PERIOD STUFF

Dornford Yates

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PERIOD STUFF

Dornford Yates

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Published by
Ward, Lock and Co., Ltd.

BERRY AND CO.
JONAH AND CO.
AND BERRY CAME TOO
THE BROTHER OF DAPHNE
THE COURTS OF IDLENESS
THE STOLEN MARCH
ANTHONY LYVEDEN
VALERIE FRENCH
AND FIVE WERE FOOLISH
AS OTHER MEN ARE
MAIDEN STAKES
SHE PAINTED HER FACE
THIS PUBLICAN
GALE WARNING
SHOAL WATER

Published by Hodder and Stoughton

SHE FELL AMONG THIEVES
BLIND CORNER
PERISHABLE GOODS
BLOOD ROYAL
FIRE BELOW
SAFE CUSTODY
STORM MUSIC

ADELE AND CO.

PERIOD STUFF

BY

DORNFORD YATES

WARD, LOCK & CO., LIMITED
LONDON AND MELBOURNE

First published in 1942
Reprinted 1942

MADE IN ENGLAND
Printed in Great Britain by Butler & Tanner Ltd., Frome and London

To the English, but for whom this book would never have been published.

The characters in this book are entirely imaginary and have no relation to any living person.

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PREFACE

To my way of thinking, a tale is ‘period stuff’ when its characters and its setting belong to an era which has come to an end. By the time this book is published, the era to which these episodes belong will be no more. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing is not for me to say: but I know that, so long as I live, I shall always remember the era in question with affection. In the hope that I am not alone in this outlook, I venture to offer to my customers these incidents of other days.

Four ‘murders’ are included in this collection. They are straightforward affairs, with no more mystery about them than that which, in such cases, presents itself to Scotland Yard. This is, as a rule, insignificant. The point is that they are nearer truth than fiction and that they accurately represent what does happen behind the scenes, when wilful murder has been done. I can say that with confidence, for for two years I was behind the scenes myself.

DORNFORD YATES.

MY LADY'S CHAMBER

Patrick Danvers, bachelor, saw no good reason why he should ever abandon this excellent state. His life was sheltered. His leisure was not embarrassed by lack of means: his work was savoury meat, such as he loved. Danvers was a herald. He respected his office and delighted in his work at the College of Arms. In an age when traditions were dying of violence and neglect, he found himself happy in maintaining the fairest of them all. For this his profession he had his father to thank. From his mother he had inherited a little house in Westminster and a fortune which was sufficient, because he was content to live quietly and to be outrun by the times. He went out little, except to dine at his club. For a man of thirty years, he had few friends: for a tall good-looking young man, who dealt with Savile Row and knew how to wear his clothes, his feminine acquaintance was almost unbelievably slight. Attempts to correct this disorder always failed: Danvers was nothing if not resolute.

As is the way of a man, Danvers seldom visited the great stores. He had no prejudice against them, but he liked the 'specialist' shops. If he had need of a pen-knife, he went to a cutler's, as his father had done. One February day however, a chance commendation took him to one of those temples of trade from which no reasonable suppliant need ever go empty away.

To say that the place was full conveys nothing at all: it was containing about three times as many customers as it could conveniently hold: these blocked the aisles and were excluded

from the lifts: some of them fought their way; the efficiency of the assistants alone prevented a riot. Climbing a magnificent staircase, Danvers wondered how the ‘Christmas rush’ had passed without a death-roll.

He had found the dispatch-case he wanted and was upon the point of leaving the counter, when he noticed another customer sitting some three yards away. This was a woman.

Now Danvers, more monk than gallant, would never have noticed the lady, had he not seen the hand leave the cuff of her squirrel-fur coat.

The hand was that of a woman, but not that of the owner of the coat; the latter, indeed, was plainly unaware of the attention and continued to choose a dog’s lead with all her might.

Danvers knitted his brows.

The hand was gone, and he had no means of judging to whom it belonged. The press was too thick. He began to wonder whether he had witnessed a theft . . . whether he should acquaint the lady with what he had observed . . . whether . . .

Here he looked round, to see whether anyone else had noticed the fugitive hand.

That somebody else had done so was immediately clear.

Another woman, wearing a squirrel-fur coat, was staring at her slight counterpart, with her underlip caught in her teeth. Finding Danvers’ eyes upon her, she turned and moved swiftly away.

Danvers began to feel bewildered.

Here a smooth voice at his elbow inquired if he was being attended to, and Danvers joined the column which was seething along the aisle.

He made his way downstairs in some uneasiness. Something was wrong. Of that he had no doubt at all. The hand he had seen had not been especially clean: he had not liked the look upon his fellow-witness's face: the lady of the dog-leads had been so wholly unconscious of any ill. He remembered that her face had been eager and very young, that she had been wearing a pert, little yellow hat.

A block on the staircase delayed him. Someone had fallen down and was being assisted to a seat. Her friends were abusing the slippery state of the stairs. These were not slippery at all, but were saving more souls than they could conveniently serve.

Danvers reached the jaws of an entrance with a sigh of relief.

To his surprise, he saw the lady of the dog-leads two paces ahead. She had, no doubt, descended by one of the lifts and now, like Danvers, was about to be gone.

As she stepped out of the doorway, a man touched her upon the sleeve. Danvers heard him say something about 'the Management.'

"Me?" said the girl quickly. "Why?"

Her voice was clear and refreshing.

“This way, if you please,” said the man, laying a hand on her arm.

“But I——”

“This way, please,” said the man.

People were beginning to stare.

Then—

“Shop-lifting,” whispered someone—and the scales fell from Danvers’ eyes.

Her cheeks flaming, the girl turned to obey.

Danvers followed her and her escort into the store.

Almost at once they passed through a private door. Danvers followed. . . .

“Excuse me, sir,” said a voice.

“I saw what happened,” said Danvers, producing a card. “Before you accuse this lady, you may like to let me speak.”

Four people stared at him. Of these the girl stared wildly, with the big, wide eyes of a child.

“Five minutes ago,” said Danvers, “this lady was choosing a lead. By her side was a woman, wearing a similar coat. Mark that—exactly similar. I saw a hand place something in this lady’s cuff. The woman saw it too, and looked extremely

annoyed. When she saw me looking at her, she instantly faded away. It's perfectly plain that the goods were intended for her."

The girl was feeling in her cuff—frantically.

"The other one," said Danvers.

She turned this back, and a pair of black silk socks fell to the floor.

"For heaven's sake!" said the girl.

"Can you describe this woman?" said a heavily built fellow, clad in a dark blue suit.

"Her features were sharp," said Danvers. "And she was heavily rouged. Her right eyelid seemed to droop."

"That's right," said the other. "*Alias* Madge Perowne." He turned to the third man, who was wearing a manager's dress and nervously fingering his chin. "Mistake," he said shortly. "It's a mercy this gentleman was there."

The manager cleared his throat.

Then he bowed to the girl.

"I can only offer you, madam, a most humble apology. I beg that you will believe that we have a very difficult task. The thefts are so very many and so very skilfully done that——"

"I don't think it was anyone's fault," said the girl shakily.

The man was visibly relieved.

“Thank you very much indeed, madam. Will you and—and the gentleman come this way?” He opened a second door. “This will take us to the back of the building. May I have a cab sent for?”

“Please,” said Danvers. “I—if this lady will permit me, I’ll see her home.”

The girl inclined her head. . . .

A cab seemed to be waiting.

With a foot on the step—

“Would you like me to take you,” said Danvers, “to have some tea? I mean——”

“Yes, please,” said the girl.

“Where shall I take you?”

“Anywhere quiet, please.”

Danvers gave the driver the name of his club.

For some moments neither spoke.

At length—

“I—I’m very grateful,” said the girl. “I mean, but for you——”

She stopped abruptly there, to burst into tears.

“Oh, my dear,” said Danvers.

“I can’t help it,” sobbed his companion. “That—that wicked woman . . .”

Danvers patted her sleeve.

“Please don’t cry,” he said gently. “You see, we’re out of the wood.”

“I know. That’s why I’m crying. Never mind.”

With that, she wept violently.

Danvers glanced out of the window. The streets were absurdly clear. In another two minutes they would have reached his club.

“Shall—shall I tell him to drive round the park?” he suggested desperately.

The girl shook her head.

“I’ll be all right—in a moment. When we get there, I’ll pow-powder my nose. Where—where are we going?”

Danvers swallowed.

“To an old-fashioned club,” he said.

“I thought—women weren’t allowed—in men’s clubs.”

“There’s an annex,” said Danvers. “I’ve never used it before.”

“You mean, I’m the first? How funny.” She wiped her eyes and

presented a tearful face. “Do I look as if I’d been crying?”

“You—you do a little,” said Danvers. “Your eyes——”

“Is my nose swollen?”—tremulously.

“Oh, no. It’s only your eyes. If you don’t cry any more . . .”

The girl averted her face and straightened her hat.

“I think I shall like you,” she said. “You’re rather like me.”

“I hope you will,” said Danvers.

A moment later he handed her out of the cab and into a vestibule.

A servant preceded them into a stately hall . . .

“When you’re ready,” said Danvers, “he’ll show you the drawing-room.”

A bright eye thanked him, and he left to dispose of his coat. . . .

The drawing-room was empty, but cheerful. Danvers had seen it but once, in the cold light of day. Then the apple-green chamber had been eminently chaste. Now, with its two big fires and shaded lights, with its velvet curtains drawn and the world shut out, the place was a glowing boudoir. Chastity was warming her hands. Luxury and Charm had kissed each other. . . .

Danvers had ordered tea before my lady appeared.

She came in, twittering.

“I say, what a lovely room. D’you mean to say you’ve never brought anyone here before?”

“Never,” said Danvers.

“Why did you bring me?”

“You said ‘somewhere quiet.’ Most people, I believe, like music. Won’t you take off your coat and sit down?”

She turned her back in silence, and Danvers took off her coat and laid it upon a chair. A simple, short blue frock became her admirably. And, when she stood on tiptoe and peered at herself in a glass, she might have been fresh sixteen.

“D’you like my hat?” she said.

“Yes,” said Danvers. “I noticed it ages ago.”

“I’m so glad. I bought it this morning. May I take it off now? It makes my head hot.”

“Of course,” said Danvers.

She pulled off the little hat and gave it into his hand. He laid it away with her coat. Then she shook her curls into place and sat down on a Chesterfield.

“Now I feel at home,” she said contentedly.

“I’m so glad,” said Danvers, and meant it.

I do not think he would have been human, if he had not. The girl was lovely. Her soft dark hair, her steady gray eyes, the curve of her exquisite mouth, her little firm hands, her slim silk legs, naked and unashamed, went to make up the miracle. Like a rare perfume, her complete artlessness immensely enhanced her beauty and glorified all she did.

Danvers, the celibate, sat down beside his guest, like a man in a dream. . . .

Tea was served: the silver and Dresden china winked in the light of the fire.

“It’s like a fairy-tale,” said the girl. “You’re the knight, and I’m the maiden in distress, and this is the enchanted palace. Isn’t it nice to have it all to ourselves?”

“That’s as it should be,” said Danvers. “The knight and the maiden always had the run of the place.”

“Till they opened some door,” said the girl. “They used to make me so wild. They were specially told that they mustn’t open some door: and then they went and did it and tore everything up.”

“But we won’t do that,” said Danvers, laughing. “Would you like to know my name?”

“Yes, please.”

“Patrick Danvers.”

“Oh, I am glad,” said the girl. “I’ve always wanted to know someone called ‘Patrick.’ May I call you ‘Pat’?”

“Please. What shall I call you?”

“Stephanie. Stephanie Beauclerk. I live with my aunt, but I don’t like her very much.”

“Why not?” said Danvers, taking out cigarettes.

“She’s not very genuine,” said Miss Beauclerk, knitting her pretty brows. “She always makes me think of a witch. And she dances with lizards, and I have to call her ‘Rocky,’ instead of ‘Aunt May.’” Danvers repressed a start. “‘Rocky’s’ her nickname, you know; but she’s really quite old.”

“Ah,” said Patrick Danvers, and left it at that.

People used to say that the coaches were still upon the roads when ‘Rocky’ Trottergill was born. This was an exaggeration, but she was getting on. Witty, unscrupulous, tough, she had married early and well, and, in spite of twice changing her name, had had a very good run. This, in all decency, should have ended in 1910. Mrs. Trottergill thought otherwise. She shortened her frocks, slept with beefsteak on her face and ‘went’ harder than ever. By 1915 she had become notorious, and in 1927 a byword. It is hardly necessary to add that she was not a desirable companion for a beautiful child. As a guardian . . .

“She’s away for the moment,” said Stephanie, “or I shouldn’t be here.”

“Where would you be?” said Danvers, lighting a cigarette.

Stephanie glanced at her watch.

“Cocktail time,” she said, “at *The Arbour Bar*. That’s what they call where I live.”

“Who call it?”

“The people who come there. All sorts. I can ask you, you know; but I don’t think you’d care about it, and I hope you won’t come. Some are very clever, of course; I don’t understand a lot of what they say.”

Danvers frowned at the fire.

“Haven’t you any friends of your own—Stephanie?”

The girl shook her head.

“You see, I came straight from the Convent. In Belgium, that was. I often wish I was back. And now I’m tired of myself. Let’s talk about you.”

Half an hour slid away before Stephanie rose to her feet.

“I’ve got to dine out,” she said, “and to-morrow I’m going away.”

Danvers stood up.

“But not for long,” he said. “I—I want you to come here again.”

“I’ll love to.” She pulled on her hat, peered in the glass for a moment and turned a glowing face. “You’ve been very nice to me, Pat, and it’s been—divine.” She stretched out her arms luxuriously. “To be able to talk to a man without his pretending he loves you. As for sitting alone in a room . . .”

“How did you know I was all right?”

Stephanie reflected, delicate finger to lip.

“I liked your voice,” she said. “And you let me alone when I cried.”

“That was a fluke,” said Danvers. “I’d no idea what to do. To tell you the truth, I believed I ought to kiss you. I had a sort of idea that a girl in tears should be kissed. You know. Like putting a key down your back, for a bleeding nose. But I don’t know much about women, and I thought it would be so awful if I did it and it was wrong.”

Stephanie nodded approvingly.

“I’m so glad you didn’t,” she said. “I shouldn’t have known you were doing it out of duty, and it would have torn everything up. Of course,” she added, “you mustn’t go by me. I’m rather an exception. I think it would have gone with most of the girls I know.”

“Let us hope,” said Danvers, “that I shan’t find myself so placed with anyone else.”

“I do hope you won’t,” said Stephanie earnestly. “It is such misery, Pat. You see, you’re like me. You and I don’t like it, but

nearly everyone does. So they all try it on, and then they say you're no sport. And some of them put it across you and others keep on keeping on."

"When it gets too thick, Stephanie, please remember that the enchanted palace is always here."

"I will, I will. Where can I ring you up? Between ten and twelve in the morning would be my best time."

Danvers stepped to a table and wrote down his office address, adding the telephone number and that of the extension of his room. Stephanie leaned over his shoulder and read out the words.

"I love your being a herald," she said. "That's better than a knight. The herald and the maiden."

"Princess," said Danvers.

A child laid her head against his shoulder.

"Ah, Pat, but I'm not. If I were, you should be my equerry and we'd come here every day."

"Princess by nature," said Danvers, unsteadily. "And you'll come whenever you can."

Stephanie nodded vigorously.

"And we'll beat the fairy-tales," she said. "We won't open any doors."

“If I remember,” said Danvers, “it was usually the princess who did that. You know. She got curious.”

“But the herald let her,” said Stephanie. “Instead of being firm, he gave way. He was really just as curious as she was. Look at Adam and Eve. Eve may have picked the apple, but Adam jolly well ate it. It was up to him to make her chuck it away.”

“He was probably afraid,” said Danvers, “that she might burst into tears.”

“Well, then he could have kissed her. She probably wasn’t like me.”

“I bet she was,” said Danvers. “Never mind.” He helped her into her coat. “You don’t know when you’ll be back?”

“Thursday, I think. I’ll ring up as soon as I can, but I don’t want to give you away. If Aunt May hears of our meeting, she’ll make me bring you along, and I’d be so—so ashamed, and you would hate it so.”

“Ashamed, Stephanie?”

“Upset. They’re a rotten crowd. I don’t want you to meet them. Good-bye.”

“Mayn’t I drive you home?”

“No, thanks, Pat dear. If I may have a taxi . . .”

A minute later, Danvers saw her into a cab.

With the small hand in his—

“If you don’t telephone very soon, I shall write and ask why,” he said.

“I will very soon. I promise.”

“Good-bye, Stephanie.”

“Good-bye.”

Danvers walked home across the park, pondering the changes and chances of this mortal life and marvelling at the superlative jugglery of Fate. When he reflected that, had he not stood at that counter, Stephanie Beauclerk and he would never have met, he took a deep breath; and, when he remembered that, but for the block upon the staircase, a beautiful child would have been charged with felony, he broke into a sweat.

That was the beginning of the business.

Within twenty-four hours his condition had become more serious. In a word, he had become aware that, glorious and free and blessed as is celibacy, it is nevertheless a solitary state.

* * * * * * * *

When a week had gone by and no word had come from Stephanie, Danvers wrote her three letters and tore the lot of them up. This demonstrates pretty well his condition of mind. He had also become sharply suspicious of the telephone-clerk employed at the College of Arms. Finally, he cancelled a visit

which he was to have paid to an aunt. This upset the aunt and his housekeeper: Danvers would not have cared if it had occasioned a war. Until he knew where he was, the man was not going to leave Town.

Then, on a Monday morning, a letter arrived.

Hunchback Hall,
Leicestershire.

My dear Pat,

I want to see you very much. We are coming back to London on Wednesday. I have not been back since I saw you. I could not have the puppy-dog after all. I told you the man we were to stay with had promised me him, but I found he wasn't to be a present so I had to let him go. And, Pat, when I was alone I cried, and when I see you I expect I shall cry again. He was so sweet and he seemed to like me so much, and, when I went away, he howled—a tiny bit of a howl, because he was very tiny himself, as if I was letting him down. We should have stayed here only one night, but somebody kicked Aunt May on the knee, doing the Charleston, and the next day she couldn't walk. I have to play poker here, and hate it because, of course, I have to be carried, and then if you lose you feel under such an obligation. If you win it's worse still, so you get it both ways. I met an old lady here yesterday who was very nice. We talked quite a lot. She said she knew my mother who died when I was born, and told me a lot about her I never knew. She said she

was a great beauty and that when it was known that she was dead some great artist who was to have painted her burst into tears, and when they asked him why he was so upset he said, 'You will never know—now.' So she must have been lovely, mustn't she? I mean, for him to say that.

With my love,

Yours very sincerely,

Stephanie.

Danvers read the note over a score of times, carried it in his case and felt the better. He may be forgiven. If you remember, he was a man of few friends.

The thought of the puppy-dog incident made him breathe through his nose. What is more to the point, it pricked him to a decision that something would have to be done.

Danvers was no Don Quixote, but he was a decent man. His tastes were simple and his life was quiet, but he was no fool. By no means worldly, he was yet a man of the world—that is to say, he could expect, recognize and contemplate without horror the failings of mankind. He had all the man of the world's flair for letting ill alone. No one knew better than he that chivalry is stone-dead and that such as seek to revive it are riding for a fall. Yet in Stephanie's case he was going to interfere. He had known as much that first evening, walking across the park, and had blinked the fact as preposterous. The case was a bad one, but what on earth could he do? Besides . . .

Beyond recording that he argued alternately that he had been

bewitched and that his dread of interference had already almost landed Stephanie in gaol, it is unnecessary to set out Danvers' searchings of heart. The latter did little more than make him face squarely the fact that he had blinked. By hook or by crook Stephanie must be plucked out of the world of Hogarth in which she moved. And he must do it—somehow. It was absurd, of course, melodramatic, but one couldn't stand by and see a child go down.

He lay awake most of that night, wondering how on earth he should go to work.

The obvious course of marriage he rejected at once.

For one thing, his head insisted that men do not fall in love in an afternoon, that a runaway match was indecent, that such things are not done and that, if they are, there is presently the devil to pay; for another, it would be unfair. Of this he was perfectly convinced. To such a child, marriage would be an adventure—an adventurous way of escape from 'Rocky' and poker and a hundred ills. She would enter the state, rather as she had entered his club, in some excitement. Such a way was not to be taken. It would be like proposing to play a baby at golf. . . .

At last he fell asleep, with a hammering brain. Three hours later he was called, and, such is the perversity of mother-wit, before the curtains had been drawn he had perceived the way.

He spent the morning of Tuesday laying his plans. Then he obtained a copy of Stephanie's birth-certificate and visited his solicitor during the afternoon. The latter was sympathetic and,

finding his client resolved, gave him and his project two invaluable hours of his valuable time. Before Danvers left his office, a deed of sorts had been drafted and by noon on Wednesday, unknown to Stephanie Beauclerk, John Galbraith Forsyth, Solicitor, had been appointed her trustee.

* * * * * * * *

Stephanie came to tea on the following day.

The enchanted palace was not crowded, but other knights and maidens were proving its charm. They all looked at Stephanie very hard. One or two of the knights surreptitiously moved their seats, so that they could observe her more conveniently.

Before tea was over, Danvers had elicited two facts. The first was that 'Rocky' was Stephanie's only relative, and the second that, so far as she knew, the girl had no fortune of her own.

"So I'm very lucky, really," she said. "I mean I've got no money, and yet I don't have to work. And I go all over the place and have a wonderful time. Only, you see, I don't want it. I don't think I'd like it even if they let me alone. Aunt May says I can't manage men, and I suppose she's right. I'm always in trouble, Pat. The puppy-dog business was awful. Aunt May was simply wild. You see, the man was our host. . . ."

"I see," said Danvers thickly. "Did you know you had a trustee?"

Stephanie opened her eyes.

"I did not."

“Well, you have. I happen to know him quite well. He’s a solicitor. I saw him yesterday, and, when he heard I was to see you, he gave me this note.”

Stephanie stared at her name. Then she opened the envelope reverently enough.

Private and Confidential.

Dear Miss Beauclerk,

By the terms of a Settlement of which you are not, I think, aware, you will upon your twenty-second birthday become entitled to the use of a small freehold house in Westminster and to a private income of six hundred pounds a year. These benefits will continue until your marriage, when they will come to an end. The maintenance of the house and the payment of three servants is also provided for. Of this Settlement I am the sole trustee, and, if you will come to see me as soon as you can, I will explain the position and do my best to assist you in every way.

Yours faithfully,
J. G. Forsyth.

Stephanie put a hand to her head.

“A house?” she said dazedly. “And six hundred pounds a year? Me? It must be a mistake.”

“Forsyth doesn’t make mistakes,” said Danvers. “May I see what he says?”

The letter passed.

At length—

“That’s clear enough,” said Danvers, giving it back. “He told me you’d be your own mistress when you were twenty-two, but he naturally left it there. Lawyers mayn’t talk, you know.”

The girl caught at his arm.

“But, Pat! My own house and servants and—and six hundred pounds a year! It’s like a dream. It’s— Oh, Pat, I think I’m going to cry.”

“If you do,” said Danvers, “I shall kiss you.” Stephanie swallowed ominously. “I’ll—I’ll make a meal of it. Before everyone.” A burst of talk from a table six paces away pointed the threat. “There’s nothing to cry about. Your luck’s come in—with a bang. But I shouldn’t say a word to a soul, until you’ve seen Forsyth. When can you go?”

“I don’t know. I can’t believe it, Pat. Aunt May won’t——”

“Aunt May be burned,” said Danvers. “You’re going to be your own mistress. How soon are you twenty-two?”

“Next week—Tuesday.”

“Well, at midnight next Monday Aunt May will cease to count. It mayn’t amuse her, but it’s a very hard fact. You’ll have your

own house, your own money and your own friends. You'll see whom you please and only whom you please. If anyone comes to see you that you don't like, your servants will send them away. You will be *independent*. No one will count except you."

"You will, Pat." The man caught his breath. "Always. But—Oh, my dear, I wish we'd got the room to ourselves. I want to hold on to you. What d'you think the house will be like?"

"How on earth can I tell?" said Danvers, laughing. "You must go and see Forsyth."

"I believe it's an old house," said Stephanie excitedly. "A little old house, with beams. And a flagged court at the back and a sundial. You'll come very often, won't you, Pat? You must come to dinner. And, when we've finished, I shall leave you, and then, when you've drunk enough, you'll come upstairs. I expect the drawing-room will be upstairs. And we'll sit by the fire and talk. And I shan't bother about any clocks, because we'll always have Big Ben. And sometimes you can take me to the theatre, and—Oh, Pat, my dear, I'm going to be so awfully happy."

In that moment, I think, Danvers had his reward. The look upon Stephanie's face was not of this world. The light in her great gray eyes, the exquisite parting of her lips, declared such things as will not go into words. The wild thing about to be set free was viewing its kingdom to come.

"You must go and see Forsyth," said Danvers uncertainly. "Can you manage to-morrow?"

His companion nodded abstractedly.

“I must—somehow. Will you come with me?”

“I think you’d better see him alone. I can make an appointment for you.”

“Would ten o’clock be too early? Aunt May gets up rather late.”

Danvers rose.

“You stay here,” he said. “I’ll ring him up right away.”

“Thank you, Pat.”

He returned ten minutes later, to find Stephanie seated upon a table, listening with rapt attention to the respectful reminiscences of the aged Groom of the Chambers who had served the club, body and soul, for fifty-seven years.

The other members and their guests had disappeared.

“Hullo, Massey,” said Danvers. “Going the rounds?”

“Good evening, sir. Yes, sir. I was telling her ladyship how I came to the club as a ‘Buttons’ in ’fifty-nine.’”

“And no one might smoke in the club, Pat, except in one tiny room.”

“And my grandfather’d just been elected,” said Danvers. “The family M.P.”

“I remember him well, sir,” said Massey. “Many’s the hansom I’ve fetched him for him to go down to the House.” He bowed with the peculiar dignity of the old manservant. “Good evening, my lady. Good evening, sir.”

The next moment he was gone.

“He shouldn’t call me ‘my lady,’” said Stephanie.

“That’s your fault,” said Danvers. “If you don’t want to be worshipped, you mustn’t look so sweet.”

Stephanie regarded him gravely. Then her eyes fell to the ground.

“That’s the way they all talk,” she said. “The others, I mean. You’re not going to be like them, Pat? You’re not going to open the door and tear everything up?”

Danvers heart stood still.

Stephanie raised her eyes and put out her hands.

“Don’t say you are, Pat! Just when we’ve found each other, and I’m going to be on my own.”

The man pulled himself together, turned away and sat down.

“Of course I’m not,” he said slowly. “I—I was only pulling your leg.”

Stephanie slid from the table, settled herself by his side and slid a warm arm through his.

“I’m so glad,” she said contentedly. “And now what does Forsyth say?”

* * * * * * * *

“Until you marry,” said Forsyth. “Then the income will cease and so will your right to the house.”

“Oh, I don’t mind that,” said Miss Beauclerk, “because I shan’t have to marry now. That’s what’s been so awful about the last two months. She hasn’t spoken to me, but I’m perfectly sure Aunt May’s been fixing me up. You can tell, you know.”

“Ah,” said Forsyth. “By the way, I shouldn’t say anything to her. When Tuesday comes, I should pack up some things and clear out. Leave a note, thanking her very much for all she’s done, enclosing the letter I sent you and giving her your new address.”

“I expect she’ll roll up,” said Stephanie. “Almost at once.”

“So do I,” said Forsyth. “That’s why I shall be there—to see you in.”

“You mean you’ll explain things to her?”

“Yes,” said Forsyth. “And now, as I said, I’m afraid you can’t see the house until the day. You see, it’s been let all this time, and the people won’t be leaving till the day before you come in. But I think the servants might stay on: there’s a man and his wife and a girl, and as they know the house, it would be as well. Of course, if they don’t suit you, you can very soon send them away.”

“Thank you very much,” said Stephanie. “But I expect they’ll be far better than any that I should get. Can I go and see the outside?”

“I don’t think I should,” said Forsyth. “I should keep it all till the day.”

“All right,” said Stephanie. “Like a present you don’t undo.”

“That’s the idea. And I’ll be there, sharp at ten, to see you in. And, perhaps, in the afternoon we might go to the Bank. You know, Miss Beauclerk, six hundred a year’s not too bad, but it won’t go a very long way. I mean . . .”

“I think it’s a heap,” said Stephanie. “I’m not at all extravagant. You see, the girl can wash my stockings and things, and that’ll save no end of money. Besides, the laundries always do them in. They put something in the water, you know. And the last one we tried burnt one of my step-ins all down the front.”

By a supreme effort, Forsyth maintained his gravity.

“I can quite believe it,” he said. “They’re a ruthless lot. But all I meant, Miss Beauclerk, was that six hundred is all right to live on, but when you’ve paid the books and the dressmaker, I don’t think there’ll be very much left.”

“I only want to live,” said Stephanie. “I don’t like razzling at all. And I’m sure I *could* live on a hundred pounds a year, so I shall really be rolling. And now won’t you please tell me how I’ve come into all this? I know you’re my trustee, but where does the money come from? And whose is the house? And why didn’t Aunt May tell me ages ago?”

"I don't think she knows," said Forsyth. "When this Settlement was made, no one was told except me. And if you were married already, you'd never have known of it yourself. That's the Law all over. It moves in a mysterious way, setting one man up and taking another down. Its documents are full of dead contingencies—old secrets never disclosed. So, if I were you, I shouldn't bother my head."

Stephanie nodded gravely.

"But I'm very grateful," she said. "It was very sweet of someone to be so kind to me." She rose to her feet, and Forsyth passed to the door. "Then you'll be there on Tuesday at ten o'clock?"

"Without fail," said Forsyth.

Stephanie put out a small hand.

"I'm so glad I can thank you," she said.

* * * * * * * *

On Monday evening Danvers left Queen Square and drove to a private hotel.

Of his occupation of the little, old-fashioned house no personal trace remained. Books that had borne his name had been removed, every drawer had been emptied, even the relevant page of the Telephone Directory had been cut out.

His cook-housekeeper and his man had put up a desperate fight, but, after four several battles, had grudgingly consented to

serve the young lady for one calendar month, “provided, in course, she should want us to stay so long, sir, which I very much doubt, for Gravel an’ me’s old-fashioned, sir, an’ only knows old-fashioned ways. We can’t do the parties an’ what-not they ’ave to-day, nor keep the ’ouse what it should be, sir, with company in an’ out all day an’ ’alf the night. Why, Gravel’d be no more use than a dog in a fair, sir, an’ I can’t do without notice an’ never could.”

Their promise to stay extracted, Danvers had worried no more. The two would be Stephanie’s slaves within a week. They had, of course, been charged to keep his counsel.

“Miss Beauclerk must never dream that this was my home. You must watch the letters and take all telephone-calls. And, if I come, I shall come as a visitor. And please remember, Gravel, that you’ve never seen me before. If you want me, you can find me at the College or else at ——’s Hotel.”

“Very good, sir,” said Gravel miserably.

And on Monday, as I have said, Danvers went.

On Tuesday at a quarter to ten Forsyth arrived, and, ten minutes later, Stephanie Beauclerk herself.

As Danvers had foreseen, her installation was a rapturous success: as Forsyth had foreseen, Mrs. Trottergill appeared upon the scene shortly before midday.

Her niece received her in the drawing-room politely enough.

“May I introduce Mr. Forsyth—Mrs. Trottergill?”

The latter looked the lawyer up and down.

“What on earth does this mean?” she said.

“It means,” said Forsyth, “that, until she marries, this is Miss Beauclerk’s house.”

“By whose orders?”

“By my instructions,” said Forsyth.

“Who are you acting for?”

“I am acting as the trustee of a Settlement, the terms of which not even Miss Beauclerk knows; but I may say that it is a Voluntary Settlement, that is to say, it is *without any consideration*. It offers Miss Beauclerk this house and a competent income: it requires nothing in return.”

‘Rocky’ Trottergill lighted a cigarette.

“Stephanie,” she said, “you can leave us.”

The girl did so at once.

‘Rocky’ sat down on a sofa and put up her pitiful legs. Then she took Forsyth’s measure, for Forsyth to see. So far from disconcerting the lawyer, the process suited him well. The sooner the lady perceived what manner of man stood before her, the better for both.

At length—

“I wasn’t foaled last month,” she said sharply.

Forsyth inclined his head. The movement suggested his delicate recognition of an unfortunate fact.

Mrs. Trottergill frowned.

“Who’s behind you in this?”

“I have told you, madam, that there is no consideration. If there had been, I should have refused to act. As there is none, I am prepared to defy the curiosity of Miss Beauclerk herself.”

“I am her guardian.”

This was untrue, as both knew.

“I did not know that,” said Forsyth politely. “In any event, Miss Beauclerk is of age.”

“D’you seriously suggest that a child such as she is can possibly live by herself?”

Forsyth uncovered his guns.

“I have reason to think,” he said, “that she will be very particular about her company.”

Mrs. Trottergill veered.

“I suppose you know she’s practically engaged?”

“No,” said Forsyth.

“Well, she is,” said ‘Rocky.’

This statement was founded on fact. ‘Joss’ Stuggenbaum, a notorious evil-liver who had great possessions, had promised her ‘guardian’ fifteen thousand pounds on the day he married the ‘child.’ Determined to secure twenty, ‘Rocky’ had demanded twenty-five. Her demand had been rejected and the offer renewed. The matter had been simmering for nearly two months.

Forsyth looked out of the window.

“Does *she* know she’s—practically engaged?”

Mrs. Trottergill’s eyes narrowed.

“What’s sauce for the gander,” she said, “is sauce for the goose. You tell her no more than you think it good for her to know.”

“Quite so,” said Forsyth, “quite so. But, if you remember, I said that, had there been any question of consideration, I should have refused to act.” He paused. Then, “*You will forgive my asking if you can say the same*.”

Before this broadside, Mrs. Trottergill sprang to her feet.

“Do you suggest——”

"Madam," said Forsyth, "you told me just now that you were not foaled last month. *Neither was I.* Consequently, both of us know that Miss Beauclerk's body can command a very high price. I am proud to act for an idealist who sets a still higher value upon her soul."

A queer, bleak expression swept into 'Rocky's' face. Her mouth began to work uncontrollably. It was all punk, of course. The man was spouting religion—Sunday-school slush. The cheapest curate wouldn't have handed out such sob-stuff. . . . The trouble was he wasn't a curate. He was—it was absurd, of course, fantastic, but he—he had the air of a Judge. Burn it, why couldn't she answer—put him where he belonged? Why couldn't she keep her mouth still? Why . . . .

Forsyth touched the bell and stepped to the door.

"I hope it will be unnecessary for your niece to tell her servants that she is 'not at home' if you call."

Somebody laughed. With a shock, Mrs. Trottergill realized that it had been she.

"Quite," she said shakily. "Quite unnecessary—thank you. Don't bother to see me out. I . . ."

She stopped there. Clearly her tongue was unruly. She had not meant to say that. She had meant to say . . .

An old woman had passed out of the house.

* * * * * * * *

Five months had gone by, and, after a miserable period of civil war, in which body rose up against spirit and matter against mind, Danvers had found himself.

The man was deeply in love, but he had himself in hand. God knows what it had cost him to make good. There were times when he had dined at his own table, sat in his own drawing-room and presently let himself out of his own house with the sweat running down his face. There were times when he had not dared to visit the house at all. He had, he knew, confounded charity with love. He had saved Stephanie, because he loved her, and for no other reason at all. So far, so good. Love in the habit of Charity may be an exquisite thing. *But the habit must not be abused—must not be employed to carry Love out of her prison . . . upstairs and downstairs and into my lady's chamber.*

Danvers had had a bad time. He had done alms, and his left hand was continually staring at what his right hand had done. The man found its stare offensive, but could not make up his mind to cut it off. And then at last he did it—and found himself.

One soft September morning he swallowed the fact that Stephanie was in balk. His honour was demanding this point of view. And until his honour was satisfied he would have no peace. Then and there he took his resolve and dined with the lady that evening with singular content.

His hostess noticed the change, and, when they had passed upstairs, to sit by the open windows and hear the great cry of London threatening the silent eclogue of St. James's Park,

mentioned it directly without any waste of words.

“What is it, Pat? You’re different. You make me think of a dog in front of a fire, all lazy and contented and blinking.”

Danvers smiled.

“I’m just the same, Stephanie.”

The girl shook her head.

“I’ve never seen you like this. Are you beginning to feel at home here?”

“Perhaps.”

“I’ve been rather hurt,” said Miss Beauclerk, “that you’ve taken such a long time. I felt at home at your club the first time you took me to tea.”

“I’ve felt at home here—perfectly.”

“Then why did you say ‘perhaps’?”

“Line of least resistance,” said Danvers, filling a pipe. “Would you like to go to a cinema?”

“No,” said Stephanie. “I’d rather sit here and talk. Tell me, Pat. Why don’t you marry?” Danvers started, and his pipe fell to the ground. “Marringer says you should.”

Marringer was the housemaid who had ‘gone with the house.’

Subduing the impulse to request that Marringer should be dismissed the next morning at eight o'clock, Danvers picked up his pipe and moistened his lips.

"Perhaps," he said, "I am not a marrying man. Some people aren't, you know."

"That's what I said," said Stephanie, lighting a cigarette. "But she said you were. She said she'd watched you, while she was helping Gravel, and that what you wanted was a wife."

Danvers could have ground his teeth.

Instead—

"Marringer," he said unsteadily, "is talking through her hat. It's—it's very kind of her to take so much interest in me, but——"

"Oh, but she loves you," said Stephanie. "They all do. I didn't know Mrs. Gravel had seen you, but she has and she thinks you're wonderful, Pat."

Danvers laid down his pipe and casually mopped his face.

"You shouldn't listen to servants," he said. "If more people came here——"

"They're very respectful," said Stephanie. "Besides, Forsyth thinks so, too. He told, me he knew no man for whom he had a higher respect."

"If you don't stop," said Danvers, "I shall say 'Good night' and go home. I came here to talk about you, not to listen to the—the

vapourings of minds diseased."

"Forsyth's mind isn't diseased," said Stephanie. "Besides, I went to see him on purpose to talk about you."

"About me?"

Miss Beauclerk nodded.

"I was worried about you," she said. "You're too thin, Pat. And I thought perhaps Forsyth would help."

"That was very sweet of you, Stephanie, but I'm perfectly well. What—what did Forsyth say?"

"He said you wanted looking after—that you worked too hard and took no care of yourself."

Danvers rose and stepped on to the balcony.

An infant breeze slipped along Birdcage Walk, touching his temples as it went.

Danvers breathed gratefully and decided to go out of Town the following day.

Presently he turned, to lean against the iron balustrade and look at the beautiful child that was twisting his tail.

Stephanie, all in white, was making, as always, a picture of artless elegance. One slim leg was tucked beneath her, her delicate arms lay along those of the chair, her dark head, thrown back, rested against its head. The dazzling beauty of her

throat was thus fully exposed, and, indeed, the pose was presenting all her physical loveliness as no jeweller can present a rare stone, set he never so wisely.

Danvers found himself gripping the iron of the balustrade. . . .

“Oh, I knew I had something to tell you,” said Miss Beauclerk. “Old Mr. Stuggenbaum’s started in again. I met him in Bond Street on Tuesday. I’d imagined it would be safe and that everyone would have gone. He tried to make me come to lunch, and, when I went into a shop, he came in and tried to pay. In the end I had to get on a ’bus. He tried to get on too, but he was too late. Of course, he rolled up here at a quarter to three. Gravel said I was out, but I don’t think he believed him. He walked up and down Queen Square for over two hours. I was so mad. I wanted to go to The Tower. And the next day he sent me some flowers, but I sent them back to the shop.”

“That’s the style,” said Danvers.

“I know, but isn’t it sickening? You see, I like going out and I love the shops. Of course, if I meet them, I’m perfectly ready to speak; but that’s not enough. They insist on walking with me, and Georges Rosqui stopped a taxi and tried to make me get in. In Bond Street. And it’s so awkward, Pat, and people begin to stare.”

“It’s outrageous,” said Danvers hotly. “Did you tell Forsyth this?”

Stephanie nodded.

“He said I should have a companion—whom I could trust.”

“I think you should,” said Danvers. “In fact, you ought to have had one all along. Of course, you should.”

Miss Beauclerk wrinkled her nose.

“She’d be awfully in the way, Pat. I like to have you to myself. Wouldn’t you just hate it, if she were here now?”

Danvers considered, frowning.

“Yes,” he said slowly, “I should. Of course, a third . . . gets in the way. But that isn’t the point. And I think you ought to have one to choke off your gentlemen friends.”

“I don’t think I could bear one,” said Stephanie. “She’d always be saying I mustn’t do this or that. She wouldn’t let me sit as I am, with a leg underneath. She’d say it wasn’t ladylike or something. And she’d go on about my clothes: I know she would. And I’m quite good at clothes, Pat: I am really. I haven’t very many, but I get the right things. And—and she’d never leave us alone, Pat. Not if you stayed till four. She’d stick like glue and make out it was her job.”

“I’m afraid it would be,” said Danvers ruefully. “Till now I never gave it a thought, but I oughtn’t to dine here like this alone with you.”

Stephanie sat up very straight.

“But, Pat it’s my home. Surely I can ask who I like.”

“You wouldn’t ask any odd man.”

“Of course not. Besides, I don’t. I only ask you.”

“In the eyes of Convention I am ‘any odd man.’”

“You’re not in mine,” said Miss Beauclerk.

“I know, Stephanie, but—I don’t know why I’ve never thought of it, but I really oughtn’t to come. And—and I mustn’t come any more.”

“Pat!”

The child was up out of her chair and standing with her hands on his shoulders, looking up into his face.

Danvers tried to lift up his heart and steady his voice.

“We must get you a lady-in-waiting,” he said. “Some nice, understanding woman, who——”

“I don’t want her, Pat. I don’t want her. I love it when you come here, because we’re alone. The knight and the maiden never had anyone else and why should we?”

The man was shaking. Stephanie’s eager breath beat upon his face. Her eyes peered into his—two glorious suppliants, praying him to spare the pretty, precious bubble that he and she had blown.

“Stephanie dear, for your sake it’s better so. Forsyth is right—as always. I’ll go and see him to-morrow.”

The girl set her hand to her eyes and stood very still.

Then she put her arms round his neck and lowered his head.

“Won’t you marry me, Pat?” she said.

Danver’s heart gave one tremendous bound.

For a moment he stood paralysed; then he took the child in his arms.

“You see, Pat darling, you don’t take care of yourself, and I can’t take care of myself, but, if you married me, we could take care of each other.”

“Stephanie, Stephanie!”

A princess gave him her lips. . . .

“But if you marry,” said the herald. . . .

“I know. I must leave this house. But I’ll never care, my darling, if I’m to be with you.”

“Oh, Stephanie, I love you so.”

A child rubbed her cheek against his.

“And you wouldn’t say so,” she said. “I tried so hard to make you, because I was sure you did. None of the others ever say anything else, but the one I wanted to say it would not speak. And so I had to. I couldn’t go on, my darling; so I had to propose to you. But I don’t think it matters, really. I mean, no one need know.”

Danvers picked her up and carried her into the room.

“I told you,” he said, “it was the maiden who always opened the door.”

“Ah,” said Stephanie, “but this is a different door. They never had doors like this in the fairy-tales. They opened into gardens or closets; but this . . .”

“What does this let us into?”

Stephanie knitted her brows.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Yes, I do. It lets me into your life, Pat.” She kissed him breathlessly. “And that’s all I want, my darling, as long as I live.” 38

Danvers set her down and held her at arm’s length.

“Now can I tell you how perfectly beautiful you are?”

His mistress nodded and buried her face in his coat.

BEHIND THE SCENES

On the thirtieth day of November a barrister left his chambers in Fountain Court. His name was famous—Sir Weston Gale, K.C. He was a man of habit at fifty-five. Unless some part-heard case was insisting that he should stay, he always left his chambers soon after a quarter-past five. Thence to the club: and thence again to his flat in Albert Court. This was the way of a man who had made his name. Many a consultation was actually held at his flat—after dinner, of course. Solicitors groaned, but complied. They had to put up with that, if they briefed Sir Weston Gale. He was a bachelor.

There was a dense fog in London. In the Temple at a quarter past five visibility was virtually nil.

Sir Weston crossed the court and passed down the shallow steps, with the lawns on his left. He was for the door in the wall, and from there for the Temple Station, where he would take the train to St. James's Park. Fog or no fog, he would walk across the park to his club in St. James's Street.

He was unaware of the shadow that moved so close to his heels. He was, in fact, composing an opening speech. But this was never delivered. As he came to the door in the wall, the shadow behind him struck at the base of the skull, and Sir Weston Gale, K.C. fell dead in his tracks.

* * * * * * * *

At a quarter to eight the same evening Sir Weston Gale's cook-

housekeeper burst into tears.

“’E’s bin knock down,” she wailed. “Knock down an’ run over, ’e ’as—in this blarsted fog.”

“Now, now, Mrs. Dunn,” said the butler. “’E may be only delayed. Stuck in the toob or something.”

For all that, he sat down again and rang up the police.

“Oh, is that Scotland Yard? . . . This is Sir Weston Gale’s butler . . . Sir Weston Gale, K.C. . . . Well, Sir Weston has not returned—returned to his flat. I mean, he’s unusually late. I’ve rung up his club, and they tell me he’s not been in—and that again is unusual. And under the circumstances. . . . Oh, no, his chambers are closed. That would be quite normal. I did ring up, to make sure, but they said there was no reply. And what with this fog an’ all. . . . Yes, Sir Weston Gale. . . . Kensington two-four-two-four-five. . . . Oh, certainly. Thank you very much.”

The butler replaced the receiver and got to his feet.

“They’ll institoot inquiries,” he reported, “an’ let us know. An’ now we’ve done it, you see if ’e don’t walk in.”

But Mrs. Dunn refused to be comforted.

“’E’s bin knock down,” she sobbed. “Lyin’ in Charin’ Crorse ’Ospital, like as not. An’ them lovely sweetbreads waitin’—’is favourite dish.”

* * * * * * * *

Four and a half hours later the Assistant Commissioner lighted his third cigar.

“I warned you,” he said, “that we might have to wait some time.”

The Director of Public Prosecutions uncrossed his legs.

“I’m perfectly happy,” he said. “When you want to go to bed, you can turn me out.”

At that moment the bell of the house was rung.

A moment later Chief Inspector Falcon was ushered into the room.

Chief Inspector Falcon was thirty-six. He had been at Harrow and Oxford and had been called to the Bar. After two years in the chambers of Treasury Counsel, he had left the Bar and entered the ranks of the Metropolitan Police. For six months he had walked his beat: then he had been transferred to the C.I.D. His rise had been very swift. You cannot keep such men down.

“Sorry I’m so late, sir.”

“Quite all right, Falcon. The Director and I understand. Will you have a drink?”

“Later on, if I may, sir. I’d rather talk first.”

“As you please. Sit down on the sofa.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The Chief Inspector sat down. The other two men leaned forward, watching his face.

“The body was found,” said Falcon, “by a porter at seven-fifteen. Bow Street caught me as I was leaving, and I was on the spot at five and twenty to eight. Rain had then been falling for half an hour. The body had been dragged a few feet, aside from the path which people would usually take: the fog being very thick, it lay where it was unobserved.

“At twenty to eight the Divisional Surgeon arrived. The base of the skull had been fractured. One heavy blow—with a hammer, or something like that. Death instantaneous. Had occurred not less than one hour and not more than five hours before. No sign of robbery.

“Sir Weston’s chambers were closed, which was natural enough. But I got a key from a porter and left a sergeant in charge.” Falcon glanced at his chief. “I’ve been rather prodigal of men, sir; but I felt that in such a case . . .”

“Perfectly right,” said the Assistant Commissioner. “No stone unturned. If it takes the Yard to lift it, it can’t be helped. Can you see the headlines to-morrow? And, while we’re on it, what have you done with the Press?”

“Let them right in, sir. It can’t do any harm and it may do good.”

“Right.”

“The porter gave me the addresses of the senior and junior clerks, and whilst I was taking them, a message came through

from the Yard, to say that Sir Weston's butler had just rung up. Getting uneasy, because he had not returned. Albert Court. I sent Ross off there at once, to break the news to the servants and take charge until I came. And then I took a car and went after the clerks.

"The senior clerk took some finding. I never ran him to earth until a quarter to ten. That was in a bar-parlour, and he was the worse for drink."

"Name of Masters?" said the Director.

"That's right, sir."

"I remember him. He was junior clerk to Charles Mason—that's years ago. And a very good man: and then he took to drink."

"I'm much obliged, sir," said Falcon. "I mean, one never knows."

"Of course."

"Well, I tried him naturally. Sometimes a man who's drink taken is very valuable. But he'd gone over the line; so I left a man to trail him and went for his junior. I found him at home—in bed. I got a lot out of him—he's a noticing lad." Falcon took out his notebook.

"First, the news shook him—knocked him right out. I think he was the last person to see Sir Weston alive—with one exception, of course but we won't count him. Sir Weston left chambers as usual between five-twenty and five-twenty-five.

As usual, sir. He left to go to his club. Said so, as usual, when Parsons—that's the junior—was helping him on with his coat. Always walked to the Temple station, using the door in the wall. His chambers are on the ground floor, and Parsons, letting him out, saw him start off that way. Saw nobody else: the fog was 'that thick.' The moment Sir Weston had left, the senior clerk went out. I don't think there's anything in it, for he makes a practice of that and, although he covers it up, he really goes out for a drink: but he daren't go out until Sir Weston has gone. Still, there it is. In fact, to-night he left on Sir Weston's heels. He was back in some twenty minutes—about a quarter to six. Behaviour perfectly normal. No one else left those chambers till six o'clock. Parsons gave Sir Weston a very good chit. Couldn't understand his having an enemy. Gentle, easy-going, generous. Often took papers out to his flat. By order, whenever he did so, he went to the servants' hall and was given a glass of port. Knows the butler and cook-housekeeper quite well. Was sure they would be terribly upset. Could recall no visits to Sir Weston which were not professional. Or telephone calls—except to his flat or his club. Never once remembered hearing high words. Occasional scraps in Court, but these were rare. 'Sir Weston was too good-tempered.'

"Well, then I went off to the flat . . .

"Ross opened the door. The butler was there with him, but the cook-housekeeper and the two maids had gone to bed. I saw Ross alone, while the butler was getting some tea. I wanted to know how the latter had taken the news, but that we shall never know, because the housekeeper fainted and that tore everything up. You may think me foolish, sir, for looking so hard at him and the senior clerk; but I felt they were possibles and I wanted

all I could get."

"I don't blame you at all," said his chief. "In fact, I agree with you."

"In a word," said the Director, "this murder was done by someone who knew Sir Weston's ways—and knew them well?"

"That's my belief, sir," said Falcon. "I may be wrong."

"I don't think you are. Please go on."

"Well, first for the butler's movements. In fact, to-day—yesterday now—was his regular afternoon out. He seems to have gone out most days—on errands and things like that. Quite legitimately, of course. But Thursday is his regular day, and so he went out. As a rule, he spends his time off in walking about, but this time the fog was so bad that he went to the cinema—a Lower Regent Street house. The picture was still going when he suddenly remembered that he had forgotten to send a telegram. A wire for Sir Weston, reserving his rooms at Sandwich for the week-end. Golf. He left the show at once and sent off the wire—from the Office in —— Court, between Piccadilly and Jermyn Street. Then he took a 'bus to the Army and Navy Stores, bought a pound of tobacco for Sir Weston—his usual brand—and took a 'bus home, arriving at half-past six.

"Well, that was that. I've asked for the telegram, which seems to have been sent off about five-and-twenty-past five. If it was, well, it lets him out—no doubt about that."

“Piccadilly to the Temple?” said the Assistant Commissioner.

“Twelve minutes by taxi, sir, in weather like that.”

“Yes. Go on.”

“He spoke very warmly of Sir Weston—seemed genuinely grieved. Had been with him more than twelve years. Plenty of people to dinner, but very few intimate friends. Relatives two—niece and nephew. The former, ‘a very nice lady’: the latter, not so good. The only time he remembered Sir Weston cross was when his nephew turned up. Mr. Ronald ——, of Cork Street. In the motor-car trade—at the moment. I expect he’ll appear to-morrow, so I thought I’d leave him to-night. Telephone-calls, nothing doing. Sir Weston seldom spoke and never took calls himself. Hammond—that’s the butler—remembered nothing suspicious at any time. No women at all.

“I think that’s all of importance. I left Ross there with one man. He’ll deal with the Press.

“We may or may not find the weapon. It’s probably in the Thames: from the door in the wall to the river is only a biscuit’s throw. But I’ve asked the River Police to look at the mud by the wall and I’m having the sand-bins searched for a quarter of a mile. Biggins is at the mortuary: I’m going on there after this.

“To-day, if you approve, sir, I go to the Post Office first. Then to Sir Weston’s solicitor—the butler gave me his name. Mr. Wallace of Newton and Crosby, Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Perhaps you know him, sir?”

“I know him,” said the Director. “Would you like me to say a word?”

“I’d be very grateful, sir. If you could ring him up at his private house, before he leaves for his office . . . I hope to be there about a quarter to ten.”

“It shall be done, Chief Inspector.”

“Thank you, sir. After that, I return to the flat, with either Mr. Wallace or one of his clerks. I thought I’d send Stock to the chambers, to see the senior clerk and learn what he can.”

The Assistant Commissioner nodded.

“I can’t improve upon that.” He pointed to drinks on a table. “Help yourself, Falcon; and then let’s hear what you think.”

“Thank you, sir.”

The Chief Inspector rose, mixed himself a whisky and soda and turned about, tumbler in hand.

“There’s a chance, sir, the Will may help us. I think the crime was committed by someone who stood to gain by Sir Weston’s death.”

The Director fingered his chin.

“Who could have known the contents of Sir Weston’s Will?”

“I don’t know, sir. But there may have been a copy.”

“To which someone had access? That’s true. And if the Will doesn’t help?”

“I still think it was done by someone who stood to gain by his death. A forged cheque, for instance, which, when his account came in, Sir Weston was bound to spot. I mean, I cannot believe that the murder was done in revenge. And it wasn’t for robbery.”

The Assistant Commissioner offered the box of cigars. Falcon thanked him and took one. As he slid off the band—

“You’re looking at the butler,” said his chief.

“Yes, sir,” said Falcon, “I am.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you,” said the Director. “Because his alibi is a shade too good to be true.”

The Chief Inspector smiled.

“That’s right, sir.”

The Assistant Commissioner seemed to be thinking aloud.

“One, he was out at the time. Two, he was familiar with Sir Weston’s ways. Three, he might have had access to a copy of the Will. If we can crack that alibi . . .”

The Director cleared his throat.

“We’re assuming that the dead man walked straight from his chambers to the door in the wall?”

“I think we can do that, sir. We have Parsons’ statement that that was the way he went. And he said he was going to his Club. But he’d pass several chambers *en route*. I’ll have them visited to-morrow, just in case.”

The Assistant Commissioner was speaking.

“From the Temple to the Stores, and from Piccadilly to the Stores?”

“Nothing in it, sir. Perhaps a shade quicker from the Temple by Underground.”

The three men talked for another quarter of an hour. Then Falcon took his leave and, after calling at the mortuary, went to his bed.

* * * * * * * *

“Tell me this,” said the Chief Inspector. “A man comes into this office to send a wire. How does he get a form?”

“From one of the boxes,” said the Postmaster. “There’s one over every desk. You know. As you pull out one form, another comes down.”

“You don’t use pads here?”

“Only for foreign forms. All the others are loose.”

“Then this telegram was sent from here, but was not written here?”

“I’d say you were right there, sir. This form has been torn from a pad.”

“Right,” said Falcon. “And now may I see the girl?”

A moment later an assistant entered the room.

“Just look at that wire, Miss Hollis.”

One glance, and the girl exclaimed.

“There now!” she said. “I knew I’d seen the name somewhere. Quite lately, I mean. Poor gentleman. Why, it must be almost the last thing he ever did.”

“To send this wire? He never sent it, Miss Hollis. And that’s where I want your help. What did he look like? The fellow that sent it, I mean.”

The girl reflected.

“Oh dear,” she murmured. “One gets so many wires.”

“I know. But this is very important. Cudgel your brains.”

“I might recognize him,” said the girl: “but I can’t recall him at all.”

“Man or woman?” said Falcon.

“Oh, a man, I know.”

“How d’you know that?”

“Because I remember his hands.”

“What about them?”

“Well, I only saw one properly.”

“Right or left?”

“It’d be his right—as he handed the telegram in.”

“What was it like?”

“The nails were bitten—dreadful. It made me feel queer.”

“Sure you’re making no mistake?”

“Oh no. I’d swear to that. But I wish I could remember his face.”

“Well, go on trying,” said Falcon. “Tell the Postmaster if you do. Not a word of all this, of course, to anyone else.”

“Oh no, sir.”

As the girl left the room, the Chief Inspector pointed to a telephone.

“Can I use that to speak to the Yard?”

“Certainly, sir,” said the Postmaster.

“Can anyone overhear me?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ll stand outside the door.”

“If you’d be so good.”

The Chief Inspector spoke first to Albert Court.

“Everything all right, Ross?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’ll be along before long. If anyone wants to go out, they must wait for me.”

“Very good, sir.”

“Nobody has been out?”

“Oh no, sir.”

Then Falcon spoke to the Yard.

“That you, Sims? Look here. The four best trailers you’ve got for Albert Court. I’ll be at the Yard to see them one hour from now. Inform A. C.”

“Very good, sir.”

Falcon reflected that he was very well served.

* * * * * * * *

The solicitor unfolded a document, straightened it out.

“It’s very short,” he said.

“Legacies?” said Falcon.

“Only to his clerks and his servants.”

“May I hear them?”

“Certainly. One thousand pounds to his butler, Hammond by name: two-fifty to Mrs. Dunn, cook-housekeeper: six months’ wages to the two maids. Five hundred to his senior clerk: one-fifty to his junior. All free of all duties.”

“I see. And the rest?”

“Four-fifths of the residue to his niece, one-fifth to his nephew. Executors, myself and one of my partners. That’s all.”

“I see. Was Sir Weston supplied with a copy of that Will?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll soon find out.”

Wallace pressed a button and picked up a telephone.

“And whilst we’re waiting,” said Falcon, “what is the date of that Will?”

The solicitor glanced at the back-sheet.

“June of this year,” he said.

“Had he made a Will before?”

“Oh yes. One or two, I think.”

“Have you got a copy of the last one?”

“A copy—yes. The original’s been destroyed.”

“I’d like to see it,” said Falcon.

“So you shall.”

Five minutes later, perhaps, Falcon left his seat and crossed to the fire.

“The position is this,” he said. “First, it is clear that a copy of Sir Weston’s last Will was sent by post to his flat in Albert Court. It is, therefore, possible that its contents may have been known to somebody else. Secondly, by the last Will but one, three persons benefit less than they do by the last Will of all. Those three are the butler, the cook-housekeeper and the niece. The first two received only six months’ wages apiece, and the third only half the residue instead of four-fifths. Am I right?”

“Perfectly,” said Wallace.

“Now let me put a hypothetical case. Richard Roe makes a Will, a copy of which falls into the hands of John Doe. Reading the copy through, John Doe perceives that Richard Roe has left him ten thousand pounds. John Doe covets this fortune and presently kills Richard Roe, either because he can’t wait or because he fears that Richard may change his mind. Very well. So far, so good. But conceive John Doe’s state of mind *when the lawyers propound an old Will*—by which he is left only five hundred pounds.”

“My God!” said Wallace, starting up.

“Exactly,” said Falcon. “His face will be a study: but never mind that. He will feel that he must take action—do something, *something* to open the lawyers’ eyes. After all, he has risked his neck. And if, after that, he is not to receive his reward . . .”

“By God,” said Wallace, “I’ll do it. I’d risk my Certificate to bring the murderer down.”

“I don’t say it will,” said Falcon. “But I honestly think it might help.”

* * * * * * * *

Some six hours later the Chief Inspector entered the Assistant Commissioner’s room.

“It’s Hammond all right, sir,” he said. “But I haven’t got half enough to make an arrest.”

“Does he know that you know?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Exactly what have we got?”

“First, he did not send the wire which he said he did. He wrote the wire on a form in his master’s flat: and he gave it to someone to send. The sender bites his nails; but Hammond does not. His alibi, therefore, has gone. More. He presented an alibi which he knew to be false. Secondly, he was dumbfounded when he heard that Sir Weston had left him fifty

pounds. Shaken to the foundations. I watched his face. Which suggests—very strongly indeed—that he had read and destroyed the copy of the true Will. That copy was sent to the flat: it is not there now. Only two of the drawers were locked, and the locks were poor."

"Why d'you think he destroyed it?"

"Lest his finger-prints should be found."

The Assistant Commissioner nodded.

"When d'you think he destroyed it?"

"After the murder, on his return to the flat."

"Right. Go on."

"That's all so far, sir. I believe that he'll take some action—I don't know what. I've four men waiting to trail him, if he should leave the flat. And Ross and another are inside."

The Assistant Commissioner smiled.

"You're taking no chances. I hear you've got the weapon."

"I think so, sir. A heavy adjustable spanner. Two feet down in the mud at the foot of the wall."

"Doesn't that connect him with the motor-car trade?"

"I think so, sir. But I'm waiting for him to move."

“Depend upon it, he will. You’ve done very well.”

Falcon wrinkled his brow.

“I don’t know about that, sir. I’ve put him in balk. I’m afraid to talk to him now, for he’s like a cat on hot bricks.”

“That’s just as well. I’m all against talking too much to a man you hope to arrest. By the way, what of the others? Hadn’t the nephew to do with motor-cars?”

“Yes, sir. But he’s been in the Clinic for over a week. And the niece is in Switzerland.”

“As well for them as for us.” The Assistant Commissioner laughed. “Whatever did Wallace say when you said he’d got to propound an out-of-date Will?”

“He saw the point, sir, all right.”

“I must say I give you best.”

“If it makes Hammond move, sir, it will have served its turn.”

With his words, the telephone rang.

The Assistant Commissioner picked the receiver up.

“Yes? . . . Hold on.” He gave the receiver to Falcon. “For you,” he said.

“Yes?” said the Chief Inspector.

“Ross speaking, sir,” said a voice.

“Yes, Ross?”

“Hammond left the flat, sir, two minutes ago.”

* * * * * * * *

At half-past ten that night Falcon reported progress at the Assistant Commissioner’s house. The Director of Public Prosecutions was also there.

“I’ll cut out the chase, sir,” said Falcon, “and only say this—that he did his level best to cover his tracks.”

“You had four men on him?”

“Only three really, sir. They work in shifts, and the fourth is always resting—I find it better that way. Well, two of them lost him: it wasn’t their fault at all. But the third got home.

“Hammond went to a garage in Islington—a place on the small side that seemed to have seen better days. There he picked up a fellow that bites his nails. The two went off to the place where the latter lives. Lodgings, I think, above a greengrocer’s shop. There they spent over an hour. Then they came out together, and the fellow went back to the garage and Hammond to Albert Court.”

“Very good indeed,” said the Director. “And now what?”

“I think we should wait on him, sir. If we do nothing, I think he may move again.”

“In what direction?”

“If you ask me, sir, I think he’ll go for the Will. How he’ll do that, I cannot say. An anonymous letter, perhaps. But, putting myself in his place, I’m sure I should try and do something to get my rights.”

The Assistant Commissioner chuckled.

“That’s how you do it, Falcon. Always putting yourself in the other man’s place.”

The Chief Inspector smiled.

“It’s a great help, sir.”

“Hammond believes,” said the Director, “that the lawyers have made a mistake?”

“Exactly. Mr. Wallace was careful to tell him the date of the Will. Hammond *knows* that one was made later—and almost certainly thinks that the lawyers have taken the wrong one out of the safe. Well, that’s enough to break a man’s heart, when he’s gone as far as murder to get his legacy.”

“I agree,” said the Assistant Commissioner. “If we sit perfectly still, he’ll move again. What about the inquest to-morrow?”

“He won’t be wanted, sir, but I’ve told him that he must be there. Six short witnesses. Mr. Wallace, to identify: the junior clerk, the porter who found the body, the Divisional Surgeon, Sir Bernard, to speak to the wound—and myself. Adjournment for a fortnight, I hope. That will suggest that we’re baffled. Of

course were keeping the spanner up our sleeve."

The Director held up a 'Late Night Special' edition of *The Evening News*.

"And who is responsible for this?"

The headline flared.

DANGER SPOT PATROLLED

"I'm afraid that was me," said the Assistant Commissioner. "I hoped it would suggest that we feared a second tragedy. You know. Homicidal maniac at large. And I felt that everyone—the murderer included—would be pleased."

"But what finesse," purred the Director. "And how un-English. That comes of visiting Biarritz. I do hope you'll go again."

The others laughed.

Then—

"Take a drink and a smoke, Falcon, and call it a day."

"Thank you, sir."

"Motive," said the Director. "That's all I ask."

The Assistant Commissioner frowned.

"What about a thousand spot cash?"

"Not good enough," said the Director. "I'm sorry to be so

trying, but you want a conviction, don't you? You don't want him to walk out."

Falcon looked over his shoulder.

"I've hopes, sir, of Islington."

"Good," said the Director. "As long as you bear it in mind. Why did he want the thousand—and want it quick? Only tell me that, and my people will send him down."

"Only," said the Assistant Commissioner.

The Director looked down his nose.

"Juries," he said, "are exacting—when they're trying a murder case. Never mind. If the Chief Inspector continues as he has begun, the day will come when Mr. Hammond will regret that he—er—eliminated a man who, to my knowledge, has saved six several necks."

* * * * * * * *

The Inquest was held and adjourned, according to plan. When it was over, Falcon returned to the Yard, and there Wallace rang him up at ten minutes to six.

"That you, Chief Inspector? I don't want to come to you. Could you come to me?"

"Yes. At what hour?"

"Shall we say seven o'clock at my private house?"

“I will be there.”

* * * * * * * *

Wallace went straight to the point.

“Hammond approached me as I was leaving the Court.”

“I know,” said Falcon. “I saw him.”

“He asked me to give him an appointment. I said I’d see him to-morrow at half-past three.”

“Good,” said Falcon. “He’s going to say he believes there’s another Will. Some cock-and-bull story, of course, as the reason for this belief.”

“What d’you want me to do, Chief Inspector?”

“First,” said Falcon, “have a stenographer there. Behind a screen, or something. I want every word that is said. Secondly, comply with his request and look for a later Will. Seem perturbed. Do it at once. Send for your managing clerk and tell him to look himself—in Sir Weston’s box in the strong-room. Is that all right?”

“Yes.”

“He will return with the true Will—shamefacedly. You will behave exactly as if there had been a genuine mistake. You will seem put out and will look through the Will. And then you will tell Hammond that it is as he thought and that he now stands entitled to one thousand pounds. He is sure to ask when he can

have this. You will say, ‘As soon as the Will has been proved.’ He will ask when that will be. How late can you decently put it?”

Wallace reflected. Then—

“In five or six weeks.”

“Will you tell him that?”

“I will.”

“And see what he says.”

* * * * * * * *

At two o’clock the next day a taxi drove into a garage at Islington.

“Want a job, mate?” said the driver, leaving his seat.

“What then?” said the gloomy foreman.

“Leak in me petrol-tank—jus’ above the exhaust.”

“Not so nice,” said the other, peering.

“Can you do it right away?”

“It’s a two-hour job,” said the other. “Yes, if you like. The solderin’ ’s nothin’. It’s takin’ the —— down.”

“I’ll bear a ’and,” said the other. “Gimme a wrap.”

Much may be learned in two hours by a well-trained man. When Detective-Sergeant Sims left the garage at half-past four, he drove to Scotland Yard at a dangerous speed.

Falcon received him at once.

“First, the spanner, sir. The foreman missed it just over a week ago. He’s properly sore, for he’s very hot on his tools.”

“Very good, Sims,” said Falcon. “How did you drag that out?”

“My spanner slipped somehow, and I asked him if none of his tools could bite any better than that. And then he was off.”

“Well done. Go on.”

“Then Amos comes into the garage—the fellow what bites his nails. He’s not the boss, but he has some sort of position—I don’t know what. Gives orders—an’ they’re obeyed: but he’s not at all popular. Went into the office an’ stayed there. Used the telephone. Later the boss comes in—Stammers, by name. Easy-going, cheerful, bone-lazy an’ drinks. Stood chatting for quite a while an’ made everyone laugh. Presently Amos comes out an’ goes up to some car. ‘Mate,’ says Stammers to me, ‘d’you want to buy a garage for fifty thousand quid?’ An’ everyone laughs fit to burst, an’ Amos looks very black an’ turns on his heel an’ goes out. I ask ‘What’s the joke?’ An’ Stammers shakes his head. ‘A family affair,’ he says. ‘You ask my brother: he’s a better vocabulary than me.’ ‘But I don’t know your brother,’ I says. ‘What, you don’t know George Stammers of Chertsey,’ he says, ‘the lawyer that’s never been done?’ They all roared with laughter again. ‘I don’t indeed,’ says I. ‘Well, you go and ask him,’ says Stammers. ‘Say you

want to buy a garage, but you don't want to pay more than twenty thousand quid. But be ready to jump when you've said it. He's no sense of humour, George.' They laughed like hell at that, an' I left it there. Then Stammers starts again. 'Skin-an'-Grief been here to-day?' 'Not to-day,' says the foreman. I asked who Skin-an'-Grief was. They said it was Amos's brother. I asked why they gave him that name. *By God, sir, it's Hammond.*"

* * * * * * * *

George Stammers of Chertsey was only too ready to talk. After a moment, Falcon held up his hand.

"Tell me shortly first," he said. "I want to get the hang of the thing. Then you shall give me a statement, as full as you please."

George Stammers, solicitor, nodded. Then—

"My brother's a wash-out," he said. "Came to me for money a year ago. I don't give wash-outs money; but I bought the garage from him and made him manager."

"You thought the property would appreciate?"

"Yes. And I was right. Three months ago a lawyer went to him and asked for an option to purchase at twice what I'd paid."

"What had you paid?" said Falcon.

George Stammers moistened his lips.

“Six hundred.”

“Pretty cheap, Mr. Stammers.”

“Maybe,” said the other, frowning. “Anyway, he wanted an option—a six-months’ option to buy at twelve hundred pounds. The lawyer offered my brother twenty-five pounds—and he had the money there. My brother took it, and gave him the option he asked. The option he gave was worthless, but the lawyer didn’t know that. He believed him to be the owner, as most people did.”

Again Stammers moistened his lips.

“Then that Jackal, Amos, came in . . .

“He’d done one or two deals with my brother—finding mugs to buy his second-hand cars. Fifty-fifty, you know. So he had the run of the office, more or less. And he found out what had happened—and got to work. Remember, I knew nothing. If only I had. . . .

“You’ve heard of the Box Corporation? That lawyer was acting for them. They’d bought the whole of the block. Bought or got options on every stock and stone. The whole block is coming down, and they’re building a picture palace and modern flats. Amos discovered all this—and what does that blackguard do?”

George Stammers leaned forward, tapping his desk.

“He comes down here to me and offers me fifty pounds for an option to purchase the garage for twelve hundred pounds. Option for three months only. Produces five ten-pound notes.”

“You gave it him, Mr. Stammers?”

“I’ll say I did. And ten days later the Box Corporation starts taking their options up . . .

“Well, as soon as they went to my brother, the gaff was blown. But they wasted no time on him. The lawyer was here—in this office, within two hours. . . . I shan’t forget our interview—neither will he. When I gave him Amos’s address—care of my brother at the garage—the blood went out of his face.

“He went to Amos and offered to buy his option; And Amos said he could have it for *twenty thousand pounds*. You see, he knew he’d got them. They’d gone too far. Twenty thousand pounds . . . And I’m glad to say their lawyer told him to go to hell.

“That was the end of October.

“Well, that was all right. Bluff, if you like—but it didn’t suit Amos’s book. *He’d been banking on selling his option.* He hadn’t *got* twelve hundred pounds—or a fifth of that sum . . . After a bit, he offered to take fifteen thousand. The lawyer laughed in his face. ‘Take up your option,’ he said. ‘And then we’ll talk.’

“And that’s how it stands. Unless he can raise the money, instead of making a fortune, he’s fifty quid down on the deal. And raise it he *can’t*, Inspector. I know he’s been to the Jews, but the lawyer’s a Jew himself, and the word has gone round. And so he’s stuck. Near nineteen thousand dangling—ill-gotten gains. But he can’t move, an’ soon they’ll be out of his reach.”

“And within yours,” thought Falcon. Aloud he said, “How soon, Mr. Stammers?”

“Little over a month now. His option expires on January 10th.”

* * * * * * * *

The Director of Public Prosecutions was bristling.

“Oh, you would, would you?” he said. “You’d arrest the two to-morrow—and give us the fight of our lives. Falcon, I’m ashamed of you. After two years in Treasury Chambers, you should know better than that.”

“You think we should wait, sir?”

“Think? It’s as clear as paint. When does the option expire? On January 10th. Very well. Hammond has already visited Wallace again—to beg him to quicken up probate. Towards the end of the time, he’ll be camping in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Let him. *And let Wallace pay him on January 8th.* By open cheque. And let Wallace warn his bank to have the notes all ready—the numbers written down. Hammond gives the notes to his brother. And his brother goes to Chertsey, to take his option up. And that is where you arrest him—with the notes in his hand. And Hammond at the same time, wherever he is. And then you’ll have a good case. Don’t think that I’m trying to save my Department work. But I want to send these men down. Frankly, I think they deserve it. It was a cold, black crime. And I’d known poor Weston Gale for forty years. He was to have married my sister . . . and then she died.”

There was a little silence.

Then—

“I never knew that,” said the Assistant Commissioner.

“Only three people do,” said the Director. “And they are all in this room.”

* * * * * * * *

On January 9th Amos and Hammond reached Chertsey soon after eleven o’clock. The brothers were in excellent fettle. Their ship had come home.

As they sighted the solicitor’s office—

“I won’t come in,” said Hammond. “I’ll stroll round and about. You won’t be long.”

Amos went in . . .

As he entered the solicitor’s presence—

“Good day, Mr. Stammers,” he said. “I believe I’ve an option outstanding . . . a matter of twelve hundred pounds.”

“That is so,” said Stammers, drily.

Amos’s hand went into his pocket.

“Due to expire to-morrow. I’m here to take it up.” He pitched an envelope down. “You’ll find a thousand there, and here’s another two hundred to square the account.”

“Amos,” said Falcon, standing behind his back.

The man swung about.

“You’re under arrest, Amos. You’ll hear the charge at the station. And now, if you please, I must ask you to come with me.”

“Under arrest? You’re mad.”

“And I must warn you that anything you may say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you.”

“Arrest for what?”

“Murder. Sir Weston Gale.”

Amos’s eyes bolted.

Then—

“You’ve got the wrong man,” he said. “I was over a mile away.”

“I know,” said Falcon. He opened the door. “Come on.”

“What about that money?” said Amos.

“We shall take charge of that—until the end of your trial.”

Amos’s eyes were burning.

“You filthy ——,” he said.

Falcon held open the door.

“Come on,” he said.

Amos passed out of the room, down the ill-lighted hall, over the pavement and into a dun-coloured car.

As Falcon followed him in—

“And his brother?” he said.

“Gone on ahead, sir,” said Ross.

Falcon slammed the door.

“Right away.”

62

* * * * * * * *

The King against Amos (alias Hammond) and Amos was what lawyers call a ‘dead’ case.

As the two were being sentenced to death, Amos turned upon Hammond and seized his throat. The warders got him away before damage was done.

“Not so impatient,” breathed one. “Besides, the hangman’ll do it better than you.”

He was perfectly right.

A SPECIAL CASE

The specialist returned to his table and picked up a pen. His patient put on his coat and settled his tie: then he took his seat on the arm of a leather chair.

“What’s the sentence?” he said.

The specialist, who was writing, made no reply. Instead he signed his name, read over what he had written and carefully blotted the sheet.

“Go on. Spit it out,” said the other. “I’m not afraid to die.”

The specialist smiled.

“The question of death,” he said, “does not at present arise. You are in all essentials a first-class ‘life.’” He folded and covered the sheet: then he pitched it across to his patient and folded his arms. “That’s my prescription,” he said. “And thank your stars that you’ve come to an honest fool.”

“And what,” said the other, “what do you mean by that?”

The specialist raised his eyebrows.

“You’re easy money,” he said. “A man in your condition is worth a hell of a lot to a capable medicine man.” He sighed. “The silly part of it is that when he’d finished with you, you’d be more grateful to him than you’ll be to me. I have to do it sometimes, in self-defence.”

“Do what?” said his patient.

“Obtain money by false pretences. Pretend to a bloke he’s sick, when he’s fitter than me. If I told him the truth, he’d swear I was no damned good and cross the street. Well, I may as well have his money as the fellow across the way.”

“You dirty dog,” said the other, and opened his note.

167 Wimpole Street,
W.
March 29th.

George Stable Esq.

To be taken forthwith for a month in southern waters—
One luxury cruise.

C. B. Windrush.

The patient looked up to meet the specialist’s eyes.

For a moment each regarded the other.

Then—

“My worthy Bertram,” said Stable, “it can’t be done. If you had taken the trouble to listen to what I said, you would have appreciated that I am up against time. I’ve *got* to deliver this book by September next. I’m already two months behind. And you sit there and suggest——”

“If you want to keep your promise, you’ll do as I say. Your brain is beginning to fail you, because you have worked it too hard for too long a time. No physic or treatment can help you: but the ocean will make you sleep and the rest and freedom from care will make you perfectly well.”

“‘Freedom from care’?” cried Stable. “That shows how much you know. Why, the loss of another month would send me out of my mind.”

“No, it won’t,” said the doctor. “I’ll tell you why. Because you will be out of touch. Once you’ve sailed, you see, you cannot get back: and you’ll know that to worry is futile, because you have burnt your boats.”

There was a little silence, while Windrush regarded his patient and the latter regarded his prescription with a malevolent stare.

At length—

“Oh, I can’t bear it,” he said, and covered his eyes. “I’ve heard all about these cruises. They’re——”

“Usually taken,” said Windrush, “by people who are perfectly well. Aboard, they rage furiously together by day and night. Ashore, they rush violently about, like the Gadarene swine. They come home laden with junk which has been ordered from England for them to buy. You can’t altogether blame them. Thanks to the air, their energy knows no bounds. But you will not rage with them. You will not go ashore or buy any junk. You will rise very late, read on deck by day and retire to your state-room at ten. You will send and receive no letters and do no work. Almost at once you will find

that you will begin to sleep, and by the end of your month you will be perfectly well."

"Well, but insane," said Stable. "I've always detested a crowd. If I knew some wealthy felon who'd take me aboard his yacht . . ."

The specialist shook his head.

"Not nearly so good," he said. "If you were a guest on a yacht, you'd have to pull your weight. Go ashore and dance and sit up to all hours. As it is, you'll be a free lance. The ship will be your hotel, and you will go as you please. And you'll find the crowd quite amusing—to watch, I mean."

"You can't gild this pill," said Stable. "It's quite the most loathsome prospect I've ever been shown. I hate the sea as much as I love the hills: but to be confined for one month to a cross between a Zoo and a Fun Fair from which I cannot escape . . ." He let the sentence go and got to his feet. "I'll think it over, Bertram. I promise you that. But——"

"Sit down," said the other, and turned to the telephone.

"Look here," said George, "I came here to buy your advice—not to be bluffed into . . ."

But the specialist was addressing his secretary.

"Get on to the Black Moon Line. I want to speak to Mr. Collins. You know. He's a patient of ours."

As he replaced the receiver—

“Bertram,” said George, “you mean well. But I want you to get this now. I’m damned if I’m going to sea.”

The specialist rose to his feet.

“Then you had better get this. Unless you do as I say, your book will never be written and you will be in a clinic in ten days’ time. Every test I put to you, gave me the same reply. You’re immensely strong, but you’re on the edge of a breakdown, through too much work. And if you go over that edge, you’ll have to take six months off, instead of one.”

The other faced him for a moment. Then he put a hand to his head and sat down in his chair.

“I expect you’re right,” he said. “Could I have a glass of water? I’m not too good.”

The specialist ministered to the patient—made him lie down on the couch and mixed him a draught.

“My God, what a show,” said the latter. And then, “I’m glad it’s you.”

“You needn’t be ashamed,” said Bertram. “The consulting-room atmosphere always revolts the strong.” Here the telephone buzzed. “And there’s my friend, Mr. Collins. I recently saved his life, so he’ll do you proud.”

Less than five minutes later, the deal was done.

Though the ship had been full for weeks, room was made for George on the s.s. *Harvest Moon*, the queen of the fleet—a

luxurious double state-room, all to himself. What especially pleased the physician was that the ship was sailing in two days' time.

As the two shook hands—

"Well, I suppose it's all right," said George. "I feel like a man in a dream. What did you say I was paying? Ninety-five guineas, all in?"

Bertram grinned.

"That's right. To them—instead of to me. If you remember, I told you I was a fool."

* * * * * * * *

The s.s. *Harvest Moon* was six days out, and Stable was feeling fitter than he had felt for months. By day he read and dozed and sauntered and dozed again: after dinner he strolled for miles on the empty decks: at night he slipped into a heavy, dreamless sleep. Even as Bertram had said, to worry was plainly so futile that he was free from care. He let the world slip, because he could do nothing else.

He had found it easy enough to go his own way. By his own request, he shared a retired table with a nurse and two little girls: the three had finished their breakfast before he appeared, and since they did not dine, lunch was the only meal which he did not have to himself. Perhaps because of this, the meal in question became an agreeable rite. Sarah and Jane were refreshing—and they adored their squire.

The other four hundred souls left Stable alone. If they lived, at least they let live. And, again as Bertram had said, he found them amusing to watch. What impressed him most of all was their common determination to get their money's worth. They left no dish untasted, no game unplayed, no entertainment unattended, no dance undanced. When land was sighted, eight hundred eyes were glued to the distant smudge, and when a chance was presented of going ashore, their owners fought for the launches as though the ship was afire. Such manners and customs provoked the stewards' contempt: the four hundred never saw this, but Stable did—and the Saturnalian atmosphere made him laugh.

His own particular steward continually filled his cup.

"You won't be goin' ashore, sir? No, I thought not. Well, you'll have a nice, quiet day, for you'll have the ship to yourself. An' I don't mind saying, I'm thankful to see them go. Not that they give much trouble, but it's the pace they make. Nothing'll ever stop them, short of a whole gale. They're so desperately afraid of missin' something. It happens it's fine to-day: but if it was pourin' wet, they'd all go off just the same. An' see the stuff they come back with—walkin'-sticks an' bellows an' strings o' beads: you wouldn't really believe that sensible 'uman beings could do such things. I understand they're goin' to 'ave crackers to-night: that means they'll all 'ave caps on, by way of revelry."

By ten o'clock that morning, the crowd was gone, and the liner lay at her moorings, a stately temple of peace. George enjoyed himself greatly, probing her empty courts. Then he had his hair cut in comfort and made for the swimming-pool. The sort of

morning, he reflected, which Bertram would have approved.

His appearance at lunch was greeted with cries of delight by Sarah and Jane. Shore life was not their portion—to their disgust.

“I knew he wouldn’t go,” declared Sarah. “He’s not like that.”

“Rot,” said her sister. “You’re saying what Dally said.”

“I don’t care if she did,” said Sarah. “I knew it, too. And I bet Godolphin he wouldn’t, when he was getting my bath.”

“Who’s Dally?” said Stable. “And what did Godolphin say?”

“He said he wished he was your steward and it did his heart good to see a pair of shoe-trees again.”

“Good old George,” said Jane, affectionately.

“Miss Jane!” protested the nurse.

“He doesn’t mind, do you?” said Jane.

“I love it, my lady. I always love someone I love to call me George.”

“Isn’t he sweet?” said Sarah.

“Really, you two,” cried the nurse. “I can’t think what Mr. Stable——”

“Mr. Stable,” said George, “is having the time of his life. What

more could any man ask? On each side a pretty girl who makes out that he's nice."

"Darling George," said Jane. "He does say such lovely things."

"We must tell Dally that," said Sarah. "'On each side a pretty girl.' That's pretty good, you know, from a man of his age."

"It's perfectly true," said George. "And now, if you please, who's Dally? Is she a stewardess?"

The young ladies shrieked with mirth.

"Dally's a girl," said Jane. "She sits away over there the other side of the band. She mucks in with us sometimes. It was simply glorious this morning, because Crumpet's gone off in a car."

"Who on earth's Crumpet?" said George.

"Crumpet's a wash-out," said Sarah. "It's not often I don't like a man, but if Crumpet tried to kiss me I'd run a mile."

"Same here," said Jane.

"I trust," said George, "that he is gentleman enough to take no such liberty."

"No, I don't think he would," said Jane. "I only said if he did. It—it isn't always ungentlemanly, is it?"

"Not if the lady makes it clear that she doesn't mind."

The sisters regarded each other thoughtfully.

Then—

“How,” said Sarah, “how does she make it clear?”

“That’s up to her,” said Stable. “But I still don’t understand where Crumpet comes in.”

“He’s Dally’s fi-fi-financier.”

“Rather her than me,” said Jane.

“Come, come, Miss Jane,” said the nurse. “You shouldn’t say things like that.”

“I’m beginning to see daylight,” said George. “When Crumpet’s away, Dally can play.”

“That’s right,” said Sarah. “If you ask me, he gives her no peace.”

“Now, now, Miss Sarah.”

“Nanny, you said so. I heard you. Anyway he always butts in. She comes without him, you see: an’ then when we’re getting going, he always arrives.”

“We hid from him once,” said Jane: “but that was no go, for old Mrs. Crumpet was trying the other side. She’s, his mother, you know, and she’s paying for everything.”

“Well, that’s very kind of her,” said George.

“Yes, I suppose so,” said Jane. “I don’t think she’s very nice.”

“Why,” said George, “is Dally alone to-day?”

“I believe,” said Sarah, “she said she was ill. She never got up till after the launches had left. The Crumpets went off in the last one—we watched them go.”

“An’ old Mrs. Crumpet,” said Jane, “looked frightfully cross.”

“So did Crumpet,” said Sarah. “I think he wanted to stay: he kept on turning round and looking back at the ship.”

“Perhaps,” said Jane, “perhaps they’ll never come back. You know. Brigands, or something.”

“Wouldn’t that be gorgeous?” said Sarah. “And Dally’d be free.”

“After three years,” said her sister. “That’s the new law.”

“But is she married?” said Stable. “I thought you said she was engaged.”

“She isn’t married,” said Jane. “But I thought if you were engaged . . .”

“Oh, have a heart,” said Stable. “It’s when you’re married, you’re sunk. Till then, you can always retire.”

“There you are,” said Sarah. “I said you could. And you swore there was this new law that you had to wait for three years before you were free.”

“A mistake,” said George, “that anybody might make. The law is most confusing. That’s really why I’ve never married. I don’t want to put a foot wrong.”

“D’you mean to say,” said Jane “that Dally can give Crumpet the bird?”

“If she’s only engaged, she can. There’s no law against that. But I don’t suppose she wants to. You mayn’t care about him yourself but——”

“He’s foul,” said Sarah. The nurse intervened.

“I’ve told you, Miss Sarah, you’re not to use that word.”

“Well, sick-making, then.”

“Or that.”

“Let’s say he’s undesirable,” said Stable: “of course, from your point of view. But Dally probably thinks him extremely nice.”

“Oh, no, she doesn’t,” said Sarah. “When he tried to touch her last night, she got behind me.”

“I don’t believe,” said Jane, “she knows she can turn him down.”

“Let’s tell her what George says,” said Sarah.

“I shouldn’t do that,” said Stable, hastily. “She—she mightn’t like it, you know. Love-affairs are personal matters. I’m sure, when you have one, you jolly well go your own way: and if

someone presumes to advise you, you bite their neck."

The sisters, wide-eyed, were understood to concur. But neither opened her mouth, lest the spoken word should shatter the exquisite postulate.

Stable continued comfortably.

"I remember a similar case. A terribly pretty girl—very much your style. She married a poisonous bloke. And we all said 'How revolting,' and things like that. But it turned out uncommonly well. And he's completely changed. If you were to see him now, you'd go and put your arms round his neck."

"Well, I don't know," said Sarah, "but I believe Dally's got stuck. And nothing could ever change Crumpet."

"Nothing," said Jane. "And what price old Mrs. Crumpet? If she's been improved by marriage, she must have been a corker when she was a virge."

Before the nurse, who was drinking, had got her breath—

"This pie reminds me," said George, "they make very good pies at my club. I'd rather like you to try them. D'you think when we're back in Town you two could give me a date?"

The two thought they could. When the storm of their approval subsided, the time for rebuke had gone by.

The meal was nearly over, when Sarah caught George's arm.

"There's Dally," she cried.

At the sound of her name a girl turned and a man looked up.

For an instant gray eyes held brown.

Then Dahlia Furlough passed on and George Willing Stable returned to the rosy apple which he was peeling for Jane.

But for both the world was different. A contact had just been made. The current which passes understanding was flowing between the two.

* * * * * * * *

It was the old story.

Dahlia was a penniless orphan; and her guardian was Crumpet senior, who went in fear of his wife. And Jane's conclusion was just. Mrs. Crumpet was not very nice. Having spoiled him all his life, she now had no use for her son; but when, for the second time, the latter had gone too far with one of the maids, she perceived that, for her peace of mind, she had better legitimatize the lusts of his flesh. It was a bitter pill. For years the beautiful orphan had been kept out of his ken, in case the susceptible Percy should seek to make her his wife. But now, by *force majeure*, her dread had become her desire. Better the penniless ward for daughter-in-law, than some slut who dropped her aitches and answered back.

The crime was not hard to commit.

Percy Crumpet, of course, fell flat for his prey: the man who had sworn to protect her, said and did without protest exactly as he was told: and Mrs. Crumpet forced the engagement

through.

But the lady was well aware that any betrothal so made is brittle as glass, and when she learned that Dahlia's American cousins would be spending a week in London in ten days' time, the case for a cruise on the *Harvest Moon* seemed quite unanswerable. And so it was undertaken, at Mrs. Crumpet's expense. Dahlia raised no objection—she had, of course, no idea that her American cousins were on their way. The cable which they had sent her had been destroyed.

* * * * * * * *

When the Crumpets returned exhausted at six o'clock, George and Sarah were fighting Dally and Jane. It was a naval action, fought with paper and pencil and ruled by chivalry. The rival fleets were out of each other's sight: only the victim knew when a hit had been made.

"B 5," said Dally.

George and Sarah regarded each other with rueful eyes.

Then—

"Hit," sighed George, marking his sheet.

"Not a b-battleship?" squealed Jane.

"One of our old ones," said George. "We—we don't mind at all."

"You do, you do," screamed Jane. "Dally, darling, we've

got them. We've . . ."

The sentence snapped off short.

Percy Crumpet was standing two paces away.

"Hullo," said Dally, swiftly. "I didn't know you were back."

"So it appears," said Crumpet. And then, "I thought you were ill."

"I didn't feel up to the excursion. I'm all right now. Let me introduce Mr. Crumpet—Mr. Stable. I don't think you've met."

"How d'you do," said George, looking up.

But Crumpet excelled himself. Instead of replying, he simply looked George up and down.

The latter smiled, while Dally grew slowly red.

"Come on," he said. "It's our turn. Sarah, let's try C 6."

Crumpet addressed his *fiancée*.

"My mother wants you," he said.

Sarah regarded her sister.

"If that was true," she said, "he'd've said it before."

Looking ready to burst—

"A damned good whipping," said Percy, "is what you need."

“Did you hear that, George?” said Jane.

“I must go,” said Dally, rising.

“As usual,” said Sarah. “The fun that Crumpet does in . . . Never mind. We’ve had a good day. And I knew you’d like George.”

Dally fled. And her swain, more black than red, made off in pursuit.

“Isn’t he poisonous?” said Jane.

“Well, I don’t exactly like him,” said George, “if that’s what you mean.”

“But you do like Dally, don’t you?”

“I think she’s sweet.”

“She can’t like Crumpet, can she?”

“Sweetheart,” said George, “there’s no accounting for tastes.”

“She doesn’t like him,” said Sarah. “Look at the way she shrinks when he mauls her about.”

Here the nurse arrived, and George got to his feet.

“Till to-morrow,” he said. “And thank you both very much for a lovely time,” He put out his hands for theirs; and when they had given them him, he bent his head and put them up to his lips. “Sleep well, two of the best. May I be there to see, when you

go to Court.”

The two looked after him.

“Isn’t he a love?” said Sarah, holding her hand to her cheek.

Her sister sighed.

“There’s nothing doing,” she said. “By the time we’re in the market, he’ll be too old.”

The nurse exclaimed.

“For shame, Miss Jane. How many times have I told you you’re not to talk like that?”

“A damned good whipping,” said Sarah, “is what she needs.”

“Miss Sarah!”

“Ask Crumpet, darling. That’s what he said to me.”

“He said that to you?”

“He did really, Nanny,” said Jane. “In front of George and Dally, about two minutes ago.”

The nurse breathed through her nose.

At length—

“I hope an’ trust, Miss Sarah, you didn’t answer him back.”

For the old school, there is a great deal to be said.

* * * * * * * *

That night, when the two were alone—

“Crumpet’s a stinker,” said Sarah. “Why shouldn’t George have Dally, instead of him?”

“It’s this damned engagement,” said Jane. “George says that Dally can fire him: but I’m almost certain it isn’t as easy as that.”

“We’ve read about it somewhere,” said Sarah.

“I know. But I can’t remember. Hotels come into it somehow. Or is that divorce?”

“Same thing,” said Sarah, boldly. “You have to stay together at some hotel.”

“That’s right,” said Jane. “It’s got to be an hotel.”

“Well, that’s no good,” said Sarah. “This is a ship. And I don’t believe Dally’d do it. I wouldn’t stay with Crumpet—not even at the Savoy.”

“Not with Crumpet, silly. She’s got to stay with George. And then she can fire Crumpet. It’s only a matter of form.”

“Are you sure?” said Sarah. And then, “She might do that.”

“Yes, but where’s the hotel?” said Jane. “And even if there was one—well, Crumpet’d roll up, too.”

“Would that matter?” said Sarah.

“Matter?” said Jane. “It’d just do everything in. George has to pretend he’s Crumpet. And how could he do that if Crumpet was there?”

“I don’t believe,” said Sarah, “they know all this. Some people don’t read the papers: and it hasn’t been out very long.”

“Dally mayn’t,” said Jane; “but I bet George does. Only, George is such a darling, he’d never let anyone down.”

“Not even Crumpet?” said her sister.

“He’d say it wasn’t cricket, or something. George is like that.”

“I’d love to stay with George: but even more than that I’d like to let Crumpet down.”

“That’s because you’re female,” said Jane. “So’d I every time.”

“Let’s concingtrate,” said Sarah. “And pray like hell. George and Dally would be priceless. Married, I mean.”

“Fancy staying with them,” said Jane.

“Like heaven,” said Sarah. “And why? Because they know how to behave.”

* * * * * * * *

Twelve glorious days had gone by, and the play on the *Harvest*

Moon was turning from gay to grave. Sarah and Jane were rampant: George and Dally behaved: the Crumpets increased in odium with God and man.

Always good to look at, Stable was now the picture of splendid health. His gay, brown eyes were clear, his skin was brown, the lines of overwork were out of his face. But if his mind and his body had been made whole, that his heart was desperately troubled, the following letter will show.

s.s. "Harvest Moon."

My sweet Ann.

You may have observed that in times of unusual stress I sit down and write to you. This is not only because you are such a perfect sister, but because you are so far away that all will be over before you can so much as reply. That makes it so much easier for both of us. You don't have to advise me, and I don't have to take your precious advice. Yet you are tickled to death, and the letter relieves my soul.

Behold me, then, on a cruise. A luxury cruise. You must have heard of them. But don't you take one. You mayn't be as lucky as I. Of my four hundred companions (probably more) only five count at all. These are:

Sarah and Jane, her sister—aged ten and eleven years old. Perfectly sweet. Blue eyes and flaxen hair. Bung full of mischief and charmingly up-to-date. They know no wrong.

Mrs. Henry Crumpet—aged about fifty-five and full of running. A harsh, unconscionable woman, with merciless eyes. Impatient and overbearing. She gives the impression that she has much to answer for.

Percy Crumpet, her son—aged, say twenty-five, a most unpleasant young man. He is idle, offensive, sensual, greasy and arrogant. I think that will do.

Dahlia (Dally) Furlough—aged twenty-three, really extremely lovely, with raven hair, gray eyes and an exquisite skin. Her features seem to be chiselled: a very fine aquiline nose, a very short upper lip, a very delicate chin. Solomon could have described the droop of her lips: but I think her temples would have beaten that connoisseur. And she is kind as she is fair. The gentlest nature, Ann, that ever I met. I am in love with her—and am sure she likes me. But *she is engaged to Percy, and, as Henry Crumpet's ward, she is Mrs. Crumpet's guest. God knows what wickedness lies behind these facts. But there they are. Add to them that she has not one penny-piece, and you will see that her position is very difficult. Although I am sure that she loathes him, how can she turn Percy down? To Percy's monstrous mother, she owes the clothes she puts on to her beautiful back.*

In twelve days' time we reach Southampton again. From there she goes straight to Cheshire, the Crumpets' home. And there she is to be married, as soon as may be.

Short of a first-class scandal, I cannot see what can be

done. What Mrs. Crumpet has, she damned well holds. And mid-Atlantic scarcely favours abduction. And once she's down in Cheshire, I feel that the game will be up.

I suppose we are both too scrupulous. Sarah and Jane would take the bull by the horns. Yet, so would I—to-morrow . . . this afternoon. But I know that Dally wouldn't, and so my hands are tied.

Well, there we are.

We reach Madeira to-morrow, and leave again the next day. I begged her to dine with me at Reid's Palace Hotel: but, she only shook her head. 'You must see I can't, my dear.' But I think perhaps she will manage tea the next day. (Tea, my God!) You see, it's Sarah's birthday, and she and Jane are crazy to be my guests. Their nurse, who has hurt her knee, cannot go ashore: but she has consented to the party—at Reid's of course—provided that Dahlia Furlough takes her place. With the quick wit of children who know their world, Sarah and Jane are broadcasting this provision far and wide. The Captain and the officers have it, and it is fast becoming the talk of the ship. Soon everybody will know that their heart's desire is depending on whether Miss Furlough can come. And since they are very much liked, Pharaoh may be compelled to let Israel go.

Ann, I can't give her up. Yet, what can I do? I can't even get her alone, to have things out. They never let her out of their sight, and she shares a cabin with the woman who means her to marry her son. By God, if we were

ashore, I'd carry her off: but a luxury cruiser's the finest prison I know. Of course she might not consent: but she MUST *prefer me to Percy. Anyone would.*

All my love, sweetheart,
George.

* * * * * * * *

The sisters, Sarah and Jane, did nothing by halves.

Greatly daring, they sought the Captain's help: and the Captain pinched their cheeks and bade them pull their own chestnuts out of the fire. But that afternoon, when Madeira was taking shape, the Captain approached Mrs. Crumpet and forced that harridan's hand.

"It would be very nice if you and your son would take tea in my cabin to-morrow at half-past four. I'm not going to ask Miss Furlough, because we all know she's a pressing engagement ashore."

With bolting eyes, Mrs. Crumpet stammered her thanks, while Percy surveyed his own feet with a perfectly poisonous stare. Dahlia said nothing at all—but the glance which she shot the Captain warmed that veteran's heart.

As he regained the bridge—

"John," he said.

The second officer turned.

“Sir?”

“Tea to-morrow, *chez moi*. You’re deputizing for me.”

“Good God! Not the Crumpets?”

“The same,” said the Captain. “I’m sorry. But you have longer to live.”

* * * * * * * *

The party was thrown early, for the liner was due to leave at quarter to six. Tea, in fact, was served at a quarter-past four. But the meal itself was only an incident. Enough for Sarah and Jane that they were enlarged. There was no holding them.

Be she never so spacious, a liner has her shortcomings, so far as a child is concerned. But the gardens of Reid’s hotel have no shortcomings at all. Sarah and Jane were enchanted. The pleasance belonged to their dreams. A goblin maze had been sunk in a fairy bower.

Miss Furlough and Stable were glad to sit down to tea . . . 81

But half an hour at the table was very much more than enough for Sarah and Jane. Before the bill had been paid, the two were darting like lizards between the hillocks of blossom and under the carolling trees.

As George overtook his companion—

“I simply can’t do it,” he said. “Let’s find a place and sit down.”

“D’you think they’ll be all right?”

“Of course. And we needn’t go for a quarter of an hour.”

“What time’s the last launch?”

“A quarter-past five, my dear. And I’ve ordered a car.” Here Sarah flashed into view. “Listen, my lady. We’re going to sit on the seat that we call ‘Land’s End.’”

“All right. How long have we got?”

“Another ten minutes.”

“Ten minutes, Jane,” cried Sarah. “Let’s go to the tennis-court.”

Ten minutes can go very fast.

In fact, twelve minutes had gone, when Dahlia lifted her face, to look into George’s eyes.

“Yes,” she breathed, “I love you.” The man’s heart leaped. “But it’s out of the question, dear: and you know it as well as I. I’m only one of thousands who have to do this sort of thing. One gets tied up, somehow.”

The man held her very close.

“They’ve seen to that.”

The girl shook her head.

“I shouldn’t have consented,” she said. “But it seemed the only

way out. And now things have gone too far."

"They haven't, Dally, they haven't. Don't talk like that."

"Face the facts, my blessed. If I am to break it off, then I've got to do it to-night. I mean, after this . . ."

"Of course. That goes without saying, my darling girl."

"And what of the next ten days? I've got to have bed and board and I must be clothed. *Her* bed, *her* board, *her* clothes. Well, that's unthinkable."

"You can have my cabin. I'll sleep——"

"My darling," said Dally, "it's hopeless. If one breaks an engagement off, one's simply *got* to withdraw. But I'm so placed that I *can't*. So the thing must go through." She took his face in her hands. "I've had a—difficult time, but so far I've always managed to keep my self-respect. And the thought of that keeps me going—as it would you."

"I know, my sweet, I know. But you can't throw away your life for a—a tenet like that."

"You'd do it to-morrow, darling. You know you would. That's why I'm here—in your arms. Because I know that during the next ten days, your manner will be as perfect as it has always been, and that no one will ever dream that you and I have a secret which I wouldn't sell, my blessed, for all the gold in the world."

Stable bent his head to kiss the beautiful mouth. As Dally gave

him her lips, her arms went about his neck.

For a moment they clung together.

Then—

“I can t face it, Dally,” he groaned. “I can’t let you go.”

“If I can face it, you can. It’s—just the luck of the fight. And after a while, you know——”

“If you were married—yes. I’d leave you alone. But——”

“You’ve said it, my darling. I am so placed that I am as good as married—and there’s the rub. I am just as dependent upon him as if I were Percy’s wife. And I cannot escape from that position.” Here her eyes fell upon her wrist-watch. “My God, George, look at the time.”

Two minutes past five.

Before the man knew where he was, the girl was out of his arms and was taking the cobbled stair which led out of Paradise, back to a hopeless world.

Shaken and sick at heart, he stumbled rather than hastened the way she had gone.

“Sarah! Jane!” she was crying.

George pulled himself together . . .

As he came up with her—

“It’s all right, sweetheart,” he said. “I’ve ordered a car.”

“Can we get to the quay in ten minutes?”

“Easily, dear. And if the launch was gone, we could always get someone or other to take us out.”

“That’d give Nanny heart-failure. Where *are* those kids?”

“Sarah! Jane!” shouted George, and ran for the tennis-court . . .

After trying the tennis-court, they made for the bathing-pool . . .

By the time they had scoured the gardens, it was a quarter-past five.

* * * * * * * *

Jane addressed her sister.

“This,” she said, “is the biggest thing we’ve done.”

“Easily,” said Sarah. “But I do wish we’d got a watch.”

As though to make good this deficiency, the distant cruiser’s syren gave audible warning that she was proposing to leave.

“That’s her,” said Jane. “She does that about ten minutes before she moves.”

The two were beneath a bed, in Reid’s Palace Hotel. No eye had seen them enter the bedroom: no eye had so much as seen them enter the house. The two had just disappeared.

George Stable heard the syren, and wiped the sweat from his face. And Dahlia Furlough heard it, and felt rather faint. The two were in a car, which was tearing back from the quay. They had cried the names of their charges, until they were hoarse. And they had sought everywhere—except in a second-floor bedroom of Reid's Hotel.

Sarah turned on to her back and crossed her legs.

"I'll bet old Crumpet's gurgling. You know. Like a bath running out."

"And Percy's all hot," said Jane. "He'll stick to whatever he touches for days to come."

"He won't come ashore, will he?"

Jane shook her head.

"He hasn't the guts," she said.

"We've bust him all right," said Sarah. "You said one night would do: but they'll have to stay here for weeks."

"And us," said Jane. "To-morrow morning we'll go in that bathing-pool. All four, of course. You know, it's going to be priceless."

"That comes of being decent," said Sarah. "For all we knew, Madeira might have been foul."

Her sister nodded. Then—

“There’s only one thing,” she said. “I do wish Nanny were here. She’ll understand, of course, when she finds our note: but she’ll get in a state when she knows we’ve been left behind.”

“Don’t,” said Sarah. “It hurts. But we’ve done it now.”

There was a painful silence.

Then the syren sounded again, and the sisters burst into tears.

* * * * * * * *

The Captain looked at the nurse and fingered his chin.

“There’s the pilot’s dinghy,” he said. “He’ll have to be dropped in ten minutes. If I put the ladder down, d’you think you could manage that?”

“Indeed I could, sir. My father was a fisherman, sir, and I’m used to the sea.”

The Captain smiled.

“All right. I’ll let you go. Throw some things together as quick as you can.”

“Thank you very much, sir.”

“It’s more than those monkeys deserve. Take care of that knee.”

“I will, sir. Thank you.”

Leaning on the arm of Godolphin, the nurse withdrew, and the second officer stepped to the Captain's side.

"Will you see Mrs. Crumpet, sir? She wants leave for her son to go off?"

The Captain frowned.

"Not that it'd make any difference, but why can't he ask for himself?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps," he said, "he isn't a fisherman's son."

The Captain grinned.

"All right. Bring her up," he said . . .

A frantic woman began to mouth her case.

"I understand that the pilot . . . I must insist that my son . . . his fiancée unprotected . . ."

The Captain raised his hand.

"Madam, I see no reason to give your son the permission for which you ask."

"But you are allowing the nurse of those horrible children ____"

"Miss Furlough is not a child."

“She needs protection, I tell you.”

“If she does, she’ll get it,” said the Captain. “Mr. Stable will see to that.”

Mrs. Crumpet went off the deep end . . .

It was the second officer who eventually got her away.

* * * * * * * *

Twenty-four hours had gone by.

‘Land’s End’ was bathed in a sunshine which seemed to have been distilled from the purest gold: the evening air was charged with the scent of many blossoms: a lazy ocean was lapping the rocks below; and George and Dally were listening to Sarah and Jane.

“You see, we knew,” said the latter, “that you had to stay together at an hotel.”

“To fulfil the law,” said Sarah. “If you could do that, we knew that Crumpet was sunk.”

“So we concingtrated,” said Jane. “And when George suggested the party, we knew we were off. Nanny’s knee was sent, of course. I think we got that by praying.”

“I think so, too,” said Sarah. “We prayed quite a lot. But we never thought the Captain’d pull his weight. He was awfully decent, of course: but he said we couldn’t expect him to put the Crumpets in irons. And when Jane said ‘It’s all they’re fit for’,

he laughed like hell.”

“Anyway,” said her sister, “we’ve done it. You will be married, won’t you, as soon as the time is up?”

George put his arms about them, and smiled at his lady-love.

“That’s the present idea, my beauties—God bless your precious hearts. How long d’you think we should wait?”

“You must wait six months,” said Sarah, rubbing her cheek against his.

“Except in special cases,” said Jane, arranging his hair.

Dally put a hand to her mouth.

But George never flicked an eyelid.

“That’s right,” he said lightly: “that’s right. And you know I can’t help feeling that this is a special case.”

HIS BROTHER'S WIFE

Madame Cologna was tired—almost too tired to eat. But this she knew she must do: so she filled a bowl with soup from the pot on the fire and sat down beside the embers, holding the bowl on her knees.

It was now three weeks since her nephew, Jean, had left—with tears in his eyes. He was gone 'to do his service': he would not be back for two years.

Madame Cologna bit her lip. She had promised the lad that nothing at all should be changed: that, when he came back, in two years, he should take up the selfsame life which he had laid down: till then, she would manage—somehow . . . And the thoughtless faith of youth had smiled through its tears. The word of 'Tante Louise' was always her bond. Almost two years lay before her, and only three weeks behind. And stout as her spirit was, already her over-taxed flesh was beginning to flag.

Madame Cologna was forty, and strong as a horse. But she had not realized the weight which her nephew had pulled. Every day this week she had worked for fourteen hours: yet she was behind her schedule: the sloping meadow, Layris, had not been dunged.

She dipped her spoon into the broth, blew on it carefully, put it up to her lips: but the stuff was still too hot. She should have remembered to lift the pot from the fire. There was nothing to

do but wait. All her chores had been finished. The beasts had been bedded down, and the cottage was shut. Bra, the mountain sheep-dog, was fast asleep. His mistress sat patiently waiting, with the steaming bowl on her knees and her eyes on the glow of the fire.

Her cottage belonged to Bielle, yet stood a little apart—five minutes' walk, perhaps, from the tiny white-walled village that hung on the mountain-side. She had been born and bred there. In forty years, she had only spent seven nights outside its walls. Those seven nights had been her honeymoon. Then she had returned with her husband, to care for her ailing father and live on the seven fields which would soon be hers.

Her mother had died when she was five years old—just old enough to drive the sheep to Layris and back again. Bra's grandfather had helped her, letting her have the glory and swallowing her rebukes. Her father had died when she was twenty-six—nine months after her marriage to Marc Cologna of Ness. And Marc had left her when she was twenty-eight.

The old days rose up before her, and Madame Cologna, who never had time to think, forgot the present before the spell of the past.

All Bielle knew her story—or thought it did. Bielle remembered the Colognas, Matthieu and Marc, whose father had gambled away their rightful heritage. Bielle remembered her engagement, and how her father had boasted, 'A Denguin marries for love.'

* * * * * * * *

The Denguins were proud. True, they belonged to Bielle: but the slim, upstanding girl and the delicate man had better blood in their veins than the rest of the village could show. *Noblesse oblige*, so they never were high with their neighbours, but civil and gentle and friendly as all should be. Still, the thing stood out. And their neighbours never forgave them for being better than they.

It was when the pylons went up—the ferro-concrete pylons that carried the power to Puyou, and further than that—that Matthieu and Marc Cologna came by Bielle. Day labour was their portion, for all they had was a roof. They walked from Ness every morning, some seven miles over the hills: and on Saturdays they were paid—twenty-four shillings and sixpence for six days' work. Hard work, too. Hewing and shovelling and hauling and mixing cement. Their fellows found them amusing. Matthieu and Marc were twins. Mistakes were frequently made. No one, even of Ness, could tell them apart.

The pylons had skirted Layris—one had been sited twelve yards from the meadow's edge—and Louise Denguin was piling the hay into cocks, when Matthieu Cologna had followed the ganger up.

"There you are," said the latter, shortly. "Out with that square of turf. You ought to be down half a metre by twelve o'clock." He glanced at Louise. "An' no damned blowing of kisses. She'll wait till then."

Matthieu spat on his hands and swung his pick . . .

After watching him for two or three minutes, the ganger made

off down the mountain the way they had come.

When he was out of sight, Matthieu stepped to the wall—the dry, stone wall which separated Layris from the meadow in which he stood.

“Mademoiselle,” he cried, “did you hear what he said?”

Louise regarded him straightly.

“Yes,” she said. “I heard.”

“Then I am very sorry. I could, you know, do nothing; for he is my chief. I cannot afford to cross him—understand that. But I do not approve his words. I am not that sort of man: and, though it was not my fault, I beg your pardon for what that bastard said.”

Louise inclined her head.

“You are forgiven,” she said, “for a rudeness that was not yours, that you have wiped out.”

Matthieu’s smile came leaping.

“Thank you. Mademoiselle.”

With that, he returned to his toil.

Unseen by them both, the ganger fingered his chin.

“Damn all bitches,” he said, “that come between a man and his work.”

At twelve Louise left Layris and made her way home.

At twelve Matthieu stopped working, and broke his fast.

At two, three labourers came, to carry on the digging which Matthieu had faithfully done. One of the three was Marc. The ganger came behind them—and ordered Matthieu back to a pylon four hundred yards off.

At a quarter-past two Louise returned to Layris, saw Marc and took him for Matthieu, as anyone would.

And Marc saw Louise.

* * * * * * * *

As the twins walked home that evening, both thought of the slim, dark girl: but neither spoke of her. Matthieu did not know that Louise had returned to Layris: Marc did not know that she had been there before.

Now the ganger was a man who never did things by halves. So Matthieu was set to labour either well below Layris or well above: but Marc worked on by Layris, and saw the slim, dark girl again and again.

The third day he spoke to her—in his dinner hour.

Louise was conscious of a very faint sense of disappointment. This—their second encounter, as she believed it to be—did not afford her quite the same thrill as their first. His appeal was not quite so shining: the understanding between them, not quite so deep. Her being was certainly stirred: but this time, meeting

his eyes, she had not felt weak at the knees.

On her way home, she laughed at herself for a fool. This came, she told herself, of expecting too much. She had looked upon him and loved him two days ago. Ever since then she had dwelled on their second encounter, magnifying the thrill which this would send through her heart. With the result, of course, that the thrill had fallen short of the standard her excitement had set.

As the brothers walked to work the next morning—

"Don't wait for me this evening," said Marc. "I've someone to see in Bielle."

Matthieu nodded.

"All right."

That evening Marc found Louise and went with her to her home. Her father was civil to him and gave him some *eau de vie*. When he had gone, her father spoke to Louise.

"Is this the man you have chosen?"

"Yes," said Louise, "if he has chosen me."

"Did you know, when first you saw him?"

The girl's pulse quickened at the memory.

"When first I saw him," she said.

Her father nodded.

“That’s right,” he said. “That is love.” He sighed, as though with relief. “He has come at the right time. I cannot plough as I used, and he can take my place.”

Marc said nothing to Matthieu on his return. And Matthieu asked no questions. The two were quiet men—serious, as the French say. Neither would have dreamed of interfering in the other’s private affairs.

On the following Sunday there was a *fête champêtre* at the village of Lay. Marc took Louise to the fête and danced with her. When he brought her back to Bielle, the two were engaged.

The next morning Marc told his brother.

“I thought as much,” said Matthieu, and wished him well.

“And you?” said Marc. “I do not like leaving you alone.”

“That is of no consequence. There is talk of work all this winter up at the Col de Fer. Good pay and good *pension*. If it is true, we may as well sell the cottage and share what we get. Last year old Helipe mentioned seven thousand francs. If we can get ten . . . It is better that you should have something to show your father-in-law.”

He never asked the name of his sister-in-law to be. Had he been told it, it would have meant nothing to him. He would see her, meet her, kiss her, all in good time. Till then, he had his work and fourteen miles to cover six days a week. Marc had the same, of course, and a girl on the top. That was the worst of

love—it meant carrying extra weight. All the same, if the ganger had not shifted him that June afternoon. . . .

* * * * * * * *

His mind whipped back to Layris . . . to the slim, dark girl, all in black, with the rake in her hand. He saw her grave, gray eyes and her parted lips.

"We'd have got on," he thought. "I'll find out who she is when I go with Marc to Bielle."

Louise, of course, knew by now that she was to have a twin brother-in-law. Marc had jested about it. "You will have to be careful to make no mistakes," he had said. And Louise had smiled and replied, "I shall know you apart." She had seen twins before.

She had to wait nearly a month for a chance of proving her boast; for two days later a baulk of wood had fallen on Matthieu's foot. The ganger was furious, for Matthieu was a good man—valiant, as the French say. Rather than lose his service, he set him to work at the depot, a mile from Ness. Light duty—helping the store-man, until he could walk. He could limp the two miles a day, but not fourteen. As I have shown, Bielle was seven miles off.

Misfortunes never come singly. The day Matthieu's foot was injured, Louise's father suffered a heart-attack. He was up and about the next day, but he dared not work as he had. That evening he looked at Louise.

"Little one," he said, "an early marriage is indicated. I am not

the man I was: and if I am to take my ease, the sooner Marc bears a hand, the better for us."

His daughter agreed. She did not say that the doctor had told her that, if he put up his feet, he *might* live for a year.

So the marriage was fixed for Monday, the thirty-first day of July.

The next three weeks fled by.

Louise had to work her hardest: Marc helped her morning and evening, before he went to his work and after, until it was dark. Matthieu chafed in secret, and cursed his foot. He spared Marc all he could, but that was little enough. He could cook and keep the house, but he could not walk fourteen miles even once in the day.

It was right at the last that he thought of the bicycle.

Marc had never ridden, but he had learned: and George Helipe had one . . .

"I am sorry," said George Helipe. "I cannot let you have it till Sunday. You may have it all day Sunday, provided, of course, you return it as good as it was. You will have, for instance, to pay for a punctured tire."

Matthieu's face fell. Still, Sunday was better than nothing. If he could persuade Marc to rest on the eve of his wedding-day. . . .

* * * * * * * *

He did persuade him that night. And Marc told Louise as much the following day.

“He will be here by five,” he said, “and you will think it is me. He will help you all day long, whilst I sit still at Ness and pack up my traps. And on Monday, *mignon*, we two shall come together—by car. The ganger is sending a lorry out of its way. ‘My wedding-present,’ he called it. He’s not a bad fellow at heart.”

“As for me, I detest him,” said Louise.

Marc shrugged his shoulders.

“He’s not much to look at,” he said: “but you can’t go by looks.”

“I’m not going by looks,” said Louise.

Marc shrugged his shoulders again, and smiled, and left it there. Probably Louise had heard something . . . For her part, Louise was faintly surprised that he should speak well of the man for whose words he had begged her pardon six weeks before.

Then Sunday had come—a beautiful, cloudless day. And with it had come—Matthieu . . .

By Marc’s directions the cottage was easy to find, and Matthieu limped to its door at ten minutes to five. At the moment at which he knocked Louise, was descending the stairs—she had meant to be up and about before he arrived. Her father was still abed, and if souls were astir in Bielle, they

were not to be seen.

Matthieu heard the clatter of *sabots* upon the flags. Then the door was opened, and the slim, dark girl and the man were face to face.

In that instant it seemed to both that something within them had bounded—and then fallen dead.

Both had been smiling. Each saw the other's smile slide into a stare—and then a look of stark horror steal into the other's eyes.

"You?" breathed Louise. "*You?*" taking the very words that were upon Matthieu's lips.

"Oh, my God," quavered Matthieu, and the sweat was out on his face.

As the girl's knees gave way beneath her, a trembling peasant caught her and carried her into the house.

He set her down in a chair and kneeled by her side: but he had no comfort to offer, because he had none himself. Before so pregnant a nightmare, the man was dumb. Louise was wailing in a whisper.

"Mother of God, I see it—I see it all now. I thought it was you all the time. You spoke to me in Layris . . . and when the third day *he* came, I thought it was you. It was not the same, you know. It was not the same. But I thought that that was my fault—that my love was expecting too much."

Matthieu cried out at that.

“Don’t. I can’t bear it. That you too, should be unhappy——”

“‘Unhappy?’ My heart is broken.”

“Louise, Louise.”

“Oh, God, oh, God, I have always thought it was you. Why did you not come to me, Matthieu, and rip the scarf from my eyes?”

“I would have, but for my foot. I had meant to see you to-day. I was going to ask *you* who *you* were. Do you see what I mean? I was going to ask you who was the girl who was piling hay in Layris, and then I was going to find her and—and. . . .”

He broke down there, bowed his head to her lap and cried like a child. And Louise bowed her head upon his, with the tears running down her cheeks . . .

The girl was the first to perceive that something had to be done. Somehow she braced herself: then she lifted her lover’s head and took his face in her hands.

“It is too late now,” she said quietly, stifling a sob. “The thing is done. No one will know, and no one must ever know. But the secret is ours for ever. And God at least has given us this one day.”

“Louise, Louise.”

His arms went about her neck.

* * * * * * * *

Ten minutes later, he was drawing water and she was opening the house.

All day long he helped her, and stayed till dusk had come in. Only the cows in the byre saw him take his leave.

"*Adieu*, my Louise, my life."

"*Adieu*, my love."

"I cannot betray my brother. It is not his fault."

"No, Matthieu, neither can I. He—he is very nice, too. I—I have no doubt that . . . that I shall be . . . happy with him."

The last words came with a rush.

The man would have spoken again, but he dared not trust his voice.

And then she was in his arms, and her lips were on his. . . .

Five minutes later he stumbled out of the byre.

* * * * * * * *

Marc and Louise were married the following day. The same night they left for Larrenx, for seven days. Before they returned to Bielle, Matthieu was doing odd jobs on the quays of Bordeaux.

* * * * * * * *

Louise played up somehow, as only a woman can. Marc never knew that the light had gone out of her life. But night after night, while the man lay asleep beside her, the girl stared up at the ceiling with sightless eyes.

She could not get over the refined cruelty of Fate. She felt that she had been cheated in the meanest possible way: and then, when she could not retire, Fate had explained to her the trick he had played. It was, of course, a question of comparison. Against her will, she was for ever comparing her present lot with that which she had been led to believe would be hers. It is easy to say she had married the wrong man: but she had not made that very common mistake. She had chosen Matthieu—and Fate had slipped Matthieu's double into his place. When it occurred to her that somewhere Matthieu was lying, nursing the selfsame grief, the tears began to trickle over her cheeks.

It was fortunate for her that only six weeks later her father had a second attack. From this he did not rally, as he had done before, and though he still clung to life, he had to be supported if he was to keep his hold. From then on until he died, his daughter's life was too full for meditation. Her nights were too short and too broken for her to lie awake.

It was after her father's death that Marc began to grow restless, to tire of the life they led, to jib at the prospect of growing old at Bielle. One night he suggested that she should sell the fields and set up shop at Larrenx with what they brought. Louise was scandalized. When she turned his suggestion down, the man

flung out of the house. From that time on, relations began to grow strained and Marc began to pull far less than his weight. No matter what labour was waiting, he always went to Larrenx on market-day. He said that he saw life there. He certainly spent money there—the money which he had received when the cottage at Ness was sold. Louise, who was his banker, gave him as much as he asked.

It was when his balance had sunk to three hundred francs that he encountered the ganger, to whom he owed so much. The man was on holiday.

"Still here?" he laughed. And then, "That's the worst of a wife. Or am I talking to Matthieu?"

"No, I am Marc," said Marc. "My brother has gone."

"Where to?"

"To Bordeaux, I believe. I——"

"Wise man," said the ganger. "I'll lay he's making his seven-and-sixpence a day. If you were in Paris now—I'm building some flats in the suburbs ten storeys high."

Two days later Marc drew his three hundred francs. That night he travelled to Paris, and reported for duty to the ganger the following day.

Louise was torn between feelings of shame and relief. Then she announced that she had persuaded her husband to seize this wonderful chance. She did not believe, she said, in standing in the way of a man. When he was a ganger himself, then he

would return to Bielle.

“But how will you manage?” said the neighbours. “You cannot work your property all by yourself.”

“My nephew Jean is coming,” replied Louise. “Marc would not leave me, until he had seen to that.”

“Naturally,” said the neighbours—and left it there.

Jean arrived the next week—a chubby-faced urchin of eight. His aunt worked him hard—as much for the sake of her story as anything else. The Denguins were proud. And the neighbours gravely accepted the new establishment.

In fact, the child’s coming was her salvation. His share of the work grew larger every year: he was good company: she came to love him, as if he had been her son. Whenever his mother wrote, Louise announced that she had had a letter from Marc. According to her he was going from strength to strength. He hoped to be back in—in two or three years, perhaps. Gravely enough, the neighbours rejoiced with her. They knew as well as she that Marc never wrote—that Marc would never return.

* * * * * * * *

Madame Cologna woke with a sudden start, and the bowl of now luke-warm soup slid off her knees and crashed on the hearth below. For a moment she stared at the embers, hissing and spitting beneath the touch of the broth: then she put a hand to her head and looked dazedly round.

At once she saw that Bra was up on his feet. This was not

surprising—the crash would have woken a heavier sleeper than he. But Bra was not turned to the hearth. His eyes were fast on the door.

Somebody knocked—again.

Wide awake now, she stepped to the cottage door, and after listening a moment, turned the old key in the lock and opened the oak.

The lamp which hung in the kitchen shone on to her visitor's face, and her knees gave away beneath her, as they had given way just fourteen years before.

As Matthieu had caught her then, so he caught her now, and, closing the door behind them, supported her to a chair.

She did not faint, but, as he kneeled beside her, she looked at him, breathing hard.

"Matthieu," she said, "Matthieu."

"The same, Louise."

She held his hand up to her cheek, and, after a little, he bowed his head to her lap.

Louise closed her eyes—in a relaxation of spirit which she had never known. The immediate future could go hang. For the moment, the weight had been taken. Matthieu was here.

For three shining minutes she rested, and Matthieu stayed still. Then she moved, and Matthieu lifted his head.

“What then, Matthieu, beloved? Why are you here?”

The man looked her full in the eyes.

“Louise, I bring you bad news. My brother is dead.”

The woman sat very still.

At length—

“God rest his soul,” she said quietly. “How did he die?”

Matthieu put a hand to his chin.

“It is a strange business,” he said. “I think I had better tell you other things first.”

“As you please,” said Louise. “I have not set eyes upon Marc for more than twelve years.”

Matthieu cleared his throat.

“Do you remember the ganger? I came across him in Paris six weeks ago. I was, in fact, a colleague—a ganger myself. We hardly spoke, but I saw that he knew who I was. Three days ago, I was sent for, to go to his bed. He was dying—obviously: he had neglected a chill. And he wished to make me a confession before he died.

“He told me this—that twelve years ago he had persuaded my brother to leave Bielle and to work under him in Paris, building a block of flats. Now Marc had arrived at two, and he let him start work at once, although he could not be signed on

till the following day. That very afternoon, there was an accident. A crane gave way: and Marc, who was mixing cement, was instantly killed. Well, that was that: but, you see, Marc was not signed on, and so *he was not insured*. This meant that the ganger's *patron* would have to pay—perhaps, fifty thousand francs . . . to you at Bielle. As for the ganger—well, you can well imagine what was in store for him . . .

"Now, except for the ganger, nobody knew who Marc was or whence he had come. And if he held his tongue, no claim could be made. So the ganger held his tongue and Marc was buried somewhere, a nameless man."

Louise put a hand to her head.

"Do you mean," she said faintly, "that Marc has been dead for twelve years?"

Matthieu nodded.

"I came at once to—to tell you. I only learned it myself three days ago. I never knew Marc had left you—that you were alone."

Louise stared straight before her.

"This means I am free," she said: "that I have been free for twelve years." She turned to the man. "And you?"

Matthieu nodded.

"I have never married," he said, and felt her hand close upon his. "And I have been fortunate, sweetheart. I have forty

thousand francs in the bank.”

Louise sat up.

“But you are a ganger, now. You will not be content to——”

“I *was* a ganger,” said Matthieu, smiling into her eyes.

“But two days ago I gave notice. I—I hope to live in the country and work on the land.”

“Oh, Matthieu, Matthieu,” sobbed Louise.

Tears of joy were running over her cheeks.

The man held her close to his heart, kissing her eyes and her forehead and then her lips . . .

At length he sat back on his heels.

“We are going,” he said, “to begin all over again. But we cannot begin just yet—there is one formality. That is why I have come by night: and why I must go away without being seen.”

A frightened look came into Louise’s eyes.

“Why must you go?”

Matthieu smiled.

“For the look of the thing, *mignon*. You see, though you are a widow, you cannot prove that you are. Only the ganger knew

that Marc was the man who was killed. And the ganger is dead. He told me the truth in the morning, and died in the afternoon. So to prove that your husband is dead is beyond your power."

Louise felt rather faint.

"Then——"

"It is quite all right," smiled Matthieu. "I have taken a lawyer's opinion, and we have nothing to fear. You have only to go to the Court, and the Court will give you leave to 'presume' that your husband is dead. You have only to swear that he left you twelve years ago and that you have never seen him or heard of him since. And you must get one or two neighbours to bear out your tale. And then . . ."

His voice faltered and died, before the terrible look on Louise's face.

As she got to her feet, he rose also, dumb with apprehension of the terror which she had perceived, which he could not see.

Louise put a hand to her throat. When she spoke, she spoke with an effort, as though the words would not come.

"I cannot . . . go to the Court . . . For twelve years I have pretended that Marc was writing to me." The man started violently. "All Bielle believes that I had a letter from him only three days ago."

There was a frightful silence.

Then Matthieu moved to a chair, sat himself down and put his

head in his hands. But Louise stood still where she was, with a hand to her throat.

For the second time in their lives, love had been conceived, only to be still-born.

Four—five minutes dragged by, but neither moved. They were sunk in misery. The waters had gone over their souls.

At last the man lifted his head.

“I had better be going,” he said. “We are not meant to be happy—I see that now. I do not blame you at all—in fact, I admire your pride. One does not wear one’s heart on the sleeve, for daws to peck at. What—what tale did you tell, to explain Marc’s going away?”

Louise replied dully.

“I said that he had been offered a very good chance, and that I had urged him to take it, against his will. Always I pretended that his letters were proving me right, that he was getting on fast. When he was a ganger, I said, then he would come back.”

The man was standing above her—had hold of her wrists. Louise looked up to see a strange light in his eyes.

“Say that again,” said Matthieu, hoarsely.

Louise was scared. His voice and his manner were that of a man gone mad. But she could not break away, and so it seemed best to comply.

In a quavering voice—

“When he was a ganger, I said, then . . .”

The sentence faded and died—before Matthieu’s smile. It was he who finished it.

“. . . *he—would—come—back*.”

As he spoke, Louise understood.

This time she really did faint, and Matthieu carried her up and laid her down on their bed.

* * * * * * * *

By eight o’clock the next day, the village knew that Marc Cologna was back. More. He had done as he said. He had risen to be a ganger and saved a packet of francs. And now he was going to work on the land with his wife.

The gossips went to their labour, avoiding each other’s eyes.

All Bielle knows Louise’s story—or thinks it does.

WHILE THE IRON IS HOT

Things were done in style in the office of Mosaic and Baal, Solicitors and Commissioners for Oaths, of Furbelow Court, E.C. All letters were dictated, transcribed, submitted, corrected, initialled and fair-copied, before they were signed. There were two shorthand-clerks, not counting Miss Gartenbauch. She was 'the confidential' and only touched the really important stuff. The others disliked her intensely. Often enough their orders came by her mouth. Of her efficiency there can be no doubt: but, had she not dyed her hair, she might have 'walked on' for one of the witches in *Macbeth*.

William Collis was one of the shorthand-clerks. Twenty-five, hard-working and honest, he often wondered whether he ought to stay. The atmosphere was unpleasant: he had the definite feeling that evil was often done. He had no proof of this, but the feeling was there, And the firm had acted for the plaintiff in that breach-of-promise suit. Settled, yes: but all the world had said that is was a case of blackmail. And the partners were unattractive. Mosaic was fat and flabby and looked like a coloured toad: Baal was tall and sallow and moved like a cat: he had the drive—Baal; but he was always smiling . . . a thin-lipped, treacherous smile. There were times when Collis felt that he'd have to leave: and then remember Miss Gage, the switch-board girl. They lunched together sometimes, and she was 'ever so nice.' Not like the others at all. And she felt just as he did about the place: but she couldn't afford to leave—with her father out of a job and her mother ill. Collis felt that he couldn't leave her alone in that den of thieves. No right to

call it that, for he hadn't a shadow of proof. All the same . . .

As he bent again to his work, the bell above him rang once.

Collis immediately rose, picked up his notebook and made his way to the senior partner's room.

Mosaic pointed to some papers.

"Fair-copy those," he said.

Collis picked up the papers and left the room.

As he passed the switch-board alcove, Mary Gage gave him a smile.

The light was failing fast—at half-past four. These January afternoons . . . Collis switched on his light.

The papers consisted of two letters, and both were short.

Collis read through the first.

January 8th.

Sir George Fitzbocket,
Charles's Club,
Pall Mall.

Miss Elsie Laceup.

My dear Sir George,

We are happy to be able to inform you that, after some difficulty, we have managed to settle this unfortunate affair by the payment to Miss Laceup of six hundred pounds. In the circumstances, we are reducing our costs to the round sum of twenty guineas. This makes the amount due to us £621 (six hundred and twenty-one pounds) for which we shall be much obliged to receive your cheque.

Yours sincerely,

Mosaic had seemed uncertain of the amount. The transcript had read 'four hundred pounds.' Mosaic had altered the 'four' to 'five.' Then he had scratched out the 'five' and written 'six.' This smacked of the unjust steward. 'Take thy bill, and write fourscore.'

Collis typed out the letter, with a frown on his face.

Still busy with his thoughts, he began to type the second letter mechanically.

January 8th.

Miss Elsie Laceup,
203, Bakery Mansions,
Fulham Palace Road.

Sir George Fitzbocket.

MADAM,

As arranged, we enclose our cheque for £70 (seventy pounds) in full settlement of any claim which you may consider that you have upon Sir George Fitzbocket. Kindly . . .

Collis stopped dead and went white to his lips.

Here was grand larceny—of the vilest, most contemptible sort.

For some moments he sat staring, but seeing nothing at all. Then he ripped the half-finished letter from his machine, added it to the one which he had already typed, tore the four sheets in two and dropped them into the basket which stood by his side. Then he picked up the two draft letters and rose to his feet . . .

A consultation had just ended in Mr. Mosaic's room—some little point had been settled, some end tied up. Baal was smiling and warming his back at the fire, and Miss Gartenbauch was checking her papers, before going out of the room.

"Oh, yes," she said, "I knew there was something else. The Laceup correspondence."

Mosaic peered at his table, his eyes ranging to and fro.

"Didn't I give them to you?"

"Oh, no, Mr. Mosaic. I left the drafts here."

"I know. I corrected them. But I had the impression—*My God!*" he mouthed, and started out of his chair.

“What’s the matter?” cried Baal.

Mosaic was trembling.

“I gave them to Collis—without thinking. I meant to give them to her, and I gave them to him.”

“Good God, Mosaic,” said Baal, and Miss Gartenbauch covered her mouth.

A knock fell upon the door.

“Steady, Mosaic,” hissed Baal. And then, “Sit down.”

Mosaic sat down.

Baal raised his voice.

“Come in.”

Collis entered the room, with the drafts in his hand.

He made his way straight to the table and laid them down.

Then he looked round.

“I’m going,” he said. “Right now. You can find someone else to do your filthy work. A pair of dirty robbers—that’s what you are. Double-crossing thieves. If I could afford it, I’d pay back the money you’ve paid me—I’m that ashamed of having been a clerk in this house. And you’ll never guess the first thing I’m going to do. I’m going straight home and I’m going to have a bath . . . because, until I’ve had it, I shan’t feel fit to sit down

with honest men.”

With that, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room.

As he passed the switch-board alcove, a hand came out.

“What is it, Bill?” said Mary, pushing her ear-pieces back.

“I’m going,” said Collis. “Because I’m an honest man. You stay on, if you like. But you know that I’ve had my suspicions. Well, now I *know*. An’ I wouldn’t be seen dead here—not after this afternoon.”

In the senior partner’s room Baal was taking charge. Mosaic was all to pieces, sweating and gray. Miss Gartenbauch was sitting with a hand to her head. Baal stabbed at a bell-push. An instant later the commissionaire entered the room.

Baal was smiling—as usual.

“I want some cigars, Shaw. Run out and get me a box of my usual kind.”

“Certainly, sir.”

“At once.”

“Immediately, sir.”

The commissionaire disappeared.

Baal whipped to the door and stood listening—a dreadful sight.

Then—

“Stay where you are,” he said, and left the room.

Baal had a very quick brain. He had seen the Laceup drafts and he knew that, read together, they were a clear confession of monstrous villainy. And Collis had read them . . . There was only one thing to be done—if Mosaic and Baal were henceforth to sleep in peace.

Their office was on the third floor, and the lift was being repaired. Returning from lunch, he had had to walk up the six flights: and he had happened to notice that the gate which faced their swing-doors was not properly shut.

The hall was empty: the commissionaire had gone.

Baal whipped through the swing-doors, glanced up and down the stairs and switched out the light.

Then he opened the gate of the lift-shaft—opened it wide.

And then he stood back, waiting, against the wall . . .

Collis came out quickly—out of the lighted hall into the dark. He stood stock still for a moment, unable to see. Then he felt a hand on the small of his back . . .

Ten seconds later, Baal re-entered the senior partner’s room.

He was smiling, as usual.

“All well,” he purred. The others regarded him fixedly. “Let us

forget the matter. As Collis has. And since we're all here, let's discuss the Allison case. Habakkuk, of course. But I think he should have a leader. I mean, the case will stand it, and so, why not?"

The others stared upon him, vouchsafing no answer at all.

* * * * * * * *

A girl's voice was speaking low.

"Is that Scotland Yard?"

"Yes. Who is that?"

"I'm employed by Mosaic and Baal, of Furbelow Court. There's been an accident here to one of the clerks. But it wasn't an accident really. You see, he wouldn't stand for some of the things they do. For God's sake send someone at once. I can't say any more."

* * * * * * * *

Chief Inspector Falcon received the gist of the message in two minutes' time. Twenty minutes later—to be exact, at eighteen minutes past five—he, with his men behind him, entered the hall of the office of Mosaic and Baal.

"Yes?" said Shaw, coming forward.

"Stay where you are," said Falcon, "and tell me which is the senior partner's room."

“But——”

“I am a police-officer,” said Falcon. With a glance at the figures behind him. “So are these. Now do as I said.”

The commissionaire hesitated. Then he pointed to the second door on the right.

Falcon spoke over his shoulder.

“You all have your orders. Start in and carry them out.”

With that, he opened the second door on the right.

Three people stared at him, as he shut it behind his back.

“My name is Falcon.” he said: “and I am a Chief Inspector from Scotland Yard.”

Mosaic, who had half risen, sat heavily down. Miss Gartenbauch caught her breath. Baal made a stupendous effort to carry things off.

“Of what are we guilty, Inspector?”

“I don’t know yet.”

There was a pregnant silence, whilst Falcon surveyed the three. The three did not enjoy this—any more than they had enjoyed his grave reply. Miss Gartenbauch’s legs were trembling. Somehow or other she made her way to a chair. Beads of sweat had broken all over Mosaic’s face. The man sat slumped in his chair, not seeming to breathe. Baal took out

cigarettes—and dropped his case.

Falcon was speaking again.

“I’ll tell you why I am here. Twenty-five minutes ago I learned there’d been an accident here . . . to one of your clerks. My informant added that ‘it wasn’t an accident, really,’ but that he had met his death because he wouldn’t stand for some of the things you do. I am investigating that statement. I’ve found that the first half is true—that there has been an accident here . . . to one of your clerks. I now hope to prove or disprove the truth of the second half.”

“Naturally,” said Baal. “But I think, when you hear the facts, you’ll see what that statement is worth. Now the man in question——”

“One moment,” said Falcon. He opened the door and spoke. “Rogers and Thane.”

Two detective-sergeants entered the room.

“Thane, get your notebook ready. Rogers, Mr. Mosaic and this lady are going to wait in the junior partner’s room. Go with them.”

“Really, Inspector,” cried Baal.

“Go on, please,” said Falcon, holding the door.

The procession was not inspiring. Mosaic’s gait was uncertain, like that of a man whose liquor is reaching his feet. Miss Gartenbauch was breathing audibly. Rogers followed them out

and shut the door. Baal was bristling.

“This is an outrage,” he said.

“No,” said Falcon. “An elementary precaution, as you should know. And now please listen to me. I’ll tell you what I know, before I ask you to tell me what I don’t know. I’ve learned from the police on the spot that a clerk of yours, called Collis, fell down the shaft of the lift at a quarter to five: that the lift was out of order and being repaired: that all the gates were shut except that on this floor: that Shaw, your commissionaire, was not in the building at the time: that, when he came back from lunch, Shaw had observed that the gate on this floor was closed, but was not latched: that he had meant to report this, but it had gone out of his mind: that all the lights were on, except that on this floor: that, except for coming up, Collis was not in the habit of using the lift: that when they picked Collis up, the lad was dead.

“Well, now I want to know this. What kind of a clerk was Collis? I mean, what was his work?”

“He was a shorthand-clerk.”

“That means he stayed in the office and only went out to lunch?”

“Obviously.”

“Then why was he leaving the office at a quarter to five?”

Baal moistened his lips. Then—

“Because he’d been fired,” he said. “Told to get out.”

“I see. Who fired him?”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“For gross impertinence.”

“What did he say or do that was impertinent?”

“He came into this room and said he was sick and tired of working for us.”

“Yes?” said Falcon.

“That was the gist of it. He used a lot of big words.”

“Let’s have them, Mr. Baal.”

“Socialistic claptrap,” said Baal. “‘Idle rich.’ ‘Interest of the community.’ You know the sort of thing.”

“I see. And he did this out of blue?”

“Absolutely. You could have knocked me down.”

“He gave no reason whatever for this display?”

“None.”

“Had he been summoned?”

“No.”

“Who was present?”

“Mosaic, Miss Gartenbauch and myself.”

“What did you say?”

“None of us said anything. We were taken too much by surprise.”

“I thought you said you fired him?”

“That was later,” said Baal.

“Was that necessary?”

Baal stared.

“D’you think we keep clerks who——”

“Of course not,” said Falcon. “But hadn’t he fired himself? Didn’t he say he was leaving, when he came in?”

“He did say something about it, but I wanted no mistake. So I went after him and told him to go at once.”

“I see. Was that before or after you rang for Shaw?”

This was a punch, and Baal felt it. He could have spat upon Falcon with right good will. Instead—

“Before,” he said.

“And that was the last time you saw Collis?”

“Yes.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing.”

“Was anyone else present?”

“No. The clerk in his room is ill.”

“And then—what did you do?”

“I returned to this room.”

“And told the others what you had done.”

“I imagine they knew,” said Baal. “I suggested we should forget the matter.”

“And it was then that you rang for Shaw?”

“I believe I did.”

“And sent him to get some cigars?”

“Yes.”

“At once?”

“I may have said ‘at once.’ If you don’t say ‘at once’ to these fellows, they put it off and forget.”

“So he left before Collis did?”

“If he says so, he’s probably right.”

“He does say so. And it’s true. He was seen to go out of the building about one minute before the cry was heard.”

“Well, that clears him,” said Baal, boldly.

“Undoubtedly,” said Falcon. He raised his voice. “Come in.” An Inspector entered the room, with two files in his hand—folders, one blue and one red. “Yes?”

“I think you should see these, sir.”

“Thank you,” said Falcon. The Inspector withdrew. “Excuse me.”

He opened the first file—the blue one.

NOTE. THESE LETTERS HAVE YET TO BE EXAMINED FOR FINGERPRINTS. THEY WERE FOUND, TORN IN TWO, IN COLLIS’S WASTE-PAPER BASKET.

The letters were held by stamp-paper, one to each wing of the file. When Falcon had read them through, he opened the second file.

NOTE. Our informant was Mary Gage, the switch-board girl. She says Collis went to the senior partner’s room.

His face was set. He had papers in his hand. He returned very soon. As he passed her, she asked him what was wrong. He said, 'I'm going, because I'm an honest man. My suspicions are proved. I wouldn't be seen dead here after to-day.' Two or three minutes later he passed her again, with his coat on, but he did not speak.

Falcon looked up.

"Sure you fired Collis, Mr. Baal?"

"I have said so"—stiffly.

"I know. I asked if you were sure. What I meant was, would you like to revise that statement?"

"I tell you I sacked him," said Baal. "What evidence have you that I didn't?"

"We'll see," said Falcon. "Thane, fetch Miss Mary Gage."

Thane left the room. Baal took out and lighted a cigarette.

"You know," he began, and stopped.

"Yes?" said Falcon.

"I don't think your behaviour, Inspector, would be approved by your superiors."

"Don't you?" said Falcon. "Why?"

“You’ll know why to-morrow,” snarled Baal. “I’ll have you matted and broken for this night’s work.”

Pale as death, Mary Gage entered the room. Thane followed her in and closed the door.

“Take a chair, Miss Gage,” said Falcon. “I’ve a rough statement here from you, and I’m going to take you through it, word for word.”

He did so, without ado. Then—

“That’s quite correct, Miss Gage?”

“Every word,” said the girl, steadily.

“Now tell me this. Collis spoke to you, as he returned to his room.”

“Yes.”

“Between that time and the time when he left with his coat on did anyone enter the room?”

“No.”

“Can you swear to that?”

“Yes. If they had, I must have seen them. His room’s right next to the alcove.”

Falcon looked at Baal.

“What d’you say to that, Mr. Baal?”

“She’s lying,” said Baal. “She saw me go in and come out.”

Mary Gage gasped.

“I never,” she said. “You never come by all day.”

“That’s a lie, and you know it,” said Baal.

The girl started up.

“I’ve no call to lie,” she said, with her eyes on the other’s face. “But I guess you have.”

Baal glared at her in reply.

Falcon was speaking again.

“Thank you very much, Miss Gage. Go back to your switchboard, will you? I’ll see you again.”

As the door closed—

“Well, Mr. Baal, and what do you say to that?”

“I have nothing to add or subtract from what I have said.”

Falcon held out the blue file.

“Give this the once over,” he said. “Don’t touch the letters, please. They haven’t been treated yet.”

Baal did as he was bid. As he read, his brain was racing. That

Collis had typed the letters had never entered his head. This was a kidney-punch.

At last he looked up.

“I think we may take it,” said Falcon, “that Collis typed those letters. Do you agree?”

Baal shrugged his shoulders.

“I’ve no idea,” he said. “I didn’t dictate them, you know. Sir George was Mosaic’s client. They’re nothing to do with me.”

“Perhaps,” said Falcon. “Do you agree that he typed them—and then tore them up?”

“How the devil can I say?” said Baal.

“What—do—you—*think*?”

Baal dabbed at the file.

“If this is true—that they were found in his basket, I suppose he did. What of it?”

Falcon took the folder out of his hand.

“I think it’s illuminating,” he said.

“What d’you mean by that?” said Baal.

“Well, they’re not very pretty, are they?”

“You’d better ask Mosaic,” said Baal.

“I’m asking you.”

Again Baal shrugged his shoulders.

Falcon went on.

“They are *prima facie* evidence of an attempt to obtain from Sir George Fitzbocket by false pretences the sum of *five hundred and thirty pounds*.”

Baal broke out.

“Made by Mosaic—not me. And what the devil has this to do with Collis’s death?”

“I’ll tell you later,” said Falcon. “Come, Thane.”

The two of them left the room, and Baal was alone.

But not for long.

Twenty seconds later, Miss Gartenbauch, followed by Rogers, re-entered the room.

With a shock, Baal realized that Falcon was now with Mosaic . . . alone with Mosaic . . . except, of course, for Thane . . . who was going to take down in shorthand whatever Mosaic said.

* * * * * * * *

“Tell me this, Mr. Mosaic. When did you last see Collis—the man who is dead?”

“Not long before all this happened.”

“Where did you see him?”

“In my room.”

“Alone?”

“No. Baal and Miss Gartenbauch were there.”

“Had you summoned him?”

“No. He came in.”

“Why?”

“He came to return some papers which had been given him by mistake.”

“I see. What were they?”

Mosaic swallowed—with difficulty.

“They were drafts of some correspondence.”

“Confidential?”

“Highly.”

“They were given to him by mistake. To whom should they have been given?”

“To Miss Gartenbauch—who was dealing with the matter.”

“I see. The original letters had been dictated to her: she had done the drafts: and, when you had read them over, she should have fair-copied them?”

“That is right.”

“When Collis returned the drafts, did he make any remark?”

Mosaic swallowed again. Then—

“He merely said that he thought there had been a mistake.”

“Nothing else, Mr. Mosaic?”

“I—I don’t think so.”

“Didn’t he say that he was leaving—leaving at once?”

“I—can’t remember.”

“He did leave at once, didn’t he?”

“It—seems so.”

“Why?”

Mosaic shook his head.

“I’ve no idea,” he said slowly.

Falcon gave him the file—with the letters inside.

“Look at those letters,” he said.

Mosaic did so—and dropped the file on the ground. Falcon picked it up and put it back into his hands. These were trembling.

"When," said Falcon, "I showed these to Mr. Baal, he said at once that I'd better ask you about them."

Mosaic's eyes narrowed.

"What else did he say?"

"He said that he didn't dictate them: that Sir George was your client—not his. And then he said, 'They're nothing to do with me.'"

"I see," said Mosaic, thickly.

"Well, what about them, Mr. Mosaic?"

Mosaic made no reply.

Falcon continued—

"Was it the drafts of these letters that Collis returned?"

"Yes."

"They're rather—incriminating."

"In a way."

"Aren't they irrefutable evidence of an attempt to obtain *five hundred and thirty pounds* from Sir George Fitzbocket by

false pretences?”

The sweat was running upon Mosaic’s face. With his eyes on the ground—

“They could,” he faltered, “they could be taken that way.”

“And you dictated them?”

Mosaic looked up sharply.

“After discussion with Baal.”

“But Mr. Baal said,” began Falcon . . .

“I don’t care what he said. I discussed them with him.”

“You didn’t mean Collis to see them.”

“No.”

“Just look at this second file.”

Mosaic looked.

After a moment—

“It fits in, Mr. Mosaic.”

“I suppose it does.”

“Now have you any idea why Collis left?”

No answer.

“Mr. Mosaic,” said Falcon, “the matter is grave. *You* dictated those letters. Mr. Baal has said they were nothing to do with him. The drafts were given to Collis. Collis returned them to *you*—and said what he thought. You found yourself in this position—that if Collis opened his mouth, you might well go to prison for several years.”

“Baal——”

“Mr. Baal was not concerned. On his own——”

“Then why did he act?” mouthed Mosaic. “If he didn’t know he was in it, why did he act? I did nothing—I swear it. I never went out of that room. Ask Miss Gartenbauch.”

“How did he act?”

“I don’t know. He called the commissionaire and told him to fetch some cigars. And when the man had gone, he went out of the room.”

“I don’t think he did,” said Falcon. “I mean——”

“I *know* he did,” raved Mosaic. “If he likes to lie about me, I’ll tell the truth about him, and Miss Gartenbauch will back me.”

“Let’s have this clear,” said Falcon. “Collis returned the drafts, said his piece and then went out of the room.”

“Yes.”

“There was then some discussion.”

“None,” said Mosaic. “Nobody said a word. But Baal came across to my table and rang for Shaw.”

“I see. And when he came?”

“He sent him to get some cigars.”

“And then?”

“Baal stood at the door, listening. And after a moment or two he went out of the room.”

“What was he listening for?”

“I thought at the time he was listening for Shaw to leave.”

“D’you think so now?”

“Yes.”

“And then he went out?”

“Yes.”

“How long was he out of the room?”

“Only a minute or two.”

“When he came back, what did he say?”

“I think he began discussing some other case.”

“What other case?”

“My God, man, how should I know? I was too much upset.”

“In case Collis should give you away?”

“No, no, NO! Upset about Baal. I didn’t know what he’d gone for, and he never said. And when, he came in, smiling . . .”

“It made you think?”

Mosaic sank into a chair and rocked himself to and fro.

“I was afraid,” he wailed. “And that’s God’s truth. But I had no hand in it, Inspector. He can let me in for those letters, but he can’t rope me into this. Miss Gartenbauch’ll bear me out.”

“I don’t know that a jury would believe what Miss Gartenbauch said. After all, she’s only a clerk. But Mr. Baal ____”

“She was there,” cried Mosaic. “All the time. With me, in the room. She saw and heard what I did. She’ll swear that we both stayed there, while Baal went out.”

Falcon fingered his chin. Then—

“Thane,” he said, “fetch Miss Gartenbauch.”

A moment later the lady entered the room.

“Sit down, please,” said Falcon, “and listen to me. Mr. Mosaic tells me that you were in his room when Collis came in with certain draft letters in his hand.”

“Yes,” said Miss Gartenbauch, faintly.

“Mr. Baal was there, too?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me exactly what happened when Collis went out of the room.”

“That’s right,” said Mosaic. “Tell him the whole of the truth.”

Miss Gartenbauch spoke very low.

“Mr. Baal rang for Shaw . . . When he came, Mr. Baal told him to run out and get some cigars. ‘At once,’ he said . . . Shaw went out of the room . . . Then . . .”

Miss Gartenbauch glanced at Mosaic.

“Go on,” said Mosaic, speaking between his teeth.

“Mr. Baal listened at the door . . . Then he looked at us and said ‘Stay where you are’ . . . And then he went out, too.”

“How long was he out?” said Falcon.

“Two or three minutes, I think. It may have been less.” Falcon nodded.

“Go on.”

“Then he came in again.”

“Did he say anything?”

“Yes.” The voice sank to a whisper. “He said ‘All’s well!’”

Falcon regarded the two.

“You knew what he meant.”

Miss Gartenbauch burst into tears, and Mosaic rose to his feet.

“You haven’t asked her if I went out of the room.”

Falcon shrugged his shoulders.

“I believe you both,” he said. “God knows if a jury will.”

Mosaic had him by the arm.

“They must, man,” he cried.

“I don’t see why they should.”

“But we’re two to one.”

“Perhaps. But you’re three of a kind.”

Mosaic drew himself up.

“I take exception to that—for myself and this lady here. I have my faults, Inspector. But I do not do wilful murder to gain my ends.”

Falcon felt, as had Collis, that he would be glad of a bath.

“That,” he said, “is easy. Perhaps, if you made a statement—if both of you made statements, here and now . . .”

“We are in your hands, Inspector.”

“You must please yourselves,” said Falcon. “But nothing was ever lost by telling the truth.”

The two made statements and signed them.

This took about half an hour.

Then Falcon sent Thane for Sergeant Rogers and Baal.

Fear had whipped the latter into a towering rage.

He took his stand before Falcon, shaking with wrath.

“If you think that, because you’re a policeman——”

“Isaac Baal,” said Falcon, “you’re under arrest. For the murder of William Collis. And I warn you that anything you may say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you.”

Baal turned and looked at Mosaic: the look slid into a glare.

“That’s what I get,” he spat, “for saving your filthy hide.”

As he spoke, he was measuring his distance . . .

Then a back-handed blow sent Falcon against the wall, and Baal was upon Mosaic, as a tiger upon a sheep.

* * * * * * * *

At a quarter to eleven that evening three men were sitting about a library fire. One was the Assistant Commissioner, whose

library it was. One was the Director of Public Prosecutions. And one was Chief Inspector Falcon.

The latter was concluding his report.

“We got him off, sir, between us, before any damage was done. Serious damage, I mean. Mosaic will have a sore throat for two or three weeks.”

“Serve him right,” said the Director. “I won’t ask if you could have stopped Baal. I will merely observe that your failure to do so is going to help a great deal. Apart from anything else, Mosaic now fears for his life and he will do his utmost to send Baal down.”

Falcon nodded.

“I respectfully agree, sir. When later I said I must see the original drafts, he went to his safe and got them without a word.”

“Good,” said the Assistant Commissioner. “Collis’s fingerprints on them?”

“On both, sir. And Baal’s too.”

“Splendid.”

Falcon was regarding his notebook.

“Ah,” he said, looking up. “I knew there was something else. I thought I’d just look to see if Baal was out of cigars. He wasn’t. He had a box of a hundred and only twelve were

gone.”

The Director sat back in his chair.

“We should get home,” he said. “And I think we shall. The defence will go for Mosaic for all they’re worth. And he is a most unsavoury witness. So is Miss Gartenbauch. We shan’t pretend that they’re not. Our line will be this—that their evidence is corroborative. Those drafts provide the motive: Shaw will prove opportunity: Mary Gage will flood-light both—with a lurid glare. Oh, yes. We ought to get home . . . Lucky you were in, Chief Inspector. And able to go at once.”

“I felt that, sir. I knew that minutes counted with Mosaic and Baal.”

The Assistant Commissioner spoke.

“You knew it was Baal, of course.”

“Oh, yes, sir. To put it bluntly, Mosaic hasn’t the guts. And I knew that my only chance was to strike at once. I mean, whilst the others were rattled—Mosaic and Gartenbauch. Once they’d recovered their poise, I shouldn’t have stood an earthly. They’re far too slim.”

The Director smiled.

“You’re perfectly right, Chief Inspector. Some irons cool very quickly. And that of Mosaic and Baal very seldom got hot. I use the past tense, because the firm is finished. For that alone you deserve the D.S.O.”

“I think Mary Gage deserves that, sir. But for her pluck and her wit in ringing us up, not a question would have been asked, and the Coroner’s jury would have returned a verdict of ‘Accidental Death.’”

“That’s perfectly true,” said the Director. “And one of the partners—probably Baal—would have attended the funeral.” He sighed. “Ah, well. They’ve had a long run. Quite the biggest blackguards I ever struck. But I’ve never advised proceedings, because I knew they’d fail. Baal, of course, was a fool. I don’t imagine that Collis would ever have opened his mouth.”

The Assistant Commissioner smiled.

“I have often observed,” he said, “that the longer the run a rogue has, the harder he finds it to recognize honesty. His sight becomes gradually affected. He sees men as fools or knaves—and nothing else. Collis wasn’t a fool, or he wouldn’t have been employed by Mosaic and Baal. Very well, then—he must be a knave. As such, Baal bumped him off, before he could do any harm. And all for nothing—a painful reflection, which Baal, of course, will be spared.”

The Director fingered his chin.

“The Press will have the scoop of a lifetime, and the Chief Inspector, who did it, will get no credit at all. I mean, as reported, it will be the simplest case. No labour expended, no subtlety required. The whole thing cut and dried in a couple of hours. How did you get Mosaic to round on Baal?”

Falcon smiled.

“Baal helped me there, sir,” he said. “He tried to wash his hands of the letters. I rubbed that into Mosaic all I knew. That made him sore, and I kept on flicking the spot.”

The Assistant Commissioner smiled.

“Legitimate, Director? Or are you ashamed of the police?”

The Director of Public Prosecutions put his head on one side.

“Special cases require special treatment. When hunting big game, for instance, the man of discretion discards his scatter-gun. After all, it’s it or him. The elephant never forgives.”

Which goes to show that the Director was no fool.

* * * * * * * *

The King against Isaac Baal was a *cause célèbre*.

Counsel for the defence put up the fight of his life. And he very nearly got home. In fact, the jury were out for more than three hours. Then they brought in a verdict of ‘Guilty,’ and Baal was sentenced to death.

The firm died also. As the Director had foretold, Mosaic’s cross-examination would have broken a better man. No proceedings were instituted; but he presently changed his name and slunk out of England to France. There he lived in some luxury. The fellow had feathered his nest. After a while Miss Gartenbauch ran him to earth . . .

When she stated the price of her silence. Mosaic felt physically

sick. But in the end he gave way. The two were married one beautiful autumn day. As they left the British Consulate, Mosaic was thinking of Baal. He felt sure he was smiling . . . somewhere. He probably was—and wondering whether he hadn't had the best of the deal.

BEGGAR ON HORSEBACK

It would have been inaccurate to say that George Cramer Salting was down and out. He had an extensive wardrobe, a room at his excellent club, and one hundred and twenty-five pounds. But that was as much as he had; and since his income had failed, and work, as opposed to labour, was not available, the outlook to use his own words, had lost its charm.

The position was hardly his fault. His parents had died before he was ten years old, and his only uncle—and guardian—had made the child his care. He had one the boy handsomely. He had sent him to Eton and Oxford and thence to the Bar; but he had made one great mistake: when George was twenty-five, he gave him three thousand a year. It goes without saying that that was the end of the Bar. Happily enough, it was not the end of George. The latter developed into an attractive young man-about-town. So for six care-free years . . . Then his uncle crashed and died, and George was left.

The man took action at once. He sold his car and his hunters and paid his debts: and then he tried to get work—and, as we have seen, he failed. For six weary months he had striven to land a job, denying himself all liquor and eating two meals a day. And now the month of August was in, and people were out of London, and George was down to one hundred and twenty-five pounds.

His old friend, John Birell, surveyed him—from the opposite side of a desk.

“I’ve told you before,” he said, “that I have enough for us both. I’ve a spare room I never use, and——”

“You’re very good,” said Salting; “and that is putting it low. But, to tell you the truth, I feel that I need a change. I’ve played the *rôle* of a parasite long enough.”

The other sighed.

“As you will,” he said. “We both know it’s thanks to you that I’m earning five hundred a year: but if you choose to forget it, that’s not my fault. If you like taking gear-boxes down . . .”

“I do not,” said George, “but I’d rather do that than starve. How soon can I start, laddie?”

“The first week in September,” said John. “Two pounds ten a week. If you can only stick it, you’re certain to be a tester in twelve months’ time. And that’s four pounds a week and a very fair job. But you cannot become a tester until you’ve spent a year in the shops. That is the old man’s rule: and he is by Mede out of Persian—you know the type.”

“Not enough of ’em left,” said George. And then, “He’s perfectly right. What a mercy I’m half a mechanic. That course I took at Willesden’ll see me through.”

“No doubt about that,” said John. “But two pounds ten a week ——”

“—is a living wage,” said George, and got to his feet. “My son, I’m extremely obliged.” He peered at a calendar. “I shall report for duty exactly four weeks from to-day.”

John Birell regarded him ruefully, biting his lip. He was about to speak when the insolent buzz of a telephone brushed his intention aside.

As he reached for the receiver—

“Sit down,” he said. “It’s not as easy as that.”

The other shrugged his shoulders and turned to a print on the wall . . .

Birell was speaking excitedly.

“Good heavens, sir . . . I’d better go down at once. Where did you say, exactly? . . . Oh, yes, I know. A very bad corner that: but I’ll lay it wasn’t his fault . . . I beg your pardon . . . Oh, the Lowland—Lord Larch’s Lowland? Yes, it was he. He was due to leave to-morrow. It’s all fixed up . . . At the moment, no one, sir. Killick’s on holiday and Barrett is sick, Merton’s gone to Ireland, to fetch Mrs. Foster’s . . . No one with any experience of shipping a car . . . Yes, sir, I quite see that, but . . . Half a minute, sir, I’ve got an idea. I’ve got a man here in the office—the very man. May I bring him up to see you? I’ve known him for fifteen years . . . Salting, sir. He’s got a way with a car . . . Very good, sir.”

He put the receiver back and rose to his feet.

“What’s it all about?” said George, staring.

“Our crack tester Weston’s smashed up—on the Great West Road. He was due to leave for Biarritz to-morrow morning, driving a Lowland down. We’ve no one else we can send, and

the car has got to be there on Thursday next. You heard me recommend you, and we're going to see the old man. He will be suspicious and hostile and, probably, damnably rude. But if you can keep your temper, you'll get the job. What's very much more to the point, you will have done in two days what Weston thought he was lucky to do in two years."

"And what," said Salting, "is that?"

"Caught the old man's eye," said his friend. "And now come along."

When Salting retired that night, he was very weary in body, but not in soul. He had driven 'the old man' in London for nearly four hours: he had set a distributor, cleaned two carburettors, greased one car all round and adjusted another's brakes. But he had received instructions to take the Lowland to Biarritz the following day. More. He had extracted a promise that, after three months as a fitter, he should become a tester at four pounds a week.

The following Monday morning, John Birell received a letter which may as well speak for itself. 132

Hotel Mimosa,
Freilles.
August 10th.

Dear John,

On Thursday evening I wired you as follows:

I now enclose:—

(1) *Lord Larch's formal receipt for the car.*

(2) *An unsolicited testimonial which his lordship was so good as to write me.*

(3) *A full statement of my expenses, complete with receipted bills.*

(4) *My cheque for what I have left out of your thirty pounds, less my fare back to London and my agreed fee of one pound ten.*

Larch is a very pleasant fellow and was so very kind as to ask me to stay the week-end at Biarritz as his guest. I, of course, refused: prospective fitters must not presume. But, as some years must elapse before I can afford to revisit these highly attractive parts, and as for the rest of the month I have nothing to do, I have taken a pleasant room at a pleasant hotel at Freilles—a pocket resort in the pine woods, where one can bathe all day. I think I shall stay for two weeks: I know that I shall return like a giant refreshed. Incidentally, it's cheaper than London—far and away. And it's terribly nice to be able to live like a gentleman again. For two weeks only, of course, but what's the odds? I only wish you were here.

Yours ever,
George.

Nearly a week had gone by—a week of blazing sunshine and flawless skies—when Sarah Delaney sat up and smacked the sand with her palm.

“Why don’t you play golf?” she said.

“I—er—don’t care for the pastime,” said Salting.

This was untrue. His handicap was plus one. But golf is not a game which beggars can play.

“Why don’t you dance?”

“I—er—don’t care for dancing,” said Salting.

This was also untrue. But casinos are not resorts which beggars should patronize.

“Or hunting?”

“I can’t say I do.”

Sarah expired.

“And your car. Have you laid that up?”

“I——”

“Don’t say you haven’t got one. I saw you in her at Biarritz—oh, nearly a week ago. A perfect sweet of a Lowland. And yet you walk.”

“I believe in walking,” said George. “It’s good for the health.

Besides, when you've driven down to the South of France, you don't want to enter a car for another ten days."

"Do you do any work?"

"Well—er—I haven't done any lately. That's not to say——"

"Have you *ever* done any work?"

"To be strictly honest," said George, "I can't say I have. On one or two fleeting occasions I have, shall we say, adapted myself to the requirements of the moment. Last week, for instance——"

"I know. You changed a wheel."

"That," said George, "is about the only thing I didn't do. But let that pass. I am bound to admit that I have behind me a singularly untroubled youth."

"'Untroubled'"—contemptuously. "You've never done any work, and you can't be bothered to play. I don't know why I waste my time on you."

"I've been wondering that for the last two days. But my most golden rule is never to look a gift girl in her beautiful mouth. What about another wallow? Or is it too late to get wet?"

"Who cares?" said Sarah, rising. "And here's Le Sporting coming to ask if he may take me to the Casino to-night."

'Le Sporting' was unattractive, yet unaware of this fact. He made women free of a charm which he did not possess. When

he blew a kiss into the air, all present felt sick. But he was probably the best dancer in the South of France.

“Oh, I can’t bear it,” said Salting.

“Sorry,” said Sarah, and threw him a dazzling smile. “But I do love dancing so, and——”

“Damn it, I’ll take you,” said George . . .

As ‘Le Sporting’ went empty away, “And yet they say,” said Sarah, “that chivalry is dead.”

George strove to smother a smile.

“Baby,” he said, “I’m afraid you’re old for your age.”

“Don’t you believe it,” said Sarah. “Besides every woman is —till she’s turned twenty-nine.”

Miss Delaney had no idea that Salting knew who she was. In fact, he knew all about her, although till he came to Freilles he had never seen her before. He had played bridge with her father two days before he was killed. That was five years ago. And now her grandfather was dead, and Sarah Delaney was worth seven thousand a year. It would not be true to say she concealed this truth, but she never advertised it. It did not amuse her to ‘splurge.’ She preferred Freilles to Biarritz, because it was quiet.

Sarah possessed great charm. She had just missed being lovely —her mouth was a shade too wide and her nose was a shade too short—but her smile was magical, and the light in her great,

brown eyes was unforgettable. If Sarah chose, she could throw a man off his balance before he knew where he was: but she very rarely chose. She was old and wise for her age. Enough to possess the fire: she never played with it. Her little figure was shapely, her dark brown curls were less trouble than they were worth, and she knew how to choose her clothes and to put them on. All servants worshipped her—a very good sign.

Salting liked her so much that he had already determined that what acquaintance they had must end at Freilles. At Freilles it had begun, on the *plage*: and at Freilles, by God, it should end. It was 'terribly nice to live like a gentleman again': it would have been terribly nice to . . . But beggars are not eligible. At least, that was his point of view—that a man who is glad to accept two pounds ten shillings a week should not consort with a girl who is worth seven thousand a year. And now this outsider, 'Le Sporting,' had put a spoke in his wheel.

Dressing for dinner that evening, George frowned at himself in the glass.

"Will you never learn," he breathed, "you perishing fool? What did you want to rush in for? It'll cost you the best of three quid—and more beside." He shrugged his shoulders and turned. "Evacuation is indicated. I shall now have to go on Monday—no doubt about that. If I don't, this spot of trouble will spread itself into a rash. The lady's picked me for a playmate, bless her heart, but the game is unhappily one which I cannot play. Incidentally, I can't afford to."

Six hundred yards off, Sarah Delaney was talking to Mary Lafone. The two were close friends and were, in fact, touring

together, as they had done before. At the moment, however, Miss Lafone, though perfectly well, had confined herself to their suite. Mosquitoes had taken to her—as everyone did; and "though," she said, "I am not unusually vain, I decline to go out and about with the face of a drunkard who's stood up for fourteen rounds."

"I want you to see him," said Sarah.

"I'm wild to," said Mary, "but I do not want him to see me. The day after to-morrow, perhaps. My face is certainly shrinking. The old, familiar contours are on their way back. I am able this evening to see out of both of my eyes."

"Come out in the car to-morrow."

"Not on your life. Not even the fowls of the air shall witness my shame. My dear, I can't even make up. I don't know where to begin. But tell me more of this lazy paragon. I decline to believe he does nothing but sleep and bathe."

"I piped to him," said Sarah, "and now he is going to dance. If I mourn my solitude this evening, I might be able to get him into the car. To-morrow, I mean—if you really refuse to come out."

"If you don't bring it off," said Mary, "I shall think the less of you both."

Everything was against George Salting that exquisite night.

Since Sarah preferred drinking water to sipping champagne, their evening at the Casino cost him some seven shillings instead of three pounds. Then, again, she

danced divinely—‘Le Sporting’s’ choice of a partner was easy to understand. For another thing, the girl was at the top of her bent; and Sarah at the top of her bent would have made a bedridden lama get up and walk. Finally, setting and atmosphere hit him below the belt.

The night was breathless: a mammoth moon peered like a gorgeous lantern out of a velvet sky, robing in black and silver a world entranced. The countless pines stood up like painted columns casting their clean-cut shadows on snow-white sand, lading the air with perfume, rendering unto Nature the buildings which men had made. All doors and windows open, the valses stole into the gardens and drifted below the tree-tops for half a mile, and, when the music was ended and all was still, the leisurely thunder of the rollers served to enhance a silence that seemed too deep to be true.

Before the two parted that night, the man had promised the maid to drive with her into the mountains the following day.

* * * * * * * *

“May I ask where we’re going?” said George. “Or would that be indiscreet?”

“East and then south, I think. At least, that’s what Mary advised. I admit it’s vague, but I’ve got some lunch in the boot. I hope you don’t mind drinking water.”

“We’re two of a kind,” said George. “I never drink anything else. I may say I had intended to ask you to lunch; but, as you’ve done so much better, may I tell you the way to go?”

Sarah shot him a glance.

"You never told me you knew this part of the world."

"The acquaintance is slight," said George. "But once I took a road which I never forgot. Mary is perfectly right about driving east and then south. At least, that's how my road runs. But towards the end, it's—well, tricky. That means that the one that's driving can't look about; and, as I've seen it before, you must let me drive."

"Very beautifully put," said Sarah. "But you needn't have worried. I know how to handle a car: but I know where the woman-driver ought to get off."

"Very few do, my dear. This engine is very sweet. Have you had her long?"

"That from a Lowland owner is very high praise. I'm going to have a Lowland one of these days."

"I should," said George. And then, incautiously, "You'll get a lot of fun out of her."

"I shan't let her stand in a garage, and drive about in a Vane."

"I'm sure you won't. But then you will never be *blasé*—you're not that sort."

"The funny thing is," said Sarah, "that you don't look that sort, either. But look at the fuss you made about taking me out to-day."

“No, that’s not fair,” said George. “I—er—liked the idea very much. I only suggested that you might be better employed.”

“That,” said Sarah, “is indisputable. But, to tell you the truth, you’ve a hideous fascination for me. You know. Like one of those wretched puzzles you can’t put down.”

“Aren’t they awful?” said George comfortably. “Fancy wasting an hour of your life trying to wheedle four pills within a small circle of cardboard stuck under a glass.”

“Oh, you have got as far as that, have you?”

“Once,” said George. “A good many years ago. But the satisfaction which I derived from the achievement of my endeavour in no way compensated me for the energy which it entailed.”

“Is that a warning to me to leave you alone?”

“Certainly not,” said George. “I’m enjoying myself very much. ‘Maire, 30 kilometres.’ That’s right. We turn to the right at Maire. And two or three miles farther on, we shall get our first sight of the hill.”

“What hill?” said Miss Delaney.

“For which we are making,” said George. “It’s quite a nice shape.”

This was an understatement. The famous *Pic du Loup* is one of the loveliest that ever lifted its head. And it stands clear out of the chain of the Pyrenees, so that men may observe its beauty

from far and near. When, half an hour later, Salting pointed it out, Miss Delaney lifted her foot and slowed to the side of the way.

“It’s exquisite, George. But what are you playing at? We can never get up so far—it’s nearly a quarter to twelve.”

“If you’ll let me drive, my dear, I’ll set you down at its foot in an hour and a half.”

Without a word, Miss Delaney opened her door . . .

The frontier road is superb—until you turn off. For all that, it is not a road from which, if the car is moving, a driver should lift his eyes. And when you turn off, to climb a track through the forest, where two cars can seldom pass and torrents roar beneath bridges whose rails have gone, you must drive circumspectly if you are to reach the meadows which harbour the *Pic du Loup*. But George was as good as his word. Precisely at a quarter-past one, he brought the Vane to rest by the side of a brawling stream, beyond which cattle were grazing and a herdsman was fast asleep, beyond which a pride of beeches made up a glancing quilt, beyond which, in all its glory, rose up *life-size* the mountain which he had promised to Sarah an hour and a half before.

The girl was out of the car and was standing with a hand to her head.

George watched her pleasedly.

Then he, too, left the car, and waited for her to turn.

At last she looked round.

“I apologize,” she said shyly. “I’m sorry I talked about puzzles you couldn’t put down. After all, if you like to be lazy, that’s your affair. But you haven’t—er—wasted to-day. You’ve shown me something more lovely than anyone ever has shown me in all my life, and you’ve driven my car as it’s never been driven before—as I shall never drive it, because I haven’t the skill and I haven’t the nerve.”

“Hush-a-bye, baby,” said George. “And what about lunch in the beechwood? If the hamper isn’t too heavy, I think I can struggle so far.”

Sarah nodded, with the softest light in her eyes. The man—her man—was transfigured. An hour ago he had put off the motley of boredom and shown his true self. And his true self was very pleasing: quiet, efficient, easy; above all, appreciative.

The truth is, of course, that Salting had thrown in his hand. For one day only, he meant to play with Sarah the game which she wished to play.

* * * * * * * *

Neither ever forgot those shining hours in the uplands, the swift flight back to the plains, the sundown which turned to gold a reach of the River Adour.

“Oh, stop, George, stop! It’s too lovely. Don’t say you’ve seen this before. I want to own it with you.”

As the Vane came to rest on the bridge—

“The miracle’s yours, my lady. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Ours,” corrected Sarah.

“Yours,” said George. “No one’s allowed more than one, and I’ve got mine here.”

Sarah never turned, but he saw the colour stealing into her cheek.

“You make very good presents,” she said. “That’s the sweetest thing that’s ever been said to me.”

“I’m sure Le Sporting——”

“Le Sporting,” said Sarah, “is foul. He is also, mercifully gutless. The compliments he pays are like non-alcoholic champagne. Look at those geese down there. Their days are numbered, of course, but I don’t suppose they know that, and they’re having the time of their lives.”

“O fortunate birds!” thought George. Aloud he said, “I feel there’s a fable there. The Nymph and the Geese. If only Æsop could see you, I’m sure it’d roll off his tongue.” He picked up Sarah’s hand, regarded the pointed fingers and put them up to his lips. “Will you round my idyll?” he said. “And dance after dinner, as every good nymph should? You know, I’m quite relieved to have brought you safe out of those hills. When I saw you standing there, at the foot of the *Pic*, with the woods and meadows and fountains doing their best, I knew that I had restored you to your natural element. And if you had thrown back—if some voice had cried ‘Amaryllis’. . .” He sighed and pushed back his hair. “I suppose I should have tried

to pursue you. But if we may trust the classics, the mortals who ran after nymphs never got very far."

"I seem to remember," said Sarah, "that Paris was not altogether unsuccessful."

"Paris," said George, "was quite shameless, but I have been nicely brought up. You see the first thing you'd have done would have been to take off your clothes. And before I could get back with the rug——"

"I decline to believe," bubbled Sarah, "that your education has been as nice as all that."

"With the fate of Actæon to warn me, I should have taken no risks. Never mind. It didn't happen. But I don't mind telling you now that when you—er—fixed your suspender, I damned near caught hold of your wrist."

"Your imagination," said Sarah, "is inexorable. I'm really beginning to wonder if I haven't missed the chance of my life. Let's go up again to-morrow."

"No, you don't," said her squire, and let in his clutch.

* * * * * * * *

Six hours had gone by, and the two were standing in the garden of Sarah's hotel. All Freilles was abed, except for a score of revellers, still dancing at the Casino, three hundred yards off.

As before, a fantastic moon had changed the world to a stage, the fragrant air was unbelievably still, and a slant of distant

music was floating into a silence that was above sound.

Standing together in the shadows, the two drank deep of a perfection too rare for speech; then George took Sarah's hands, set them upon his shoulders and bent his head. As he kissed her lips, her arms went about his neck.

For a moment they clung together; then she made to release herself and he let her go.

One farewell smile, and Sarah turned, to make her way to the house.

George stood where he was and watched her—a silver ghost, passing from moonlight to shadow and then to moonlight again. When she came to a bend in the path, she turned and lifted a hand. George stepped into the moonlight and lifted his. So the two stood, for perhaps three seconds of time. Then the silver ghost disappeared, and, after a moment or two, George turned on his heel.

Sarah went down to the *plage* the following day. And Mary Lafone with her. The latter was not at all sure that she was yet fit to be seen, but a burning desire to see Salting had ridden rough-shod over the rear-guard of doubt. And Sarah had been insistent . . .

But though the hours went by, George Salting never appeared.

Not knowing what to think, the two left the *plage* at mid-day. Sarah's one idea was to get to the telephone.

She did so within one minute of entering her hotel.

“Oh, is that the Hotel Mimosa? Can I speak to Monsieur Salting?”

“Monsieur Salting has left, madame.”

“Left?” cried Sarah. “*Left?* But where has he gone?”

“That I do not know, madame. I think perhaps to England. I know that he meant to catch the Paris express.”

Sarah felt rather faint. Then:

“Can you give his address? I mean, it’s rather important.”

“I am sorry, madame, but Monsieur Salting left no address.”

Sarah hung up the receiver and walked upstairs to her room.

As she shut the door, she saw the note on her bed. 142

> *Good-bye, Sarah darling. Yesterday was and will be the happiest day of my life.*
>
> *George.*

When, two minutes later, Mary looked into the room Sarah was lying face downwards upon the bed.

* * * * * * * *

Seven months had gone by when John Birell received Miss Delaney and begged her to take a seat. The lady was buying a

Lowland, and wished to discuss the body which was to be specially built.

“I know what I want,” she said, “but it’s rather hard to describe. I saw one at Biarritz last summer, in black and white. Those colours wouldn’t suit me, but the line was superb. It was a sportsman’s coupé, and——”

“Was it something like that, Miss Delaney?”

A photograph passed.

Sarah sat very still.

At length:

“Yes,” she said. “That’s the car. I—I want one like that.”

Details and price were discussed.

As Sarah rose, “When will she be ready?” she said.

“We’re terribly busy,” said John, “but I think in three months.”

“That seems a very long time.”

“I know. I’m very sorry. But, as I think I told you, there’s a waiting list for Lowlands as long as my arm. I think we can short-circuit that: but I doubt if we’ll get the chassis for nine or ten weeks.”

Sarah Delaney nodded.

“All right,” she said. And then, “I’m going abroad for a bit. I’ll ring you up when I get back.”

John Birell followed her out and saw her into her car.

Youth is resilient, but Sarah Delaney had changed. The sudden, violent death of her gay affair with George Salting had hit her over the heart. She had never tried to find him: she had accepted the fact that she would see him no more: but she had been mad about him—and she had believed that he was in love with her. More. She had worn her heart on her sleeve for Mary Lafone. She had as good as told her that George was her man. She had haled her down to the *plage* that terrible day . . . As well it might, the shocking *dénouement* had driven her into herself. Not that she broke with Mary, wisest of friends; but she never confided in her from that day on. Sarah had learned her lesson: but the way in which she had been taught it had left its mark.

* * * * * * * *

It was two months later, in May, that Birell rang up the works.

“Is that you, Yeoman? Well, listen. Merton’s just rung up to say that his wife’s very ill and he’s leaving for Yorkshire at once . . . Yes, exactly. Heaven knows when we’ll see him again. What job was he on? . . . Car D? Gosh, that’s Miss Delaney’s. What’s Salting doing just now? . . . Car M? That’s Mrs. Bailey’s. Well, she must wait. Put Salting on to Car D. . . . Yes, right away. He can look her over this morning and take her down to Stockbridge this afternoon. Report to me on his return . . . Right.”

George Salting, first-class tester, received the news with resignation. He disliked being 'shoved on to somebody else's job.' He had not the faintest idea, that Car D was destined for Sarah Delaney herself.

Exactly four hours later, that lady was ushered into John Birell's room.

"How's my car getting on?"

"Very well, Miss Delaney. The body should be ready on Monday. I very much hope that you'll have her three weeks from then."

"And the chassis?"

"Is being tested."

"Road tests?"

"Yes."

"Can I go out with the tester? I'd like to see how she moves."

"Well, I think she's out at the moment. She was to have run down to Stockbridge this afternoon. Half a minute. She mayn't have started." He picked the receiver up. "Works, please. . . . Is that you, Yeoman? Look here, has Car D. gone out?"

"Just filling up," said Yeoman.

"Well, send her round to the office before she goes. And see

that the second seat's clean. I've got a passenger." He put the receiver back, and looked at the girl. "It'll be rather rough, Miss Delaney. You won't go to Stockbridge, of course, but ____"

"Why not?" said Sarah. "It's a very nice run and I'd like to see her let out."

"Just as you please, Miss Delaney. We'll give you some rugs, of course. But it's only a bucket seat."

"If I can't stick it," said Sarah, "I'll tell him to bring me back."

The two were out on the pavement before the Lowland appeared; and, since the traffic was heavy, precluding all speed, both Sarah and George saw each other before the latter could bring the chassis to rest.

God knows how they felt, but neither gave any sign.

Birell, of course, introduced them.

"This is Tester Salting." George Salting took off his cap. "This is Miss Delaney, Salting, who's buying the car." Sarah inclined her head. "She's going with you to Stockbridge, unless she finds it too rough. From now on, you're under her orders."

"Very good, sir," said George, and Sarah climbed into her seat.

John Birell arranged the rugs and was pleasantly thanked.

A moment later, the chassis was under way.

After perhaps three minutes:

“I think,” said Sarah, faintly, “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“So’m I,” said George. “But not yet. I’m going to wait till Chiswick. No one’s ever been sick in the Bayswater Road.”

Sarah pulled off her hat and began to laugh.

“What other man,” she said, “would be so brutally sane? Never mind. Please tell me this. What on earth are you doing this for?”

“Bread,” said George. “They pay me four quid a week, and I can’t complain.”

Sarah stared at the man, whose eyes were fast on the road.

“Do you mean you’re earning your living by testing cars?”

“That statement of fact,” said George “is entirely correct.”

“But why? What’s happened? Last August——”

“Last August,” said George, “I was sailing under false colours. That Lowland you saw me driving didn’t belong to me. I was delivering it. I was damned near down and out when I landed a job as a fitter at two pounds ten. But I had three weeks to spare, before they could take me on. So I thought I’d fleet them at Freilles—one last, luxurious wallow, before I got down to fried fish. And then you rolled up . . . and assumed that I was, er, what I seemed . . . and a foul emotion called ‘pride’ forbade me to put you wise.”

“And I thought you were lazy!”

“I led you to think so,” said George. “It seemed the easiest way.”

“When you said you didn’t play golf——”

“The truth was I couldn’t afford it. Besides, I’d disposed of my clubs.”

“Or hunt?”

“My hunters were sold at Tattersall’s more than a year ago. But I richly deserved quite half of the strictures you passed. Till my source of income crashed, I had done no work. Of course I didn’t have to. But that’s by the way. I ought to have had a job. And then, when the dump went up, I should not have been left.”

There was a little silence, while George stole a march on a coupé which had been holding them up. The Lowland was running superbly. Her way in the stream of traffic was that of a fish.

At length:

“Why,” said Sarah quietly, “why did you leave as you did?”

George’s shoulders went up and down.

“Deception,” he said, “has never appealed to me.”

“What exactly do you mean by that?”

“This,” said George. “I was really a beggar on horse-back—prospective fitters don’t engage private bathrooms down in the South of France. Well, that didn’t matter at all—nobody knew who I was and nobody cared. And then Miss Delaney appeared and picked out the beggar on horseback, to keep her company. Well, that was a very different cup of tea. . . . Of course I should have dismounted there and then. But, as we know, I didn’t. You played into my hands, and I let things slide. But I was damned uneasy. A horrible day of reckoning was bound to come. And so—I cleared out.”

There was another silence.

At length:

“I didn’t ask you why you cleared out. What I did ask was why you cleared out as you did?”

George wrinkled his nose.

“If you must know,” he said, “some singularly unattractive emotions dictated that violent course. But please don’t pursue the matter. Look at that bloke in the Vane. He ought to be pushing a pram in a desert place. Oh, and there’s a fire-engine’s bell. I think we’ll slip into this yard and wait till it clears.”

As the Lowland glided under an archway, the Vane collided with a taxi and the fire-engine’s bell rang out . . . Since the street was none too wide, full five minutes went by before the flow of traffic could be resumed.

As the Lowland slipped into the stream—

“And I thought I had road sense,” said Sarah.

“Habit,” said George. “Besides, avoiding trouble is one of a tester’s jobs.”

When they reached the Great West Road:

“I’m sorry,” said Sarah, “to have to return to the charge, but I think I’ve a right to be told why you went as you did. You see, you let me down bung. I dragged Mary down to the *plage*——”

“But you got my note?”

“—on purpose to show off the boy-friend I knew would be there. And there we sat for three hours.”

“Oh, my God,” said George. “And they swore that my note should reach you at eight o’clock.”

“We then,” continued Sarah, “returned to the hotel. I confess I was less talkative than usual. I never felt such a fool in all my life. And, being a fool, I rang up—to be told that you’d gone. And then I went upstairs and found your note on my bed.”

George slowed up at cross roads—but not because of the lights.

“I think I’ll turn here,” he said quietly. “And then I can take you back.”

“I don’t want to go back,” said Sarah. “I’ve come out to see my car tested. Please carry on.”

“To Stockbridge, madam?”

“Almost. There’s a village just short of Stockbridge where I can have tea.”

As the man let the Lowland go:

“And so, you see,” said Sarah, “I think I’ve a right to be told ____”

“My dear,” said George, “I’m a tester. As such, I’m under your orders. I’ll take you where you like. And I’ll answer any questions . . . about this car.”

“I’ll wait till we stop,” thought Sarah. Aloud she said, “Very well.”

But when George declined to enter the inn which she chose, she threw in her hand.

“Please, George.”

The man shook his head.

“Mother knows best,” he said, smiling, and turned to lift his bonnet and peer at his charge.

That night he gave notice, and left on Saturday. When Sarah rang up on Monday, Merton, now back at the works, was again in charge of Car D.

* * * * * * * *

George was unhealthily tired.

He had eaten nothing since breakfast, walked for more than ten miles, to save his fares, waited for more than five hours, and missed a fitter's job by the skin of his teeth.

As he entered his landlady's shop:

"There's a lady to see you, Mr. Salting. She's sittin' outside in a car. Ah, here she is. She must 'ave seen you come in."

George turned about, to see Sarah, standing framed in the doorway, finger to lip.

"How . . . how good of you," he said slowly. He put a hand to his head. "Could you bear to wait five more minutes, whilst I have a wash?"

He swayed as he spoke, and his landlady caught his arm.

"You don't want a wash, Mr. Salting. You come an' sit down in the kitchen an' eat some food. Besides, there's the sink, if you must. But first you'll 'ave something to eat." She spoke over her shoulder to Sarah, halfway to tears. "He's 'ungry, lady. That's all. When you're out of work, you know . . ."

George pulled himself together.

"I'm quite all right, Mrs. Welling. I've been testing a car of this lady's. That's why she's here."

"No, it isn't," said Sarah. "It's more important than that. But I'd like to talk while you're eating. I'm sure Mrs. Welling's right."

“In course I am,” said that lady. “Come along to the kitchen, miss. His supper’s as good as ready, an’ then I’ll leave you alone.”

Shepherd’s Pie, bread and butter, and tea make a very good meal when you have eaten nothing for thirteen hours. George was himself again, before he had emptied his plate. He was talking gaily enough, but Sarah was very quiet.

At length:

“I’ve a question to ask you,” said Sarah. “It’s not the one that you think. But it is of the utmost importance that you should answer it truthfully—yes or no. That day we spent in the mountains, and then . . . that night. Were you . . . playing up, when you called them ‘the happiest day of your life’?”

“No,” said George, after a little silence. “I wasn’t. That’s . . . why I faded away.”

“Were you afraid of falling in love with me?”

“I . . . was . . . in love with you, lady.”

Sarah left her seat and stood by his side.

“Why do you think I’m here, my darling?”

George looked round helplessly.

“I suppose because you love me. I can’t think of anything else.”

“Exactly,” said Sarah. “And now please listen to me. I’m

staying at the Savoy. Of course you know what it's like. You've probably stayed there yourself."

"Once or twice," said George. "It's—er—very comfortable."

"I agree. Put yourself in my place. Could you endure the comfort of the Savoy, when the girl you loved was doing her best with this?"

"I should manage somehow," said George. "I mean—it wouldn't help her if I slept on the floor. I should probably pray for her, before going down to the Grill."

"I'm different," said Sarah. "The food would stick in my throat."

"No, it wouldn't," said George. "Not if you greased it with Roederer '21."

"That shows how I need you," said Sarah. "For nearly a week I've been trying to stay myself by drinking the '25."

"The '25?" screamed George. "Why there's no such wine. That's why you think you love me. You've drunk some filth or other that's gone and deranged your mind."

Sarah put her arms round his neck.

"Come and look after me, darling. If you feel you must work for your living, I'll find you a job."

George stood up and took the girl in his arms.

"All right," he said. "I'll do it. I know when I'm beat. I'm crazy about you, Sarah. And when I left you at Freilles, it tore my heart. But I hoped and believed you'd forget . . . an' find somebody else. It would have been better so. But, as you haven't, my darling . . . and as I'm only human, and not a saint with a chromium-plated halo that can't come off . . . and as, from what I knew of your father, I really believe he'd say 'Well, I'm sorry it's got to be you, but it might have been worse' . . ."

"You knew him?" cried Sarah.

"Just. He was such a splendid fellow. But that's by the way. I'm going to marry his daughter." He stooped to kiss her lips. "But, before I do, she's got to keep her promise and find me a job."

"After," said Sarah. "I want my honeymoon first. Let's go and ask Mrs. Welling. I'll bet she backs me up."

Mrs. Welling did. She went further. She recommended the purchase of an estate.

"An' you let 'im farm it, miss. Now that's a gentleman's job. An' then you'll always 'ave him right under your eye."

"What a glorious notion," said Sarah—and so it proved.

FINESSE

George Helipe, husbandman, was in one of the vilest tempers that ever seared the soul of a selfish man. Since he made small secret of this, his fellows were quite relieved when he left the Oloron ’bus—with a two-mile walk before him, up to the hamlet of Ness. Helipe was relieved, too: the attention which he had attracted had very nearly driven him out of his mind. Of such is the vicious circle . . .

The trouble was this.

At considerable inconvenience, Helipe had visited Larrenx that February day: this, in response to a summons from his solicitor. The latter’s note had been deliciously vague, but Helipe had had no doubt that the Widow Lacaze was unable to pay the interest on one of his loans—with the happy result that the meadow which she had mortgaged would now become his. Helipe, however, was wrong. After ten minutes’ smooth conversation, the lawyer referred to a matter which had been before the Court for nearly three years.

“The dispute about Padu, my friend—that little, worthless meadow which you do not need, which Bourda, your neighbour, claims. At last it is settled—this dispute: the law is slow. It is settled in Bourda’s favour. It is, of course, annoying: but——”

He got no farther than that, for his client went off the deep end. An hour and a half had gone by before the lawyer could get him

out of his house. He had always assumed that the meadow called Padu was his—that Bourda's impertinent claim would be contemptuously dismissed. His lawyer had led him to think so—had laughed with him over the costs which Bourda would have to pay. And now *he* would have to pay them. What was ten thousand times worse, *the spring which rose in Padu was all his water-supply*.

That was the naked truth.

During the winter months, two or three tumbling rills would serve his needs: but these would fail in the summer—they always did: from May to November his holding depended upon Padu . . . depended upon the fair water which issued from Padu's spring.

* * * * * * * *

Her father had just emerged from the Oloron 'bus, when Jeanne Helipe took her lover's face in her hands.

"I sent for you," she said, "because you must ask him to-night. He will be in excellent cue. The Widow Lacaze cannot pay, and her field is now his."

Paul Colomez raised his eyes.

"The good God preserve me from all usurers."

"I wholly agree," said Jeanne, gravely. "Whenever the field becomes mine, I shall give it back. But we cannot help her, my darling, by throwing away this chance of helping ourselves."

“I have a wise sweetheart,” said Paul, and kissed her eyes and her lips.

The saying was true. Jeanne Helipe’s brain was as quick as her features were good. The girl took after her mother, now nine years dead. Her nose was straight, her chin firm, her head well set on. She was shapely and very strong. She worked in the house or the fields from morning to night: yet she was maidenly —a fact which distinguished her from the ordinary peasant-girl. Bloom is apt to wear badly; and a twelve-hour working day is a test which sweet-and-twenty can seldom stand. But Jeanne was never a drudge, as most of her fellows were. She made the best of the present, keeping her eyes on the future she meant to have.

“Good temper or no,” said Paul, “your father is sure to object. He will, of course, call me a Spaniard—and other things.”

“Naturally,” said the girl. “But that will not worry me, and it must not worry you. Besides, a good well-digger always has Spanish blood. And everyone knows that you are the very best in the Basses Pyrenees.”

“I am doing well,” said Paul. “He can’t get away from that.”

“What will weigh with him,” said Jeanne, “is the fact that you will take me without any *dot*. That is the ace of trumps and will win us the trick.”

In fact, she was wrong. When, twenty-five minutes later, her father flung into the kitchen with fire in his eyes, the oath he was meaning to utter died on his lips. Brought up, so to speak,

all standing, he stared upon the young man, without seeming to breathe. Then a hand went up to his mouth, and the fire went out of his eyes.

“Good evening,” said Paul, staring.

The other turned. “Good evening,” he said roughly. “What brings you here?”

This was not according to plan: but when Paul glanced at Jeanne, the girl, as wide-eyed as he, had no directions to give. The absurd—the fantastic had happened . . . before her eyes. Her father had entered raging: and the spectacle of her lover had turned the storm into calm. As in a dream, she took her father’s cloak from his shoulders and stood with it spread like an apron before her skirt.

Helipe stepped to the fire and put out his hands.

“Why are you here?” he repeated. “Tell me the truth.”

Paul Colomez took a deep breath.

“I was meaning, before I went, to ask your permission, Monsieur, to make Jeanne my wife.”

“That is great presumption—a landless Spaniard to ask for my daughter’s hand.”

“I am not quite landless,” said Paul. “I have a house and two fields.”

Helipe laughed.

“A hovel with half an acre of worthless soil.”

“I have my profession, Monsieur. I do not work on the land. And, whilst I am a good Frenchman, I am not at all ashamed of my Spanish blood.”

Helipe fingered his chin.

“Your profession,” he said slowly. “And what is that?”

Paul Colomez frowned at his back. Then—

“I thought you knew,” he said, “that I was a digger of wells.”

Helipe swung about.

“Can you find water?” he snapped.

The other stared.

“Sometimes,” he said, “if water is to be found.”

Helipe leaned forward.

“Find me water,” he said. “Find me water, my friend, and dig me a well. Two metres of drinking water that never fails. Do that, and you shall marry this daughter of mine. But I must have it at once. We may have a very dry spring. The well must be ready for use before April comes in.”

Frowning upon his rough boots, Paul strove to conceal his excitement and veil his surprise. His heart, of course, was

leaping. This was the sort of stuff with which he could deal. He was on his own ground.

“That gives only six weeks,” he said slowly. “Half February is over, and it would mean going all out——”

“And what,” said Jeanne, “what of your offer from Josse? The one you were telling me of. The chance of pleasing——”

“To hell,” screamed Helipe, “to hell with his offer from Josse. Is he being offered by Josse the woman he hopes to possess? What is money beside my daughter?”

Paul lifted his head.

“One engages to pay. Josse would give me a contract—a paper signed.”

“Have I said that I won’t?”

“I beg your pardon,” said Paul. “If you will put into writing that Jeanne and I shall be married the first day of May——”

“That is too soon,” said Helipe. “Your well may be full in April and dry in July.”

“One can judge from the flow. If it is swift and strong, it may diminish a little, but it will never fail.”

“Listen,” said Helipe. “I will draw as much as I need on April the tenth. If, half an hour after I have finished, there is still two metres of water within the well, this girl and you shall be married the first day of May.”

Paul regarded his palms.

"It will have," he said, "to be a very good spring."

"That is what I require."

"You will pay for the materials?" said Paul. "I cannot afford ____"

"I will pay for the masonry."

"And the stones, to pack behind that?"

Helipe waved his arms.

"All that to my charge. You will but find the water and make me the well."

Paul gave a short nod.

"Very well," he said. "Let us write these things down and sign them. And then I will go. And to-morrow I will return: and when I have found the water, the work shall begin."

Twenty minutes later, the duplicate contracts were signed.

* * * * * * * *

By half-past two the next day, Paul was sinking his pipe. Although he took care not to show it, he was depressed. If his rod was to be believed, there was not one decent spring on Helipe's estate. There was certainly water here—where he was sinking his pipe; but either it was not abundant, or else it

was very deep. And this was the only place: the rest of the property seemed to be dry as a bone.

So now he was sinking his pipe—to be sure that water was there before he began to dig.

The pipe was a pointed steel tube, some three feet long. About the point were small holes, designed to admit any water, but not any earth. His hammer was a billet of wood, hoist to the top of a tripod and then let fall. His two younger brothers worked it, whilst Paul stood by. When the tube had been hammered almost into the earth, Paul screwed on another section, some three feet long. Then he stood back, and the boys fell to work again. And so on . . .

There were three spectators, two of whom Paul could have spared. One was Jeanne, watching with a hand to her mouth. One was Helipe, his hard-bitten face like a mask. And one was Bourda, his neighbour, ostentatiously fencing Padu, some twenty paces away.

It was, of course, sheer bad luck that the only spring Paul could find should be, so to speak, commanded by the meadow which Helipe had lost.

The work proceeded. When twelve feet of pipe had been sunk, the well-digger lowered a tell-tale into the tube. In silence he pulled it up, to find the thing dry.

Bourda laughed and spat.

“For me,” he said, “you will never find water there.”

“Wait and see,” said Paul. “I am only twelve feet down.”

Helipe’s eyes were like slits.

“Wells are expensive,” said Bourda. “And when they fail, their cost has been thrown away. I should buy Padu, Helipe. I will let you have the meadow for twenty thousand francs.”

In a red mist of anger, Helipe turned on his heel and blundered away. The market-price of Padu was fifteen hundred francs.

The work proceeded—more slowly. The lower the pipe was sunk, the harder it was to drive.

To the lovers’ relief, Bourda was called away before it was time to lower the tell-tale again. But when Paul drew this up, it was perfectly dry.

Jeanne drew in her breath, but her lover summoned a smile.

“Courage, sweetheart,” he said. “We are but twenty feet down. I am sure there is water there: it is only a question of depth.”

Jeanne looked into his eyes.

“I am sure, too,” she said slowly. She stifled a sigh. “And now I must go. I have to see to the cows. Perhaps you will have found water, before I return.”

She made her way back to the farm, with her underlip caught in her teeth.

In the first flush of pride and excitement, she had not

considered the fact that Paul's success or failure was governed by Nature herself. She had assumed that springs were there to be snared. The rest, she knew, was easy. Paul was a master of his craft . . . And then, this morning, fear had knocked at her heart. She had seen the look on his face, whilst he was using his rod . . . And now she perceived the truth—that the dice were loaded against them, that water in abundance was simply not to be found.

To make matters ten times worse, she knew that her lover would never throw in his hand. If he found a spoonful of water, he would dig his well *on the chance* that the spring, when opened up, might prove to be an excellent source. And so love's labour would be lost and six weeks' gruelling labour would go by the board. And the business would do him no good. It would soon be everywhere known that Paul Colomez had let a customer down.

"Mother of God," she whispered. "Our state will be worse than it was. My father will hound him out, and I shall be forced to marry that viper Birot. I cannot stay here much longer: and I am in love with Paul: and Birot is twice my age and has rotten teeth." She shuddered. "Oh, dear, oh, dear, I am sure there is some way out. Mother of God, let me see it, before the damage is done."

It was as she was passing the house, to come to the byre, that she heard her father's voice from a chamber above.

"Sit down, my friend," it said. "I will give you a glass of my wine."

Jeanne stood still in her tracks. She had not known that her father had company. After a moment's reflection, she entered the house, and, stepping out of her *sabots*, whipped up the crazy stair and set an ear to a door.

"I thought it was that," said Helipe. "I thought it was that. And I do not blame you, Birot: my little daughter will make a most excellent wife."

"And the *dot*," said Birot softly. "What figure do you propose?"

"*Dot?*" said Helipe. "*Dot?* You must be out of your mind. You are not a Viscount, are you—to ask for a *dot*."

"But, my friend, consider——"

"You are mad," said Helipe, shortly, "as well as base-born. You must provide for my daughter, if she is to take your name. What is 'Madame Birot,' I ask you, to a girl who has been known as 'Mademoiselle Helipe'?"

Birot grimaced.

"I could take offence," he said smoothly. "I have the right. But I prefer to honour a father's whim. I hereby renounce any *dot*. I will take the girl as she stands."

"That is all very well: but you must provide for her."

Birot raised his eyebrows.

"Do you suppose that I shall permit her to starve?"

Helipe shook his head.

“I must have something concrete,” he said. “When I am dead, she will be a valuable wife. A contribution to her property is indicated.”

Birot stared upon him, with open mouth. At length—

“Are you suggesting,” he said, “that I should purchase the girl? That so far from taking a pauper——”

“I am,” said Helipe, “making no suggestion at all. I am simply pointing this out—that a Birot who marries an heiress must first contribute something to her inheritance.”

With that, he emptied his glass—and filled it again.

After ten futile minutes—

“Mark you,” said Birot, “I do not say that I consent. The thing is preposterous—unheard of. But, if I *were* to consent, what figure had you in mind?”

“No figure,” said Helipe, swiftly. “I ask no money at all. I simply require a gesture. Upon my death, Jeanne will become the owner of this very beautiful farm. To improve upon it is hard—if not impossible. The woods are pure, and the meadows are very rich. Still, as luck will have it, there is a little corner which could be rounded off. It is a meadow, called Padu, which Bourda owns. Give that to me—to add to my daughter’s estate, and, though I should not do so, I will consent to your marriage with that most desirable girl.”

“But——”

“Those are my terms,” said Helipe. He got to his feet. “Mark you, my friend, I do not desire the match. But the girl is looking around, and I feel that she should be settled without delay. And if you will make this gesture . . .”

Birot rose also, and Jeanne made good her escape. . . .

Wise in her generation, she did not tell her lover what she had overheard: but she did take care to meet Bourda and tell him that, afraid of extortion, her father had authorized Birot to purchase his field.

“My dear,” said Bourda, “I shall give you the ten per cent.”

“Don’t sell till I say so,” said Jeanne. “I shall know how far he will go.”

Bourda closed his eyes.

“It is clear,” he said, “that one day you will make some fortunate man a wonderful wife.”

“That is my intention,” said Jeanne.

As the early dusk came in, Paul found a spoonful of water forty feet down.

* * * * * * * *

Three weeks had gone by, and the tragi-comedy was gathering weight.

Helipe was ‘sitting pretty’: Birot was half out of his mind: Paul was nursing a hope which he knew was forlorn.

After his interview with Birot, Helipe had lost interest in the well: but as the days went by, but Birot failed to report, the value of a well of good water began to compare with the virtue of Padu’s spring. This, extrinsically. Birot’s failure to report could only mean that Bourda was asking a fancy price: and, though he was not to pay it, Helipe could not bear the idea that Bourda should get what he asked. Twenty thousand francs . . .

Helipe would have preferred Padu to any well. But if the price of Padu was this fantastic exalting of Bourda’s horn, a well of good water was very much more to the point. The masonry, perhaps, would cost him two thousand francs. Not a very high price for sending friend Bourda to hell.

Thanks to Jeanne and Bourda, Birot was losing weight. When he had stuck at ten thousand, Jeanne had contrived to encounter him in the fields. That night he had gone to twelve, and Bourda had laughed in his face and had talked about twenty-five. Subsequent encounters with Jeanne had got him as far as eighteen, but Bourda had raised his price to twenty-six.

“I am sorry, my friend, but I am becoming attached to this little field. I do not want to sell it, and that is the truth. If you will say here and now that you will buy it for twenty-six thousand francs, well then I will make the sacrifice. I am a man of my word. But less than that, no. I cannot for nothing tear a piece out of my heart.”

Birot had to be assisted out of the house.

And now for Paul.

Realizing that, if there was water, there was not much, Paul had decided to double the size of the well. If the depth of its water is the same, a well two metres in width will hold more than twice what a well of one metre will hold. In theory, it should, of course, take just twice as long to dig. But Paul had got down to things, and theory had gone by the board. Early and late he had laboured, as never before. It had torn Jeanne's heart to see him. The two boys who hauled up his buckets had never been worked so hard.

And now he had found his water, forty feet down—a delicate film of crystal, which, when it was trapped, would yield, say, three gallons an hour. Three gallons. And nothing less than thirty would serve his turn.

Jeanne found him soon after mid-day, his dinner untasted, sitting with his head in his hands.

"What is it, beloved?" The girl went down on her knees. "You have laboured too hard, and now——"

Before the look in his eyes, the sentence faded and died.

"Mother of God," she breathed, "you have not struck rock?"

Paul shook his head.

"I have found water," he said: "the water I sought. It is running under the soil on a bed of blue clay. It cannot pass through the clay—and neither can I. I have heard of such clay, but I never saw it before. It is very much like rubber. My pick is useless: I

have sent George for an axe."

"But if you have found water, my darling, what need to pass through the clay?"

"Because I have not found enough." He threw back his head and laughed. "I have dug a well of two metres forty feet deep —and found a spring that gives three gallons an hour."

Jeanne buried her face in her hands. After a little, tears began to trickle between her fingers. The man sat staring before him, with sightless eyes.

"And . . . you cannot . . . pass through the clay?"

"I am going to try: that is why I have sent for an axe. But when I am two metres down, I shall throw in my hand. You see, we are up against time. A bed of clay at this depth may well be thirty feet thick: and I should have started the masonry two days ago."

Jeanne put an arm round his neck and laid her wet cheek against his.

"Listen, sweetest," she said. "Until we know it is hopeless, you must not let my father see your despair. If you succeed, he will embrace you: but the moment he thinks you have failed, he will order you off the estate."

Paul nodded. Then with a sudden movement, he turned and took her face in his hands.

"I should," he said, "I should have had a wise wife."

“I am going,” said Jeanne, “to have the most valiant husband in all the world.”

The man bent his head and kissed the smile on her lips . . .

But Jeanne did not feel like smiling: she made her way down to the farm with a hunted look in her eyes. The game was as good as over—and Paul and she had lost. Only a miracle could save it—a miraculous gush of water, such as the rod of Moses had once produced. And miracles did not happen to people like Paul and her. Prayers and tears were useless: and so were labour and love. Her father, Bourda and Birot would, all of them, win. Each would get what he wanted. Her father would get Padu: Bourda would get a fortune: and Birot would get herself. And Paul would be ruined, and both their lives would be smashed.

Alone, in the byre, the girl went down on her knees.

“Mother of God, have mercy. We are not more wicked than most and better than some I could name. Help us now, I implore. It is so little to you, and so much to us. A little gush of fair water, that no one will ever see. No one will know that it was not always there. And Paul has laboured so hard, and I love him so much.”

Sitting back on her heels, she wept, the picture of grief. Then she dried her tears and went about her business, racking her brain.

Four o’clock found her standing, regarding the rising ground at the back of the farm. Seventy paces away was the mouth of the well—with the tripod standing about it, and George and Marc,

Paul's two brothers, peering into the depths. Above and beyond it was Padu, guarding its precious rill, which turned away to the left, to babble past Bourda's dwelling and then dive under the road. And above again was woodland, a pleasant screen of hazel, where Paul used to eat his dinner and take his rest.

Jeanne regarded the picture, biting her lip. Then she looked to right and to left and made for the well.

Holding to one of the timbers, she called to Paul.

"You cannot see down there. You have done enough for to-day."

"I can feel," cried Paul. "I am nearly a metre down. Not all over, of course. Still . . . But perhaps you are right. One cannot work in the dark."

Two minutes later, he clambered up to her side.

"Send the boys home," she said. "I have something to say."

Paul told the lads to be gone and dragged himself into his coat. Then—

"What is it, sweetheart?" he said. "Have you found the rod of Moses—to conjure a spring of water out of a rubber floor?"

"I am not quite sure," said Jeanne. "First tell me this. If water should reach this blue clay, are you sure that it cannot soak through?"

"Can it soak through rubber?" said Paul. "But there is no

water there. If only there had been water, all that I had to do was to dig a hole in the clay. I should not even have had to wall its sides."

"Had there been water," said Jeanne, "how deep would you have gone down?"

"As deep as I could. I should have aimed at two metres. Because of the water, I might not have got so far."

"Can you get so far now?"

"Of course. There is, alas, no water to get in my way."

Jeanne reflected aloud.

"A *cuvette* two metres by two—which was always full."

"That is a dream," said Paul, "or a well-digger's tale."

"I have an idea," said Jeanne. "Please listen to me." She threw a glance about her, before going on. "Padu is just there, above us—and so is Padu's rill. If the water of Padu's rill could make its way down to the clay, tell me, dear, would it make its way into your well?"

Her lover opened his eyes.

"No doubt about that," he said shortly. "Unhappily Padu's rill is forty feet up."

The girl caught his arm.

“Take it down,” she breathed. The man started. “Sink your pipe in the rill, and drive your pipe down to the clay. Your pipe has holes at its base. If they can let water in, they can let water out.”

Paul stood as though carved out of stone. At length—

“It is a trick,” he said. “A very good trick, I grant you. But I shall not do it, my dear. Your father signed that contract——”

“And double-crossed you the next day.” Breathlessly she told him of Birot, and the promise her father had made: and how she had put Bourda wise and kept Birot at bay.

Paul went white with anger: his lips went pale. When he spoke, he spoke vibrantly.

“By God, I will do this thing. Your father deserves no less. The very next day, by God . . . I am sorry to have to say it, but he is a swine. Never mind. You have a fine brain, my beauty, and I shall do as you say. I shall take to-morrow and Thursday, to make my hole—my *cuvette*. No. It will take me three days—that terrible clay. To-morrow, then, Thursday and Friday. And on Friday night, when it is dark, I shall sink my pipe. And on Saturday morning . . .”

“Yes?”

He turned and looked at the girl.

“On Saturday morning, my dear, I shall find two metres of water within the well.”

* * * * * * * *

Just before mid-night on Friday the work began. Not daring to trust his young brothers, Paul worked alone—with Jeanne to keep watch. The girl did more than that. She helped him set up his tripod and hoisted and let fall the block, whilst he held the first length of his pipe. Also she prayed continually—under her breath.

The night before, the man had chosen a pool, where the water swirled for a moment, before going on. Padu's turf had here encroached on the rill, and blades of grass leaned over, as though to veil the water from curious eyes. The pool being eight inches deep, two inches of pipe could protrude from the bed of the rill, yet never be seen. And the water would never be missed. Padu's spring had always enough and to spare.

The man worked feverishly—as he had worked for three days. The rubber-like clay had almost broken his heart. Mercifully, Helipe had been confined to the house: his yearly attack of bronchitis had supervened. He was, therefore, bound to accept his daughter's report. This had excited him greatly. 'Water in abundance had been found: though the boys baled as hard as they could, Paul was working in water up to his waist.'

"Mother of God, have mercy. We are not more wicked than most."

When the pipe had sunk thirty-five feet, the rough operation became a delicate business, requiring infinite care. At this particular spot, the clay might be more or less than forty feet down: and only the tip of the pipe must enter the clay,

and only two inches of pipe must protrude from the bed of the rill. Paul had short lengths of pipe ready, some only six inches long.

Without a kindly moon, the work could not have been done. The wooden hammer, of course, made but little sound: a hundred yards off, it was lost in the rush of the rill.

The pipe descended literally inch by inch. Between each blow, Paul let down his precious tell-tale, to see if it came up wet. Patience strove with impatience—the latter with Time behind her, to back her argument. Jeanne was biting her fingers and watching the eastern sky. But Paul went quietly on, deliberately striking and testing and adding short lengths to his pipe.

At last Jeanne could bear it no longer.

“Paul, my heart,” she faltered, “I cannot be sure, but I think it is four o’clock.”

Paul nodded.

“I think so, too,” he said quietly. And that was all.

Jeanne tried to pray, but her tortured brain refused to obey her will. Though she had not said so to Paul, her father had declared his intention of sallying forth this morning, to prove the depth of the water within the well. *And Bourda always rose early.* Success was within their grasp. But success would be useless—*failure*, unless it could be achieved by five o’clock.

Strike . . . test . . . strike. . . . The pipe continued to sink, at twenty inches an hour. Neither knew, I think, exactly what time

it was when Paul drew up his tell-tale, and found it wet. The pipe was down to the clay.

After a careful calculation, he dealt the pipe one more blow: then he set about dismantling the tripod, as fast as ever he could.

So far as the pipe was concerned, his luck was in: two inches only were protruding out of the pool. If, then, he unscrewed the last length—some six inches long—the top of the pipe would be four inches under water: and that would do. He had aimed at six. Six inches under water, in case of drought. But beggars could not be choosers, and four would do.

Quietly, he adjusted his chain-wrench. . . .

An instant later, Padu's water was pouring into the pipe.

For two or three moments, the flow of the rill seemed to stop: and then the pipe was full, and the pool rose up to the level at which it had swirled before.

Paul straightened his weary back.

"It is done," he said. "Four lengths of pipe should be left. I have one here."

"I have the three," said Jeanne. "And the timbers are close to the hedge."

"And the chain-wrench. I think that is all." He threw a glance round. Then he looked at the western sky. "A little rain would help us. I think it is on the way. To cover our traces, I mean. If

Bourda——”

“Bourda will not come here to-day. It is market-day at Larrenx: and when he has milked his cows, he will make for the ’bus.”

Five minutes later, the two were out of Padu, and all the gear was lying by the side of the well.

The man caught the girl to his heart.

“Back to your bed, my darling. I could not have done it without you. You taught me what to do, and then you helped me to do it, as no one but you could have done.”

“How did I help, sweetness—except that I hauled up the hammer, I think, three times?”

“By watching me in silence,” said Paul. He bent his head and kissed her. “And now to bed.”

“Test the well first—to be sure.”

Paul shook his head.

“A test would tell us nothing. It is too soon. I am going to set up the tripod, and then I shall go. And when I come back at seven, the well will be full.”

“I shall not sleep,” said Jeanne.

“Nor I. But we will make up for that the first week of May.”

* * * * * * * *

Helipe himself measured the water at nine o'clock. Finding a depth of two metres, his eyes bulged out of his head. He turned to Paul, and indicated the boys.

"Let them draw fifty buckets," he said.

They did so, before his eyes: and at half-past ten he measured the water again. When he found a depth of two metres, he put out his hand for Paul's.

"I am going to Larrenx," he said, "to order the stones and cement. The mason owes me money: so they will be here to-morrow at break of day. Jeanne will give you some dinner—but not the boys. I shall announce your engagement to such as I meet."

For once in his life, the man was as good as his word. To all and sundry he said that his future son-in-law had dug him a peach of a well. Bourda heard the news, while drinking at the Café de la Paix, and, starting up to his feet, upset two bottles of wine. Less than an hour before, he had refused Birot's latest offer for Padu—twenty-two thousand francs in notes of the Bank of France. Cursing all big-eyed sirens, he sought high and low for Birot, with all his might: if only he could find Birot, *before* Birot heard the news . . . But Birot had heard the news and was seeking high and low for Helipe.

Larrenx is not a big place, but a puckish Fate ordained that neither search should succeed till the driver of the Oloron 'bus was starting his engine up. Then Bourda saw Birot, as Birot saw Helipe. Then Bourda, too, saw Helipe—and broke into a run.

“Helipe,” he cried, “I have sold Padu to Birot. The meadow is his.”

Birot spun round. To lose Jeanne was bad enough. And now this filthy blackmailer . . .

“You lie in your throat,” he said shortly. “You know that——”

“I am not lying,” screamed Bourda. “I have the *compromis* ready. All you have to do is to sign.”

“What if you have? You refused. It is now too late.”

“You are mistaken, my friend. I said ‘I accept.’ I call upon you to——”

“You excite my disgust,” raved Birot. “Besides, I am not such a fool——”

“I say you are a fool and a knave. When the Judge commands you to pay me——”

“Perjurer,” shouted Birot, waving his arms. “You know that I declined your infamous terms.”

“Never,” shrieked Bourda. “The thing was settled this morning. Lies will not help you to——”

“You say that I lie, liar? My God, I cannot support such clumsy treachery.”

“Traitor yourself,” yelled Bourda. “When you are languishing in prison . . .”

Since the two were too much engaged to notice the sound of a horn, the Oloron ’bus had to swerve, before it could go on its way.

* * * * * * * *

Five rainless months had gone by, and Jeanne was regarding a letter, finger to lip.

Be good enough to consider yourself cast off.

For myself, I shall make it my business to ruin the lying Spaniard whose well is now utterly dry. If you were here, instead of fifty miles off, I would denounce you both, in the presence of witnesses.

Helipe.

That evening Paul ‘jumped a lorry’ and travelled to Ness. With him, he took his chain-wrench—and a pipe, just four inches long. Nobody saw him arrive, and nobody saw him leave.

Helipe received a letter the following afternoon.

My Father,

Paul is quite certain that you have made a mistake. The spring may have choked itself for twenty-four hours. He says that does happen sometimes with a new-made well. Pray measure the water again, before you do anything

rash.

JEANNE.

"The lying jade," spat Helipe: but he picked up his measuring-line. . . .

When he went to his bed that night, he was weary in body and soul. In body, because himself he had drawn fifty buckets of water out of the well: in soul, because, an hour later, the well was once again full. This would have rejoiced his heart—if that morning he had not bought Padu for twenty-two thousand francs.

As a daughter, Jeanne had her shortcomings: but she was a wonderful wife.

MISSING, BELIEVED KILLED

“That you, Falcon?” said the Assistant Commissioner.

Chief Inspector Falcon said that it was.

“Can you spare two hours this evening?”

“Of course, sir.”

“At my house, about half-past nine?”

“I will be there, sir.”

“Good.”

The Chief Inspector wondered what was afoot. Something big, of course. The Arundel Silver Case had begun like that. The Director of Public Prosecutions would be there. *Ex officio.* He never came to the Yard, but he did occasionally visit the Assistant Commissioner’s house. The two were great friends. And the Director was a fine lawyer, as well as a man of the world. His advice was of great value. Naturally. The better the work of the police, the surer that of the Crown. Falcon admired him and liked him. He understood.

At half-past nine that evening the Chief Inspector entered the well-known room.

The Assistant Commissioner was frowning, pacing the floor. Seated upon the club kerb, the Director of Public Prosecutions

was smoking a cigarette.

“Ah, Falcon, good evening. Sit down.”

“Good evening, sir.”

He bowed to the Director, who smiled, and took his seat on the sofa before the hearth.

The Assistant Commissioner pointed to a box of cigars.

“Thank you, sir.”

“Matches? Light it and listen. Smoke helps the brain. I had a visit this morning from the Chief Constable of Wiltshire. This good gentleman has been shown what may or may not be a mare’s-nest. The trouble is that, before you can see which it is, you’ve got to touch off a mine. And he doesn’t want to touch off a mine—in case it is a mare’s-nest, and nothing more.”

“If it isn’t a mare’s-nest, sir?”

“It’s murder.”

Falcon nodded.

“In that case, sir, he’d better not waste any time.”

“I’m afraid time has been wasted. If it is murder, the murder is three months old.”

Falcon bit his lip.

Then—

"A case of disappearance, sir?"

The Assistant Commissioner nodded.

"That's right. They're always the worst. Traces gone, tracks covered, scent cold, memories dimmed." He sighed. "Never mind. Take a look at that. The Chief Constable got that letter two days ago."

The Rectory,
Footman's Hassock,
Wiltshire.

14th August.

Private and Confidential.

SIR,

I feel it my duty to acquaint you with the following facts.

Nearly four years ago the well-known author, Coles Oxen, came to live in this parish at the Manor House. Neither he nor his wife came to Church, and, though I called more than once, they did not return my visits, which I accordingly discontinued. I am a bachelor.

Some time last May, I think, my housekeeper told me that Mrs. Oxen had gone. I understood her to mean that she had left her husband. I do not listen to talk in the servants' hall: but my housekeeper is a good servant,

and when she opens her mouth, I hear what she has to say. I asked how she knew. She said she had heard it in the village—a maid from the Manor House had spread the news.

And there I left it.

Sometimes thereafter I saw Mr. Oxen pass—alone in his car. He always waved or cried out a salutation. Life apparently went on just as before.

Then last week my housekeeper mentioned the matter again. In the course of conversation she told me this:

That Mrs. Oxen had left in no ordinary way. She and her husband had gone up to Town for the day—alone in the car. (It seems they often did that—about once a week.) Mr. Oxen returned alone. When he came in, he asked the butler if his mistress had telephoned. The man said no. Then Mr. Oxen said, 'I assume she'll send for her things. She's not coming back. Anyway they'd better be packed.' Packed they were the next day, but Mrs. Oxen neither telephoned nor wrote. Her trunks were still waiting. People were wondering if they would ever be claimed.

And now I am wondering, sir.

Yours faithfully,
C. J. Dominie.

When he had read it through, Falcon stepped to a table

and laid the letter down.

“Yes, sir?”

The Assistant Commissioner coughed.

“The Chief Constable wants to know what to do. We all know who Coles Oxen is—a well-known novelist. Very well known. A best-seller. The Press will leap at a scandal in which such a man is involved. I mean, he’s ‘news.’ And so the Chief Constable is very naturally anxious not to put a foot wrong.”

“I quite see that, sir. All the same . . .”

“Exactly,” said the Director. “The innocent have suffered for the guilty, and always will. Oxen may be a sheep. But there are such things as goats.”

The Assistant Commissioner frowned.

“That’s all very well,” he said. “If he wasn’t an eminent man, I shouldn’t think twice. Neither, of course, would Wiltshire. But an innocent, eminent man has very much more to lose than an innocent man whose name is quite unknown. I take it, he lives by his pen. Well, our action may ruin the bloke. You know what the public is.”

The Director raised his eyebrows.

“It’s for you to decide,” he said.

“Then, again, I don’t want a wash-out. Once we move in the matter, we’ve got to go on. If we find a mare’s-nest, good—I’m

only too glad. But I do not want to get stuck. And if the man is guilty—well, with all this lapse of time, it's hardly a promising case."

The Director nodded.

"That's very true," he said. "The odds against a conviction would be painfully long. But the Wiltshire Constabulary won't get one."

"Oh, I know, I know. It's us, or no one. But would you believe that people could be so hideously slow? I mean—three months! It doesn't give a policeman a chance. What do you think, Falcon? I mean, if we do take action, you'll have to handle the job."

The Chief Inspector considered. Then he spoke as a man who is weighing his words.

"If Oxen suffers, sir, he's only himself to thank. He may be casual—they say that authors are. But when the weeks go by, but a woman doesn't send for her things—well, I know, if I'd been in his place, I'd have taken advice. Informed my lawyers, or something: asked what to do. I mean, you *can* let things slide: but if they come back on you, then you can't complain. All that's assuming he's innocent. If he's guilty—well, sir, we can but try. If he's done his work well, then those three months will weight us out of the race. But he may have left something undone—some string untied. And if we can come across that, it may carry us home."

There was a little silence. Then—

“I dare not agree,” said the Director. “Because, if I do, in six weeks’ time you’ll bring me a rag of a case, and when we go down all round, you’ll say it’s my fault.”

The others laughed. Then—

“That’s a good point, Falcon,” said the Assistant Commissioner. “All the same . . .”

The discussion continued.

In the end the decision was made.

“All right, Falcon. I’ll write to Wiltshire to-morrow. Can you start in on Wednesday?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you’d better take the papers. There are two or three statements there. Very little in them. The meat’s in the parson’s letter, and that you’ve seen.”

* * * * * * * *

Mr. Oxen’s butler brought his master the note.

Oxen ripped it open with the point of a trowel.

Dear Sir,

I shall be much obliged if you will receive me. I have come from London for this purpose.

Yours faithfully,
Richard Falcon.
(*Chief Inspector, C.I.D.*)

"Is he waiting?" said Mr. Oxen—a heavy, thick-set man, with a rimless glass in his eye and a rather expressionless face.

"Yes, sir."

"Bring him along."

Falcon found Mr. Oxen hard at work. Not literary work. He was standing knee-deep in a trout stream, spreading liquid concrete over an iron grid. The grid was engulfed in the concrete, which came to rest upon matchboarding, roughly nailed to two rafters spanning the stream.

"Good morning," said Oxen. "I hope you won't mind waiting until I've finished this bridge: but I've mixed the gruel all ready, and if I don't use it now, it won't set as well as it should."

"I don't mind in the least," said Falcon. "Give me the pail and I'll fill it, while you're arranging the stuff."

"There's a Christian," said Mr. Oxen, passing the pail. "Wonderful thing, ferro-concrete. I think this'll be a good job."

Falcon nodded.

"You do it all yourself?"

“I did. It amuses me. I laid all those flags up there and I did the steps.”

“Did you indeed?”

“Masonry,” observed Mr. Oxen, “is satisfactory. The work you do lasts. And you can’t get good wood to-day. But this little bridge will be here when our children are dust.”

They finished the foot-bridge together. Then they sat down on the grass and began to talk.

“Why d’you want to see me, Chief Inspector?”

“About your wife.”

“Good God, is she in trouble?”

“Not that I know of,” said Falcon. “But we want to know where she is.”

Oxen looked away.

“So do I—in a way,” he said. “Not that I want her back. I’ve never been so care-free—we never got on. But I’d like to know she’s all right. She’s plenty of money, of course: about three thousand a year. But I find it strange her not having sent for her things.”

“So do we,” said Falcon. “And people are talking, you know. Will you tell me what happened, Mr. Oxen?”

Oxen took out tobacco and started to fill a pipe.

“I said just now,” he said, “that we never got on. That isn’t quite accurate. We got along very well for about three years. And then we began to quarrel—I don’t know why.”

“When was that?” said Falcon.

“About two years ago, I’ve been married five.”

“Relatives?”

“None, thank God. Neither she nor I. Distant cousins, you know; but no more than that.”

“Yes?”

“Well, we scrapped and made it up and scrapped again. Always across each other. It may have been my fault, but I think it was hers. That, I suppose, is natural. She probably feels the same. I never could bear disorder of any kind. I cannot do my work, unless there is order about me—the garden tidy, the whole house swept and garnished, everything in its place. To her, such things meant nothing. She’d upset the contents of an ashtray, and never ring for a servant to sweep them up. I mention this, because as a bone of contention, I fancy it took first place.”

“You asked rather a lot, and she gave less than nothing. Is that about right?”

“Exactly. Well, one Sunday in May—the 13th—we had one of our usual rows, and both of us said some hard things. We were going to Town the next day—driving up. We used to go up about once in every ten days. We left in the morning, as usual,

but we hadn't got very far before we started again. A car's a bad place to have a row in . . . And as we were nearing Egham, my wife said, 'That's enough. I'm not going any farther. Put me down at Egham, and I'll get a Green Line 'bus.' Well, we'd just passed one of these, so I knew that she'd be in London nearly as soon as I. So I said, 'All right.' And I put her down at Egham, just as she said.

"As I was nearing Town, it occurred to me that we hadn't arranged about meeting for us to drive home. But she knew that I'd lunch at my club and I guessed that she'd ring me up. And so she did—just about half-past one. She said, 'Hullo, is that you?' And I said it was. 'Well, don't hang about,' she said, 'for I'm not coming back. I'm leaving—quitting for good. And that is that.' And then she rang off.

"I won't describe my emotions, except to say that I was seething with rage. I don't quite know why. I'd like to have answered back, but I didn't know where she was. So I couldn't do anything. But I felt that to leave like that was letting me down. It made me look such a fool. At least, I should look a fool when I got back home.

"Well, I don't mind admitting I did feel a hell of a fool. All the way down I was thinking how on earth I could carry it off. I decided to be as casual as ever I could. So I shoved the car away, walked into the house and asked if she'd telephoned. The butler said 'No.' 'Well, I expect she will,' I said. 'Or at least she'll send for her things. They'd better be packed to-morrow. She's not coming back.' With that, I left him gaping and went and had a stiff drink. And except that, two days later, I asked if her stuff was ready—and he said it was—

I've never referred to the matter by word or deed. Perhaps I should have done so; but the honest truth is this—that her absence relieved me so much that I came to live in dread of disturbing a sleeping dog. I don't want her back, Chief Inspector, and that's the truth. Now that she's gone, I'm like a boy out of school."

"You don't have to have her back. If she returned to-morrow, you'd have a perfect right to send her away."

"Perhaps. But it would be awkward. And it would upset my work. Throw me out of my stride, you know. I've worked as well again since I've been alone."

Falcon sighed.

"There are times, Mr. Oxen, when personal inclinations have to give way. The lady is still your wife, and you cannot just shed all responsibility for her, because she has absented herself. We want to know where she is and we naturally come to you. As her husband, you must help us to find her."

"What can I do?"

Falcon raised his eyebrows.

"If I were you," he said, "I should get in touch with her bank."

"Of course," said Oxen, quietly. He closed his eyes. "You must think me a full-marks fool, but that never occurred to me."

"It wouldn't have. I'm used to these things. Where did she bank?"

“At the Westminster. Cork Street Branch. And if I fail at the bank?”

“You’ll have to advertise.”

Oxen made a grimace.

“That will entail publicity of a very unpleasant kind.”

“Perhaps. But that can’t be helped. She’s got to be found. And I think I ought to say this—that, so far, I’ve only heard your side. I make no accusation. All you have said may be true. But to us it’s a case of disappearance—no more and no less. As such, it is our duty to investigate it. And that we shall do.”

“If you must, you must,” sighed Oxen. He got to his feet. “And I suppose I must help you—against my will. It won’t be very pleasant for me. The place will be alive with reporters from dawn to dusk. And I shall get hundreds of letters spouting abuse. D’you advise me to see my solicitors?”

Falcon rose.

“All this,” he said, “all this might never have happened, if you had taken that step three months ago.”

“You’re right, of course,” muttered Oxen. “I’ve been the damnedest fool. But it’s all her fault for leaving me in the air. If she wanted to go, well and good. But she needn’t have gone like that.”

As they walked to the house—

“D’you want to see the servants?” he said.

“I’d like to see the butler,” said Falcon.

“Very well.”

“And, after that, I’d like to see over the house.”

“With pleasure,” said Oxen. He laughed. “You’ll find it in order now.”

* * * * * * * *

The following evening Falcon made his report.

“That’s Mrs. Oxen, sir.” A photograph passed. “It doesn’t tell us much; but she doesn’t look too good-tempered, and that’s what the butler said.”

“What else did he say?”

“He bore out what Oxen said about the fourteenth of May; the two left the house together, and only one came back. Left about nine, came back about a quarter-past eight. Quite normal, that.

“I don’t think he cares for Oxen, but he says it’s quite a good place. He didn’t like Mrs. Oxen. She had a very sharp tongue. Very irregular. Heard her say once, ‘You married me for my money. And then, within six months, you had your big success. So you didn’t need my money. . . . If only you’d known.’ That rings true, sir. Besides, I’ve checked it up. He married in June ’33 and had his big success in October that year.”

“A trying lady, Falcon.”

“I think so, sir. But Oxen gave it her back. The continual scrapping certainly affected his work. According to the butler, that is. Towards the end, he’d spend three days in the garden for every one at his desk. ‘How the hell can I write?’ he’d cry. And she’d shrug her shoulders and laugh.”

The Assistant Commissioner frowned.

“Other women?” he said.

“I don’t think so, sir. I thought we’d keep a look-out.”

“I see. Go on.”

“Well, then I went over the place—with Oxen, of course. It’s really most awfully nice, and he’s got some beautiful things. All his own, he says. Mostly family stuff. And, my word, he was right about order. I’ve never seen anything like it, within and without. The rooms look dressed, like shop-windows; the garden is just the same. The paths and lawns are a picture: the latter are mown every day. I think the stables and coach-house impressed me most. Workshops and garage, really. One loose-box, the carpenter’s shop; the other, sand and cement and all that a mason could want; gardener’s stuff in the stalls. The coach-house is better kept than many a drawing-room. Two cars. A very nice sportsman’s coupé 25 h.p. Rolls, and a little M.G. No chauffeur. He uses the M.G. now, for the Rolls is hers. ‘I paid for it,’ he said, ‘and it’s in my name. And we both of us used it, of course. But in fact I gave it to her, and I don’t feel inclined to use it in case she asks for it back.’ That was all there was to see. It doesn’t sound very much, but when you see

all in such order—well, everything's magnified."

"Yes?"

"No letters for Mrs. Oxen, but two or three bills. And statements of her account. I took these with me to-day, when I went to the bank. There can be no doubt that she's dead. Her last cheque was drawn on the tenth—four days before she left him—three months and ten days ago. And that, sir, is as much as I know."

"What do you think?"

Falcon stared out of the window.

"Oxen's not a nice man, sir. I'm sure he knows his wife's dead; and I had the impression that he was ready for us."

"Murder?"

"Yes, I think so. Two people got into that Rolls, to go up to Town; but only one arrived. He says she got out and into a Green Line 'bus: but I think he is saying that, to explain his arrival alone. Too late to check it, of course. And we can't check the telephone-call which he says she made. He knows that all right. He knows that we can check nothing—because of the lapse of time."

"He killed her on the way up?"

"I think so, sir. And not on impulse. He'd got it all worked out. He never dropped her at Egham. He dropped her long before that—at some very quiet spot . . . I propose to have a look at

the country round about there. Between Footman's Hassock and Basingstoke. There may be a derelict shaft not far from the road. Or a well, or something. I know it sounds pretty hopeless . . ."

"Yes," said his chief, "it does. I was always afraid of this. Have you read the fellow's books?"

"Three, sir, to date. I was reading one last night. He's a very clever man. I suppose you'd call them 'thrillers,' but they're really beautifully done. Every end tied up. He never puts a foot wrong."

The Assistant Commissioner nodded.

"I had the same impression. We're up against something here."

* * * * * * * *

The advertisements went in, and the Press had the time of its life. Reporters repaired in swarms to the Manor House. It was not very nice for Oxen. On the whole he kept his temper remarkably well. Then somebody backed his car on to one of the shaven lawns . . . Oxen went off the deep end—and kept the entrance-gates locked from that time on.

For fourteen days on end, Falcon, with four good men, was exploring the countryside. They passed as surveyors. The weather continuing fine, the five camped out, and the days and nights in the air did the lot of them good. But all their efforts were fruitless. If a body was there when they came, it was there when they went.

The four returned to London, and Falcon walked with his suitcase to Footman's Hassock's inn. For a week-end only. Having no idea who he was, habitual customers talked while they drank their beer. About the Oxens, of course. Falcon listened, joined in and drew them out. Then Oxen's gardener came in and gave Falcon away. The Chief Inspector laughed and stood drinks all round. Soon tongues were wagging again. . . .

"Particular?" said the gardener. "Find me another word. An' he's worse nor what he was before Mrs. Oxen went. Flares up an' fires young Pearson for walkin' into the garage without 'avin' wiped 'is feet." He turned to Falcon. "Bert Pearson used to come special to wash the cars."

"Ah, that was before she went," said somebody else. "Bert came in ragin' about it the Saturday night before."

"Was it?" said the gardener. "Oh, well, he's worse than he was. I'm afraid to go into them stables. . . ."

"Who washes the cars?" said Falcon.

"Oh, he soon 'ad Bert back," said the gardener. "He done it himself once or twice: but that was more than enough. Got that wet, he did. But I will say he does good work. I don' mean writin' books. Mason's work—gutters and such like. He could give points, he could, to a lot of pros. In course 'e 'as lovely tools—all sent down from London, Army an' Navy Stores. Still, tools never made a mason. You ought to see 'im render a wall . . ."

When closing time came—too early—Falcon went for a stroll. Bert Pearson's dismissal was curious. Dismissed

just before Mrs. Oxen had disappeared. Brought back a few days later. And, during his absence, Oxen had washed the cars. *Oxen had washed the Rolls the day after the journey to Town.* There might be nothing in it, but Falcon was sure there was. Mud on the wheels, perhaps. Lane mud. Mud that does not belong to the King's highway. And Bert Pearson would have remarked it. 'He got that wet' . . . Falcon sighed. Oxen was provident . . . just like the men in his books . . . thought everything out. Such men were—difficult. And when they had three months' start . . .

The next day the Chief Inspector called at the Manor House.

Oxen was working—writing: but when he heard Falcon was there, he laid down his pen.

"Well, Chief Inspector, I hope you're satisfied."

Falcon shook his head.

"I shan't be that until Mrs. Oxen is found."

Oxen shrugged his shoulders.

"Why pretend?" he said "You know as well as I do that she must be dead. When I went to the Bank and found her account untouched—well, I put the advertisements in because I had said I would, but . . ."

"Exactly," said Falcon. "Her failure to draw any cheques could mean only one thing."

Oxen rose and began to pace the room.

“I feel badly about it,” he said. “I can’t deny that. It wasn’t my fault, of course, and I can’t pretend that life isn’t pleasanter now. But—well, I wished her no ill. And she might have had quite a good time on three thousand a year.” He stood still there and looked round. “I don’t know if she made a Will, but I won’t touch a penny-piece. If anything goes to me, it goes on to charity.”

“And the Rolls?” said Falcon. “What shall you do about that?”

Oxen repressed an almost imperceptible start.

Then—

“Oh, I think I can keep that,” he said. “I admit that I gave it to her; but nobody knows that but you and it’s registered in my name.”

“She may have willed it,” said Falcon.

“It’s possible,” said Oxen, doubtfully.

“It’s a matter for the lawyers,” said Falcon. “And, by the way, may I see that car again?” Oxen stared. “You see, if you rule out yourself, your butler was the last known person to see Mrs. Oxen alive. And then she was in the Rolls. So I wish to examine it.”

“Haven’t you tried the Green Line?”

“Yes. With no result. No conductor can remember that he picked up your wife at Egham three months ago.”

“They won’t swear they didn’t?”

“Oh, no.”

“And the telephone-call?”

Falcon rose.

“The police are not magicians, Mr. Oxen.”

“Then I think you might take my word.”

“I don’t say that I don’t. And now may I see the car?”

The two made their way to the stables—two minutes’ walk. Oxen produced a key, and they entered the harness-room. Remembering Bert Pearson, Falcon made use of the mat. Oxen led the way into the coach-house and opened the coach-house doors.

The Rolls was in perfect condition. No dent, no scratch. Falcon opened her doors and looked inside. Then he took a torch from his pocket and went over every inch. Nothing. He got out and slammed the doors to.

“No carpet at the back, Mr. Oxen.”

Oxen laughed.

“You have a knack of flicking me on the raw.”

“What exactly d’you mean?”

“You’ve unearthed the last offence my wife gave me.”

“What was that?”

“She was smoking, as we drove up. She threw out a cigarette-end—or thought she did. In fact, it fell behind her, within the car. I never saw it, of course. As we were nearing Bagshot, I noticed a smell of burning. . . . By the time I had found what it was, the rug was smouldering fast. I stopped, got out and ripped it out of the car. The road was dirty and wet. By the time I’d stamped the fire out, the rug was foul. I pitched it into the ditch, got back in the car and went on. I think that put the lid on our final row. You’ll admit it was very annoying.”

Falcon raised his eyebrows.

“Accidents do occur.”

* * * * * * * *

The next day Falcon went to the Army and Navy Stores. There he asked for a manager and, when he came, showed him his card.

“I think Mr. Coles Oxen is one of your customers.”

The manager went off to see. When he came back—

“You’re quite right,” he said: “he is.”

“I don’t want to take up your time, but I’d like to see his account. I want to see what he bought the first half of this year.”

“Certainly,” said the manager. “Come this way. It’ll take some time, of course. But we have the original bills.”

It was a bow at a venture. This the Chief Inspector would have been the first to admit. But when he saw what he had brought down, he could hardly believe his eyes.

This was a bill for two nail-files at five and sixpence apiece. It was signed at half-past three on a Monday afternoon. Monday, the fourteenth of May. It was signed by Helena Oxen—who had the right to sign on her husband’s account.

* * * * * * * *

The Assistant Commissioner looked at the bill once more and then handed it back. Falcon received it in silence.

“And the bank says it’s her signature?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Still think the man’s guilty?”

“I’m sure of that, sir.”

“But this knocks your theory out.”

“I know, sir. It’s very confusing. I’d made up my mind that she never got up to Town.”

“More. It bears out his tale.”

“I can’t deny that, sir. And yet I’m sure he killed her. Why did

he get rid of Pearson? And where's that mat?"

The Assistant Commissioner sighed.

"I agree," he said, "the whole thing's highly suspicious. But that is as much as we can say." He hesitated. "I'm sorry, Falcon, but we shall have to give it up. You've been on this more than a month, and I want you for other work. There's this Jordan matter, for instance. Rowe's making no progress at all."

"Will you give me one more week, sir?"

"No, I won't. I'll give you another two days. I shan't be here to-morrow or Thursday. If you've nothing by Thursday evening, you've got to throw in your hand: and on Friday morning take over the Jordan case."

"Very good, sir."

* * * * * * * *

Seated alone in his room, Chief Inspector Falcon stared at his blotting-pad. The day was Wednesday; the hour was four o'clock. The man was tired of thinking—racking his brain. It was bad enough to draw blank—wherever you went: but to have your conviction disproved by the victim herself. . . . That was very hard. To make matters worse, Falcon still felt in his heart that the Green 'bus tale was a lie.

"Confusion confounded," said Falcon, and picked up *The Evening News*.

There is reason to believe that Mr. Coles Oxen, the well-known author, has decided to leave Footman's Hassock and that the Manor House, which he owns, has been put in the hands of a firm of London Estate Agents.

"Wonder if that's true," murmured Falcon.

After a minute or two, he took up his hat and went out.

He walked up Whitehall, and the exercise did him good.

He visited two house-agents without success.

"Three's lucky," he said, approaching a well-known office in Berkeley Square.

One of the partners received him and heard him out. Then he leaned forward, to touch a bell on his desk.

"I'll just make sure, Chief Inspector: but I don't think he's written to us. And I think he would have done so, if he was proposing to go. I mean, we sold him the place. And he was ——"

Here the door was opened, and a clerk came into the room.

"Oh, Chase. The Manor House, Footman's Hassock. You know. Mr. Oxen's place. Is that in our hands—to be sold?"

"No, sir."

“Excuse me,” said Falcon, “but what were you going to say, when Mr. Chase entered the room?”

The partner put a hand to his head. Then—

“Oh, I know. I was going to say that we saw him not long ago. Some time in June, I think. And he was very pleasant. If there was anything doing, I feel sure he’d come to us.”

“May I ask what he was here for?”

“He was after some photographs. We got out a prospectus, you know, when the house was for sale. Illustrated. It seems he’s made a lot of improvements; but he wanted to have pictures taken from similar points of view. And then put the two side by side.”

“I see. Were you able to help him?”

“We raked up two or three copies, didn’t we, Chase?”

“Two, sir. I meant to have told you—two more turned up last week. Shall I send them to Mr. Oxen? I remember he said he wanted all we had left.”

Before the partner could answer—

“I’d very much rather,” said Falcon, “you gave them to me.” 190

* * * * * * * *

Back in his office, Falcon marshalled his thoughts. These, no

longer listless, leapt into place.

By the merest accident, he stumbled upon a mistake which Oxen had made. The only mistake, it seemed. Oxen had sought to recover all the copies of a document which, read aright, would give him away. A foolish act, of course. Who on earth would think of a prospectus, filed in a house-agent's office, four years old? But that was beside the point—which was that *somewhere within that prospectus* was lying the clue which would bring the murderer down.

The prospectus was very well done. A map of the property: a ground-plan of each of the floors: short, well-written descriptions: and six photographs.

Falcon studied the map and the plans, until his eyes ached. Then he sent for Inspector Ross, gave him the second copy and told him to use his brain.

After twenty minutes' endeavour—

"But what are we looking for?" said Ross.

"I'm damned if I know," said Falcon. "But I *do* know this—that Oxen's afraid of something in this prospectus. It's up to you and me to find out what it is."

The two bent again to their task.

Suddenly Falcon looked up.

"Wait a moment," he said.

“Have you got it, Chief?” cried Ross.

“No. But I’m half-way home. Listen. We thought . . . *I* thought . . . *I* was sure that Oxen murdered his wife on the way up to Town. The Stores’ invoice proved me wrong. So I had to make up my mind that he did her in on the way back. *But it never occurred to me that he brought her home in the car.*”

“O-o-oh,” cried Ross, pointing. “Of course you’re right.”

Falcon tapped the prospectus.

“Now we know what to look for, Ross. This document here will tell us where she lies.”

It was Chief Inspector Falcon who found the answer at last. Ross had gone home, worn out. And Falcon was very tired.

The answer was not in the map: nor yet in the plans: nor yet in the photographs. It was in the text. And the answer was two words long.

* * * * * * * *

At half-past twelve the next day three police cars slowed down at the Manor House gates. In the third was sitting Bert Pearson, saucer-eyed.

Falcon alone went in and up to the house . . .

Very soon he appeared with Oxen, pale in the face.

The two walked down to the stables.

As they approached the building, two other detectives appeared and followed behind.

“I should like the coach-house opened,” said Falcon. “Opened right up.”

“Certainly,” said Oxen.

He took a key from his pocket and entered the harness-room. A moment later the coach-house doors were opened, and the two detectives took them and swung them wide.

Falcon spoke again.

“I’d like the M.G. out. My men will do it.”

Oxen stared.

“As you please.”

In silence the smaller car was man-handled into the yard.

Ross appeared with Bert Pearson.

Beads of sweat were standing on Oxen’s brow.

Falcon spoke again.

“And now the Rolls.”

Oxen frowned.

“You know my objection to that. It may be very silly, but——”

“Your objection is over-ruled.”

Oxen shrugged his shoulders.

In silence the Rolls was pushed out.

Falcon glanced at Bert Pearson, whose eyes seemed to be upon stalks. Then he put a hand in his pocket and pulled a document out.

“Read those words, Mr. Oxen. The words I have underlined.”

His face a wet mask of gray, Oxen lowered his eyes.

Fine double garage (late coach-house). Inspection pit.

The print swam in front of Oxen. At last he looked up.

“Yes?”

“Once a pit, always a pit. When did you seal it, Mr. Oxen?”

There was a long silence.

Falcon spoke to one of his men.

“The photographer and the masons,” was all he said.

“Very good, sir.”

As the man left the yard, Oxen opened his mouth.

“Take me now,” he said, thickly. “I’d rather not be here when you open it up.”

* * * * * * * *

The Director of Public Prosecutions sat back in his chair.

“Go on, Chief Inspector. On the Saturday he fires Bert Pearson.”

Falcon went on.

“That night—or the following night—he leaves the house, when the others have gone to bed. He enters the coach-house, of which he alone has the key. The coach-house is very deep, and the Rolls is easy to move. With her nose against the back wall, she is almost clear of the pit. Two other points. First, he can get to the stables by way of the harness-room: secondly, the coach-house has no window and so he can use the light, without being observed.

“That night he constructs his cradle—the rough, wooden platform to hold the concrete in place, until it has set. It’s very straightforward work for most of the wood is there. Say two hours, or two and a half. Then he replaces the Rolls and goes back to bed.

“He does the murder on Monday, on the way back from Town. In the car, no doubt. Just hits her over the head. And then he drives home with her in the back of the car. He puts the car away and goes up to the house. That night he goes out again, when the servants have gone to bed. He locks himself into the coach-house and moves the Rolls. He takes

two planks out of his cradle and drops his wife's body through—down into the pit. And the mat—which was marked. Then he puts back the planks and measures and cuts his iron rods. He lays them in place on the ledge which had supported the wood. Then he mixes his concrete. As there's a tap in the stables, he doesn't have to go out. Then he seals the inspection pit. Say three hours' work—in all. Then he clears up, moves the Rolls back, shuts up and goes to bed.

"The following day he washes the Rolls himself. Then he puts the Rolls away and lets her stay put. She's low and long, and, so long as she wasn't moved, no one—not even Bert Pearson—could possibly know that any work had been done."

The steady voice came to an end.

For a moment nobody spoke. Then the Assistant Commissioner lifted his voice.

"Does you great credit, Falcon. I'm very pleased. It's a dead case now. And two days ago . . ."

The Chief Inspector smiled—ruefully.

"I'm not at all proud of myself, sir. Right under my nose, from the first. Right—under—my—nose. But I couldn't see it. Nearly five weeks wasted, sir. The whole of the sum came out in the very last twenty-four hours."

"I don't agree," said the Director. The others regarded him. "I don't consider that one minute was wasted here. The man had three months' start. How on earth could you tell which way the fellow had gone? Besides, he was very clever. That tale of the

Green Line ’bus. He *meant* you to think that he’d murdered her on the way up.”

“I never thought of that, sir.”

“Ah, but he did. It was extremely skilful. He laid a drag, which led you away from the house. The Green Line ’bus and the telephone-call were lies. You recognized them as such—and instantly made up your mind that he drove into London alone. That was your first impression: and first impressions are almost always right. What is more, they are very hard to eradicate. Oxen knew all that. He’s a clever man.”

“He very nearly got home, sir. If I hadn’t been to the Stores . . .”

“See how well he had done his work. You saw in that bill the axe which demolished your case.”

“I did,” said the Assistant Commissioner.

“In fact, it was a sign-post, telling you which way to go.”

“I failed to read it,” said Falcon.

“Of course. He’d blinded your eyes. But that didn’t matter, Chief Inspector, because you have a faculty which is more precious than sight.”

“What’s that, sir?” said Falcon.

“Instinct,” said the Director. “I have remarked it before. And that’s where Oxen fell down. You *knew* that he was guilty. And

that’s why you wouldn’t let go.”

AND ADELA, TOO

Major Piers Mariner read through the letter again.

25th November, 1939.

Dear Sir,

Miss Emma Birley decd.

In reply to your letter of the 21st inst., we are now in a position to tell you that, by the last Will of this lady, dated December 1934, you are her residuary legatee. Since the legacies which she left amount to no more than six hundred pounds, you therefore become entitled to practically the whole of her estate, real and personal. This consists of her small property in Dorsetshire, with the dwelling-house and its contents, and rather more than one hundred thousand pounds, invested in gilt-edged stocks. No restrictions are imposed, but the hope is expressed that you will occupy and maintain the property with the help of the income of the capital mentioned above.

Before coming to any decision, you will naturally wish to inspect the property in question, and it would be very convenient if you could obtain leave of absence as soon as possible, for the servants, now in charge of the house, are anxious to know their position.

We need hardly say that we shall be happy to keep any appointment in London which you may be able to make and to give you all those particulars which it is impossible to write, but we think you will be interested to know that the late Miss Birley was a very old friend of your Mother, to whom she was deeply attached.

We are, dear Sir,
Yours faithfully,
Hammett and Mole.

Major Mariner laid down the letter and covered his eyes.

"These things don't happen," he murmured. "It can't be true. There's a snag and a half somewhere—I'll lay to that."

His doubt was reasonable. Fortune smiles or frowns upon high and low, but she very rarely relents, and she still more rarely makes good and more than good an injury which she has done.

In 1938, tired of knocking about and longing for a place of his own, Mariner had sunk his fortune in one small enterprise. There was nothing the matter with his judgment—a fortnight before the war, the enterprise was paying forty per cent., and then it stopped dead. When the man reported for duty, all his debts had been paid and he had an empty factory which nobody wanted to buy. But that was as much as he had—and he had always lived well . . .

And now this letter had come—this patent of peace and plenty, bringing his heart's desire to one of the pleasantest fellows that

ever strolled on to parade.

He was not in France at the moment: he was instructing cadets upon English soil. The soil was soaking and was swept by a bitter wind: the surroundings were bleak and uninspiring: as a residence, his hut was undesirable, but, though twice over the Colonel had offered him leave, the man had only smiled and asked to be sent to France.

Mariner sat up with a shock.

France, of course. Every time. But not for a week. He must see his—his heritage first.

'The Colonel was more than sympathetic. Mariner left the next morning on seven days' leave.

* * * * * * * *

As the train drew out of Paddington, Mariner settled himself for a care-free doze. It was now two o'clock, and he had been up since five. A long train-journey to London, a long interview with Messrs. Hammett and Mole, and a painfully short lunch had been successfully crowded into the last eight hours; and now he was on the last lap, bound for the village of Unicorn, seven miles from a station whose name was Pless.

Mr. Hammett had been inspiring.

"It's really a small 'show place,' brought right up to date. It's convenient, good to look at and terribly comfortable. Just enough land. The servants are quite admirable—the old-fashioned type, you know. The butler knows how to serve

wine, and his wife is an excellent cook. And most reliable people. They've been in charge now for three months, for Miss Birley fell ill in London and died without going home. Acute arthritis, they said. She used to go to Droitwich, to take the cure. Anyway, there you are. Her very agreeable home is a going concern. I know what I should do, but it's up to you."

"You're sure there's no snag?"

"How can there be, Major Mariner? By the way, as Miss Birley was insured against death duties and there was over three thousand standing to her account, we're ready to pay you two thousand here and now. Would you like us to send it to your bank?"

"Yes, please."

Of such had been the interview . . .

Mariner fell asleep with a smile on his face.

After nearly half an hour, he woke with a start. The train was pulling out of a station.

"My God," he cried. "That wasn't Pless?"

Two pairs of eyes regarded him.

Then—

"Pless is to come," said an archdeacon. "To the best of my belief, you will reach there in an hour and three-quarters. But that is surmise, for it is my habit to alight elsewhere."

“Thank you very much,” said Mariner, humbly. And then, “I should like to apologize.”

The prelate inclined his head, and Mariner’s eyes met those of his *vis-à-vis*. There was no doubt about it—the latter was trying not to laugh. Her slim forefinger was fast between her regular teeth. And her excellent throat was vibrating.

“A scream, isn’t it?” said Mariner.

The lady covered her eyes and let herself go. . . .

The ice being properly smashed, the three got on very well for nearly an hour. Then the prelate took his leave, and Adela Leith and the soldier were left to themselves.

“Scratch the divine,” said Piers, “and you get the salt of the earth. Not always, of course, but a sense of humour will get you a hell of a way. That is why Germany will never learn. The average Boche has no more sense of humour than a skunk with a sore tail.” He glanced at the countryside. “D’you know Dorset at all? I haven’t been there for years.”

“I live in Dorset—about seven miles from Pless.”

Mariner opened his eyes.

“Not—not at Unicorn?” he stammered.

It was Adela’s turn to stare.

“That’s our village,” she said. “We live about half a mile off.”

“Well I’m damned,” said Piers. “I mean, that’s where I’m bound for—the village of Unicorn.”

The girl regarded him squarely.

“Address, the Dower House?”

“That’s right.”

“Which means that you’re the new owner. I’m glad of that.”

“Why are you glad?” said Piers.

“Well, we didn’t know, you see. We didn’t know what to expect. You might have been simply poisonous, for all we knew.”

Mariner sighed.

“I’m glad I’m not poisonous,” he said. “But I don’t quite see what it matters. If I had been simply poisonous, you could have left me alone.”

Adela raised her eyebrows.

“To be frank,” she said, “we’re rather fond of the place. At least, I am. I’ve known it since I was twelve. I—used to see a lot of Jane Austen. That’s what we always called her. She was exactly like Jane.”

There was a little silence.

Then—

“It’s clear,” said the man, “that I’m an interloper. I suppose you know I never saw her in all my life.”

“That doesn’t make you an interloper. People can’t live for ever, and when they disappear, then someone must take their place.”

“That’s hardly a stranger’s job.”

“Not as a rule, I admit. But Jane had no relations and very few friends.”

“Well, I don’t understand it,” said Piers. “I shouldn’t think anyone does. Er, was she at all eccentric?”

Adela shook her head.

“She was very level-headed. Her ruling passion was order: she couldn’t bear a book to be out of place. When you go through her papers——”

“Good lord,” said Piers. “D’you mean to say Hammett and Mole haven’t done all that?”

“I quite expect they have; but, unless you destroy them *en masse*, you’ll have to do it again. But it won’t be difficult. They’ll all be in perfect order—I’m sure of that.”

Piers Mariner swallowed.

“Perhaps you’ll come and help me,” he said. “Unless you would find it distressing to——”

“Oh, no. It wouldn’t distress me. I’d like to come. You see, though I saw her a lot, I never got to know her. Nobody did. Her detachment was supernatural. I rather despair of making you understand: but one had the same feeling for her as one has, for instance, for a really fine Chippendale chair. She was correct—charming. But if she had any feeling, she never let it appear.”

“She was a study,” said Piers.

“Exactly,” said Adela Leith. “And being free of the Dower House was like having a permanent private view. The house and its contents made the most perfect setting for her personality.”

Mariner sighed.

“I see,” he said, “that I’m going to let everything down—servants, setting and atmosphere. The Athenæum elects a Chicago tough.”

“Which is absurd,” said Adela. “You’ll simply turn a museum into a home.”

“Yes, and what about the attendants? I mean, when I’m on leave, I like to have my breakfast at ten o’clock.”

“I’m sure they’ll be perfectly happy, as long as you let them go on as they’ve always gone. They’re mad about the place, and all they’re afraid of is change. If you like to let them run it ——”

“It’s all I ask,” said Piers.

“Then you’ve nothing to fear. After two or three weeks——”

“Two or three weeks? There’s a war on—or so they say. In any event, I’ve only got seven days’ leave.”

Adela bit her lip.

“Oh, well, you’ll be coming back.”

“Perhaps—in six months’ time, if I’m still on the face of the earth.”

Adela hesitated. Then—

“Well, I shall be half a mile off. If any crisis arises, they’ve only to ring me up. Of course, that’s just as you please: but if it would be a convenience. I’d be very happy to help.”

“If I had my way,” said Piers, “you’d come and induct me to-night.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Well, come and have lunch to-morrow. Let me temper the wind to my staff. If I can begin by saying, ‘Oh, by the way, Hawkins, Miss Leith will be here to lunch,’ a positive wave of relief will——”

“I don’t quite see why it should: but I’ll come if you like.”

“It will give me great pleasure,” said Piers, and spoke no more than the truth.

Any man would have been very happy to entertain Adela Leith in a public place: but lunch alone with her in a private house belonged to the realm of visions which young men see, which still are no more than dreams when they reach old age. The lady was immensely attractive—from every point of view.

* * * * * * * *

Nearly three hours had gone by, and the man was dozing before a luxurious fire. The room was in darkness, save for the shaded light of a standard lamp; but the solid mahogany panelling rendered the flicker of the logs, and the silver dial of an elegant tall-case clock caught and gave back to the eye what light there was.

A perfect servant entered the lovely room.

A discreet cough. Then—

“Excuse me, sir, but when would you like dinner served?”

“Hawkins,” said Piers, “I’m going to give you a shock. I’m afraid I like dining late.”

“Your time is our time, sir.”

“What about a quarter to nine? Will that throw you out too much?”

“Not at all, sir. A quarter to nine. Er, I’m afraid, sir, I can’t make a cocktail.”

“I’d prefer a glass of sherry—at half-past eight.”

“Very good, sir. May I serve champagne, sir? We still have two or three dozen of Cliquot 1904.”

“If you please, Hawkins. A marvellous wine. I thought I’d drunk my last twenty years ago.”

“I’m glad you like it, sir. And shall I decant some port?”

“Not after champagne. I’d like a glass of brandy, if you can give me that.”

“Oh, certainly, sir. And whisky and soda to follow.”

Mariner shook his head.

“I never drink after dinner. I’d like my brandy in here, but that’s the end.”

“Some barley-water, sir? Just to quench the thirst.”

“Yes, I would like that.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Oh, and give Mrs. Hawkins my compliments and ask her to excuse my not making her acquaintance to-night.”

“Thank you very much, sir. You’ve had a tiring day.”

“As a matter of fact, I have. And I rose at five, Hawkins, a fearful hour.”

“Especially at this time of year, sir. I’m rather afraid perhaps I disturbed you just now.”

“No, you didn’t, Hawkins. I wasn’t asleep.”

“Is there anything I can do for you, sir?”

“Nothing, thanks. I shall doze till it’s time to dress.”

“Very good, sir. Thank you.”

The perfect servant withdrew, and Mariner pinched himself, to be sure that he was awake. After a glance about him, he covered his eyes.

“There must be a snag somewhere,” he murmured. “Or else I’ve been dead for some hours and am now in Paradise.”

This impression was presently confirmed by a long and glorious bath and a dinner fit for a king, by mahogany winking with silver and Waterford glass, by *The Times* and *Punch* and three chapters of *Pride and Prejudice*—all five perused by the side of the library fire.

When Mariner laid himself down in a fine, four-poster bed at eleven o’clock—

“All this,” he murmured, “all this and Adela, too.” And as he was falling asleep, “There must be a snag somewhere.”

* * * * * * * *

“Well, what d’you think of it?” said Adela.

The two were standing in the sunshine upon the miniature terrace which ran the length of the house.

Mariner raised his eyebrows.

"'Behold, the half was not told me.' It's simply Perfection, with her feet up. To think that I've got to leave it in five days' time."

"That's a shame. Can't you get an extension of leave?"

"I daresay I could: but I shan't. A desire to prolong one's wallow can hardly be called an 'urgent, private affair.' However, I shall return: and one of these days, if I'm living, I shall return for good."

"And never go away any more?"

"Never," said the man. "Why should I? I'll never be half so happy anywhere else."

"Has it got you down so soon?"

Mariner looked away.

"For twenty years," he said, "I've dreamed of a place like this. Not half so perfect, of course. But a place of my own in the country—a little place, with a meadow or two and a man and his wife and a groom. It was always out of the question—until last year: and then it seemed that, if I worked all I knew, in three or four years I might have my heart's desire. Then the Boche went off the deep end, and everything crashed." He sighed. "Ten days ago the outlook was almost sordid. And now, clean out of the blue, I have been handed this

glorious heritage—entirely thanks to my mother. I don't suppose you knew that."

"Your mother?"

Mariner nodded.

"She's been dead for years, of course. But Miss Birley liked her so well that she left her son a fortune for old times' sake. And now come in and play hostess; for here and now I warn you I won't treat you as a guest."

Adela laughed.

"The perfect host," she said. "After lunch may I see Mrs. Hawkins?"

"Wrong," said Mariner. "'After lunch I'm going to see Mrs. Hawkins'—and try to persuade her to give the usurper a chance."

"I don't think that will be necessary."

The lady was right. Mrs. Hawkins's declaration of loyalty left nothing to be desired.

"You know we was anxious, Miss Adela, not knowing what to expect. But 'Awkins come in last night an' he says, 'Maria,' he says, 'the Major's a jool.' And 'Awkins is 'ard to please. And this morning I was waitin' to be summoned when in he strolls into the kitchen with a pipe in his mouth. 'How d'ye do, Mrs. 'Awkins,' he says, an' puts out his hand. Then he takes his seat on the table an' sits there swinging his legs, thanks me for the

dinner I'd cooked him and talks to me, gay and natural, for a quarter 'f an hour. Then, 'I'm interruptin' you,' he says, an' gets to his feet. 'Oh, no, sir,' says I. 'I'm sure it's been a great pleasure.' 'The pleasure's been mine,' he says, 'an' I warn you I'm comin' again.' Then he says how nice an' comfortable everything was and that if there was anything we wanted we'd only to say the word. It's a wicked shame—'is 'aving to go so soon."

The truth is the servants welcomed a humanity which they had never experienced for seventeen years. Their devotion to their late mistress had been intense. But Miss Birley had been their lady spiritual. The change from her service to that of a lord temporal suited the two honest souls far better than they knew.

Back in the library, Adela made her report.

"As I expected," she said, "the conquest you've made is complete."

"Don't be fulsome," said Piers. "They're only giving me credit because you're backing my bill. And I'm not surprised Miss Birley liked having you here. You see, you show everything off. That's obviously a good chair: but with you in its arms it becomes a specimen piece."

If that was fantasy, it was more than founded on fact, for Adela's youth and beauty must have done anyone good. Her soft, dark hair and gray eyes, her regular, clean-cut features and her most agreeable smile, her straight, slim figure and really exquisite legs—these things could never have failed to rejoice

the most critical eye. The trouble was that nobody ever saw them. Her mother was dead: her father, Sir Jasper Leith, was painfully poor—and proud. He denied himself everything, to keep intact the estate which a Jasper Leith had held for more than three hundred years. Unfortunately, he denied his attractive daughter everything, too. Adela had not the clothes in which to go out and about. The two evening dresses she had were three years old.

The girl had been faintly surprised that 'Jane Austen' had left her nothing, when she had died. The latter had known very well how unkind was Adela's lot, and must have been well aware that only a hundred pounds would have been of the greatest help. But people were strange about money . . . And when all was said and done 'Jane' had been kindness itself for more than ten years. She had been free of the Dower House all that time. It looked as if the charter would be renewed—with the new owner absent, except for a bare week's leave, say, twice in the year.

Adela sighed.

"I came," she said, "to help you go through the papers."

"I know," said Piers; "but first you must show me the house. I haven't been over it yet, and I will not have my own servants telling me what is what."

Adela smiled.

"You'll feel it less, if a stranger——"

"You're not a stranger. I've never felt strange with you. I think

perhaps it's your mouth. Not that I've seen it before, for no one has ever seen such a beautiful thing. But, when you smile, it sort of——"

"That'll do." The girl got to her feet. "Come and look at the morning-room. By the way, that writing-table was made by Sheraton himself. It's been photographed more than once for the furniture books."

It was past four o'clock when Adela said she must go.

"But we haven't started the papers, Adela—dear."

"That's your fault. It's rising half-past four, and I've got to be back by five."

Mariner swallowed.

"I'm sure Mrs. Hawkins——"

"Sorry, Piers. I've simply got to get back."

"May I hope that you'll come to-morrow?"

Adela shook her head.

"I'd like you to meet my father. I'm not going to ask you to lunch; but come to tea to-morrow at five o'clock."

"I'd love to, of course. But I don't like letting you go. I didn't feel lonely last night, but I shall to-night."

"You're very downright, aren't you?"

“At least, I mean what I say.”

Adela smiled.

“I think you think you do. The truth is you’re rather bewildered, and I, who know the ropes, have been holding your hand. And now you don’t want to let go.”

Mariner shook his head.

“That isn’t the truth,” he said slowly. “The truth is I like to be with you, because you’re so very attractive in every way.”

He picked up Adela’s fingers and bent his head: but before he could kiss their tips, the girl had whipped them away.

“All in twenty-four hours?” she flashed.

“Seconds,” said Mariner, quickly. “I wanted to do that the moment I saw your face.”

* * * * * * * *

The next day little happened—except that Mariner knew that he was in love. He talked to himself, whilst shaving, and had things out.

“On the face of it, this is absurd: and yet, I’m forty-one and, except for Agatha Dust, I’ve never been bitten before. And why should I fall just now? The odds were dead against it. I’ve all and more than I want—without raking in some woman, to mess things up. But Adela isn’t ‘some woman.’ She’s—got repose. She’s like some old picture I’ve seen, and just as quiet. What I

can't understand is why she is on the market—a peach like that. She should have been swarming with swains before she was seventeen. And here she is—twenty-two, and wasting her precious days on one of the dangerous age. I'm miles too old, of course: but it seems to be the fashion to marry a child. Which is absurd. The whole blasted thing's absurd. And yet—last night I missed her . . . And I'm going to miss her to-day. I've seen her here in this house, and she fits right in. An' if I go off an' say nothing, and then come back in six months, to find she's gone and got off with somebody else . . . No, I couldn't face that. If there's nothing doing, all right. It can't be helped. But not to have a stab would be the act of a fool."

He walked to the Grange for tea—and saw with pain the nakedness of the land. Sir Jasper was very pleasant: his daughter was very quiet: Mariner had to work hard to bring the light into her eyes. But he extracted a promise that she would come to the Dower House the following day.

"I can't come to lunch. After lunch, if you like: but I mustn't stay very long."

Mariner walked home, raging. That a man should set pride of possession before such a daughter as that. Never mind. If she would take him, he'd give her a glorious show. Make up for everything. He'd put the light into those eyes—and keep it there.

* * * * * * * *

The next morning might have been that of an April day.

Reluctant to stay within doors, Mariner went for a stroll, and

met the Vicar, whose only son was learning to be an officer. Almost at once it appeared that the boy was one of Mariner's school of cadets. The Vicar, of course, was transported, and Mariner had to promise to visit the Vicarage later and meet the Vicar's wife. It was the least he could do. But Adela had to be wooed, and he only had three days left.

He could not sit still after lunch, but wandered about the Dower House, passing from room to room. Presently he mounted the stairs. If Adela came by the meadows and in by the garden gate, he should be able to see her a long way off. Proving his bedroom windows, he found he was wrong; for these looked south, but the lady would come from the east. He made for Miss Birley's bedroom, a little, austere chamber, right at the end of the house. But again he was foiled; for, though its windows looked east, the path through the meadows was screened by a belt of firs.

Mariner turned away and stood looking round the room. It might have been that of some prioress, simply but beautifully furnished with old, church oak. A *prie-dieu* stood in the corner: a heavy, well-worn Bible was lying beside the bed.

Not knowing why he did so, Mariner opened the Book.

Emma Birley from her Mother. 7th March, 1879.
The second chapter of Proverbs.

'The second chapter of Proverbs.'

Mariner turned to the passage, idly enough. This was easy to find, for a folded sheet of foolscap was lying between the pages, to mark the place.

He never read the words of the chapter, because the words on the foolscap blotted out everything else. Blotted out Bible and bedstead, blotted out austere chamber, blotted out light. Time stood still for ten seconds, while the fine handwriting retreated, until it became very small, and then came back again to its natural size.

Will
of
Emma Birley
September, 1938.

With shaking fingers, Mariner unfolded the sheet.

This is the last Will and Testament of me, Emma Birley, of the Dower House, Unicorn, Dorset.

I revoke all other wills heretofore made.

I leave to my faithful servants, William and Maria Hawkins the sum of five hundred pounds apiece, provided they are still in my service and not under notice at the time of my death.

I leave the whole of the rest of my property, real and personal, to Adela Codrington Leith, of The Grange, Unicorn, in the hope that she will occupy and maintain the Dower House, as I have done.

I appoint Messrs. Hammett and Mole, Solicitors, of 166 Great Tower Street, E.C., executors of this my Will.

Made at the —— Hotel, Droitwich,
on the sixth day of September, 1938.

Emma Birley.

Witnessed by:
George Wynans,
Hotel Porter.
Thomas Green,
Floor Waiter.

Mariner folded the paper and turned to stare out of a window with eyes that saw nothing at all.

"Very right and proper," he murmured. "No doubt about that." He sighed heavily. "I always felt there was a snag somewhere."

He closed the Bible and made his way downstairs.

He entered the exquisite library, keeping his eyes on the ground. The windows to the terrace were open, and the afternoon sunshine was slanting into the room, badging panels and books and a picture by Claude Lorrain. But the man did not wish to see it. The iron had entered deep enough into his soul.

He took his seat at the table which Sheraton made, and taking pen and paper, began to write:

Messrs Hammett and Mole.

Dear Sirs,

The enclosed document will speak for itself. It was within a Bible, by the side of Miss Birley's bed. I shall, of course, leave here to-morrow, and I enclose my cheque for the two thousand pounds which you were to pay into my bank. I should like to say that Miss Leith, the pleasure of whose acquaintance I happen to have, is very well known to the servants and is far better qualified to inherit than I was. I particularly wish that she should never know how this Will came into your hands.

The man had got so far, when Hawkins entered the room.

"Excuse me, sir, but the Vicar would like to speak to you on the telephone."

Mariner smothered an oath.

"All right, Hawkins. I'll come."

He got to his feet and passed out into the hall . . .

Nearly five minutes went by before he got back. The Vicar had been insistent—could not accept the fact that Mariner found he must leave the following day. Then the Vicar's wife had to speak, to voice her disappointment, to venture to commend to his kindness her only boy. It was all very natural—and nearly drove Mariner mad. He hardly knew what he was saying. When at last he got back to his table, he wiped the sweat from his face.

He had sealed and addressed his letter, before a step on the terrace declared that my lady was there.

Mariner braced himself.

Then he stood up, to play the scene of his life.

* * * * * * * *

Nearly two hours had gone by, when Adela rose.

“I’m disappointed in you. You admit that you’re not recalled: and yet to-morrow morning you’re taking the London train.”

“Adela, dear, I tell you I’ve business in Town. Then again I’ve a letter to post. If I post it here, God knows when it’ll fetch up.”

“Where to?”

“The City.”

“Well, that’s all right. Give it to me. We’re sending to Pless this evening, to meet the up express. The guard will take it and post it at Paddington.”

“And what about my business?” said Piers.

“I decline to believe that that’ll take two whole days. And how has it arisen so suddenly? Why can’t you tell me the truth—which is that you’re bored?”

Mariner sighed.

“Let’s say I am,” he said. “If you had come to see me more often——”

“I’d cancelled an engagement for to-morrow, so that, if you asked me, I should be free to come.”

Mariner stood very still, his underlip caught in his teeth. One more luxurious day—with Adela all to himself. It wouldn’t really matter. Though his letter was posted to-night, and Hammett and Mole took action without delay, no letter of theirs could reach her for forty-eight hours. Which meant that, though he stayed on, he would still be out of the way, before she could learn the truth.

He raised his eyes—to meet hers.

For an instant she let him see that she had never thought that he would leave her like this—to fly to some girl in London, with whom a poor baronet’s daughter could not compete.

Then she turned to the door.

“Adela, listen. I’ll stay another night, if you’ll give up your day to-morrow and spend it with me.”

The girl spoke over her shoulder.

“I never said I’d do that.”

“Well, I ought to go. I ought, really. But if you’ll come over to-morrow and—and keep me company . . . I mean, that’s a prospect I’m not prepared to forgo.”

Adela turned.

“It’s all very silly,” she said. “Whether you stay or go is nothing to do with me. I had arranged, in my mind, to come and have lunch to-morrow and stay to tea. I’d reason to think you’d ask me—those papers ought to be done. But if you should go, well, go. I’ve plenty to do at The Grange—I promise you that.”

Mariner came to the girl and took her hand.

“And you call me downright,” he said.

Adela shrugged her shoulders.

“I’m bad at pretending,” she said.

“Thank God for that.”

The hand slipped away.

“Are you staying or going?” she said. “I only want to know.”

“You’re coming to lunch to-morrow and staying to tea.”

Adela nodded.

“All right. Give me the precious letter. I’ll see it goes off to-night.”

The letter passed—the letter to Hammett and Mole.

“Let me walk back with you.”

“Not on your life. I always travel alone.”

* * * * * * * *

Late as he went to his bed, Mariner slept very ill that Monday night. This was natural enough. He had made a mistake, and he knew it. That he had sailed under false colours was not his fault: but he ought to have hauled them down as soon as ever he could: in other words, he ought to have gone on Tuesday, as he had determined to do. He was involved deep enough with Adela Leith: and now, by agreeing to stay, he was going to make a bad business worse than before.

"God," he groaned, "I must be out of my mind. I go an' sweat blood for two hours, bucking an' posing to put the lady off, an' then, when she says she's disappointed, I say, 'Oh, I didn't mean it: if you'll come and sit on my knee, I'll stay where I am.' How's that for a mug? How's that for the king of mugs? It's going to be hell to-morrow. She's as good as told me she's on: and I shall have to be brutal—show her there's nothing doing and never was. I suppose, poor blessed child, she's seen a way of escape—a chance to be quit of Bleak House, rid of the ghastly spectre that's spoiling her life. Well, thank God, the gates are open, the bars are down. She won't know it till Thursday—Friday, perhaps. An' then she'll walk out and into this pretty place. And then she'll thank her God that I let her down. With this an' four thousand a year, she ought to do devilish well. She'll be in the shiny papers within three weeks. Ah, well . . . I wonder what I've done to deserve all this. Lugged bung into heaven an' shown all round—an' just as I'm settling down, fired back into hell. 'Sorry you've been troubled.' An' as if that wasn't enough, I fairly lay hold of a shovel an' pile the agony on. I'll say our five hours to-morrow'll take five years off my life."

Four hours of the five were over, and tea had been served and presently taken away.

The papers—surprisingly few—had been perused and then restored to their places, because, one and all, they concerned the heritage. There were no private letters—not even a book of addresses which might have been burnt. And the order was almost unnatural. Miss Birley might for years have been preparing for death.

The beautiful tall-case clock struck half-past five.

Adela Leith was sitting before the fire—not on a seat, on a cushion, looking into the blaze. And the man was sitting on the arm of an easy chair, biting his lip, with his eyes on his darling's face.

Things had not gone so badly—so far. Adela had been very gentle and very sweet. She had not talked of his going, but only of his return, and had never once referred to the fact that he was leaving before his time. As for Piers, although the man was in torment, he would have torn in pieces an order for his release. He was devouring the promise of something he could not have, dwelling upon the glory shining beyond the gulf. If hearts can bleed, his was bleeding . . . After all, it must be admitted that he had been hardly used.

Six minutes must have gone by, before either spoke. Then—

"I'm sorry about yesterday," said Adela, keeping her eyes on the fire. "I didn't behave at all well: and I think you were very forgiving to have me to-day."

Mariner's nails were biting into his palms.

"Don't talk like that," he said quietly. "It's—it's indecent."

"My conduct was. I forced you to keep a date which you hadn't made."

"Girls like you don't have to force men to receive them."

Adela shrugged her shoulders.

"The pressure was moral," she said. "When I found you were clearing out, I invited myself. Unless you were prepared to insult me, you had to stay."

"That never entered my head. Believe me or not—I ought to have gone this morning. But I didn't go, because I wanted to stay."

"To entertain me?"

"Of course."

Adela sighed.

"If you'd said that two days ago, I might have believed it, Piers. You see, I'm—credulous. I suppose it's living so quietly and never going about. But, if you had really wanted to——"

"Adela, listen." Mariner braced himself. "In the first flush of possession, all I touched was of gold—the house, the surroundings, the contents, the servants, everything. My dream had come true—and more. I'd been given half a

kingdom, and you were the king's daughter that went with it all. And then, after two or three days, the gold began to wear off, and I realized with a shock that when a dream comes true, it loses its charm. If I was twenty years younger, perhaps I could do with this life: but I've knocked about too long to put up my feet in the country and let the world go by. A week-end, yes. Very nice. Very nice indeed. But to live here for months on end is a cup of tea which I am not prepared to quaff."

Adela raised her eyebrows.

"Three days ago you said that when you came back for good, you'd never go away any more—that you'd 'never be half so happy anywhere else . . .'"

"I know. I believed it then."

"But your outlook's changed?" said the girl.

"Yes."

"I'm sorry for that. I liked that state of mind. The first one, I mean. Don't you think you could get it back?"

Mariner sighed.

"You do make things hard, don't you? How can I recapture ____"

"—'that first, fine careless rapture'? I don't know. But I liked you better then. 'The first flush of possession' suited you down to the socks."

Mariner covered his eyes.

“I can’t recapture it, dear. I—I only wish I could.”

“Would this help at all?”

The man looked up.

“What?”

Adela pointed to a paper flaring between the logs.

“This,” she said.

Mariner started forward, to peer at the flames.

Then he gave a great cry and snatched at his precious letter, addressed to Hammett and Mole. Adela caught his wrist. Before he could free himself, a crumpled wafer of ash was all that was left. When the man sought to lift it out, it crumbled away.

Mariner was trembling.

“Oh, my God,” he said somehow. And then, “Do you know what you’ve done?”

Adela nodded.

“Yes.”

“You don’t,” cried Piers. “You can’t. You haven’t the dimmest idea. That letter——”

“I know,” said Adela, calmly. “That letter contained a Will.”

Twice Mariner tried to speak.

At last—

“How did you know?” he said hoarsely.

“I promised to come here yesterday, ‘after lunch.’ I kept my word. I came across the meadows and in by the garden gate. Then I walked on to the terrace and into this room. You were out in the hall, telephoning. I could hear your voice. I saw your cigarettes on the table and went across to take one, before I sat down. And there was the Will . . . and your letter . . . I couldn’t help seeing the one, and I read them both. Well, the whole thing shook me up, and my one idea was to try and get time to think. So I whipped out on to the terrace and into the fields . . . When I came back, I was ready. I knew what to do. I *had* to get hold of that letter—which you, of course, were going to post in London the following day. So I had to make you stay. Then you would give me the letter, to send to Pless. Well, we both know I brought it off.” She got to her feet. “And now I really must go. It’s a quarter to six.”

The man had hold of her wrists.

“You know that nothing on earth can revive that Will?”

“I know. I’d far rather you had it. I think you’ll be happy here.”

Mariner raised the slim hands, set them upon his shoulders and looked the girl in the eyes.

“You know,” he said, “you know I’m in love with you?”

The shyest of smiles stole into Adela’s face.

“I’m afraid that’s why I did it.” Piers caught the girl to his heart, and her arms went about his neck. “You see, you told me that ten days ago you were broke. Well, if that Will had gone through, you would have been very poor, and I should have been very rich. And so you would never have spoken . . . A thousand to one, I’d never have seen you again. Well, that was no use to me. I didn’t want any of this, if I couldn’t have you.”

His face pressed tight against hers—

“Adela, my darling, my darling. No woman on earth——”

“Rot, beloved. My sex’s one idea is to eat its slice of cake and have it, too. And now don’t you think you could get an extension of leave?”

Mariner kissed her lips.

“I think so,” he said. “I have a feeling that marriage is an ‘urgent, private affair.’”

ABOVE SUSPICION

Nobody would have dreamed that Herr Herman Herring was deeply concerned: but then nobody would have dreamed that the quiet, Bavarian craftsman, who painted on leather as nobody else could paint, was the son of a Kentish squire and had won the saddle at Sandhurst in 1912. His papers were all in order—his papers had been in order for fifteen years; and since he was very careful, only three men in the world knew that the language he spoke was not his mother tongue. And none of these three was German. He had been shot through the throat in what is still called the Great War: in fact, he was hit while saving a British gun, but everyone thought he was hit while carrying rations up to the Hindenburg line. In a word, he had been accepted as what he appeared to be—a dreamy, Bavarian craftsman, who liked to live and let live. That he loved the craft which he practised, there can be no doubt: it gave him infinite pleasure to reproduce some great picture and turn his reproduction into some useful thing. His screens fetched high prices in London: Americans visiting Munich sought out his tiny shop: Goering had commissioned a cigar-case: irony went all lengths when the Chief of the local Gestapo requested the British agent to make him a miniature badge. All his leather was dressed by an old-fashioned country tanner, who knew his whims: once a month, more or less, Herring would visit the tanner and choose his skins: this meant staying a night at a village inn—twelve crow's miles from the frontier: but what if it did? The man was above suspicion. Time and an infinite patience had done the trick.

So much for Herring's armour. For the rest—well, in three men's mouths his name was a household word. Not his name, perhaps—his number. Major G. F. Herring was known as '72'. His reports were beyond all price. He knew what to look for and never forgot what he saw: he knew what to listen for and never forgot what he heard: best of all, the man had vision. . . .

And now, this August morning, the spy was deeply concerned.

He had left Munich, as usual, the day before, had chosen a score of skins and had slept at the little inn which knew him so well. As usual, he had risen at daybreak, to make the most of the mountains before he drove to the station to catch his train: and, as usual, he had visited his 'letter-box,' which was so faithfully cleared by 'Carrier Pigeon 6.' (The 'letter-box' was an oak, which no one on earth would have known for a hollow tree; but hollow it was, and a canister lay within.) And then he had found that *his 'letter-box' had not been cleared* . . . that the last dispatch he had 'posted' was lying where he had laid it three weeks before.

Herring emptied the canister and put it back into the oak: then he strolled out of the thicket and on down the mountain-side. The man was worried to death. If his old dispatch was important, the one he had brought to post contained matter of life and death. That it should be carried was vital. Somehow Great Britain *must* know the news it contained.

Such heavy movements of troops can mean only one thing. . . . Two days after that date the attack will be

launched. . . . The gas in question is only handled by men whose masks contain . . .

For a moment Herring considered going himself: at once he dismissed the notion as that of a fool. Good Germans were not leaving, but coming home. Ten to one he would not be permitted to go. In any event, his mere application for permission would instantly render him suspect—ruin the cloak of darkness which he had so patiently woven for fifteen years. There were, of course, other ways: but now the Gestapo was rampant, and Herring mistrusted the channels he had so seldom used. In case of war, he had himself devised a means of replacing 'Carrier Pigeon 6.' But the details were in his pocket. They were contained in his three-weeks-old dispatch.

The man raised his eyebrows and sighed. He had, of course, been very lucky till now. Last September, for instance, he had delivered the goods. Still, what was the use of that, if now, when the fuse had been lit, he was going to fail?

Herring began to whistle a musical-comedy valse. . . .

Half an hour later he struck the mountain road which would bring him back to the village in twenty minutes of time. Herring glanced at his wrist-watch. A quarter-past eight. Just nice time for breakfast and a leisurely drive to the station six miles away. All was as it should be—except the *raison d'être*. That had just ceased to exist. Better have stayed in Munich. All he had done was to squander twenty-four hours. All the time the fuse was burning. . . .

Here he rounded a bend, to see a 'sports saloon' by the side of

the way. Its bonnet was raised, and either a boy or a girl was peering inside. Oh, a girl—he could see her bare arm. An English girl. The car had a ‘G.B.’ plate.

The man caught his breath.

The car was bound for the frontier—at least, it was facing that way. If the girl could be trusted and he could speak to the girl . . . if she had a head on her shoulders and knew how to hold her tongue. . . . It was madness, of course. He knew it. Setting at nought the very first rule of the game. And yet—the fuse was burning; and here was the ghost of a chance of putting Great Britain wise.

A head came out of the bonnet when he was ten paces away, and Herring was quietly surveyed by a pair of grave, gray eyes in the face of a beautiful child.

He clicked his heels together and raised his hat in the air. Then he spoke with a definite accent.

“Can I be of help, if you please?”

A charming smile leapt into the lovely face.

“Oh, good! You speak English. I can’t speak a word of German—I can’t think how anyone does. Any stranger, I mean. Of course it’s all right for you.”

Herring laughed.

“Believe me, we find your language extremely hard.”

“Well, you speak it all right,” said the child. “And now for this car. I know exactly what’s wrong, because it’s happened before. The carburettor’s stuck up. Well, that isn’t very serious. I could clean it myself here and now. But I can’t get it down. It needs a bigger spanner than any I’ve got.”

“Natural and downright,” thought Herring: “but terribly young.” Aloud he said, “I’m afraid you have need of a garage, from what you say.”

The girl shook her head.

“Not a garage. Only a spanner. And perhaps a mechanic to use it, although I could do it myself.”

Herring thought very fast. The child looked tired.

“I fear the nearest garage is seven miles off. But there is a village quite close. If you will lock your car, I will escort you there and assist you to telephone. And then they will send or bring you the tool you require.”

“That’s an idea.” She closed the bonnet and took a key from the switch. “And while I’m waiting, I’ll have a wash and some food. D’you think I could get a hot bath?”

Herring nodded.

“I think so. There is a very nice inn.”

“Then I’d better take this suit-case. . . . Oh, thank you so much.” She slammed and locked the car’s door. “You must wonder what I’m doing and why I’m alone.”

Herring bowed from the hips.

“I never question my good fortune.”

“You’re very polite; but then all Germans are. At least, they have been to me.” The two began to move down the road. “As a matter of fact, I’m bolting—running away. You see, I came abroad with a man. I’ve known him six months or so, and I thought he was quite all right. And he wanted to come so much, and he hadn’t a car. We got on all right for a bit, and then last night he tried to get into my room. Well, that showed me where I was, so I thought I’d better clear out. And I did—at four this morning. . . . . It’s very sick-making you know. I mean I’d played the game, and I always let him drive whenever he liked.”

“‘Sick-making’ exactly describes it. And where are you making for?”

“The idea was Lucerne.” Herring blinked. “I’ve an uncle and aunt staying there, and now I feel I’d like to be with someone I know. Of course I thought I knew him, but you know what I mean.”

“I think,” said Herring, “that you are very wise.”

The child shook her head.

“If I’d been wise, I wouldn’t have picked John Weston.”

“I think it was kindness of heart that made you do that.”

“In a way, perhaps. I suppose I was sorry for him. He really is

poor, you know. I left him a tenner. Do you think that'll be enough?"

"If you want my opinion," said Herring, "I think it was ten pounds too much."

My lady laughed.

"That's like my big brother," she said. "You do remind me of him. He's very quiet, like you, and terribly sane."

By the time they had reached the village, the two were the best of friends. This was inevitable. Although she was twenty-one, Ariel Choate had the way of a little maid. As puppies do, she took goodwill for granted and knew no wrong. Yet the girl was no fool: an instinct or innate wisdom sat in her grave, gray eyes. Add to all this a rare beauty of figure and face—a beauty of which she seemed to be unaware—and it will be seen that she had been born out of time. She was not even pre-war. Ariel Choate threw back to the golden age.

Regarding his charming companion, Herring hovered between excitement and shame. Here was the channel ideal. Yet, to put such a being in peril was nothing less than a crime. . . . The way of the service is hard. Even while the man was recoiling, the spy decided that the lady must serve his turn.

Fate played into his hands.

As they came up to the inn, the hostess ran out of the door.

"Oh, sir, Hans has come from rail-head, and there is no morning train. Nobody knows the reason, but it has been

stopped. The afternoon service is running. The train for Munich will leave at half-past four."

"In that case," said Herring, smiling, "I shall spend another six hours in the country I love. And now please attend to this lady. Her car has broken down, but I shall arrange all that. She would like a nice bath and some breakfast. It is up to us both to show her that the Reich can honour its guest."

The poor woman split herself. She had a hazy idea that by showing an English lady that she was anxious to please, she might be doing something to chip those terrible scales from Great Britain's eyes.

* * * * * * * *

The spanner arrived at eleven, and shortly before midday Miss Choate slipped into her seat and started her engine up. The latter responded at once with a steady, confident idle, sweet to the ear.

"You are an angel," said Ariel.

"Are you sure all is well?" said Herring, spanner in hand.

"Better than ever," said Ariel, "thanks entirely to you: I'm only so sorry I never knew you before. You've been simply sweet to me from beginning to end."

Without turning his head, the man glanced up and then down the deserted road.

"Will you stop your engine?" he said. "I've something to say."

The gray eyes widened a trifle, but Ariel did as he asked.

"For five minutes only," said Herring, "I'm going to pretend that I am at work on your car. Please watch the road behind you as well as ahead, and if you see anyone coming, say so at once. Is that quite clear, Miss Choate?"

With her eyes on the driving-mirror.

"Yes," said Ariel, quietly. And then, "There's no one in sight."

"Then listen to me." Herring stooped to the bonnet again. "I've been of some service to you. Will you be of some service to me?"

"You know I'd love to"—eagerly.

"You can be of the greatest service, if you will do as I say. But, first, you must get hold of this—that I'm not what you think I am. I am as English as you are: only my work lies here."

The grave, gray eyes were like saucers. When Ariel spoke there was more than awe in her tone.

"Do you mean . . . you're Secret Service?"

"That's just what I mean," said Herring. "Eyes on the road, my dear. I'm putting my life in your hands."

"It's safe," said the child, quickly.

"You don't have to tell me that. And now listen very hard. In my coat on the seat by your side are two dispatches which

England simply must have. They are most frightfully important, and I cannot get them through. If you will take them to Zurich ——”

“You know I will.”

“I know you will do your best; but I want you to understand that you will be risking your life. If these papers were found upon you, you’d—never see England again.”

“And what about you?”

“That’s beside the point. This sort of thing is my job; but it isn’t yours.”

“You can put it that way, but I——”

“Please don’t argue—we’ve only three minutes more. The moment you get to Zurich, drive to a good hotel and ring up Mr. Henty of Belvoir Platz. He is an English surgeon. Give your name and address and say you were advised to consult him by a Mrs. Arthur Malone. Now will you repeat that, please?”

The girl repeated his instructions, and Herring went on.

“He will then make arrangements to see you without delay; and the moment you two are alone, give him the two dispatches and tell him that you have brought them for ‘Number 72.’ Add that they’re simply vital and that ‘Carrier Pigeon 6’ has broken down. Will you repeat that, please?”

Again the girl repeated what he had said.

“Very good,” said Herring. “And now take the papers out. There’s a wad in each breast-pocket, inside the coat. . . . Got them? Right. You’ll have to carry them on you. How about that?”

“Inside my shirt?”

“That sounds all right, but they simply mustn’t fall down.”

“Inside my trunks?”

“That’s better. Will you put them in now?”

After a very short struggle—

“O.K.” said Miss Choate. “I’m afraid they’d be a bit crushed, but I’ll bet they don’t move.”

“Bless your heart,” said Herring. He closed the bonnet and opened the near-side door. As he put on his coat, “And now you must go,” he said. “Will you give me a lift to the village? That’s natural enough.”

“Of course. But I don’t want to go. I don’t read the papers much, but I know things are pretty tight. And I can’t bear to leave you like this, to face it alone.”

“Please start her up,” said Herring. “I’ve got to get back.” He took his seat by her side. “You needn’t drive too fast, and we’ll talk as we go. Oh, and please remember this. Directly you’re through with Henty, you’ve got to forget I exist.”

As Ariel started the engine—

“Don’t talk like that,” she said. “It’s quite bad enough to leave you. Do you really think that I can forget to-day? I’m not going to talk, of course. I’m not such a fool. But—oh, my dear, how can I ever forget?”

“Put her in gear,” said Herring. “I give you my word, I’ve got to be getting back.”

The car began to move forward.

“What’s your name?” said the girl. “You know I’m Ariel Choate.”

“George Herring—Ariel.”

“That’s right. And I’ll call you George. I can’t bear leaving you, George. It is so awful to think of your being alone. Alone in your shop in Munich. Supposing there’s war?”

“My pretty Ariel, I shall be quite all right. I may have some trouble in getting my hearsay through, but——”

“I hate your being alone—in the enemy’s camp.” The child was half-way to tears. “I’ll pray for you every night, but I’ll never be happy again till I know you’re safe. You see, your being English has altered everything. I liked you before—so much; but now you’ve touched some chord. I was alone when you found me—alone in a foreign land. Forlorn. That’s the word. Forlorn. And then you came—and I wasn’t forlorn any more.”

“You’ve paid your debt—if there was one. That was the sweetest thing that’s ever been said to me.”

“It’s true. But listen. Now, you see, you’re going to be forlorn. And I can’t bear that. Oh, I do hate leaving you so.”

“You’re going on duty, sweetheart; and so am I.”

“I know, I know. But I want to see you again. I wouldn’t mind parting at all, if you were coming to England—before very long.”

“I’ll come one day. And call at your Sussex home. And you shall give me lunch . . . and show me the formal garden and the little, winding staircase, cut out of yew. But I don’t know how you’ll explain me, for no one must ever know that we met as we did.”

“You need no explanation,” said Ariel Choate.

She put out a little hand, and George caught it in both of his.

“God bless you, sweetheart,” he breathed. “Remember me in your dreams. I’ll never forget you—never. Or how you pulled my chestnuts out of the fire.” He bent his head and pressed the hand to his lips. “And here’s the village coming. Stand by for a formal parting. I know you’ll play up.”

Her eyes on the driving-mirror, Ariel threw out the clutch and set a small foot on the brake. Then she took the man’s head in her hands and looked into his eyes.

“Please take what care you can. You’ve come to mean—a great deal: and I’ll never be really happy until I see you again.”

“One day,” said George, smiling, and kissed the bow of her

mouth. . . . And then he was out of the car, and the door was shut.

"*Auf wiedersehen*, Miss Choate." He raised his hat in the air. "I hope you will have a good journey. I will return the spanner this afternoon."

Ariel smiled and bowed.

Then she let in her clutch, and the car whipped into the village and out of George Herring's sight.

* * * * * * * *

Henty heard Ariel out, with a hand to his mouth. Then he picked up the two dispatches and slipped them into a drawer.

"Never thought I'd see those," he said.

"He said they were urgent," said Ariel.

The other nodded. "They'll be in Whitehall to-morrow before midday." He hesitated, biting his lip. "You say he was leaving for Munich this afternoon?"

"That's right."

"Did anyone else know that?"

"Oh, yes. The inn people knew it. He was to drive to the station and take the afternoon train."

The surgeon left his chair and began to pace up and down.

“And he met you quite openly?”

“Good heavens, yes. We walked to the village and back on the crown of the road.”

There was a little silence. Then—

“I can hardly believe it,” said the surgeon, “but it seems that for once the Boche has been late off the mark.”

“What on earth do you mean?” said the girl.

“This. That ‘Carrier Pigeon 6’ was taken a month ago. Great pressure was put upon him to open his mouth—to reveal where the ‘letter-box’ was that he was accustomed to clear. Once the Boche knew that, he was bound to get ‘72,’ either by waiting at the box or else by making inquiries for ten miles round.”

Ariel felt rather faint.

“But he didn’t,” she said. “He didn’t open his mouth.”

“I’m afraid he did,” said the surgeon: “some twenty-four hours ago. If the Boche had acted at once, you and ‘72’ would never have met. As it is . . .” He broke off and shrugged his shoulders. “Thanks to you, we have these precious reports. But ‘72’ was the——”

The sentence was never finished, for Ariel stood up and swayed, and the surgeon leaped to catch her before she fell.

Two minutes went by. . . .

“Better now?” said the man. “You’re a girl in a million, but women weren’t made for these things.”

“I’m quite all right,” said Ariel. “Listen to me. Somehow or other we’ve got to get him out.”

“Get who out?” said the other staring.

“George Herring—‘72.’ The Boche mayn’t have acted yet. He hadn’t acted this morning at twelve o’clock.”

“My dear, be reasonable. We don’t know where to find him. Until you said it, I never knew his name.”

“He’s a leather shop at Munich. He’s certain to be on the ’phone.”

“Yes, but even so——”

“I’m going to fetch him,” said Ariel, and got to her feet. “I’ve got my Customs Pass, and there’s room in my car. I won’t believe it’s too late, till I’ve seen for myself. For God’s sake help me to try. I can come to no harm, but I must have a plan. Oh, please don’t look like that.” She caught the man’s arm. “He’s only a number to you; but if you knew him, as I do, I think you’d do your utmost to save his life.”

Four frantic hours had gone by, and Henty was speaking to the chemist with whom he dealt.

* * * * * * * *

“Is that you, Strub? Have those things from Munich arrived?”

“I am very sorry, sir, but I have no further news. My furnishers wire me that the railway——”

“Listen to me. I’ve an English lady here on whom I must operate within forty-eight hours. Her son is now in Munich and since he has no idea that his mother is ill, her daughter is leaving to fetch him, going by car.”

“Could she possibly——”

“She can and will. I’ve asked her. But you must send somebody with her to pick up and pay for the stuff.”

“I will send my son with pleasure. He can, perhaps, be of service. His English is very good. At what hour does she leave, if you please?”

“To-morrow at seven o’clock.”

“Very good, Mr. Henty. Rudolf will be at your house at a quarter before that hour. Would you like some more artery forceps? I mean, as things are——”

“I’ll take two boxes. At a quarter to seven, then.”

“That is understood, sir: and I am deeply obliged.”

Henty replaced the receiver and looked at Miss Choate.

“Well, we’re over that stile,” he said. “Rudolf Strub is a very efficient young man. And he speaks very decent English. He’ll see you in—and out, if he’s half a chance. And now is there anything else? I want to get you to bed.”

“Only some clothes,” said Ariel. “If he is to be my brother, he must have some English clothes.”

“That’s not too hard. I’ll give you some country clothes. All made in England, of course. Shove them into your suit-case; and if the Customs get curious, your brother was hiking to Zurich with only a pack, so you’ve picked some stuff out of his luggage, in case he’s short.”

“Good for you,” said the girl. “And you think his passport ____”

“Miss Choate, I hope. If my little friend can do it, I know he will. He has done more difficult things. Of course we’re rushing him rather: you can’t get away from that. But I promised him forty pounds, if the passport was in my hands by a quarter to six.”

Ariel got to her feet.

“I won’t promise to sleep, but I’d better go and lie down.”

The surgeon opened the door.

“You will go to bed, if you please. You know the way to your room. I’m coming up in ten minutes, to bring you a drink.”

“Dutch courage?” said Ariel.

“No,” said the other, smiling. “You don’t need that.”

* * * * * * * *

Munich was very hot, and the fans in Herr Herring's workroom were running steadily.

A pair of book-ends, half finished, lay on his bench, but the man was down on his knees, regarding a fine reproduction of Cranach the Elder's work.

"Might have known it was Cranach," he said.

The scene was a martyrdom—above perspective, grotesque in its disarray, yet rich in majesty of portraiture, blazing with peerless colour, crammed with a detail so lovely as to embarrass the eye. A slight form stood apart from the glorious rout, a girlish standard-bearer, clad in doublet and hose: the slim, bareheaded figure might have been Ariel Choate's; but the exquisite face *was* hers, down to the droop of the mouth and the grave, gray eyes.

Herring raised his eyebrows and smothered a sigh.

"No need to paint her," he murmured. "She sat for Cranach in 1506." And then, "Just as well she's there and I'm here. If I were to see her again, I might make a fool of myself."

The man declined to doubt that the girl was safe. After all, the odds in her favour were fifty thousand to one. Even now the British were touring. Only that morning two had walked into his shop. And the Germans were glad to see them. And Ariel's natural charm would turn the point of suspicion every time.

So all was well—except for that motor-car smash. This had occurred near the station from which, the day before, he had taken the Munich train. 'Early this morning,' the station-

master had said. A car which was coming from Munich had skidded and overturned. Four men were dead or dying as a result. It was said they were of the Gestapo. . . .

Herring shrugged his shoulders and got to his feet.

It might mean nothing of course: still, 'Carrier Pigeon 6' had broken down, and one could not ignore the fact that, but for that timely skid, two vital dispatches might never have reached Whitehall. If that was so, another car had left Munich—oh, hours ago. . . . And any time now the bell of his shop would be rung . . .

Herring began to whistle *Wine, Women and Song*.

After all, his best work was done. Once Germany was at war, his reports would be of less value than they had been before. His sources of information would soon run dry, and the channel which he had devised was not one-half so swift as 'Carrier Pigeon 6.'

"Just fifteen years," he breathed. "Five for poor old Bunty, and ten for Mum. And, by God, they've not been wasted. . . ."

(Herring's only brother had been shot dead on the Aisne by a German who had surrendered a moment before: his mother had died of wounds, when a hospital, half a mile square, had been deliberately bombed.)

The man put away his reproductions of Cranach the Elder's works. Then he wiped the sweat from his face and returned to his bench. As he picked up one of his book-ends—

“Mug’s game,” he muttered, “imagining things.”

And, with his words, the bell of his shop was rung. . . .

God knows he was calm enough, as he lifted aside the curtain which hung at the foot of the stair. But there he caught his breath, and a hand went up to his throat.

Ariel was standing before him suit-case in hand. Her grave, gray eyes were enormous. Her lips were framing some question he could not hear.

Twice Herring tried to speak.

At the third attempt—

“Oh, my God,” he said feebly. And then, “I made sure you were through.”

“That shows you’re alone,” said the child. “And that’s what I wanted to know.”

She set the suit-case down and began to unbutton her shirt.

“But——”

“I’ve been, my dear. The papers left Zurich by ’plane. They were in London this morning at seven o’clock.”

Herring laid hold of the curtain, breathing most hard, the tremendous wave of relief had left him weak at the knees. But the girl’s next words put him up on the tips of his toes.

“Listen, George. We’ve not an instant to lose. ‘Carrier Pigeon 6’ has opened his mouth.”

Herring’s brain cleared for action.

“I want,” he said quietly. “I want to know why you’re here.”

“To fetch you, of course. I’ve fixed it all with Henty. I’ve got your passport here—you’re my brother, Hilary Choate. You’ve only got to sign it: somebody worked all night.”

“And the photograph,” said Herring. “My dear——”

“I took you yesterday, when you thought I was taking the inn. My camera takes sideways. I got your head and shoulders, and they have enlarged the head. And now, dear, please be quick. Here’s the passport and here are some English clothes. For God’s sake go and change. We’ve got to pick somebody up—I’ll tell you all as we go.”

The man shook his head.

“Henty must be out of his mind. If the ‘Pigeon’ has split, I’m done. And if I cut and run, you’ll only go down with me.”

“I shall if you argue: if not, I’ve a sporting chance.”

“Please clear out at once. I mean what I say.”

Ariel sighed.

“I wish you’d believe I do.” She whipped to where he was standing, set her hands on his shoulders and looked

him full in the eyes. “George, my darling, get this—I’m sinking or swimming with you. You can put me out of your shop; but I swear I won’t leave your doorstep, until you get into the car.”

Herring’s strong hands were on hers.

“My sweet, I beg you——”

“What d’you think I’m here for?” The question, so quietly put, was more weighty than any prayer. “Because I knew last night that unless you could see it with me, I never wanted to see the formal garden again.”

His arms about her, Herring stood still as death, looking over his darling’s head.

So, for perhaps ten seconds. . . .

Then—

“God forgive me,” he breathed. “Give me the passport, sweetheart. I’ll be as quick as I can.”

* * * * * * * *

The Lowland slid up a long rise, flicked through a white-walled village and fell down a sudden hill with the rush of a lift.

His precious parcels beside him, Rudolf Strub slept wedged in the back of the car. He would have enjoyed his outing, but for the brutal fact that the English seemed to ignore the existence of food. Ham sandwiches, graced with water—could anyone call

that a meal for a Christian man? But for that sausage at Munich. . . . The young man stirred in his sleep. The sausage he had bolted at Munich was getting to work.

Ariel sat like an image—a very lovely waxwork, her eyes on the tapering road. She showed no sign of strain, but her colour was not as high as it had been the day before, and her face was that of a girl, not that of a child. She drove as hard as she could—had driven as hard as she could for more than two hundred miles. She could, of course, do nothing else: and yet—at times she wondered. It would be so awful to have pelted . . . into the net.

Seated beside my lady, Herring stared into the distance with narrowed eyes, striving to put himself in his enemies' place. What action would they have taken, when 'Carrier Pigeon 6' had opened his mouth? Send to the 'box' at once, post a man to watch it and rip the truth from the peasants for ten miles round. They had done that, of course—put forty men on the job, and eight or ten cars. Each car to scour one segment of the circle drawn round the 'box.' And there his luck had come in, for the very car that mattered had overturned. Another car, of course, had taken its place; but, somehow or other, a lot of time had been lost. Inexcusable, that: a man may fall by the way, but the game should go on. Never mind—it had thrown them out. One segment—the segment that mattered—had not been scoured till to-day. After, that, it was a question of hours; for the most inefficient agent would go to a village inn, and, once he had got so far, the most inefficient agent would see that Herr Herring of Munich might be the man he sought. Very well. He would speak to Munich—and two men would leave at once for the little leather-shop in the *cul-de-sac*. . . .

And when they found it empty, the hunt would be up. In less than twenty minutes every frontier station would be informed.

> *Herman Herring of Munich, bullet-wound scar on either side of his throat, thick fair hair turning grey, clean-shaven, blue eyes, broad forehead, prominent chin. This man is a British agent and must at all costs be taken, alive or dead. Hold anyone resembling, reporting to WX.*

Herring glanced at his watch. Ten minutes past eight. At this rate they'd make the frontier just about nine o'clock—six hours after leaving Munich, six pregnant hours. . . . They'd beat the Gestapo to it; but where was the car that could beat a telephone-call? The Gestapo would not be there, but their orders would.

And then, what?

One thing, at least, was clear. If the hunt was up, they would know—without being told. The Boche makes a meal of things. The frontier post would be humming—men out in the road with revolvers, and innocent tourists delayed and despitefully used.

And then, what?

His passport declared that he was Hilary Choate. And it had been very well done. The trouble was that Choate was the spit of Herring—throat-wound, blue eyes and the rest. *Hold anyone resembling.* If those instructions were out, he would never get through. And they would be out—they must be. The Gestapo had missed him twice—first at the village and

then at his leather-shop. This was incredibly true. But only a fool would suggest that they might miss him again. Such miracles did not happen. The Gestapo was a body of clever, unscrupulous men. They missed a catch now and then. But never three times running—not on your life.

* * * * * * * *

Dusk was coming in, as they entered the frontier village through which the Lowland had passed some thirteen hours before. Herring was quiet as death: the man had weighed things up and had made up his mind. Ariel was jumpy: she started and swerved when a dog ran out of a shop. Rudolf, now wide awake, was clutching the passports and Ariel's Customs Pass. He felt unaccountably sick and was actually praying God that the man he had tipped that morning would be on duty that night. Unless the car was cleared quickly. . . . Rudolf had pride of race. He did not wish to be common on foreign soil.

Right and then left through the square and then, a hundred yards on, to the left again. How did this English girl do it? No hesitation at all. Yet she was right, as usual. There was the bridge and the—

Rudolf closed his eyes and let out an agonized groan. Worse than the worst had happened. Four cars were waiting at the frontier, head to tail, and guards were standing stolidly, backs to the lowered pole. And the Guard-Room was busy: its lights streamed into the road, and a man with a trunk on his shoulder was mounting its shallow steps. And America was lodging a protest: "Every country in Europe, I tell you; but never before have I . . ."

“Oh, my God,” wailed Ariel, and set a foot on the brake.

Herring laid a hand on her arm.

“It’s quite all right,” he said quietly. “Pull up behind the last car, but don’t get too close.” He turned to the luckless Rudolf, who was regarding the passports with glazing eyes. “Give me the passports and pass.”

“But, George——”

“Hush. I know what I’m doing.” The documents passed. “And now listen, please. I’m speaking to both of you. Obey every order they give you, on no account leave the car, and answer no questions at all.”

With that, he opened his door.

“Oh, George, I can’t bear it. Let’s——”

“Steady, sweetheart. I shall come back very soon. But if they tell you to move, you must do as they say. Don’t hesitate. Just do it. And please remember this—that everything depends upon your holding your tongue.”

He stepped down into the road and slammed the door. Then he strode straight to the Guard-Room, and Ariel’s frantic eyes saw him mounting the shallow steps.

As he came to their head, a guard stopped him.

“It is forbidden——”

And there he saw the look upon Herring's face. This was the glare of the Prussian, having authority.

"Forbidden?" roared Herring in German, raising a threatening fist. "Get out of my way this instant, you insolent swine."

The other started aside.

"Pardon, sir. I did not——"

Herring passed in, lowering . . .

His eyes swept the white-washed place. No secret police there: and a door behind the barrier gave to a second room. Customs and guards were staring, and four or five harassed tourists had turned about. A cabin-trunk stood by a counter, on which a dressing-case was being thoroughly probed. At a desk two officials were looking up from the glare which a shaded light was casting on to a printed sheet.

"Who's in charge here?" blared Herring.

Nobody answered him, but one of the two officials stepped to the barrier.

Herring pushed a woman aside and made for the hatch. He motioned to the official to do the same. As the latter obeyed, frowning, Herring flipped open his jacket for half a moment of time. Then—

"Let me through," he spat. "I've got to get through at once to WX."

Apologizing profusely, the other did as he said—and followed Herring into the inner room.

Herring went straight to the telephone, hung on the wall.

Receiver in hand—

“Priority WX,” was all he said.

Perhaps twenty seconds went by.

Then—

“WX,” said someone.

“Extension 20,” said Herring.

After a moment or two——

“Hullo,” said another voice.

“Axel speaking,” said Herring. “Is that you, Hans? Well, here I am on the edge. Have you any more news?”

A receiver was violently replaced, but Herring went affably on.

“No, I didn’t think you would. . . . Yes, we came very fast. That kid. . . . But, my dear Hans, what a peach! Too thin, of course, but if I could have her a while she’d soon fill out . . .” Herring burst out laughing. “Of course, if you—what?” His chin went up, and he stood to attention smartly, clicking his heels. “Good evening, sir.” He bowed. “Yes, I’m all right so

far.” He sniggered. “That’s quite understood. . . . I’ve every confidence, sir. . . . Yes, I honestly think I could. My—er—very attractive driver has no idea. . . . Yes, that’s quite clear. . . .” A drumming in Herring’s ear suggested that someone was ringing the frontier post. “Yes, I know. But I think that I shall be able. . . . Well, if all goes well, I think—may I put it this way? I propose to deal with him first, and then to pick up his rôle and recover the stuff. . . . If I may say so, sir, I entirely agree. . . . Quite so. It gives me a free hand. . . . Oh, I ought to be there in a little over an hour. . . . I beg your pardon. . . . No, not the slightest idea. The guards here thought I was English, when I walked into the place. . . . No, not for long, sir. Your badge is a talisman. You ought to have seen the man’s eyes, when . . . . That’s the joke of the century. . . . I’ll make it so. Never fear.” The drumming was growing violent, but Herring went steadily on. “You’re terribly kind, sir. . . . Oh, I’ll deliver the goods. . . . How soon? Oh, in two minutes’ time. Half a moment, sir.” He thrust the documents into the official’s hand. “Stamp these in here. I don’t want them seen outside. Quick as you can. I’ve got to be off in two minutes—you heard what I said.” The other ran for the door. “Excuse me, sir. I was telling one of these boobies . . .”

As the door closed. Herring whipped a knife from his pocket and carefully severed the wires, where these ran off the plaster and under the wood. The drumming stopped dead. Before the official was back, Herring was speaking again.

“Yes, sir, that’s quite understood. . . . They’re stamping them now. . . . Very good, sir. . . . You’re very kind. *Auf wiedersehen*, sir.” Herring relaxed. “Hullo, Hans. . . . Well, you heard what his lordship said. . . . So long, old fellow. . . .

Oh, don't be a —— fool."

He put the receiver back and turned to the sweating official, busy with rubber stamps.

"My God, aren't they ready yet?"

"Almost, my lord. I told my men to bring the car up to the door." He pressed a stamp on to the pass and snatched at a pen. "There. It is all in order." He blotted his signature and folded the pass: then he gave this and the passports into the outstretched hand. "I hope very much that your lordship will overlook—I mean, in the ordinary way, no cars are held up; but doubtless your lordship knows that one Herman Herring of Munich——"

"Fool!" The official quailed before the blast of contempt. Herring thrust out his jaw and spoke through his teeth. "Herring's over the border. One of your breed let him through—with a lorry of fruit. I've got to repair the damage. I've got to go to Zurich and do your work."

With that, he flung open the door and lunged for the hatch. The other followed, stammering, not knowing what he said. He was preoccupied—trying his best to remember when last his men had cleared a lorry of fruit.

The Lowland had been advanced to the foot of the steps. As Herring rounded her bonnet, a soldier opened the door. . . .

As Herring took his seat—

"All clear, my beauty," he breathed. "Go on. They're lifting the

pole.”

Ariel fought off her faintness and let in the clutch. . . .

As the car moved on to the bridge, America lodged a fresh protest. The words came clear. “Orders, my foot. I saw that car arrive five minutes ago: and I’ve been here more than an hour. If you think you can . . .”

Then Rudolph opened his mouth.

“You will please excuse me,” he said, “but my stomach is not myself. I am sure that I must relieve it.”

“Out of the window,” said Herring. “We can’t stop here.”

But Rudolph’s pride was spared. He was very common indeed —but not upon foreign soil.

* * * * * * * *

Forty-six hours had gone by, and a formal garden in Sussex was looking its stately best. The sun, which was low, was shedding a golden light, and the print of the topiary work lay sharp on the velvet lawns: beds of blossom, new-watered, made flashing crescents of scarlet and squares of blue; and the regular lanes of flagstones, brown and gray, threw up the blaze of colour on either side.

Her slim, bare arm in George Herring’s, Ariel stared at the badge which lay in her palm—a miniature badge of leather, beautifully finished, alight with crimson and gold.

“And directly he saw this, you say . . .”

“—he could see nothing else. It’s the mark of the brute, my darling, and that is why brutality never pays. The man he was looking for was under his hand. He was face to face with him, and his orders were clear. But when he saw the mark of the brute, he could think of nothing at all but of saving his skin. His common sense stopped working. The brute had to be placated—and that was all.”

“I don’t care,” said Ariel, lightly. “The mark of the brute can’t talk. You were in there a quarter of an hour and you must have put up the very hell of a bluff.”

“Did you time me?” said Herring, smiling.

“I couldn’t. My watch had stopped. But——”

“Mine hadn’t, and so I know. I was there just over four minutes, from first to last.”

“I simply don’t believe you—but let that go. And now will you tell me, please, what they said in Whitehall?”

“They were mostly concerned with whether you’d hold your tongue.”

“What did you say?”

“I said I’d considered that and I thought the safest plan was to make you my wife.”

Ariel’s laugh rang out.

“I’ll bet you did. And what did they say to that?”

Herring swung her round and looked into the grave, gray eyes.

“Do you really want to know?”

Ariel nodded her head.

“They said, ‘You’re a damned lucky man. Often enough you’ve taken your life in your hand; but she left hers in pawn when she drove into that country to get you out.’”

“They don’t understand—that’s all. If they’d heard the past tense used of someone they knew was alive—someone that they were in love with. . . .” With half a sob, her arms went about the man’s neck. “Ah, there’s the blackbird bathing. He always bathes at sundown. And then he goes to his nest at the head of the little stair.” 244

SMOOTH JUSTICE

Home Farm Road is a very quiet thoroughfare. Its small, old-fashioned houses stand back, behind high walls. Each house has its forecourt and garden. The gardens are deep—for London. In summer these may be delightful: and they are not overlooked, for, one and all, they back on to Lord's Cricket Ground. This is a great advantage—for such as like a private house to deserve its name. And many do. No house in Home Farm Road is ever empty. House-agents say that there is a waiting list.

Sir Spencer Sedan was a distinguished man. At fifty-eight he had done much for literature. His scholarship had been honoured the world over. He was a widower, and since the death of his wife, he had lived in Home Farm Road. And now he was dead, too. His servants found him on the lawn at the back of the house, at seven o'clock in the morning of a beautiful July day. The body was stark—had seemingly lain there all night. Face downwards. The cause of death was clear. Sir Spencer had been garotted—choked from behind.

At eight o'clock that morning the Assistant Commissioner of Police received the news; and twenty-five minutes later Chief Inspector Falcon was walking up Home Farm Road. He had come straight from his flat in Grosvenor Row.

As he approached Number Six—the fatal house—two reporters joined him and walked by his side.

“Anything for us, Chief Inspector?”

Falcon smiled.

“Sorry,” he said, “but you must give me a chance. I only know that Sir Spencer Sedan is dead.”

“Murdered?”

“I am told so.”

“May we know your informant?”

“I’m afraid not. I was rung up at my flat.”

“When will you have something for us?”

“I promise that you shall have something in two hours’ time. But not if you go to the servants. Leave this house alone, and I’ll do my best for you. You might warn the others off.”

“We’ll see to that, Chief Inspector. Two hours from now?”

“Something—yes.”

By now the door had been opened. The constable on duty saluted, and Falcon passed into the forecourt and out of sight.

* * * * * * * *

Much less than an hour had gone by, when two police-cars arrived with Sir Bernard Bury, Surgeon, Detective-Inspector Ross, two Detective-Sergeants and certain specialists.

After a short consultation—

“As you probably know,” said Falcon, “Lord’s will be crammed to-day. It’s the second day of the Eton and Harrow Match. So I must go round at once, before the public come in. I mean, it’s a hundred to one that the man who committed this crime climbed over the wall from Lord’s. But I want to be sure of that. It looks like that from here, but I’ve got to be sure. Ross, you take over the servants—statements from each of the three. I don’t think you’ll get any grain, but you never know. And run the gardener to earth: Sims can do that—at once. Clear the road before the body is moved and keep a uniformed man outside the front door. And I want two uniformed men in the Cricket Ground. They’d better report to me in a quarter of an hour. Donat, come with me.” He turned to the eminent surgeon. “Will you excuse me, Sir Bernard? You see how I’m placed.”

“Of course, Chief Inspector.”

“Inspector Ross will take any orders you give. Come, Donat.”

The two set out for an entrance to Lord’s Cricket Ground . . .

The place was alive with preparation. Foremen, waiters, groundmen, club-servants, stewards, attendants—all were making ready for the classic match which was to be finished that day.

The two passed in through the hubbub and made their way to the wall—the long, tree-shadowed wall that kept the gardens of the houses in Home Farm Road.

“That’s right,” said Falcon, speaking half to himself. “That’ll be the garden of Number Four.” He went on walking and counting. “Here’s Number Five. And this’ll be Number Six.” He ran his eye over the wall. “No marks that I can see. He must have been wearing soft shoes. Never mind. Get me a chair, Donat, from one of those tents.”

Standing upon the chair, Falcon looked over the wall.

For a moment he stood, peering. Then—

“Wrong again,” he said. “This isn’t the house. I’ve counted wrong. This must be Number Five. That’s Number Six—next door.”

The two moved along, Donat carrying the chair.

“And here’s where our man got over.”

There was no doubt about it. The edge of a brick had been chipped by the toe of a heavy boot. The yellow gash stood out of the grimy brown.

“Give me the chair, Donat. . . . Oh, yes. Quite clear. Some ivy leaves are broken the other side. Up and down at this spot. I thought as much. Out of Lord’s: back into Lord’s. I wonder where he got out.”

Together, they walked round the ground. A man who meant to get out could have made his escape at one of a number of points—without being seen or heard. As the two completed the circuit, they saw the two uniformed police.

"Night-watchmen, Donat," said Falcon. "Go to the Groundman's office and get their names. See what each one has to say, and report to me at H.Q." He addressed the uniformed police. "I want you to keep the public away from this wall. At the moment few people know that a murder was done behind it some hours ago: very soon everyone will know, and some will be curious. If they question you, refer them to the Secretary of the M.C.C. I'm going to see him now."

So he did. He apologized for 'acting first and asking afterwards': he said exactly what he had done and what Donat was going to do: and, perceiving that the Secretary was prudent, he told him as much as he knew. When he left, ten minutes later, he knew that the M.C.C. would do whatever he asked.

* * * * * * * *

From Number Five Home Farm Road, the family was away. Two sisters, Scotswomen, caretakers, were only too eager to help. The pity was that they had no help to give. Falcon thanked them and left them and glanced at his watch. He looked up to see three reporters on the other side of the road.

"Better get it over," he murmured, and put up a hand. The three were at his side in a moment. . . .

As always, he gave them good measure: and when they had hurried away, he walked up to Number Seven and rang the bell.

"Is Mr. Teether in?"

"I'm afraid he's in bed, sir."

“I see. Mrs. Teether?”

“I’ll see, sir. What name, please?”

“Chief Inspector Falcon.”

Mrs. Teether appeared in the forecourt, red in the face. Anger did not become her—it made her eyes look like beads. Nor, for the matter of that, did her dressing-gown: pink was of no use at all to a figure like hers.

“Yes?”

“I am a police-officer,” said Falcon, “and I am inquiring into the death of Sir Spencer Sedan.”

“Well, we don’t know anything.”

“You may not have seen what happened, madam: yet——”

“I tell you no one here knows anything.”

“You may be right,” said Falcon: “but I must judge that for myself. May I see Mr. Teether, please?”

“That you certainly can’t. The doctor would never permit it. He had a very bad night, and——”

“What is the matter with him, Mrs. Teether?”

“He’s seriously ill.”

“I know. I’m sorry. What of?”

Before the woman could answer, there was a ring at the bell.

“There! That’s another reporter. I do think you police——”

“If it’s a reporter,” said Falcon, “I’ll send him away.”

With that, he opened the door, to find himself facing a cheerful, bird-like man, with a case in his hand.

Mrs. Teether exclaimed in annoyance, and Falcon glanced at her and then back at the man.

“The doctor?” he said.

“That’s right,” said Dr. Perkins. He entered and closed the door. “And how is the patient to-day?”

“You’re early,” snapped Mrs. Teether.

The doctor put his head on one side.

“A good fault, madam. What’s the trouble next door?”

“Sir Spencer Sedan,” said Falcon, “is unhappily dead.”

“No?”

“Yes. He died by violence.”

“Good God!”

“I’m Chief Inspector Falcon—in charge of the case.” The doctor bowed. “And I’m very glad you’ve arrived, for I want to see Mr. Teether; but Mrs. Teether insists that he is too ill to

be seen."

"It's true," cried the woman. "He had a dreadful night, and I'm sure his temperature's up."

The doctor stared. Then—

"I'll go and see him," he said. "You wait here, Chief Inspector. I won't be long."

Mrs. Teether followed, protesting: and Falcon was left alone.

After, perhaps, five minutes Dr. Perkins reappeared.

"He's perfectly fit to see you. I've told him so. Apparently this business has upset him—Sir Spencer's death."

"Please tell me this," said Falcon. "Did you expect to find him in bed to-day?"

"Oh, yes," said the doctor. "I sent him to bed on Tuesday—four days ago. You see, he has a weak chest, and people who have weak chests should not do foolish things. . . . Should not stroll in the garden after dinner, in evening dress. That may seem harmless enough: but when the garden has been watered an hour or two back . . ." He shrugged his shoulders. "Result, he's in bed. If he wasn't, he'd be seriously ill. But he should be up on Monday. What symptoms there were have gone."

"I see," said Falcon. And then, "May I see him now?"

"Certainly. I'll take you up."

“If you please. Could you possibly stay? I shan’t be long.”

“Very well.”

The two went up together and into a pleasant room at the back of the house.

The patient, propped up in bed, peered at them, as they came in. He was a small man, with a heavy moustache. His hair grew thick at the sides, but the top of his head was bald. Mrs. Teether was sitting beside him, simmering with rage.

She addressed the doctor darkly.

“We shan’t forget this,” she said.

“Mrs. Teether,” said Dr. Perkins, “at the present moment your husband is in my care. If I thought he was not fit to be questioned——”

“I’m the best judge of that.”

“I don’t agree. He may be upset: if he is, it’s a matter of nerves. Physically, he is as fit to be questioned as you or I.”

“A sick man?”

“He is not a sick man,” said the doctor. “He would be if he wasn’t in bed. But, as he’s in bed, he isn’t.” He looked at Teether. “This is Chief Inspector Falcon. He’s asked me to stay while he’s here, and I’ve said that I will.”

“How d’you do, Mr. Teether,” said Falcon. “I’m sorry to be so

tiresome, but if you'll try to help me, I shan't be long. Excuse me." He moved to a window. "I see you can see Sir Spencer's garden from here. I should say you can see the spot where the body was found." He turned. "Did you see him in the garden last night, whilst he was alive?"

"Oh, dear, no," said Teether. "I haven't been near the window since the doctor sent me to bed."

"I see. And you, Mrs. Teether?"

"Certainly not."

"Did you see him lying there this morning?"

"I naturally saw that something was going on."

"Did you see Sir Spencer's body?"

"I saw something lying on the lawn. It was covered up."

"That was this morning?"

"Yes."

"When was the last time before that that you saw anything on the lawn?"

"I couldn't say. Perhaps yesterday; perhaps the day before."

"But nothing last night?"

"You can't see anything at night."

“That wasn’t what I asked you. Did you see anything last night —last night, yesterday evening or this morning, before Sir Spencer was dead?”

“I did not.”

“And you, Mr. Teether?”

“No.”

“Did you—either of you—see any movement of any kind, or any light, suggesting movement, during the night just past?”

Mr. Teether covered his eyes.

“I’ve told you once—I’ve never been near the window since Tuesday last.”

“Then the answer is ‘No’?”

“Of course. And I wish you’d be quick. My head . . .”

“Naturally,” said the doctor. “If you like to discard your glasses, what d’you expect? Your eyes are striving to ____”

“That’s nothing to do with it,” snapped in Mrs. Teether. “His head was very much worse before he took them off.”

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

Falcon continued.

“You heard my question, Mrs. Teether. What do you say?”

“I’ve told you before—I saw nothing. Besides, the curtains were drawn.”

“Did you hear any sound—any unusual sound?”

“No.”

“Are you perfectly sure?”

“I am.”

“And you, Mr. Teether?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Please listen to me. I have my duty to do, and so have you. Are you, or either of you, aware of any single thing, however slight, which you think might throw some light upon this crime?”

“No, I’m not,” said the woman.

“Nothing,” said Teether, quickly. “Nothing at all.”

“Why didn’t you want to see me?”

The man in bed started. Then he shot a glance at his wife.

“Because he was ill,” she snapped. “How would you like ——”

“I was asking your husband, Mrs. Teether. *You* didn’t wish me

to see him, because you said he was ill. Now I want *his* reason —and I want him to tell me himself."

"Because I was ill," said Teether.

"But you didn't even know I was here."

Teether looked helplessly round. Then again he covered his eyes.

"Oh, my head," he groaned.

Dr. Perkins expired.

"Where are his glasses?" he said.

Mrs. Teether went off the deep end. In terms which were anything but moderate, she reviled the doctor and Falcon as fools and knaves. Finally, she demanded their withdrawal and conjured them never to return. Teether took no part in the proceedings, but lay very still in bed, with his hands to his face.

Falcon and the doctor retired.

In the hall below—

"What do you make of all that?" said Perkins.

"I don't know yet," said Falcon. "Don't mention it, please. And may I have your address?"

"Of course. Sixty-six Blueborough Road."

“Thank you. I expect you’ll have to be going. I must just see the servants, before I leave.”

* * * * * * * *

At ten o’clock that evening Falcon was ushered into a room that he knew. This was the library of a private house. As he entered, two men looked up from a backgammon board. One was the Director of Public Prosecutions. The other was the Assistant Commissioner of Police.

With one accord, the two sat back in their chairs.

“Any progress?” asked the Assistant Commissioner.

Falcon shook his head.

“Nothing so far, sir. Sir Bernard thinks he was killed between eleven and one. He won’t swear to that, of course. But he thinks he was. I don’t think the man who did it entered the house. Nothing was disarranged: no drawers were forced. More. There were notes on Sir Spencer’s table to the value of seven pounds ten, and these hadn’t been touched. And his note-case was still in his pocket, as well as his watch. As for Sir Spencer himself, his personality seems to have been reserved for his work. He wasn’t interested in people—made neither enemies nor friends. Never spoke on the telephone: rarely entertained. His only relative is his sister, living alone at Hove. So far as I can discover, he left no Will.”

“Secretary?”

“On holiday, sir. In Scotland. She’s on her way back.”

“Gardener?”

“Old and lame, sir. He couldn’t climb over a wall.”

“Lord’s?”

“No watchman saw anything sir. That’s not surprising, for the ground was in some disorder, and the men were doing less watching than clearing up.”

The Assistant Commissioner pushed back his chair and rose.

“In fact,” he said, “the only glimmer of light is provided by the people next door.”

“That’s right, sir. The Teethers. There’s no doubt that they know something. For all we know, they may have seen the whole thing. Their windows command a stretch of the lawn next door—*the* stretch of the lawn on which the body was found. And the night was by no means dark. Or they may have heard high words, or something. But for some reason or other they’re determined to hold their tongues.”

The Assistant Commissioner frowned.

“What reason?”

“I can’t imagine, sir—unless it’s that old reluctance to be mixed up in a case. But they don’t give me that impression.”

“Take a cigar and sit down. What impression do they give you?”

“They give me the impression of fear, sir.”

In the silence which followed Falcon took a cigar and sat down on a Chippendale chair.

The Director had a hand on his chin.

“Why d’you say that, Chief Inspector?”

“Well, at first, sir, I couldn’t understand the woman’s hostility. She’s a most unpleasant type—no doubt about that. The sort of overbearing woman who takes offence at nothing and works herself up. But this one was out of temper before I had opened my mouth. After that, as I daresay you’ve heard, she ran true to form. Worked herself into a passion which finally burst. But that’s beside the point. Why was she really angry before a word had been said?”

“I think I see. Please go on.”

“Well, I think the answer is, ‘Because I had sent in my name and she knew who I was.’ There’s nothing like fear, sir, for making some people angry. And I think she was afraid the moment she heard I was there. The man’s demeanour certainly bears that out. He was plainly rattled; and if she hadn’t been there, I might have found something out.”

“But what are they afraid of?”

“That’s what beats me, sir. Whatever they know—whatever they saw or heard, I cannot see why they should be frightened. That they were concerned in the crime, I cannot believe. Neither could have committed it, and they’re not the kind that

would screen a murderer."

"You've had no time, of course, to check up on them yet?"

"Not yet, sir. By this time to-morrow I ought to know some of their history. I've little doubt that Dr. Perkins will help. I mean, he's no cause to love them. Mrs. Teether was insufferably rude to him as to me."

The Assistant Commissioner studied his finger-nails,

"Frightened or no, if they don't mean to talk, we can't make them. I think you should keep your eyes open for something else."

"Very good, sir. Of course, there's the secretary. She'll be here tomorrow, and she may have something to say."

"That's right. I don't blame you for looking at the Teethers. Their behaviour is highly suspicious, and nobody else seems to be suspicious at all. But the deepest suspicion's no good if it leads to a *cul-de-sac*."

The Director looked down his nose.

"You have the knack," he said, "of pointing unpleasant truths. I'm with the Chief Inspector. I should like to change foxes. 'What is biting the Teethers?' promises a far better run than 'Who murdered Sir Spencer Sedan?'"

"That's what I'm for," said the Assistant Commissioner.

The three laughed together. Then the butler brought in the

drinks and they went on discussing the case.

It was past eleven, when Falcon took his leave.

The Chief Inspector had covered a quarter of a mile, when he suddenly stopped in his tracks and put a hand to his head.

The next moment he was running like fury the way he had come.

He reached the house he had left, to find the Director on the steps and his host with a hand on the door.

“Why, Falcon!”

“Can we come back, sir, for a minute? I’ve something important to say.”

“Of course. Come on.”

The three re-entered the pleasant library.

“Yes?”

“It’s just occurred to me, sir: and I’m sure I’m right. I mean, it all fits in. *Sir Spencer was murdered by mistake.*”

There was a pregnant silence. Then—

“Reasons,” said the Assistant Commissioner.

The Chief Inspector gave them. Finally, he summed up.

“So there you are, sir. A man came to murder Teether. He came in with the crowd at Lord’s, and when the crowd went away, he stayed behind. When it was dark, he made his way to the wall. He knew Teether walked in his garden in evening dress. He counted the houses as he went—*and he made the mistake which I made*: there must be something misleading, to put you wrong. He stopped at Number Six, instead of at Number Seven, as he had meant to do. Then he looked over the wall. There he saw Teether strolling—*as he believed*. He saw a man of much the same height, with a heavy moustache . . . with the top of his head bald and hair growing thick at the sides . . . wearing evening dress—*and glasses*. . . . And as soon as his back was turned, he just nipped over and choked him—and then cleared out.”

“Well done, indeed. Go on.”

“As for the Teethers, the moment they learned of the murder, *they* knew there’d been a mistake—that the man had meant to kill Teether, and not Sir Spencer Sedan. And they knew why he meant to kill Teether—and that knowledge made them afraid. So they did their clumsy best to stone-wall the police. And Teether removed his glasses in case I should remark his resemblance to Sir Spencer Sedan.”

“Admirable,” said the Director. “You’ve only left one thing out. And that is, of course, that they know who the murderer is.”

* * * * * * * *

Dr. Besom of Hazel in Hampshire pointed to a chair.

“Sit down, Chief Inspector. And what can I do for you?”

“I’ll tell you,” said Falcon. “Some two years ago, I think you sold your London practice to Doctor Perkins. Among your patients was a lady called Mrs. Burnt, of Home Farm Road.”

“That’s quite right. She died soon after I left. A very nice old lady. I was sorry I couldn’t stay on to see her out.”

“What was her trouble, Doctor?”

“Cancer. She stuck it very well, but she hadn’t a chance.”

“Had you attended her long?”

“Ten or twelve years, I should say. I knew her well.”

“And her niece—Mrs. Teether?”

The doctor made a grimace.

“I had little use for her, Chief Inspector. But the old lady had to have someone to look after her, and her niece was a capable woman and did it well.”

“And Mr. Teether?”

“I was spared the pleasure of his acquaintance. A clerk in some solicitors’ office, I believe. The two of them lived with Mrs. Burnt. They originally came on a visit, when she was first taken ill. And then they stayed on. It was very, er, convenient for them. I believe that, except for his earnings, they hadn’t a bean.”

“And she had no other relatives?”

“She had a son—Lucius Burnt, of whom she was very fond. I only saw him twice: a fine, upstanding fellow—a rolling stone. England didn’t suit him. He liked the colonies. But I think he’d’ve stayed at the last, when his mother was ill, if it hadn’t been for the Teethers. He couldn’t stand the Teethers at any price—said they were parasites, as in fact they were. She told me all about it, after he’d gone. He said she must fire the Teethers, and she refused. So off he went to Australia, and, unless he returned very nearly as soon as I’d gone, she never saw him again. I was very sorry for her, but I couldn’t blame him. He was a rough diamond—never cost her a penny-piece: and to see the Teethers sponging got on his nerves. After all, the house was his home: he’d spent his childhood there. I remember he’d showed me the spot where he’d buried a favourite dog. And she was mad about him. Always had his photograph by the side of her bed. Used to read me bits out of his letters, and things like that.”

“I see. Was this before or after he’d gone away?”

“Oh, both. The dispute didn’t alter her feelings. I believe she’d have fired the Teethers, if only he had come back.”

“Pity he didn’t. As it is, the two of them have his home.”

“Go on,” said the doctor, incredulously.

“Fact,” said Falcon. “And Teether doesn’t work any more.”

The doctor shook his head.

“There’s been dirty work there,” he said. “I suppose they got round her at the last. Have you seen the Will?”

“In view of what you’ve told me, I’m going to look at it now.”

* * * * * * * *

An official at Somerset House produced the original Will.

“Popular, this Will,” he vouchsafed. “I only had it out about ten days ago.”

“Really?” said Falcon. “Someone else want to see it?”

“That’s right. A great, big fellow. Colonial, I’d say. And he didn’t enjoy it either, to go by his face. ‘Can this Will be questioned?’ he says. ‘Not now,’ says I. ‘It’s been proved. You’ve got to question a Will before it comes to be proved. And this has been proved for two years. It’s too late now.’”

“What did he say to that?”

“Nothing. He only looked very black. Read it through again, he did. An’ then handed it back an’ went off.”

“What was he like,” said Falcon.

“Tall, clean-shaven, tough. A fine-looking man. Spoke better than you would expect. His hands were rough.”

“Fair or dark?”

“Dark. D’you think you know him?”

“I might,” said Falcon. And then, “I’m much obliged.”

With that, he turned to the Will.

This was type-written and made on a printed form. By it, Mrs. Emily Burnt, Widow, of 7 Home Farm Road, left all her property, real and personal, of every kind whatsoever to her ‘dear niece, Florence Amy Teether and her husband, Albert Teether,’ jointly, and appointed these two persons Executors and Trustees of her Will. Her signature had been witnessed by Mary Willett, Servant, and Annie Cobble, Cook, both of 7 Home Farm Road. It was dated June, 1934, and had been proved in May, 1936.

* * * * * * * *

Two hours later Falcon made his report.

“I must confess,” said his chief, “that it looks very much as if Lucius Burnt was our man.”

“That’s my belief, sir,” said Falcon. “I’m sure it was he that went to Somerset House. If I’m right, he had a strong motive for putting Teether to death. Revenge—for stealing his birthright, while he was out of the way.”

“I agree. And it looks very much to me as if we are on the track of another crime. I mean, why shouldn’t the Teethers give Lucius Burnt away? He’s tried to kill Teether, and failed. He may try again, and succeed. So it’s very much to their interest to have him strung up.”

“I submit, sir, that they are afraid of what he will say.”

“What can he say?”

“He can suggest ‘under influence’—that they put pressure upon a dying woman to make a Will in their favour instead of in his.”

“I know. But he can’t prove it. It won’t be nice for them; but you can’t put it higher than that. No. Their fears are better founded. They are afraid of the *results* of what Burnt will say. They are afraid that the Will may be scrutinized. It wasn’t, when it was proved. No Will ever is. It appeared to be in order, and that was that. Had a *caveat* been entered, then it would have been scrutinized. But no *caveat* was entered, for Burnt was in Australia, and they took good care not to tell him his mother was dead. So the time went by. And now the danger has once more lifted its head. Depend upon it, Falcon, there’s something wrong with that Will. And that’s why the Teethers are frightened. They don’t want to go to prison for several years.”

The Chief Inspector’s eyes were alight.

“By God, if we can prove that, sir—forgery of a Will. I’d rather send them down than Lucius Burnt. After all, Teether had bought it. Forgery or undue influence, it’s as dirty a piece of work as ever was done.”

The Assistant Commissioner laughed.

“I agree. But you can’t go about murdering people, just because they’ve done you down. And when you murder the wrong man . . .”

“Oh, I know, sir,” said Falcon. “But I must say I’m sorry for

Burnt. What must his feelings have been, when he saw from the papers that he'd murdered Sir Spencer Sedan?"

"God knows," said his chief. "It's almost enough to make a man give himself up. But that's by the way. Sentiment is to us forbidden fruit. If a jury likes to devour it, that is the jury's affair. How about finding Burnt?"

"Ross is seeing the shipping lines now, sir. To find out when he arrived and whether, by any chance, he's proposing to sail."

"That's right. And if Ross draws blank?"

Falcon shrugged his shoulders.

"We may have to go to the Press, sir. The Press and the B.B.C. I'd like to avoid that, sir: but honestly, at the moment I don't know where to look."

"One thing leads to another in this sort of job. What about the witnesses to the Will?"

"I'm hoping to trace them, sir. They've both left Home Farm Road."

"Get one and you'll get them both. They'd better come up and look at their signatures. When's the Inquest? To-morrow?"

"That's right, sir. Identification, finding of the body, cause of death. I thought I'd ask for an adjournment of fourteen days."

"All right."

* * * * * * * *

Forty-eight hours had gone by, and Chief Inspector Falcon was talking to Mrs. Wayward of Shepherd's Mile.

"Would you like to see her here, Chief Inspector?"

"I'd rather see her in her kitchen, if you don't mind. She'll be more at ease there than here. But I'd like to see her alone."

"She'll be alone now. The kitchen-maid's out to-day."

The two walked round to the back of the pleasant house.

Five minutes went by before Falcon came to the point. He had made friends with Annie—a little, white-haired woman, with bright, blue eyes.

"I want," he said, "to talk about Mrs. Burnt. How long were you with her, Annie?"

"Just over sixteen years, sir. And a very good mistress she was."

"So I gathered from Doctor Besom. There's a nice man."

"A very nice gentleman, sir. I remember him well."

"Why did you leave Mrs. Burnt?"

Annie looked down at the ground.

"Well, we wouldn't never have left her, sir—me and Mary, I

mean. But it wasn't like being in her service. When I went to say 'Good-bye,' I hadn't seen her for weeks. An' I didn't like Mrs. Teether. Nor Mary didn't, neither. She doesn't know how to treat servants, if you ask me."

"She had to be there, I suppose, to take care of Mrs. Burnt?"

Annie shrugged her shoulders.

"We could have done that—me and Mary, I mean. When she came, she came for a fortnight—an' stayed six years. More, for all I know. An' the mistress wasn't happy: she didn't like either of them: but she hadn't got the courage to send them away. An' so things sort of drifted, as you might say, until in the end it was more their house than hers. An' then me an' Mary, we went."

"Couldn't Mr. Lucius do anything?"

"He came back too late, I think. They was too well in. An' he put himself in the wrong, by being so fierce. Mary—she'd been his nurse—she begged him to 'andle his mother, an' not to go at the thing like a bull at a gate. But he was that mad he wouldn't listen to reason. An' then she wouldn't neither, an' off he goes. And yet she worshipped him, as much as she—well, she didn't hate them: no, I shouldn't say that. But she was afraid of them. That I do know. I remember her havin' us in to witness her Will. The Teethers were out that night, for once in a way. It was very, very seldom they left her alone. She'd typed it out herself on her little machine. Mary'd got the paper for her, and then she did it out. It was late by the time she'd done, an' she was afraid they'd come in before we'd all written our names. Poor lady, she was that nervous, in case we was caught. An' when she

was signin' her name, she caught her nib in the paper an' made some terrible blots. But of course there was nothing to be done."

"That wouldn't matter," said Falcon, "so long as her signature was there."

"That's what we said. An' I told her as how my father, not being able to write, used to make his mark. An' she said, 'Well, that's what I've done,' and we 'ad to laugh, because it was true."

Falcon left it there. Better she should see for herself that there were no blots on the Will at Somerset House. They talked for another five minutes before he got to his feet. By then he had 'Mary's' address—a tiny village in Wiltshire, where she kept house for her brother, a smith by trade: and by then Annie Cobble had promised to come and meet 'Mary' in Town.

* * * * * * * *

It was not often that Falcon felt mentally tired: but he did the following evening, when he rang the bell of the Assistant Commissioner's house.

"Who'd be a policeman?" he sighed.

Then the butler opened the door, and he entered the hall.

A moment later he was in the presence of the two men he knew so well.

"Ah, Falcon. Sit down," said the chief.

“Chief Inspector,” said the Director, “from what I am told, some people would say that you were lucky. I should resist that conclusion. You induce good fortune, because you work so well.”

Falcon inclined his head.

“That’s very kind of you, sir. But this tune I shot at a jackal and killed a lion. And when you do that, you don’t feel proud of yourself.”

“Sit down and drink that,” said the chief, and put a glass into his hand. “That is a brandy and soda. And that will do you good.”

“You’re very good, sir,” said Falcon. He sat down and drank. “And now I’ll tell you my tale.”

“As you know, I left for Wiltshire about mid-day. I lunched at Basingstoke, and I got to the village of Wallflower soon after three. The cottage was easy to find—it was one of only fifteen—and it had the prettiest garden, about six feet by nine. And there was Mary Willett, kneading a loaf of bread. I’d left the car short of the village, but when she looked up and saw me, she nearly jumped out of her skin. The door was open, you see, and she saw me before I could knock. And strangers in Wallflower are probably pretty rare. Well, I left out the ‘Chief Inspector’ and did my very best to put her at ease, but, once upset a person like that, and they seem to want a night’s rest before they recover their poise. She was such a nice-looking old lady, with apple-cheeks—at least, they should have been apple, but the blood had gone out of her face. It

came back after a bit, but her hands were trembling so that she couldn't manage her bread.

"I didn't ask any questions for a quarter of an hour. I just talked about Annie Cobble and Dr. Besom and, finally, Mrs. Burnt. I was marking time, of course, and hoping that she would calm down, but at last I gave it up and came to the Will. To my great surprise—perhaps I should say dismay—she denied all remembrance of having witnessed the Will. Well, I went round and about and to and fro, and then I must have said something which she found good, for she sat up straight, stopped trembling and looked me full in the eye, 'What are you here for?' she said. 'To be perfectly honest,' I said, 'I rather suspect that Will. I'm not at all sure, Miss Willett, that the one at Somerset House is the one you and Annie witnessed, although it bears your names. But that's between you and me. I want you to come to London and look at the Will yourself. If you think it's the one you witnessed, well and good. I trust you to tell me the truth.'—'And what if it isn't?' she said. I shrugged my shoulders. 'In that case,' said I, 'we should have to do something about it.'—'D'you mean to say,' she said, 'you could get it reversed?'—'Oh, you never know,' I said. 'But we might have a try. Sure you don't remember how Mrs. Burnt sent for you both, when the Teethers were out?' She put her hands to her eyes. 'Yes, I do,' she said. 'And I'll tell you now. Why didn't you say you were a lawyer? I thought you were one of the police.'—'Well, what if I was?' I said. 'You've nothing to be afraid of.'—'Of course I haven't,' she said. 'But I'm glad you're not.'

"Well, it seemed best to leave it like that. She was quite different, poor woman. She was no longer trembling—in

fact, she was ready to laugh. And I felt rather ashamed. But the point is she talked. Told me about the blot, without any prompting from me, and fairly let go on the Teethers and all their works. But she wouldn't talk about Burnt. Just said 'Yes' and 'No' and made very light of the fact that she'd been his nurse. So I said I'd arrange a day for her to come up to Town, and got up to go. And as I came to the door, which was open wide, Lucius Burnt turned in at the garden gate.

"The moment I saw him, of course, I knew who it was. And everything else became clear. In a flash, you know, sir—much quicker than I can tell. After he'd killed Sir Spencer, he'd gone to Mary Willett, who used to be his nurse—as you, sir, had thought he might, though you never told me—and, unable to bear his secret he told her what he had done. Hence all her nervousness, and hence her naïve admission that she thought I belonged to the police. And I had—well, reassured her . . . allowed her to think I was a lawyer . . .

"He was clearly working at the forge—her brother, you'll remember, was a smith—for he had a leather apron over his arm: and a fine helper he must have made, for he's a great, big fellow, without an ounce of fat.

"He stopped dead, when he saw me, and kept his eyes on my face, and I passed out of the cottage and closed the door. Then I said, 'You're Lucius Burnt.' And he said, 'That's my name: But I don't know yours.' 'I'll tell you mine in a minute,' I said. 'Can we go somewhere and talk?' 'What's the matter with this garden?' he said. 'I've nothing to hide.'—'Too public,' said I. 'Let's try the churchyard.' That was one minute's walk, on the other side of the road. 'Perhaps you're right,' he said. 'I'll just

leave this.' He held up his apron and showed a shoulder-strap gone.

"I stood aside, and he opened the cottage door. As I walked to the gate, I heard Mary whispering. Burnt cut her short. 'Lawyer be damned,' he said: 'He's a plain-clothes man.' And the poor woman cried out . . .

"As we walked across to the lich-gate, 'She took me for a lawyer,' I said. 'I never told her I was. You see, I came to see her about your mother's Will. I'd no idea you were here, and I wasn't looking for you. Don't be misled by that, because in fact I've a warrant for your arrest. But I wasn't looking for you this afternoon.' He laughed at that. 'My luck's dead out,' he said, 'if you're telling the truth. Never mind. What about the Will? The fellow at Somerset House . . .'—'I know.' I said. 'But I've reason to think he's wrong. Entirely between you and me, I think that Will was forged: and if we can show that it was—well, if I were to try the case, I'd send the Teethers to prison for fifteen years.'"

Falcon put his hand to his head.

"I know, of course, I shouldn't have talked like that; but he'd had such brutal misfortune that I felt I must give the man something—some little crumb of comfort to help him up. And, right or wrong, I'm glad to think that it cheered him. He clapped me on the back and cursed the closing hours, because his one idea was to stand me a drink."

"You hadn't cautioned him?" said the Director.

"No, sir. I purposely didn't do that. A clear dereliction of duty.

I know that perfectly well. But I didn't think it was fair—till he'd sobered down. I mean, he'd have taken no notice. He simply had to talk. And talk he did. He never attempted to deny it—and of course I'd made no charge. We sort of both took it for granted. He said what a shock it was when he found that he'd killed the wrong man and he said he was so much upset that he nearly gave himself up. 'Of course I should have,' he said, 'if you'd taken somebody else.' And the tale he told! If I were on the jury that tries him, I swear I'd let him off."

"They probably will," said the Director. "It will be an outrage, of course, but entirely natural."

"The Teethers never cabled him, when his mother died. They never wrote by Air Mail. They sent an ordinary letter, posted long after her death to an address which Burnt had left two years before. That he got the letter at all is the merest chance. He never knew his mother was dead for eighteen months. And then he was down and out and he couldn't get home. Then he wrote to Teether, and I'm glad to say he's got his reply. You'll see it later, sir. I really think I'd have done murder, if I had had such a letter from such a man.

"Well, I pulled him up at last and pointed out that I had my duty to do. I told him to beware of solicitors and mentioned Harvey of Bow Street as being an honest man. Then I said I was going to caution him and that after that he'd better keep his mouth shut—which, of course, he didn't do, as we drove up to Town. But when you're in a car, sir, you can't write everything down."

The Assistant Commissioner was laughing. The Director of Public Prosecutions was trying to keep his face straight.

“It’s clear, Chief Inspector, that you’ve had a trying day. But I’ll make you a present of this—that I should like to think that I could have picked my way one-half so well. I’m sure the Assistant Commissioner agrees with me there.”

“I do, Director.”

“And since we all feel a quite unjustifiable sympathy for Lucius Burnt, please do your very best to give me a cast-iron case against our friends the Teethers for forgery of a Will.”

Falcon looked up.

“I can practically do that now, sir. I quite forgot. A report was waiting for me when I got back to the Yard. A report from the printers who print those forms of Wills such as Mrs. Burnt used. You’ll remember that the Will we suspect was dated June, 1934. Well, the printers have examined that Will and they are prepared to swear that that particular form was never on sale until 1936.”

* * * * * * * *

The Attorney-General fingered his chin.

“It’s a pity,” he said, “we can’t accept a plea of manslaughter. But that is out of the question. It’s murder, and nothing less. If he’s found guilty, he’ll certainly be reprieved. But he doesn’t deserve a life-sentence. On the other hand, he does deserve something. Sir Spencer was savagely killed, and it isn’t right that Burnt should get off scot-free.”

The Director raised his eyebrows.

“I’m willing to bet that he does, if the case against the Teethers is taken first. But if Burnt is tried before they are, and a jury sends him down, there will be a great deal of feeling when the Teethers come to be tried and the whole of the truth is known.”

“Yes,” said the other, “there will. And rightly. It’s really a matter for the Judge, but I daresay you can arrange that the Teethers are taken first.”

“I think so, Mr. Attorney.”

“Well, do it. I think it’s right. And if any questions are asked, you can count on me.”

* * * * * * * *

So it fell out.

R. v. Teether and Teether lasted two days. The chief witness for the Crown was Lucius Burnt. Both the accused were found guilty and were sent to penal servitude for fourteen years.

Two days later a jury was empanelled to try *The King against Burnt*. After a careful hearing, the jury was unable to agree, and the case was postponed for a month. Then Burnt again stood his trial and was found ‘Not guilty.’ He had spent three months in gaol on a murder charge.

Probate of the forged Will was presently revoked, and Mrs. Emily Burnt was judged to have died intestate. Letters of Administration were granted to her son.

WAY OF ESCAPE

“This way, if you please, sir.”

The senior partner of Corin, Whymper and Bell followed the servant along a magnificent hall and into a pleasant chamber whose open windows gave to a broad, flagged terrace, alight with sun.

“If you’ll take a seat, sir, I’ll tell his lordship you’re here.”

Perhaps a minute went by, while the lawyer regarded a very beautiful Titian, hung too high for his taste. Then a figure strolled from the terrace into the room.

“How d’you do, Mr. Corin. And what can I do for you?”

The solicitor bowed.

“How d’you do, Lord Avon. I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance. If I may say so, you have a most lovely home.”

“It is nice, isn’t it?” said Avon. “Of course it’s looking its best. A summer’s day like this would give a tenement charm. Sit down on that sofa, won’t you?”

The lawyer took a seat—and went straight to the point.

“I’m afraid,” he said, “I bring you rather bad news. It’s about your friend, Major Coleton. He died of fever at Rome, some ten days ago.”

Avon raised his eyebrows.

“I’m sorry for that,” he said. “I’m nearly always sorry when someone I know is dead. But I can’t pretend I’m shaken. I mean, I used to know him. If I remember, we met at a shady club. And we used to get tight together, to drown our woes. But that was in the dark ages. I haven’t set eyes on Coleton for fourteen years.”

The lawyer sat back.

“I’d reason to think,” he said, “that you were an intimate friend.”

“I was—more than once, for an hour or so at a time. The confidences we exchanged were quite unprintable. And then we faded out of each other’s spheres. Now that you’ve mentioned his name, I remember him well. He had an infectious laugh and he wore a glass in his eye.”

The lawyer leaned forward.

“Did you know he had a daughter, Lord Avon?”

The other opened his eyes.

“I can’t say I did. I have a hazy idea that he’d lost his wife.”

“That’s quite right. She died when the child was born. That child is now seventeen. And by his Will you’re her guardian and sole trustee.”

At the third attempt—

“Oh, don’t be silly,” said Avon. “You’ve turned over two pages or something. I was a boon-companion—not a maiden-aunt.”

“The fact remains,” said the lawyer. “We didn’t draw the Will—he drew it himself. It happens to be quite in order: but I naturally assumed that he’d asked you . . . and you had consented to act.”

“Not on your life. I tell you, I haven’t seen him for fifteen years. And our communion was patchy. We helped one another home: but the old school tie was never out of the drawer.”

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

“Then you must renounce,” he said. “When I saw the Will, I assumed that you were a very close friend—and, of course, that you had consented to what he proposed. As it is, there’s no reason whatever why you should act.”

Lord Avon fingered his chin.

“To be perfectly honest,” he said, “I don’t think there is. More than once, as I’ve told you, we got on extremely well. But we weren’t on the sort of terms from which obligations arise. Our philosophy was ultra-*Epicurean* . . . Coleton was a casual acquaintance: I don’t believe I ever saw him by day. But for two or three months—just after my sight was impaired—I used to do a pub-crawl, to try and forget. And often enough, he’d be there . . . And if he was, as we were both fancy-free, we’d pool our dudgeon and lead one another astray.”

The lawyer folded his papers and put them away. Then he got

to his feet.

“Always the way,” he said, “when a client makes his own Will. Either it’s bad in law, or else he makes some provision which he has no right to make. And when he’s dead and gone, the trouble begins. Will you send me a formal letter, just saying you must renounce? You see, I must have it in writing: and then we can go to the Court.”

Lord Avon rose.

“You must stay to lunch,” he said. “You can’t——”

“You’re very kind indeed, but I mustn’t do that. We’re terribly busy just now. As it is, I’ve wasted a morning I couldn’t spare.”

“I suppose you have,” said his lordship. The lawyer stared. “I mean, I’ve never said that I should renounce. I’ve every right to, of course; and I quite expect that I shall. But I’d like to think it over. One has a natural reluctance to let a dead man down. I mean, if he was alive, I’d tell him to go to hell: but now it’s too late—he can’t pick anyone else. The dead are so helpless . . . This may be fellow-feeling. You see, to a great extent, I’m helpless myself.”

There was a little silence. Then—

“I—didn’t know that, Lord Avon. From what you said just now, I gathered——”

“I’m two-thirds blind. I lost my sight in the war—a gun-shot wound on the eve of the Armistice. After four or five

operations, they got a bit of it back. But I can't look down—only up. If I want to see the time, I've got to hold my wrist-watch above my head."

"Dear me," cried the lawyer. "I'd not the slightest idea."

"Few people have. I don't go about very much. Still, this is beside the point—which is that I'll think things over and let you know."

"As you please, Lord Avon. But, as an honest lawyer, I'm bound to say this—you must be fair to yourself. If you like to act, well and good: but I heard you say just now that if my late client had asked you, you would have at once refused: that being so, no shadow of obligation——"

"I agree. The thing's fantastic. But the blackmail which Sentiment levies is always insidious stuff. I'll ring you up to-morrow and say how I feel." His lordship strolled to the fireplace and touched the bell. "You'll have a glass of sherry before you go?"

* * * * * * * *

Richard Alanol Shere, ninth Earl of Avon and Lippe, had been one of those fortunate youths who find the world at their feet. 'Nol' had had everything—charm, good looks, an old title, riches, a grand physique. More. He did all things well. Before he was twenty-one, he was an acting Major and had been awarded a bar to his D.S.O. 'Unto him that hath shall be given. . . .' And then the blow had fallen. A jealous fate intervened, and the light of a brilliant life was suddenly dimmed.

He still had everything—charm, good looks and the rest: but he had to be led about, because he was two-thirds blind. A really beautiful horseman was now unable to ride: a plus-one golfer was unable to hit a ball: cruellest cut of all, a very exceptional soldier had to be put on the shelf. When at last he went to his home, the famous seat of the Earls of Avon and Lippe, he could see no park, no gardens, but only the upper parts of the immemorial trees.

After his first depression, the man took his great misfortune extremely well. He rearranged his life and smiled in the face of Fate. He spent the season in London, going about quietly and dancing three nights a week. He travelled in mountainous districts, because they offered him prospects which he could see. He passed much time at Lockley, his Hampshire home, getting to know every inch of the house and grounds: at the end of eighteen months, no one who saw him there would have dreamed that he could see nothing which was not above his head. Independence is sweet: the man was happiest there. But he spent the season in London, because he knew that the way of a recluse is not a good road to tread.

So for the next five years. And then a chance conversation, which he was not meant to hear, had turned a half-time hermit into a monk.

Lady Glent had pronounced the incantation.

“My dear, he’s the catch of the world. What more could the modern girl want? A man like that—who can’t see the look in her eyes. . . . Talk about eating your cake and having it, too . . .”

Nol Avon had sat very still. He had been on the edge of proposing to Angela Glent.

He gave up his London flat the following day—and never returned to Town for nearly two years. When he did, his visits were short. He used his Club, patronized shops that he knew, strolled alone in the Parks. But he never spoke to a woman, because he could not see the look in her eyes.

And now the man was clean in the prime of life—with the mien of a serving soldier and a philosopher's heart.

* * * * * * * *

"I'm afraid, Lord Avon, she's very, er, young for her age."

"That's a very nice fault."

The headmistress breathed through her nose.

"Some people would call her irresponsible."

"I see. I wonder what I shall call her."

The headmistress rose to her feet.

"The point," she said, "which I was seeking to make is that she will not be finished for fully two years. Her father realized this and was most anxious that she should remain at Glencouth. You see, we understand her. So if you should be thinking of Paris ——"

"I wasn't thinking of Paris. And now may I see my ward?"

The headmistress drew herself up.

“I’m rather surprised, Lord Avon——”

“I’m not. But I’m getting impatient. I can’t discuss the future of a being I’ve never seen.”

The headmistress rang the bell . . .

To the servant who opened the door—

“I wish to see Miss Coleton,” she said.

More than a minute went by, while Avon sat very still and his hostess stood by the fireplace, tapping the floor with a toe. She knew she had played her cards badly. She should have praised—not blamed a fatherless child. She should have disguised her feelings, pretended she loved the chit—who brought her in a clear four hundred a year. Her cold dislike of the orphan began to swell into hate. A knock fell upon the door.

“Come in.”

A girl with an elfin face slid into the room. Pale and thin, she looked no more than fifteen. And apprehension sat in her big brown eyes.

From his seat on the low divan, the guardian surveyed his ward. But the girl never saw he was there. The big, brown eyes were fast on the woman she feared.

“This is your guardian, Coleton. His name is Lord Avon. Go and say ‘How d’you do.’”

Lord Avon put out his hand.

“Come and sit down, Julie.” The girl took his hand, and he drew her on to the seat. “And please don’t call me Lord Avon. All my friends call me Nol.”

The big eyes lighted.

“Like Oliver Goldsmith?”

“That’s right. What a man he was. Ever read *The Vicar of Wakefield*?” The girl shook her head. “Well, we’ll read it together one day . . . some winter’s night, in front of a good wood fire.” The small hand took hold of his—tight. “Exactly. But that’s for later. The first thing we’ve got to do is to open our hearts. I’ve got a car outside, and I’m sure if we ask her nicely, Miss Netherly-Wainscoat will let us go for a drive.”

The headmistress moistened her lips.

“This room is at your disposal. It’s one of our rules, Lord Avon ____”

“I must ask you to make an exception this afternoon.” His Lordship got to his feet. “Julie, you’ll have to lead me: I don’t see as well as I might.”

“She must go and change, Lord Avon. She can’t be seen out like that.”

“She won’t be seen out. She’s going to stay in the car. Lead on, Julie. Remember I can’t see a yard.”

The two passed out of the room . . .

With his hand on the door of the car—

“Where to, my lord?” said the chauffeur.

“Round and about, Cromer. Don’t bring us back under the hour.”

These orders were varied before thirty minutes had passed.

“Back to that school, Cromer. I’ve changed my mind.”

As the car swung into the drive—

“Straight to your bedroom, Julie, and shove in a case the things you’ll need for the night. Then come down again and get right into the car.”

“You don’t think she’ll——”

“If she tries, she’s for it. What’s the good of being a guardian, if you don’t throw your weight about? You’re sleeping at Lockley to-night—in the Hyacinth room.”

“Oh, Nol, I can’t believe it.”

“Neither can I. Never mind. At breakfast to-morrow morning we’ll know it’s true.”

The girl slipped out of the car and ran for the back of the house, but Cromer led his master up to the head of the steps . . .

Perhaps two minutes went by before an unprincipled woman raised her voice.

“But this is unheard of. Without one word of explanation——”

“That is not so,” said Avon. “I have this moment told you that I am withdrawing Miss Coleton because she is not receiving the treatment she should receive for five hundred guineas a year.”

“You’ll take her word against mine?”

“Yes.”

The headmistress lost control.

“If you think that, because you’re a lord, you can do as you please——”

“I know I can—as a guardian. And now, please, listen to me. If I have any rot from you, I shall instruct my solicitors to issue a summons against you for an account. That means you will have to account in open court for the whole of the two thousand guineas which you have received from Miss Coleton during the last four years.”

The woman’s face was working.

“That’s bluff,” she spat.

“Call it and see,” said Avon. He raised his voice. “Cromer.” The chauffeur opened the door and entered the room. “Has Miss Julie come back?”

“In the car, my lord.”

“Then take me there.”

As the car turned out of the drive—

“Oh, Nol, was she very awful?”

“Well, she didn’t exactly put her arms round my neck. But it might have been worse, my dear. Anyway, that is that. You’re going to be finished at Lockley. I’ll teach you to ride and to fish. And we’ll rake up some jovial spinster, to share your bathroom and help you to buy your clothes.”

* * * * * * * *

Two care-free years had gone by, and the *ménage-à-trois* had been an immense success.

Miss Aldgate, Julie’s companion, adored and adorned her post. The lady was discretion itself. Always on tap, she lived her own life at Lockley and never once did she come between guardian and ward. She refused three offers of marriage, because she was so well placed. After all, she had her own suite and a maid to herself: and everything found and four hundred pounds a year. And Lord Avon was perfectly charming. She returned from a walk one evening, to find a sub-lieutenant sprawling before her fire. It was her only brother, fetched by car from Portsmouth, to spend his leave at Lockley and live like a prince for seven glorious days.

The transformation of Julie was an accomplished fact. Avon himself hardly knew her for the pitiful child he had

abducted two years before. Her latent beauty had fairly come into its own, and the girl was really lovely, figure and face. These would have been enough to lift her out of the ruck, but her eager, downright charm hit people over the heart. Natural as the day, she was much more than attractive; her presence was actually refreshing and those who had known it once hoped very hard that they might know it again. But though Nol Avon took care that his ward went out and about, the girl was never so happy as when the two were together and nobody else was there. Her first few days of freedom, before Miss Aldgate had come, had made a lasting impression on Julie's heart, and nothing would make her give up the ways she had found so precious on her release. On their second evening together, Avon had bade her sit at the top of a pulpit-staircase—a movable work of art, from which could be reached the highest library shelves.

"I can see you there, you see. . . . Take a cushion, of course, and lean back. If it's uncomfortable, we'll try and fix something else."

Julie, rising twenty, still loved to take her seat on the pulpit-stair. If ever Avon protested, she shook her head.

"I like to feel you can see me."

And when the weather was cold and the library grate was ablaze with a fire of logs, the girl would take her seat on the arm of the deep arm-chair which her guardian used. So, leaning back at his ease, Avon could watch the play of her striking face.

It is no good blinking the fact that the man was in love with his ward. Himself, he declined to admit the delicate truth. ‘Natural affection,’ he called it: and sometimes ‘second childhood,’ and things like that. ‘The uncle idolizing a favourite niece.’ He fought to deceive himself, and got a very long way. The fact remains that pity had swelled into affection, and affection had slid into love. More than twice her age, Avon loved Julie Coleton, body and soul. October was mad about May.

Two care-free years and ten days . . .

Then Corin rang up one evening to beg that Lord Avon would receive him the following day.

“Of course,” said Nol, and wondered what was afoot.

Since his first visit to Lockley, the lawyer had never proposed an appointment like this. He had been down twice—each time at Avon’s request. And the two had corresponded . . . But that was all. As trustee of her father’s Will, Corin was more than content with Miss Coleton’s lot. That is putting it very low. Lord Avon’s interpretation of guardianship was overwhelming. His ward’s private income, for instance, was never touched.

Avon said nothing to Julie, but told Joanna Aldgate to keep her clear of Lockley until it was time for lunch. That the man had scented trouble, there can be no doubt. When Corin came into the room, he was seated upon a footstool, because he was anxious to watch the solicitor’s face.

This was extremely grave; and the men shook hands in the silence which waits upon serious things.

Then—

“Yes?” said Avon, quietly.

“Major Coleton’s alive,” said Corin.

“*Alive?*” cried Avon. “D’you mean he’s been raised or something?”

“He’s never been dead.”

Avon put a hand to his head.

“But——”

“He’s been in prison. Lord Avon. I’d rather not say what for.”

“Good God,” said Avon, rising. “And now . . .”

“His two-year sentence has pushed him over the edge. He doesn’t care what he says and he drinks like a fish. And he wants his fortune back . . . and his daughter, too.”

There was a dreadful silence.

Then—

“How,” said Avon, “how do you know all this?”

“He staggered into my office the day before yesterday. He jeered at my amazement and—well, shortly, this was his tale. Two years ago he committed a certain crime. Finding the police on his track and knowing very well that the game

was up, he persuaded his faithful valet to take his clothes and his name and to pass as Major Coleton, until the storm should be past. The idea was to avoid publicity, because, you see, the police didn't know who he was. Very well. He was duly arrested and charged as William Boot, and, as William Boot, he was presently put away. But he had expected two months—instead of two years, and the servant died of fever the day before the master was brought to trial. Coleton was fairly hoist with his own petard.

"And now—well, he's gone to the devil. Two years in a Roman prison have seen to that. When I talked of scandal, he hooted. He's utterly callous, Lord Avon—cares neither for God nor man. But you can't get away from the fact that he is Major Coleton and that, as the solicitor who propounded his Will, I shall have to apply to the Court to have the probate revoked."

"And . . . Julie?" said Avon, quietly.

"She's unmarried, under age, and her mother is dead. Her father has a right to demand that she goes to him. But you can resist that demand—by going to court."

"When the whole damned thing will come out?"

"I'm afraid so, Lord Avon. Police-court reporters know when they're on a good thing."

There was another silence.

Then—

"Money?" said Avon.

“Nothing doing,” said Corin. “He says he wants his daughter —‘to keep him company.’”

Avon wiped the sweat from his face.

“Where is he now?” he said.

“He’s—out of the way,” said Corin. He lowered his voice. “I ought to be struck off the Roll, but I’ve won us a breathing-space. One of my clerks was about to leave for Bordeaux: by sea and from London Bridge—a four-day trip. Well, he made the fellow tight and put him aboard in his stead. That was yesterday morning. Of course he’ll come back, hot foot: but we’ve got the inside of a week, to think what to do.”

“I give you best,” said Avon. “By God, I give you best.”

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

“Not much in my line, I admit. But something had to be done. And a drunkard is easy money. I mean, if I like to say so, he can’t deny that he asked to be sent to France.”

“I don’t care. You did damned well. And now—how much does he know?”

“Of Julie? Next to nothing. I said that, until he was sober, I wouldn’t discuss her at all. I wouldn’t say what she was doing or where she was. But when he comes back, I shall have to. I don’t want to act for the man: but I’m bound to see him righted, and, what is more to the point, he must not fall into the hands of a—less sympathetic firm.”

“Ah,” said Avon. “And then we should be for it. Publicity, blackmail, an’ the rest. And it may happen any day, Corin, when once the fellow gets back.”

The solicitor was biting his lip.

“If only she was married,” he said.

“As the layman to the lawyer,” said Avon, “what if she was?”

“He’d have no standing,” said Corin. “He could make a scene on her doorstep—no more than that. And a married woman can weather that sort of squall: but linen as dirty as Coleton’s, washed in court and hung out in the public prints, would weight the most promising *débutante* out of her race.”

Avon covered his eyes.

“Supposing,” he said, “supposing she was engaged. The man would have to be told, but ten to one he’d want to go through with the deal. Could he get a special licence? Wouldn’t she have to have her father’s consent?”

Corin reflected, frowning.

Then—

“No,” he said. “She could marry with your consent. At the moment, you are her guardian—you can’t get away from that. And you will remain her guardian, till Coleton returns to the charge. Then I shall have to take action, and your guardianship will be suspended, until the probate is revoked. And then it will cease. But she isn’t engaged, is she?”

Avon shook his head.

“Unhappily, no—though I’ve reason to think she’s turned several offers down. I only asked, because, if it—it could have been managed, it would have been a way out of this ghastly stew.”

“No doubt about that,” said Corin. “Mark you, the child’s in no peril. I said just now that, when the probate’s revoked, your guardianship will cease. So it will. But if you then decline to let her go to her father, the man can only issue a summons. And once the Court knows the truth, his summons will be dismissed.”

“‘Once the Court knows the truth,’” said Avon. “Which means that everyone else will know it, too. Can’t you see the headlines? DAUGHTER HUNTS WHILE FATHER DOES TIME . . . PEER PREFERRED TO PARENT . . . FIGHT FOR SOCIETY GIRL . . . My God, Corin, it’d break her. She’d be *déclassée*, before she’d made her *début*.”

The lawyer flung out his hands.

“Yes, but what can we do?” he said. “She can’t possibly go to Coleton. The man’s a drunken satyr. She—wouldn’t be safe.”

Avon drew himself up.

“How long have we got?” he said.

“Four clear days,” said Corin. “We may have more: but we cannot count upon that.”

“Look here,” said Avon. “You won this breathing-space. Have you any idea how to use it? Any idea at all?”

“None whatever,” said Corin. “I acted instinctively. We had to have time to think. I’ve been thinking ever since. But unless we can marry her off in the next four days, I don’t see what we can do—except sit still and wait for the storm to break. She can ride it out, of course. No doubt about that. But —well, she’s bound to get splashed.”

“I can’t buy the man off.”

“You couldn’t have done so the day before yesterday. And such a deal wouldn’t be legal. He could take your money and go to court the next day.”

For nearly another hour, the two men fought with the problem they could not solve. Then the lawyer looked at his watch and said he must go.

“I have a board-meeting at three, and I must get back. If I see a glimmer of light, I’ll ring you up.”

“I’ll do the same,” said Avon. “Four days, you said?”

“Four clear days,” said the lawyer. “Of course we may have longer. I mean, he may fall into the Bay of Biscay.”

“Not he,” said Avon, sadly. “That sort of bloke never does.”

* * * * * * * *

Ten hours had gone by. Dinner was over and gone, Joanna had

retired to her suite, and guardian and ward were strolling upon the broad terrace, arm within arm.

Dusk was stealing out of the spreading park, veiling the formal garden, blurring the mansion's shape, and only the library windows were framing a glow of light. The country air was breathless, all sound was still, and the stone balustrade was still warm from the heat of the sun. Queen was succeeding king: an exquisite night was succeeding a glorious day.

"The great thing about us," said Avon, "the greatest thing, I think, is that you and I have always told each other the naked truth. No mucking about, no dressing, no covering up. With this result—that we know where we are with each other, as very few people do. Well, that makes it much more easy for me to say to-night what I'm going to say."

Julie stood still, with her eyes on her guardian's face.

"Oh, Nol, what ever's coming? You make me afraid."

"Well, that you need not be. I can tell you that right out. You have nothing whatever to fear. Get hold of that, my lady, here and now. But sometimes one's plans go wrong, and then—well, one's got to take stock and set about making some more."

"What's happened, Nol?"

"All in good time, sweetheart." The man drew her into a walk. "The thing is this. In roughly two years' time, you'll be twenty-one: and then my guardianship will come to an end. Next year you're to be presented—we both know that: and I'd always

hoped that, before you came of age, you'd find some fellow worth having an' marry an' settle down."

Julie's fingers found his.

"Yes?"

"Well, that was what I hoped. It wasn't what I wanted. But then one's hopes and one's wishes don't always coincide. I hoped that would happen, because I was sure in my heart it was best for you. Some girls knock about on their own and do damned well for themselves. But you are not that type. And I felt you'd be happier if you married young and passed from a home like this to a home of your own."

"That was what you hoped?" said Julie, pointing a leg.

"Yes."

"Now tell me what you wanted. I'd like to hear that."

Avon's hand closed upon hers.

"I wanted to keep you, my darling . . . keep you always, Julie . . . make you my wife."

Again, the girl stopped dead.

"*Make—me—your—wife?*" she breathed.

"That's right," said Avon. "Wed you. Marry the child I abducted two years ago. It's a scream, I know, but it happens to be the truth. I, your elderly guardian, wanted to marry my

ward.”

Julie was trembling.

“But, Nol, I——”

“It’s all right, sweetheart, I knew the thing was absurd. I was far too old—and infirm. So I put it away. But, in fact, that was what I wanted . . . And that’s the end of the prologue to what I have got to say.”

“I’d—I’d like to sit down, Nol.”

The man picked her up in his arms and turned to the house.

“Guide me,” he said quietly. . . .

A moment later, he set her down on a sofa and took his seat on the floor.

“Better now, my darling?”

Julie nodded.

“My knees felt wonky—that’s all.”

“Enough to make them,” said Avon. “I’m glad to sit down myself. Stripping one’s soul like this is bad for the heart.”

“Go on,” said Julie, gently. “Tell me the rest.”

Avon took a deep breath.

“D’you remember your father?” he said.

“Very faintly,” said Julie. “You see, I never saw him after I’d gone to Glencouth.”

Avon set a hand on her knee.

“He’s reappeared, my darling. He wasn’t dead—after all.”

Julie sat still as death, while the blood slid out of her face.

“Then—then you’re not my guardian?” she whispered.

“For the moment I am. Get that. And in any event you’ll stay here, unless you would rather go. But I don’t think you would, my sweet. I mean, he’s very much changed. It’s better you shouldn’t see him. You see, he’s gone over the edge.”

“What exactly d’you mean, Nol?”

“He’s become impossible, darling. It’s probably not his fault, but he drinks like hell and he doesn’t care who knows it or what he does. He’ll be quite all right financially: your fortune’s not been touched, and he’ll have it back. *But you cannot go to him.* And that is what he’s going to insist that you do.”

“He’s going to insist . . . ?”

“In vain, my beauty, in vain. But he swears that he’ll have you back. And so we shall have to fight him—fight him in court.”

“Oh, Nol.”

“We’re bound to win, my darling. We’re bound to win. Remember, I told you just now that you’d nothing to fear. But—

and here is the rub—we cannot win, unless we expose his sores. And when I say ‘we,’ I mean ‘I.’ You won’t appear. The lawyers and I will do it. But we shall have to speak out—prove to the Court in plain terms that he is not a fit person to have his daughter in charge.”

“Tell them he drinks?”

“And worse. He’s got—a ghastly record: and we’ll have to bring it out.”

“Will everyone know? I mean, will it be in the papers?”

“Yes.”

There was a little silence. Julie was staring before her, and Avon was looking up, with his eyes on her lovely face.

At length—

“I’d better go to him,” she said. “I couldn’t stay here in your house, when all that had come out. You can’t have a ward whose father’s a—a man like that.”

“My blessed child,” said Avon, “d’you think I’d care?”

“I should,” said Julie, fiercely. “You’ve been . . . very sweet to me . . . and I’m—I’m damned if I’ll foul your nest.”

Avon captured her fingers and held them tight.

“You’re growing up,” he said, smiling.

“Don’t laugh at me, Nol. I mean it.”

“I know you do. And I love you for it, Julie. But listen—I haven’t done yet.”

He saw the girl moisten her lips.

Then—

“Go on,” she said.

“There is a way out, Julie. For me, a way into heaven: for you, a way of escape.”

Slowly her head came round and she met his eyes.

“What on earth d’you mean, Nol?”

The man ignored her question.

“But if it’s going to be taken, it’s got to be taken at once.”

“To-night?”

“No, no. The day after to-morrow. And if we take it, Julie, your father cannot ask for you back, and so his unfortunate record will not come out.”

“Do you mean——”

“Wait, my sweet. I told you just now what I wanted, as opposed to what I had hoped, and how I had, very rightly, dismissed the idea. But now, my darling, Fate has played into

my hands . . . If you will become my wife, we'll be out of the wood. Once you're married, you're safe. Your father's guns will be spiked, and you and he will be spared publicity.

"Well, that's what I wanted to say. And here is the epilogue.

"If you will do me this honour, I give you my word that *nothing at all will be changed*. We shall behave exactly as we have behaved, my sweet, for the last two years. Joanna will stay with us, and, except that you'll have a new surname, every single thing will be exactly the same . . . exactly—in every way. The only thing is this—that if we are going to do it, we've got to be devilish quick. We must have a special licence, and the Reverend Joe must marry us here in the chapel in two days' time. An' then we'll all three go abroad—wherever you like. Two months on the continent, while your father is settling down. And then we'll come back and go on the same as before. That I swear to you, Julie. Our marriage will be a ripple—the jump of a fish. And then the ripple fades out, and the pleasant, lazy water slides on, with nothing to show that its surface has ever been touched."

Julie put a hand to her head.

"I'm rather dazed," she said slowly. "The whole thing seems like a dream. May I—think things over, Nol? I'm not as young as you think."

"Of course, my darling. You must sleep on a thing like this. But please try and make up your mind before ten o'clock. If I am to get that licence, I'll have to shift."

"I'll let you know before then."

“You won’t forget this, will you—that I have told you the whole and the absolute truth, and that if you marry me, Julie, you will be making me free of my heart’s desire?”

For a long moment, the steady, brown eyes held his. Then Julie moved, and the two of them got to their feet.

Avon found her fingers and put them up to his lips.

“Sleep well, sweetheart,” he said. “And please let me know by ten.”

“I will,” said Julie, quietly. “Good night, Nol. You’ve been so very gentle . . . and terribly sweet.”

* * * * * * * *

Three weeks had gone by.

On learning that his daughter was married, Major Coleton had abused all women in quite unprintable terms; this something irrational storm was immediately followed by a tidal wave of self-pity, in which the impiety of children was sharply contrasted with the devotion of sires. Finding Corin unsympathetic, the man had got to his feet and commanded him with great dignity to render his bill of costs: he had then staggered out of the office and been turned from the doors of five other firms of solicitors the same afternoon. The next day he had done better. One Mr. Lemonbaum had received him and heard his tale—and extracted twenty-five pounds on account of costs. He had also taken Coleton’s instructions—which he had not carried out. The Countess of Avon, he felt, would not respond to blackmail. . . . Within the week, Coleton was back

with Corin, abusing all lawyers in quite unprintable terms. . . .

Meanwhile, the Lake of Como, which Julie had never seen, was casting about her its immemorial charm.

Finding a villa to let on the shore of the lake, Avon had taken the place for a couple of months. With a launch and a private quay, with a man and a maid from Lockley and Cromer, to drive the car, with weather as fair as the prospects on every side, the *ménage-à-trois* made bold to let the world slip and to 'fleet the time as they did in the golden world'.

And now—three weeks had gone by, and, as once before, a man and a maid seemed to have the world to themselves.

An unbelievable moon was lighting the lovely scene, limning with harlequin magic the everlasting hills, lacing the lake with silver, turning the villa's *loggia* into a royal box. Julie was sitting on the parapet, swinging a slim, bare leg, and Avon was in a low chair, with his eyes on his lady's face. The *salons* were dark. Joanna had gone to bed.

"Once you said this," said Julie, "that the great thing about us was that we always told one another the naked truth."

"I remember it perfectly," said Avon.

"Well, now it's my turn," said Julie. "I've something to say."

"Go on, my beauty," said Avon, crossing his legs.

"You know I wouldn't give you my answer, until the next day?"

“I think that was very natural.”

“That’s only because you’re Nol. A thousand girls out of a thousand would have flung their arms round your neck before you were half way through.”

Avon uncrossed his legs.

“My sweet, I——”

“They would. Oh, and please sit still. I—I want you to hear me out, before you get up.”

“Very well,” said Avon, obediently.

“Well, as I was saying, they would. They’d have thanked their God and flung their arms round your neck. But I couldn’t do that, because I had to decide whether I had the right to accept your name. I mean, you were doing it to save me: and though I should be safe as your wife, a father-in-law like my father was not a very nice dowry to bring to a man like you.

“Well, I thought it over till two, and I finally made up my mind that it couldn’t be done. But in the morning I—I weakened. You see, for more than a year I’d wanted to be your wife. Please sit still—you promised . . .” Avon sank back. “Well, I knew it was out of the question—that I wasn’t cast for that rôle. But that was *my* heart’s desire. And now, here it was, at my feet. And if I said ‘no,’ and you fought my father in court and it all came out, then it *would* be out of the question for good and all, for Lord Avon could never marry a woman whose name was mud. And so I wrote you that note. . . .

“I think that’s all—except that you promised that nothing at all should be changed, that ‘every single thing’ should be the same as before, that I’d have a different surname—no more than that. Well, you’ve kept your word, of course. You always do. But I never asked for that promise . . . and if you want me to be happy, you’ll take it back.”

Julie was in the man’s arms, held close to his heart. So they stayed for perhaps a minute, not moving at all. Then Avon bent his head, and Julie’s cool hands went up and guided his lips to hers.

The girl was whispering.

“You never said you loved me—that evening.”

“I—I did my best to keep sentiment out of the bill.”

“You felt my position?”

The man smiled into her eyes.

“You are growing up, Lady Avon.”

“I am grown up, my darling. I’ve been grown up for ages. But in the eyes of their guardians, wards don’t grow up. I can’t tell you what I went through—in love with a man who I knew was in love with me, and yet would never propose, because he must make no profit out of his trust.”

“Words fail me,” said Avon slowly. “It isn’t often that happens, but now I’m dumb. And how dare you say that you weren’t cast for this rôle? You’ll simply——”

“Whatever I am, you’ve made me. You’ve taught me all I know. And now the beggar-maid——”

“That’ll do.” With a sudden movement, Nol picked her up in his arms. “I’m in love with the Countess of Avon, and she is in love with me.” 294

“That’s all that matters,” said Julie, sliding an arm round his neck. “But I can’t give everything up. The pulpit-staircase, for instance. When I was a little girl——”

The rest of the sentence was lost, for Avon had managed to find her mouth for himself.

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PERIOD STUFF

It is not too much to say that Fanfare was looking its best.

For more than four hundred years the old, rose-red mansion had ruled the spreading deer-park, much as a rare jewel commands the precious setting in which it lies. Once it had been an upstart, lording it over acres that had been free: but the house and grounds had come to belong to each other, and the lovely trick which England alone has mastered was an accomplished fact. Nature had accepted the work of men's hands: Fanfare was naturalized.

And now it was evening—seven o'clock of a beautiful summer's day. The light of the sun was gentle, the winds were still, and the landscape had the look of a picture—a vision filched by a hero out of the golden world.

A small, swift car was scudding up one of the two-mile drives, and the tired staff-officer seated beside the wheel observed the beauty about him and felt refreshed.

"Not too fast, Pearson," he said. The driver slowed down. "This is the real thing. Look at that oak over there. At least six hundred years old. And the house was built when Henry the Eighth was king."

"My word, sir," said Pearson, wide-eyed. And then, "It's a peach of a place. Gorblime, look at them stags."

"Deer," said George Thane. "In their element. We're looking at

a slice of the England that Shakespeare knew. Fanfare. Mind you remember it, Pearson. It's period stuff."

"Shan't forget this, sir."

The lodge-keeper had signalled the car, and when, some five minutes later, this came to rest, the great door of Fanfare was open, and a servant stood waiting for Major Thane to alight.

As the latter left his seat—

"Lord St. Axe?" he said, quietly.

"His lordship is away, sir."

The officer raised his eyebrows.

"I see. Who is in charge?"

"His lordship's sister, sir. Lady Ursula."

"Will you ask her ladyship if she can see me—Major Thane?"

"Certainly, sir. Will you come in, please?"

Thane passed into a truly magnificent hall. . . .

"If you'll take a seat, sir, I'll tell her ladyship that you are here."

"Thank you."

There were sofas and easy chairs, but Thane made his way to

an oriel, served by a window-seat.

After a moment or two the servant returned.

“Will you come this way, please, sir?”

Thane followed the man through a small withdrawing-room and on to the broad, flagged terrace commanding the park.

A girl was standing, with her back to the long balustrade—a slight, boyish figure, in shirt and slacks. Her head was bare, and the blue-black, ‘Beechwood’ hair was framing a striking face. Her eyes were gray and wide-set, and her features might have been sculpture, they were so fine and clean-cut. The lift of her chin spoke volumes. A glance was enough to show that here was the true *châtelaine*—the lady whose word was law, on whom her lord could count to hold his castle as he would have held it himself. Period stuff.

She neither moved nor spoke, and as Thane came up he saw that her nerves were taut.

“How d’you do,” he said gravely.

“How d’you do.”

“They tell me your brother is away.”

“He’s with his regiment.”

“Of course. And you are in charge?”

The girl nodded.

“Sole charge,” she said shortly. “He gave me a Power of Attorney before he left.”

“That’s splendid,” said Thane. He swallowed. “As I daresay you realize, I’m here because Fanfare is now in the danger zone.”

“All England is now in the danger zone.”

“I’m afraid I agree,” smiled Thane. “Officially, however, she isn’t. But Fanfare is.”

“I won’t get out,” said the girl.

“I’m not going to ask you to.”

“Then what do you want?”

“Quite a lot of things, I’m afraid. I’ll call them ‘your co-operation.’”

“You mean to say that Fanfare is under martial law?”

“More or less. Do you think we could sit down to a table? I’ve got to ask you some questions and write the answers down.”

Lady Ursula led the way to a stately library.

* * * * * * * *

Half an hour later George Thane got to his feet.

“I think that’s all clear,” he said. “We take over the lodges to-

morrow at six p.m. At the same hour you will receive a signal section which will take over your switch-board. The sergeant will be responsible for seeing that the black-out is observed and that nobody leaves this house between dusk and dawn. And he will bring you your pass and one for your steward, too."

"Am I under his orders?" said the girl.

"Oh, no. But I'd like you to tell your staff to do as he says."

"Whose orders am I under?"

"Those of District Headquarters."

"In other words, yours?"

George Thane smiled. Then—

"They'll come—if they come—through me."

Lady Ursula moved to a window and stood looking out. Then she spoke over her shoulder.

"I'm afraid I'm what men call difficult. But I don't think you can imagine what Fanfare means to me. To us, I should say, for my brother is just the same. Like so very few other people, we've always had enough money to keep it up, and, though I say it, it is the most perfect thing."

"That's why we're not turning you out." The girl swung round. "There were good reasons why we should. But since we're out to save England, it seemed absurd to begin by spoiling one of the loveliest features she has. There'll probably be talk about it

—shouts of ‘One law for the rich, and another for the poor’; but that won’t matter at all, provided you work with us. If we can say, ‘We are seeking to preserve Fanfare as a national treasure, and Lady Ursula Beechwood is staying there under our orders as caretaker, guardian, or what you will,’ I think that all will be well. But we must be able to give you a good report.”

The girl had the man by the arm.

“You shall. I swear it. I’ll do whatever you say. I’d no idea that you cared—that anyone cared.”

Thane smiled at the eager face—four inches from his.

“We do—very much,” he said. “When I get back may I say that you are ready and willing to accept and obey any order that we may give?”

Lady Ursula hesitated. Then—

“Yes,” she said slowly, “you may—provided it comes through you.”

“Very well.”

“But you won’t turn me out. Promise you won’t turn me out.”

“I can promise you this,” said Thane. “We won’t turn you out till Fanfare has to be loop-holed. And I don’t think that will happen—unless the Hun has improved in the last six weeks.”

There was a moment’s silence. Then—

“You look so tired,” said the girl, and moved to a bell.

Thane shrugged his shoulders.

“We’re all a bit tired,” he said. “Don’t forget what I said about raiders. If one should come over low, don’t be curious. They’ve pretty ways, when they know that they can’t be hurt.”

A servant appeared.

“Two Manhattans, please,” said the girl.

“Not for me,” said Thane quickly.

The servant glanced at his mistress, who nodded her head. As the door closed—

“Don’t humiliate me,” she said. “We both know that you would have accepted, if I’d offered you a drink when you came.”

Thane laughed.

“Very well,” he said. “You see, I know why you didn’t.”

“Why didn’t I?”

“Because you didn’t want me to think that your policy was one of appeasement.”

Lady Ursula smiled and nodded.

“Quite right.”

“May we have the cocktails outside?”

“On the terrace? Of course.” Lady Ursula led the way out. “We always have them here on evenings like this.”

Ten minutes later Major George Thane took his leave.

* * * * * * * *

Lady Ursula picked up the letter and read it again.

Dear Sully,

You were devilish lucky to fall into George Thane’s lap. I thought he was overseas, but he must have come back. One of the very best. Stayed for ten days at Fanfare, when you were abroad. He was terribly nice to Dad, who was failing then. All oke here, but I can’t put in for leave for the next few weeks. Take care of yourself, sweetheart. All will be well.

Your loving brother,
Bim.

P.S.—It was George who taught me to make the Manhattan as it should be made. Mind you have one every night as long as the rye whisky holds out.

After a little, she sat down and wrote a note.

Dear Major Thane,

I think it was rather like you not to tell me that you had stayed at Fanfare and had known my Father and Bim so well. The latter is thrilled that we are in your hands. Please come and have lunch the very next day you are free. I'm glad to think you had one of your own cocktails. The signal section is behaving beautifully.

Yours very sincerely,
Ursula Beechwood.

She received a reply the next day.

Dear Lady Ursula,

I'm afraid lunch is out of the question. But, if I may, I will come one late afternoon, as I did before. Perhaps Wednesday. Sorry to have to be so indefinite.

Yours very sincerely,
George Thane.

* * * * * * * *

Fanfare was growing used to the sound of the aeroplanes. They were always very high up, and the nearest bomb which had fallen, had fallen four miles off. The park was heavily timbered, and this was fortunate: only a madman would have attempted to land. Ursula knew this. Three years ago Fanfare

had been photographed from the air, and afterwards she had gone up, and the park had seemed to be woodland from a height of three thousand feet. She wrote to her brother, “We’ve much to be thankful for.”

All day she worked very hard, for Fanfare needed maintaining and the staff had been greatly reduced. All the men under forty had gone, and some of the girls. Just now she was clipping the yew, for Lee and Mullins had gone, and she trusted nobody else. Lee had taught her himself and she did it well, but the work was exhausting work and the formal garden had to be carefully done. ‘The finest topiary work in England,’ one of the guide-books had said. It used to take Lee three days, working ten hours a day. Ursula knew she would be lucky if she did it in double the time.

The stable-clock struck eleven, and Ursula laid down her shears, drew off her gauntlets and took her seat on the turf. She took a rest of five minutes every half hour.

The summer’s day was perfect, and Fanfare seemed to be dozing, with a smile on its lovely face. Its lattice windows were open, its twisted chimneys rose smokeless against the blue, and the blend of stone and brickwork offered a glowing tribute to rain and shine. Bogey, the great Alsatian, was couched at the head of the steps. He was watching the deer, who feared him because of his breed. Bogey knew this and deplored it. He would not have harmed so much as a hair of their coats. So he lay still as death and watched them—a glorious company, moving very slowly across the green. It was not often the herd came so close to the house: it was moving along the sunk fence, the garden’s verge. Ursula rose—half to

watch them and half to look at the time. Her wrist-watch lay on the stone at the foot of the steps: she took it off when she was clipping, for fear of jarring its works. By its side lay a tiny dispatch-case—a present from Bim.

"Two minutes to go," she murmured, and turned to look at the deer. "My God, what a picture! I wish George Thane could see this. Talk about tradition. And Jacques had the nerve to call them 'fat and greasy citizens.' Bogey, who said there was a war on?"

With her words it came . . . without warning . . . out of the blue. Ursula tried to reconstruct the incident afterwards—always without success. One moment, all was at peace: the next, a screaming whine slid into a shattering roar. Instinctively, she threw herself down as a bomber raved overhead—so low that she thought he was crashing. Bogey was barking like mad. With her cheek to the turf, she could see him: she could not hear him, nor could he hear her voice. And then it was over. The bomber soared up and was gone. Only the reek of burned spirit sullied the air.

Ursula rose to her knees and sat back on her heels. Still deaf from the tearing blast, she could hear Bogey barking now—and something else . . . confused cries or something. In a flash she was up on her feet, with her eyes on the park. The herd of deer was in flight, but more than a score of bodies were lying upon the sward. Stragglers, with broken legs, were hobbling after their fellows as best they could: some, the lucky, lay still; others were kicking and crying dreadfully, their beautiful bodies stained with the flowing blood: a doe whose muzzle was streaming was trying to lick her dead fawn.

Ursula leapt for her dispatch-case. A moment later, automatic pistol in hand, she was down at the gate in the ha-ha and out in the park. Bogey was still on the terrace, barking like mad. As she fell on her knees by a doe, the whine slid into earshot, coming the opposite way. She turned to see the bomber diving again. Once more she fell flat on her face. This time she could hear his guns going, could pick the stammer out of the hellish roar. And then he swooped up once more—a split second too late.

His wing-tip caught the bough of an aged elm, and the aircraft checked and swung and then plunged violently into the arms of an oak. The crash was a proper one. The port wing was off and the fusilage was crumpled and torn to bits; but the English oak held fast, and the aeroplane came to rest with its nose six feet from the ground.

Hermann Putsch laughed. A glance behind him showed that Rudolph was dead: a broken bough had thrust up and had staked him under the chin. The result was—unattractive, and Hermann Putsch laughed again. Then he climbed out of his cockpit and let himself down to the ground. As he alighted, he found himself facing a girl—a girl who was wearing gray slacks and a short-sleeved shirt. Her hands were behind her back, and the look in her eyes was grave.

Putsch clicked his heels together and bowed from the waist.

“Ah, the daughter of the house. Sorry, my dear, but English dogs should not bark at German officers. He had to be—corrected, and so I came back.”

“I see,” said Ursula, slowly. “And the deer?”

Putsch laughed again.

“I am a sportsman,” he said. “The chance was irresistible.”

“I see.”

Ursula’s right hand moved, and Putsch found himself facing a pistol. He cowered in mock alarm.

“Dear, dear! Am I supposed to put my hands up?”

“As you please,” said Ursula, and shot him clean through the brain.

She never saw the three figures standing ten paces away, but turned and ran like a hare for the gate in the fence. . . .

The sergeant addressed the two signallers, rifle in hand.

“None of us saw nothing,” he said. “We found this bloke lying here, with his forehead stove in.” The heel of the butt of his rifle came down on the bullet-hole. He lifted the rifle again and rubbed the butt in the grass. “Like that,” he said shortly.

“O.K., Sergeant,” said someone.

“Her ladyship was over there with the stags.”

“Never left ’em,” said the voice.

“Eggs-actly,” said the sergeant. “Wootton, report to H.Q.;

Hancock, stay here."

Bogey was lying on the terrace, his beautiful paws together, the blood running out of his mouth. As Ursula fell to her knees, the fine, dark eyes met hers and the tail lifted very slightly and then fell back. She put her cheek to his muzzle and felt the touch of his tongue.

"I've killed him, Bogey," she whispered.

Again the tongue touched her cheek. Then the great fellow seemed to stiffen. His head went up and back, and his hind legs kicked. And then he was dead.

Ursula rose to her feet and ran down the terrace steps.

As she made her way back to the deer, she saw men as trees running to where the aeroplane hung.

She had shot two does before she was aware that the sergeant was by her side.

"Between eyes and ears, my lady?"

"That's the best," said Ursula. "Just like a horse."

When the rest were out of their pain, the sergeant coughed.

"Excuse me, my lady."

"Yes?"

"That Jerry was dead, my lady, before he fell out of his 'bus.

You never set eyes on him. You was too busy, my lady, a-shooting the stags."

"Is that—advisable?"

"Please, my lady, it is. Too many love-yer-enemies knockin' about."

Ursula nodded.

"I see. And the bullet-wound."

"I've fixed that, my lady."

"Thank you," said Ursula. "And thank you very much for helping me out. I'm glad I killed him, aren't you?"

"Done my heart good, my lady. An' that's Gawd's truth."

He came to attention, saluted, and turned away.

Ursula stared at the deer, lying still in the grass. Then she, too, turned and made her way back to the garden and up the steps. At the top of the flight she sat down, laid her pistol beside her and put her head in her hands. After a little, her tears began to fall evenly on to the warm stone.

* * * * * * * *

It was nine o'clock the next morning when Thane arrived.

By then all was in order. The remains of the bomber had been salvaged, the broken boughs had been carried, the dead were

gone. And Ursula was working steadily, clipping the yew.

She came to meet the man slowly, shears in hand.

“It would happen,” he said quietly, “the one day that I was away. I only got back to Headquarters at half-past eleven last night.”

“You couldn’t have done anything.”

“I know. But I’d like to have come. I’m terribly sorry it happened.” He hesitated. “I suppose you didn’t notice a second enemy ’plane?”

Ursula shook her head.

“There might have been forty,” she said, “for all I know. When one is so—so conspicuous . . .”

“I know,” said Thane. “I just asked.”

“Why?”

“Because sometimes they hunt in couples. Not always, of course.”

Ursula regarded him steadily, finger to lip.

“Like snakes, you mean? And then, if one is killed . . . the other comes back?”

George Thane raised his eyebrows.

“Yes—if he thinks it’s safe. The German mind works in a curious way. If Fanfare was a strong point, he’d either attack it in force or leave it alone. But he knows very well that it isn’t: he knows it for what it is—a private house. Yet that private house has *presumed* to be the death of two Germans and to cost him a valuable ’plane. Honour, therefore, demands that the private house should be punished—put in its place.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Unbelievable, but true. That is the German outlook, and always was. Most people won’t believe it—say it’s absurd. But it happens to be true.”

“I believe it,” said Ursula. “He said he had to come back because Bogey barked.”

Thane was staring at her. Then he looked sharply round to see if they were alone.

“I was told they were dead,” he said.

“One was. I killed the other for what he’d done.”

Thane bit his lip.

“Does anyone know this?” he said.

“Yes. But they won’t talk. The sergeant was very nice.”

“Tell me everything, please. I must be ready to snuff any rumours out.”

Ursula told him all. Then—

“Why is it such a crime to put to death an enemy murderer?”

“God knows,” said Thane bitterly. “And please don’t think that I blame you. I give you best. But we don’t want this to get out.”

“If it did, there’d be trouble all round?”

“There might be.”

Ursula sighed.

“What a mess it all is,” she said.

“That’s war,” said Thane. “War’s no redeeming feature. Every one of its many facets is flawed and dull. I’m just going to see the sergeant. I’ll come back to say good-bye.”

* * * * * * * *

God knows how such secrets get out. Possibly a servant had seen the rough justice done. Possibly Signaller Wootton’s admiration for—worship of Ursula had run away with his tongue. Authority closed its ears, but three weeks later four lines appeared in an American magazine and were presently passed with a translation to an official of the German Air Force.

Major von Blowitz studied the type-written sheet.

For your INFORMATION and ACTION.

The following appeared in the August issue of the American periodical ——:

. . . LIKE THE TWENTY-TWO YEAR OLD SISTER OF A BELTED EARL WHO INTERRUPTED HER SLAUGHTER OF WOUNDED HINDS TO GIVE THE MISGUIDED SPORTSMAN A SOP FROM HIS OWN DISH. THEN SHE RETURNED TO HER ERRAND OF MERCY, LEAVING ENGLAND WITH ONE LESS MOUTH TO FEED . . .

Dive-Bomber No. ——, of Squadron No. ——, of the ——' Command, piloted by Lt. Hermann Putsch, who was accompanied by Lt. Rudolph Heins, failed to return to its base on July 11th last. Subsequent reconnaissance suggested that it had crashed at FANFARE, the country seat of the Earl of St. Axe, seven miles from the town of —— (see Map of England No. 47-119) and that the carcasses of animals were being carried away.

"So," muttered Major von Blowitz.

He took up his pen and wrote.

This great presumption will be punished.

George Thane, too, saw the paragraph—and spoke on the telephone.

"That you, Wilson? Look here. Will you keep an eye out for Fanfare from this time on? I've reason to think that the Boche has his eye on the place. But he won't expect opposition, and if you could lay for him, you might get a bag."

"Oke," said Wilson. "Will do."

*　*　*　*　*　*　*　*

After a day in the estate-office Ursula was leaving the terrace when Major Thane was announced.

“All well?” he said quietly.

“Yes,” said the girl. “I was going to walk in the park.”

Together they passed through the garden and down to the gate in the fence.

“Not working too hard?” said Thane.

“And you?”

George Thane smiled. “Not so hard as I was,” he said. “Things are straighter now.”

“Ready for anything?”

“Yes.”

Ursula put up a hand and pushed back her hair.

“What,” she said, “will be the end of it all?”

The soldier shrugged his shoulders.

“The old order,” he said slowly, “has changed more than once: but now it will pass away.” He pointed to the house and then to the rolling park. “This will survive—if you make it over to the State.”

Ursula nodded.

“I’d thought of that,” she said slowly.

“With a proviso that you should remain in charge.”

“That’s how they’ll do it?”

“I think so,” said Thane. “I’m speaking roughly, of course. All sorts of imaginary wrongs will be righted after the war. And private deer-parks come very high on the list.”

“Naturally enough,” said the girl. “Besides, we shall have no money to keep it up. And what of all the houses of half this size? Houses that aren’t show places, that can’t be run under two or three thousand a year?”

“God knows,” said Thane. “My own home was one of those. I’m thankful now that it went when my mother died.”

There was a little silence. Then—

“I’m afraid I like the old order,” said Ursula. “But then that’s natural.”

“Many others will feel the same, when they taste the new. And among them will be your tenants, and hundreds of thousands of people who did themselves damned well on a fiver a week.”

“In fact, no one will be the better?”

“No one,” said Thane. “Such wars as this don’t better things: they make them worse. One gets rather tired of the tripe that

fools or knaves are propounding about ‘a better world.’ If they must talk, why can’t they tell people the truth, that we’re fighting this war for our lives—no more and no less? As it is, their wretched dupes are fully expecting the millennium the moment we’ve beaten the Hun. And when it doesn’t materialize—well, they won’t be exactly pleased. They may even recall that some of the people who make these promises are the very people who previously preached disarmament . . . I mean, that rather taints the tripe. Then, again . . .” And there he saw the light in Ursula’s eyes. “Sorry,” he said, smiling. “I get worked up.”

Ursula laughed.

“You are so like Bim,” she said. “He gets worked up, too, you know. And though I agree with every word he says, I always laugh. And then he throws something at me.”

“When I know you better,” said Thane, “I shall do the same.”

The two strolled on, talking, towards the deer. The late afternoon was joyous, after a day of showers. A Puck-like breeze was plaguing the delicate tree-tops, a pomp of snow-white clouds sailed in the matchless blue, the sun blazed in his heaven, and all things, high and low, were brilliant and clean-cut.

Ursula sighed.

“No good looking ahead.”

“No. It’ll be all right, you know. But life will be a bit quieter for some of us.”

“That won’t worry me,” said the girl.

“Or me. But then I’m half a recluse, when I’m not on the job.”

“So are Bim and I. We used to hate going out.”

George Thane smiled.

“That’s wrong for you,” he said. “Too young.”

“So everyone said. But I value those evenings now. And what would I have to remember if I had been out and about?”

“Ah, if you feel like that . . .”

“I do. I’ve been damned happy. Fanfare, within and without, has . . .”

The rest of the sentence was lost, for Thane had swung round and was looking towards the house—and up to the right, north-east. Ursula followed his gaze.

Then the breeze, which had fallen, rose, to bring to their ears a very faint humming sound . . .

“My God,” breathed Ursula.

Instinct is a queer faculty. Time and again, such a sound had come to their ears. But this time each of them read the doom in the note.

Thane’s eyes were fast on the sky, but his hand came out for the girl’s and she caught it gratefully.

Five tiny specks appeared against the blue of the sky. They were very high and were moving very fast. The sound of them was increasing rapidly.

The two stood still as death, with their eyes on the aeroplanes. Ursula had the feeling that she was dreaming some dream—some frightful nightmare from which there was no escape. The sense of utter helplessness froze her blood. Her glorious heritage was doomed. Fanfare was to be demolished before her eyes.

The bombers were very near now, but they showed no sign of diving, though they had reduced their height. For one moment, the girl's heart leaped. Perhaps after all . . . And then she realized that a target must be picked up. They would pass and turn and come back—and then they would dive. Yes, that was right. The formation was flying straight on, but was coming down. It seemed to pass directly over the house . . . Then the trees hid it, and only the steady hum declared where it was.

Ursula glanced at Thane. The man was listening intently, straining his ears.

Both heard the change of note. Ursula guessed and the soldier knew what it meant. The first run had been finished; in a moment now the second run would begin.

The girl began to tremble, and Thane drew her arm through his and held it against his side. He knew what she did not know, and was hoping that the chance in a thousand would still come off.

And then his straining ears caught another sound, and a sudden

light leapt into his steady eyes.

Ursula could not interpret the burst of machine-gun fire, but the soldier sighed and smiled and patted her hand.

“Come,” he said, “the biter is being bit.”

The sounds came from their left and they ran to their right. Soon the trees gave way, and they saw the flurry in progress a mile above earth.

Odd explosions argued that bombs were being got rid of at any cost. Then an enemy bomber fell plumb, like a falling torch. Before it had reached the ground, another broke into pieces and followed it down. The three that were left were streaking towards the sea. One was losing height, and the British machines were hanging on to their prey.

“Three for certain,” said Thane. “That fellow will never get home.”

He turned to see Ursula sway, with a hand to her head—and was just in time to catch her and lay her down on the grass.

After two or three moments—

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I suppose you’d call it reaction. What can I do for those pilots? I never knew what gratitude meant until now.”

“They’re quite happy,” said Thane. “They’ve had a good afternoon.”

“Was it an accident?”

“Not altogether.”

“Then you——”

“I was given a hint,” said Thane, “and I passed it on. Do you feel all right? Then let’s get back to the house.” He put out his hands for hers and drew her up to her feet. Then he shot a glance at his watch. “I’ll have to be getting along.”

“We must have a drink about this.”

“Quickly then.” He sighed. “One never knows, of course, but I have a feeling that you won’t be troubled again.”

* * * * * * * *

More black in the face than red, Major von Blowitz stared at the type-written sheet.

In accordance with your instructions the five bomber aircraft mentioned below left this station to reduce the property Fanfare yesterday afternoon. I regret to report that all but one of the five failed to return. The two surviving officers report that, as the formation approached Fanfare, superior enemy forces, which had been lurking in cloud, appeared and engaged them. Our brave airmen pressed home their attack and all their bombs fell in the target area, but the enemy took advantage of their devotion, and four were overwhelmed. The fifth, which had been damaged,

crashed on landing and became a total loss.

Major von Blowitz wrote—with a shaking hand.

Please see attached report.

There can be no doubt that we have been the victims of a cunningly baited trap. I submit that any further extracts from the American Press should be carefully tested for treachery before they are forwarded for action.

* * * * * * * *

Six weeks had gone by, and Fanfare's magnificent timber was clad in buff and gold. George Thane passed an hour with Ursula now and again. The two had much in common. And each found the other refreshing—Ursula was so natural: Thane, so steady and gentle, just like the look in his eyes.

And then came the telegram.

Captain Lord St. Axe seriously injured admitted County Hospital York asking for you.

House Surgeon.

Thanks to Thane's assistance, Ursula reached the city within ten hours.

A Wimpole Street surgeon received her—made her sit down.

“Will he live?” said Ursula.

The man shook his head.

“I’m terribly sorry. It’s only a matter of hours. He came in to dine at York, and some bombs came down. He joined in the rescue work, and a wall collapsed.”

Ursula stood up.

“May I see him, please?”

The surgeon passed to a cupboard, took out bottles and poured something into a glass.

“Drink this, Lady Ursula, please. Then I’ll take you up.”

Two minutes later she entered the private ward.

“Hullo, Bim.”

The tall figure, swathed in bandages, never moved; but the well-known voice came steadily out of the swollen lips.

“Sully, I’m glad to see—hear you. And here’s a go.”

“Bad luck, my darling.”

“In a way, yes. I hadn’t a chance to get clear. And that’s that. I’m outed. I want to talk about you.”

“I’ll be all right, Bim.”

“I know. But it’s rather a business. All right your carrying on whilst I was away; but now that I won’t be back . . . It all goes to you, of course. And the death duties are mercifully covered. But—well, my sweet, I don’t want you weighted out.”

“I’ll manage somehow, darling.”

There was a little silence.

Then—

“You can’t—alone,” said St. Axe. “Besides . . .” He moistened his lips. “D’you think you could marry George Thane?”

Ursula caught her breath.

“I—I think I could,” she said faintly. “I mean, I think he likes me, and . . . and . . .”

“Of course he likes you. He’s probably mad about you, if you ask me. What I mean is, d’you think you could bear it?”

“Yes,” said Ursula, quietly. “I—know I could.”

“Thank God,” said St. Axe. “And now you’ve said it, I’ll say he’ll do you a treat. He’s one of us, George is; and he’ll put his arms about Fanfare and lift it up. Promise you’ll fix it, sweetheart.”

Ursula hesitated.

“Darling, I may be mistaken. I think he cares, but I’ve seen him very little. I may be wrong.”

“No, you’re not,” said St. Axe. “Women don’t make mistakes about things like that.”

“But, Bim, he may not ask me. I’m—not very good at men.”

“Then you must ask him,” said St. Axe.

“Oh, Bim, I can’t. Supposing——”

“George Thane will behave: you may lay to that. It’s a lot to ask of a girl—a hell of a lot. But I’ve weighed it up, my sweet, and I know I’m right. I’d write to him if I could; but my—my hands won’t work.”

“Bim, Bim.”

“Promise me, sweetheart.”

The answer came in a whisper.

“For . . . for your sake, Bim.”

“That’s a good girl. Fanfare apart, you see, you’re all I’ve got: and to go out and leave you stranded would worry me stiff. But George will look after you.”

“Oh, Bim, Bim.”

The girl was down on her knees, by the side of the bed.

“Sweetheart, don’t grieve. It’s useless. It’s just the luck of the fight. I was sore at first—being downed by a load of bricks. And then I perceived the smile on the face of Fate. It’s a kindly

smile, Sully. There's no vice about the old fellow—he knows his job. And so I began to cast back. And, Sully, sweetheart, you can't get away from this—that I've had a damned good time. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over. You and Dad and Fanfare—what more could any man ask? Twenty-five glorious years. And you and George will carry on the tradition . . . The title must go, of course: but what's in a name? And you mustn't count me out. Love's stranger than Death, Sully . . ."

* * * * * * * *

When she was back at Fanfare, Ursula wrote a short note.

Dear George,

Could you come and see me one evening? I've no one else to talk to and I'd like you to know how things stand.

Yours,
Ursula.

She received a reply the next day.

Dear Ursula,

I will come this evening. I was waiting for you to write.

Yours,
George.

* * * * * * * *

The day had been cold and wet, and a fire of logs burned on the library hearth.

As the servant closed the door, George Thane took Ursula's fingers and put them up to his lips.

"Won't go into words," he said.

"Thank you. I'll take it as said."

Ursula pointed to a chair and took her seat on the opposite side of the hearth.

"I'm the sole heir," she said. "Of Fanfare and everything. The duties are covered by insurance, and, so, for a while at least, I can carry on."

George Thane sighed with relief.

"I'm very thankful," he said.

"The title goes out."

"I know."

"I—I hope you'll help me sometimes. I can manage up to a point. But . . ."

"I'll always help you," said Thane. "You've only to ask."

"Bim said I could call upon you."

“I’ll never fail—either of you.”

Ursula moistened her lips.

“He . . . he hoped we’d become—great friends.”

“I—I like to think that we have—Ursula.”

“I want us to be—so much: but, George . . .” She expired. “You’ll never know what that cost me—to use your name.”

“I did it somehow,” said Thane; “but I nearly died.”

“When you called me ‘Ursula’?”

“Yes. Most people find it so easy. I never have.”

Ursula smiled.

“We are alike, you know. Bim said we were. He said you were one of us.”

“He couldn’t have paid me a higher compliment.”

“He did,” said the girl. “A much higher one. At least, I think it was.”

Thane sighed.

“I won’t ask what it was. In fact, I’d rather not know.”

“He always called me ‘Sully.’”

“I know he did.”

“He never liked ‘Ursula,’ and neither do I. But ‘Sully’ I love. Will you call me ‘Sully,’ please?”

“Yes, Sully—I will—always. I think it’s a glorious name. Was that the compliment?”

“That you should call me ‘Sully’? Oh, no. That was my idea. The compliment’s more of a challenge than anything else. Never mind. Are you working just as hard? You don’t look so thin.”

“Things have eased off a lot for me. I’m actually going so far as to think about leave.”

“Leave?” cried the girl. “That means you’re going away.”

George Thane smiled.

“I might—for ten days.”

“Where would you go?”

“I suppose, to Town. I can’t think of anywhere else. The idea is to get a change from ‘the trivial task.’”

“If I could raise an aunt, would you care to stay here?”

George Thane hesitated.

“I don’t think I ought to,” he said. “I’d rather stay here than anywhere else in the world; but——”

“Do you really mean that?” said the girl.

“Of course I do. But, aunt or no aunt, I—feel it would be a mistake.”

Ursula sighed.

“You’re a difficult person,” she said. “I wish you’d think less of me and more of yourself. If you want to stay here—well, do it. I’ve asked you to. And I haven’t just asked you to use you. I’ve done it because I happen to want you here.”

George Thane rose to his feet and crossed to Ursula’s side.

“Stand up,” he said, “and let me look into your eyes.”

Ursula rose and faced him. She had to look up, for he was taller than she.

“Bim’s orders?” said Thane quietly.

“No,” said the girl. “He never gave orders like that. But when I told him the truth, he made me promise to bring it off if I could.”

George put his arms about her and held her against his heart.

“And I wouldn’t play, would I?”

Two arms went about his neck.

“No. You were very tiresome. And I’m no good except at a frontal attack.”

George bent his head to kiss the beautiful mouth.

“Are you sure you mean it, Sully? I mean, I’ve loved you from the moment I saw you first. But then that’s natural.”

“If you want the truth, that’s half why I was so hostile that first afternoon.”

“Oh, Sully, my sweet! And if Bim hadn’t forced your hand, we’d never have known.”

The girl made to start away, but he held her close.

“Why, George?”

“I was going to apply to be transferred. I couldn’t stand it, Sully. I couldn’t believe that you cared, and I felt that I had no right to go for my protégée.”

Ursula’s eyes were on a portrait.

“Bim’s smiling in his sleep.”

“He can’t be—I’m not good enough. It was a case of ‘any port in a storm.’”

“Rot. We both chose you. I think, as compliments go. . . .”

“You said it was a challenge, my darling.”

“So it was. You picked it up, when you came and looked into my eyes.”

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