queen.”

“Thank God, thank God.” She clung to me desperately.

“Oh, John, I can’t spare you again. Ever since you left, I’ve been half out of my mind. You see . . . without you I’m beggared . . . you’re all I’ve got.”

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Her tears were wet on my lips, as I strained her against my heart.

“I’ve come out of Hell,” I whispered. “We’ll never do it again.”

“Promise, my darling.”

“I promise—never again. . . . And now we must fly.” I kissed her and let her go. “We must find the Rolls and——”

“I’ve found her. I don’t think there’s anyone with her, but——”

“I know there isn’t,” said I. “But come along, my lady. We’ll talk when we’re out of the wood.”

Less than ten minutes later I lifted the Rolls from a thicket and on to the road.

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\* \* \* \* \*

“Freda appeared,” said Helena, “at a quarter to eight. It seems that she missed her train in a final, frantic endeavour to do as we said. We told her to deliver the letter to Geoffrey or Barley alone. Ten times she took that letter to your cousin’s Salzburg address: ten times she was asked to leave it: and ten times the poor girl refused. When she had missed her train, she determined to try once more, and this time they managed to bluff her into giving it up. Well, the moment I heard her story, I knew that the damage was done, so Sabre and I made for Witchcraft as fast as ever we could. I confess I was rather worried. You see, though you didn’t know it, you and Pharaoh had now the same objective. It seemed extremely likely that you would use the same roads. And even when Pharaoh arrived—as he did, about half past nine—I couldn’t be sure that he’d missed you, for he might have dealt with you and come on for me. I watched him take the path, with Dewdrop, like some familiar, padding behind. Their silence was rather dreadful: they never exchanged one word. When they’d gone I made sure of the Rolls and came back to watch—and pray. The darkness was very trying, for the path, as you know, was in shadow and I had to watch for you both. And then, far away in the forest, I heard two shots. . . .”

When I told her what I had learned, which, except that my

cousin was safe, was little enough—

“We must make for Yorick,” she said. “Pharaoh’s stranded, and that will give me a chance—with my brother, I mean. If Valentine’s bored enough, I may be able to get him to go away. If I offer him the Carlotta, he may see the point of a month at Juan-les-Pins. Besides, if we want your cousin, Yorick is where he will be. He’s certain to be watching the castle—it’s all he can do. He probably visits Plumage, as you did to-day. But he knows that when we return, it will be to Yorick itself.”

“Very good,” said I. “I take it we drive to the door.”

“Oh, yes. It’s safe enough now. Here’s Sabbot, where we turn to the left.” She studied the map. “Left again at Arudy, and then straight on.”

I whipped the Rolls round a corner and put down my foot.

“If Pharaoh listens to Freda, he’ll find his car. It won’t move like this, but it’s better than running to Sabbot and hiring what he can get. I speak from experience, my sweet.”

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Helena shook her head.

“I don’t think he’ll listen to Freda. I think that by now he’s at Witchcraft, raging at the loss of the Rolls and looking high and low for your car.” She let out a ripple of laughter that did my heart good. “I feel quite sorry for Dewdrop. Fancy combing those thickets by night for a car that was never there! Have you plenty of petrol, John?”

“To burn,” said I. “Pharaoh’s a careful man.”

I felt her hand on my sleeve.

“If you’d been ‘careful’, we shouldn’t have found the cottage, and we should have missed . . . our dream.”

As her face touched my shoulder, I carried her hand to my lips.

“And when Valentine’s gone?” I said.

Helena’s chin went up.

“I’m not the Countess for nothing. The flag will be flown tomorrow, as though the Count was still there. That should be enough for ‘Captain Faning.’ And when he walks in with his servant, old Florin shall have the pleasure of laying the two of them low.”

“You think you’ll get Valentine off by an early train?”

“He keeps late hours. If I let him have the Carlotta, I might get him off to-night. He’s a creature of impulse, you know. Paint the toy bright enough, and he’ll want it at once. My God, John, I’ve *got* to do it. He simply must be gone before Pharaoh comes back.”

I glanced at my watch.

Five minutes to eleven, and fifty-three miles to go. We should be at the castle by midnight: but unless he had the luck of the devil, Pharaoh could hardly reach Yorick before five o’clock. To get from the cottage to Plumage had taken me more than six hours—and that was by day. But if he was there at five, would the Count be gone? Since I did not know her brother, I could

not weigh the chances of Helena's gaining her end, but I had an uneasy feeling that she was attempting too much. Her brother might well consent to be gone the next day, but to leave, bag and baggage, at once, in the midst of the night . . .

At length—

“Why not go to Pommers?” I said. “And use your original plan? We've only to find my cousin, and that should be easy enough. Let Pharaoh go back to Yorick. And then one night we'll cross the moat by the footbridge and do him in.”

“I'm afraid to wait, my darling. If Pharaoh gets his foot in again, I think he'll play the card in his sleeve. He doesn't want to play it, but after tonight he'll feel that the luck's against him—and out it'll come. And the card that he's got in his sleeve is *putting my brother wise*.” She drew in her breath. “Once Valentine knows of the gold, it's no good killing Pharaoh, for three weeks later another will reign in his stead. My brother will talk right and left. What's almost worse, he'll never leave me alone, as long as there's twenty pounds left. So you see, for that reason alone, Valentine *must* be gone before Pharaoh comes back.”

After this there was no more to be said, but I know that I made up my mind that if we came safe through this pass, the gold must be disposed of without delay. Oath or no, this terribly dangerous cargo must be discharged. Otherwise, though all four rogues were silenced, the secret which had leaked out would leak out again. And then—more havoc: more lust and strife and bloodshed, and my darling's hair going gray.

The miles streamed by in silence, and I think it was just past midnight when I switched the Rolls off the road and into the entrance-drive.

This rose through the woods, and had it been day, we could not have seen the castle before the last of the bends. The instant, however, that I had taken this turn, the lights of the rooms that opened on to the ramparts filled our eyes. The moon was certainly gone and the night was dark, but the flood of light was abnormal, and for one short moment I thought that the rooms were on fire. As though some ball were in progress, all six great casements were ablaze, and the battlements stood against the brilliance as though they were part of some theatrical 'set.' Except for a gleam here and there, the rest of the castle was black.

Helena laughed drily.

"I told you he kept late hours."

Of the blaze of light she said nothing: that the Count preferred casinos to castles was obvious enough.

I drove the Rolls through the meadows and over the bridge.

As our headlights illumined the gateway, I saw that the curtains were gone and the gates were shut, but a wicket in one of the leaves was open wide, and a servant was standing beside it, shading his eyes. He had, of course, seen our lights from the porter's lodge and had opened for 'Captain Fanning,' as no doubt he had done before. As I brought the Rolls up to the wicket, I saw him start. Then he opened the door for his mistress and bowed to the ground.

“Come, John,” said Helena quietly. She turned to the man. “Shut the wicket, Hubert, and wait in the lodge. The car will stay there.”

In a flash she was in the courtyard, with Sabre and me behind.

The doors were open, and Helena sped up the staircase which led to the principal rooms. In the hall the lights were burning, but from first to last I saw no other servants, and we afterwards learned that the Count, at Pharaoh’s suggestion, had sent them to bed every evening at half-past ten.

Helena’s ear was fast to the library door. After a moment she passed to the dining-room. There for a moment she listened. Then her hand went out to the handle and softly opened the door. . . .

A girl was standing on the table, regarding herself in the huge Italian mirror that hung on the wall. Her dress did not become her—it was so much finer than she. I think she herself perceived that something was wrong, for she frowned at her reflection, as she plucked and pulled at the frock. As we stood there, unseen and unheard, she proceeded to take it off, thrusting it up to her shoulders and over her head. The dress, too slight for her inches, clung to her breadth, and for thirty seconds or more a writhing, swearing sack of crimson and gold was surmounting a thickset body and clumsy legs. The scene was too coarse to be comic. Some girl from the streets of Lass was trying on Helena’s clothes.

Champagne was on the table and on the floor. I counted seven bottles, of which one only was full. A wineglass

had been used as an ashtray and another lay shivered in a pool of the wine it had held. A bottle that had held brandy lay on the floor, and the carpet about it was stained to a deeper red: beside it, a giant liqueur-glass looked foolish enough. And beside these the Count was lying, flat on his back. His condition was most apparent. To say he was drunk conveys nothing. Valentine, Count of Yorick, was down and out.

\* \* \* \* \*

The girl had seen us in the mirror.

Her hands clapped fast to her cheeks, she was staring at Helena's reflection with starting eyes. To confirm the mirror's report, she shot us one glance of horror: then she crumpled and sank to the table, dragging the dress about her and shrinking as though from some vision which was but waiting to give her the judgment that she deserved.

Helena went to her quickly and touched her arm.

"Don't be afraid," she said quietly. "If you do as I tell you, I'll see that you come to no harm."

She turned to me, to speak English.

"Can you get him on to the terrace and bring him round?"

"I'll try," said I. "But I haven't a lot of hope."

With that, I picked up the Count and carried him out. Then I came back for the pails in which the champagne had stood. Their ice was mostly gone, but the water was very cold.

I ripped his collar open and sluiced his head and his throat. I shook him and sat him up and opened his eyes. I took off his coat and his shirt and held the ice to his spine. And other things I did, in my efforts to bring him round.

I might have spared my pains: the fellow was too far gone. He would come to his senses in time, but nothing that I could do would hale them back.

As I sat back on my heels—

“No good?” said Helena quietly.

“Hopeless,” said I. “He’s all in. He may come round by midday, but he won’t be fit to talk to for twenty-four hours.”

As the words left my mouth, the castle clock told us the time.

A quarter past twelve.

“We must get him away,” said Helena. “Now, at once. There’s a train that leaves Lass for Innsbruck at one o’clock. We can’t put him aboard at Lass—he’s too well known: but I guess the train stops at Gola—that’s ten miles on. The girl will have to go with him and see that he comes to no harm.”

Although I could see that it was drastic, I had then no idea how monstrous was the action which she proposed. Her brother was her liege lord: when he succeeded her father, she was the first of his vassals to go on her knees, to put her hands between his, to swear to honour his person and ever maintain his freedom and all his rights. And this was no matter of form. For better or worse, for more than five hundred years

the body of the Count had been sacred in the eyes of his house. Times might change, but not Yorick. Its motto held.

On that handsome July night Helena snapped the tradition and broke her oath. Not a servant would have dared help her. The warden would have withstood her, no matter what tale she told. But the only concern I felt was lest the weight of her brother should prove too much for my back.

And here I must set out clearly what had to be done. The Count had to be removed. Though no one of the servants must suspect the order of his going, yet all must be sure that he was gone. This before Pharaoh arrived, for until they were sure that the Countess was again in command they would dare not obey her orders to seize the guest of the Count.

After perhaps five minutes our plans were laid.

Whilst Helena spoke with Mona, the girl from Lass, I scrawled a note to Pharaoh, and boldly signed it ‘V.Y.’

*Dear Fanning,*

*Sorry, but I'm fed up. I've had enough of Yorick and I'm going to-night, I don't know where, but I'll probably get a train. See you again some day. . . .*

I think it looked the note of a drunken man.

As I laid down my pencil—

“That’ll do very well,” said Helena. “He never writes, so nobody knows his hand. Leave it there on the blotting-pad. And now we must go. Mona’s a broken reed, but it can’t be helped. I’m not afraid of her talking—she’s far too scared for that. But I am afraid of her bolting the moment she gets the chance.”

“Is there no one to whom we can take him? I mean, the scandal \_\_\_\_\_”

“The scandal doesn’t matter. There’ve been too many of them. But there’s only my nurse at Pommers, and Pommers is seventy miles.”

“Some village inn,” I suggested.

“The train would be better, I think. But that isn’t the point. I don’t like to leave him like this without someone who knows who he is, but will hold their tongue. No. There’s nothing for it. Mona’s our only hope.”

A moment later our strange procession took shape.

Helena led the way and I brought up the rear, with the Count on my back, while Mona minced between us, bearing her shoes in her hand.

As once before, we passed through my lady’s bedroom, down the two flights of steps and so to the postern-door. Helena opened this and then stood waiting whilst Mona and I passed out. At once, as we had arranged, I turned to the right and made my way over the turf by the castle wall. One minute later, perhaps, I saw the light that streamed from the porter’s lodge.

This passed over the Rolls to illumine the jaws of the bridge and had, of course, taught Bugle the trick which had served me so well.

Six paces away from the gates, I laid my burden down.

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“Is your back all right?” breathed Helena.

“Yes, thank you, my sweet.”

At once she turned to Mona, who was drooping beside the wall.

“If you cross that bridge, the porter will see you, and you will be chased and caught. In a few minutes’ time, however, the porter will leave his lodge. You’ll know when he’s gone, because then the wicket will open. The moment the wicket opens, cross the bridge. When you’re over the bridge, you can put on your shoes. Then run down the drive until you come to the woods. Wait there at the edge of the meadows, and the car will be down in five minutes to pick you up.”

“It is understood, my lady.”

“You will wait without fail, on the right-hand side of the road.”

“Without fail, my lady. My lady will not be long.”

“Five minutes,” I said. “Perhaps I shall come before. But until the wicket opens, you must not move.”

“Very good, my lady.”

With many misgivings we left her and hastened the way we had come. This time, however, we left the postern ajar.

We had found her bedroom lighted and left it so—an open wardrobe declared the rape of the frock: and now we only waited to set wide open the doors of the principal rooms. Then we went down to the courtyard—up to the last of the jumps.

As the porter stepped out of his lodge—

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“Why didn’t you tell me,” said Helena, “that his lordship was gone?”

The fellow looked scared.

“I—I didn’t know, my lady. I—I thought his lordship was here.”

“He went this evening. He says so. He’s left a note.”

The porter put a hand to his head.

“No one has gone out, my lady, since half past nine. And at half past nine, my lady, I know that his lordship was here.”

There was a startled silence. Then—

“Fetch the night-watchman,” said Helena.

The man ran into the courtyard and disappeared.

In a flash the wicket was open and I was outside.

I opened a door of the Rolls and ran for the Count.

As I heaved him into the car, I saw a bedraggled figure hurrying on to the bridge. I laid the Count flat on the floorboards and put his coat over his face. Then I took my seat at the wheel and started to turn the car round. . . .

Helena was speaking.

“Rouse the other watchmen and the warden as well. The castle is to be searched. Unless he left by a postern, his lordship must still be here. Tell the warden that I have news for his lordship which will not wait, that I’ve gone to Lass to catch him in case he has gone.”

“Your ladyship will be returning?”

“Within the hour.”

I had the car well in the shadows and Helena’s door was open before she left the wicket to take her seat. And she was so quick that, though the porter made to escort her, I was able to have the car moving before he was out of the light.

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As I whipped over the drawbridge, I heard her sigh with relief.

“And now for Mona,” she said.

The time was now half past twelve, which shows that much may be done in a quarter of an hour. Indeed, I would not have believed it if the clock had not been chiming as we passed over the bridge.

As we left the meadows, I set a foot on the brake and switched out my lights. . . .

For a moment we sat in silence. Then—

“Mona,” cried Helena. “Mona.”

The girl did not answer, and after a frantic moment I flung myself out of the car.

“Mona,” I cried, “where are you?”

A figure rose out of the night.

“She’s hopped it, sir,” said Barley. “Cut through the woods. But I’m thankful to see you, sir. And that’s the truth.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It was twenty minutes later, on the skirts of Annabel village, that Barley stood by the Rolls and told us his tale.

We dared not return to the castle before ten minutes past one, for Lass was twelve miles from Yorick and not even the Rolls could have done the double journey in less than thirty-five minutes, no matter how much she was pushed. We had, therefore, ten minutes to spare—much against our will, for that Pharaoh was racing for Yorick we had not a shadow of doubt. Still, to be uneasy was foolish: that day I had done the journey as Pharaoh was doing it now. . . .

It was now ten minutes to one—two hours since Pharaoh had found that the Rolls was gone. If a car had come by at that

moment, he could have been at Sabbot at eleven o'clock—to find the village sleeping and every door shut and barred. Charm he never so wisely, Pharaoh would never leave Sabbot under the hour. The man could hardly use violence, for that would set the police on his track: and Sabbot's only garage had many faults. Its master was disobliging and deaf as a post—a hideous combination for anyone pressed for time: its complement of cars was shocking, but before I could take one away, I had had to pay a deposit of twenty pounds: its petrol-pump was not working: its boy was dull of comprehension and had his right arm in a sling. Still Pharaoh was Pharaoh, and Dewdrop was there to help. . . . Supposing that they had left Sabbot at half-past eleven o'clock. No car that came out of that garage could possibly bring them to Yorick in less than two hours and a half. Say two hours—just in case. . . . If Pharaoh had the luck of the devil, we might expect to see him at half past one: but I would have laid a fortune that he would not arrive before six. (Here, perhaps, I should say that I had not forgotten the car I had left in the greenwood—Pharaoh's own car. But Pharaoh did not know it was there, nor did he know how to get to the spot where it stood. That he would stumble upon it was more than I could believe.)

So, as we had time to spare, Barley stood by the Rolls and told us his tale.

“A wire come on Monday, sir, a little later than usual, about ten o'clock. *Return at once*, it said and it bore your name. Well, we left as sharp as we could—for Villach, of course: but when we gets out at Villach, there ain't no car to meet us, let alone no Rolls. ‘That's queer,’ says Mr. Bohun. ‘I don't understand it,’ he says. ‘If Mr. Spencer could wire, he

could send a car. It may be all right, but we'd better go careful, Barley, from this time on.' Well, we 'ired a car at Villach, and stopped four miles from the farm. Then we enters the woods on foot. . . . It was just about half past four when we sights the house. Everything looks as usual—sleepy an' peaceful, you know, sir, an' no one about. But Mr. Bohun's uneasy. 'Mustn't rush in,' he says. 'You stay an' watch out,' he says, 'while I go round to the back.' He hadn't hardly spoken before Rush comes out on the apron, as bold as brass.

"I give you my word, sir, that shook us. We made sure they'd got you all right. But of course we couldn't do nothing until it was dark. Then we crept in and 'ad a close-up." He drew in his breath. "Those two—Rush and Bugle—they're simple: that's what they are. They're like a turn on the 'alls. You could walk right in between them, before they'd know you were there. For 'alf an hour that evening we listened to what they said, and of course we very soon knew that Pharaoh'd got his foot in the castle and you was away. Then Mr. Bohun goes for the farmer's wife: but she knows nothing at all, except that his lordship's back and given special orders that Bugle and Rush is to have your rooms at the farm.

"Well, we had to have quarters somewhere, so Mr. Bohun comes here. 'The last place they'll look,' he says, 'and the best I know.' Then we starts in watchin' the castle and visitin' Plumage at night. And that was all we could do, for to look for you was hopeless—we didn't know where to begin. But we knew where Pharaoh was, and we made up our minds to get him, for once he was out of the way, all roads were clear."

Barley closed his eyes and pushed back his hat.

“D’you think we could get that man, sir? We could have had the others time and again. Bugle and Rush, I mean—though we could have had Dewdrop, too. But Mr. Bohun says ‘No. Bugle and Rush,’ he says, ‘is our information bureau. So we won’t do them in,’ he says; ‘if there’s any news goin’ they’ll have it, and we may as well be in on that.’ So we’ve let them be—so far. But you wouldn’t believe how we’ve laid an’ laid for Pharaoh—and missed him every time. Look at to-night, sir. I’d been lyin’ there where I met you since half past six. Keepin’ observation, I was, for Mr. Bohun’s at Salzburg—I’ve told you that. To beat up his quarters, he said, in case you’d called. Well, I thought I had got him to-night, when the Rolls slowed down. I was ready to blow his head off—an’ then it turns out that it’s you. I don’t believe in charmed lives, but if ever a blackguard had one, Pharaoh’s him.”

“You wait, Barley,” said I, and got into the car. “When d’you expect Mr. Bohun?”

“To-morrow morning, sir. About seven o’clock.”

“What could be better?” said I. “Tell him to expect me for breakfast at about a quarter to nine. And that after that, if he likes, we’ll run along to Plumage and close the information bureau.”

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As I let in the clutch—

“Good-bye, Barley,” cried Helena. “Do what you can for his lordship and ask Mr. Bohun to forgive me for making free with his room.”

But Barley made no answer. I think he was incapable of speech.

\* \* \* \* \*

We were back at the castle within a quarter of an hour.

As the warden stepped out of the wicket, Helena spoke.

“Has anyone entered the castle since I’ve been gone?”

The porter replied,

“No one at all, my lady.”

I had known that would be his answer, but the words were comfortable words. The race had been ours all the way, but now we *knew* it was over and the numbers were up. I began to wonder if Pharaoh had yet left Sabbot. . . .

Helena was addressing the warden.

“He’s not been to the station, Florin. Unless he’s here, he must have gone somewhere by car.”

“His lordship’s not here, my lady. And the Adelaide postern was open which shows that he went that way.”

“He should have been seen on the drawbridge.”

“He should, my lady. But one of the lamps went out about half past ten. His lordship may well have gone by whilst the porter was making the change.”

“The fact remains that he’s gone—when I needed his presence most. It can’t be helped. I shall have to act without him. Open the gates.”

I drove the Rolls under the archway and into the small courtyard.

As the leaves were closed behind us—

“Out of sight of the wicket,” said Helena.

There was just enough room to berth the car out of view.

Helena turned to the warden, who had opened the door by her side.

“The porter is to put out his lights, but stay in his lodge. He is to open to no one, until you return. Mark that. To no one at all. And in five minutes’ time you and all the night-watchmen will come to the library.”

“If your ladyship pleases,” said Florin.

Helena left the car, and I followed her up the stairs. . . .

As I closed the library door, my lady took off her hat, pitched it on to a sofa and moved to the hearth.

“Put a match to this fire, John dear.”

I knelt to do her bidding. Then I patted her delicate instep and raised my eyes to her face.

“You must be worn out, my beauty.”

She put out a little hand and touched my hair.

“I don’t know why. I haven’t done much but sit still.”

I rose to my feet.

“What are you going to tell them?”

For a moment she did not answer, but stood with her eyes on the flames. Then—

“That the man that murdered young Florin is coming to the castle to-night: that three hours ago he did his best to kill you, because he knows you can prove that he took young Florin’s life: that they know him as ‘Captain Faning,’ but that *I* know him as ‘Pharaoh’—a very dangerous felon, who is wanted for at least four murders in England alone.” She turned to set her hands on my shoulders. “You must forgive me, darling, for playing this hand alone. But now you must stay in the background until we’re through. They must not begin to believe that I’m acting on your advice. Now that Valentine’s out of the way, my authority here is supreme, but I’m putting a strain upon it when I use my brother’s absence to order the death of his guest. If he felt that you were behind me, the warden would seek to withstand the orders I’m going to give. I mean, they’re pretty serious. . . . And so I must leave you right out—for this night only, my dear. To-morrow—this afternoon you’ll stand on another footing, for everyone in the castle will know I’m to be your wife.”

I could not answer her, but I put my arms about her and kissed

her lips.

For a moment we clung together. Then she drew back, flushed and smiling, leaving her hands in mine.

So we stood for another moment, looking into each other's eyes.

I think I never found her more lovely, for, with all her pride of beauty, she looked just a little shy. And she looked so glad to be shy. . . . And never before had I seen such stars in her eyes.

And then—the stars faded, and the light in her face went out.

The lips I had kissed were moving, but no words came . . . and her little hands were trembling . . . and the blood was out of her face.

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She was looking over my shoulder—not so much with horror as dully, as though the battle were hopeless and she were tired.

As I let her go and swung round—

“Don't move, Mr. Spencer,” said Pharaoh. “The triggers they give these things are absurdly light.”

‘This thing’ was an automatic pistol, pointing in my direction, about six paces away.

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I confess that I was dumbfounded, and several seconds went by before I could find my tongue.

Then—

“That’s so much bluff,” said I. “This isn’t the forester’s cottage. If you fire on me here——”

“I most frankly admit,” said Pharaoh, “that the feelings with which I should kill you would be extremely mixed. To be still more frank, I don’t want you to force my hand. Not that I value your life. In fact, you’re rather a nuisance. But if I were to—er—abate you, I should probably have to withdraw—and that wouldn’t suit my book. But for you to take any action would suit my book even less. And so, if you move, I *shall* fire. . . . I’m sure Lady Helena favours my point of view.”

“Yes,” said Helena, quietly. “I see your point. Don’t move, John, I beg you. He means what he says.”

“He does indeed,” said Pharaoh. “Stand perfectly still.”

He covered the distance between us. Then he raised his pistol and placed the mouth of its barrel directly between my eyebrows against my skin. So he stood still for a moment, while a look of demoniac hatred ravaged his face. Then his hand went into my pocket and took my pistol out.

As he stepped back—

“Melodrama,” said Helena.

The slightest tinge of colour came into Pharaoh’s face. Then he shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

“Perhaps you’re right,” he said. “After the love scene, the strong stuff.”

With his words a knock fell upon the door. . . .

“Ah,” said Pharaoh. “The trusty warden, no doubt. ‘With his white hair unbonneted, the stout old sheriff comes; Behind him march the halberdiers . . .’ I think you were going to tell him something, Lady Helena. Well, do have him in. But perhaps I ought to remind you that Mr. Spencer’s life will depend upon what you say.”

The pistols slid into his pockets: but though he withdrew his left hand, his right hand stayed where it was.

Again the warden knocked, and Helena raised her voice and cried to him to come in.

The warden entered the room.

As his eyes lit upon Pharaoh, he started, as though in surprise: then he closed the door behind him and turned to where Helena stood.

My lady moistened her lips.

“I’m not at all satisfied, Florin, with the watch that is being kept. Here’s Captain Fanning returned, but he was never

challenged or——”

“I found a postern open,” said Pharaoh. “To save the porter trouble, I entered by that.”

“He should have been seen,” said Helena, “crossing the bridge.”

The warden looked greatly concerned.

“There is something amiss, my lady—I know not what. I will swear that Hubert is faithful and Piers, who is watchman to-night, is a man of his word. Yet, as I tell them, they might have no eyes nor ears.”

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“There is something amiss,” said Helena. “Double the watchmen, Florin, and stop all leave. Two porters are to stay in the lodge and to keep a list of all persons that use the bridge. No postern is to be opened without permission from me. Why were the servants abed when I came in?”

“By his lordship’s orders, my lady.”

“Those orders are cancelled—until his lordship returns. And now rouse his lordship’s valet and let him prepare the room in the eastern tower—the room above mine. Mr. Spencer will sleep there to-night. And rouse Rachel, as well. She will make my room ready and wait till I come. One thing more.” She drew out her master key. “Here is my key, Florin. You may as well keep it for me until I need it again.”

The warden bowed and took it.

“Will your ladyship speak to the men?”

“Not to-night. I’ve changed my mind. But please see that they do their duty. I’ve a definite feeling of danger—very pressing danger, Florin: so please beware.”

“Rest assured, my lady, nothing that I can do shall be left undone.”

Helena smiled and nodded, and the warden bowed low. Then he bowed to me, but not Pharaoh, and left the room.

There was a moment’s silence. Then—

“I congratulate you,” said Pharaoh, “upon your quickness of wit. I had to give you some rope and you used it all.”

Helena took her seat in a high-backed chair.

“I rather fancy,” she said, “you’d have done the same.”

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“I don’t know that I should have,” said Pharaoh, wrinkling his brow. “I believe in a margin of safety. . . . Now why do you think the warden ignored me when he went out?”

Helena shrugged her shoulders.

“Perhaps you don’t command his respect.”

Pharaoh fingered his chin.

“Dewdrop,” he said quietly.

One of the curtains swayed, and Dewdrop stepped out.

“Concentrate on that warden, Dewdrop. You heard what her ladyship said. If he seems to be getting ideas, you must act for the best. The situation is delicate, Dewdrop, for what are we among so many? And now cover Mr. Spencer. I want to talk.”

As Dewdrop moved towards me, he took his seat on a sofa and crossed his legs.

Seeing no reason to stand, I stepped to a table and took my seat on its edge. At a nod from Pharaoh, Dewdrop took his stand on its farther side. I did not like him behind me and moved more than once, but he always moved when I did, to keep just out of my view.

Pharaoh was looking at Helena, smiling an insolent smile.

“I’m afraid it’s clear,” he drawled, “that you didn’t expect me so soon.” He sighed. “That’s been the misfortune of so many people I’ve known. Some of them are still living. . . . You see, a car came by, and its owner gave me a lift. To be perfectly frank, he surrendered the wheel to Dewdrop without a word.” Again he fingered his chin. “You know, I can’t help feeling you ought to have thought of that.”

“I agree,” said Helena, shortly. “That was a bad mistake.”

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“But the only one,” said Pharaoh. “Indeed, if I may say so, I’m much impressed. Mr. Spencer’s quite a good chauffeur—I’m sure of that: but only a brain in a thousand would have thought of abducting the Count.”

Helena stared.

“Are you being humorous?”

“No,” said Pharaoh quietly. “I’m simply giving you the answer to a simple addition sum. As it’s very short, I’ll do it over again. . . . You left the castle as I was approaching the bridge. In fact, I was able to cross it while Hubert—the faithful Hubert—was closing the wicket, before he re-entered the lodge. That’s why he didn’t see me. But that’s by the way. . . . Well, I found your departure astounding. I mean, on the face of it, once you had gained the castle, to deliberately leave it again was the act of a fool. But you are no fool, Lady Helena. . . . I was still considering this paradox, when I found the postern ajar. I confess that helped me a lot—in more ways than one. And the moment I heard that the Count of Yorick was missing, the sum came out.” He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. “Let me put some cards on the table. I want you to see that, if for no other reason, *because you have scruples* you are weighted clean out of this race. You see, I am not so embarrassed—I never am. Now take to-night. Placed as you were, once I was back in the castle, nothing this side of hell would have got me out. Yet the Count would have disappeared. Now there’s a little problem—which I will resolve. I assume he was drunk—forgive me, but he usually is by ten. Well, they say blood’s thicker than water, but I never found it so. *I* should have dropped him gently into the moat. . . . Perhaps you think I’m bluffing. Let me tell you what happened to-night. I wanted a car—badly, and I took the first that came by. Well, that was against the law. By taking that car I offended law and order—two inconvenient gods. They therefore had to be sidetracked. . . . *What is left of that car is lying on its side in a gully, two*

*miles from where we sit. For all I know, it's still burning—with the man it belonged to inside."*

This recital was dreadful enough, but Pharaoh lent it a horror that made my blood run cold. I knew it was true—every word. He had murdered an innocent stranger with considerably less compunction than I would have felt about shooting an injured horse. Yet the crime gained in the telling—he painted the face of Murder and tired her head. Inhumanity stared from his eyes and rode on his awful voice. The chill of death loaded his accents: the iron of them was frozen, bruising the ears they entered and setting the teeth on edge. But two things they could not do. They could not shake Helena's courage or whip the infinite scorn from her beautiful face.

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"Are you seeking to frighten us?" she said.

Pharaoh sat back.

"No," he said smiling. "Only to open your eyes. Never mind. Would you care to say where you took him? The Count, I mean."

"I must refer you to your powers of deduction. You seem to believe in them."

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"As you please," said Pharaoh, coolly. "In any event, I'm not at all sure that I want him—he's rather a two-edged sword." He glanced at his watch. "Dear, dear, a quarter to two. It's far too late to discuss my mission to-night. If you'll promise me one or two things—well, I daresay your room is ready——" he raised his eyes to the ceiling "—and the room above yours."

“You insolent swine!” I roared. “If you think——”

The sentence ended in a manner which I should like to forget. It is no good concealing the truth. I yelped with pain, leaped from my seat on the table and swung about, smarting and furious, to face Dewdrop’s levelled pistol some three feet away.

The Jew had pricked my buttock with the blade of his knife.

I hesitated, trembling with rage and desperately weighing the chances of an immediate attack. Fire upon me they dared not. To do so would cost them their hopes and most likely their lives. And they must be shown that blackmail was not to be our portion, that——

Helena’s arm was about my shoulders, and her cool, slim hand on my wrist.

“Not that way, my darling, I beg you. Let me play the hand.”

“I entirely agree,” said Pharaoh. “You’re much too mutton-fisted. But you mustn’t become abusive. That’s really all Dewdrop meant.”

The blood surged in my temples. To be baited so was more galling than any knife. But at last discretion prevailed. . . .

199

“All right,” I said thickly. “You play it. I’ll manage to bide my time.”

The clasp on my shoulders tightened, but that was all.

“What terms,” said Helena, quietly, “do you suggest?”

“Your word that you will do nothing before midday. That at that hour you two will be here, to take up the same positions you now lay down. That you will give no orders and make no sort of statement which might correct the impression that I am your guest. In a word, I desire your parole—the parole of you both.”

There was a moment’s silence.

Then—

“I give it,” said Helena, quietly.

“And Mr. Spencer?” said Pharaoh.

Before I could speak—

“I pledge his word,” said Helena.

“That’s good enough,” said Pharaoh. “Allow me to wish you good night.” He bowed and turned to the door. “Come, Dewdrop,” he said.

As in a dream, I watched the two retreating with never a backward glance.

As the door closed behind them, Helena put a hand to her head.

“Oh, John,” she said faintly. “I’m afraid I’m . . .”

The sentence petered out.

I was just able to catch her before she fell.

And there I stood, shaken and helpless, pledged to report to a butcher in ten hours' time, with my darling limp in my arms and the blood that Dewdrop had drawn running down my leg.

\* \* \* \* \*

Half an hour had gone by, and I was sitting, brooding, on the side of my bed. I was clad in the Count's pyjamas and was wearing his dressing-gown. I had cleansed myself in the bathroom and staunched my wound. This, of course, was nothing, but because it was deep, it had bled a deal more freely than I had supposed. It certainly ached a little, but I was more hungry than hurt. I needed food very badly—to help me, body and soul. Sleep was out of the question. Besides, I did not feel tired. . . .

I wondered how Helena was faring. I had handed her over to Rachel, herself again: but we had arranged no meeting and she had not so much as spoken, except to bid me good night and advise me to bar my door. Then the valet had shown me my chamber, asked at what hour he should rouse me and taken his leave.

I sought to review the position—to find, if I could, some loophole admitting hope. But I could see none at all. We had made an appointment to-morrow to hear our doom. With my health in his hands, Pharaoh could ask what he pleased. Helena was at his mercy, and he knew it better than she. Already the man had proved it. Dewdrop had pricked me, and I had cried

out with pain. Instantly Pharaoh had made a fantastic request—and Helena had not argued, but had answered for me as well. And then she had fainted. . . . Talk about holding good cards—the man had the pack to choose from, while we held nothing at all.

I began to see the secret of Pharaoh's success. Once it was known that to call his bluff was fatal, the man could win game after game with the acme of ease. This knowledge had become his bulwark—'Cross Pharaoh and die.' His defence was attack—always. So long as life was worth living, it was not worth crossing Pharaoh, no matter how high the reward.

201

I put my head in my hands.

I had hoped to serve my darling, to fill the place which young Florin's death had made void. I had hoped to save and protect her—and I had become a millstone about her neck. More. I had brought her to ruin. If she tried to resist to-morrow, I was to be the rack with which Pharaoh would bend her spirit to his desires. Because she had come to love me, the man, through me, would strip her of all that she had. And this in the house of her fathers, with her servants gathered about her, all ready to give their lives for the mistress they loved. But I had rendered them useless. Warden, watchmen, the very walls of the castle, its stones and oak—these things could avail her nothing because of me. I had found her armed against Pharaoh: and I had struck off her armour and left her bare. . . .

Some one was knocking—tapping, but not on the door.

As I started up, the sound ceased.

It had come from the direction of the bathroom. Perhaps, if I waited . . .

The tapping began again.

For a moment I stood still, listening. And then I was proving the panelling close to the bathroom door. The sound came from behind the woodwork.

202

In vain I sought for some handle, while little bursts of tapping demanded an answer that I was not ready to give.

Suddenly I thought of the bathroom.

This like the bedroom, was panelled, and there, sure enough, a key was declaring a cupboard sunk in the wall. The moment I opened this, I knew that someone beneath it was knocking upon its floor.

The cupboard ran to the left, but its recesses were dark: I, therefore, rapped in answer and hastened to find my torch. As soon as I brought this to bear, I saw the bolts of a trap which was sunk in the floor of the cupboard six feet from the door.

In an instant I had it open, and there was a curling staircase of polished oak and Helena, wrapped in a dressing-gown, sitting on one of the stairs. Beside her was standing Sabre, fairly snuffing excitement and ready to leap. The sight of him made me wonder where he had been. I had not set eyes on the dog for more than two hours.

“Thank God,” says Helena. “I thought you must be asleep. And now take Sabre, my dear, and tell him to watch your door. And then come down.”

The watch was soon set, for Sabre was very wise, and thirty seconds later I entered my lady’s room.

On the hearth a fire was burning, and the constant leap of the flames was dispensing what light there was. Walls and ceiling were faintly giving this back, and gold and glass and silver were winking out of the shadows that veiled the room. At first I saw all things darkly: then substance grew out of the shadows to charm the eye—the lovely head of a bedstead, the delicate column that stood for a standard lamp, the elegant curves of a table and the style of a great bergère. A long flash declared a pier-glass and a bright patch of painted woodwork a chest of drawers. And in the midst stood Helena, straight and slim and smiling, her dressing-gown swathing her beauty from ankles to throat. The gown was pink, I remember, all flowered with tiny posies, and she was wearing pink slippers which looked absurdly small.

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She pointed to a table, standing close the hearth, laid for one only, but bearing enough for three.

“Open the wine, my darling. I’ll cut the chicken up.”

As I filled her glass—

“We mustn’t eat much,” I whispered. “If we do, they’ll know I’ve been here.”

“Let them know,” said Helena, quickly. “What do I care? What

does it matter, John? What does anything matter now?"

I shook my head.

"This matters, Nell. Compared with this, the forester's cottage and all was a Sunday School show. Don't think I'm prudish. I'm not. I'm only too glad of a good excuse to be here. You see, I'm a man, and I love you—from throat to foot. But no one must ever know it. If we stood on the steps of a scaffold, I'd say the same."

I saw her fingers tighten about the stem of her glass.

Then—

"You're right," she said. "I'm getting my values wrong. Never mind. Sabre can cover your tracks. I'll leave a plate on the floor and they'll think I gave him a meal."

204

"And the wine you upset," said I. "I'll wet the carpet with water before I go."

Absurdly enough, this arrangement comforted me. The fragments of propriety that remained were scarcely worth taking up: all the same . . .

So we broke our fast together and shared her glass. Whilst we were eating and drinking we hardly exchanged a word, and when we had done I carried the table away and moved her chair to the blaze.

"Cigarettes," she said. "In the china box by the bed."

For five minutes we smoked in silence, regarding the leaping flames. Then I threw down my cigarette and got to my feet.

“Interlude,” I said quietly. “And now, if you please, my darling, I want you to go to bed. We’ve got a hard day coming and we’ve left a hard day behind. It’s no good our talking to-night. I shall be on the ramparts at nine, but I hope that you won’t appear till eleven o’clock.”

She did not seem to hear me, but after a moment or two she rose to her feet.

“John,” she said, “do you love me?”

I caught her hand and put it up to my lips.

“You know that I love you,” I said, “far more than life.”

“I wonder,” she said. “That’s terribly easy to say.”

“Why, Nell, what’s the matter?” I whispered.

She shook her beautiful head.

“Nothing’s the matter. I only wondered. . . You see, I love you—blindly. There’s nothing else in my world. Reputation, Yorick, Valentine—compared with you they’re so many idle words. And I naturally can’t help wondering whether you love me as much. It doesn’t matter, you know. I neither ask nor expect it. But sometimes I wonder, my darling, whether you do.”

“Give me your hands,” I said, “your beautiful hands.” She

dropped her cigarette and gave me her other hand. “And now your eyes.” She lifted her gaze to mine. “I can’t define the word ‘love,’ but when you look troubled, Nell, it tears my heart. Pharaoh’s getting at you through me—we both know that. Well, I can’t curse the day I met you, but I wish to God that he’d got me at Annabel, Nell—that day when Rush jogged his arm, and he hit the mirror instead.”

Her arms were about my neck, and her breath on my lips.

“No, no. Take it back. Don’t say such terrible things. Oh, John, my precious, my darling.” For a moment she clung to me desperately. Then she snatched a note from her pocket and thrust it unto my hand. “You say you love me. Then take this note to your cousin and save me from something that frightens me more than death. You can go by the footbridge and tunnel—that key I gave to Florin was Valentine’s master key. But you must go before it’s light. If you’re seen coming back it won’t matter—because you’ll be coming back.”

“But, Nell, how can I? I’m on parole, my darling. We’ve passed our word.”

“How could I help it? I was fainting. For more than a minute my head had been going round. And who have I passed it to? To a fiend—a butcher, that’s trying to smash my life. And how am I breaking my word? Listen. This note’s to warn your cousin that Valentine must not return. We never told Barley to keep him, so when he comes to they’ll naturally let him go.”

“It’s ‘taking action,’ Nell. You swore you wouldn’t do that.”

“If you love me, you’ll do it, John. Call it breaking my word, if you please, and think the less of me for it—but do as I say. I haven’t mentioned Pharaoh. I haven’t breathed a word of the plight we’re in. But if it comes out that I laid hands on my brother—well, I’ll just be ruined for life. Open the note and read it. Here—give it to me.” She seized it and tore it open. “Listen to this. *For the love of God keep Valentine with you. Use any violence you like. He must not return to the castle, and no one on earth must know that he is with you. For the love of Christ don’t fail me.*”

“But why write to Geoffrey, Nell? I could tell Barley to tell him, and——”

“No, no. You don’t understand. It’s too serious for that. I don’t think you know what I’ve done in abducting the Count. You must give this note to your cousin—into his hands.”

“But, Nell, that’s out of the question. Geoffrey won’t be back till seven o’clock.”

“What does that matter, John? We’re free till noon.” She stuffed the sheet into its envelope and thrust this again upon me. “Take it, I beg and pray you, and give it into his hand. You talk of my reputation: in this affair far more than my name is at stake. If they knew what I’d done, my own servants would use me as a leper: they all took the oath that I took, and it’s never been broken, John, since Yorick was built. I *had* to do it, John—you know that I had: but if anyone ever finds out, there’s an end of me.”

“Pharaoh knows, my darling.”

“What can he prove? Nothing. But if Valentine and he get together, I haven’t a chance. And Pharaoh would be on to Mona within the hour.”

“But, Nell—my God, I can’t leave you.”

“Why not? I’m perfectly safe. And if your cousin’s punctual, you can be back by eight. I’ll send a horse to meet you at the mouth of the entrance drive. You see, you alone can help me. I can’t send the note by a servant, and yet it must go.”

For a moment I stood irresolute. Then—

“All right,” I said, “I’ll take it. But——”

“Thank God, my darling.” She threw herself into my arms.

“Now I do know that you love me. Don’t think I don’t know what I’m asking. I——”

“I’m not going to wait for Geoffrey. The moment——”

“You must—you must. You must wait and see him read it—and bring me back his promise to do as I say. Don’t you see, you must wait for Geoffrey, in case my brother wakes up before he arrives?”

“I’ll bet he doesn’t,” said I. “But what if he does? I’ve only got to tell Barley to——”

“No, no. You mustn’t tell Barley. He mustn’t know.”

“But he knows already, Nell.”

“Not this—and he mustn’t know it. But your cousin will understand.” Her arms were tight about me, and her eager, parted lips were two inches from mine. “Oh, John, my darling, do it. Do as I say. Go down and give him the note and see for yourself that he reads it—and then come back.” She laid her cheek against mine. “Think it’s a whim, if you like. Write me down as unbalanced—as making a fuss about something that doesn’t count. But I think you must see that I’m troubled: and you said that when I looked troubled . . . it tore your heart.” She brushed my cheek with her lips and threw back her head. “Ask what you like of me after—I’ll give it with all my heart. We’ll live or die together—just as you say. But we’re going to live—I know it. We’re going to come out of this pass. But I mustn’t be stained, my darling—I don’t want your wife to be stained with a blemish that won’t come off.”

“God help me,” said I. “I’ll do it.” I felt her relax. “But I’m riding blind, my darling, for I cannot see with your eyes. It’s not breaking our word to Pharaoh—that I *can* see. At least, I don’t think it is. And then I can see that no one but I can do it, if the secret is to be kept. And I see that it must be kept—I didn’t know the tradition was so severe. But why I must wait for Geoffrey—why I must stand and watch while he reads your note——”

“To bring me back his promise. Until I know that he’s read it, I shan’t know a moment’s peace. Oh, John, my dear, I’ve got so much to carry. . . .”

Her great, gray eyes bore out this pitiful truth. For a moment I hung upon them. Then I drew her head on to my shoulder and stroked her hair.

“Very well, my beauty. I’ll go at once.”

I hastened back to my bedroom and dressed as fast as I could. Gingerly feeling my wound, I remembered Helena’s promise to send a horse for me to the mouth of the entrance drive. She had, of course, no idea that Dewdrop had stabbed me so deep. Perhaps if I stood in my stirrups . . .

Before I left the chamber, I drew the bolts of the door. Then I took Sabre and made for the polished stair. I could not close the cupboard, but I let the trap into place. And then I was back in my darling’s pretty bedroom, ready to leave.

As she drew the curtain aside, to fit her key to the door—

“You’ll change at Annabel, John?”

“Yes,” I said. “God knows I’ll have time to burn.”

“I don’t know that you will. It’s now a quarter past three. You won’t be there much before six.”

She opened the door, and I took my torch from my pocket to light the steps. Compared with the charm of her bedroom, these seemed uncommon grim. . . .

For a moment the flesh breasted the spirit.

I thought of the moat and the gratings and the seven miles I must cover, soaked to the waist: and I thought of the warmth I was leaving and the witching light and the peerless luxury—and Helena’s faint perfume. But for her ‘whim’ . . . .

I pulled myself together and led the way.

The hall and passage were silent, and though we had ears for the watchmen, this time no footfalls came to harry our nerves.

She would have come down to the grating, but that I would not allow: so I took my leave at the head of the dripping steps.

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Her hands were upon my shoulders.

“I’m asking a lot of you, aren’t I? You were in paradise, and I’m sending you out—for a whim . . . You must try and forgive me, my dear. You must try and believe that—that it wasn’t your paradise only, but mine as well. To be there, as we were, in my bedroom, with only the light of the fire—well, I’ll never be really happy until we are there again.”

“There’s no one like you,” I said.

She put up her mouth and I kissed her and held her close.

“I’ll be back in four hours, my sweet. Oh, and Sabre’s plate, and I never watered the floor.”

“I’ll see to that, I promise.”

As I came to the foot of the steps, I looked up and flashed my torch. Then the door was shut above me, and Sabre and she were gone.

Twenty minutes later I fought my way out of the bushes that were masking the tunnel’s mouth.

Something at least I was spared, for Geoffrey drove up to the inn five minutes before his time.

“Well, I’m damned,” he said. “And where the deuce have you been?”

“I’ll tell you later,” said I, and put the note into his hand. “And now come out of that car. I’ve got to get back.”

“Get back where?” said Geoffrey.

“I’ll tell you later,” said I. “You read that note.”

My cousin stared. Then he drew out the sheet of paper and read the message it bore. When he had done, he looked me full in the eye.

“You shouldn’t have opened it, should you?”

It was my turn to stare.

“As a matter of fact, I didn’t. She’d sealed it before I came down—in. Then she broke it open and read it to me herself.”

Geoffrey fingered his chin.

“Well, you can’t go like this,” he said, getting out of the car. “I mean——”

“Geoffrey,” I said, “believe me, I must get back. I’ll get into touch again as soon as ever I can, but, however strange you

find it, I can't wait now."

"Only one moment," said Geoffrey, taking my arm.

Despite my protests he haled me up the steps and into the inn.

In the hall I planted my feet.

"Look here, Geoffrey," I said. "I don't want to have a row, but *I've got to get back to her without one instant's delay*. I wouldn't have dreamed of coming, but she couldn't send a servant and—well, there was no other way. I'd have left the note with Barley, but she wouldn't have that. She's got to know that you've got it and have promised to do as she says."

"Oh, well, here goes," said Geoffrey, and hit me under the jaw as hard as he could.

When I came to my senses, I was lying on the floor of a car that was travelling fast. My wrists and my ankles were bound and my mouth was gagged. Barley was seated above me, watching my face.

As I tried to sit up, he pushed me back on the pillows which made my bed.

“Lie quiet a bit, sir,” he said, “and you’ll soon be as right as rain.”

To this day I do not know why I did not go out of my mind.

My head was splitting, for Geoffrey knew how to hit: the wound in my buttock was sore: but these things were nothing at all compared with the rage and anguish possessing my soul—impotent rage, white hot, that quenched its fire in my brain: inarticulate anguish that filled my heart with its cries.

They say that I fought like a madman, but that was because I was mad: Barley had to throw himself on me, to keep me down. And then at last I fainted. . . .

I do not think Barley knew it, for my senses had hardly left me before they returned: but I think that discretion came with them, for then I saw that to struggle and fight was hopeless and that I could avail myself nothing till the gag was out of my mouth. And so, to feign resignation, I lay quite still where I was and shut my eyes. And that was my undoing, for after a moment or

two I fell asleep.

I was, I suppose, exhausted—body and soul. And Nature leaped at the chance to ‘knit up the ravell’d sleeve.’ Be that as it may, I slept—and once I was sleeping, I slept the sleep of the dead.

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Though the car fled on, I knew nothing, and I never knew when it stopped: I was lifted out, still sleeping, and though my bonds were loosened, I never stirred.

And while I slept, Lady Helena Yorick was playing her part.

\* \* \* \* \*

The song of a brook woke me, and I propped myself on an elbow to gather my wits.

The next instant I was afoot and was staring wildly about me. . . . The wooded peak of a mountain looked placidly back—and a pride of beeches was smiling and a chapter of gray-green rocks was casting its stately shadow upon the most vivid of swards.

It was then that I noticed the sunshine.

This was rich and golden. It was not the clear sunshine of morning: it was not the brilliant sunshine that dazzles midday: it was that mellow sunshine, that generous, lenient liquor that makes glad the heart of man.

I was staring at the watch on my wrist—and the dial seemed to shiver before me, as though afraid to tell me the truth.

It was half-past four. I had slept for more than nine hours.

The dial of my watch grew misty. I felt the tears beginning to leave my eyes. One of them fell upon the dial.

So I stood for a moment.

Then I flung myself down and buried my face in the grass.

\* \* \* \* \*

“Come, come, old fellow,” said Geoffrey, “you mustn’t take it so ill.”

I made no answer. I dared not trust my voice.

“You’d have done the same,” said my cousin. “Damn it, John, I couldn’t ignore such a hint.”

I sat up at that, and dashed the tears from my face.

“Hint? What hint? My God, if you knew what you’d done!”

Geoffrey raised his eyebrows.

“I don’t know what she read you,” he said. “But I don’t think she read you that.”

As he spoke, he gave me a paper—Helena’s note.

*Mr. Bohun,*

*For the love of God keep John with you. Use any violence you like. He must not return to the castle and no one on earth must know that he is with you. For the love of Christ don't fail me.*

*Helena Yorick.*

I think something snapped within me—but that was all. I think, perhaps, the silver cord was loosed. As a gust that heralds the tempest, the scene in Helena's bedroom swept into and out of my mind.

Very slowly I folded the note.

“No,” I said, “you’re quite right. She didn’t read that.” I laughed shortly. “You’d have seen through it, of course: nine out of ten people would. But you must remember that I’m no ordinary fool. Besides, I trusted her blindly—trusted *and loved* her blindly. . . . So you see it was awfully easy to have me on.” I laughed again. “It’s rather like fooling a dog or a baby child. A dog, I think. *Your* dog. You’ve decided to have him destroyed, so you take him out for a walk and stop at the vet’s. *He* doesn’t know. He doesn’t care where you go, so long as he can go with you—be with his god. He loves you blindly, you see. He’s not the faintest idea that you’re going to do him in. You can speak to the vet. in his presence—‘I want this dog destroyed.’ You’re perfectly safe. He’ll lick your hand while you’re speaking, if only you’ll give him the chance. . . . But—if—that—dog’s—eyes—were opened. . . . If when you were gone and he was standing, waiting, with his eager nose to the threshold, straining his ears for some signal of your return—if

then by some magic that dog was made aware of the truth . . .”

“Now, look here, old fellow,” said Geoffrey, “I’m not going to take any sides till I know where I am. I want to hear your story from first to last. Don’t leave out any details. This show’s bung full of detail, and details count.”

I plucked at the grass.

“I don’t know that I care to tell you.”

“Take your time,” said Geoffrey. “But we don’t leave here till you do.”

“I don’t know that I want to leave here.”

“No more do I,” said Geoffrey. “It’s a very attractive spot, and I’m glad of a change.”

I lay back and stared at the sky.

I felt a curious detachment from all that ten hours ago had been my life. Looking back, I seemed to be looking across some unbridgeable depth. I had strutted and fretted there—on the farther side. It was I that had stopped the Carlotta, strained my back moving the Rolls, kissed Helena Yorick’s lips. I had done these things—over there, on the farther side. They belonged to no dream. *But they did not belong to me.* God knew what they were part of—I only knew that they were not part of my life . . . for I was here, but they were over there, on the farther side.

I think the truth is that my interest in Helena Yorick had

suddenly died: and since that had filled my being, for the moment my life was empty as never before. I did not regret the lady—I was neither happy nor sad. I simply had no material upon which my emotions could work. The bitterness I had shown Geoffrey was that of a savage critic—not of an injured man. I was impersonal.

So much for the state of mind which my abrupt disillusion had brought about. For the disillusion itself, a jagged flash of forked lightning had riven my heaven in twain. Helena Yorick had deceived me. Not Geoffrey, or Barley, or any familiar friend, but Helena Yorick—Nell. If fifty million archangels had with one voice proclaimed that this would take place, I would have laughed them to scorn. And yet it was true. Nell—my heart, my darling, Nell had looked into my eyes and fooled me to the top of my bent. The utterly impossible had happened. The ideal I had carved out of marble had crumbled away.

If I had had any impulse, it would, I am sure, have been a desire to withdraw. But the shock had rendered me passive. I did not care. Surveying the position, however, I perceived that I must go on. Nine days ago my cousin and I had allied ourselves with the Countess: the object of that alliance was to bring Pharaoh down: until that object was gained, I could neither stand still nor withdraw. Besides, the girl was in trouble, and I had broken her bread. . . . And yet—how could I go on? The Countess had pledged my word—the parole she had given was broken. If honour meant anything . . .

Something uneasily, I decided that my honour was not involved. I had let her play my hand, with Pharaoh's consent. If she had cheated—well, that was Pharaoh's look-out. He had

trusted her, as I had, and she had let him down. Well, that was not my fault, and now it was far too late to put back any cards. There was only one thing to be done—the game must go on and from now I would play my own hand.

I sat up and looked at my cousin.

“I suppose I may as well tell you,” I said.

“I suppose so,” said Geoffrey, yawning.

“Where shall I start?”

“From where I left you at Villach, just over a week ago.”

A full half hour went by before I had done, for my cousin asked many questions and instantly pulled me up if ever I slurred my facts. When once I protested, he looked at me very hard.

“I don’t trust your judgment,” he said.

When at last the recital was over, he got to his feet.

“I’ve got to digest this,” he said. “I shan’t be long.”

Whilst he strolled, I lay flat once more and stared at the sky, and though I would gladly have stopped them, my thoughts ramped back to the antics which I had lately performed.

Helena Yorick had piped, and I had danced. That was as much as it came to. But I had trusted the piper, and the piper had played me false. No artifice had been spared to lead me astray.

She had piped me into her bedroom and into her arms. She had played upon my senses without restraint. And the notes I had found so precious—so sweet and true and natural, were all of them false. . . .

My cousin was standing before me, regarding his watch.

“From what you tell me,” he said, “the countryside appears to be littered with cars: our immediate vicinity, however, seems to have been neglected. We must, therefore, wait for Barley. He’s a job of work to do and he won’t be here for another hour and a half. Still, that’ll give us time to settle two or three points. And between you and me, it’s as well that you had that sleep, for unless I’m much mistaken, you won’t have time for sleep for the next few hours.

“With regard to the promise Lady Helena gave to Pharaoh. . . . If you hadn’t been overwrought, I like to believe that your reason would have told you that from every point of view that promise was no more binding than a bucket of Glauber’s salt. For one thing, it was exacted—she promised under duress. For another, let’s quote his own words. *Because you have scruples you are weighted clean out of this race. I am not so embarrassed—I never am.* He makes that arresting statement, and then within five minutes he has the blasted effrontery to prove it up to the hilt.

“No wonder he left the room quickly: he was probably worried to death that Dewdrop would burst out laughing before he could get him outside. If you must have another reason, Pharaoh let you both go because he was stuck. As long as you two sat there, he could not move. More. The warden’s

suspicious were aroused and the house was full of your men: his only chance was to take up the rôle he asked for—the rôle of the Countess' guest.

“So much for the promise to Pharaoh. Now for the Count. He must, of course, be held till Pharaoh is dead. Barley's attending to that. Last night, at *The Reaping Hook*, he very properly held his tongue, but he knew just as well as you what a valuable prize you'd made. Like guest, like host, you know. In fact, to be honest, we'd been hoping to make it ourselves. You mustn't think we've been idle. We've watched and listened and learned a whale of a lot. And the Count's removal stood very high on our list. Well, as I say, Barley's attending to that. That's the job he's on now—shunting the Count.

“And now for you. I'm not going to labour the point, because you seem so sore, but I suppose you realize that you were—er—evacuated in order to save your life. I mean, you can't really believe that Pharaoh, if he can help it, is going to let you live.”

“I haven't really thought about it,” said I. “He's certainly tried to kill me and if he gets the chance I imagine he'll try again.”

“Don't imagine,” said Geoffrey. “Believe. Believe that he'll go on trying for the rest of *his* life. Your death-warrant was signed that morning at Annabel, ten days ago. I said so myself that evening. How many times since then has that warrant been counter-signed? As long as you're useful, he'll use you—be sure of that. He meant to squeeze the Countess through you. But when he had got what he wanted, you were to die.

“And that brings us to her ladyship. This appears to be delicate ground, so I won’t say much. But, if you please, ask yourself this. Why didn’t she leave with you last night, as she did five nights ago? A possible answer is that she may have thought you’d prove mulish—jib at breaking her promise to the rottenest swine that ever took a girl by the throat. But the great probability is that she wanted to do a deal. She meant to see Pharaoh and ask him the price of your life.

“Well, there we are. Looking back I can see the many mistakes I’ve made. The biggest one was going with Barley to Salzburg yesterday week. If I hadn’t done that, by now I should have been painting again and you’d have been leading the healthy, aimless existence which I had hoped would develop what virtues you have. However, as luck will have it, it’s not too late. Thanks to Helena Yorick’s efforts, you’re still alive, though why she should bother about you is more than I can conceive. . . .

“Now this is what I propose. As soon as Barley returns we make at once for Plumage and close down Bugle—*not* Rush. Rush is ripe for secession: rats leave a sinking ship. He may have something to tell us. If not, we proceed to the castle—complete with Rush. We use the tunnel and footbridge and Rush can unlock the doors. Then we get hold of the warden and put him wise. From him we can learn——”

And there he stopped dead, with his eyes on the foliage behind me and his pipe halfway to his mouth.

As I turned to follow his gaze, Sabre leaped out of the beechwood and over the brook.

For a moment the great dog nosed me, moving his tail, and then, before I could think, he was gone the way he had come.

\* \* \* \* \*

I was just in time to see Sabre pass over a shoulder and flash out of view. Heavily I made for the spot. Somewhere beyond his point of disappearance Helena Yorick was moving, looking for me.

I dreaded the interview: I dreaded the useless inquest which she and I were to hold. What did the cause of death matter? The thing was dead.

The shoulder was masking a valley from which the sunshine was gone. The woods above it were smiling and the mountain beyond was lifting a radiant head, but the valley was grave and cool as the nave of a church.

At first I could not see Sabre. Then I saw him leaving the valley to climb its opposite side. And then I saw his mistress, standing above in the sunlight, with one of her hands to her throat.

As I saw her she waved, and I answered. Then with one consent we began to go down to the valley that lay between.

The day was yet hot, and the cool of the glen was refreshing beyond compare. I never remember such fragrance. Its perfume rose from the soil: the verdure issued all manner of lovely scents: and as I came up to the pretty, tumbling water I could not only feel the cool, I could actually smell the sweetness with which it was charging the air. Such

magic I think must be rare, for though I have proved the country—hill and dale and forest—at every hour of the day, I have never known a perfumery such as that little glen or any other water that smelled as sweet as it looked.

Helena was regarding me straitly.

“Is this your greeting, John?”

I stood very still.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

I pulled out the note she had written and looked her full in the eyes.

“I know,” she said. “I did it because I loved you.”

I tore the note to pieces and let them fall.

“You’ve done that to my faith,” I said.

“I see,” said Helena, slowly. “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it.”

I shrugged my shoulders.

“I suppose so,” I said. “I don’t know. You’re so much more clever than me. But something inside me’s broken. I can’t pretend.”

“I know you can’t, but I can. Every woman can. But I only pretended, John, to save your life.”

“I know, I know,” I said. “And I’m—much obliged. But I can’t get as far as your motive. If I hadn’t been mad about you, you couldn’t have had me on. Even so, I jibbed at your tale. And so you used our communion to get you home. We’d breathed the same breath, you and I, and you invoked that—that rubric to bring me up to the scratch.”

Helena lifted her head.

“And so I’m damned,” she said.

“I shouldn’t think so,” I said helplessly. “But it means we speak different tongues. Oh, can’t you see what I mean? I thought it was I that induced the light in your eyes, but now you’ve shown me that you can switch it on.”

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“Is it any good my saying I can’t? That when it came it was you that—brought it there?”

“Helena,” I said, “we can’t argue. Our words have got different values. Love, light, faith—these words mean one thing to me and another to you. I can’t define love, but——”

“I can,” said Helena, quietly.

In desperation I put my hands over my eyes.

“Look here,” I said. “If you like to think that I’ve weighed this wretched business and decided to turn you down, then you must think it. I can only tell you you’re wrong. I haven’t weighed it: I’ve never decided a thing. When Geoffrey gave me that note, something inside me died. I think it was the power of caring. . . . I’m awfully sorry—I suppose I’m built that way, but it isn’t

my fault.”

“And this last week . . . the times that we’ve spent together, on the road, in the forest and—and elsewhere . . . last night and the night before . . . all these things mean nothing? Their memory leaves you cold?”

I nodded miserably.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “but it’s true. I remember these things as though they belonged to some film that I’d been to see. I know that I helped them to happen, but now somehow they don’t seem to belong to me.” I looked desperately about me, because, I suppose, I felt that I was at bay. “You know, it’s hopeless, Helena. I can’t explain, because you can’t understand. When I say that I’m sorry, I’m lying. I’m not even sorry—I’m numb. You’ve taken from me the very power of caring—there’s nothing left.”

There was a little silence, which the busy fret of the water seemed to enrich. Sabre, his mission accomplished, was idly exploring the lawn upon which we stood, considering the evidence it offered of animal life. Helena stood like a statue, regarding her folded hands. And I stood still before her, with my eyes on the brooch that flashed from the breast of her frock. Though she must have been tired, she looked as fresh as ever, but her country shoes were scratched and one of her stockings was grazed.

At last she lifted her head.

“I can still care,” she said slowly. “I have the power of being sorry—or glad. And I’m glad this has happened—thankful, and

that's the truth. It's a jolt in a way, of course: but although we don't speak the same tongue, I think you'll get what I mean. It's very much better that this should have happened now than in six months' time. And now I'm going to speak plainly. . . . Don't think I'm pleading my cause. That's not my way. I've never pleaded my cause, and I never shall. I make known my will, and people observe it or not, as they feel inclined. Nothing on earth would induce me to marry you now. You're the one man on earth I can't marry—get hold of that. But I want to show you your trouble, because—well, I owe you something and perhaps one day it'll save you from making the same mistake.

“You are an idealist, John. That's one of the reasons why you appealed to me. I love idealists. I'm one myself. But idealists must live—and, what is still more important, *they've got to let live*. They've got to remember that they are ‘of the earth, earthy’ and that so is everyone else. An idealist must be human, must keep his feet on the ground. If not, he becomes a nuisance—he carries his joke too far. You can't see that just now: you can't translate what I say: but I think you'll be able to one day, and then you'll remember my words.

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“You ‘can't get as far as my motive’—that's what you said. What you really mean is that you cannot see my motive, because you are looking too high. Your head's in the air and your eyes are fixed on something that's not of this world: but my motive is natural and human and belongs to the earth. It's a pity you ‘can't get as far,’ for the motive counts.

“You see, if I had deceived you—and, of course, I don't deny that I did, I laid myself out to deceive you: I used every art that I knew—well, if I had deceived you with any shameful object .

. . let's say to smooth my path to some other man, then your estimate would be true, for by using our understanding to let you down I should have committed a sin which not even an angel from heaven could ever forgive. But we both of us know that what I did I did because I loved you. . . . And when you come down to earth, as I think you will, you'll see that that makes a difference. . . . And something more you'll see, when you lower your eyes. *You'll see what it cost me to do it.* I debased our lovely coinage . . . to save your life.

“Some people would call you a fool, but I know better than that. You see, I know you so well. You're so very simple and downright, and Honesty is your god. That worship and your unbridled idealism are, as it were, the lenses through which you see. And so what I did looks monstrous. . . . It's because of that that I'm neither angry nor hurt—only thankful. If you had weighed me and had dared to find me wanting . . .”

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Five hundred years of seigniory loaded the protasis: the cold majesty of a lion seemed to look out of her eyes: her repose became suddenly fatal—that of some lovely idol from which there was no appeal.

Something was stirring within me. . . . The challenge had stabbed some emotion that was not dead.

“Finish the sentence,” I said. “That's just what I've done.”

For a moment she regarded me curiously.

Then—

“No, you haven't,” she said. “You think you have: but you

haven't. If you could speak my language, you'd understand what I mean. But that's by the way. As I said just now, I—am—thankful that this has happened. . . . To be honest, I knew it *might* happen. I saw its shadow while I was writing that note. And I very nearly added *Don't let him know I've done this*. And then I thought 'No,' because that was a coward's way. I wasn't prepared to deceive you . . . to save myself."

With a sudden air of pleasure she looked about. Then she whipped off her hat and pushed back her hair from her temples, as though to make the most of the cool.

"How fragrant this valley is! It's like a church turned into a perfumer's shop." She drew a luxurious breath. Then she looked at the rill, took two or three steps towards it and breathed again. "How very strange. I can actually smell the water. Is it imagination, or am I right?"

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I answered with an effort.

"It's not imagination," I said.

The eager look left her face and she stood very still. I could see that her eyes saw nothing.

"I know," she said, half to herself. "Don't rub it in."

Again something stirred within me . . . something that seemed to be broken. The movement hurt.

I saw her brace herself and lift up her head. Then she whistled for Sabre.

As the Alsatian came bounding—

“And now where’s your cousin?” she said. “I fancy the game’s nearly over. But I’d like him to hear my news and then we can settle the best way to go in and win.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As once before, the three of us sat on the turf, and, as once before, Helena Yorick was speaking with my cousin’s eyes on her face. But mine were upon the ground.

“If I had to give my story a title, I should call it ‘How Pharaoh was hoist with his own petard.’ But that wouldn’t be strictly correct, because, as you’ll hear, it was the infallible Dewdrop that let him down.

“As John has told you, I saw him out of Yorick just about twenty past three. Then I went straight to bed, and after a little I managed to get to sleep. At half past six I was awakened by the most awful din. Sabre was barking like mad and the fire-alarm of the castle was going all out. Then I heard men running and voices, and I’d hardly got my dressing-gown round me before old Florin was speaking and knocking upon my door.

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“Well, you’ll never guess what had happened. A watchman had found blood on the terrace—a trail of blood that led him up to John’s room.”

She paused there and turned to me.

“I’d no idea that Dewdrop had stabbed you so deep. I don’t know why, but I thought he’d only just pricked you. It never

entered my head that you were bleeding like that.”

I said nothing, and at once she resumed her tale.

“The moment I heard the news I saw the infinite value of holding my tongue. I knew whose blood it was and why it was there, but I felt that, left to itself, that blood would cry out with an eloquence which I could never approach. All the representations it made might not be strictly true, but that was not my affair. I was not going to say, for instance, that it came from a wound in the fleshy part of the leg. It might have come from the mouth. . . . The harder I thought, the brighter the outlook appeared. By using you so roughly, Dewdrop had stirred up a regular hornets’ nest: it seemed to me more than likely that with a very little direction the hornets would turn their attention to Pharaoh and him.

“I told the warden to rouse you and, if he could get no answer, to break down the door. Very wisely, you’d left this unbarred—I shouldn’t have thought of that. Of course your room was empty, but I went in myself and looked carefully round. You see, I was sure that you must have staunched the wound and I wanted to see if you’d left any traces of this. But, again, you’d been very careful. And so I was free to give the hornets a tip.

“I turned to the warden.

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““Where does this trail lead to?”

“Poor Florin stared.

““But it leads to this chamber,” he said.

“‘Nonsense,’ said I. ‘It leads *from* here. Some hurt has been done Mr. Spencer and he has been taken away.’

“The truth of the fiction was obvious. The hornets saw it at once. Four or five servants rushed off to study the end of the trail.

“‘Who was aware,’ I demanded, ‘that Mr. Spencer was to be lodged in this room?’

“Florin ticked off the suspects.

“‘Your ladyship, myself, the valet, Rachel, both the night-watchmen . . .’

“He hesitated there, so I dug in the spurs.

“‘Is that absolutely all?’

“‘Captain Faning knew,’ said Florin.

“I gave a most lifelike start.

“‘Captain Faning!’ I cried. ‘So he did. And his servant, too.’

“It was Florin’s turn to start.

“‘And his servant?’ he cried.

“‘Yes, yes,’ I cried. ‘Both of them knew. His servant was there last night. I didn’t know it when I was speaking to you. *But he was behind the curtain.*—I don’t know why.’

“Then I called upon Florin to find you—I gave all sorts of wild reasons why you must be found. And then I fainted, and good, honest Florin caught me and carried me down to my room.

“So you see I’m quite a good actress. . . .

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“Well, the hunt was up all right. Talk about sensation. . . . I could smell the lust for vengeance. The hornets were fairly off.

“I’d no time to bathe, but I made the best of a shower. You see, my one idea was to get down to Annabel as soon as I decently could.

“Before I was out of the bathroom, I heard the incredible news.

“‘Captain Faning’ and his servant were gone.

“What had happened seems fairly clear.

“When the fire-alarm went, Dewdrop instantly rushed to Pharaoh’s room. The fire-alarm told them nothing, but of course it aroused suspicions of the gravest possible kind. In case the worst had happened, Pharaoh decided at once to secure his line of retreat. So he sent Dewdrop down to the Rolls, with orders to bluff the porters and get her outside the castle at any cost. He himself held on—he actually dressed—for though the castle was humming, for all he knew it was nothing to do with him. But when he heard the tramp of ‘the halberdiers,’ he knew he was done: and when ‘the stout old sheriff’ knocked on his door, he threw in his hand. They had to break the door down to get into his room, but those doors are very strong, and long before they were in, Pharaoh had left by the window and he and the Rolls and Dewdrop were out of

sight. If you like to say they walked out, it's perfectly true. Pharaoh let himself down by two sheets in the time-honoured way, and as for Dewdrop—well, he had no porters to bluff. I'm rather afraid they made two of 'the halberdiers.'

“The position might be far better, for Pharaoh's at large. Still, it's very much better than it was. He's not only out of Yorick without any loss of life, but his flight has proclaimed him guilty of shedding blood. Nothing that I could have said could have done the trick so well. For one thing only, I never could have created such a menacing atmosphere. I really and truly believe it was that that got him out. The barometric pressure was terrific. I think he must have known that unless he ran before it, his hour was come.

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“Well, the rest was very easy. I sent for old Florin and told him most of the truth. I told him that 'Faning' was Pharaoh and that Pharaoh was after the gold: that Pharaoh had killed young Florin and that since you, John, could prove this, he was going to take your life: that he'd only spared you till now—well, to serve his own ends: that, though that blood was your blood, for the moment I knew you were safe: but I said that your death was appointed and that, Pharaoh being Pharaoh, nothing on earth could save you—except his death.”

She turned to Geoffrey.

“I don't have to ask if you agree with me there.”

My cousin shrugged his shoulders.

“I go rather further,” he said. “If Pharaoh may be believed, Pharaoh is not in the habit of showing restraint. Yet he's shown

very great forbearance where John is concerned. Time and again it's John that has twisted his tail. John saw young Florin's body and knows where it lies: thanks to John, he had to leave Annabel: because of John, you left Yorick and disappeared: but for John's help you couldn't have abducted the Count. . . . Well, those are the sort of pinpricks that make forbearance wear thin." He turned to me. "And then you go and call him an 'insolent swine.'" He raised his eyes to heaven. "You know, restraint's like a cord. It's been known to snap. And all you got was half an inch of cold steel—in a most appropriate place . . . instead of being plugged in the stomach or shot through the head."

"It's easy to talk," I said, "in a glade like this. I've shown quite a lot of forbearance, when all's said and done. Last night Pharaoh strained it to breaking point. This morning you did your bit. And now you're twisting my tail. . . . My life belongs to me. Whether I save it or lose it or risk it or chuck it away is for me to decide. When you talk as you did just now, I've a fellow feeling for Rush. I know I'm a blasted fool, but I do hate being told so. And it doesn't do any good. I may not be fit in your eyes to take care of myself, but, until you can get me certified insane, I've got the right to do it . . . and, like all congenital idiots, I rather value that right."

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There was a little silence.

Then—

"I apologise," said Geoffrey. "There's a good deal in what you say: and I think I should feel as you do, if I were to stand in your shoes. And please don't think for one moment that I would

ever call you a fool. I only hope that if I had been placed as you were, I should have done so well. As for your life, I value it more than you do: and I don't like to see you so careless of something I've helped to look after and come to prize." He turned to Helena. "All my fault," he said. "As far as restraint's concerned. I'm afraid I'm a pretty bad third—or fourth. Won't you go on, please?"

Helena nodded.

233

"There's not much more to be told. I said nothing of Valentine, of course. His return now might not be fatal, but he's very much better away. At a quarter to eight I left the castle a fortress and drove to Annabel."

"Unarmed and unaccompanied?" said Geoffrey.

Helena shrugged her shoulders.

"The risk was slight, and how could I take a servant to where I'd left Valentine? Yet it was vital that you should know at once that Pharaoh was out. To my dismay, you were gone: but, as your room door was locked, I guessed you'd left Valentine there and so would come back.

"Well, I took a room and had breakfast and talked to the man and his wife. They knew me, of course: but I couldn't help wondering what they'd say if they knew that the Count of Yorick was lying two doors away. Then at last Barley returned about half past ten.

"Well, we held a consultation, Barley and I. His orders were at once to remove the Count, and, much as I wanted to see you, I

felt that for every reason those orders must take first place. You see, though Barley knew where he'd left you, neither he nor I had a map: and though he's plainly a shark at finding his way, his directions to me were enough to break anyone's heart. I've been looking for you for six hours. I sat down and cried once. Sabre'll bear me out."

"Great heart," said Geoffrey quickly, and touched her hand.

Helena smiled.

"The glory to Sabre," she said. "And for all the good I've done, I might have given Barley a message—he'll be here in half an hour. I was able to help him, though. I diverted the household's attention while he got my wretched brother into the car. As for his ultimate disposal—well, when I look at you, I feel humble. I acknowledge a master brain. 'The Gordian knot of it he will unloose, Familiar as his garter.'" 234

"Pure chance," said Geoffrey lightly. "I'd painted the river just there, and the monks were very kindly and obviously simply stamping to use their skill. You know. Any friend of mine . . ."

This told me the truth of the matter. I knew where Valentine was. And that was some sixty miles off—in a private ward. This stood remote, its windows commanding the cloister of the convent to which it belonged. The only patients admitted were those alleged to have been bitten by dogs that were mad. The treatment lasted a fortnight. . . .

"Well, there you are," said Helena. "There are the facts. And now, if you please, Mr. Bohun, what do we do?"

“We take you back to Yorick. I shan’t know a moment’s peace till you’re where you belong.”

“And then you’re wrong,” said Helena. “I’m going to see the fun.”

\* \* \* \* \*

In the discussion which followed I took no part and indeed I scarcely listened to what was said, for my thoughts would not leave the scene in the fragrant valley and at last, since I did not care, I tired of haling them back and let them be. Like so many flies, they hovered over that inquest, alighting on question and answer, feeding on look and accent and returning again and again to the graze on Helena’s leg. This was slight, but the skin had been more than bruised, for the silk of her delicate stocking was smeared with blood.

I rose and moved down stream. There by the side of the water I sought some fern. I was gone some time, for the finer fronds were rare, but after a while I had gathered a little bunch. This I drenched with water. . . .

Helena and Geoffrey stopped talking as I approached.

“You’ve hurt your leg,” I said slowly. “My handkerchief’s too far gone, but this will serve as a sponge.” I stooped to lay the fern by her side. “I hope it doesn’t hurt very much.”

“Thanks awfully,” said Helena, quickly. “No, it hurt when it happened. But now it doesn’t hurt any more.”

I turned and made for the road, while my cousin followed

behind. . . .

As I reached the stretch of macadam—

“There’s nothing for it,” said Geoffrey. “We shall all have to sleep at Yorick, because of this wilful girl. Perhaps she’ll see reason to-morrow. How the devil can she lie out all night? She’s all in now.”

“She can’t, of course,” said I. “But what’s that to do with us?”

“Only this,” said my cousin. “That she won’t sleep at Yorick unless we do. Her very words.”

Although I made no answer, I there and then determined that, now that Pharaoh was gone, nothing—not even violence should bring me within those walls. Yorick for me was a graveyard: the thought of its hospitality seemed to tear something inside me—some vital that had no feeling an hour ago.

We strolled the road in silence, from time to time turning about.

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After a while my cousin pushed back his hat.

“As a child,” he said, “I never liked blind man’s buff. And when it was mixed blind man’s buff—boys and girls, I mean—I liked it less. That dislike I have never lost. . . .” He put his hands to his head. “I’d give a hell of a lot to know where Pharaoh is.”

I looked at him sharply. The last few words he had spoken half to himself, but his tone was the tone of a man who is worried to

death. Because I was fond of Geoffrey, the instinct to share his trouble lifted its head, and in that moment my apathy fell away.

Pharaoh. Yes, where was Pharaoh? And what would Pharaoh do?

As I asked myself these questions, my newly-awakened interest leapt into life, my darkness was suddenly lightened and I saw that here to my hand was the very distraction I needed to drive my distemper away: the location and destruction of Pharaoh and Pharaoh's men.

No longer mutinous, my thoughts fell upon the conception, tooth and nail. They gorged themselves upon it, like so many beasts. Action—violent, revengeful action was the antidote nonpareil to the poison which I had drunk. And I was free to take action. .

..

Yorick and its treasure be damned—I had my own quarrel with Pharaoh. Ten days ago he had murdered a fellow-man: I had sworn to bring him to justice, and so I would. More—a hundred times more. My duty to Helena was over: the yoke that had cumbered my efforts was off my neck.

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I began to think very hard.

Pharaoh would be close to the castle. Not, of course, at Plumage: 'the rooms wot the Willies had' would be empty once more. But Pharaoh would be close to the castle, unless he had thrown in his hand. And that was unthinkable. For one thing only, he had to have my life.

Still, if I were dead, Pharaoh would be close to the castle—

close to the gold. And he would be close to his treasure, because, if he was to have it, he had got to be quick. . . . Rush was a rotten apple, and rotten apples corrupt. And Pharaoh himself had done nothing to stop the rot. Reverse had succeeded reverse. And to keep such a gang together one had to do more than fail. Pharaoh would be close to the castle because he was up against Time.

I had no doubt at all that he meant to attack.

The position was formidable, for Yorick was up in arms. But what were its walls and sentries, when more than a million sovereigns were lying within? And since finesse had failed, Pharaoh was going to do what Pharaoh had done before. He was going to commit burglary. Once within the castle, a gang of four such men could have its own way. What were footmen and grooms and porters? Only troops could cope with the violence which these felons were ready to offer to gain their ends. Three or four writhing servants, and the Countess must open her cellar and bid them take what they would. Who knew better than Pharaoh that ruthlessness pays?

I remembered that Helena had told me that when she went to Salzburg she carried a thousand sovereigns: that these were contained in two boxes: that each of these weighed nine pounds. Allowing for the weight of the boxes, I reckoned that the Rolls could carry at least fifty thousand sovereigns in canvas bags. And fifty thousand sovereigns meant seventy thousand pounds. . . .

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The calculation bore fruit.

Before I had finished my sum, I knew where Pharaoh would be. And that was as close to the castle as he could bring the Rolls.

A moment's reflection assured me that Pharaoh would make no use of the entrance drive. That was too dangerous. From what Helena had told me, I knew that no tracks led from it and that nowhere could a car leave it because of the well-kept ditches on either side. But the Rolls must be berthed out of sight, until her moment arrived. . . .

I was ready to wager a fortune that the Rolls was now standing in Starlight—the lovely coppice less than two miles from Yorick, the coppice whose branches leaned over the gray high road. A blind track struggled into Starlight—a curling, grass-grown ribbon that lost itself and its meaning in less than a hundred yards. I knew. I had used it myself. There the Rolls had rested, while Helena and I sat side by side in silence, waiting in vain for the drone of the enemy's car. And now she was there again. And where the Rolls was, was Pharaoh: her way was his line of advance and his line of retreat. The thing stood out. In the woods between Starlight and Yorick—somewhere there Pharaoh would be.

I began to wonder how Pharaoh would enter the castle. If Rush could reach a postern. . . . But how could they cross the bridge?

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Here, with a shock of dismay, I remembered that I was unarmed. For a moment my hopes seemed dust. Then I saw that this was a matter in which I must use my wits. My cousin would arm me, if I could show him good cause. This should not be difficult. I was so simple a fool that he would never doubt

my good faith. I began to think how to deceive him. . . .

“This home-coming stunt,” I said. “Won’t Pharaoh be there to receive us—at the mouth of the entrance drive?”

“As like as not,” said my cousin. “The only thing is that unless he heard or saw Lady Helena leave the castle, he’ll never imagine that either of you are outside. So he won’t be ready. But we’ll have to go by all out. All the same, I’m damned uneasy. I can sympathise with detectives who are answerable for the safety of Royalty. And I know very well what they’d do. They’d take her straight to Salzburg and put a guard on her room.” He gave his head to the air. “I’m tempted to go by Plumage: but, to tell you the truth, I’m afraid to get out of the car. If we meet the fellow on foot, we’re damned well done. Will you go with her in her car?”

“No,” said I. “I won’t. I’ll follow with Barley behind.”

“All right,” said Geoffrey, “all right. But Barley’s the better shot, so you’d better drive.”

I thought before replying.

“Incidentally,” I said, “I haven’t a pistol to fire—or any sort of weapon, for the matter of that.”

“You won’t need one, if you drive.”

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“I’d rather have something,” said I. “I’ve been caught bending once through being unarmed.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” said Geoffrey. He put his hand to his

side and unfastened a hunting-knife.

“Knives seem to be your portion, but, except my pistol, I haven’t anything else.”

The blade was sheathed, and I slid the knife into my pocket without a word.

“And allow me to add,” said my cousin, “that I am immensely relieved to see you showing some signs of taking thought for yourself. I take off my hat to valour: but to valour plus discretion I go on my knees.”

I suppose my heart should have smote me: instead, I fear it was leaping—to see how well the fool was playing the knave.

And at that moment we heard the drone of a car.

Two minutes later Barley drew up beside us in a smother of dust.

“O.K.?” said Geoffrey, shortly.

“Every time, sir,” said Barley. “It couldn’t have gone more easy if you’d been there. The old fathers, they wasn’t half pleased. His lordship come to his senses as we was gettin’ him out, but I don’t think he cared what happened—his head was too bad. An’ when he saw the monks an’ the gateway, I think he thought he was dead. Anyway he shut his eyes tight and started in on Latin for all he was worth. I gave them your note and I showed them the ‘punctured wound.’ I’d made it with my trousers’ buckle, same as you said. That was good enough for them. Four of them carried him off, an’ two of the others rushed

off to heat the irons. I only 'ope they don't take his leg off."

My cousin strove to steady his voice.

"Hush," he said. "Her ladyship knows quite enough."

I turned to see Helena approaching.

"All's well," said Geoffrey. "Your brother is safely bestowed, if not in Abraham's bosom at least in the arms of the Church. And now shall we be going? I don't want to get in too early, but, if we can find a nice inn, I think we'd all be the better for breaking bread."

Helena nodded.

"I'll sit with Barley," she said. "I've got to try and show him the way to my car."

Ten minutes later we sighted a good-looking coupé, tucked under a rock that looked like a leaning pulpit, by the side of a fall.

As Barley slowed down—

"And now," said Helena . . .

"May I come with you?" said my cousin. "I'd like you to drive."

"Very well. But Barley must lead. I don't know the way."

This was not at all to my liking: but happily Geoffrey stepped

in.

“Barley shall lead,” he said, “till we’ve eaten and drunk. After that, I’d like to go first. Please do as I say.”

Helena hesitated. Then—

“All right,” she said abruptly, and left the car.

Her manner made me uneasy. There seemed no doubt that she wanted to have me in view. But all that Geoffrey could see was that, if we were to pass Pharaoh, the car that was leading was more likely to pass him unscathed.

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After some fourteen miles we stopped at a wayside inn. The fare was rough and all the appointments most rude: but I think we were all four thankful to break our fast. Though they did not know it, I was a good deal more thankful than anyone else: the others would find plenty at Yorick, but God only knew when and where I should eat again.

No more was said of the order the cars should take, and when our meal was over, the coupé was under way before I had taken my seat.

Quick as a flash—

“You’ll have to drive, Barley,” I said. “You haven’t heard, but Dewdrop stuck me last night. I think he found a muscle or something. I’m stiff as hell.”

“Very good, sir,” said Barley, and took the wheel.

A mile or two later—

“Where’s your pistol?” I said. “I don’t anticipate trouble, but now that you’re driving, I’d better have it in case. I suppose you can guess who’s got mine.”

As Barley surrendered the weapon—

“Her ladyship did tell me something. Fancy Dewdrop stabbin’ you, though. They have got a nerve, those swine. I’d like to be be’ind him with a knife. Sit down? He wouldn’t have no call to sit down, nor anything else. Five foot of clay’d be all he ’ave any use for.”

I let him breathe out his threatenings and gave my mind to the problem I had to solve.

I was now well armed: but, rack my brains as I would, I could think of no way in which I could give Barley the slip.

243

The position was this. I wished to alight as close as I could to Yorick, yet not at the castle gate. Some spot in the entrance drive would have suited my purpose well. It had been arranged, however, that the last three miles should be covered as fast as ever they could. Unless, therefore, I left the car before we approached the mouth of the entrance drive, I should have to wait until we had crossed the drawbridge, and that would be the end of my effort, for I should be seen retreating and Geoffrey and Barley would follow and spoil my game. I could make some excuse to alight a moment before we entered the danger zone, but, in view of what had happened that morning, Barley would never go on until I re-entered the car,

and the others would notice our absence and then the fat would be burnt. It looked as though I should have to enter the castle and leave by some window or other as Pharaoh had done. But then there was always the drawbridge, flooded with light . . .

I felt a sudden fury at being used as a child. Even Barley would not take my orders. And the moment we gained the castle, the porters no doubt would be told that I was not to go forth. Here was pretty treatment for the man whom the Countess Helena of Yorick had elected to honour. . . . I perceived that I had escaped an ignominious existence. I had been allotted the rôle of Lord Consort—a favoured gentleman-in-waiting, the basin of the fountain of honour, very strictly preserved. . . . Happening to glance at the mirror—the car was closed—I noticed the great Alsatian couched on the hinder seat. It occurred to me that the dog was there to watch me. The excuse had been that there was not room in the coupé—which was absurd. The coupé would have held four. . . . My decision to cheat this surveillance hardened into a stony and vicious resolve.

One thing was in my favour—dusk had come in. And since Helena was not hastening, night would have fallen by the time we came to the drive. So my cousin had ordered, for though I think we all knew that the risk of encountering Pharaoh was very slight, it was Helena's presence that hoisted the flag of peril and made it essential that we should omit no endeavour to keep her person safe.

Again, it would have been worse to have been in the leading car. The net might have been drawn rather tighter—but that was all. My chances seemed desperately thin. . . .

In this state of mind I spent the next fifty minutes, smarting, resolved and powerless to find a way out, watching the darkness deepen and the coupé's tail-light turn to a brighter red. And then at last, a mile from the entrance drive, the tail-light bore to the right and the coupé slowed down and stopped by the side of the way.

At once we did the same—and, somehow or other, I felt that my chance had come.

“I'll see what they want,” I said, and slipped out of the car.

As I came to the door of the coupé—

“Look here, my son,” said Geoffrey, “Lady Helena wants you to lead.” My eyes were burning, and I lowered my gaze to the road. “I don't think it really matters, and so I have given way. From now on put down your foot and don't take it up again till you're over the bridge.”

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“Whatever happens,” said Helena.

My blood was boiling.

“Is that an order?” I said.

“You gave it that name,” said Geoffrey. “But we're going to do the same.”

“All right,” I said. “I don't care.”

I made my way back to Barley and opened my door.

“I’ve got to leave you,” I said. “They want me to ride with them. You’re to go first now and to drive like hell. Don’t lift your foot till you get to the castle gate. You’ll be keeping them back as it is, for the coupé’s the faster car.”

“Very good, sir,” said Barley.

I slammed the door and stood back and he let in his clutch.

As the car leapt forward, I fell on my face in the road.

I watched him pass the coupé—and, a moment later, the coupé draw into his wake.

In a savage triumph I watched its tail-light diminish. Then the road bent round to the left and it flicked out of sight.

My six-mile walk to Starlight did me a world of good. It seemed to limber my muscles and steady my wits: the darkness secured me, the cool night air refreshed me, the silence rested my mind. Though I wasted no time, I did not hasten unduly, for, for one thing, it seemed as well to conserve my strength and, for another, I wanted to use my ears. As luck would have it, a quilt of cloud had risen to mask the moon, so I walked in the midst of the road with nothing to fear.

My sole concern was Sabre.

I was sure that no car would come back—when convicts escape, they cannot be rounded up with a prison-van. I was equally sure that my cousin would never permit the Countess to take part in any search: but if he and Barley came out with Sabre in leash, and if they set the dog free at the mouth of the entrance drive—well, once that day he had found me on far more difficult ground: and that with no scent to help him. Besides, my way led past the mouth of the entrance drive. . . .

The place seemed destined to be the very covert of Fear.

A furlong before I reached it, I was careful to leave the road and to make my way through the woods for the next half-mile.

I believe it was that that saved me, for as I shall presently show, half an hour later Geoffrey and Barley and Sabre in fact came down to that sinister three-way spot.

Be that as it may, for my six miles I had the world to myself and by the time they were past, my senses were tuned to what is called concert-pitch. I have always seen well in the dark, but that night I could see as though my eyes were alight. I could separate all the scents with which the country was stuffed. Not the slightest sound could escape my vigilant ears, and as I stepped out of the roadway and into the track *I heard the Alsatian coming a minute before he arrived.*

For a moment my heart stood still, and then I saw that if Helena was not with him, I ought to be able to charm him from his duty to Geoffrey into a service he knew.

He found me seated a little way up the track.

In a flash I had him by the collar and had flung an arm round his neck.

“Sabre,” I breathed, “Sabre, don’t let me down. Stay with me, Sabre. I’ll be so glad to have you. I’m on a good thing, Sabre. And you can help me, old fellow, to pull it off.”

And other nonsense I whispered, in my frenzy to cheat pursuit.

The great dog nosed my temples, moving his tail. For a moment he seemed uncertain, turning his head to look back the way he had come. Then he lay down by my side and rested his head on my thigh.

I made much of him naturally. Sabre had crossed the floor.

So we stayed for five minutes. Then, with my hand on his collar, I got to my feet.

I am sure the dog knew that the business on which I was bent was perilous stuff. From that time on, no man could have been more sagacious, more swift to make report, more scrupulous to obey. And, well as I saw, his sight was better than mine, for he saw the Rolls before I did, and checked me by standing still.

The car had been backed up the track and so stood ready to leave. No one at all was with her. Her radiator was cold.

For a moment I hesitated, wondering whether or no to make some disconnection and so disable the car. And then I decided against this. The outlook was too uncertain: before now I had wanted a car, and wanted it quick. I took my knife from its sheath and turned to the delicate business of running my quarry down. . . .

And here for the first time I saw that Sabre alone was going to save my venture from becoming as abject a failure as ever was seen.

I had set out to prove the country which lay between the castle and where I stood. I wished to make for the meadows from which the castle rose. But already I had lost my bearings. I had only the faintest idea in which direction to move. I had never set foot on the ground which I was to search and knew no more what to expect than the man in the moon. And the night was most dark.

As though I had told him my plight, I felt Sabre lower his head. Then he moved past the Rolls, led me up a sweet-smelling bank and presently out of the coppice and into the rolling park.

“When the lighth go out,” said Dewdrop. “Thath what he thaid.”

“That’s right,” said Bugle. “That’s ’ow we done that villa down in the Souf of France. That was a show, that was. You never see such precautions against a poor — thief: ’ouse like a — prison turned inside out—an’ ’alf a packet of candles between two ’undred rooms. Ally Sloper was in that with Pharaoh. I can hear him laughin’ now as he opened the garden-door. ‘Dear brothers,’ he says, ‘I’m afraid there’s some bandits inside. So don’t you go for to cross them by shown’ a light.’ Just as we makes the ball-room, a flunkey comes bustlin’ in with a candle in each of his hands. ‘All lights out,’ says Pharaoh, and shoots him dead. Talk about panic . . . We — well helped ourselves.”

“But the stuff was there,” said Rush. “That’s what gets me. Panic’s all right, but we don’t know the way to the gold.”

“Pharaoh’s fly,” said Bugle. “It ain’t only the keys you can make wot can open doors.”

There was a little silence.

The three were sitting in the meadows, just clear of the woods —not between the castle and Starlight, but close to the entrance drive. The lights of Yorick were showing a furlong away.

I was crouching directly behind them, against the trunk of a tree. Sabre, beside me, was standing still as a rock. I could, I believe, have killed two—perhaps all three. But it was

Pharaoh I wanted, and Pharaoh was not there.

I could not follow their reasoning. Why should the lights go out? In the ordinary way the lights were put out at midnight—perhaps before. But now the case was altered: the drawbridge had to be watched. And then this talk of panic. . . . Had Pharaoh suborned some servant to do his will?

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Rush lifted his cuff from his wrist.

“Twenty past eleven,” he said. “Gawd, wot a —— day.”

“When the lighth go out,” said Dewdrop. “Unleth, of courthe, he thould happen to talk before.”

I felt more confounded than ever. Dewdrop’s final sentence did not make sense.

Rush led me back on to ground on which I could stand.

“I’d like to know where those two ——s was takin’ that —— dog.”

“Dogs is all right,” said Bugle. “You’ve only got to face ’em and put out yer ’and.”

“You bet,” said Rush, warmly. “Besides, I don’t fancy Alsashuns: they aren’t no better than wolves. But that ain’t the point. I’d like to know wot they’re up to: they haven’t come back.”

“We’ve left no trail,” said Bugle. “We never got out of the car.”

“We’re out of it now,” said Rush. “An’ I don’t want no more surprises—not after las’ night.”

Dewdrop shifted uneasily.

“Ith very awkward,” he said, “your lothin’ that car. Pharaoh won’t like that, he won’t.”

“Well, he’ll have to lump it,” said Rush. “By ——, I wish he’d been there. I tell you, I never saw nothing: there weren’t no scrap. We don’t even know who took it. Some —— performin’ goriller, if you ask me. An’ wot ’arm ’ad I done the ——? Pharaoh won’t like it, won’t he? ’Ow would he like to be wiped off one of them benches on to them flags? Beckwards, too. I dunno why I’m not dead. An’ you talk about losing the car.”

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“It wasn’t our fault,” said Bugle, “and that’s Gawd’s truth.”

But Dewdrop had no comfort to offer.

Like some dreadful bird of ill omen—

“Ith very awkward,” he said.

There was another silence.

I was once again out of my depth.

That the three were waiting for Pharaoh seemed pretty clear. But where was Pharaoh now? And what had Pharaoh been doing since seven o’clock? He had not seen Rush or Bugle, nor had he learned their news. More. While his men had the use of

the Rolls, Pharaoh was using his feet. And that was not like Pharaoh. . . .

Somewhere in the pile of the castle a new light leaped into life—a definite eye of radiance, unshaded and unconfined. For a moment it stabbed the darkness, a steady pinprick of light. Then it broke into a series of flashes—a silent luminous stutter that no one could ever mistake.

And so my eyes were opened. Before his fellows could tell me, I knew the truth.

*Pharaoh was on the ramparts, and Pharaoh was going to 'talk'. Pharaoh had been in the castle the livelong day. He had never left with Dewdrop. And now he was going to quench the lights of the castle: and when he had put them out, he would let his accomplices in.*

Dewdrop deciphered the message, word by word.

252

“Clothe—up—to—bridge—thtand—by—to—enter—by—lath  
—nighth—pohtern—directly—lighth—fail.”

The lamp flashed once more and went out.

Before I had gathered my wits, the three were afoot.

To this day I cannot decide what I should have done. Had I left them and dashed for the castle to give the alarm, before I had found the warden the lights would have failed. Had I attacked, whatever the result of my effort, I think it is clear that I must myself have gone down, but Pharaoh would still have been rampant: and Pharaoh was the head of the corner, supporting

his own supporters, each one of whom he could replace.

At least, that is how I saw it, and see it still. The brain, the will and the drive promoting this reign of terror belonged to Pharaoh alone. And only the destruction of Pharaoh could end this sinister rule. First Pharaoh, and then his fellows: but Pharaoh first.

I say ‘that is how I saw it’, but that is more than the truth, for I saw it very darkly, and as I stole after my quarry towards the bridge, I was myself the prey of a horrid uncertainty for which I was not to blame. I had staked and won: and now I was staking my winnings, as gamblers do. But this was no gaming-table: this was the instant business of life and death.

Wild to exploit the advantage I clearly held, in fear of wasting this by striking too soon, in fear of losing it by holding my hand, I moved ten paces in rear of the shambling thieves, with one hand on Sabre’s collar and the other on Geoffrey’s knife.

253

They never could have heard me, for Rush and Bugle made enough noise for six: and had they looked back, I am sure they would not have seen me, for I could only see them because they moved between me and the lights of the lodge.

So far as I had gathered, they knew no more than I did what Pharaoh was going to do. He was going to cut off the light—disable the main switchboard, without a doubt. Then they were to use the postern—

The vision brought me up with a jerk.

How could they use the postern? The postern was fast. Pharaoh must have opened it somehow. Unknown to the warden, he must have obtained the key. But how on earth had he done this? And how could he know which key would unlock the postern which he had used last night?

A sudden apprehension lifted its ugly head. In Pharaoh's presence Helena had handed the warden a master key. *That was the key with which Pharaoh had opened the postern:* though no alarm had been raised, because nothing was known, Pharaoh had killed the warden and had taken the master key.

That this was so, I instantly made up my mind. 'Talk about panic. . . .' Blindness, havoc and panic would rule the night. The sheep would have no shepherd—and Geoffrey and Barley were gone. How Pharaoh would find the treasure, I could not think. But that was Pharaoh's affair. My way at least was clear. The thieves would bring me to Pharaoh and everything was to be gained by my holding my hand.

And here, as though by magic, the lights of Yorick went out.

254

There was now less need of silence and more of speed, for the three rogues ran for the drawbridge as hard as they could. Sabre and I ran behind them, as though we belonged to the crew.

Over the bridge they clattered and up the sweep to the gate, on to the turf that was blowing beneath the ramparts and past the spot at which the Count had rested the night before. Ahead I saw something white by the castle wall. The three turned aside

to avoid it, and I did the same. As I went by, I saw that it was a sheet. At that moment Sabre left me—he seemed to stop. But I had no time to wrangle. . . .

The postern-door was open. The three stumbled in and stood waiting. And I stood waiting without, with a foot on the step and my head close against the wall.

If there were sounds in the castle, they did not reach my ears, for the rogues were not used to running, and all I could hear was a noisy chorus of breathing, heavy and hoarse.

So for less than a minute—and then came Pharaoh’s voice.

“Bugle.”

“Ere,” said Bugle at once.

“Don’t talk, you ——. Whisper. Here. Take these goods. . . . Have you got them?”

“I’ve got a shoe,” breathed Bugle. “Wot’s this?”

“A wipe,” said Pharaoh. “To which side of the drive are the cars?”

“To the right from here.”

“Drop the wipe on the drawbridge: and sling the shoe into the fields to the left of the drive. If you want to live, make it snappy. They’re going to open those gates before you get back.”

As Bugle went by me, I saw that here was a chance which would never return. Pharaoh had used no torch. If Bugle's reminiscence were true, the probability was that he would not use one to-night: I was tall and thick-set, very much about Bugle's build—a suit I had left at Plumage was fitting him very well: and Bugle had been told to whisper. . . .

In a flash I was running for the drawbridge in Bugle's wake.

The castle was alive with murmurs—sounds of disorder and distress: someone was out on the ramparts, raving 'To me!' men were trampling and shouting: I could hear blows falling upon woodwork and the shiver of breaking glass. But I heard these things as in a dream, *for now I knew whose key had opened the postern, whose handkerchief would lie on the drawbridge, whose slipper fall in the fields. . . .*

The knowledge set my heart pounding. Some fountain that had not been working burst suddenly into play. Its liquor was bitter-sweet—and it made me drunken with rage. A girl had been mishandled. Not the Countess Helena of Yorick, for she was not of this life: but a slight, pathetic figure, whose head was bare . . . that had stood very still in a valley, with a graze on her delicate leg . . . whose eyes had seen nothing, whose lips had asked a favour—'Don't rub it in.'

What then took place, happened more swiftly than I can set it down.

Bugle was on the drawbridge, and I was standing, ready and waiting to kill him, three paces away. I saw the man drop the handkerchief and I saw him draw back his arm to

discharge the shoe. It was then that I noticed Sabre—nosing the scrap of linen, white on the bridge. . . .

As the shoe left Bugle's hand the Alsatian crouched, and as he turned to come back, the great dog sprang.

The shock would have sent a giant flying, for Sabre weighed fully six stone.

As Bugle met the rail of the drawbridge, I heard a bone snap, and then the two went over, into the moat.

The splash they made must have been heard, but for the outcry within the castle itself.

As I ran for the postern, I heard a hubbub in the archway and Florin's voice calling on Hubert to open the gates.

As I stumbled into the passage—

“This is the stuff,” breathed Rush. “Up the stairs on yer left. I've got to lock this door.”

It seemed best to do as he said. Pharaoh and Dewdrop were gone. I needed Rush to bring me to where they were.

Without a word, I turned to the steps I knew. . . .

As I came to their head, I became aware of a radiance—a faint suggestion of light, enough to outline the doorway that gave to the little hall. Another step, and I heard the drone of a voice.

I entered the hall a-tiptoe.

One of its doors was half open—not that of the staircase which led to Helena’s room. Beyond this a light was burning, the light of a torch—and an ice-cold voice was teaching a bitter sentence to cut like a whetted knife.

“So you see, there’s not much left. To-morrow morning, no doubt, order will be restored. Very likely the police will arrive. They won’t arrive to-night, for the telephone isn’t working. I’m afraid I’m to blame for that. The search which is now proceeding in a somewhat haphazard way, will be organized: clues will be sifted: the abduction will be reconstructed. Your sheets are below the ramparts, so they’ll know you were taken that way. Your handkerchief lies on the drawbridge: the slipper which you kicked off will be found in the fields. I expect they’ll employ your Alsatian—I’m sure I should. But as I carried you here, I don’t think that he will come off. One has to think of these things. Be that as it may, no stone will be left unturned to find the beautiful countess—you really are lovely, you know—the worshipful mistress of Yorick, that carted her drunken brother out of her way. And all the time you’ll be here, sharing this somewhat unfriendly chamber with me and my friends. . . . You do see the point, don’t you? They won’t search the castle, because they’ll know for certain we’re none of us here. You didn’t search it this morning—you *knew* I was gone. And if they did search the castle, I hardly think Florin would let them look in this room. It’s cleverly done, that door. You’ve got to be curious to find it and an expert to find its lock. I’m both. I found them on Wednesday evening—with the help of your brother’s key. I need hardly say that had I known that the key which you handed the warden was his and not yours, we should have adjourned to this chamber this morning instead of to-night. However, all’s

well that ends well. . . .”

A stealthy step behind me remembered Rush.

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As I turned, he was locking the door at the head of the curling stair.

For a fraction of a second I hesitated. Rush was at my mercy. Was this the time to unmask? And then I decided to stake my winnings once more.

Rush straightened his back and turned to the half-open door. Then he hung on his heel for an instant, to breathe in my ear.

“Come on, you old ——. I’ll give you Pharaoh’s a genius. He’s got little Sheba cold.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Here, since it bears upon my story, I must describe how you entered that secret room.

This was the way of it.

In the massive door from the hall the keyhole was set to the right, and when you had turned the key, the iron-studded oak opened inwards and so to the left. At once you found yourself at the foot of a staircase-turret, the steps of which rose to the right and after three or four rises curled out of your view.

Now the door was very heavy and, not being truly hung, had to be held open: if it were not so held, it at once swung back to its frame and, since its lock was a spring-lock,

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shut itself fast. A catch was, therefore, provided, to prevent it from playing this trick—the sort of self-acting catch that is used for an entrance gate: and to bring this catch into action, you had but to open the door as wide as you could. *But by so doing you were masking another door.*

Enter the turret and let the door shut behind you, and there in the wall which the door, when open, had hidden, was another smaller doorway which gave to the secret room. The door which it framed was also of oak and iron, but though it boasted a handle, there was no keyhole at all. It was in fact locked by the catch which held open the major door. Turn this catch to one side, and the minor door would swing open without a sound.

From within the room this door, when shut, could neither be opened nor seen, because it was backed with the woodwork which covered the walls.

All this, of course, I learned later. All that I knew at the moment was that the door to the room had been ‘cleverly done’.

Rush whispered over his shoulder.

“Watch out for this door. It’s wedged.”

He sidled round the oak, and I followed, with a hand on my pistol and Geoffrey’s knife in my sleeve. . . .

I shall never forget the scene, which seemed to belong to the dark of the Middle Ages, to the stealth of the Holy Office, to that frightful gallery of horror where the wicked have sat in

judgment upon the good.

Only one torch was alight, and this was so held by Dewdrop that its beam fell on Helena's face. To this the eye naturally turned, and in an instant the rest of the room was black.

She was sitting upright on a bench, with her back to the panelled wall. The neck of her dress was torn and had fallen from one of her shoulders, leaving this naked except for a pink silk strap. Her eyes were lowered to avoid the glare of the torch, but her beautiful head was high and for all the emotion she showed she might have been sitting in church. If anything, her air was listless: she did not seem to be breathing, she sat so still.

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The sight of her captive and desolate hit me hard.

That Pharaoh had been able to seize her was all my fault: but for me, she would have had Sabre, her bodyguard. More. Had I returned to the castle, my cousin and Barley and I would all have been there, and the odds against Pharaoh's success would have been absurd: as it was, I had made them even—and Pharaoh had won.

The beam of the torch was blinding, and I shut my eyes and sank my chin on my chest. I wanted to be able to see where Pharaoh was. Rush was beside me: he had lingered a moment to take up the wedge and to lock the major door, but now he was standing beside me—I could hear the reptile licking his beastly lips. And Dewdrop, a pace or two distant, was holding the torch. But I had not distinguished Pharaoh, and Pharaoh was first on my list. Then the man spoke again, and I knew that he

was standing or sitting on the farther side of the room.

“As always, I’m perfectly frank. My hand is upon the treasure. It’s simply a question of testing these walls and this floor. But I can’t get it out of the castle—at least, not as much as I want. I don’t like to use the drawbridge: I believe even your bucolics would find that strange. But I know there’s another way out. You took it with Mr. Spencer five nights ago.”

There was a little silence. Then—

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“Go on,” said Helena, quietly.

“You will tell me that way,” said Pharaoh.

“And then?”

“We shall work till dawn, removing as much as we can.”

“And then?”

“We shall clear up and go,” said Pharaoh. “And you will be free. I hardly think you’ll want anybody to find us—in possession of so much gold.”

“Clear up and go,” said Helena. “What do you mean by ‘clear up’?”

“I mean what you think I mean. There’s a nuisance I’ve got to abate.”

“If you were honest, you’d say ‘a score to settle’.”

“I prefer the term ‘nuisance’. Still, that may have to wait a little. At dawn we shall leave the castle, and you will be free.”

Helena took a deep breath.

“I see,” she said. “And now I’ll tell you something. 262 You’ve got a long way, but a long way is never enough. You know that you’re near the gold, but you don’t know how to reach it. It’s very well to talk of testing these walls and this floor, but that’s a job for a mason, and you know it as well as I. But if the gold was here, as you admitted just now, you couldn’t get it away. More. So long as you stay here, you’re safe, for no one will open this room. But the longer you stay here, the slighter your chance of escape. You’ve only the Rolls and my men will very soon find that, looking for me. And to-morrow, as you surmise, order will be restored. Quite good order, I warn you: Mr. Bohun will see to that. If you wait till then, therefore, you will have to cut your way out. You’ll have no gold to carry, so that should be easy enough: but once you are out, you’ll have no sort of transport and the park will be full of my people, looking for me. Of course, as I say, if you stay here, you’re perfectly safe. But you’ve neither food nor water, and nothing that you can think of will make me talk.”

“What, nothing?” said Pharaoh.

“Nothing,” said Helena, calmly. “You’ve no one here to torture, and I’m not afraid for myself. For the moment I’m up against it: but you are up against time.”

It was clear that she meant what she said: her fearlessness was sublime: there were things in Hell undreamt of in her

philosophy.

I wondered if she believed what Pharaoh had said. ‘Removing as much as we can . . . clear up and go . . . and you will be free.’ Once Pharaoh had access to more than a million pounds, was Pharaoh the man to grab what he could and bolt? If she opened her mouth, Pharaoh would certainly go. It seemed likely that he would take with him a thousand pounds. Fifteen hundred, perhaps: Dewdrop and Bugle and Rush could each of them manage a bag. And something else he would take—*against his return*: and that was her master key. And she herself would be free, *for she would be dead*. Was it likely that Pharaoh, the ruthless, would spare her life? Spare her to cut off his access, if nothing else? Her life hung by only two threads—the secrets which Pharaoh was demanding, which she declined to divulge. If she opened her mouth, she would cut them. And Pharaoh was going to force her to open her mouth.

The fellow toyed with the screw.

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“It certainly looks,” he said, “as though we shan’t be able to finish to-night. Still, these things shouldn’t be rushed. And you know I can’t help feeling that twenty-four hours in this chamber will help you to change your mind. The quarters are close, aren’t they?”

“So much,” said Helena, calmly, “may happen in twenty-four hours.”

I heard Rush swallow uneasily.

“Will happen,” said Pharaoh. “Will—outside in the world. But here. . . . Is that door shut and locked?”

“Yes,” said Rush.

“As I was saying, here we are out of the world, and time will stand still. Outside—well, the warden will rage and your people imagine vain things: Mr. Bohun will organize: Mr. Spencer will grin like a dog and run about the——”

“Mr. Spencer’s the rock you’ve split on from first to last.”

“In a sense that’s true,” said Pharaoh. “I frankly admit I’m more accustomed to dealing with knaves than fools. And he’s been very fortunate so far: but I don’t think his luck will last. It’s all my fault,” he sighed. “I’ve only myself to thank. But he made such an excellent lever that against my better judgment I let him live. But there—we all make mistakes. To be perfectly honest, I went to the forester’s cottage because I believed he was there. I didn’t need you, you know. I already knew of this room.”

“You seem to need me now.”

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“Quite,” said Pharaoh, “quite. But that’s because your brother has gone. As a host—well, his hospitality left nothing to be desired. I find you more exacting. Never mind. About Mr. Spencer. You know I did give him a chance. I actually wrote him a note, containing some good advice.”

“People like Mr. Spencer don’t take any notice of threats.”

“Perhaps the gods love them,” said Pharaoh. “They always die young.”

“Mr. Spencer has spoiled your game—and he isn’t dead yet.

Mr. Spencer has forced your hand and he's singed your beard—and he isn't dead yet.”

“I assure you,” said Pharaoh, “it's only a matter of time.” A gust of passion suddenly shook his accents. “*If he goes to Tibet, I'll get him.*” The gust died down, and he laughed. “Stupid,” he murmured. “Let's say I don't like his face.”

“You don't like him because you fear him.”

“He may prove inconvenient. Unabated nuisances sometimes do.”

“It isn't his tongue that you fear. You fear his hand.”

“But you don't, do you?” flashed Pharaoh. “It's astonishing how you've fallen for that young calf. And it isn't as if you were plain. Mountebanks weren't meant for Madonnas. And so many better men would be happy to share your cottage and sleep in the room above yours. . . . But there you are. There's no accounting for tastes. And at least you've seen something of each other. . . .”

To this day I do not know how I held myself in. I sought to fix my gaze on the truth that my turn was coming, that I was going to kill Pharaoh and ram his foul contumely down his rattling throat.

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I could just distinguish the man, but the resolute beam from the torch went far to distract my eye. I could make out that he was sitting astride of a chair, about six paces from Dewdrop, close to the wall. There was furniture standing between us, a massive writing-table against which Dewdrop was leaning, holding the

torch.

For fear of missing my man, I dared not fire upon him from where I stood. Reach him I could not, without crossing the beam of the torch: and, remembering our brush in the forest, I feared lest his swiftness of action should once again save his life. Though the others were at my mercy, it would have been more than folly to strike them down.

I must bide my time—somehow . . .

“I told you I had no scruples.” The voice was cold and harsh as the Vardar wind. “Am I to demonstrate this?”

Helena shrugged her shoulders.

“That’s a matter for you—not me. I find it sufficiently obvious, but perhaps you like gilding your most refined gold.”

“I have two questions to ask you. You know what they are. To obtain the accurate answers, I am ready to go all lengths. Not a long way. All lengths.”

“I believe you,” said Helena calmly. “The trouble is you’ve got as far as you can.”

“Let us see. Your brother was a mine of information, as you may believe. Amongst other things he told me the following curious fact. When a son or a daughter of Yorick is ten years old, a leopard, the badge of Yorick, is tattooed upon their skin. . . . Is—is that true, Lady Helena?”

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Helena moistened her lips.

“Yes.”

“He said—it may not be true, but he said they were always tattooed beneath the left breast. . . . In your case, I think, an expert was brought from Japan. It was thought, very properly, if I may say so, that so exquisite a canvas deserved a master’s brush. . . . May we . . . see his handiwork, please?”

Helena sat as though stricken—turned into stone.

Pharaoh proceeded mercilessly.

“If you would like assistance, you’ve only to say the word. We’re none of us lady’s maids, but Rush has the reputation of being a lady’s man.”

The sweat was running on my temples: my blood seemed to burn my veins: the compression within me was tumultuous: all my being seemed swollen with a fury that knew no law.

As I tried to measure my distance, I found that I could not see, for my eyes had been fixed on Helena and now could not pierce the darkness which veiled the rest of the room.

And then I heard Rush moving. . . .

Had the fellow moved forward, that must have been the end of this tale. But he only passed behind me, to stand between me and Dewdrop—I suppose to be nearer his master . . . the suddenly favoured courtier approaching the steps of the throne.

That the end was fast approaching was very plain. Any moment now I should have to send my mask flying. *First*

*Pharaoh*. . . . I would strike down the torch and hurl myself at the monster before he had time to think. And this time his lightning speed would be outrun. I almost laughed. There was that within me no bullet on earth could stop. If all else failed, I would tear out his throat with my teeth. *First Pharaoh, and then his fellows*. But for the thought of his fellows, I could not have stood my ground. But if I should not survive Pharaoh. . . . My heart that had been smoking seemed suddenly cold. Rush had the reputation of being a lady's man.

Helena was trembling. A little hand went up to cover her eyes.

“I'll make you an offer,” she said.

Her change of tone was piteous. She spoke with an obvious effort, as one whose spirit has been broken, as one that had had nothing, from whom had been taken away even that which she had.

“I'll make you an offer. I nearly made it just now. If you'll go now, I'll show you the secret way. To-morrow night I'll meet you with five thousand pounds in gold. And after that, I'll pay you five thousand a year—for every year that you let Mr. Spencer live.”

It was clear that a child was speaking, a terrified child. Offer, promise, figures were things grotesque. Her suggestion was below comment. But Pharaoh had his foot in the opening, quick as a flash.

“That's better,” he said. “Much better. You've gone, shall we say, a long way. But I'm sure Mr. Spencer's worth ten thousand a year.”

The man was playing with her—playing the fish he had hooked.

Helena's voice was shaking.

“I've no right to give any more. The money's not mine. That's more than I ought to take for my personal use.”

It was awful to hear such naïveté issue from Helena's lips. So perhaps Red Riding Hood spoke to the wolf.

“I am not concerned with your right. To insure Mr. Spencer's life will cost you ten thousand down and ten thousand a year.”

Her palms clapped fast to her eyes, Helena threw back her head.

“All right,” she said, “I'll pay it.”

The words seemed torn from her throat.

“One thing more,” said Pharaoh. “It will not be convenient to meet you to-morrow night. I take the first premium now. Show me that cellar, or strip. I don't care which you do, for I guess you can open it naked as well as clothed.”

I think a full minute went by before Helena moved.

Then very slowly she rose and turned to the right, Dewdrop following her with the beam of the torch. Clear of the bench she stopped. Then her hand went up to a sconce which was clamped to the panelled wall. For a moment it rested there. Then she laid hold of the bracket and pulled it down.

I heard no sound, but a panel below the sconce moved, and, when she turned, I saw the shape of a door which was standing ajar. This was low and narrow, some twenty inches wide by some five feet high.

So Helena severed one of the threads by which her life was hanging.

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Slowly she returned to the bench, and the beam of the torch with her.

As she took her seat, Pharaoh rapped out an order.

“Put a light on the lady, Bugle.”

I think my heart stood still: but I had a torch and the wit to do as he said.

“Rush and Bugle stand fast: Dewdrop with me.”

He crossed to the gaping panel, with Dewdrop directly behind him, lighting his steps.

As he pulled open the door, I saw the stonework beyond.

Then the two stepped through the cut and began to go down. . . .

I stood waiting for their footfalls to fade. My moment had come.

Rush was speaking and wagging his dreadful head.

“Sheba’s the goods,” he murmured. “Look at that mouth. Here.

I'm goin' to 'ave a close-up. Gimme that —— torch.”

With all the goodwill in the world, I did as the beast desired—I wanted my two hands free and one of his full.

Between us we bungled the business, and the torch fell down and went out. I let him grope and find it. As he stood up, grunting, I took him fast by the throat and drove my knife into his heart.

He made no sound at all, but the two of us fell together, for he went down on his back and I went down upon him, because I would not loosen my grip on his throat.

He gave one frightful convulsion. And then I knew he was dead. . . .

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For a second I lay there listening. Then I got to my knees and sought for the torch. When I had found it, I switched it on to the bench. This was empty.

I turned the beam on to myself.

“Helena,” I said, “it’s all right. I’ve done the swine in.”

She did not answer, so I got to my feet and threw the beam round the room. She must be there somewhere, for she would not have sought the cellar and Rush had the key of the door.

And then all at once I knew where Helena was.

She had fled for the staircase-turret when Rush and I, between us, had dropped the torch. Rush had locked the door of the hall,

not the door of the secret room.

I took a step towards this—and stopped in my tracks.

*The doorway by which I had entered had disappeared.* In its place the unbroken panelling rendered the light of my torch.

As I stood, staring, Pharaoh's words came into my mind, 'It's cleverly done, that door: you've got to be curious to find it . . . and an expert to find its lock.'

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\* \* \* \* \*

Helena was safe—for the moment. So much I saw. (As a matter of fact, she was saved: but at that time I did not know that no one within the room could open the door she had shut.) And Rush was dead, and Pharaoh and Dewdrop knew nothing of what had occurred. In the twinkling of an eye my position had been reversed. A moment ago it had been desperate: but now it was very strong. In a word, I had the ball at my feet. When Pharaoh and Dewdrop returned, they would walk clean into my arms. And that, one by one, for the cut through which they must pass would only let one at a time. If I could not make an end of the two, I deserved to be shot.

I began to survey the shambles.

The chamber was spacious, and had been used, judged, for prisoners of high degree. There were no windows at all and the only air was admitted by a fireplace of chiselled stone. The furniture was handsome, but very stern and might have been that of some abbot, sworn to subdue the flesh. The seats were more stalls than chairs and there was not a cushion between

them of any kind. Indeed, the only comfort lay on the floor: and there lay luxury, for the carpet was twice as rich as any I ever trod and, since it was laid upon stone, a horse might have pranced on its pile without being heard.

I stepped to the cut through which Pharaoh and Dewdrop had passed.

As I had supposed, this gave to a winding stair—no doubt of a considerable depth, for though I strained my ears, I could hear nothing at all.

Determined to leave nothing to chance, I proceeded to lay my ambush with infinite care.

Pharaoh must find nothing wrong—until too late. To all appearance the room must be as he had left it. The bench, however, could be seen from the head of the winding stair. I must therefore suggest to Pharaoh that his captive had merely moved. This was easy enough. Next to the bench stood the fireplace, which jutted into the room. On the other side of this was a chair with its back to the wall. If my torch were trained upon this, Pharaoh would receive the impression that his captive had changed her seat, for the chair was masked by the fireplace and could not be seen from the cut. The only question was how to support the torch.

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For a moment I stood thinking. Then I perceived that, unless I were to flout Reason, this office must devolve upon Rush.

Anyone leaving the stair with a torch in his hand would be almost sure to illumine the opposite side of the room. The corpse must therefore be moved, in any event. And if I could

gird it into the semblance of life. . . .

In two or three minutes the grisly business was done, and Rush was seated upright in a high-backed chair, with an arm along one of the chair's and the torch in his hand. His belt and mine and some cord I had found in his pocket had done the trick. His head had proved troublesome, but I took a stick from the grate, buttoned this into his waistcoat and propped it like that.

The effect was hideous, for the corpse was poking its head. But that was beside the point. At the first blush, not even the man's own mother would ever have known he was dead.

Here I should say that, before I had set Rush up, I had taken away his pistol and Helena's master key.

Once again I took care to listen at the head of the winding steps—and heard no sound.

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To pick my own position was easy enough. I had only to take my stand behind the panel-door that belonged to the cut. This was wide enough to conceal me, yet not wide enough to embarrass my falling on.

I decided to use a pistol, for the bullet was swift and sure and at quarters so close I could not possibly miss. For all that, I took the knife, too, and, since I had now no belt, I pierced the band of my trousers and made this into a frog. Regarding the two, I preferred Rush's pistol to Barley's which must have come out of Salzburg and seemed to be cheaply done. But Rush's weapon exactly resembled my own.

And then at last I was ready, with the knife at my hip and a

pistol in either hand. . . .

Looking back, I find it strange that I, who ten days before had never, that I can remember, so much as knocked a man down, should have made these dreadful preparations without a qualm. That I had already done murder troubled me very much less than the loss of my belt. Indeed, my only concern was lest by some improvidence on my part the butchery which I purposed should not be fulfilled. It might be said that I was but making ready to save my life; but I cannot plead that excuse, for that consideration never once entered my head. But that was not of valour. I think the plain truth is that I was possessed. What I had witnessed in that chamber had fired within me a furnace of roaring hate. I was going to kill Pharaoh and Dewdrop exactly as I had killed Rush—not because I had set out to do it, not because that was the reason why I was there, but because they had ravished Virtue—broken a lovely spirit, by abusing its lovely flesh.

I had to wait full five minutes before I heard a sigh on the winding stair.

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With my ear to the crack beside me, I listened with all my might.

The sigh grew into a murmur, and the murmur into that unmistakable sound—the regular scuffing of feet that are mounting a flight of stone steps. The footfalls were hasty. The two were mounting apace.

Why this was I could not imagine. Why should they run? The stars were fighting against them. But for their haste, I should

not have heard them so soon.

The rapid, regular shuffle began to grow clear. . . .

Unless they were moving as one, the shoes of one of the two were rubber-soled, for only one set of footfalls came to my ears. In this case—

And there I saw the glow of a torch.

Two steps more, and I heard their heavy breathing. . . .

The stars against them? All the company of heaven had ranged itself on my side. The two would be spent and breathless. . . .

Dewdrop began to speak before he had entered the room.

“Bugle an’ Ruth to go down. Pharaoh thayth——”

As he stepped through the cut and I fired, I saw my mistake.

Dewdrop would lisp no more, but the deafening roar of my pistol had carried a message to Pharaoh which not even a child could misread.

I could have done myself violence.

It was not as if I had not been warned: I had been told as plainly as any fool could have been told that Dewdrop alone was mounting the winding stair. I had only to pocket my pistols and take my knife. Torch in hand, out of breath, my victim could have made no resistance. . . .

As it was, by using my pistol, I had thrown away the most valuable weapon I had—the element of surprise.

It was true that, had I stabbed Dewdrop, Pharaoh would still have waited in vain for Bugle and Rush. But though he would have been angry and would at last have come up to see for himself the reason for their delay, he would never have dreamed of danger. But now he was warned.

Pharaoh was more than warned. My shot, being fired when it was, had reported the ugly news that Dewdrop was dead. The fact that no one came down would confirm this report. And no one could have killed Dewdrop, unless he had first made an end of Bugle and Rush.

The truth was in Pharaoh's hands. He knew as well as did I that someone was in the chamber, waiting to take his life.

As I say, I could have done myself violence. I was here to play the knave, and I was playing the fool.

I am bound to confess that I cannot defend my annoyance at finding that I must fight Pharaoh instead of playing the butcher as I had already done. I can only say that at that time I had no fear for myself: but since I knew very well that the man was as swift and as cunning as I was slow, I was full of apprehension lest he should escape. The bare thought of such an outcome made the sweat start on my brow. *Live*—after what he had done? *Live—to walk out of that room and do it again?*

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Somebody laughed—a very unpleasant laugh.

I think it was the devil within me—the sheriff that had been

sent to fetch Pharaoh's soul.

I pulled myself together, slid my pistols into my pockets and set about hoisting Dewdrop out of my way.

Now by firing, as I had, upon Dewdrop, I had cast away the element of surprise: but that was not all the mischief that I had done, for the roar of the heavy pistol had made me completely deaf.

When I had fired in the forest, so savage was the report that four or five minutes went by before my full hearing came back: but here, within four such walls, the shock of the violent explosion had appalled the drums of my ears.

To listen for Pharaoh's coming was, therefore, but waste of time, and, since he might arrive any moment, I made my preparations as swiftly as ever I could.

These were simple—there was not much I could do.

The chair on which Rush was seated I slewed to the left, so that the beam of his torch fell full on the cut in the wall. I then took Dewdrop's torch and studied the room, marking the furniture well in case I must move in the dark. Then I slid the torch into my pocket and lay down behind the great table of which I have spoken before.

This was a pedestal table of carved, gray oak. Between the two pedestals there was a knee-hole or archway three feet wide by some twenty-six inches high. Looking through this, I directly commanded the cut, while the pedestals offered good cover on either hand.

I ventured to settle myself with the greatest care, for I knew that if I possibly could I must kill my man before he had entered the room: if Pharaoh could contrive to come in, the advantage I presently held would be utterly lost, for, though we should, in a sense, be fighting on even terms, Pharaoh was an expert at murder, but I was no more than a resolute amateur.

Since the cut was so narrow, the gauntlet he had to run was extremely strict and, unless my pistol misfired, I did not see how he could do it and save his life. So I lay very still, from force of habit straining my useless ears, with my pistol-hand on the plinth of the pedestal-table and my eyes on the cut that was waiting to frame my dead.

After a little, I found myself thinking how soft the carpet was. .

..

I do not know how long I waited, but the first intimation I had of Pharaoh's approach was the sudden roar of his pistol as he fired at and shattered the torch.

I fear this tale is a record of bad mistakes, but when I was laying my ambush I made the worst of them all. I have no excuse to offer. I think a child would have seen that he must so place the torch that, while it illumined the cut, it could not itself be seen from the head of the winding stair. Be that as it may, the horrid shock and the darkness took me aback, and when I fired at the cut, I fired an instant too late. Pharaoh's answer came swift as a flash, and his bullet went through my knee-hole, to lodge in the wall beyond:

And then—silence.

We were both of us deafened, of course: and, remembering that, I at least had the sense to move.

An instant later I was standing behind Rush's chair.

And then for the first time that night I felt the stab of something I knew to be fear.

I was as good as blindfold, my ears were stopped: four walls hemmed me in, and somewhere within their compass was moving—Death. Pharaoh was trying to find me, stealing this way and that. He had only to brush against me, touch me with the tips of his fingers, and I should be—caught. His deadly swiftness of action would see to that. Any moment this might happen. Any moment the roar of his pistol might make the last sound I should hear. He might be but three feet off—*now*. In another instant I might feel his breath on my cheek. . . .

I began to tremble: my knees felt suddenly loose: my cousin's words came leering into my mind, 'I never liked blind-man's buff' . . . .

It was the remembrance of Helena that put to shame my fear. I had heard her whip Pharaoh—here, in this very room: whip him before his fellows: cut him across the face. And the whip she had used was *my courage*. 'You fear him . . . you fear his hand.' For an instant I thought upon her and strangely enough remembered the way she had of pushing her hair from her temples, as though by that pretty gesture to banish care. Then I turned refreshed to my duty, which was to take Pharaoh's life.

At once I set out to find him, with my left hand stretched before me and my pistol all ready below.

Someone has said the best method of defence is attack. Be that as it may, I truly believe that my action saved my life, for Pharaoh passed me in the darkness and came upon Rush. I know this was so, for he fired upon the body, supposing it to be me, and the flame that leaped from his pistol gave me a mark to aim at, instead of lighting my face.

In a flash I had fired again—and had drawn his fire, for, before I could think, a bullet had flicked the sleeve of my pistol-arm.

This showed me, once for all, that so far as snap shots were concerned, I stood no chance whatever against such a man. With such rapid and accurate fire I could not begin to compete, and, as I whipped to one side, I made up my mind that I must not fire again until I knew for certain that my bullet was going to kill. In a word, if I was to win, I must come to close quarters with Pharaoh, if not to grips.

I had now come back to the table, and, as I edged my way round it, I thought of the knee-hole below.

I think it will be admitted that in making your way to and fro in a room that is dark, your tendency is to skirt the furniture which you encounter, keeping in touch with its edge, because, I suppose, you like to be able to feel your way. After all, this is natural: blind men move by the wall. If, then, I entered the knee-hole and let Pharaoh move to and fro, sooner or later he would skirt the pedestal-table and, though I should not hear him, if I had put out my hands, I should feel the slack of his trousers as he went by.

An instant later I was crouching beneath the archway, with my

pistol on the carpet before me and my empty hands outstretched upon either side.

I had not long to wait.

When I did not return his fire, I fancy the man was uncertain whether or no I was dead. He, therefore, sought the spot from which I had fired and, finding no body there, turned and came to the table exactly as I had done. And exactly as I had done, he began to edge his way round it. . . .

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The slack of his trousers brushed my attentive hand.

In a flash I had him by the ankles and, ripping his feet from beneath him had brought him down on his side. Then I snatched up my pistol, thrust it into his stomach and pressed the trigger—*in vain*.

*The magazine was empty. Slovenly to the last, Rush had never troubled to replenish his clip.*

And here my instinct served me—there was no time to think.

Pharaoh had fallen to his right and so on his pistol-arm. While this was taking his weight, he could not aim, and though in a flash he had flung his weight to the left, in that instant my fingers had caught the wrist of his pistol-hand. For a moment he fought for his freedom: then he let himself fall on his back: but now my wits were working and before it could reach his pocket, I had hold of his other wrist.

I had ‘scotch’d the snake, not killed it,’ as Shakespeare says: and I think no snake ever fought so hard for its life. It was all I

could do to hold him, though I was far stronger than he, for he writhed and flung and twisted, as though indeed he belonged to the serpent tribe. In vain he sought to kick me, for his legs were within the knee-hole and he could not draw back his feet: and all my weight was upon him, and I am a heavy man.

And in that instant the room was flooded with light. . . .

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For a moment I thought that someone had entered the chamber. And then I guessed that Pharaoh had turned the switches when first he came into the room, that the switchboard itself might report the repair of the damage which he had done.

So for the first time that night I saw my enemy's face.

I think he must have known that I was his assailant, but the sight of me seemed to send him out of his mind. He fought no more as a serpent, but like the madman he looked, his face convulsed with passion and his eyes starting out of his head. Again and again he lifted me, arching his back: he wrenched his arms to and fro, as though the limbs were not his: with his heels he thrashed the woodwork confining his feet, and he did his best to reach my face with his teeth. But my 'healthy, aimless existence' stood me in stead. He only did himself violence; and both of us knew, I think, that now at last he was to be brought to book—at the hand of a fool.

I often think that it was this bitter reflection that made him forget his cunning and robbed him of all control, for the game which he should have played was to offer me no resistance unless and until I attempted to change my grip. Had he played that game, I should have been hard put to it to have my way:

but, as it was, he expended his strength, like a madman, upon the strait jacket in which he was now confined.

At last, to my relief, the tempest blew itself out, and he lay back, spent and panting, to take his rest: but, before I could think of moving, he had lifted his head once more and was staring into my eyes.

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I looked back, grimly enough.

He did not struggle: he simply gazed upon me, as though he would brand my image upon his memory. There was foam on his lips, I remember: and the hate in his eyes burned red.

So for perhaps ten seconds. Then the fellow spat in my face.

So a madman made a madman.

If he resisted, I know not, but I used him as a lay figure from that time on.

I dashed his hand on the massive plinth of the table, to break his wrist, and when his pistol had fallen I brought his hands together and got to my knees. And then I was clear of the table and had jerked him up to his feet.

I let his broken wrist go, whipped out his second pistol and pitched it across the room.

Then I seized his throat with both hands, turned him back to the table, bent him across its corner and broke his back on the oak.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sitting on the bench by the fireplace, I wiped my face and my hands on Helena's black silk scarf. This had been wrung and creased, and I had no doubt that Pharaoh had used it to gag her, before he had carried her off.

Now that the business was over, I found it hard to believe. Yet there was Rush dead and dreadful, still in his chair: there was Dewdrop's body, with its broken face to the wall: and there was Pharaoh, still hanging as I had left him, over the edge of the table to which I owed so much. What had seemed so hard had proved easy. A little cunning, a little patience, a little luck—and the three had played into my hands. For my battle with Pharaoh I had only my folly to thank. My cousin would have shot him before he had entered the room.

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I looked at my watch.

The time was twenty minutes past twelve. Not an hour had gone by since Pharaoh had 'talked' from the ramparts and Dewdrop had read his message to Rush and Bugle and me. And now they were all four dead, but I was alive.

The reflection brought me up to my feet.

Alive, if you please: but I was shut in a chamber from which I could see no way out. . . .

For twenty minutes I sought that secret door, but I could not so much as determine which were the panels that backed it, so well was it hid. I shouted and beat upon the woodwork, using Helena's name—in vain, and when I had bruised my hands and made myself hoarse, I went back to the bench I had left and sat down to consider my plight.

Helena was locked in the turret—my hand in my pocket fingered her master key: but the turret, no doubt, had embrasures, and she would be found and released so soon as she could make herself heard. She had, of course, heard the firing, but if the thieves were fighting what did that matter to her? Let Pharaoh revenge her escape upon Bugle and Rush: or seek to blast his way out of the secret room. (Here perhaps I should say that though Helena heard the firing, the sound was so muffled that she could not be sure what it was, while, so thick were the walls of Yorick, that nobody else in the castle heard it at all.)

Now when Helena's release was effected and Geoffrey and the warden were found, the three would take counsel together upon her report. The position would be considered—but not for long.

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Four dangerous, desperate felons were trapped in a secret room the very existence of which was known *and must be known* to no servants at all. If, therefore, they were to be released, my cousin and Barley and Florin must perform this most perilous office entirely alone. And what would be the object of risking three valuable lives to open that secret door? To destroy four bloody-minded convicts—the men *had* to die—*when the chamber, left undisturbed, would work their destruction in silence without any fuss*. And then, a week later, a grave could be dug in the woods, and Florin and Barley could enter and carry the corpses away.

The thing was clear. To open the room would be madness. The council would surely decide that Pharaoh and his companions must be left to die where they were.

Of course, if Bugle's body were found . . . But dead bodies sank. I had a hazy idea that after six days they floated . . . after six days . . .

Something dazedly I surveyed my surroundings.

Rush offended me. Besides, I wanted my belt.

I stepped to its side and unstrapped and unlashd the corpse: this subsided sideways, over the arm of its chair. I walked to the cut in the wall, regarded the steps for a moment and slammed the panel that hid them into its place. The cellar would make me no exit: that was beyond all doubt.

For some absurd reason, a verse of the Bible kept coming into my head. *For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.*

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Its irrelevance angered me.

I had no desire to take anything out of the world. Nor, for that matter, had Pharaoh. If instead of *world*, you read *room*—he had brought nothing into this room and now it was very certain that he would carry nothing out. Or Dewdrop, either. Or Rush. Not a single golden sovereign—not even their lives, although they had brought them in. It occurred to me that I, too, had brought my life into this room. . . .

*It is certain we can carry nothing out.*

I stamped uneasiness down, and turned again to the walls. No windows, no doors. How did one get out of chambers that had neither windows nor doors?

It was then that I thought of the fireplace.

A grate must have a chimney; and if the chimney was wide . . .

The chimney was wide—and barred by a massive grill.

With the aid of Dewdrop's torch, I examined the heavy lattice. This was corrupted by rust. If I had had a crowbar . . .

My eye fell upon the cross-bar which was resting upon the dogs—the bar to fend logs from falling on to the slab . . .

This bar was of polished steel and though I soon found that I could not burst the lattice, after two minutes I felt the whole grill move. At once I turned my attention to the clamps which held it in place, and ten minutes later I had torn two out of the sockets in which they had stood so long. Then I laid hold of the grill, and under the weight of my body the side no longer supported slowly gave way.

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I have said that the chimney was wide, and so it was. If I could find a foothold, I could climb it for several feet. My fear was that it would narrow, before I had gone very far.

I need not have feared for my foothold. A series of slots had been made for the feet of a sweep. And though, as I mounted the flue, it certainly diminished in size, I was able to move, not, indeed, with freedom, but without any actual danger of being wedged.

It was not a pleasant experience, for soot and filth kept falling into my eyes and choking my nose and mouth with each breath that I drew, and, after some twenty feet, as luck would have it, I

let fall Dewdrop's torch.

With a venial flurry of oaths, I decided to let this lie. At the moment it could not serve me—I could hardly go wrong.

So I went on my way blindly, cursing the soot and the cobwebs and hoping as hard as I could that the flue was not peculiar to the room I had left.

I must have climbed forty feet when my hand encountered a ridge and I felt a current of air. And then I knew I was saved, for the ridge and the draught were declaring the mouth of a second flue.

I had to climb above it, before I could leave the main shaft. Then I put my feet over the ridge and, since I could find no foothold, began to let myself down.

With my hands on the ridge, I sought foothold—and sought it in vain. The flue was becoming enormous: I could scarcely straddle its width. Unless I could find some ledge . . .

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And then I knew that I had come to a fireplace.

An instant later my feet were touching the wood that was laid on the dogs.

I could, of course, see nothing. The room was dark. But as I crawled out of that fireplace, I knew where I was.

I had come to Helena's bedroom.

I took two paces forward and bore to the left.

An instant later I was touching her standard lamp.

The room was a little disordered.

A wardrobe door was open, and three or four dresses were hanging out of its mouth. I could see that the bed had been lain on, and a little gilt chair had fallen on to its side.

As my eyes travelled round, I saw myself in the pier-glass. . . .

As may be imagined, my state beggared all description, and I made at once for the bathroom, to do what I could. For me to move was to damage, but at least the tiles in the bathroom would take no hurt.

Roughly I washed the filth from my head and my hands, but though I did what I could to wipe the soot from my shoes, I very soon saw that until I could change my clothing, I should not be fit to move in a furnished room. And what clothes I had were at Plumage. . . .

At once to get to the farm became my burning desire.

Before I did so, I must set Helena free. That was simple enough. I had her master key, and there was her private stair to bring me down to the hall. And yet I dreaded the duty. I did not want to see her—at least, not now. I dreaded the explanations which I should be forced to give. I did not want her to know that I had been there, in that room: that I had seen Pharaoh break her, that *I had heard her purchase my safety for ten thousand pounds a year.*

Almost I decided to go and seek some servant and commit to him the honour of setting his mistress free. But that would have seemed an insult which would have been hard to explain.

As I stepped to the curtain, I heard the whine of a dog and then the scratch of claws on the door that led to the ramparts—not that I was proposing to use. In a moment I had it open, and there to my joy was Sabre, still, of course, very wet, but safe and sound.

I afterwards learned that, perceiving the bustle above him, the dog had declared, by barking, that he was down in the moat. His rescue effected, he had, as Pharaoh had conjectured, at once been impressed and taken into the meadows and encouraged to scour the woods: but, knowing better than his betters, he had presently given them the slip and had made his way back to the castle and up to his mistress' door.

The great dog seemed pleased to see me, but none too pleased to see that I was alone. At once his nose fell to the floor and he moved to the bed. I watched him curiously. At the bed he paused, and I heard him let out a growl. Then he found his way to the wardrobe. . . . As he stood with his nose to its sill, I saw the hair rise upon his chine.

I picked up a box of matches and turned to the private door.

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“Come and find her, Sabre,” I said. “I know where she is.”

The Alsatian started and stared. Then he bounded towards me, put his great paws on my shoulders and licked my face.

One minute later we stood in the little hall.

With the master key in my hand, I turned to the turret door. For a moment I hesitated. Then I took a deep breath, fitted the key to the lock and pushed open the oak.

“Helena,” I said.

She made no answer, and I took the box from my pocket to strike a match. Here the door returned upon me, and in some impatience I pushed it roughly away. As I struck the match, the door swung back to the wall and stayed where it was.

Helena was not to be seen. Neither, for that matter, was Sabre. He had gone to join his mistress at the head of the turret stair.

I was wondering whether to follow or whether to wait where I was, when I suddenly saw that my duty to the lady was done.

The appearance of Sabre would show her that she was released. The way to her bedroom was open, and she had no need of escort, because the terror was laid.

With trembling fingers, I whipped the key from the lock of the turret door. Then I opened the door which gave to the winding staircase, passed through and locked it behind me with all dispatch. Five minutes later I crossed the moat by the footbridge and entered the tunnel which would bring me into the woods.

\* \* \* \* \*

I have till now said little of how I had been affected by

Helena's words and demeanour when she was in Pharaoh's power. Until I was clear of the castle, I had no time to consider what she had said and done; but the blazing honour she had shewn me had made, as it were, a background to every thought I had had.

As I walked to Plumage, I remembered those terrible moments—how in her pride she had flung my puny efforts in Pharaoh's face and how in her fear and trembling she had sought to buy my safety by committing a breach of trust. No queen could have done more for the king she loved. And Helena had done this for me—who had broken off our engagement and told her I did not love her six hours before.

I walked to Plumage, found the farm silent but open and the men of the house abroad. No one saw me enter, find a change of clothing and take my leave. I made my way to the footbridge that spanned the stream, and when I had put off my corruption, I hid my foul clothes in the bushes and set out for Annabel.

As I went, the dawn came up. . . .

All the way three scenes continually presented themselves, not separately and in order, but confounded and intermingled beyond belief. Helena commanded them all. The first was laid in her bedroom, lit by a flickering fire: the second lay in a valley, where the cool of the day had come in and the air was sweetness itself: and the third was a cold, white circle of merciless light. Yet, as I say, I could not keep them apart. While I thought of her words in the valley, I saw her broken and trembling at Pharaoh's threat: and when I saw the scene in her bedroom, the words that she spoke to Pharaoh

kept thrusting into my mind. But at last, out of all this welter, I came to four conclusions—and they were these.

That her ‘love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women,’ a thing too rare to be committed to pen and ink: that my severe reception of her deceit was inspired by a just resentment at being addressed as a lover, but used as a child: that for me no other woman would ever so much as exist: that I was stopped from seeking to repair what had happened, because she had told me plainly that after what I had said she never could be my wife.

I have set down these things precisely, as though they were counting-house matters, instead of the self-same stuff as that from which poets have wrung everlasting rhymes. But that is because, since all is wheat to me, I cannot sift the grain from the chaff. On that day and the days that followed I think my heart found itself, working out its own salvation by studying the scenes and conclusions which I have set forth, and scourging itself with the phrases of that gentle indictment which a girl had preferred against me in a valley that knew no sun.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although I had once postponed and had come to regard with increasing apprehension the opening of Helena’s eyes—to the truth, of course, that it was I and not Bugle that had stood in the secret chamber and had listened to all she said—it had never occurred to me that, *if only I held my tongue, neither she nor anyone else need ever suspect that I had entered the castle that Friday night.* Yet before my cousin had spoken a dozen words, I saw that, if I was careful, my secret would keep itself.

He found me finishing breakfast in his room at *The Reaping Hook*.

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“Well, you have missed something,” he said. “Let that be your punishment for deceiving three simple souls. Not that I blame you—this time. My lady had no right to treat you like that. I told her as much in the coupé. But she wouldn’t listen to me. But that’s by the way. You’ve missed—in a way we’ve all of us missed the most astounding show that ever was seen. Lady Helena saw a good bit—more than enough, I’m afraid.” He threw himself into a chair. “Upon my soul, I don’t know where to begin.”

I moistened my lips.

“What about at the beginning?” I said. “Oh, and don’t leave anything out. This show’s bung full of detail, and details count.”

Geoffrey fingered his chin.

“No, they don’t,” he said. “Now isn’t that funny? Details don’t count any more. Never mind. You shall have your wish. Ask what you like, my dear John. I’m ‘in a holiday humour and like enough to consent’.”

“What do you know?” I said.

“I feel sure,” said my cousin, “that you will be glad to hear that your failure to arrive at the castle knocked the three of us flat. We couldn’t assimilate the fact that simple, honest John Spencer had laid himself out to deceive us—and done it so devilish well. You certainly got your own back.

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Lady Helena was wild. ‘I’d never have believed it of him,’ she raged. And when she saw my lip twitch, ‘I suppose you mean I taught him,’ she said.

“Well, now that she was safe in the castle, I was only too glad of an excuse to get out, and so I announced that Barley and I would seek you without delay. She insisted that we should take Sabre and gave the dog his orders before we left. It’s right you should know that she was extremely worried, not to say deeply distressed. ‘Pharaoh hates him,’ she kept on saying. ‘His fingers were itching last night to take his life. That’s why he made Dewdrop cover him—because he knew that he couldn’t trust himself’.”

My cousin paused, to frown on his finger-tips.

“I hope, in the merciful course of time, to forget the way we employed the next two hours. We used Sabre exactly according to the instructions on the box. *Should the dog display emotion, release him at once. Remain exactly where you were when he left you, until he returns. Then take hold of his collar and he will lead you to John.*”

I began to shake with laughter.

“Quite so,” said Geoffrey. “Quite so. After about an hour the dog displayed emotion and was released. After another hour Barley and I displayed much more emotion and withdrew to survey the mouth of the entrance drive. . . .

“We hadn’t been there ten minutes when we heard the Carlotta coming—coming from the castle all out. By the use of our torches we stopped her, to find that she was manned

by a flying squad. Watchmen, porters, grooms—all of them armed to the teeth. They were going to compass Yorick, travelling east: and the coupé was coming after, to travel west. *The Countess Helena had been kidnapped. Yorick was plunged into darkness and my lady was gone. Let down in a sheet from the ramparts. Her handkerchief had been found on the drawbridge and Sabre had been found in the moat.*”

I felt that it was time to say something.

“But how,” I began . . .

“Don’t interrupt,” said my cousin. “Listen to me. Well, I let the Carlotta go, deciding that Barley and I would do better on foot. I sent him east and ran west—yes, *ran*, with my heart in my mouth. The idea was to find the Rolls . . . if the Rolls had not gone.

“I found her at a quarter to one, up a little track—and very near cried with relief. You see, that meant that my lady was yet in the park.

“I rushed off and stopped the coupé, which was lapping for the twentieth time, told the chauffeur to go on patrolling, but to send me reinforcements and tell everybody he met. Then I went back to lay my ambush. I soon had plenty of men and I did the job well. Pharaoh simply hadn’t an earthly. Though he didn’t know it, that track had become the scaffold on which he and his little friends were going to die.

“At a quarter to two a wallah comes pelting with a message—we very nearly killed him, of course. But by the time he’d said his piece he was nearer death than before. *The Countess*

*Helena's compliments, and will Mr. Bohun come back to the castle at once."*

My cousin covered his face.

"I don't think I've ever felt such a blasted fool. But  
*blasted . . .*

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"Well, I took the Rolls and drove back—to hear Lady Helena's tale.

"She was lying, dressed, on her bed when a gag was clapped over her mouth. Pharaoh, of course: but alone. She put up a fight, but he very soon had his way. He bound her wrists and ankles and took her master key. Then he carried her down her private staircase and into a secret room—the antechamber, in fact, to the cellar where lies the gold. And there he left her, while he went to do in the switchboard, throw a red herring to Florin and let his confederates in. He told her as much. Sure enough, before he returned, the lights of the room went out, and five minutes later she was alone with the four.

"What then took place I don't know. I'm afraid there's no doubt that she suffered: but, except that Pharaoh put it across her, she simply leaves that bit out. But he must have been pretty ruthless, for in the end she opened the secret panel concealing the cellar steps.

"Well, Pharaoh and Dewdrop went down, to view the gold: but Rush and Bugle remained in the chamber on guard. I ought to have said that her hands and her feet had been freed. Still, she hadn't much chance, for they kept a torch on her face.

“I shall never understand why Pharaoh employed two such wash-outs as Bugle and Rush. The first thing those two bright lads did was, between them, to drop the torch. By the time they’d found it again *their prisoner was gone*. The door to the secret room is a secret door. It cannot be opened from within. It was, therefore, standing open. In a flash my lady was out and had shut the door.

“Well, though she was safe, she wasn’t clear of the wood. She was locked in a staircase-turret, and Rush had her master key. She called from the embrasures, but, as the castle was empty, there weren’t any ears to hear. Then, after a while she found Sabre standing beside her, licking her hand.”

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I felt that such a statement demanded some sort of expression of disbelief.

“But you said——”

“You shut your face,” said Geoffrey. “Truth is stranger than fiction—every time. The door to the turret was open and so were the doors to her room. But her room had been used. The thieves had escaped by the chimney, entered her room by the fireplace, cleaned themselves up in her bathroom *and disappeared*.”

“But that’s fantastic,” said I.

“The very word I used,” said Geoffrey. “I also employed ‘grotesque.’ I used the phrase ‘out of all reason.’ That they had escaped was clear. But why release my lady and make themselves scarce?”

“The obvious thing to do was to search the castle forthwith. I ought to have said that long before I got back, the switchboard had been repaired and the lights had come on, and while my lady was talking, the staff which had been scattered was trickling back. Florin and I induced some sort of order before beginning the search.

“We began with my lady’s bedroom. One look at the hearth was enough. There was soot all over the place. But nothing and nobody else. We left the watchmen there and my lady and Florin and I went down to the secret room. It was empty now, we knew, for Pharaoh and Co. were gone: but the door to the cellar was open and my lady wanted it shut.”

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He took a deep breath.

“I’ll tell you what we found. We found Pharaoh, Dewdrop and Rush—all three of them dead.”

“Go on,” said I, incredulously.

“Fact,” said my cousin, shortly. “I’m glad you weren’t there to see it. It was a dreadful sight. Bugle had done the three in and then cleared out. I fancy there’d been some scrap. Pharaoh’s back was broken: he had no wound.

“And here’s my interpretation of this astounding find.

“In Pharaoh’s absence Bugle and Rush between them let Lady Helena go. Warrantably fearful of the consequences of what they had done, Rush and Bugle quarrelled, and Bugle killed Rush. Afraid to face Pharaoh—such a dereliction of duty meant almost certain death—Bugle decided to kill him and Dewdrop,

too. And so he did. Then he escaped by the chimney, with Lady Helena's master key. This let him out of the castle by the way by which he came in. Why he waited to let her out, I cannot conceive. Possibly some twinge of conscience—you never know. That's one of the points which we shall never clear up."

"Then everything's over," said I. "The terror is laid."

"The terror is laid," said Geoffrey. "Bugle remains, of course. But I very much doubt if we shall see Bugle again."

Thoughtfully I regarded my napkin.

Was it five or six days before a corpse rose to the surface of the water in which it lay?

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"Then everything's over," I repeated.

"Except the interment," said Geoffrey: "which is fixed for to-morrow evening, as soon as it's decently dark. As you seem to have had a night off, I think you might help with that."

\* \* \* \* \*

Six days had gone by, and my precious secret was safe.

This was hardly surprising. Only two beings knew that I had approached the castle that terrible night: and of these the one was a dog and the other was dead. I had not used Barley's pistol: I had cleaned my cousin's knife: my filthy garments lay hid in the Plumage woods. Nobody knew that in my note-case was Helena's master key.

But another secret was safe.

On the Sunday night Pharaoh, Dewdrop and Rush had been laid in a common grave, not far from the mouth of the tunnel that ran from the moat. Barley and I were the sextons, and Barley and Florin together brought out the dead. This, of course, by dark, by the secret way. And so, outside ‘the big five,’ as my cousin saw fit to call us, not a soul in the world was aware that the rogues were dead. Indeed, the belief was still held that they had escaped, for Helena, Geoffrey and Florin had kept to themselves what they found in the secret room. It was very much better so. The ‘attempted abduction’ of its mistress was quite as much as Yorick could well digest.

Though nobody knew it but I, Bugle had yet to appear. 300  
For some unaccountable reason the moat still withheld its dead. I wondered what would happen when the body was seen. Not that I feared for my secret. No one could say at what hour the man had been drowned.

My cousin was painting Plumage. Twice a day he visited Yorick: but I was not invited and would not go unmasked. Neither would I go to Plumage—although I longed to see her—because I was sure that Helena sat with my cousin and watched him at work.

And now six days had dragged by—and I was about to be gone.

The truth was this. Morning, noon and night Helena Yorick commanded me, heart and soul. Against my will, I was her obedient servant, her obedient, humble servant and no longer

master of myself. My memory was her mirror, reflecting nothing but the beauty of flesh and spirit with which I had been familiar a week ago. When I rose, I remembered the mornings when I had done what I could to turn a pool in the forest into my lady's bath: when I went to my bed, I remembered my pallet in the kitchen and the smile she threw over her shoulder as she mounted the break-neck stairs: when I drove the Rolls, the seat beside me was empty, or else profaned: when I walked alone in the greenwood, I found no health in Nature, but only in the thought of the footfalls that once had lisped by my side. And since the estate of neighbour followed the estate of lover with a very ill grace, I had made up my mind to leave it and to go and stay at Innsbruck which was a city I knew. My cousin was to follow with Barley in four days' time.

And so I was sitting at Annabel, cursing life and regarding my half-packed trunks with a listless stare, when the host of the inn came bustling with a note in his hand.

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*Dear John,*

*Your cousin tells me that you are leaving to-night. Before you go, will you be so good as to show me where young Florin lies? I would not ask you this favour, but I was fond of young Florin, and you are the only being who knows the site of his grave. I cannot believe you will refuse me, and so, if it will suit you, I will call for you to-day at a quarter to three. Please will you tell the bearer 'yes' or 'no.'*

*Helena.*

I went down to the door of *The Reaping Hook*, to speak to the groom.

“Tell her ladyship ‘yes’,” I said.

\* \* \* \* \*

As the coupé stole into the forecourt, I descended the steps of the inn.

Helena smiled and nodded and I took off my hat.

“Will you drive, please?”

With a pounding heart, I took my seat by her side, perceived the glow of her presence, discovered her faint perfume. . . .

The spot to which we were going lay twelve miles off, and, after leaving the car, we must walk half a mile through the forest to come to the dell. Be sure, I drove slowly enough . . . But though half an hour went by before we left the coupé, in all that time we never exchanged one word.

Again and again I sought to make some remark, but I feared that my voice would tremble and so betray an emotion I did not wish her to see. To sit thus by her side, as I had sat so often, was stirring the depths of my being, as though with a sword. Though I kept my gaze fast on the road, with the tail of my eye I could see her peerless features and the gentle, steadfast look on her lovely face. She was neither grave nor smiling, but something betwixt the two: her air was the air of one whose day is over, who has of choice withdrawn from the lists of life and is now content to sit and watch the tourney in

which she will ride no more. I had never seen her like this and at first I could not discover what it was that I found unfamiliar in the beauty I knew so well: and then I saw: the eagerness was out of her face.

When I brought the car to rest, Helena was out in the road before I could open the door. Then we entered the forest together, as we seemed to have done so often in other days.

In silence we came to the glade where Geoffrey had been painting when I first set eyes on the thieves, and in silence we passed to the coverts which might have been planted on purpose to keep the dell. And then at last we came out—not quite as I had intended, above the bluff, but lower down, between the bluff and the water, at the edge of a sloping lawn.

Helena caught her breath.

“Oh, John, how lovely,” she said.

Though I knew the spot was handsome, when I had seen it before I had been too much distracted to consider the features that went to make it so rare, and indeed, from where I had lain, I could not have observed their disposal, because of the bushes that clothed the head of the dell. But now I could mark its bulwarks and tell the lovely columns that stood, like those of a temple, to line its verge.

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The place was a lawn of fair grass, cropped, I suppose, by the grateful life of the forest, though I never saw a creature close to that spot: from the little bluff at its head two blowing banks sloped down to a tumbling rill: a delicate silver birch was the only tree that sprang from the vivid turf, but beeches and limes

and chestnuts stood up on the flanking walls and rose in superb disorder beyond the brook. On these three sides the dell was hung with an arras of breathless leaves: but the head of the hollow was open, for there the trees stood back, so that, facing the bluff, you might have been standing in a chancel and looking over its screen to the heights of the nave beyond. Yet the place was not grave, but gay. Great shafts of sunshine were piercing the plumes of the trees at the head of the dell, badging the turf and flashing the falling water and printing on Sabre's shoulders the trembling shadow of some obstructive spray.

"It's finer than I thought," I said quietly. "I never saw it from here."

"Where were you lying?"

I raised my arm and pointed.

"Up there. On the edge of the bluff."

"And where . . . ?"

I took off my hat and moved forward.

"Here," I said. "You can see that the turf has been pieced."

For a moment we stood together, looking down on young Florin's grave, while she, no doubt, remembered his strength and devotion, his pride in his lady's favour and the light she brought into his eyes: but I could only remember his pitiful, helpless body and how in death he had seemed to be calling upon me to pick up his fallen torch.

“I must bring old Florin,” said Helena. “I think it would help him a little. He’s gone straight on, of course; but I know that it must have hit him most frightfully hard. His son was exactly like him—very quiet and very respectful, very gentle in all he did. His smile was always grave, but he had a great natural charm. I think he belonged to Nature. He loved the woods and forests, and I think they gave him their gifts. . . . It’s strange that those fiends should have chosen to lay him where he belonged.” She pulled off her little hat and turned to the rill. “Dells seem to be our portion. But the last one was out of the sun.”

“It was full of perfume,” said I.

Helena took a deep breath.

“Yes,” she said. “That’s true. You can’t have it every way. The fragrance was exquisite. But here the air’s quick and radiant, and there it was dim and still. But I love the light and the warmth. And sometimes I even need it—to lift up my heart.”

“The sun makes music,” I said, “wherever he goes.”

Helena sat herself down with her back to the rippling brook.

“I’d like to stay friends,” she said. “I know you’re going away, and I think you’re right. But I’d like to think that though our—our moments are over, we still were friends.”

“If you please,” said I, dully, and sat down a little apart.

“I’ve so much to thank you for.”

“I don’t know that you have. But that’s neither here nor there.

We've peered at big things together—you and I. We've eaten of strange, sweet fruits—like two children; hand in hand. And now we're back where we were—where we were when you came to Plumage and I told you about the gold. We *can* go farther back: perhaps we have. But I'd like to stop there, if you can. I mean, one can always be friends."

"I can stop there," I said thickly.

"That's right," said Helena gently. "I thought you could."

For a moment she looked at the palms of her little hands, as though to consult those pretty pages before proceeding with a discourse that was making my heart feel cold.

Then—

"When I say friends, I mean it. I'll always have a feeling that I can depend upon you. I shan't attempt to, you know. But I shall be glad of the feeling. You know. When things go wrong, it makes a world of difference if you can say to yourself 'If So-and-so were here, they would understand'."

I nodded.

"You can count on me," I said. "You let me come to know you as—as I'll never know anyone else."

"Will it help you, John?"

"I don't know. I'll write and tell you."

"That's right. And I'll always answer. You see, my dear,

we must never meet again. We've looked at glory together—and turned away. It wasn't our fault, you know. We rather . . . rushed our fences. But down in that valley of shadow we gave each other judgment . . . and the judgments were good."

I could not speak. I sat as though turned to stone. My heart in my breast was ice. The blow which had fallen already, had fallen again. I had nothing to lose, and had lost it. 'From him that hath not shall be taken away even that which he hath.'

"I—I don't know that mine was," I said desperately.

"I'm afraid it was," said Helena. "I put my love above honour—and you mustn't do that. And in any event mine was. *You took my love and you put it back in its place.* I don't say you weren't right to do it, because you were. But there are some flowers, my dear, that you can't transplant. I mean—if you move them, they die."

Blow upon blow. Couldn't she see that the thing she was striking was dead? Everything and everyone was dead. Young Florin and Pharaoh and Dewdrop and Bugle and Rush, and now her love. And I had killed them—not Bugle, of course, nor young Florin. But everything else.

"That's all right," I heard myself saying. "I'm glad . . . it's dead."

There was a long, long silence. By the time it was over I had myself in hand.

At length—

“Poor Bugle,” said Helena slowly. “He did me a very good turn.”

“By dropping the torch?” said I.

“I suppose he dropped it,” she said. “But Rush was bullying me, and sometimes I think that Bugle was going to stop him. I don’t know, of course. When it fell, I just flew for the door. And in any event he waited to set me free.”

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“A twinge of conscience,” said I.

Helena shrugged her shoulders.

“He needn’t have done it,” she said. And then again. “Poor Bugle. I’ll always remember him kindly. I think he was the best of the lot.”

“I think you’re right,” said I. “I had a weakness for Bugle, to tell you the truth. Of course Rush showed him off.”

“I know, I know. But he had a spark of feeling. More than a spark, I think. Very few men, placed as he was, would have troubled to let me out.”

“What will you do,” I said, “about the loss of your master key?”

“Change the locks, I suppose. It’s a hideous waste of money: but if Bugle’s tempted, you know, there are plenty of crooks who’d pay a long price for that key.”

I dared not pursue the matter: to do so would be to sail too

close to the wind. I decided that Bugle must show another spark of feeling by returning her master key. I would post it to her—not from Innsbruck. I should have to journey to Salzburg and post it from there. That would be easy enough: I could be back at Innsbruck again before my cousin arrived.

There was another silence.

I ventured to glance at my companion.

She was sitting square, with her knees drawn up before her and her fingers laced about them, the pose of a thinking child. She was looking straight ahead, and when I followed her gaze, I saw that this was fixed on the ragged oblong which the sun and the dew between them were already beginning to efface. The edge of a shaft of light was touching her hair with splendour, and her profile stood clean and faultless against the green of the leafage six paces away. As always, her chin was up, and I often think that the coin was never minted from which the image of royalty stood out so clear. Her temples, her exquisite nose and the droop of her mouth, the curve of her chin and the slender white of her throat—the chisel of Phidias might have rendered their beauty, but I cannot believe that chisel or brush or pen could ever have captured the aspect that made that beauty live. She looked so gentle, yet fearless, so calm, content and stablished, so stately and yet so human, and yet again so distant, as though her flesh was sacred because her blood was royal. Her air was pensive, yet not at all unhappy, but rather glad: but for me, her crowning glory was absent: the eagerness was out of her face.

I shifted my gaze to her insteps, slim and silk and shining,

making the turf a carpet fit for a queen.

With her eyes on young Florin's grave, Helena spoke again.

“That wasn't the only reason why I wanted to see you before you went. I want your help in a matter . . .

“Your cousin is painting my picture—he's nearly done. It is the most lovely portrait. . . . And as he won't hear of a fee, I want to make him a present.

“Well, I've got a cup at Yorick, an old, gold cup, with a curious history. Years ago, in the sixteenth century, the Yorick of that day was painted. A young painter came from Vienna, a man called Latz. Had he lived, he would have been famous, for the picture is terribly good. Your cousin picked it out in an instant as being the best of the lot. Well, when the painter had finished, the Count was so pleased with his work that he called for wine and drank the young man's health, and when he had drained the cup he called for gold. I suppose his treasurer brought it. Then he filled the cup with gold pieces and gave the painter the lot. I hope it was adequate payment. In those days it probably was. The next morning the painter left Yorick to make his way home. On his lonely ride to Salzburg the poor man was robbed and murdered—his body was found by the road. Now the thieves didn't break up the cup, but six months later they tried to sell it at Innsbruck where Yorick then had a hotel. But, as it happened, they took it to the very goldsmith that Yorick himself employed. The moment he saw the arms, he knew that the cup had been stolen, and, to cut a long story short, the thieves were taken and hanged and the cup came back to the castle because the poor painter was dead.

“So you see that cup will make a most appropriate gift. But I’m so afraid that your cousin may refuse to accept it that, before I ask him to do so, I want to have it engraved with his crest. And that’s where you can help me. I must have something of his that bears his crest, to give, to the engraver to copy. A cigarette-case or a flask. Perhaps it’s on the backs of his brushes. . . . You see, without that I’m stuck. At the present moment I don’t even know what his crest is.”

I wrinkled my brow.

“Strangely enough,” said I, “it’s the same as your own—a leopard. But that doesn’t mean——”

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“*What?*”

The word flamed.

As the saying goes, I almost leapt out of my skin: and turned to find her staring—tense, wide-eyed and staring, white to the lips.

And then I knew I was lost. *I had learned her crest from Pharaoh, and Pharaoh was wrong: and I had repeated the error which Pharaoh had made.*

“I—I thought,” I stammered. “I had an idea——”

“*The badge of Yorick is an oak-tree.*” She whispered rather than spoke. “*We’ve never displayed the leopard for more than two hundred years.*”

The sibilant accusation struck me dumb.

She was round now and was kneeling, with her arms held close to her breast and her hands to her throat. Her breath was whistling in her nostrils and her eyes seemed to pierce my brain.

Helplessly I shrugged my shoulders.

“I suppose I must have——”

“*My God,*” she breathed, “*you were there.*” As my eyes went down, she clapped her hands to her head. “*My God!*” she cried. “*It was you! You, John, YOU, and not Bugle that . . .*”

I pulled out my note-case and took out her master key.

As I laid it down by her side—

“Sabre killed Bugle,” I said. “His body’s down in the moat. None of them saw it happen, so I walked into the castle and took his place.”

Helena sat back on her heels, finger to lip. Her eyes were still wide, still staring: she seemed to be murmuring something I could not hear.

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“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t mean you to know.”

At that a tremor ran through her: then, with a sudden movement, she flung herself down on her face and burst into tears.

For a moment I sat hesitant. Then something snapped within me.

I lifted her up and gathered her into my arms.

With my face pressed tight against hers—

“Don’t cry, Nell,” I said. “I can’t bear it. And—and please don’t send me away.”

“I’m not sending you away,” she sobbed. She caught at my coat. “And I’ll tell you another thing. I’d never have let you go. If all else had failed, I was going down to the station.”

I held her off and looked into her tear-stained face.

“But, Nell, just now you——”

“I wanted to know if you loved me. I had to be sure of that. But now . . .” She hid her face in my coat. “Oh, John, my darling, you’ve made me feel so humble, so cheap and——”

I stopped her beautiful mouth.

“How d’you think I feel, Nell? How d’you think I felt when I stood in that secret chamber and heard you buying my safety—the life and health of the man who’d just turned you down?”

A child looked into my eyes.

“Shall we . . . take each other back, John?”

“Yes, please, Nell,” I said quietly.

With a little sigh of contentment she slid an arm round my neck.

\* \* \* \* \*

Our respective tales had been told, my disaffection forgiven, our grace had been said, and we were now standing together at the edge of the lawn. We had started to return to the car, but now with one consent we had stopped to look again upon the beauty which we were to leave.

It seemed so strange that life and death and fortune had lain in that peaceful setting, awaiting a sweet June day-spring to leap to their battle stations, thence to dispute the fate of six human beings, not one of whom, till that morning, had so much as suspected the existence of such a spot. A century of dawns and sundowns had found and left it sleeping, as it was sleeping now: and then in a twinkling the earth had opened, the brook had played storm music and . . .

“To think,” said Helena, “that I treated you as a child.”

“The truth is,” said I, “we’re both children: and children hate to be treated as children, you know.”

Helena lifted her head, to survey the blue of the sky. The eager look in her face would have made a sick man well.

“I wasn’t,” she said. “I was a woman all right. But I think—it’s all your own doing, you know—but I think, my dear, you’ll have a child for a wife.”

\* \* \* \* \*

There is not much more to be told.

My cousin's reception of the truth was more than handsome: and I really believe that Barley would not have exchanged the knowledge that I had caused Pharaoh's death for all the gold that lay in the cellars of Yorick or anywhere else. But old Florin's simple tribute would have warmed any man's heart.

“Sir, you have done my duty. And that, by the grace of God; for I myself could never have done it so well.”

It was he who said at once that Bugle's body would be found held down the grill which kept foreign matter from passing into the waste-pipes that led from the moat. Sure enough, there it was. Its removal and the subsequent rites were grisly enough: but the four of us did the business without any help, because, having got so far, it seemed a pity that we should explode a theory which Yorick—and Yorick's neighbours—had been at such pains to digest.

When my cousin broached the question of getting rid of the gold, Helena made no objection, but only begged his assistance to carry through a transaction she dared not attempt alone. This to our great surprise, till we learned that her solemn trust was now at an end, because her father had said that *on her marriage* the gold must be re-invested or lodged at a bank. And this in due course was done. My cousin arranged the affair with a famous house and within six weeks, a fortnight before we were wed, the bullion was out of the cellar and Helena mistress of a fortune which was considerably greater than that which her father laid up.

A letter from the Count of Yorick afforded us infinite

pleasure and deserves to be set out in full:—

*Dear Helena,*

*I hope you are very well. I am not at Yorick because I was bitten by a mad dog and a good Sammarrytone brought me straight here. I would like to thank him for that. He saved my life, you know. Fancy a mad dog worrying me. I think I must just have gone out for a walk or something and then it just leeped upon me and worried me and I knew no moar. And this is the only one place that I could have been saved from going mad. It makes you get hot all over. By the way I'm off liquor. Acholol, I mean. They make me heeling drinks here with virtue in them and I fairly lapp them up. And the wound's heeling like a little child. They say liquors's very dangerous for hiderofobia. I nearly died, you know. All the wile the good Sammarrytones were taking me to the monnastery, it was touch and go moar than once. The madness was in my vanes. It makes you go hot. But I'm all right now. They say I can get up for a little wile on Sunday and look at the flours. I shall like that. I see the vannity of life now all right. There is a good monk here called Father Bernard. Of course they are all good: but he is the best. He says all is vannity and that the pumps of the world are void. You know there's a lot in that. Well, I must end now. But I thought you might wunder where I was. What a escape! Fancy a mad dog like that ranging about seaking whom he might devower. I tell you, I hadn't a chance. He just leeped upon me, nashing their fangs. I can see it now.*

*Your loving brother,  
Valentine.*

*P.S.*

*What about Fanning? I rather hope he's gone. If not, perhaps you could fire him out. He swore Spencer was your evil genie, but I thought Spencer had a good eye. Sour grapes, I guess. I suppose you knew what you were doing.*

The reformation this letter foreshadowed was more than we could believe, but I am bound to record that it was fairly fulfilled. The shock or the fear of death or, perhaps, his curious communion with that honest and kindly fellowship of simple souls wrought in the Count an astonishing change of heart. The weeds that had choked his qualities withered and died, and though I was most apprehensive of our relation, twenty-four hours' acquaintance had made us the best of friends.

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His postscript brings me to Pharaoh.

Of that unconscionable scoundrel I have but little to say. That the man was most swift and daring I cannot deny, but I think that his deadly reputation was to him the highwayman's mare. Carefully fed and cherished, it was this that carried him into and out of engagements without a scratch; but when at last he was standing upon his own feet, even I was able to show that, if his eye was quicker, at least his spine was as brittle as that of another man. For all that, he was bold and efficient—and something more. Ill served, dogged by misfortune, he

nevertheless contrived almost to wring a victory out of defeat. So far as I know, he only made one mistake—and that was to kill young Florin: so far as I know, he had but one slice of luck—and that was, on binding Helena, to find that she had in her hand her master key.

The portrait my cousin had painted will always rank for me as one of the greatest triumphs a painter ever achieved. This is not because he had rendered a beautiful likeness, nor yet because he had captured the leaping spirit that lived in the lovely flesh: but because he had marked, as I had, that the precious eager look was out of his subject's face and *had painted it in from memory* out of a grateful heart. 316

Though my life is secure and happy beyond belief, the events of those terrible days are cut as in stone upon my mind. But I would not forget them, if I could: for out of their wrack and turmoil I won my beautiful wife. Often and often I read their grim inscription and gaze at the riotous pageant which this calls up. I see that dreadful labour down in the sparkling dell and Dewdrop finger the paper that I let fall: I tread *The Reaping Hook's* stairs and I hear—as I shall hear to my dying day—the deadly voice of Pharaoh behind the door: I see him enter the room with Valentine's hand upon his shoulder and I hear him whistling for Sabre with my heart in my mouth: I hear the Carlotta coming with the rush of a mighty wind, and I hear the cough of the Rolls as her engine failed: I hear Rush plying Bugle to make my blood run cold, I hear Pharaoh bullying Freda, and I see the flame of the pistol that saved his life: I see the awful change in my darling's face, and I turn to see Pharaoh smiling behind my back: I smell the fragrance of the valley that knew no sun, and I see the smear of blood upon Helena's

delicate leg: and then I see her stricken and trembling in Pharaoh's power, and I hear the roar of our pistols and I see the man spent with hatred, staring into my eyes. . . .

It is written, Out of the eater came forth meat. I can only say I have found this saying most true. The goddess Aphrodite rose from the foam of the sea: but Helena Spencer came out of the wrath of a tempest that had risen to smite us both. Together, saving each other, we rode out that frightful storm—the remembrance of which is not grievous, for our desperately perilous passage, side by side, has bound us more closely together than the sharing of any joys.

THE END.

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## *TRANSCRIBER'S NOTES*

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- Silently corrected palpable typos; left non-standard spellings and dialect unchanged.

[The end of *Storm Music* by Dornford Yates]