

GANGSTERS' GLORY

E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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INSPECTOR DICKINS RETIRES

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E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

The Million Pound Deposit
Inspector Dickins Retires
The Treasure House of Martin Hews
Matorni's Vineyard
The Light Beyond
The Fortunate Wayfarer
Chronicles of Melhampton
The Exploits of Pudgy Pete and Co.
The Ex-Duke
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Harvey Garrard's Crime
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The Amazing Quest of Mr. Ernest Bliss
The Great Prince Shan

The Devil's Paw
Jacob's Ladder
Aaron Rodd—Diviner
The Wicked Marquis
Havoc
The Other Romilly
The Mischief Maker
The Falling Star

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INSPECTOR DICKINS RETIRES

By
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

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I. THE CALL OF THE BURNING MASCOT

Sub-Commissioner Colonel Maurice Larwood was depressed, and with adequate reason. He made no attempt at spurious cheerfulness as he waved the official, for whom he had sent, to a chair.

“Sit down, Dickins,” he invited gloomily. “Time we had a few plain words together, I think.”

Detective-Inspector John Dickins seated himself in silence. It was not the first of such conferences to which he had been summoned, but this time every one knew that the situation was critical. He remained silent, waiting for his Chief to continue.

“Three years ago this month, Dickins,” the latter went on, “I had to send for your predecessor, Benskin. We were pretty well in the same trouble then. He made a great coup, and we saved our bacon. To-day things are worse. We’ve got to accomplish what I’ll admit seems almost impossible, or walk out.”

“Bad as that, is it, sir?”

The Sub-Commissioner was a man of reserved habits who seldom swore. His departure from his usual custom on this occasion was significant.

“It’s damn well as bad as it can be,” he declared. “There’ve been half a dozen questions asked in Parliament, the Home Secretary’s had the Chief on the carpet—which hasn’t improved his temper, as you can guess—and the Press are gibing at us every day.”

“That doesn’t do any good.”

“It does a great deal of harm,” the Sub-Commissioner agreed vehemently. “Makes the public uneasy, and it gives the men we can’t lay our hands upon confidence. It wasn’t your fault, of course, Dickins, that you were on leave when Martin’s Bank was sacked, and Peggy Scott’s jewels were stolen and her maid strangled. I dare say it wouldn’t have made any difference if you’d been on the spot, but there the ugly fact remains. One show’s a month old, and the other three weeks, we haven’t made an arrest, and I can’t honestly tell the Chief that we have a line on any one. . . . I don’t want to discuss those two affairs particularly. Unfortunately there are several others behind them which have never been cleared up. I want to speak of the situation generally. What are we up against, Dickins?”

“Got any theory yourself, sir?”

Larwood pushed the heavily-shaded electric lamp which stood on his table a little farther away and leaned back in his chair. Perhaps he was anxious to conceal, even from his trusted subordinate, the deeper lines which seemed to have stolen into his sensitive face during the last month and the harassed droop of his mouth. For

years Maurice Larwood had been considered the smartest and best-looking of the higher officials at the Yard. During the last few months, however, the anxiety had been too much for him, and he had perceptibly aged.

“Here’s a confession, Dickins. Every theory I’ve ever had has been upset. The only conclusion I can come to is that a different type of man is making a profession of crime.”

“That’s quite all right, so far as it goes, sir,” Dickins assented; “but there’s something more than that behind it all. I believe that the most agile brains in the criminal world have tumbled to the folly of the opposition gang system—one side giving the other away all the time. I believe they’ve sorted themselves out, and come together. What we’re up against now is a criminal combine—the whole brains of the underworld pitted against ours.”

“Not a bad idea,” the Sub-Commissioner reflected. “Scotland Yard’s a combine after all. Why attempt to fight us in sections? The idea’s all right.”

“I tell you where it seems to me that it works in their favour, too,” Dickins continued. “There’s no squealing. I needn’t remind you, Chief, that the majority of the criminals whom we bring to justice are there, if not through a downright squeal, by just a hint or a word from some unexpected place. We got a line on the Harwood affair, if you remember, entirely through an anonymous letter.”

The Sub-Commissioner nodded pensively.

“That’s quite true, Dickins,” he acquiesced, “and, when one comes to think of it, we’ve been short of that sort of information lately.”

“You can see why, sir,” Dickins persisted. “The very fact of those whispers having ceased means discipline, and discipline is the result of combination.”

“It all sounds very probable as a theory,” the Sub-Commissioner sighed, “but it doesn’t help us very much, does it?”

“It helps us to understand the situation,” Dickins pointed out. “I’ll tell you a conclusion I’ve come to. There aren’t more than a dozen criminals in England, and one at present on the Atlantic, who count. I believe these particular men have been at the back of every one of these outrages which we can’t fathom, because they are working together as one society, and I believe that they have a trained band of gangsters under them. They are top dogs for the moment, sir, I’ll admit, but I’ll get them if you’ll have patience, and let me work my own way. I’ll tell you how, too. I’ll get them through their one unconquerable weakness—CONCEIT.”

“Conceit?” Larwood echoed.

“With a capital ‘C’, sir. It’s the same in the higher grade criminal as the lower, and as time goes on it develops—self-pride in his own exploits, an invincible desire

to brag about what he has done, to match his accomplishments against those of his fellow-criminals. It's a form of individuality which will always prevent any great combination against us succeeding permanently. It's hung more men than any other in the whole gamut of human weaknesses. In the end I believe it will break up completely this dangerous crowd who I'll admit have got the upper hand of us for the moment."

"You know something?" the Sub-Commissioner almost spat out.

"What is the good of knowledge, of conviction, if you like, without being able to obtain proof?" Dickins rejoined, with almost the first sign of feeling he had shown. "Yes, I know something. I believe I could tell you the headquarters of the very men we are up against, but I couldn't bring any of them in. There isn't one of them against whom we have a single thing."

"Dickins, you're talking like a man," Larwood declared. "Get on with it."

"What I want to do," the detective explained, "is to think out some way of getting them all together. It's no good taking one. The rest would all melt away, find another pal, and start again. Not only that, but I'll have to get them after my own fashion. We can't go on working as we have been. Our methods are too old-fashioned. The other side know every move we make. They've bluffed us long enough. We must try a bluff on them, and not an ordinary one either."

The Sub-Commissioner was a changed man. The anxious lines which had saddened his face were smoothed out. His eyes were brilliant. He seemed to be looking into the promised land.

"You shall have a free hand, Dickins," he agreed. "You shall go your own way. But tell me about this one man on the Atlantic. Do you mean Nick Conklin?"

"He is due here to-morrow on the *Majestic*," Dickins replied. "We can't stop his landing. There's not a thing against him that I know of."

The Sub-Commissioner smiled. It might have been forgiven him if there was the slightest shade of condescension in his tone. It was so often that his subordinate held the trumps.

"I have later information," he confided. "Conklin has changed his mind. Wisely, too. He disembarked at Cherbourg. By this time he is on his way to Paris."

Detective Dickins looked thoughtfully out of the fog-dimmed window.

"A pity!" he murmured.

His Chief stared at him.

"Why on earth is it a pity?" he demanded. "Aren't our hands full enough as it is? Surely we don't want another accomplished criminal working in our midst!"

Dickins sighed gently. He edged his chair a little closer to the table.

“Chief,” he asked, “when you were a lad, did you ever try to catch sparrows and stray birds under a sieve-trap?”

“Of course I did,” the other admitted. “What properly brought up boy didn’t?”

Dickins leaned still farther forward, and his gesture was almost dramatic.

“You are well hidden behind the hedge,” he went on, “and you are holding the string attached to the piece of wood which supports the trap. The bait underneath is good soft bread-crumbs, and a few pieces of raw meat which the cook has given you. The sparrows hop up nearer and nearer. At last they are underneath. Your fingers are itching to pull the string, but still you pause. You shiver with excitement. With slow, ponderous hops a fat starling approaches the rim of the sieve. You let the sparrows play. You let them even hop away with the bait. You want the starling. Nick of New York is my starling!” . . .

A police commissioner, in indoor uniform, entered hastily, carrying a scrawled telephone message which he handed to Dickins.

“Excuse me, sir,” he begged the Sub-Commissioner, saluting. “This has just come over the line, urgent, for the inspector.”

The latter glanced it through, and sprang to his feet.

“Report later if I may, sir,” he exclaimed. “There’s a job on I’ve been watching for up Roehampton Lane.”

Larwood nodded assent, and his subordinate made a hurried exit.

The rain was falling gently when Dickins, in the plainly painted black car of familiar design, shot out of the Park, and, with his badge freely displayed, dashed along towards Hammersmith. The traffic was held up for him on the bridge, and he slackened speed only when he reached the far end of Roehampton Lane. Eagerly, and with the same purpose in view, Dickins and his policeman chauffeur both leaned forward, gazing at the bleak-looking residence standing a little way back from the road. There were few lights in the windows, and, considering the early hour in the evening, the two men seemed surrounded by an impressive silence. Little wisps of fog drifted by. The rain dripped from the leaves of the trees and shrubs. Just as the car was brought to a standstill a muffled report came from behind one of the screened windows of the house.

“They’re at it, sir!” the chauffeur exclaimed. “Shall I drive right up? The gates are wide open.”

Dickins sprang lightly from the car, and beckoned his companion to follow him.

“We’d have gone up if the gates had been closed,” he muttered. “Seems to me as though they’d left them open for their get-away. We’re too late for the scrap in any case. Listen!”

There was another report, and then silence. Dickins looked around searchingly.

“They have a car hidden somewhere here,” he whispered. “Get your gun out, Burdett, and crawl after me.”

Dickins’s surmise was correct. They had scarcely gone half a dozen yards when they came upon a small coupé drawn up by the side of the avenue in the shadow of a great elm tree, its bonnet facing towards the gate. There were no lights shining, and even the outline of the vehicle was undistinguishable until they had almost blundered into it. Dickins opened the door carefully. The interior was empty. He flashed an electric torch upon the name-plate, and smiled to himself.

“I’m looking after the occupant of this car,” he told his companion. “You get up to the house in case you’re wanted. If you meet any one coming down, keep out of sight if you can.”

The man started off, running on the narrow grass edge underneath the trees and shrubs. Dickins stood with his eyes fixed upon the house. Suddenly the front door was opened, letting out a blaze of light, and, for a single second, the slight figure which leaped into the darkness was intensely visible, like a shadow picture thrown on to a screen. Then there was darkness again, the more complete because of the faster-falling rain. Dickins crouched back behind the car, into the obscurity of the dripping trees, and waited. His head was a little thrust forward, his nostrils dilated with the effort of listening. Presently came the sound which he was expecting—the sound of flying footsteps drawing nearer and nearer. The waiting man made no movement, only his limbs became a little more tense. The figure came panting to the side of the car, tore open the door, and flung into the space at the back of the driver’s seat the attaché case she had been carrying. She flashed on the lights, and pressed the starting button. Dickins’s entrance from the other side had been so noiseless that she was unaware of his presence until she heard him subside into the place by her side. A half-stifled scream escaped her.

“Who are you?” she demanded breathlessly. “How dare you get into my car?”

He caught a glimpse of her face, white and terrified, under her closely-fitting black *béret*, the large eyes flaming, the lips parted and quivering. The engine was started, but her right hand had left the gear handle. He leaned over and caught her wrist. Quick though he was, he was only just in time. The tiny ugly-looking weapon upon which her fingers had already closed was lying on the rug between them. He kicked it towards himself, and, picking it up, slipped it into his pocket.

“Rather a desperate young woman, aren’t you?” he remarked.

“I carry a pistol to defend myself against such people as you,” she said coldly. “What are you doing here, forcing your way into my car?”

He caught her sideways glance, her face dimly lit by the small electric bulb on the dashboard—a glance of almost venomous hatred. Up at the house lights were now showing from every window.

“There has been a burglary, perhaps worse,” he said, moving his head backwards. “I came down to inquire into it.”

“You’re a policeman then?” she scoffed.

“Precisely. And seeing you arrive from the house in considerable haste, and carrying that bag which you have just thrown behind your seat, it becomes my duty to ask you a few questions.”

“A safer job than going on up to the house,” she retorted, with the same look of scorn shining in her eyes. “There might have been men to be dealt with there.”

“Exactly,” he agreed. “I always choose the safer places when I can. Supposing we start?”

“Am I under arrest?” she demanded.

“Unofficially,” he assented.

“Where do I drive to?”

“Over Hammersmith Bridge. I will direct you afterwards.”

She pushed in her gear, and they swung out of the gate. She drove with one hand, the other dangling by her side, and Dickins seldom took his eyes off that hand. Occasionally he glanced at her face, brooding now and perplexed with thoughts. She felt herself under icy but ceaseless observation, and she hated it. Her eyes were like javelins.

“You’d handcuff me, I suppose,” she mocked, “if it were not that you need me to drive the car?”

“I could drive the car myself perfectly well,” he assured her, “and I shall handcuff you the moment I think it necessary.”

She relapsed once more into furious silence. Nine o’clock was striking as she pulled up on Hammersmith Bridge. She glanced at him questioningly.

“My strict duty,” he remarked, “is without a doubt to tell you to drive to the Hammersmith Police Station. I am inclined to modify that, however. You can go straight ahead, and drive to Number 8 Pembroke Crescent, if you know where that is.”

“And then?”

“That will be my business,” he answered, in a slightly harder tone. “Drive on at once, if you please.”

She obeyed, and they proceeded without speech of any sort to the door of Dickins’s house. There she relinquished the wheel, and looked about her with

apparent listlessness. All the time, though, he could envisage the thoughts which were passing through her brain. He leaned out of the window and called to a policeman on the opposite pavement. The man promptly obeyed the summons.

“Johnson,” he directed, stretching out his hand for her attaché case, “put that down on my step, will you. Afterwards, come back, and guard the car whilst the young lady and I are inside. Don’t allow any one to interfere with it in any way.”

“Very good, sir,” the man replied respectfully.

Dickins turned to the girl. His hand closed upon her wrist.

“Having spared you the handcuffs,” he said, “you will forgive me if I take the ordinary precautions. You will descend with me now. I shall just hold your wrist like this. Good! Now we mount the steps together. Excellent! Constable, don’t lose sight of the car.”

He opened the green front door with his latch-key, the attaché case in one hand, and guiding his companion with the other, crossed the hall, and ushered her into his pleasant little sitting-room. She looked around her, and shrugged her shoulders.

“If this is to be my place of detention,” she said, “I suppose you don’t mind my making myself comfortable?”

“Not in the least,” he assured her. “Pray take my easy chair. Perhaps you would like to smoke?”

“My own cigarettes,” she answered curtly, producing her case and lighter. “A quaint sort of prison, this, isn’t it?”

He looked across at her keenly and thoughtfully. A new suspicion was beginning to frame itself in his mind. He turned the valise upside down upon the table, went through its harmless contents rapidly, slit up the lining with his clasp knife, and tore it open. She watched him with derision in her eyes.

“I can’t think what you’re suspecting me of all this time,” she observed. “I ran away from that terrible house because I was frightened when the burglars came. You can’t blame me for that, can you?”

He stood on the hearth-rug by her side, and looked down at her. She was leaning back in her chair, swinging her long, silk-clad legs ceaselessly, glancing up at him now with laughter in her eyes and a good-humoured twitching at the corners of her lips. All her anger seemed to have gone—or was he merely being fooled?

“You look as though you still wanted something,” she murmured. “Yes?”

“I want the seven Rosenthal diamonds and the three emeralds that your friends went after to-night,” he confided. “I know that they’re somewhere in your possession. Will you hand them over quietly? I mean to have them.”

Her bluff was good enough, but there was a light in his eyes which chilled her.

“You are talking like a fool,” she declared. “I never heard of the Rosenthal jewels, and if you dare to lay a hand upon me you shall die for it. I promise you that. Do you hear?”

He made no immediate reply, but moved a few feet away, and rang the bell.

“I haven’t the faintest desire to interfere with you, or your secret hiding-places,” he told her coldly. “That is not my affair. As it happens, my housekeeper was a female searcher at Bow Street for years, and she will do all that is necessary. She is a civil woman, but, believe me, she will find all that there is to be found.”

The girl sprang to her feet. Now indeed she was seriously alarmed.

“No one shall touch me,” she insisted. “It is an indignity, this! I can explain myself, and my presence in that house. My name is Martha Dring. I am a well-known artist and designer. I have a flat and a studio in Chelsea, and many friends who will make you suffer for this. A police searcher, indeed! You are mad!”

He remained silent, tapping a cigarette upon the mantelpiece, and lighting it casually.

“Do you hear me?” she called out. “I will not allow your housekeeper to touch me. How dare you think of such a thing?”

“Hand over the jewels then,” he suggested.

She looked at him murderously, then turned swiftly towards the woman who stood upon the threshold. The latter was neatly dressed in black, and her air was one of respectful attention, but she was nearly six feet in height, with a hard face, and a stalwart body.

“Mrs. Boyce,” Dickins explained calmly, “this young lady has concealed about her person seven large diamonds and three emeralds. You will kindly search her for them.”

The woman advanced into the room. The girl held out her arms to him piteously.

“Ten minutes—just give me ten minutes,” she begged. “Send her away. Let me talk to you. I can explain everything. I couldn’t bear her hands upon me.”

Again she inclined her head towards the street, and again Dickins had that curious conviction that she was listening. For what? He strode to the window and pushed back the curtain. The car was outside, and the policeman was still standing there on duty. Otherwise the neighbourhood seemed deserted. He turned back.

“If you prefer it, you can hand over the jewels to me,” he reminded her.

“I haven’t got them,” she shrieked. “I’ll kill her if she touches me.”

He pointed to the clock.

“It seems to me,” he confided, “that you are a very clever young woman, playing for time. I confess I don’t know why. You see the hour. I give you ten minutes. At

twenty minutes to ten I shall return. It will be your fault if the affair is not concluded. I shall give you no other warning.”

She stood as though paralysed. Dickins turned away, closed the door behind him, and stepped out into the street. All the time he was haunted by a peculiar sense of disquietude, for which, indeed, there seemed no reason. The faithful constable was still standing stolidly by the motor-car. The Square and the street itself were both deserted. There was nothing to be heard except the rumble of traffic from the distant main thoroughfare.

“Everything O.K., Johnson?” he asked, looking searchingly around.

“Everything, sir,” the man replied. “Begging your pardon, sir?”

“Well, what is it?”

“Have you noticed that little red, dragon-shaped light in the front of the bonnet—looks like a kind of mascot? I’ve seen the same sort of thing before, but this is different. It lights from the switchboard—one turn green, two red.”

Dickins felt a shiver of apprehension as he examined the burning mascot. He was an unintelligent-looking man, this constable, but he had discovered the one thing which Dickins himself had missed. All the way from Roehampton they had come with the red light aflame. . . . Dickins asked only one more question.

“After we had entered the house, Johnson, did you notice any one about who might have been following us?”

“Well, in a kind of way, I did, sir,” the man confessed. “I wondered afterwards whether I ought to have mentioned it. There was a man on a motor-bicycle turned into the Square as you did, got off as you stopped, had one look at the car, and away he went. Perhaps——”

Dickins broke into the man’s deliberate speech. Time counted now. His words rattled out like pistol-shots.

“Leave the car, and run to the nearest telephone station,” he ordered. “Speak in my name to Scotland Yard, giving code word ‘Zebra’ S.Y.Z. Department. Order Main’s Emergency Men in a police wagon, with maxims charged, round here in ten minutes. Stay away yourself. It isn’t your job, and there may be trouble.” . . .

Dickins, tensely alert, ran up the steps, entered the house, and knocked at the door of the parlour.

“Twelve minutes,” he called out. “I’m coming in.”

There was a confused tangle of feminine voices, the girl’s shrill, vociferous protest.

“Sixty seconds more then,” he conceded. “After that I’m coming.”

He stood with his watch in his hand, and, at the expiration of the time,

disregarding her angry cries, he entered the room. It seemed to him somehow, in the light of what might happen at any moment, an utterly insignificant thing that the girl was standing clad only in a torn chemise and black chiffon knickers a few feet away from his landlady's extended arm. Yet he remembered for long afterwards the fury in her eyes and the shivering of her passionate body.

"I've got the three emeralds all right," Mrs. Boyce announced, "but I can't find no more than six of the diamonds. An obstinate young hussy, she is, too!"

He stuffed the stones into his pocket. The girl was sobbing now as she feverishly drew on her frock.

"If ever I get the chance," she moaned, "some day I shall kill that woman—and you."

Mrs. Boyce disappeared, with the satisfied air of a woman whose task has been well accomplished. In the silence of the room the two faced one another. The girl's eyes were filled with hate.

"Well, you've got your jewels," she muttered, with her hands at her throat.

"I was bound to have them," he answered.

"And now?" she demanded.

"You can go."

"I can what?"

"You can go. I don't want you."

"You aren't charging me?"

He shook his head.

"I ought to, I suppose, but I don't want to. Listen!"

He paused for a moment. A motor-horn hooted below, but the car passed on. Some pedestrians crossed the Square, but the sound of their footsteps grew fainter.

"You're a fool, Martha Dring," he admonished. "You're a clever artist. I've seen your work. It's good. Stick at it, and cut this underworld out. I know why you came in. Excitement! You're all craving for it—your sort. Find it elsewhere. If we wanted you you'd be in prison now. Prison's damnable, you know. You'd never be any good afterwards. Get back to your job. Wash yourself clean of this business."

Once more they listened. Then she leaned towards him, and neither Dickins nor any other living man could have told what thoughts were passing behind her flaming eyes, her quivering lips, or whence the swift rising and falling of her bosom.

"Listen," she begged. "I suppose I'm still squeamish. I hate you, but I am going to save your life. Out of the house—this moment! From behind, if you can. Never mind how I know. Don't stop to ask me questions. Costigan's gang are on their way here. You know that they're killers. Leave the stones, and they may leave you alone."

My God!”

This time they both rushed to the window. Three abreast they were coming down each side of the Square on motor-bicycles, and three abreast along the narrow street. Dickins waved his hand from the threshold as he sprang backwards.

“I’ll remember next time I drive behind a red mascot,” he promised. . . .

Ten minutes later, when the police van thundered into the Square, not a trace was left of the coupé car with the red mascot, or of the nine motor-bicycles which only a few minutes before had been leaning against the railings of the Square. There remained instead a portentous silence, the front door of Dickins’s house wide open, and in the kitchen the dead body of Mrs. Boyce with a cord around her throat, and the one remaining diamond of the Rosenthal burglary concealed in her garter.

At a little before midday on the following morning Major Eustace Grant, D.S.O., well known in certain West End circles, an occasional patron of the arts and a reputed millionaire, sat in an easy chair in the library of his luxurious suite in Berkeley Square, languidly glancing through some book jacket designs from the portfolio of the girl who sat opposite to him. In the distance, visible through the open door of the bedroom, a valet was moving noiselessly about. Closer at hand a waiter was arranging a tray and a cocktail shaker. Grant studied the last of the designs through his horn-rimmed eyeglass with somewhat disparaging nonchalance.

“Good stuff, yours, of course, Miss Dring,” he acknowledged. “Modern—quite the futurist touch, and all that—but if I permitted myself to find a fault with it, I should say that your last efforts have been a little too florid in design, too arabesque, if you follow me, a forsaking of the beauty of line—the quality in your work which first attracted me—for the vulgarity—I use the word in its academic sense—of curve.”

“Perhaps you’re right,” the young woman admitted listlessly.

“Nevertheless,” her patron concluded, “I will add the last two to my collection.”

The waiter, who had finished his task, departed. The valet had closed the connecting door between the two rooms. Grant laid down the designs. He looked severely across at his visitor.

“It was the schedule which was at fault, not I,” she declared. “I was in my car three minutes after I had received the jewels, but Dickins was there before me. He must have had some one waiting who had telephoned up to Scotland Yard.”

Her companion frowned.

“The schedule would have worked out to a second,” he insisted, “if Sam had not mistaken the combination—a thing which I have never known happen to him before. Describe exactly what took place in Dickins’s rooms.”

“He had a female searcher there,” she confided, “and whilst the beast of a

woman searched me he went outside and discovered the red mascot lamp. He came back at once, collected the jewels, with the exception of the one diamond which the woman had slipped under her own clothes, and went off.”

There was a brief pause. Major Eustace Grant was occupied in studying his carefully manicured finger-nails.

“And then?”

“Costigan’s men came in. How they got there so quickly I can’t imagine, but they did it. They made not a sound, and they filled the place like rats. They started me off. I told Costigan that the woman had kept one of the diamonds. I’m sorry now that I did it, but she was such a beast. I suppose they got the alarm just as he was searching for it.”

“Our first failure,” Eustace Grant sighed, “and it disconcerts me. It must never happen again. I do not blame you or Sam particularly, Miss Dring, but to me any one who is associated with a failure has committed a crime.”

She shrugged her shoulders as she picked up her portfolio.

“After all, I was only the get-away,” she reminded him, “and I was on time.”

“By the by,” he asked, as she turned towards the door, “why didn’t Dickins take you in?”

“I have no idea,” she assured him.

“I wonder,” he speculated.

The Sub-Commissioner asked Dickins the same thing, at about the same time, in his office at Scotland Yard.

“Why didn’t you bring the girl in?” he demanded.

There was a peculiar light in the detective’s eyes as he leaned forward.

“Because I fancied that she would be of far more use to us free.”

Colonel Larwood stroked his chin.

“It was a fine coup to get hold of the jewels,” he admitted. “It will give us a leg-up just when we need it. All the same, an arrest would have been useful. We might have got a squeal out of her.”

“She would never have squealed,” Dickins declared confidently. “We don’t want her, Chief. Not yet at any rate. Besides, I’m sure she’s not really one of the gang. She’s only one of these amateurs who’ve gone crazy about crime just now.”

“You don’t think she had anything to do with strangling the old woman then?”

“I know she didn’t,” was the prompt reply. “That was one of the young gangsters who got scared when he heard us coming along. Leave the girl free, sir. She may work into our scheme.”

“What is your scheme,” Larwood inquired, “and who are the men you want? Have you any idea whom you are looking for?”

“Just an idea,” Dickins admitted. “I am going to begin, sir, by handing you in my resignation.”

“What the devil use is that?” his Chief demanded irritably.

“Can’t you see, sir, they’ve got us too well staked?” the detective pointed out. “For five nights I’ve been on duty, watching for them to bring off that Rosenthal affair, and nothing happened. The sixth night I came round for that chat with you, and the job was done. True, they didn’t make a success of it, but it was only a matter of seconds. The fact of it is, their intelligence department is better than ours. They’re so damned clever, too. That young woman merely switched on her signal lamp before my very eyes. One of Costigan’s men was waiting on Hammersmith Bridge with his motor-bicycle, and followed us right to the door. All he had to do was to telephone, and the gang very nearly scooped us. Let me work from outside, sir. We’ll have a code, and whenever I want help I can send for it.”

“It’s unusual,” the Sub-Commissioner reflected.

“So are the circumstances,” was the quick retort. “We’ll never get these men the ordinary way. They’re much more likely to get us. I haven’t a shadow of evidence, but I believe I know who they are. I want to get closer to them. I can’t as Detective-Inspector Dickins. I may in a new personality. At any rate, that’s what I want to try.”

“You’re taking on a great risk, Dickins.”

“So I am now, with the odds all against me. In a matter of thirty seconds that motor-bicycle crowd would have got me last night. Take that job for an example and see how easily they worked it. They entered the house just as they liked, although we were watching it, helped themselves to the jewels, frightened old Rosenthal and his wife to death by firing a few shots, and got clear away without leaving the ghost of a clue behind them. We’ve got to change our methods. I have my plan worked out, and, with the Yard unofficially behind me, I think I have a chance. What I want to do is to get some of them bragging, pit them against one another, and make them talk. I think I know how to do it. They’re going to dig their graves with their own tongues.”

The Sub-Commissioner affected to deliberate, but his mind was already made up.

“Well, Dickins,” he decided, “I suppose you must have your way. I shall have to get the Chief’s consent as a matter of form, but I think I can promise you that. Tell me exactly what it is that you want from us?”

“First of all, a grant of money. I am going to put my house and furniture up for

sale, enter a nursing home, and find some rooms in London where no one will think of looking for me.”

“No difficulty about the money. What else?”

“My resignation through ill-health announced in the Press.”

“Agreed.”

“A complete force of fighting men, with guns, ready at any hour, and under the strictest discipline. That five minutes’ delay last night cost us the coup.”

“You shall have Martin’s special flying squad made over to you. Martin boasts that he can beat any Fire Brigade in London on his start.”

“Last, and most important, don’t hurry me, sir,” the detective concluded. “I believe in cultivating ambitions, Chief. I have one now. There may be big things doing, and I may know about them, but I want to keep my mouth shut. I’ll have things fixed so that if anything happens to me you’ll get every scrap of information I’ve collected, but I want my sparrows and starling at one throw. Give me time and I’ll get them.”

“I’ll do my best,” the Sub-Commissioner promised, a little dubiously. “You must remember we’ve got the Press abusive, the Home Secretary rampant, and the Chief blasphemous. The recovery of the Rosenthal jewels may calm them down for a time. It won’t be long before they’re fuming again, though.”

“Stick it out, sir,” the detective begged, as he rose to his feet. “I promise you that it shan’t be for a day longer than I can help. The trap shall be baited and the string in my hand in less than a week. Unless they get me first, Chief, I promise I’ll bring them in before you’re wearing your first bunch of violets.”

In his very luxurious masculine bedroom, with his valet hovering in the background, Major Eustace Grant paused for a moment in the tying of his white cravat. He looked steadily into the glass. The same thought which had haunted him throughout the afternoon was back again.

“I wonder,” he reflected, “why the devil that detective fellow didn’t take Martha Dring?”

II. THE BRAGGARTS' CONFERENCE

Eight men were seated drinking cocktails around a table set a little way back from the bar in the wickedest, most expensive, and most exclusive club in London. You could buy cocaine, opium, or any other form of drug you fancied from that innocent-looking, pink-cheeked barman behind the counter. You could obtain addresses on a card which would enable you to visit the most depraved haunts in the East or West End of London, and indulge in any form of vice which appealed to you. You could engage a private room upstairs, and rob your dearest friend, or any one else whose skill you fancied was inferior to your own, of thousands, and you could knock him on the head with less fear of disagreeable consequences than anywhere else in the metropolis. But you could not cross the portals after eight o'clock without having donned evening-clothes, nor could you remain a member for one day after January first in any year without your subscription of forty guineas having been paid.

Major Eustace Grant, D.S.O., who was Chairman of the Committee, and a very autocratic ruler of the place, tapped lightly with his forefinger upon the table, and held the newspaper which he had been studying a little closer to him.

"This should interest us," he remarked. "The paragraph is entitled, 'Changes at Scotland Yard.' It proceeds as follows:

"We understand that in consequence of the great dissatisfaction recently expressed in the columns of our leading newspapers, in the House of Parliament, and throughout the country, drastic changes in the personnel and management at Scotland Yard are contemplated by the authorities. Amongst others who are relinquishing their posts we learn that the resignation of Detective-Inspector Dickins, on account of ill-health, was last week accepted by the Chief Commissioner."

Grant's nearest neighbour, a man named Passiter, a long, evil-looking person, who had the reputation of being the best-dressed and the worst-moralled man in London, smiled reflectively.

"Their shrewdest man, I thought," he remarked.

Grant tapped a cigarette upon the table. He was one of those people whose features are good-looking enough in repose, but whose smile is disfiguring. He smiled now.

"Dickins was the man who sent Martha Dring home, although he found the

Rosenthal jewels on her,” he reminded them. “I should think that’s what they gave him the sack for.”

“I wonder why he did it?” Mat Sarson, a thin, wizened-faced little man, who had once been a jockey, speculated. “It isn’t like a Scotland Yard bull to part with any one he’s once got his hands on.”

Costigan, chief of the gangsters, who had been invited up to have a cocktail, grinned.

“We must have been a sight coming up the Square when he left,” he declared. “He’d never have got away with her. Here she is. You can ask her for yourself. Good-bye, all! My dinner’s waiting.”

He took his leave as the girl swung in through an unexpected door. She was dressed in black, her dark hair parted in the middle and brushed smoothly away from her forehead, her face unrelieved by any touch of colour. Her shoes were rubber shod, and she moved noiselessly. There was something a little ghostly about her appearance.

“Working to-night, Miss Dring?” Passiter asked her.

She nodded carelessly.

“I am taking Jo’s place if I’m wanted,” she yawned. “He ran his car into a brick wall last night. No one’s any use at a get-away if they can’t see in the dark. Charles, a dry Martini.”

She sat down at the table and lit a cigarette.

“I’ve often meant to ask you,” Grant remarked, “but you haven’t been round much lately, why do you suppose Dickins didn’t take you in from his house that night in Pembroke Square?”

She held out her hand for her cocktail and sipped it thoughtfully.

“I was never quite sure myself,” she admitted. “I think he sensed that the gang were close up.”

Passiter pushed the newspaper towards her.

“He’s got the chuck anyhow,” he announced. “It may have been over your job.”

She read the paragraph, and thrust the paper away without comment. The door facing them was suddenly opened, and Angus Flood, a neat, debonair-looking man, the manager and proprietor of the Club, ushered in a visitor. The seven men at the round table were interested, for the circumstance was unusual. The visitor was a man of apparently youthful middle age, clean-shaven, with very little hair, which was parted in the middle. His bearing, although assured, was unobtrusive, and his features lacked the hardness of most of the casual visitors to Flood’s Club. His dinner-clothes were well-cut but a little unusual in design. His collar was of the sort

generally affected by artists, and his black tie long and drooping. Angus Flood, with his hand upon his companion's arm, brought him across to the table where the seven men were seated.

"Gentlemen," he announced, "I have to introduce to you a very distinguished visitor—one who hopes to become a member of the Club."

There was a brief silence whilst they looked him over. He endured their scrutiny with good-humoured composure, and he seemed to fully return their interest. Grant leaned forward towards him, but he did not at once invite him to sit down.

"You must excuse us, sir," he said, "if we display a little diffidence in the matter of visitors who are not, as a matter of fact, eligible to enter the Club even when introduced by our host. We are a club of peculiar people with peculiar aims in life, and we want no strangers amongst us. Many distinguished men throughout Europe have endeavoured to take up a membership here out of curiosity. We do not welcome such."

"I am not of that order," the stranger assured them. "Mr. Flood should perhaps have mentioned my name. I am well enough known to him."

"I kept it as a pleasant surprise," Angus Flood intervened. "Gentlemen all," he went on, pointing them out in turn—"Major Eustace Grant, our President; Mr. Passiter, our Vice-President; Mr. Lane; Mr. Sarson; Mr. Rubens; Mr. Frisby; Dr. Bradman; and, in a place by herself as our only lady member, Miss Martha Dring. This is Mr. Nicholas Conklin from the other side of the water, better known to you perhaps as the world-famed Nick of New York."

The little company were frankly stupefied. The new-comer was without doubt a young man of unusual personality, but there was nothing in his physique or bearing to suggest one of the most bloodthirsty murderers and most dangerous criminals of the age. They stared at him almost incredulously. Then gradually they began to realize the strength of the thin, fiercely straight mouth, the immovable jaw, the steely eyes which were already flashing a response to their challenge from behind his horn-rimmed spectacles. No one, perhaps, in the room, seemed more nonplussed than the pale-faced but muscular-looking waiter, who had been handing Martha Dring her cocktail. He seemed scarcely to be able to remove his eyes from the new-comer, and his lips murmured his name in awed syllables.

"Nick of New York—Nick Conklin!"

"You must pardon our surprise," Eustace Grant observed suavely. "We understood that that admirable force, the police of this country, who mean well, although their energies are so frequently misdirected, had intervened to prevent your projected visit, and that you were, in fact, in Paris."

“Does it take you as long as that to say anything every time you speak?” the stranger asked, a little irritably. “The police tried to stop me all right, but I have a clean bill of health and I go where I please. Do I sit down with you, or don’t I?”

Passiter, the wickedest looking of the assembled company of sinners, with his narrow face, his low forehead, overhung jaw, and vicious mouth, intervened.

“Let me speak a word,” he begged. “If you once sit down you are a member of the Club and one of us. Nick of New York is welcome.”

“Fair talk,” the new-comer admitted. “Here you are—passport, papers, sheaves of them.”

“They lied at Southampton and Cherbourg,” Grant murmured. “Not that you have any object in lying to us though,” he added meditatively.

“Wait,” the stranger enjoined.

He stepped back into the middle of the room, and looked intently at the amazing tapestried decoration of futurist design which hung upon the four walls—naked men engaged in gyrations around stooping women. For a moment he seemed to be measuring the distance with his eye. Then he came back to the table, and miracles happened. One or two of them declared that they caught the occasional flash of steel under his coat; others fancied that they had a glimpse of his white fingers. Anyhow, he stood with immovable face and body before his inquisitors. In little more than as many seconds there were four sharp reports like the faint explosion of a boy’s popgun, four rather more formidable stabs of flame, four black spots in the middle of each of the bodies of the four men.

“Did I miss one?” the performer asked, drawing a case from his pocket, and lighting a cigarette.

There was a tense but brief silence. The barman, who had disappeared precipitately, lifted his head from behind his counter; Angus Flood, who had been crouching with a stool held in front of him, looked out over its top. The men at the round table, with one accord hastened to the walls. There was the same little black hole in the centre of each of the bodies of the four painted figures, penetrating at least two inches into the panelled walls, a small black aperture, deadly and sinister. They returned to the table.

“Nine dry Martinis,” Eustace Grant ordered from the waiter, who was standing by his side still dazed. “Mr. Conklin, I trust that you will join us for cocktails and dinner. For once we find that report has not lied or exaggerated. We always understood that you were the finest gunman in your country. I have never seen such shooting in my life.”

Dinner was served a little later at the round table of the restaurant underneath the musicians' gallery, which was always reserved for Eustace Grant and his friends. As a rule they were moderate drinkers, especially the nights when there was work to be done, but on this occasion the champagne was drunk in magnums, and afterwards heavy demands were made upon the Napoleon brandy and the special Romeo and Juliet cigars. The conversation turned towards individual exploits. Mr. Nicholas Conklin, who had the air of having drunk a great deal of wine, was inclined to be boastful.

"You chaps are all right," he declared, leaning back in his place of honour at the much-envied round table. "I'd like to know something, though. What's the slickest single-handed job you, any of you, ever did?"

Alcoholic loquacity had its limit at Flood's Club. There was a slightly uneasy silence. Every one looked around at the sprinkling of guests occupying the adjacent tables. George, the special waiter for their own table, with a napkin tucked under his arm, was listening intently, but no one else seemed interested.

"Say, this joint is all right, isn't it?" Nick of New York asked querulously. "I've always understood that you chaps ran it and could do what you liked with it. I'll give you a start anyway."

He thrust his hand into his pocket and produced and laid upon the table an exquisite platinum watch, on the large side, but marvellously thin. He touched a spring and the back flew open.

"Read that," he invited with a complacent gesture.

They all leaned forward and passed it from hand to hand. The inscription was cut into the metal, and was sufficiently distinct:

"Presented to President Cooleridge

by

A few of his Old Class-mates.

*A slight Token of their
Deep Admiration and Respect."*

There was a list of names on each side which the world who knew anything of Wall Street, or of American sport, read over with respect.

"How did you come by this?" Passiter inquired.

Nick of New York laughed softly.

“How did I come by it?” he repeated. “How do we, any of us, come by our trophies? I took it from the President’s pocket.”

“I thought the President was always surrounded by detectives,” Martha Dring murmured.

“So he is. So he was,” was the boastful acknowledgment. “There were six around him when I took it. I did it for a bet of twenty thousand dollars with Ed. Dwyer of New York, and for the same bet I promise to put it back again any day you like when I return to the States. I’m not proud of the job. I just mentioned it because, in a way, it’s unusual.”

“Why aren’t you proud of it?” Mat Sarson demanded. “It seems to me a creditable piece of work.”

“Too near pickpocketing for my taste,” Conklin confided. “Some day I’ll tell you how I shot Sheriff Dewson and his man, each carrying two guns, and brought away the Boston City treasure-chest. Just now I’d rather hear some of you others talk.”

Passiter tossed off the remainder of his glass of brandy, waved George the waiter on one side, and leaned across the table.

“Did you ever hear of Martin’s bank robbery at Charing Cross?” he asked.

There was a very real flash of interest in the eyes of Nick of New York. The robbery had made history in the profession, and the news of it had been bruited all over the world. It had been the subject of many a sad conversation between Sub-Commissioner Larwood and Detective Dickins.

“That was a tough affair,” Passiter continued, his mouth opening in an evil grin, and his ill-formed teeth showing more clearly. “I worked it out from beginning to end. We cleared up thirty-three thousand pounds in notes and securities, and there was never an arrest.”

“Marvellous!” Nicholas Conklin exclaimed, in a tone of genuine admiration. “Some fighting too, wasn’t there?”

“There would have been more,” Passiter admitted, “but only one of the police who rushed the place had a gun. There were three cashiers in the bank to be dealt with, and the porter who was closing the door. We’d have given them a show, but one of them was shouting like hell, so out the lot had to go. We’d got the stuff all ready when the police rushed us. They asked for what they got, and they got it—hot lead from a steady hand. I saw to that. Afterwards we just stepped into three taxis and drove quietly away. Five men we put out that day, and the police are still guessing.”

“You’re wonderful fellows,” Nicholas Conklin acknowledged. “It’s great, too, to have a place where you can talk things over like this. To my mind, half the pleasure

of a job is looking back after it's all finished. I suppose every one here is to be trusted?"

Eustace Grant smiled.

"You don't quite understand the nature of this place," he confided. "The restaurant down here is nothing to do with the Club. It's open to the general public in fact, but for all its *de luxe* appointments, it is really a den of thieves. I don't suppose there's a soul in this room who hasn't been in trouble, or asked for it, at some time or another during his life."

"What about the waiters? Your own particular one, for instance?"

"Ours is a new hand," Eustace Grant admitted, "but he's just done five years for a job in Brewster's gang, without a squeal. We look after that sort of man for the rest of his life. Flood took him on as soon as he was satisfied, and gave him our table as a special honour."

"You're amongst the big pots, you know," Bradman, a well-dressed man of middle height, with tired eyes and drawn cheeks, drawled. "There isn't a person here who wouldn't be gratified if he could qualify for an invitation to sit at this table. The Major very seldom takes on any one fresh, though. We're as safe here as though we were locked up in our own parlour. Every one knows who we are, and when there's a job done they can make a pretty good guess about it, but there's never been a squeal from this place yet. Folks who want to commit suicide choose an easier way."

Mr. Nicholas Conklin smiled appreciatively.

"Bully!" he exclaimed. "Let's have some more yarns then."

Eustace Grant glanced at his watch.

"Perhaps you'd like to see us in action?" he suggested, dropping his voice a little. "We can't offer to let you in on to-night's show—it's too small an affair—but you can come along and watch our work, if it would interest you. You can stay with Miss Dring here, and have a dumb show. She's the best get-away we've got, although she's just had rather a narrow shave."

"Fine!" the American assented. "What about a rig-out?"

"We can arrange that for you upstairs," Grant replied. "All you want is an overcoat, a bowler hat, and some dummies."

"You won't mind taking me on, Miss Dring?" Nick of New York asked.

She shrugged her shoulders, and looked at him thoughtfully.

"I'll take you with pleasure," she said, "but I don't fancy you'll find it very exciting to-night. You won't forget that you're not in Chicago or New York, will you? Gunning's a little more expensive here, and you're too clever at it."

He grinned as he rose to follow Grant out of the room.

"I was showing off just a bit," he admitted. "Don't you be afraid, young lady. I'm no cheap gangster, handling a weapon for the first time in his life. A man will have to ask for it if he gets anything from me."

Nick of New York found himself presently in a small, flagged Square, narrowing into a long passage, and bounded on the left by the side of a tall warehouse, and on the right by a ten-foot brick wall, separating it from a similar passage. At the far end was a gate, over which was suspended a gas-lamp. He looked up and down with the air of one used to such situations, and anxious to fully gauge the possibilities of the present one.

"Rather hemmed in here, aren't we?" he queried.

"We are perfectly safe," she assured him. "There is no exit at all on this side from the showrooms where our men are. All we have to do is to watch the windows above our heads, get out of the way when they drop the bag, pick it up, and make for my car. I have the key of the gate there. I'd have left it open but a policeman passing might have noticed. If anything should go wrong, you must think and act for yourself, but don't shoot unless you have to."

"All right," he promised. "How long will they be?"

"Ten minutes at least. We are all right to whisper, but you mustn't smoke."

"What is the stuff?" he asked.

"Diamonds. Up above us is Moses Reinberg's office, the diamond merchant—up on the third floor there. He's just back from Brazil—been sorting his stuff for the last few days, and off to Amsterdam to-morrow. He's a perfect pig of a fellow, but I'm sorry for him to-night."

"Going to get it, is he?"

She nodded.

"I'm afraid so. Grant and Passiter are working, and there's only one way of cleaning up things that they believe in. They haven't even troubled about masks to-night, and that's a bad sign." . . .

The cool wind blew down the alley-way. The girl lifted her *béret*, and let it play upon her cheeks and in her hair. Her companion looked upward to the narrow strip of star-sprinkled sky. Together they listened.

"Queer life for a girl like you," he muttered. "You don't seem to be cut out for it somehow."

"You don't know me," she whispered back. "I must have excitement. I can't rest without it. There's one sort I don't want, so I take this."

Then silence again. They were a long way off a main street, but every now and then they heard the steady rumble of traffic. As the time drew near she was breathing quickly but softly. He watched the rise and fall of her slight bosom underneath her tightly-drawn coat.

“Hell waiting, isn’t it?” he ventured.

“The worst agony in life,” she murmured. “But, God, how one lives!”

A taxicab passed down the street, honking noisily. An unexpected aeroplane throbbed its lighted trail through the clouds above. Then silence again.

“I think I’m a little hysterical to-night,” the girl faltered. “This waiting—it has never seemed so long.”

He pressed her hand, and, to his surprise, she yielded it gladly.

“Nothing to be jumpy about,” he reassured her. “I’ll take care of you.”

“So you’re Nick of New York!” she breathed. “You’re not half such a brute as I fancied you.”

“There are times,” he confided, “when I am not a brute at all—when I feel just the same things as other men.”

Quickly, and without warning, the tragic world opened its fire upon them. From the third story of the blank building in the shadow of which they cowered, they heard the dull yet ominous report of an automatic—once—twice. Then silence. Another, and even more fearsome sound—the trying of the locked gate in the next yard, heavy footsteps in the adjoining entry, hideously unexpected, distracting. Then the sound for which they were prepared—the opening of a window above their heads, and a hissing admonition.

“Look out! Bag coming! Trouble on your left!”

A dispatch case came hurtling through the air. Nick Conklin, with amazing dexterity, caught it before it touched the pavement, and thrust it under her arm.

“Run!” he cried. “Don’t look behind. Leave the door open.”

She had a horrible vision of a policeman on the dividing wall, his truncheon strap in his mouth, prepared to spring down. Then she remembered Grant’s eternal edict—she was part of a whole. She must obey orders. With trembling knees she ran to the end of the passage, without once looking behind, opened the gate, sprang into the car, and started the engine. Her heart was beating furiously. Once she fancied that she heard the spit of a gun. There was a flash which might have been flame against the wall. Then footsteps—never the steps of a policeman those—swift, light, and stealthy upon the paved tiles. The door was pushed open, Nick Conklin leaped lightly into the car, and they shot ahead.

“Oh, Nick of New York,” she gasped, “I am afraid!” . . .

Their way seemed winged through the traffic-crowded street. Once he leaned forward and spoke.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“To Flood’s, of course.”

She made a final dash, turned a corner sharply and pulled up in front of the Club. Then things happened quickly. A commissionaire threw open the door, snatched the dispatch case from her, and vanished inside. The girl and Nick descended. Almost at once, a young man, who seemed to come from nowhere, jumped into her seat and drove off. From the hall of the Club, where they paused for breath, the table where they had dined was clearly visible, and Nick Conklin, as he surrendered his overcoat, stared at it in blank amazement. He touched the girl upon the arm.

“Look there!” he exclaimed.

She laughed, and, stooping down, rang a bell let into the wall, and covered by a square piece of silk. A man and a girl rose at once from their places at the table, and sauntered down the room.

“We haven’t had time to let you into all our secrets yet,” she confided. “Get into your cloakroom, quick. I’ll call you when you are to come out.”

He obeyed, a little dazed. In less than two minutes he answered her summons, and found her waiting.

“Don’t hurry for a moment,” she enjoined, handing him a cigarette. “I forgot that this was your first night, and you didn’t know our tricks. Pretty good, weren’t they, those two, considering our artist had only had a few minutes in which to study you.”

“Marvellous!” he declared. “Gave me some start!”

“They’ve done their job for the night now,” she continued, looking into her mirror critically, and touching up her lips. “They’ve gone up by the back way to change. Come along and examine Passiter and Eustace Grant. They’re perfect.”

“What’s the great idea?” he inquired.

“An alibi, of course,” she explained. “There are forty people in this place now who could swear, and honestly believe it, that neither Passiter nor Eustace Grant, you or myself had left the restaurant this evening. Look at Passiter’s teeth, and Grant’s droop of the mouth, and the way he holds his cigarette. There they are, to the life.”

“It’s a great stunt,” Conklin acknowledged.

The waiter held their chairs as they resumed their former places. He poured wine into their glasses, watching them all the time covertly.

“It’s simply done, you see,” Bradman pointed out, leaning across the table. “Directly you and Miss Dring left your dummies came down by a back way from the

dressing-rooms into the cloakrooms. Thirty seconds after you had disappeared they re-entered and took your places. Now watch!”

A bell set underneath the table rang softly. The two dummies of Passiter and Grant rose to their feet, and strolled away. Everyone at the table drew a little sigh of relief.

“A few minutes behind time to-night,” Chaplain Lane remarked.

The girl glanced at her watch and nodded.

“There was some shooting,” she confided, “and other trouble.”

“You got the stuff?” Mat Sarson asked anxiously.

She nodded reassurance. Grant and Passiter strolled up the room together, unruffled, exactly as they had left it an hour before, exactly as their doubles had left it two minutes since. Grant had his arm on Passiter’s shoulder, and appeared to be in high good-humour. At the table he helped himself quickly to champagne, and took up the conversation just where it had been abandoned an hour ago. To all appearance the little party were continuing with unbroken mirth their light-hearted feast. The girl, however, whose nerves were on edge, was conscious of a sense of strain. Grant, his monocle firmly adjusted, stared fixedly at the label on the bottle of wine which he had been drinking. He turned to the waiter, who was never far away from his elbow.

“George,” he directed, “tell Mr. Flood I want a word with him.”

The man disappeared. Flood came hurrying up.

“Yes, Major?”

“About this Cliquot ’19?”

“There is very little of it left, I’m afraid.”

Grant dropped his voice suddenly.

“Any one unusual about this evening?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“A troublesome young man I don’t like the look of at all, sitting at a table by himself, near the door. Wants to look over the place afterwards, and join the Club. Says Jourdain would propose him.”

“Damn Jourdain anyway! Write him off the books. I’ll speak to the young man presently.”

“Yes, sir.”

Flood took his leave. Grant leaned towards their distinguished American guest.

“Any trouble your end?” he asked. “I thought I heard a gun.”

“Nothing of that sort,” Conklin assured him. “A clumsy, splay-footed policeman

came stumbling over the wall at me, and I gave him the double knuckle twist, and I never heard from him again. Did you find trouble?"

"Yes. That isn't what's bothering me though. Keep things going here."

Grant, with a careless nod, and his cigar still between his fingers, walked towards the table near the door where the young man was seated. He greeted him courteously.

"You want to join our small Club, I hear?" he said.

"I should like to," the other admitted.

"You have a proposer?"

"Yes. Mr. Mitchell Jourdain."

Grant's manner apparently underwent a sudden change.

"Dear me, dear me!" he regretted. "What did you say your name was? Mr. _____"

"My name is Phillipson—Edward Phillipson. I am in business in the City."

Grant shook his head.

"I am sorry," he confided. "The Club is absolutely filled up."

"Jourdain was telling me——" the young man began.

"Forgive me if I interrupt you," Grant begged. "Mr. Jourdain is not *persona grata* here. His name, in fact, has been removed from the list of members."

"But why?"

"He gave offence in some way, I suppose," was the stiff response. "In any case, as I have told you, the Club is full. Will you excuse me now, Mr. Phillipson. I am entertaining friends."

Grant made his thoughtful return to the table, and led the little party up into the private bar.

"That fellow who said he wanted to join the Club," he recounted, "under a false name, by the by, was Richard Gibbs. He's one of the young men they've pushed along to take Dickins's place. I don't like his coming round here to make inquiries—especially to-night."

"You needn't worry," Conklin chuckled. "He's after me. Told to keep a line on me whilst I'm in the City, I expect. He called at the hotel this morning. Said he was an interviewer. I may not be over-bright, but I can tell an interviewer from a detective."

Grant's face cleared.

"That's better," he admitted, in a tone of relief. "You see," he went on, dropping his voice a little, "we got the stuff to-night, but there was trouble. Passiter had to put a man right out, or he'd have got me."

Passiter's face contracted. He snarled in ugly fashion.

"It was your bullet, damn it, which did the trick, Grant, not mine," he rejoined.

Grant was unmoved.

"Very likely," he agreed carelessly. "At any rate, one of us has killed a policeman in the unfortunate execution of his duty. Our get-away was excellent, our alibis are cast-iron if ever they were needed. We have nothing really to worry about, but I have a proposal to make to you all. I hear that in New York the higher branches of the profession have been neglected. Mr. Conklin here will tell you so himself. Let us take a few months' holiday, and visit that amiable metropolis. Not all together, of course. I should go myself from Genoa by one of the new Italian boats. Then some one could go from Marseilles, another by the French Line from Havre. There are also the ordinary routes, of course, and a line from Glasgow to Canada. What do you say would happen to us, Mr. Conklin?"

The latter considered the matter.

"You might bring it off," he admitted. "The stuff's there, and you've got methods of your own that ain't so bad. Your trouble would be to get the right sort of local information. I don't think it would ever pay me to join up with you."

There was a moment's silence. A stranger entering the room would have become instantly aware of the fact that there was a sense of strain amongst this little company of men. Even Grant was retaining his imperturbability of speech and manner with an effort. Passiter had mounted the stairs shivering. Chaplain Lane was very pale, and drinking a great deal of wine. Passiter leaned across the table towards their visiting member, and his face and tone were vicious.

"Who cares whether you join up with us or not?" he snapped. "We could find out all we want to know amongst the suckers of New York. There's too much smooth talk and swell clothes about our ways lately. Some of you fellows," he wound up, with a scowl at Grant, "are getting above your job. We're crooks, remember, not gentlemen."

Again there was a queer little silence. It was very seldom that an outbreak like this was heard at Flood's. Martha Dring pushed her chair back from the table. Grant pinched a cigar carefully and lit it, as though to emphasize his brief pause.

"You must excuse our friend," he begged, turning to Conklin. "He appears to be a little upset to-night—a touch of nerves, perhaps. Pull yourself together, Passiter."

"Blast your nerves!" Passiter shouted, tearing off his coat, and throwing it on the floor. "I'm sick of these sham duds. We did better when we worked from Bermondsey. I'll fight any of you for a hundred quid."

"You forget," Grant reminded him quietly, "that there is a lady present."

“Oh, don’t mind me,” Martha Dring observed wearily. “I think I’m getting nerves too. I shouldn’t mind seeing a good fight.”

“You won’t see it here,” Grant rejoined, and as he shook his right arm an ugly little life-preserver slipped into the palm of his hand. “We are all on edge to-night, and we’ve got to pull ourselves together. A brawl in the Club is just what would give the whole show away. I am master here, remember. Passiter, put on your coat.”

The man sulkily obeyed. He was trembling from head to foot. Grant tapped on the table, and George, the inevitable shadow of the assembly, crept out from the recesses of the bar.

“Two magnums of the Cliquot, some whisky, soda, and cigars,” Grant ordered. “I’ll tell you the honest truth, I’m nervy myself.”

“We’ve been at our job too long without a break,” Chaplain Lane declared eagerly. “A sea-voyage will do us all the good in the world.”

“I’ll show you where our expenses are, and a bit to go on with, boys,” Grant volunteered.

He threw a handful of gems upon the table. They all clustered round. Mat Sarson, who was the expert, let them fall through his fingers.

“They are better than the report,” he declared in excitement. “Even when they are cut, boys, there’s fifteen thousand pounds worth here.”

The champagne was brought and poured out in tumblers. The dangerous moment was passed. Sam Rubens took a pack of cards from his pocket.

“I’ll play any one at stud poker for my share,” he challenged.

There was a roar of laughter.

“You cheating little devil,” Grant scoffed. “As though any one would play with you!”

Rubens—smooth-faced, olive-cheeked, Levantine in appearance—grinned. His beautifully manicured fingers played round the cards.

“Of course I cheat,” he agreed. “Every one who plays cards cheats, except the mugs. The thing is, who cheats the cleverest. Any one like to try?”

He looked wistfully around without eliciting any response.

“The trouble of it is we can never get a game of cards here with Rubens about,” Grant grumbled.

“You should learn to cheat as well as I do,” the young man smirked.

Nick of New York suddenly set down his empty glass.

“Look here, boys,” he said. “You’re all a little tired of the regular game. You’re all spoiling for a gamble. So am I. What about a big one?”

“How big?” some one muttered.

“Something that will give you plenty to talk about for the rest of your days and brace up all the nerves in your body, eh? I don’t know what sorts of sports you are yet. Have you got the pluck, I wonder?”

“Cut that out, you little swine,” Passiter snapped.

“We’ll see about the pluck,” Grant observed. “Get on with it.”

“You’re going to clean up here. You’d like to put the bulls off by clearing right out for a spell. Not a bad idea. I’m doing the same myself from New York. Before you go let’s wind up big. Let’s see what you’re worth, each of you. Count me in alongside, if you dare.”

“Cut that out!” Passiter growled once more. “We’ve had enough of your bragging.”

“I don’t brag about anything I can’t make good,” Nick Conklin declared, with a grandiloquent gesture, “and I’m not afraid to take any one of you on. What I propose is this. Start a competition amongst us men. Keep it open, say a fortnight, or as long as you like. Every one meet on the last night, and the one who’s got the most to show for his one job—mind, one job only—scoops the lot. One of us will get something worth having then—not these odd bits of money. You can have side-bets, if you like. I shall back myself for a thousand pounds against any one here.”

There was a gleam of appreciation in Grant’s eyes.

“Do you mean that we are to work alone?” he inquired.

“You can make the conditions yourself,” Conklin conceded. “You know the ropes here better than I do.”

They all pondered heavily. The light of a great covetousness was in their eyes. Nick of New York was reputed to be a braggart and a millionaire. They wanted his money. Passiter, in his excitement, had recovered his temper. He leaned across the table, his eyes bright, a streak of unusual colour in his cheeks.

“I suppose you realize, all of you,” he said, “that what we are proposing to do beats anything else that has ever been done by any company of adventurers in the world?”

Bradman, with a superior smile, cut in.

“There has never been a company of adventurers like us,” he said. “We have the police beaten and scared. If this exploit comes off, Scotland Yard will have to go out of business.”

“To get back to details,” Grant intervened, tapping the table. “There is a certain amount of unnecessary risk attached to a single-handed exploit. To my mind, the artistry of an affair demands a safe, effective and graceful get-away. For that purpose a reasonable amount of secondary assistance is needed.”

“I agree,” Mat Sarson, who was reputed to be the original cat burglar, piped up. “I can work my own stunt better than any one else on earth, but I need covering up afterwards.”

“He needs dropping into his little basket, poor dear,” Bradman mocked. “I’m for communal help so far as the get-away is concerned, and Costigan’s gang behind if necessary.”

“Every one seems unanimous about that,” Grant announced, turning to Conklin. “My only regret is that this may place you at some disadvantage, as you are comparatively a stranger with us.”

“Not at all,” Nick of New York said coolly. “I have watched Miss Dring’s methods. They’re neat enough for me. I shall invite her to be my partner.”

For some reason or other Grant was displeased. There was a frown upon his face as he turned towards the girl.

“What do you say, Miss Dring?”

His tone was silky, yet portentous. One could almost have detected a threat under the simple question. The girl met his challenge joyously.

“If Mr. Conklin really means it,” she assented, smiling at him, “I’ll be his get-away with pleasure—and we’ll win.”

Eustace Grant rose to his feet. No one there had ever seen him so near losing his temper.

“You’ll have to aim high,” he warned them.

Nick of New York laughed quietly.

“If I have to break into the Tower of London and bring away the Crown jewels,” he declared, “Miss Dring and I will win.”

“Your thousand pounds is a bet,” was Grant’s challenging reply.

III. MAT'S LUCK

Martha Dring leaned from her armchair and gazed over at the trees on the other side of Berkeley Square. A misguided thrush was hopping about on the railed-in lawn. Fragments of blue sky were visible ahead. One ridiculous butterfly was hovering about the shrubs. She removed her cigarette from her mouth, and turned to the man opposite.

"I have decided how I should like to spend the day," she announced. "I should like to motor down to Brighton."

Eustace Grant stared at her in dismay. He was very immaculate in his grey tweed suit, Bond Street linen, tie and handkerchief to match. His brown shoes were just old enough, and perfectly polished. No wonder that, so far as appearance went, he was rather the despair of his present associates.

"But, my dear Miss Dring!" he expostulated. "I thought that our day was planned. You were to drive me round the parks in my new coupé, lunch here, discuss our forthcoming schemes this afternoon, and dine at Flood's."

She shuddered.

"A perfectly horrible programme," she objected.

A dull tinge of colour showed under the fading sunburn of his cheeks. He was beginning to realize that this girl could anger him more than any other person in the world.

"It is too late to start for Brighton," he remarked coldly.

"It is not," she contradicted. "It is eleven o'clock, and in your Rolls-Royce we can be down there in two hours. Order the car, please. I have brought my motoring coat, and I should like to start as soon as possible."

"Do you know why I gave in to you to-day?" he asked, half an hour later, as they were rushing through the country southwards.

"Perhaps you realized that I should probably have gone home if you hadn't," she remarked calmly. "I didn't want you to give in. I didn't wish to come to your house this morning. You told me that you had something very important to say before you decided upon your plans for New York, and here I am."

He had made up his mind to restrain himself, and he did. He had never been wholly determined as to what her attitude towards life really was. There was a certain fineness about her which seemed absolutely incompatible with her present tastes.

"To me it is very important indeed," he confided. "I wanted to ask you to come

to New York with me.”

She stared at him in very genuine astonishment.

“With the gang, I suppose you mean?”

“No. With me. Married, if you like. So far as I know I have no wife alive at the moment.”

For a few seconds she continued to stare at him in stupefaction immeasurable. The lines of bewilderment were deeply traced in her fine olive forehead, and the pupils of her beautiful eyes were distended. Then, all at once, she seemed to realize that he was in earnest. The corners of her lips broke away. She threw herself back amongst the cushions, and she laughed until the tears came into her eyes. Perhaps if she could have seen his face at that moment she would have realized that she was driving with a possible murderer.

“Major Grant,” she said, “I gave you credit for—for a greater sense of humour.”

“I fail to see the connection,” was his icy rejoinder.

She dried her eyes and sat up, pulled the rug over her knees, and settled down to talk.

“Let me speak plainly,” she begged, “to justify myself to myself and in order that there may be no future misunderstanding. I met you at a studio tea, and I was attracted because I was told that you were a suspected criminal, and for no other reason.”

“Are you going to put me in my place?” he asked dangerously.

“Wait,” she insisted. “I was fed up with everything. I wanted sensations which decent life couldn’t give me, and I confess that I always have been, and am now, fearfully attracted by crime and the psychology of criminals. You showed me—you still show me—ugly but dramatic phases of life which fascinate me. I am so far involved that I suppose I may be counted amongst the criminal classes, but marriage with any one of you, any physical contact of any sort whatsoever—why, the very idea of it revolts me! How you could ever have thought it possible is beyond my understanding. . . . I am not apologizing. You asked for it, and you’ve got it. Never allude to the subject again, please.”

Eustace Grant twisted his cigar around with thoughtful care, and, leaning back, looked steadily upwards. The budding branches of the wood through which they were passing, bent back by a sudden April gale, and disclosing fleecy fragments of white cloud driven across a background of blue sky, had no message for him. Neither was he conscious of the elusive wafts of perfume from a bank of violets which came to them from a sheltered and mossy bank in the hollow of the hill, so warm and sweet that the girl by his side almost forgot the ugliness of the moment. He

was restrainedly, viciously silent and detached, and to his companion there was something far more menacing than the threat of words in his speechlessness. . . .

Arrived at their destination, they drew up in front of one of the smaller hotels, and he handed her out with ostentatious politeness.

“Luncheon in half an hour’s time,” he proposed. “I shall meet a few friends at a rendezvous near here.”

She nodded.

“I shall walk along the promenade,” she decided.

He disappeared within the portals of a neighbouring and world-renowned hostelry, and the girl crossed the street to the front. Even on such a blatant place as the Brighton promenade she found acquaintances, and had to stop frequently to answer inquiries. Then, when swinging along, with the sea-wind full against her, inspired by some of the outdoor passions of her earlier and healthier girlhood, with the colour stealing back to her cheeks, and a clearer light to her eyes, she came face to face with a man being wheeled along in a bath-chair. She looked at him at first with the ordinary pity of a healthy person towards an invalid, and then in horror. Notwithstanding his unnaturally white cheeks, his rimmed eyes, and apparently shrunken frame, she recognized him at once. She motioned to the man who was pushing the bath-chair to stop.

“Mr. Dickins!” she exclaimed, holding out her hand. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I had no idea you’d been as ill as this.”

“I’m not so bad as I look,” he assured her, smiling. “Every one here is so terribly healthy that one looks ill by contrast.”

“It was only the other day,” she confided, “that I read in the paper about your resignation through ill-health.”

“Ill-health, and general incompetence,” he sighed. “How’s business?”

She flushed slightly.

“Quite flourishing, thank you.”

“Some one had pretty good luck with Moses Reinberg’s diamonds,” he remarked. “The thieves got clear away without leaving a clue, I hear.”

“So one read.”

“And only one murder,” Dickins continued, pausing a moment for breath.

“Only one poor fellow, who wasn’t allowed a chance to defend himself, butchered. Did you read about it?”

“I never read the papers.”

“It seems that he saw lights from the windows, ran up to do his duty, and was shot down in cowardly fashion from behind,” Dickins went on. “The trouble is that

he was only thirty-eight years old—a young fellow who did fine things in the war, married, with three children. No fight, just butchered. It makes me mad down here to feel that I can't get my fingers on the throat of the coward who did it. Don't you feel like that, Miss Dring?"

She felt his burning eyes upon her, and her knees began to tremble.

"Oh, well, no one knows exactly what happened," she reminded him. "He was doing his duty, I suppose. No use getting maudlin about it."

"All the same," he rejoined, looking back from the sea, where his eyes had rested for a moment, "don't you agree with me, Miss Dring, that all the excitement, the romantic thrill of crime which so many members of the general public nowadays seem to feel, must turn into dust and ashes at the mere thought of a cowardly murder like that?"

"Yes," she almost screamed, "of course! Mr. Dickins, I'm afraid I'm letting you talk too much. I must go now. There is one question I should like to ask you though, if you wouldn't mind. It's terribly personal, and a little incriminating, I suppose."

He waved away the bath-chair attendant for a moment. She waited until the man was out of hearing, and then continued.

"Did you get into trouble the night you took the jewels away from me for not bringing me in? Had that anything to do with your leaving the Force?"

"Nothing whatever," he assured her. "I had a perfectly free hand then. I didn't see that you could do us much good, and I thought—I hoped it might be a lesson to you. Prison is pretty well the end of all things for a civilized person, you know."

"Are you living near here?" she asked abruptly.

"I have a little cottage on the downs," he told her. "Sunlight Lodge, South Downs."

"Can I come and see you one day?"

"Whenever you can tell me what I should like to hear," he answered gravely.

Eustace Grant was elaborately polite but silent throughout the service of luncheon. During the drive home he made only one remark.

"I hear that your friend Detective Dickins was on the promenade in a bath-chair, all crocked up," he confided.

"I saw him," she replied. "Poor fellow, he looked ghastly ill."

For the first time during the day he smiled.

"So they tell me. The best news I've heard for ages. I'd read in the papers that he'd had the push, but one never knows what to believe."

"You're rather by way of being afraid of him, aren't you?" she asked.

He winced a little.

“With our organization we don’t need to fear any one,” he declared. “All the same, Dickins was dangerous. He was one of the few men I should have put away any time I could have done so safely.”

“‘Safely’ meaning, I suppose, without any risk to yourself?”

“Naturally. When you’re at war you don’t fight a duel with your enemy. You kill him whenever you can get him.”

“It sounds a little like murder.” She shivered.

“Murder is all part of the game, as you know quite well,” he rejoined coolly.

He directed the chauffeur to drive to her studio in Chelsea, and politely assisted her to alight.

“Are you never going to speak to me like a human being again?” she asked, smiling at him from the pavement.

There was a subtle menace underlying his terse reply.

“I’m making up my mind what to say,” he answered.

From the moment when Martha Dring entered the Club that night and swung herself on to a high stool at the bar she shared in the general consciousness that some portentous event was casting its shadow over the place. Even the downstairs waiters, who were supposed to know nothing of what was going on amongst the *élite*, were whispering together in little groups. Charles, the barman, was so occupied in listening to his master’s eloquent but inaudible tirade that he had not even noticed her entrance. Grant, Passiter and Bradman were seated still in their outdoor habiliments at their cocktail table, without a glass in front of them, having apparently even forgotten to order drinks. The girl tapped lightly upon the counter.

“A dry Martini, Charles,” she ordered.

The man returned to his duties at once. With the skill of a necromancer, he began to juggle with the bottles and a silver shaker. In a matter of seconds, a tapering glass, filled with cloudy amber liquid, an olive reposing at the bottom, and a delicate morsel of lemon hanging over the side, was gently propelled towards her.

“What’s the matter with every one to-night, Charles?” she asked, as she lit a cigarette.

The inimitable Charles glanced around, and wiped a spot off the counter with his dish-cloth.

“Every one is a little tired, madam, I think,” he replied. “Sunday is usually a day here when our clients are not feeling quite themselves.”

Martha made no remark. She watched Charles with curious eyes as he busied

himself about the bar. He was a powerful-looking man, neatly dressed, with pink and white complexion, eyes always clear, notwithstanding his terrible hours. His flaxen hair was carefully brushed. There was not a wrinkle upon his face, and his general appearance of ingenuousness was almost irresistible. Yet he was supposed to know more about the middle and upper class underworld of London than any other man breathing. She studied him reflectively.

“Charles,” she inquired, “what do you think of this sort of life?”

“Madam,” he replied, after a moment’s pause, “not much. It’s like this, though, with me. At any other club or restaurant in Europe I might earn as much as twenty pounds a week, if I was lucky. Here, with special tips and commissions, I earn fifty, and I have earned more. This place will come to an end some day, of course. Then I shall go and live in the country where I can garden, and walk in the mornings, and take my gun, and shoot a rabbit or two after tea.”

“A quaint change of habits and life, Charles,” she remarked.

He looked around him, and his eyes rested by chance upon the four holes in the grotesque bodies of the men upon the wall, made by Nick Conklin of New York.

“Is there any one who goes on with this life who isn’t in too thick to get out?” he asked softly. “I don’t think so.”

“What about me?”

“Madam, you are the only lady who comes near this place, so I don’t know that you count with the rest of them. I will say this for Major Grant,” he went on, “he won’t have any ordinary women around, or in the distance. It shows what a clever man he is. It’s a pleasure to serve you, Miss Dring, as I think you know, but every time I see you come in I’m sorry. You’ve satisfied your curiosity if that’s what brought you. I should cut it out now—and Major Eustace Grant, too,” he added, in something less than a whisper.

She smiled at him delightfully, and when she smiled in that fashion Martha Dring was a very beautiful girl.

“You’re a dear, Charles!” she said. “Get me a packet of cigarettes. And now we’re alone, tell me what’s wrong to-night?”

“Midget Mat’s going out,” he announced softly, “and I don’t think the governor much fancies his chances.”

Half an hour later she descended the stairs and crossed the room towards the famous round table. Eustace Grant gave a little shiver of pent-up feeling as she swung past her accustomed place next to him, and sat down between Nicholas Conklin and little Mat. George, the waiter, with set, unsmiling face, leaned over her

chair.

“Caviare or oysters, madam?”

She gave her order.

“Why is every one so serious about Mat’s going out to-night?” she asked coolly.

Eustace Grant replied.

“In the first place,” he explained, “let me say that I am the person who is making the objections. Mat is, I admit, the finest cat burglar in the world, but this is not a cat burglar job, he has not been used to working single-handed, and I don’t feel that he has had enough experience of indoor work. Then I don’t like his ghost. He is half a head taller than Mat at least, and he is a long way from getting down to the weight.”

“Cut it out,” Mat growled, swallowing the remains of a tumbler of champagne. “I’ve got to have my chance in Nick Conklin’s show, haven’t I, and my chance came to-night. I saw the old folks down at Brighton to-day, and, better still, I saw Dickins, the only ’tec who’s ever put my wind up, in a bath-chair, looking as sick as hell. . . . So long, you fellows! Here comes my call. See you in about an hour.”

The uniformed page-boy from the telephone leaned over his chair and whispered the familiar announcement:

“Wanted on the telephone, sir.”

Mat swaggered down the room, and a minute later his place was taken by a very creditable replica.

Luck! The luck of the underworld! The luck of the prepared against the unprepared!

“Mat’s luck!” that wizened little mortal chuckled to himself, as he sped down the broad front stairs of the great silent house in Belgrave Square. They were stirring uneasily in the upper regions, but what matter? He was approaching freedom now, with flying footsteps. In those last stretches he was conscious of a sense of vastness around him, perhaps because he himself was so small. Here and there the massive frames of the oil paintings glittered through the semi-darkness, and rows of pale faces glistened. He never paused to reflect that in his pockets reposed the jewels which had decked those flesh-painted bosoms, those tapering necks. . . . More sounds in the gloomy spaces above! What did it matter? The front door ahead, and, outside, the most wonderful get-away ever dreamed of—Ginger Ellis, Costigan’s first lieutenant, with his thirty horse-power bicycle and side-car guaranteed to go through any traffic sixty miles an hour, through a market town on Saturdays, or up the side of a house if necessary. Hurrah! Finished with the stairs! The floor—how he could dance on it!—smooth with the wear of years, slippery as generations of

housemaids' arms could make it. Across it he sped to the ponderous front door. The well-oiled bolts slid back in his hands. The key turned as easily as butter. Inch by inch he opened it, loving the wet wind which streamed in upon his heated cheeks. Another inch or two—he peered out!

“Gawd!” he muttered.

For the first time Mat's luck faltered. Exactly opposite, on the other side of the way, was a fully uniformed policeman—magnificent, portentous, slow moving. His heart for a moment sank. He closed the door softly and turned round, crouching on one knee, his wicked-looking automatic gripped in his right hand. The pursuing fools had turned on the electric light over their heads. They were asking for it. He, himself, was as yet out of sight. He waited till they were half-way down the stairs—four of them, two apparently with some sort of guns. He peered out again into the street, risking his own life that he might not take theirs. The policeman had moved a few paces on—but not far enough. He closed the door. What must be, must! He levelled his gun, and pulled the trigger. A miss! He fired again. Sickening! Not his fault—the fault of these interfering blunderers who stood between an honest marauder and his living. The man on the stairs spun round, clutched for the banisters, and, missing them, lost his footing, and fell crashing down, to lie a doubled-up heap upon the floor. There was a shriek of pain, a shout from the other men as they caught sight of Mat. A moment's agonized silence. Once more he pushed open the door. The policeman was within half a dozen yards of the corner. He closed it again stealthily. No risks after what had happened. There was a blaze of illumination now in the hall. The other man with a gun, a striped waistcoated footman, was rushing forward. Well, he was asking for it! Let him down gently. He picked him off about the knees, and the man collapsed with a great squat bump upon a rug. And now for his rush! He sprang up, and opened the door, turning round for a moment to glance at his pursuers. A grey-haired man in pyjamas had picked up one of the guns, and let fly. Mat felt a sharp pain in his arm, a shock as though a bullet had flattened itself upon the metal of his braces. The policeman was out of sight now. Bang went the door. Mat laughed as he leaped from the pavement into the carriage attached to the motor-bicycle.

“Like hell, Ginger!” he cried. “They're after me!”

The shadowy figure by the side of the machine jumped into the saddle, but even as he did so he groaned. The engine was beating stoutly, but Mat knew well that something was wrong.

“Back tyre gone, Mat. There's a taxicab at the corner. Sit light, and I'll get you there.”

Floppity flop—flop—flop! Gone those hopes of a swift ride to safety. The front door behind was thrown open. There was a stream of light, some one yelling for the police. Floppity flop—flop—flop. Nearly over at that corner! Groaning and bumping, they crossed the road. Mat's luck was gone, but Mat was still a man.

"Got your story right?" he snapped out.

"No one can touch it," was the swift response. "I know the housemaid next door. I was waiting for her."

Mat's luck was in again. The taxicab man had seen them coming, and had started his engine.

"Charing Cross by Pall Mall," Mat ordered, throwing himself in.

The man shoved in his gears. They were away. By the grace of Providence the chauffeur heard nothing of the shouting behind. Mat did though, and the sweat poured down his face. He wiped it off with his handkerchief, let down both windows, and lay back. He lay back and panted.

After they passed Buckingham Palace he became himself again. They were unchecked. The luck held. They sped along the great broad thoroughfare. Just before turning up into Pall Mall, Mat stopped the chauffeur. The man pulled up under a tree.

"What is it, sir?" he inquired, opening the door with his left hand, and leaning around.

Mat stepped lightly on to the road. There was nothing coming either way, and the darkness was intense.

"Driver," he said earnestly, "I want to ask you a question. Do you think you would know me again if you saw me?"

"Of course I should," the man assured him, without reflection. "I should know your ugly little face anywhere. You used to ride for Loughton's stable before you got into trouble, and, though I was badly wanting a fare, I ain't easy in my mind as to what you were doing when I picked you up."

"Sorry," Mat snapped, as he drew his automatic from under his coat. "You've asked for it."

He blew the man's brains out from a couple of feet away. Then, with a shuddering little cry, he went slinking through the shadows up into Pall Mall.

The bell under the table! A shiver of excitement ran through the assembled party. In due course the telephone boy made his appearance, and addressed the ghost.

"Wanted on the telephone, Mr. Sarson, sir," he announced.

The pseudo-Midget Mat arose with a mumbled word of apology, and departed.

The little company who were left had been through many such scenes before without turning a hair, but some demon of unrest seemed to-night to have them in its clutch. Even Eustace Grant was nervously folding and unfolding his napkin. Martha, sitting apparently as quiet as a statue, was tearing her handkerchief to pieces under the table. Passiter was drinking fiercely, but the hand which held his glass was shaking.

“Mat’s through all right then,” he muttered.

“What are we all crazy about?” Grant queried severely. “Welcome the boy back, but don’t forget he’s only been gone a few seconds. Don’t, for God’s sake, look as though anything could have happened.”

Mat, at any rate, forgot nothing. Up the room he came, smiling a greeting here and there, his fingers tucked into his jacket pocket exactly as he had noticed the dummy’s. He slipped into the vacant place with perfect naturalness. But when he was once there his tone was thick and choked.

“Give me a bottle of wine,” he demanded—“a whole bottle.”

They filled and refilled a huge brandy glass, and he drank and drank and drank. When he set down his glass his eyes were like pools of fire.

“You’re beat. You’re beat, all of you. You’re beat!” he cried, in a muffled voice, leaning across the table. “You think nothing of us, Nick of New York, but you’ve got to pay. You others can try pocket-picking in Swan & Edgar’s. You’d have kept me back, Boss Grant, and you, Ted Passiter. You never did a job like this.”

The room was nearly empty now, and the gems trickled through his fingers on to the table-cloth—diamonds and pearls which had hung on the necks of queens, jewels around which history had been written. Something ghoul-like, some devilish quality of another world crept into and distorted the faces of the men who pored over them. Then, if Grant’s heavy hand had not closed with apparent playfulness upon her mouth, the girl’s shriek would have rang out through the room. She pointed dumbly. Their eyes followed the direction of her finger. Slowly, on the left-hand side of his shirt-front, a small red stain was growing larger and larger. Mat himself looked down. He saw it there and he knew.

“Hell, I’m going!” he muttered. “They got me after all!”

There was a door leading into the musicians’ gallery within a couple of feet of where he was seated. They pushed him through it, and the few loiterers in the restaurant imagined that he was drunk. But before his feet had touched the first of the stairs Mat was dead!

IV. PASSITER'S SIMPLE JOB

“Organization,” Major Eustace Grant, D.S.O., president of the famous little company of crooks, declared boastfully, as he leaned against the upstairs bar of Flood’s Club. “That is what does it, Conklin—the most perfect organization in the world, every detail thought out, every possibility taken into account.”

Mr. Nicholas Conklin—or as he was usually called amongst his intimates, Nick of New York, the notorious American criminal—drank his cocktail in respectful silence.

“There’s a touch of luck in it, too, Major,” he insisted.

“Why luck?” Grant rejoined. “It’s quite true that when the description of the man who had burgled Portland House was circulated, and Mat’s dead body was found the next day in the Thames, the police did come here. I interviewed one of the inspectors myself, but I ask you how could they make anything out of it? There were between thirty and forty people in the restaurant downstairs who were prepared to swear to the fact that Mat never left our dining-table except to answer the telephone, that he was with us all the evening, and only went away when he was so drunk that he had to be helped out. The commissionaire who put him into a taxi declared that he could do nothing with him. Off he drove, and our responsibility ended there. As to the man who committed the burglary at Portland House, he may have been a small man, too, and may have resembled Mat, but what do we know about that? What do we know about the jewels?”

“I hope we know that they are going to be added to the general stock,” Conklin observed. “There was one there, at any rate, I should like to see again.”

“I will decide later about their disposition,” Grant promised, “but I don’t think they’ll come your way, in any case, my friend from overseas.”

Conklin chuckled.

“We’ll see about that. I haven’t finished feeling puzzled about Mat yet. You had to have some one follow him when he was pushed into the taxicab.”

“The gang were out—Jacky Costigan’s,” Grant explained shortly—“Costigan’s Hornets’, as the police call them. We have our own motor-boat, and, if it comes to that, the taxicab was ours too. Poor Mat wasn’t the first who’s been taken for a ride down to the Thames, only he was dead before he started, poor fellow!”

“Well, I’m beginning to think something of you chaps,” Nick Conklin remarked condescendingly. “I’m proud to be connected with you, Major. I used to think we ran things pretty well over my way, but we haven’t the detail you have. Charles,” he

added, turning to the barman, “set up a round of cocktails to me. I know, when the time comes,” he went on, “I shall be almost ashamed to take all this money away with me. I would be, at least, if I didn’t know that you could all afford it.”

There was a ripple of laughter around the little circle, which had increased during the last few moments. Eustace Grant laughed with the usual unpleasant curve of his lips; Passiter’s expression of mirth was like the harsh cackling of a hyena; Chaplain Lane’s was more natural; but Sam Rubens’s was simply a jeer.

“What are you going out for, Nick—the Crown Jewels?” Grant demanded sarcastically.

“I think he’s got his eye on the Mint,” Passiter suggested.

“What about the Bank of England?” Bradman queried.

“Chaff away, you fellows,” Conklin invited good-humouredly. “The fact remains that, on the night of the feast, Amos Grimmett, your great valuer, will award me the prize. What I am going after I marked down long before I came to this country. I admit the Major here is a great organizer, and he’s got you lads going well, but I can take the lid off my little affair at any time. I have every risk taken care of, even to the chance of the under-house-maid having the toothache.”

“You fellows do know how to brag,” Sam Rubens declared. “Pity you won’t learn how to play cards. I’d take some of you down a bit.”

“When you bring off this marvellous coup, are you going to hire the whole of Costigan’s gang,” Grant inquired, “or have you chartered the *Mauretania* to bring your own people across?”

“I am working alone,” Nick of New York announced. “I have never needed help, and I never seek any. I am taking only a get-away—Miss Dring, if she will still trust me.”

Martha came into the room at that moment, and, at the sound of her name, crossed towards the bar. Conklin thrust a cocktail into her hand, which she drank almost feverishly.

“I was just saying that I want you in my show,” he confided. “I told you so from the first, you know.”

She made a little grimace.

“I’m not sure that I want to do anything about it,” she replied. “It isn’t that I don’t trust you, Nick, because I do, but I think that my sympathies are swinging over to the other side. You really bad men are getting on my nerves.”

“Where have you been all day?” Grant asked suspiciously.

“I’ve been to Brighton to lunch with some friends, and I went round to call upon ex-Detective Dickins,” she answered defiantly.

“Hankering after these Scotland Yard muts, are you?” Grant muttered.

“I think I am,” she admitted, turning towards him with a sweet smile. “They haven’t your brains, but I like their dispositions better. They’re not so bloodthirsty as you people.”

“Who says they’re not?” Passiter demanded. “They’re such rotten gunmen. That’s why they don’t do more mischief.”

“I like them all the better for it,” she insisted. “Then, Mr. Dickins is quite an artist. He has a sweet little cottage, and, for a man, really good taste. He has some copies of old masters he bought in Florence which are exceedingly well chosen, some modern French etchings which I envied him, some genuine old engravings, Dutch furniture I’d give anything to own, and—listen—one of my designs which he bought at the Goupil Gallery.”

“How’s his health?” Passiter sneered.

“He doesn’t look any better,” she sighed. “Of course, he says he feels stronger every day. By the by, I see you’re all here. Is any one going out to-night?”

“I am,” Passiter announced. “Want to come with me? You’ll see something.”

“I don’t think so,” she answered. “What sort of a stunt is it?”

Passiter shook his head.

“I’m after the big prize,” he confided. “I can’t afford to give anything away, even at the last moment. If you’re coming with me you shall hear all about it before you leave; if you’re not, it’s mum. I could do with you and Nick Conklin,” he reflected, eyeing them thoughtfully.

“Any rough-house business?” the girl inquired.

“Not in your department.”

“We’ll think of it,” she promised. “Give me another cocktail to get my courage up.”

“A round,” he insisted. “Charlie, cocktails round.”

There was a little flutter, a chorus of well-simulated amazement, some applause. Passiter was notoriously a mean man. He mocked at them.

“After the day of judgment here,” he prophesied, “there won’t be one of you who has the money to stand cocktails except Bert Passiter.” . . .

They drifted down to dinner. Passiter seated himself between Nick Conklin and Martha Dring. He refused champagne, and ordered Evian water.

“For my work,” he explained, “I need no stimulant. I love it. Afterwards—for enjoyment, and nothing else—as much wine as the best of you. Now, if you really mean to come with me, I’ll explain the show.”

“If we don’t cotton to it,” Conklin assured him, “we won’t give you away.”

Passiter talked in a low tone, and earnestly, now addressing himself particularly to one, and now to another. When he had finished, he indulged in a triumphant chuckle. He looked at them sideways and clapped himself on the knees.

"It's clever," Nick of New York admitted, "and simple: too simple, I'm afraid. Do you think he'll fall for them?"

"How can he help it?" Passiter demanded. "What else is there for him to do? You're getting soft-hearted. You ought to take a fancy to this scheme of mine, Miss Dring. It's the most humane job that's ever been planned."

"It seems to me all right," she admitted.

Passiter straightened his tie. He was looking like a pleased and malicious guinea-fowl.

"I tell you a crook's business needs brains," he confided. "These other fellows aren't bad, and the Major knows a thing or two, but there's too much gunnery about his jobs for my taste. Not enough finesse. See what I mean? Not enough subtlety."

"You'll leave your gun behind to-night then, of course?" the girl remarked.

Passiter smiled—a cunning smile.

"Couldn't do that," he replied. "I keep it for an emergency though. I don't use it for the sake of making a noise like those Chicago toughs. Well, are you on, both of you?"

They exchanged glances. Nick of New York nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Yes, we'll come," the girl agreed.

The commencement of their expedition seemed to Martha and her companion full of mystery. They drew up exactly according to directions in a small street leading out of the Brompton Road, and found themselves in the shadow of an enormous building with the outline of which neither of them was familiar.

"Buckingham Palace, after all," Conklin whispered, as he stepped on to the pavement.

She extinguished the lights of her car and took him by the arm.

"It's one of the museums, I believe," she confided. "I forget which. Come along!"

Apparently Passiter's organization left nothing to be desired. About twenty yards up the street they stepped through the postern door of some great wooden gates, and found themselves in a large yard in which were hundreds of packing cases. Keeping in the shadow of the building, Martha counted the doors until she reached the seventh. With the pressure of her hand it opened. They were both conscious more by sensation than by actual vision that Passiter was standing now within a few

feet of them.

“Follow me!” he directed. “Don’t use your torches. I’ll flash on a light where it’s necessary.”

Both to Martha and Conklin the way seemed interminable. They followed their smooth-footed guide along a maze of passages, across bare rooms littered with empty boxes, huge, crypt-like chambers packed with damaged or rejected statuary, both ancient and modern, from the crudest Grecian remains to the latest grotesque productions of some ultra-modern studio. Here and there they came across a collection of bones, apparently of some primeval creature, formless and shapeless, re-collected and fastened together by artificial means. There was a gigantic statue, evidently smashed to pieces in transit, with the head lolling over the side of the case, a hideous grin fixed upon its opened mouth. There were broken pillars, the strange, entwining designs upon which had been lost by a fracture, and, in one room, row after row of pictures, unwelcome offerings, with their faces turned to the wall. It seemed to be the garbage heap of years, the unwanted contributions of centuries. All these things they saw by the occasional flashes of the torch, which Passiter, a few yards in front, carried. They watched him in wonder, and Martha, at any rate, for the first time understood his peculiar reputation as a thief by night. He seemed like a human stoat, bent half-way to the ground, making his progress in little darts, switching on his light precisely at the right moment, dimming it when the way was clear. Even his breathing was inaudible. He had become a soundless creature of the underworld. . . . They came at last to a short staircase. Here he held out a warning hand and mounted the steps one by one. On the topmost he paused for quite a minute, standing there, almost invisible, with his light extinguished. Then he motioned to them to come on.

They knew, of course, when they stepped out into the broad alley, with its show-cases on each side, that they were in the museum proper. Yet, in the dim light, there seemed something unearthly in their surroundings, as though they had wandered into some supernatural edifice of mammoth proportions. Passiter obviously had no such fanciful thoughts. He beckoned them to stand close to him, and pointed to a divan a few feet away.

“That,” he whispered, “is the divan where you rested after exploring the north end of the building and fell asleep. You will take your places there as soon as I have gone. To your left, about twenty yards away, runs the main avenue. You see it?”

Martha nodded.

“To the right,” he went on, “it leads to the side entrance, where you will find your car, and by which I wish you to leave. To the left, about eighty yards down, the

janitor sits in an easy chair, watching over the loaned jewels. You understand? All one long avenue, the jewels and the janitor one end, the door by which you leave the other.”

“Quite clear so far,” Conklin murmured.

“Very well,” Passiter continued. “You sit down now. You rest on that couch for exactly five minutes after I have disappeared. You can count seconds, if you can’t see your watch. Then you get up, and, taking no precautions as to silence, you become perfectly natural. You have just awakened from sleep, and you are a little dazed. You stumble out to the avenue. The young lady can call for help. You turn towards the janitor, mind, and not towards the door. You wake him if he is still asleep, and he comes with you to open this door, outside which you have left your car. Keep him with you as long as you can. Tip him well. Make friends with him. Explain that you have been out very late for two nights, that Conklin here is your fiancé, and that you really wandered in more to rest than to see the exhibits. Then you fell asleep, and you’ve only just woke up. Meanwhile, at the other end of the alley, I shall be busy. It will not take me long to cut through the show-case and collect the jewels. My get-away is planned at another exit altogether. When the janitor returns the affair is over. Not a shot, not a blow, not an unkind word. It is the Passiter method,” he concluded, with his ugly grin.

Conklin pulled out his watch, and peered at it.

“Get to work,” he enjoined. . . .

Passiter glided off, and the other two subsided into their places. . . . The passing minutes seemed interminable. The girl’s hand suddenly felt for her companion’s.

“This place terrifies me,” she murmured. “I seem to hear sounds all round. Listen! What is it, Nick?”

“The silence,” he whispered back. “Stick it out. It gets on your nerves. I felt it once in the Pyramids at Cairo.”

“There are people moving about in the distance.”

He listened intently. A shadow crept into his face. He was not at all sure that she wasn’t right, but he affected to disbelieve her.

“Fancy,” he assured her. “Hold on. It will all be over in one more minute now, and you can scream as loudly as you like.”

At precisely the appointed time he replaced his watch in his pocket, and they rose. On the whole they gave a very creditable imitation of a young couple suddenly awakened from a tragic fit of somnolence.

“There must be a night-watchman or some one,” he declared, as they followed directions and staggered along to the broad avenue. “You wait here. I’ll explore

down the other way.”

“No, you don’t!” she choked. “I shall come with you.”

She followed a few yards behind, and Nick Conklin advanced with a good deal more caution than he had at first intended. Exactly as indicated, they paced the eighty yards, and, just in front of them, by the side of a show-case, discovered a man stretched out in an easy chair, apparently asleep. An electric torch lay by his side: his uniform coat was undone.

“Hullo there!” Nick cried.

There was no reply. He held out his hand to prevent Martha approaching more closely, and pressed forward himself. His first premonition had been correct. The watchman lay limply in his chair, with his throat cut from end to end. The blood was dripping down from his shirt on to the floor. The keys had slipped from his nerveless fingers. He was quite dead.

Nick’s first instinct was to stoop down and pick up the keys. Almost as he did so his sense of stupefaction passed. Life and understanding rushed swiftly once more through his brain. With the intuition of a man who has hunted, and been hunted, he knew that he was not alone, that some one was watching, or hiding within a few feet of him. He tossed the keys to the girl, but his eyes searched always the empty spaces, and his gun was in his hand.

“Let yourself out, and get clear away from this,” he whispered. “Don’t wait for me. I can look after myself.”

“Behind you, Nick!” she shouted. “Jump! Quick!”

Her warning saved his life without a doubt, for the murderous-looking jemmy, which had been aimed straight at the back of his head, only grazed his shoulder. In a second he was grappling with a fierce and brawny aggressor, a stronger and a heavier man than he, but, as he knew in a single second, his easy prey. He almost laughed as he felt the old-fashioned clutch, the fumbling for the knife, the slight drawing back to stab. No easy victory of that sort was to come to the unknown, but prompt and merciless disaster at the hands of his smaller antagonist. He felt himself spinning, his ankle twisted, his wrist broken, his neck burning, himself gasping for breath. He fell upon the hard floor with a sickening crash, and for many a long day afterwards in hospital he lay and wondered.

Nick of New York, of fighting fame, was himself again now, with a vengeance. He crouched on the scene of his triumph, his gun firmly poised in his hand, he himself partially protected by the stone pillar behind which his recent victim had lurked. He knew perfectly well that there was another marauder to be dealt with, and he knew where he was hiding. He was behind the show-case on the other side of the

watchman, and Nick waited feverishly for his head or his arm or any part of him to emerge. His blood was up now, and he was ready almost to kill. A few yards away the girl was still standing, intensely alert, ready to call out if he needed direction. Amazingly, she had lit a cigarette.

“Where’s Passiter?” he cried.

A low whistle from half a dozen yards away answered him. Just then the thing for which he had prayed happened. The man whose hiding-place he had correctly surmised slowly thrust his hand, a revolver clenched in his fingers, around the corner. Like a flash, Nick pulled the trigger of his gun, and almost simultaneously a yell of pain rang out, nearly drowning the crash of the weapon upon the hard floor. Nick stood upright.

“That’s all, then!” he exclaimed. “Got what you wanted, Passiter?”

Passiter, from behind another show-case a few yards away crept into evidence. Even in the dim light, and behind the mask which he had hastily assumed, he presented a somewhat shamefaced appearance. Nick pointed sternly to the ghastly vision of the watchman.

“Was that your work?” he demanded.

“Cross my heart, it wasn’t,” was the eager denial. “When I heard you calling to be let out down there, and he didn’t move, I crept a little nearer along the side-alley. At the same moment I saw what had happened to him, and the other two at work. I’d have stopped your coming if I could, but if I’d called out they’d have got me, sure.”

Nick made no reply, but the girl’s eyes flashed through the gloom.

“You had the drop on them,” she reminded him coldly. “You could have forced their hands up.”

“The light wasn’t good enough for shooting,” he muttered.

“Anyway, we’re clearing out of here now,” Nick declared. “Get what you want, and I should look sharp about it. This chap on the floor won’t come to for half an hour yet. Let’s have a look at the other one.”

The man behind the show-case had fainted. Nick glanced at him, and turned away. Passiter was already at work on the glass front.

“We’re off, Passiter,” he announced. “If you will take my advice, you’ll get your job done quickly and follow. This isn’t a healthy place for honest people.”

Passiter chuckled as he removed the first square of glass. . . .

Nick Conklin piloted his companion down the gloomy corridor, between two rows of frowning statues and white-draped show-cases. At the door he paused to select the key from the bunch he was carrying.

“East corridor number one. Here we are,” he remarked, fitting the key into the lock and turning it. “Now for a breath of fresh air, a long drink, and a smoke.”

“Perhaps,” the girl groaned, with a despairing look ahead.

Guarding their car, and awaiting their egress, with obvious interest, were two stalwart policemen.

Not for one single second did Nick of New York permit himself to appear perturbed. He paused to light a cigarette, threw away the match, and approached the kerb.

“Good evening, Constable,” he said pleasantly, as he opened the door of the car. “Glad to see you’re keeping an eye on the little bus.”

“One moment, sir,” the man enjoined, stretching out his hand. “I should like to know what you were doing in the museum at this hour of the night, or rather morning. Bit early for studying curios, isn’t it?”

Nick’s air of surprise was very well done indeed.

“Why on earth shouldn’t I be in the museum at any hour I please?” he retorted wonderingly. “It’s my responsibility, and I like to look up old Fawcett any time I’m passing late. He’s getting a little ancient for his job.”

“What is your name, sir, and what have you to do with the museum?” his questioner persisted.

Nick glanced at the stripes on the man’s cuffs.

“Why, don’t you know me, Sergeant?” he demanded in surprise. “Marsden, my name is—Nick Marsden. I’ve been Junior Curator here for two years. Here’s my card,” he added, thrusting his hand into his pocket, and producing one. “I don’t know if it has my address on—9 Basil Mansions. This is my sister. We’ve been dining down in Hammersmith, and I thought we’d look in on our way home.”

“Seems queer I don’t know you by sight,” the sergeant demurred, withdrawing his hand, however, from the door.

The girl took her place at the driving-seat, and Nick settled himself by her side.

“Well, take stock of me now, Sergeant,” he invited cheerfully. “You’ll know a good-looking fellow next time we meet. I hope it’s when you’re off duty, and we’ll have a drink together. I know the rules and regulations, you see.”

The man smiled, and was on the point of saluting when the constable by his side whispered in his ear. Once more he approached the car window.

“Would there be any objection to my looking round inside?” he asked. “The constable here seems to think he heard some unusual noises, and noticed some lights going on and off a short time ago.”

“Not the slightest objection in the world,” Nick declared, promptly handing over

the keys. "There certainly were lights—we couldn't have looked round without—but no noises that I know of. Leave them for Mr. Marsden at Number 9 Basil Mansions, will you? That's all right, Martha," he added, to the girl, who was sitting tensely by his side. "Let her rip. Passiter's away by now."

This was not altogether the sergeant's idea, but whilst he hesitated the car was round the corner. It was well past the Hyde Park Hotel when the police whistles began to blow.

The car was raced off from the back entrance of Flood's almost before their feet had touched the ground. Nick Conklin looked after it curiously.

"Exactly what happens to it?" he asked.

"It goes to earth all right," she answered. "The Club owns a garage not a mile away. The number plate was changed by pressing an electric button before he started. When he gets to the garage there are men there waiting for just such a message as I sent. The top will come off, and go down into the cellar, and there will be another one on within ten minutes. Even in its disguised condition the car is then run down into an inner garage that only one or two people about the place know of. . . . We have time for one quick drink with Charlie if you like. Afterwards, we've got to go upstairs."

"What about our ghosts?" he asked.

She made no reply for a moment. They ran lightly upstairs and entered the bar. He gave an order whilst she glanced down at the table through a small window of observation.

"Passiter isn't back," she announced, "but our dummies are there."

She hurried to a small house-telephone and spoke a few words. Presently the telephone-boy appeared, and the young woman and man who were seated at the table rose and left the room. Conklin watched them with admiration in his eyes.

"They're jolly good!" he declared. "I should have thought I had been looking in a mirror."

"Finish your drink quickly," she begged. "You have to be introduced into more of our secrets now."

They climbed up another flight of stairs and entered a room full of cupboards but with no other indication of its purpose. A young man with black curly hair, and hooked nose, who was reading a paper by the fire, jumped up at their entrance. She addressed him quickly.

"Mr. Conklin," she explained, "was seen face to face, but in an overcoat and wearing his hat. Evening-clothes, I should think, but with a long coat. Mrs. Burrows

in her room?"

"She's there all right," the young man replied. "Come into this dressing-room, sir. I'll have you fixed up in five minutes."

He was as good as his word. Conklin looked in the glass and laughed.

"Better let me make you up a little," the young man suggested.

"Not on your life!" Nick refused hastily. "I don't know myself now. The man must have seen I was wearing a black tie, and not this florid white atrocity. It is all different, and these glasses are the devil. I'll have the things out of my pocket."

"Better leave them with me, sir," the young man urged. "They'll be quite safe."

"No, I'll take my things," Conklin decided.

"What's this that looks like a locket?" the young man asked curiously.

"Inside," Conklin confided with a grin, "it's an American police badge. The poor chap it belonged to won't want it any more."

At the table downstairs every one was very gay. It was contrary to etiquette however, to make any remarks upon the changed appearance of the two latest arrivals.

"Any one who beats me in the great world's competition," Passiter, refreshed with wine and sandwiches, boasted, "has got to get a long way on the right side of Amos Grimmett."

"Let's see them," Grant suggested.

Passiter hesitated. It was an hour after his return from Kensington, and nothing had happened. He thrust his hand into his trousers pocket and opened his palm. Two magnificent rubies, and one great diamond, reposed there—all three of incredible size.

"These rubies were the eyes of King Mustaphy, whoever he may have been," he quoted, "and the diamond the heart of his queen, insured by the British Government, to whom they were lent, for thirty thousand pounds."

"Don't you think," Martha asked coldly, "that at least a share of all that belongs to the man who did the work?"

Nick of New York waved the suggestion on one side, and shook his head.

"I'm no poacher," he declared. "When my time comes I'll bring in my own stuff."

V. THE TABERNACLE OF JUDGMENT

The man and the woman, each carrying suit-cases, almost the first of the passengers to descend from the hissing monster of the train behind, pushed their way through the crowd towards the long line of waiting vehicles. The man's coat collar was turned up, and his soft Homburg hat pulled down. The woman was wrapped from head to foot in a long fur coat, the deep collar of which completely encircled her head. Adequate lighting has never been a hobby of the Great Eastern Railway Company, and it seemed impossible that they should have been recognized either by friend or enemy as they crossed the narrow stretch of platform at Fenchurch Street Station between the train and the main exit. The unexpected happened, however. The dressing-cases were safely deposited in the taxicab, the woman had already entered, when the man felt a heavy grip upon his shoulder and heard a booming voice in his ear.

"Almost missed you, Freddy, my boy! Welcome back to the old country! Train a bit late, eh?"

The man eyed his interlocutor in blank amazement, into which there crept swiftly a darkening blend of fear. He was absolutely, for the moment, incapable of speech. Chaplain Lane, bland, suave and rubicund, patted him on the shoulder.

"Gave you a start, old chap, didn't I?" he continued cheerily. "I forgot you wouldn't be expecting me. Get in, and I'll come a little way with you."

The newly-arrived traveller dumbly obeyed. The chauffeur, leaning round from his seat, called through the window:

"Where to, sir?"

"The Terminus Hotel, London Bridge," the former ordered.

Chaplain Lane laughed loudly.

"No, you don't!" he exclaimed. "Any one who works for us, and brings it off like you have, stays at no Terminus Hotel. We have rooms for you at the Milan. The Milan Hotel, chauffeur," he added, in a louder tone. "Of course we didn't know about the lady," he went on, removing his hat roguishly, "but that can be arranged. Freddy, my boy, find your tongue. Introduce me."

The man made an effort to pull himself together. He was not much to look at—a hard, sullen face, with the complexion of an indoor dweller, and a none too pleasant type of expression.

"This is my wife," he said shortly. "I was married in New York the day before we sailed."

"Married, you dog!" the other repeated. "You might have sent us a cable. My

congratulations to you both. We'll crack a bottle about it presently. Madam, I'm delighted to meet you. Put your little hand in mine, and remember that in Chaplain Lane you've met one of your husband's best friends. Fine fellow, Freddy. There are one or two of us pretty well pleased with him just now, I can tell you."

The woman glanced across at him with a queer smile. She had rather fine eyes, although a trifle over-bold, and hair which left one only a guess at its natural colour, but pronounced itself temporarily auburn.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Chaplain Lane," she murmured.

"Married, eh!" the latter remarked once more, sitting a little forward in his uncomfortable place, with a hand on each knee. "Well, now I've seen your wife, I don't blame you. American, madam?"

"I'm Scotch really," the lady admitted. "I've lived most of my life in America though."

"Look here, Chaplain," her husband intervened, "I don't think much of this staying at the Milan. We'd much sooner go to a quiet place. Besides, you know, after all," he went on, looking intently at the other, "it hasn't panned out nearly as well as we hoped. Peventon Bay, where we first tried to land, was a rotten business. We gave the man we thought was the boss a thousand dollars, and as soon as we had four lorries laden a police squad came up and pinched the lot. The only landing where we were really successful was fifty miles up the coast in New Jersey, and that was no child's play, I can tell you."

"That's all right, Freddy," Chaplain Lane assured him soothingly. "You've got back safe. That's the great thing. It wasn't the stuff I came down to inquire after. We shan't quarrel about that. You did your best, I know. The Major's aching to hear about it. He's just the sort that would like to take the job on himself. What about coming up and having a bite at the Club with us to-night—you and madam, of course?"

"We're tired," was the somewhat ungracious reply. "We had rather a bad crossing. Besides, we haven't any clothes."

"I have an evening-dress, and you have your dinner-clothes there, Freddy," the lady volunteered. "I tell you I'm dying to taste some good English food again after that muck we've been having on the steamer."

"And you shall, madam," her prospective host declared vigorously. "I'll order your dinner myself. We won't keep you late, Freddy."

The latter muttered something, but was obviously ill at ease. Suddenly he burst out with a question. The woman by his side was gazing through the rain-splashed windows at the broadening streets.

“I say, Chaplain, how the devil did you know I was coming this way home? The only word I sent you was that I was sailing on the *Olympic*.”

“I know, old chap,” Lane murmured, “but you know the Major as well as I do. It isn’t that he doesn’t trust anybody, but he likes to have a double report when a job’s on.”

“So I’ve been shadowed, have I?” the man growled.

“Not you, my lad,” the other assured him. “We just found out from the White Star office that you weren’t on the *Olympic*, so we wirelessed the other two steamers that started about the same time.”

“Pity you couldn’t have left me alone. I had trouble enough getting off as it was, what with the Federal people and the police.”

“Well, that doesn’t matter now that you’re here,” Lane declared cheerfully. “We’ve got you a nice little suite at the Milan for a week, a home-coming present from the boss. To-night, after dinner, we’ll just hear how the thing’s cleaned up, and then—well, if I had a wife like yours,” he added, with a gallant gesture towards the lady, “I should take a week’s holiday, and show her the sights of London—shops, theatres and that sort of thing. Eh, Mrs. Bramfield?”

“That’s what I’m looking forward to,” the latter assented. “I can’t make out what’s the matter with Freddy the last few days,” she went on. “He——”

“Thing didn’t clear up as well as I’d hoped,” her husband interrupted irritably. “I’m afraid the Major will be disappointed, Chaplain, and that’s the truth.”

“Well, you know him,” the latter replied. “He’s not one to cry over spilt milk. Besides, I don’t suppose it’s as bad as all that when you come to look into it. Here we are—Milan! I’ll just take you along, and register, and we’ll have one little glass together to welcome Freddy home, and wish you both happiness.”

The programme was duly carried out. They found a corner in the lounge, and the woman, in her dark scarlet travelling-gown, and with the aid of the minor improvements effected by the use of a vanity case, displayed unexpected attractions. The man still seemed tired and worried. The bottle was half empty when he rose to his feet and strolled over towards the cigar-stand. Chaplain Lane leaned a little farther back in his chair, and gazed up towards the ceiling. He addressed the woman without looking at her.

“Did he bring the stuff along?”

“He surely did,” she answered.

“This steamer,” he went on—“the Terminus Hotel—is it a double cross?”

“I guess so,” she admitted. “I got to see you, Chaplain, quick.”

“I’ll work it to-night,” he promised. “Look out! He’s a sly dog, Freddy. He’s

watching us.”

“That yarn of yours about the wireless didn’t go very well.”

“How’s that?” Chaplain asked, busying himself with a cigarette-case.

“The wireless on our little boat’s been out of order since we started,” she confided. . . .

Chaplain Lane smiled his way into the upstairs bar at Flood’s Club that evening at about a quarter past eight. He was arrayed in unusual splendour—a long coat, white tie and waistcoat, and a white carnation in his buttonhole. He ordered a double Martini before he was half-way across the floor. Nick Conklin, who was seated at the counter, turned round to greet him.

“Why all this gorgeousness, Chaplain?” he demanded.

Lane looked round the room.

“I am going out,” he confided.

“The devil!” Conklin murmured. “You must have an odd sort of job on to tog yourself out like that. Want any help?”

The other shook his head.

“I don’t think so,” he answered. “It’s a queer sort of affair, anyway. I’ll tell you one thing about it, Nick, though. It may put me up top in your competition.”

Nick of New York smiled.

“It makes me feel good to hear a man talk like that! Charlie, I’ll buy the Chaplain another drink, and I’ll have one myself. Ah,” he added, slipping off his stool, as Martha Dring entered, “here comes Miss Dring. Perhaps she will join us.”

“Why this unusual magnificence?” she inquired, glancing at the Chaplain.

“I am entertaining friends,” he announced. “Afterwards I am going out.”

“You’ve really screwed your courage up to that!” she laughed. “You aren’t dining with us, then, I suppose?”

“Indeed I am,” was the prompt reply. “The lady and gentleman I am expecting are being entertained exceptionally by the Major at our table. The man was once a junior member of our society. We still have connections.”

“Since we are to meet him,” Nick Conklin remarked, “might one inquire as to his name and his particular line of country?”

“His name is Bramfield—Freddy Bramfield,” the other confided. “He is a boot-legger’s transport agent, if you know what that is. Sort of supercargo who takes the stuff out, and then has to plan to get it into the hands of the bootleggers proper.”

“What a fascinating occupation!” Martha exclaimed.

“It has its points,” Lane agreed cheerfully. “Bramfield’s predecessor had a bullet through his head on the third trip, which put him out of business, and from the little

I've seen of him I should say Freddy's pretty well scared. Here they are!"

The Chaplain hurried forward with outstretched hands and beaming countenance. Bramfield was very little improved by his rest and change into dinner-clothes; his wife, on the contrary, was a transformed woman. A new complexion had arrived. The tinge of her hair contrasted disturbingly with the hazel of her eyes. She was no longer furtive, or showed any desire for concealment. From certain points of view she was a very beautiful woman. Their host ushered them to the bar.

"You all ought to know Freddy Bramfield," he declared, waving his hand towards Passiter and Bradman, who had just entered. "He belongs to the one adventurous profession left in the world. His is a holy mission, too. He devotes his life to philanthropic enterprises."

"In plain words, I suppose," Eustace Grant remarked, as he sauntered up to join the group, "to saving a great nation from dying of thirst. How do we come out this time, Freddy?"

"Not so well," Bramfield confessed gloomily.

Grant indulged in a little grimace.

"Never mind," he said. "I'm sure you did your best. We'll talk business after dinner. Present me, if you please, to your beautiful wife."

The introduction was duly effected, but a close observer, such as Nick of New York, might have wondered whether, after all, it was entirely necessary. Afterwards they all went down to dinner.

Neither Cliquot '19, nor the old brandy which followed, seemed able to materially lessen the gloom which darkened the expression of the returned bootlegger. He was like a man sitting in the company of evil thoughts, or held in the thrall of some fear. Every one in turn made an effort to induce him to join in the conversation, but each in time desisted. He remained alone, a death's head at the feast, a dull flush of colour in his cheeks from the wine he had drunk, but his eyes still lustreless. Almost the only person he addressed directly was Conklin.

"Are you any relation to the fellow they call 'Nick of New York?'" he inquired.

"That is what they call me on the other side," was the gracious admission.

Bramfield moved uneasily in his place.

"What made you come over here?" he demanded. "Are you hitched up with this gang?"

"In a way I suppose I am. I can't call myself a full partner, I am sorry to say. I have no share, for instance, in your little expedition."

"It wouldn't do you much good if you had," Bramfield muttered.

Grant leaned forward.

“Don’t depress us so, Bramfield,” he begged. “We were rather hoping great things from you.”

“Well, you had better prepare to be disappointed then. The game’s pretty well up over yonder. It’s ruined by graft, that’s what it is. What with the Federal men, and the police, and the profit that the bootleggers expect to make themselves, there’s nothing left. My last trip. I’m through!”

“Well, we’ll talk about that,” Grant suggested good-humouredly. “We may be able to fix you up a little differently next time. Would you like to have our business talk to-night?”

“Let’s get it over,” Bramfield grunted. “I’ve got a packet for you in my suit-case outside, and the sooner I get rid of it the better I shall be pleased.”

Grant rose, and laid his hand upon the other’s shoulder.

“Carry on, you people,” he invited, “or amuse yourselves any way you please. I can see that Freddy isn’t going to be a bit of good until he’s had a clean up.”

The two men left the room together. Nick looked after them thoughtfully. George, the waiter, who had fallen back into a dark corner, watched them with a scowl. As soon as her husband was out of sight, the woman, obeying a glance from the Chaplain, rose to her feet, and preceded him from the room.

Upstairs, in one of the mysterious private rooms, Grant moved the green-shaded lamp, under which he had been counting stacks of dollar notes, a little farther away. He leaned back in his chair.

“Thirty thousand dollars,” he meditated. “It isn’t very much, Freddy. It’s barely what we paid for the stuff.”

“Can’t be helped,” was the dogged reply. “I tell you, Grant, the job isn’t worth taking on nowadays. They’ve gone crazy over there. Every other bootlegger’s a gun-man, and the Federal crowd are frankly out to kill. They got me lying down once, I’ll admit. They took a cool hundred thousand off me at the Vornay Hotel in Sixth Avenue. It’s highway robbery, that’s what it is, but what can you do? It’s no good talking about the law when you’re selling the stuff, and you’re full of lead in two minutes if you handle a gun with them.”

“I see,” Grant mused. “Six thousand pounds. It isn’t much.”

“What about me?” the other man grumbled. “I was meaning to finish this trip. Seems to me as though I shall have to take up some other line of business.”

“Shouldn’t be surprised,” Grant remarked. “I dare say you’ll find married life a little expensive. Your wife knows how to make the dollars fly.”

Suspicion for the first time flared in Bramfield's eyes. He leaned forward in his chair. There were two veins at the side of his forehead which became suddenly taut.

"What do you know about my wife?" he demanded.

Grant laughed softly.

"Oh, I know something about her," he observed. "I knew her before you did, I think, Freddy. She's been doing odd work for us for a good many years. I even know where she is at the present moment."

"What do you mean? She's downstairs," Bramfield exclaimed, rising to his feet.

"Oh, no, she isn't. They've finished downstairs. The party's broken up."

"She's in the bar then. I told her to wait there."

"Oh, no, she isn't," Grant insisted. "If you want to speak to her you can. Try 4308 Western, Apartment 128."

"That's my number!"

Grant's right hand stole into his pocket.

"That's your number, you swine!" he said fiercely. "Your wife's there now, with Chaplain. They're going through the other dress suit-case. What a damned fool you must be to think you could double-cross us!"

The man was speechless. His jaw seemed to have fallen loose. He sat and stared, and all the time he shook.

"You've lost your nerve all right," Grant continued contemptuously. "You know what's going to happen to you, I suppose?"

Still Bramfield remained speechless. Surely though he knew that it was his death sentence coming, he still lacked all power of resistance. Grant clapped his hands. From what seemed to be a cupboard, but which disclosed itself now as the top of a staircase, two or three slim, dark forms, stepped into the room. Grant pointed to his victim.

"Tie him up," he ordered. "I haven't quite finished with him yet."

The first note of the man's cry of agony was stopped by the gag they thrust into his mouth. Grant watched them at their task. Then he asked for a number on the telephone.

"Milan Hotel? . . . Give me Mr. Bramfield's suite, please. He arrived this evening. . . . Hullo! . . . That you, Babette? Nearly finished? . . . Good! Well, tell the Chaplain to bring the stuff along. Your husband's fretting about you. . . . Right! Ask Charles, in the bar, to look after you when you arrive. We are in what I call my 'Tabernacle of Judgment'."

The man in the chair was on the point of collapse. Nerves and body were alike giving way under the strain of these accumulating horrors. Babette, his enchantress of

a month, from whom he had kept no secrets, the friend of his enemies, even now alone with Chaplain Lane in his rooms! A sick and morbid jealousy was added to his other afflictions. He writhed uselessly in his chair. Grant, who had apparently forgotten him, was calmly writing a letter.

A numbness of the brain, perhaps a species of unconsciousness, relieved the strain. His body was limp. He had tried the strength of his bonds, and he knew very well that escape was impossible. What a fool! What a blind fool! The three hundred and sixty thousand dollars and Babette had seemed so alluring, and now instead—probably the river! He began to shiver. The thought of the black, icy water suddenly appalled him. He was back again, mercilessly half conscious. The only sound in the room was the scratching of Grant's pen as he continued to write.

They came in laughing, Chaplain Lane carrying the suit-case, Babette's arm resting in friendly fashion upon his coat-sleeve. Grant swung round in his chair to welcome them. The half-unconscious man opened his eyes, and Babette shivered, as she met their terrified glare.

"How much?" Grant asked.

Chaplain Lane's smile was seraphic.

"Three hundred and sixty thousand dollars," he announced. "All in thousand-dollar bills. I believe," he went on, "Bramfield was right so far. No one would introduce him to a bank, or give an order on London. It's a queer business a boot-legger's in New York. Thousand-dollar bills are bulky, but they're good handling."

Grant opened the suit-case, and passed his fingers over the sheaves of stiff, perfectly new notes.

"Ten thousand for you, Babette," he decided, passing them to her, packet by packet. "The remainder you can put in against Nick's competition, Chaplain, subject to a reversion of a hundred thousand dollars to the funds. Satisfied?"

They both knew their man too well to hesitate.

"That goes with me," Chaplain Lane assented cheerfully.

"And with me," Babette agreed, "but I think if anything happens to Freddy, Chaplain ought to marry me. After all, it was I who brought Freddy along. What are you going to do with him anyway?" she demanded, throwing herself into an easy chair, and displaying freely her long, shapely legs.

Eustace Grant swung round and looked thoughtfully across at his victim.

"I am afraid Freddy will have to take a ride," he replied. "A man who would double-cross us as he has done could never be trusted."

With either foot or hand Grant must have touched a bell, for two of his previous

visitors suddenly appeared. Even Babette trembled a little at the sight of them.

“Go over him once more for a gun,” Eustace Grant ordered. “If you’re absolutely certain about it, untie him.”

They went over him with practised hands. Then, as rapidly as they had bound him up, they pulled out one long stretch of thong, and the man sat free. He swallowed half a dozen times before he could speak, tried to rise to his feet, but sank back in the chair.

“Oh, my God!” he groaned.

Eustace Grant studied him curiously.

“What made you try to double-cross us, Bramfield?” he asked. “You know very well what’s happened to the others.”

“Mad, I suppose,” the man stammered “It didn’t seem to me you could ever know. Buddy Brown, who paid me the money, was shot by a Federal man the next day. If I hadn’t told Babette you could never have known. There wasn’t a soul alive to tell. Just Babette! I trusted Babette!”

Grant shook his head gravely.

“There’s always a string left loose, Bramfield,” he said. “You’ll have to go.”

The man tried to call out, but the sound which escaped his lips was little more than a quaver of agony. He turned piteously to Babette.

“You’ve got every penny of the money between you,” he faltered. “Speak to him, Babette. Tell him to let me go. I won’t squeal. I’ve got enough to live on from the last job until something else comes along.”

Babette said nothing. A silence which seemed to have in it all the elements of primitive and savage cruelty. Chaplain Lane said nothing. Eustace Grant nodded almost imperceptibly to the shorter of the two men. There was a little gurgling cry. The cupboard door opened and closed. Eustace Grant finished the direction on the envelope of the letter which he had been writing, and rose to his feet.

“Time we paid Charlie a visit, people,” he suggested.

VI. CROOKS PAY

“What,” that famous American crook, Nick of New York, asked, stretching himself out with the lazy content of a man who has come to the end of a wholesome and well-spent day, “might be the value in English pounds—not dollars, mind—of the Duchess of Clarence’s famous diamond, ‘The Light of China’?”

There was no immediate response from any one of the seven men who were seated at a round table in the private cocktail bar at Flood’s Club. They all turned towards Amos Grimmett, generally known as “Old Grim,” the most famous valuer and receiver of stolen jewels in the world, who happened to be the guest of honour that evening. He was a carefully dressed, middle-aged man, of Jewish appearance, clean-shaven, with fresh complexion, and with brown eyes like gimlets. He hesitated for some moments before he pronounced judgment.

“You’re asking something, Mr. Conklin,” he acknowledged thoughtfully. “I don’t want to give you a hasty answer. Let me think for a moment.”

George, the faithful waiter attached permanently to the little company, came silently to the table, and busied himself with the rearrangement of the glasses. He, too, seemed to find some absorbing interest in Amos Grimmett’s anticipated reply.

“In its present form,” the latter declared at last, “I should value the stone at one million pounds, and I should congratulate the buyer rather than the seller. Broken up, I presume, you would ask me what I would give for it?”

“We shall arrive at half the value that way anyhow,” was Eustace Grant’s dry comment.

“There is no one in the world who is willing to do business connected with which there is a great deal of risk,” Amos Grimmett pronounced didactically, “unless he makes a profit. I have to make a profit, and I have to guard against accidents. A club dinner here every week or so, my house at Hampstead, and my bachelor apartment at Brighton, suit me a great deal better than the stripes and arrow on the other side of the fence. For breaking up I should offer you a hundred thousand pounds for the stone.”

“Have you ever seen it?” Bradman asked.

“Once only, under difficulties. It was exhibited at Christie’s for a week, when the late Duke thought of selling it. We had to look at it from behind bars, with a detective on each side of us, and to accept the guaranteed weight. As I do not frequent Buckingham Palace or the opera I never expect to see it again.”

“Oh, you can’t tell,” Nick Conklin remarked. “I had an idea—in fact I may say that I am making plans—to go after it.”

There was a flash of excitement in George's sombre face. Every one else laughed derisively.

"Father of Abraham!" Amos Grimmett muttered. "Why, young fellow, you wouldn't have a dog's chance."

Sam Rubens, famous at his job, a cracksman who had broken into more impossible safes than any other criminal in the world, smiled in superior fashion.

"Nick, my lad," he advised, "let the idea float away. I used to declare that there was no safe which couldn't be tackled given time, the right tools and the right stuff. I have seen the duplicate of the safe in Clarence House in the Bank of Montreal, and I have eaten my words. I reckon I'm top of the tree at my job, and I'll lay fifty to one in tenners that there isn't a man breathing can break into that safe."

"Sam's right," Chaplain Lane declared. "I went over its specifications once when I was with Tyson's gang, and we decided that there was nothing doing."

Nick Conklin finished his cocktail, and nodded amiably.

"You're right, both of you," he assented. "Anyway, I'm a mug of a safe-breaker. I wasn't thinking of doing the job that way."

"Just going to call upon Her Grace, I suppose, and ask her to show it to you," Grant observed with a smile. "You Americans have more nerve than we have."

"Not exactly that way either," Nick said gently. "The Duchess is wearing it, I understand, at the Drawing-Room on Tuesday, and again at the reception she is giving on Tuesday night. That is so, isn't it, Miss Dring?"

"Yes," Martha acquiesced, "unless she changes her mind."

"I shall have to risk her changing her mind," Nick acknowledged. "I thought of planning for Tuesday night."

There was a little ripple of laughter round the table. Even Grant shook his head.

"You'd never get within a hundred yards of her," he declared. "Besides which, if you did, you'd never get away."

Nick thrust his hand into his pocket and produced a roll of drawing paper. He spread it out upon the table, and disclosed a couple of elaborate plans.

"You fellows don't seem to think much of me as a worker," he complained, handing them across the table. "When I go out after anything I generally mean having it, and as to not getting away from Clarence House, just study that plan for a moment, will you? You will see that there are no fewer than seventeen possible exits. The one I have chosen is marked in red ink. Nice piece of work that for an amateur draughtsman!"

"It's a wonderful piece of work," Eustace Grant admitted, passing the plan on to his neighbour; "but, as I told you before, you won't have a chance of getting near the

woman. This isn't one of those big political stunts like you have in the States, where any one can break in. It's an ultra-fashionable society function, given for the purpose of entertaining foreign royalty. You'll never get near the house!"

Nick of New York felt in the breast pocket of his coat, and drew out two very beautifully engraved cards. He passed one across the table to Grant, who studied it through his monocle:

The Duchess of Clarence
AT HOME
Clarence House
March 17th. 10-3.

Mr. Nicholas.

"Here's yours," the invited guest added, presenting a similar card to Martha. "If I make a mess of things myself, I'll try my best not to get you into trouble."

She stared at the card wonderingly.

"I'm beginning to have confidence in you, Nick," she confessed, "but I shall be glad when this little show is over."

Eustace Grant returned the invitation to its owner.

"Well," he said, "we've found out by this time that you have enterprise, Nick, but, if you'll take my advice, you'll drop this stunt. My opinion is that there isn't a human being alive who could bring it off."

"But why not?" Nick persisted.

"Because," Grant explained earnestly, "the only moment when you will be really near the Duchess is when you make your arrival bow. All the rest of the time she will be surrounded by royalties, and, as a matter of social etiquette, you couldn't possibly approach. You might cut the stone from her neck, perhaps, when you make your bow, but what would be the good of it? There will be a couple of detectives within a few feet of her, and you will be wedged in amongst a crowd of Englishmen who, with all their faults, as you know, are not cowards. Any attempt at rough-house business would be simply absurd. With both those fiendish little automatics of yours going, you still couldn't fight your way a dozen yards."

Nick of New York smiled happily.

"You've got me all wrong, Major," he protested. "I have a nice invitation here to a perfectly swell party, and, with a young lady like Miss Dring to look after, you don't think I should behave like a tough, do you? We're not going to make any sort of a disturbance at the Duchess's party, I can promise you that. Just a bow, and a civil word, a glass or two of champagne, and perhaps a caviare sandwich, and *au*

revoir. But, all the same, I may bring away 'The Light of China'."

"Bet you a monkey you don't," Grant challenged.

Nick indulged in a slight grimace.

"I shouldn't call it exactly level betting," he complained, "but I'll take you once. . . . By the by, did I hear that Sam Rubens was going out to-night?"

Passiter grinned scornfully.

"It's Sam's night all right," he assented, "but he doesn't need to go out for it. He's got a hold of a mug, and he's going to fleece him here."

"Is he in the competition?" Martha inquired.

"The Chief's let him in," Passiter grumbled.

Eustace Grant tapped a cigarette upon the table and lit it.

"Cardsharpping," he observed, "is certainly the lowest branch of our profession, but, after all, Sam is one of us, and that's his speciality. I remember three or four years back when things weren't going so well we were very glad of those few thousands of which he relieved an Argentine gentleman after the Lincoln. It's not high-class work, but we've got to let him in. And that reminds me, his man's downstairs. We'd better dine."

They all trooped down to take their places at the famous round table under the musicians' gallery. Sam Rubens was waiting there, thin and dark, with lean face and hungry eyes, correctly enough dressed in tail coat and white waistcoat but with a quaint air of aloofness from the class of people who might be supposed to so attire themselves. His companion and guest presented a far more remarkable appearance. He was probably the fattest young man that any one of the party had ever beheld before in their lives. His shoulders, which seemed to be bursting out of a very capacious dinner jacket, were immense. His pink and white face was as round as the sun. His stomach, as part of the anatomy of a young man, was incredible. His sponsor, however, seemed to find nothing unusual about him, and introduced him with gusto to the rest of the company.

"My friend Mr. Ned Fordham," he announced. "Comes from the north of England—Manchester way. Somewhere where they know how to feed them, eh, Ned?"

The young man grinned. He spoke with a broad, north-country accent.

"Aye, lad," he declared. "I've eaten all there was in Manchester, and I've come to London to pick up a bit. I've met with this young mon to start with," he added, with a little guffaw.

There was a certain amount of hand-shaking.

“I am sorry that the rules of the Club did not admit of our inviting you to the bar,” Eustace Grant explained politely. “I trust that Sam has seen that you had a cocktail here.”

“He’s seen that I had four, and it would have been five if you had been a minute longer,” Mr. Ned Fordham confided. “I don’t like that rule of yours, mister. I’ve been brought up in bars. I’ve spent most of my time in them, and I love ’em.”

“Our Club is very small, and our members like to keep together,” Grant apologized. “I understand, Mr. Fordham, that you are a great card-player?” he added, as they took their seats.

“Oh, aye, I play a bit,” was the deprecatory response. “The folks up here are a trifle hot for me, but I’ve tumbled into a bit of brass, so they’re welcome. Are you going to take me on?”

Eustace Grant shook his head.

“We’re none of us great card experts here,” he admitted. “Sam’s our principal performer, but they tell me he’s not quite so good as he thinks he is. He’ll play with you after dinner, though, if you want a game.”

“I’m out for a game all right, or I shouldn’t be here,” the fat young man responded heartily. “My folks tell me that it’s a soft way of losing your money, but it’s my brass after all to do what I like with, and, though I’m not bragging, it will take a bit of getting through.”

They glanced at him—Passiter, Rubens, Bradman and Chaplain Lane—with a hungry respect for his wealth. Two people at the table, at least, were envying Sam Rubens. Eustace Grant suddenly looked across the room, and waved his hand to a young man who had just made a timorous entrance.

“Come along, Jack,” he invited. “We’ve an empty place to-night, and we’ve a friend here I don’t think you’ve met,” he added, indicating Nick of New York. “Conklin, this is Jack Costigan.”

The dark young man with the shiny hair accepted the chair on Nick’s left, and he lost no time in making himself known to his neighbour.

“I’ve heard of you often,” he confided. “Jimmy Peake, who got the chair last month for putting a cop wise as to where he belonged, was a pal of mine. You worked with him once or twice, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes, I remember Jimmy,” Nick admitted drily—“a decent fellow, but rash.”

“I’ve been wanting to meet you ever since you arrived,” the new-comer went on. “You know who I am?”

“I think I can guess,” Nick admitted. “You’re Jack Costigan, aren’t you, who runs the Bermondsey gang—the ‘Hornets’ you call yourselves?”

“You’re dead right, and let me tell you this, sir: we’re not such gunmen as you fellows on the other side, but we put them away all right. Just a flick here”—he touched with a long and not too clean forefinger the side of his neighbour’s waistcoat—“and you’ve got yours all right. No fuss, no noise, no risk to speak of. You leave the knife behind. We have them made common on purpose.”

“This is very interesting,” Nick Conklin confessed, studying his companion for a moment or two more closely. “Where are you to be met with?”

“Well, I eat here pretty often, but I ain’t a member. I wish I were,” the young man added, with almost pathetic wistfulness. “There ain’t anything in life I’d rather have than to be a member of this Club. Not class enough yet, I reckon. I work for the Major sometimes though, and I’d be proud to work for you if you’re looking for help at any time. When I’m not to be heard of here I’m at the Mariners’ Alley, Rotherhithe. I’ll write it down for you.”

He tore off a piece of the menu, and, with painstaking care, wrote an address which Nick pocketed.

“Let me see,” the latter reflected, “it was you lads did in John Simon, the leather merchant, wasn’t it, and made that big haul?”

The young man’s face glowed with triumph.

“I did that job myself,” he boasted; “couldn’t trust any one else. The loot was too heavy. The old fool was asking for it, too—with four thousand pounds in Treasury notes and bills under his bed.”

“He sure was,” Nick Conklin acquiesced, sipping his champagne thoughtfully. “Your job that, eh?”

“And a few others I can tell you of when we’ve a little more time,” the young man promised. “You see, like most of my lads, I was kind of born with a knife in my hand. We all worked for the tanners or fellmongers in Bermondsey. I was earning six quid a week when I chucked it.”

“You’re doing a lot better than that now?” his neighbour speculated.

“You bet,” was the scornful reply. “Pleasanter life too. I just hang round the pubs in the late morning, and sometimes pick up a likely lad or two, and then have a look at the West End in the afternoon to see if I’m wanted. Then, once a week we go out on our own. There’s generally some one who’s looking for trouble—got too rich or getting chatty or something of that sort.”

“We’ll do business before long,” Nick promised him.

“And jolly proud we shall be,” the gangster declared. “They’re great readers, my lads—scarcely one of them who don’t take the *New York Police Gazette*. You won’t find Nick of New York any stranger, sir.” . . .

Dinner drew towards a close, and, in the absence of any inspiring contribution to the conversation from his other guest, Eustace Grant presently led the way up to the card-room on the second floor which was reserved for such occasions as this, or for a surreptitious game of *chemin de fer*. More liqueur brandies were served, and, with a good deal of chaff, the business of the evening was discussed.

“Seems to me a lot of fuss about a simple game of cards,” the fat young man remarked suspiciously. “Don’t seem as though you played very often, either,” he added, looking around.

“As a matter of fact we don’t,” Eustace Grant admitted, from the depths of an easy chair. “The only game we really all care for is *chemin de fer*, and that’s unfortunately illegal.”

“That’s a game I’d like to know,” Mr. Fordham announced eagerly. “Couldn’t we have a go to-night?”

Eustace Grant shook his head.

“Daren’t risk it,” he regretted. “I’m chairman of the committee and I can’t see the rules broken. Clubs in the middle of London like this have to be run on pretty strict lines nowadays.”

Mr. Fordham looked peevish, but consoled himself with a huge cigar.

“Bring out the cards then, lad,” he directed Rubens. “I’ll soon see what you’re made of.”

The latter produced a brown-paper parcel with elaborate carelessness, cut the strings, and threw half a dozen packs upon the table. With clumsy fingers the fat boy broke the outer coverings.

“I’ll go you through the pack red or black a fiver a time,” he suggested. “Just for a breather, eh?”

“Who deals?” Sam Rubens asked cautiously.

“We can cut,” the other proposed.

Sam hesitated, but only for a moment. He looked upon the affair as a waste of time, but his guest must be kept in a good humour.

“All right,” he agreed. “Lowest deals.”

He cut a three, but Fordham produced a two. He proved, also, a remarkably good guesser, for at the end of the deal he was forty fivers up to his opponent’s twelve. The latter was a little dazed, a little rattled, too, by the ripples of amusement around.

“Have another go?” Fordham invited. “This is good enough for me. Twenty-eight fivers you owe me, my lad.”

“It’s a fool’s game,” Sam Rubens declared irritably. “We’ll play poker.”

Fordham looked dubious.

“We are old-fashioned folks up north,” he observed. “Nap and *vingt-et-un* are our mark. Poker’s that game where you have five cards and bet, ain’t it?—one pair, two pairs, three of a kind?”

“Admirably defined,” Eustace Grant sneered. “I should think you’d better play nap.”

The young man looked at him with a frown. When he frowned his face seemed to go into creases.

“It don’t take me more than a few minutes to learn any game,” he boasted.

“Give me a drop more of that brandy, and I’ll skin him.”

Chips were counted out. Memorandum blocks for I O Us were produced, and the stage generally set for the contest. Martha, standing by the side of Eustace Grant, looked on scornfully.

“I think I’d rather see fighting,” she confided. “Sam looks like a greedy little ferret, and that absurd young man has drunk too much.”

“Well, you couldn’t sympathize with such an atrocity,” Grant remarked. “I wonder how much money he really has? A hundred thousand pounds, Sam told me. More than he’ll be able to get rid of in one night anyway.”

“You’re thinking about the competition?” she smiled.

“Perhaps I am,” he admitted. “I’m not afraid of Sam anyhow. If we carry the thing through to the end it will probably be a show-down between Nick of New York and me. Do you think he’s serious about ‘The Light of China’?” he added, dropping his voice.

She shrugged her shoulders.

“He boasts, like you all do,” she observed, “but there’s generally something behind what he says.”

Eustace Grant looked frowningly at the ash upon his cigar.

“If by any miracle he got that,” he quietly muttered, “we might as well throw in our hands at once. You heard Amos Grimmett’s valuation this afternoon?”

“Yes, I heard it, but I don’t believe in miracles. Neither Nick of New York nor any one else in the world could get away with that.”

Eustace Grant pondered for a moment. His stealthy, light-coloured eyes rested on the girl’s face. He convinced himself that she was keeping nothing from him, and he breathed a sigh of relief.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “It’s an impossibility.”

The poker duel commenced and continued without much initial interest. The

young man from Manchester, with hands generally inferior to his opponent's, bet cautiously, and lost steadily. Sam Rubens recovered his spirits and his confidence. He leaned back in his chair. He chattered to his friends. He chaffed his adversary.

"Time we got going, Big Ned," he mocked. "Have a go at me this time. I raise you fifty quid. Take a look at what I got. A full house will beat me maybe."

The fat young man threw down his cards with a scowl. Sam was benignly triumphant.

"Stick it out, fat boy," he urged, as he dealt himself two aces, and a pair of twos to his adversary, "your time will come. One card? There you are. One for the dealer, and I'll back my threes against yours."

"Make it another fifty then," Fordham declared savagely, and promptly went down with his three twos. "Give me a whisky and soda," he demanded. "I can't play this game dry."

"Serve my guest everything he desires," Sam Rubens begged, "and give me the same."

It was Fordham's deal next, and directly he saw his cards he threw himself back in his chair with a whoop of joy.

"There's a good time coming for us all," he chanted. "How many, laddie?"

Sam Rubens made a grimace. It cost him an effort, for he had four aces.

"One," he decided, after much hesitation.

"I'll play what I've got," his opponent declared with riotous exultation, "and double the ante."

"Look here," Eustace Grant intervened, from his easy chair by the fire, "I think it's only fair to give Mr. Fordham a hint. You shouldn't give your hand away like that, sir. If you've something good, sit tight. Half the art of poker is concealment. You don't mind, Sam?"

"Oh, no," the latter answered peevishly. "I want to play the game sporting. I see you, and raise you fifty, Fordham."

"Making it three hundred," the latter calculated. "Try six hundred."

Sam Rubens paused. He had put his opponent down at first with a straight. It might be a flush, or even a full hand, but even if it were fours, it was beaten by his four aces. There was nothing ahead but a straight flush.

"Try a thousand," he countered.

"Make it two thousand," the fat boy squeaked.

They were all around the table now. Sam Rubens was still confident, but not disposed to risk catastrophe.

"See you," he decided. "Four aces here."

"I've got a run of those little chaps all in one suit," Fordham announced, scarcely able to speak for excitement. "One, two, three, four, five of spades. How's that?"

"Straight flush," Passiter gasped. "My God, he wins!"

Sam Rubens had lost all his winnings, and more besides. He drained his whisky and soda, however, and did his best to pull himself together. This was outrageous luck, of course—damnable, outrageous luck but still hopeless against science. Several hands were played quietly. Then he timed his coup. He dealt, looked at his cards, and laid them face downwards upon the table.

"I double the ante," he declared.

"I redouble," Fordham rejoined, swaying a little in his seat.

"Very well," Sam Rubens agreed. "That's two hundred to come in. How many cards?"

"I'll play what I've got," Fordham decided, with a grin. "Four hundred."

"Eight hundred."

"Sixteen hundred."

"Three thousand, two hundred."

The fat young man was sweating from every pore.

"If I only understood the game," he moaned. "I'm not scared anyway. Double."

There was a quiver of emotion. Probably at that moment the coolest person in the room was Sam Rubens. He saw heaven opening before him.

"That was rash of you, fat boy," he jeered, "because it gives me the opportunity of making it twelve thousand eight hundred pounds. That's what it will cost you to see me. Feel like it, eh?"

Fordham groaned.

"I may have got the hang of this wrong," he lamented. "I got to see, though."

Down on the table, from Sam Rubens's hand, damp with perspiration, went the cards.

"Nine, ten, jack, queen, king of spades," he cried hoarsely, leaning forward and looking into his opponent's face with glittering eyes.

One by one Fordham's cards followed on to the table.

"I got the same as the last time," he declared, "but they ain't little ones. Ten, jack, queen, king, ace of hearts."

There was a second's breathless silence. Sam Rubens sat quite still, a strange, dramatic figure, numb and speechless. His eyes were like burning pools of light fixed upon the fatal cards. Suddenly he was on his feet. His hand shot out towards his adversary. His lips were pale. His eyes seemed to disappear into caverns of white flesh. There was fury in his tone.

“Them ain’t the cards I gave you,” he yelled.

The fat young man, marvellously composed, grinned at him.

“Why, of course they ain’t, Sam,” he agreed. “You don’t suppose I’d bet that way on what you gave me against a framed hand!”

“You’re a cheat!” his opponent shouted.

“Why, didn’t you know it?” Ned Fordham asked wonderingly. “Ain’t you?”

The argument was ended, so far as Sam Rubens was concerned, for with a little stuttering cry he collapsed in his place. The conqueror tapped his glass, and the gesture being favourably received, he opened his mind to the company.

“I was invited here,” he confided, “to have a bout with the most famous crook gambler in London, so notorious that there ain’t a barman who don’t warn the suckers against him. I’ve played him at his own game, and he calls me a cheat. He can’t pretend he thought I was a sucker. That wouldn’t go anywhere. Sit down, young lady, opposite me, please—just to oblige.”

Sam Rubens remained barely conscious—a white, stupefied figure. Martha obeyed the fat young man’s invitation. He dealt her five cards.

“You bet, madam,” he invited. “Never mind the chips.”

“But I have only four cards,” she pointed out.

“But I dealt you five,” he insisted. “Look under the table-cloth.”

She lifted it up, and discovered the missing card. There was an awed murmur from the bystanders. The young man from Manchester stretched out his hand.

“Give me a pack,” he begged—“any pack.”

Passiter placed one in his hand. He dealt five cards to himself and took five others from the top of the pack. Even as he held them there they disappeared.

“Now, madam,” he said, “your bet.”

“But I have no cards,” she protested.

“That’s queer!”

He looked up to the ceiling, and slapped the table with his hand. This time it seemed to every one present that a miracle had happened. One by one the cards came fluttering down, and fell in front of Martha in a regular line. She uttered a little shriek, and left her place.

“What you folks have seen,” Fordham declared, turning to Eustace Grant, “was a trial of skill between two famous card crooks. I want to ask you this, sir. If I had lost, would Sam Rubens there have expected my brass?”

“He certainly would,” Grant admitted, “and we stayed here to see that you paid.”

“Ain’t it justice, then, that I should get mine?” Ned Fordham demanded.

“It is certainly,” Grant replied, “and you shall have it.”

Sam Rubens looked up. The spirit had died out of him. He was a limp, nerveless object, his hand still shaking, his voice toneless.

“Do I have to pay him?” he asked Grant piteously.

“You certainly do,” was the firm response. “How much have you on you in cash?”

“Nineteen hundred pounds,” the young man groaned, producing a wad of notes.

Grant counted the money, and pressed the bell. After a brief delay Charles appeared.

“Tell Mr. Flood to bring down his account book,” Grant directed.

There was another brief delay. No one seemed inclined for speech. The fat young man lounged back in his chair, his cigar in the corner of his mouth, his hands in his pockets. Presently Flood presented himself.

“How much have you standing to Sam Rubens’s account, Flood?” Grant inquired.

“Four thousand four hundred pounds and a trifle of interest,” was the prompt reply. “Against that there’s his drink and restaurant bill for a month.”

“We’ll see to that,” Grant decided, drawing his cheque-book from his pocket and writing rapidly. “Make out a cheque on the Club account, Flood, to Mr. Ned Fordham here.”

“For the four thousand four hundred pounds?”

“Every penny. There you are, Fordham,” Grant went on, pushing the notes across the table. “Nineteen hundred pounds in cash, a Club cheque for four thousand four hundred, and mine here for the balance, less two hundred pounds for the chips.”

The young man from Manchester collected the money and cheque and thrust them into his pocket with a grin.

“Well,” he confided, “you Londoners are all right. I knew you were mostly crooks, and I never thought I should touch the whole of this.”

Grant held open the door for him. No one offered to shake hands.

“You’ll collect your other cheque from Mr. Flood in the office downstairs,” he said. “We may be what you have called us, but—crooks pay.” . . .

Sam Rubens looked up, white and distraught, from the depths of his chair.

“Am I cleaned out, Chief?” he faltered.

“You are,” was the stern response.

“Every bob?”

“Every bob. It was the worst show I ever saw. Bad enough to lose to the law,

but when you can't tell a cleverer crook than yourself from a sucker it's time you went out of business, Sam. We've no more use for you."

The young man listened to his Chief's edict and staggered towards the curtained recess at the farther end of the room.

"Crooks pay," he echoed as he pressed his gun to his temple and pulled the trigger.

VII. WIVES NEVER TELL

Eustace Grant was a man of fixed habits and prejudices. One of these was a strenuous objection to receiving any one connected with the little band of super-crooks over which he presided at his Berkeley Square flat; another was to retire to bed three times a week at half-past ten. Consequently, when his servant announced a visitor at five minutes before that hour on a night when he had no engagements, and had already lit his last cigarette before turning in, he was annoyed.

"Who is it, Brooks?" he asked, stretching out his hand to the drawer of his writing-table from long-established custom.

"Dr. Bradman, sir."

Grant left the gun undisturbed.

"You can show him in," he directed briefly.

Bradman, as spick and span as ever, with tired eyes and listless manner, sauntered into the room.

"Sorry, Major," he apologized. "I know you don't like being disturbed here, but I had to see you. I want to go out to-morrow evening."

"Rather sudden, isn't it?"

Bradman nodded.

"The thing's just happened that way," he explained. "To-morrow's indicated."

"Local?"

"Hampstead. I've been trying to persuade a pal of mine who has a small practice up there to let me in on a stunt I've figured out for months. He only made up his mind this evening. To-morrow has to be the day."

"Want any help?"

"Not even a get-away. It's a quiet affair, but, if it turns out as I hope, it may put me in the running for the big prize."

Grant raised his eyebrows.

"To-morrow night's yours then," he consented. "Have a drink before you go."

Bradman shook his head.

"No, thanks. I know your habits, and I'm off. As we are alone though for a minute, I should like just one private word with you, Major."

"Go ahead."

"It's about Nick of New York."

"Well?"

"That proposal of his involves us in a huge gamble, doesn't it? Do you think he'll bring in the Clarence diamond?"

Grant considered his reply carefully.

"I do not," he decided. "I tell you frankly, Doctor, that if I thought he had the ghost of a chance I should abandon my own enterprise. I like Nick all right, and we've made him very welcome over here, but I've no fancy for seeing him become a millionaire at our expense. That's why I'm rather glad he's chosen an impossible task."

"You think he'll be trapped?" Bradman asked, a note of eagerness underlying his lazy tone.

Eustace Grant departed from his usual custom. He lit another cigarette, pressed a drink upon his visitor, and helped himself from the sideboard.

"I don't fancy you've ever cottoned to our friend Nick," he observed, watching his visitor keenly.

Bradman hesitated.

"I can't tell you exactly what the feeling is I have with regard to him. I certainly don't dislike him. He's done some very neat, small work for us, but I have a sort of anxiety about him I can't put into words."

"Do your best," Grant begged.

"Well, I think I'm a little afraid of him," Bradman continued. "He never seems to make a mistake. If he should happen to bring off this Clarence diamond affair he'd have the laugh on us for the rest of our lives. They wouldn't forget to rub it in from the other side, and somehow or other I can't help feeling that he's got some devilish scheme at the back of his mind that's going to give him a chance."

"Well?"

Bradman shrugged his shoulders.

"I ask myself," he continued, "what's the use of my risking my life and liberty to enrich our friend Nick?"

"There's a fine of five hundred pounds if you don't go out before the end of next week," Grant reminded him.

"Just so," Bradman acquiesced; "but, after all, five hundred pounds isn't a great deal of money."

"If you want my advice," Grant declared, "you'd better go on with your enterprise. The terms were we were all to go out once. The others have mostly come up to the scratch, and we must do the same. It wouldn't be playing the game to shirk."

"Very well," Bradman agreed. "I obey orders."

He paused to finish his whisky and soda. Both men were fully conscious of a lurking sense of reserve in the air—something which neither of them cared to put into

plain words. The Doctor set down his empty tumbler and took the plunge.

“Major,” he asked, “if Nick Conklin should happen to bring off this coup, should you consider that we were reasonable people if we allowed an American to despoil us to such an extent?”

“I find that an awkward question, Doctor,” Grant admitted cautiously.

“It’s one which we shall very soon have to face.”

“It seems to me that we all opened our mouths rather too wide that night,” Grant acknowledged. “Still, there it is; we accepted the challenge, and you know our motto—‘Crooks pay.’ We’ve got to keep our word.”

“You are certainly right, Major,” Bradman agreed. “We opened our mouths too wide, but whose fault was it? Who got us boasting about ourselves and our exploits, and what we could do? Why, that fellow Conklin. He worked for it deliberately.”

“You may be right,” Grant confessed. “He’s a conceited little devil himself. He got us going that night all right.”

Bradman’s speech became slower than ever. It was almost a drawl, but a very impressive one.

“On reflection, the thing seems to me absurd. Seven of us are to go out and risk our lives, and bring in—well, just consider what there is in now. There are the Reinberg stones, worth at least forty thousand pounds, a hundred thousand dollars in American bills which Chaplain Lane retrieved, the Ranee’s jewels from the Museum, which might be worth anything between forty and fifty thousand pounds, and the balance of Mat’s haul after we’ve settled with his widow. There alone is a fortune, Major, which surely should belong to one of us, and not to a perfect stranger. Crooks pay all right. What about Sam Rubens? You were firm enough there, and quite rightly; but I can’t see the fun of risking my life, or parting with all that loot to an outsider—especially as I think that he has something up his sleeve.”

“What could he have up his sleeve?” Grant queried.

Bradman hesitated. He splashed a little more soda-water into his glass and toyed with a cigarette.

“He’s too friendly with Miss Dring for my fancy,” he confided. “I’ve seen them out together more than once. Miss Dring amuses herself with us, but she belongs, when she chooses to take her place, to the class of person who has the *entrée* to Clarence House. She may know something, and be standing in with Conklin. We don’t want them to walk off together and have the laugh of us, do we? That’s why I say that our motto was meant to apply amongst ourselves and not to a casual visitor.”

There was a quick gleam in Grant’s eyes, the springing into life of an agreeable

idea.

“Very well put, Doctor,” he murmured. “Nick, after all, is an American, and a foreigner. I must look up the rules. An honorary member, that is what Nick of New York is. If he brings in the Clarence diamond and claims the booty we shall have to consider the matter from that point of view.”

Bradman smiled to himself as he took his leave and went happily into the night.

Less than twenty-four hours later the Doctor’s enterprise was definitely launched, and he himself, with a black bag in each hand, was waiting before the front door of an inhospitable-looking house in one of the less prosperous regions of Hampstead. The door was opened after a considerable delay by a young woman dressed for the street.

“What did you want?” she asked, without any particular effort at courtesy.

“This is Number 7 Myrtle Street, isn’t it?” he inquired. “A Mr. Lazenby telephoned to Doctor Hammond, asking him to call.”

“I didn’t know Mr. Lazenby had telephoned, and you are not Doctor Hammond anyway,” the girl rejoined suspiciously.

“Of course I’m not,” was the terse reply. “But I’m Dr. Hammond’s *locum-tenens*, if you know what that is. Dr. Hammond is away for the day—perhaps for several days.”

The girl permitted him to enter, but seemed still dubious.

“I don’t think Mr. Lazenby will care to see any other doctor,” she objected.

“Please show me the way to his room,” Bradman insisted. “I can soon find out whether he requires medical attendance or not.”

She led him up the dark, unpleasant staircase, and opened a door of a room on the first landing. Bradman followed her into a dreary and meagrely furnished little apartment. An elderly man with a grey beard was sitting up in a plain iron bedstead, reading a newspaper. He scowled over the top of it at the two intruders.

“Who are you?” he demanded. “What do you want?”

“I’m taking Doctor Hammond’s place for a few days,” Bradman explained. “He asked me to look in and see you this evening. As a matter of fact, I think you telephoned, but I was coming in any case.”

The man on the bed shook his paper vigorously.

“I telephoned for Doctor Hammond if he happened to be passing—not unless—just if he happened to be passing. I didn’t require a professional visit at all.”

“That’s quite all right,” Bradman assured him with a smile. “Doctor Hammond’s down in Brighton, and may be there for several days. He told me you were a special

patient, and even if you didn't ring up I was to drop in and see you."

"I can't afford two doctors," the man on the bed declared. "Doctor Hammond is very dear—very dear indeed."

"Well, I am not," Bradman confided. "In fact, I don't make any charge at all for these odd visits."

The old man nodded his head in mollified fashion.

"No charge at all?" he repeated.

"None whatever."

"You can leave us," Mr. Lazenby told the girl. "I will talk to this gentleman for a few minutes. You heard what he said? No charge at all. Very reasonable, I am sure."

"Can I go out for half an hour?" she asked.

"Not longer," the old man stipulated. "Don't forget the key."

The girl departed, after a curious glance at Bradman. The latter, fresh from the ministrations of the *coiffeur* and general disguiser of Flood's Club, endured her scrutiny with indifference.

"What have you got in those two bags?" Mr. Lazenby demanded, as she closed the door.

"Medicines in one and surgical instruments in the other," was the brief reply. "Now let's see what the trouble is with you to-day? Let me feel your pulse."

The man on the bed held out his wrinkled wrist.

"It's my heart I'm worried about," he confided. "I shall welcome a second opinion, Doctor. Our friend Hammond is very sound, I am sure, but a little hasty."

The Doctor had forgotten none of the old tricks. His touch was light and skilful, his tone soothing. As soon as he had concluded his examination, he opened the smaller of his black bags, produced a bottle, poured out a dose from it into a medicine-glass, and brought it to the bedside.

"I do not as a rule prescribe drugs, Mr. Lazenby," he said, "but I find yours a very interesting case, and with interesting possibilities. Your heart, in effect, is quite sound, but you have one slight weakness which is entirely curable. In three weeks you will be a strong man. Drink this in one draught, if you can."

Mr. Lazenby obeyed orders, and chuckled as he sank back amongst the pillows.

"Very good news, Doctor," he declared. "I always thought that I ought to have a second opinion. Hammond—very good fellow—old-fashioned."

He closed his eyes, and slept peacefully. . . .

Bradman listened for a moment to his breathing, and then picked up the larger of his two bags. With it in his hand he turned towards the narrow wardrobe, scarcely wider than a grandfather's clock, which stood by the bedside. He examined and felt

it over from top to bottom, his fingers straying down the panelled fronts, and he only smiled when the chink of metal responded to the tap of his finger-nails. A moment later the bag was open upon the floor, and its marvellous rows of silver-bright burglarious implements flashed in the electric light. Bradman got to work. The old man slept. . . .

It was a longer job than Bradman had imagined, but it came to an end at last. The heavy door had been swung open long ago. It was the combination for the steel drawers which bothered him. At last they came like magic into his hands, opening as though they ran on velvet—and such an opening! The Doctor felt his breath come quickly as he stared downwards with glistening eyes. No troublesome bonds or shares, but bank-notes, sheaves and rows of them, dollar bills in piles inches thick, *mille* notes of France in packets of fifty, drawer after drawer full. Hammond had told the plain, amazing truth. There wasn't a word of exaggeration anywhere. Currency! There it was in the notes of three countries! Hoardings as easily handled as the proverbial miser's gold. Bradman felt his eyes grow hot with desire, his fingers itch to commence their final task. . . . Then suddenly every nerve in his body was set shivering by that gruesome, familiar sound. He was back in the hospitals—the first man he had ever seen die. God, it had been like that! Raucous, hard, and gasping—the death-rattle in an old man's throat! Lazenby had raised himself in the bed. His eyes, fixed upon the intruder, were wide open, full of venomous hatred, of fear, of despair—then the head fell back upon the pillow. The perspiration streamed from Bradman's forehead. He moved closer to the bedside, looking down at the crumpled-up figure. He knew quite well what had killed him—the shock of half waking, and seeing his opened safe and exposed treasures. The Doctor felt the heart by instinct—but he knew. . . .

His brain worked quickly. There was no doubt but that the old man's death was due to shock. Hammond would have to help him through with that. There was one last office though which must be performed, and performed quickly. The very expression of hatred and agony lingering in those eyes was in itself an accusation. He leaned forward, and stooped down, only to find himself once more rigid. There was a slight noise at the door. He turned his head. The handle was slowly being moved backwards and forwards. Now it was gently shaken; a second's silence; then a soft but insistent tapping. Bradman wiped the perspiration once more from his dripping forehead, choked down the horrors and got to work. He emptied drawer after drawer of the safe into his medicine-case. He filled it full, filled his pockets, closed the safe. Then, carrying his two bags, he walked to the door, and opened it. It was the girl who stood there, calm and unperturbed, but with a dangerous light in her

eyes.

“Why have you kept me waiting here?” she demanded.

He paused to clear his throat.

“I am sorry. There is bad news,” he told her. “Mr. Lazenby died whilst I was examining him, soon after you left.”

“Come back with me, please,” she insisted, entering the room.

He followed her to the bedside. She stood looking down at the dead man without a quiver. Then she glanced around, and her large, dark eyes took note of many things. She picked up a glass, and smelled it.

“Why did you give him this?” she asked. “It is much too powerful for a man with his heart.”

“What do you know about it?” he rejoined.

“I was a hospital nurse for some years,” she confided drily. “Wait, please. Don’t go away.”

She leaned down, and, lifting the mattress, touched a button in the wooden foundation. A drawer slid out. She helped herself to a bunch of keys, unfastened the safe, opened the drawers one by one—the drawers swept empty of their treasure.

“You might have saved yourself a great deal of trouble if you’d known of that secret hiding-place, mightn’t you?” she asked, with a curious, half-human gleam of sarcasm shining in her eyes. “Please come downstairs.”

He followed her obediently, anxious only to reach the front door. She divined his purpose, however, and calmly blocked the way. He looked down at her. Was this the psychological moment? Unless he committed another and a very risky crime he was in her hands. Better to bargain perhaps. Besides, there was something in that cold, sweet smile, the almost insolent uplifting of the eyes which stirred him queerly. Better to bargain.

“I wish to talk to you for a few minutes,” she said. “Please come into my sitting-room.”

He followed her, but he ventured upon a faint protest.

“There are things which must be done at once,” he pointed out. “A nurse——”

“All those things will be attended to in due course,” she interrupted. “Sit down, please.”

He obeyed, wondering whether it was by chance that she seated herself by the side of the telephone. Even in those few moments of suspense he was conscious of a different atmosphere in the small, shabbily furnished apartment. There were some books upon the table, a couple of water-colours upon the wall, a few cheap flowers. Everything was spotlessly clean.

“Listen carefully,” she begged. “I have looked after this old man Lazenby for five years. I left the hospital to come here with him. He has made me do the work of a servant as well as nurse him. He has paid me not even a pittance, but he offered to leave me the whole of his money. I refused. I knew that he had relatives.

“‘Leave me half,’ I suggested.

“He agreed. Yesterday he asked me to telephone for his lawyer to run through his will. Whilst he slept I read it. He had left me fifty pounds, and the whole of the rest of his property to his nephews and nieces. I also discovered that he had secretly sent a cable to them, and that they are even now on their way back from Australia.”

“Filthy old beast!” Bradman exclaimed. “What did you do?”

“For a time,” she went on, in the same unemotional tone, “I did nothing. I just thought. I reviewed my life during the last five years. I thought out the whole situation. Then I burnt the will. I telephoned to the lawyer not to come until he heard from me again, and I deliberated whether I should kill the old man and take the money, or just walk out of the house, and leave him and his money to perish. Quite a problem, wasn’t it?”

Bradman was incapable of speech. The girl’s voice and manner affected him amazingly. His whole being was absorbed in listening.

“When you rang the bell,” she went on, “I was going into the Gardens to walk for an hour, and think. I didn’t altogether believe in you, as I felt at the time that you were an impostor. However, I let you in, and I went.”

He leaned suddenly forward.

“And what decision did you arrive at?” he inquired.

“To kill the old man, and take the money,” she answered coolly. “When I returned, found the door of his room locked, and knew that you were still there, I felt that things might be different.”

Bradman was a man of many experiences. He had been a brilliant surgeon, a criminal, and a sinner. Life had throbbled fiercely in his veins more than once, but never with the same peculiar virus of excitement.

“What do you propose?” he asked swiftly.

Her eyes searched his face.

“Are you married?” she demanded.

“I am not,” he replied. “What of it?”

“A piece of excellent good fortune,” she declared. “You will get a special licence to-morrow, and marry me on Monday.”

“You might tell me your name,” he suggested, trying to imitate her coolness.

“Mary Lawson. I am quite a nice person. From the snobbish point of view, I will

tell you that I am a doctor's daughter, and the niece of a bishop, and, for the side of you which I hope also exists, I will confess that my flirtations have been trivial, that I have never loved or been loved. . . . Our marriage, you see," she went on, "constitutes a partnership. A wife cannot give evidence against her husband. The glass which contained that rather strong draught shall be destroyed. Also the list of the numbers of those bank-notes will go on the fire, and a few other documents. The currency, then, with which you have filled your bags will be untraceable. The nephews and nieces will find the deeds of some property and a considerable balance in the bank, but nothing else. All that you have in your bags you will keep—our joint property. Do you consent?"

"Who wouldn't?" he gasped, a queer passion underlying his words.

He advanced across the room, leaving the two bags to look after themselves.

"You are going to marry me on Monday," he reminded her hoarsely.

She stretched out her arms, and her lips seemed to steal unsuspected things from his innermost being. The reflection of his passion flamed in her own pale face. Presently she pushed him away with a laugh like music.

"Don't forget the death certificate, the nurse, or the bags," she reminded him, as he opened the door. "What about Doctor Hammond?"

"He's my friend," Bradman confided.

"Then everything should be quite easy," she said.

Bradman was late when he reached the bar at Flood's Club that night, but Grant was still there, and, as it chanced, alone.

"Well?" he asked.

There was a strange sparkle of excitement about the Doctor. He had lost his listless manner. Even his voice sounded more human.

"Sixty thousand pounds in easily changed notes after making a split of twenty," he announced. "A clean bill of risk and a wife."

VIII. HORNETS STING

There was nothing apologetic or particularly ingratiating about the appearance or manner of Eustace Grant as he descended the brick steps into the cellar of the "Golden Sun" at Rotherhithe, and faced the group of young men seated on each side of the long table. The buzz of welcome, which a few years before had greeted him, never materialized. He entered, and took his place in the midst of stubborn silence. With a touch of bravado he threw open his black overcoat to display his dinner-clothes as he swung himself into his accustomed seat at the head of the table.

"What's the matter with you Hornets?" he demanded. "Jack Costigan says you're dissatisfied. I ask him why? He says, 'Ask them yourself.' Well, that's what I'm here to do."

They were really, seen *en famille*, a villainous lot of ruffians. There was a huge fire burning at the farther end of the room, and nearly every one had removed his coat. Their shirts and pull-overs were flashy, but scarcely one was clean. A *coiffeur* would have gasped at the task before him, had he been confronted with their tousled heads of hair. There was a common quality in all their faces—savagery. They looked like killers. There were twenty-eight men around the table, and one knew quite well that there were twenty-eight concealed knives. Jack Costigan leaned forward in his chair.

"Here's the boss, lads," he announced. "You thought he wouldn't dare to come to you, but I knew him better. Spit it out like you do to me. Tell him your trouble."

"You've got too swell up at the West End," one voice growled. "Why don't we get more work?"

"That's Jack Costigan's job more than mine," Grant answered quickly. "We use you when we can, and you get your share then of everything we touch."

"Your jobs are all too b——y high-class now," another voice squeaked out.

"My lads," Eustace Grant enjoined, "listen. Crime and robbery ten years ago was the work and pastime of the scavengers, such as you. To-day it has become a hard-learned profession. The drinks are free, Jack. Tread on the bell."

A surprisingly smart-looking barman from upstairs brought whisky and served everybody. Those who had been drinking beer poured the whisky boldly into the pewter mugs. To Grant he presented a tall tumbler of thin glass, with ice in the bottom, poured in whisky from a squat bottle, and added Schweppes soda-water.

"Cigars and tobacco," Grant further ordered, and cigars and tobacco were served. Then their old leader addressed his Hornets.

"Now, lads," he began, "you couldn't have a better example of what I mean than

the barman who has just served you. Five years ago Jimmy Craske was good enough for us—Jimmy, stinking like hell, his trousers tied up with a dirty handkerchief, no collar, and a filthy shirt. And as for the muck he served us, I wonder we lived after drinking it. To-day, you have a clean, smart fellow to wait upon you, and good liquor. Why is that? Simply because times have changed, and you've damned well got to change with them if you mean to do any good. You earn big money still. Don't spend it down here with riverside trollops, and gamble it away with Chinks. Prowl up into the West End, buy decent clothes, pick up the tricks like Jack here has. Leave the fag end of you, who have no ambition, to deal with drunken sailors and shop burglaries, and knifing a man you think has welched you for a bob or two. Stick your noses up and buy patent shoes. Jack's done it, and he's free of my West End headquarters whenever he likes to come. You can do it when you want to, but I'm damned if you come up to my haunts regularly, or if I pass you any high-class jobs till you can come up looking like human beings."

An older man from the end of the table knocked out his pipe, and voiced the general murmur of tepid approval.

"That's not such bad talking," he declared. "The boss has scored against us all right. The only thing is it will take some time to alter our ways, and meantime we want work."

"How's this to start with then?" Grant demanded. "I want the whole lot of you on Saturday night, for serious business. It will be Covent Garden way, all particulars from Jacky. I'm the man who's doing the job. It will be a hundred quid if things go wrong, and a thousand if you get me out safe. If you don't I'm for the next world, so sharpen your knives before you come, lads. That's all I've got to say to you for the present."

There was a definite murmur of applause now, in the midst of which Grant took his leave, beckoning Costigan to follow him. They stood outside in the squalid street, a short distance away from the main thoroughfare, whilst Grant's car was being fetched from a place of security.

"At four o'clock to-morrow afternoon," Grant promised, "I'll give you a timetable, Jack. It will be worked out to the second. I'll pledge my word to that. See that they've had a drop to drink, but not too much, and let them remember they must clear my way and throw a ring round my car till I am well forward, or they'll have to look out for themselves in the future. It's a big do, Jack," he added, resting his hand for a moment upon the youth's shoulder, "and if ever I felt nervous in my life I do now."

"You'll pull it off all right, Major," the young man predicted confidently. "We'll

see they don't get at you anyway. Our boys are spoiling for a fight, every one of them, and there isn't a slinker in the lot."

They stood in silence, watching the gently falling rain. From end to end, Grant's eyes swept the irregular line of shabby houses, the backs of the warehouses with their side entries, famous bolt-holes in the old days, and his thoughts travelled backwards. He, too, notwithstanding a different education, had felt in his younger days much the same spirit as those ruffians below—the tedium of inaction, the itch always to fight. Many a time he had prowled out, generally alone, for it was before the days of gangs, sometimes with a set plan, sometimes merely seeking prey, but always with the thrill of excitement in his blood, so hard now to recapture. And then—the war! He found himself wondering in those few minutes of waiting whence had come the lure of the distant thunder from across the seas, which had made him one of the first to enlist, had sent him into battle with the courage of the born fighter. Corporal, sergeant, a commission, a D.S.O., a certain V.C. if all his superior officers had not been killed, distinctions everywhere as a brilliant and fearless man of battle. He had left the war with a halo around his head, and the praise of the most distinguished generals of the day ringing in his ears, and on his first night in London he was back again in the old cellar! It was there and then he had planned out the transference of his energies to the West End with such brilliant success. He had the knack of finding the right men with whom to surround himself. War-time service had taught him that. He was a rich man now. There was no real need for him ever to work again, no need to take another risk. Yet the thrill of his coming enterprise was already in his blood. He knew that nothing would stop him, although, from the first moment he had conceived it, he had been conscious of an unaccustomed sense of apprehension lurking always in the background. Fear he had never known, apprehension such as this never before to the same extent. Yet he had somehow the curious feeling that there was a certain fitness in this last visit to the nursery of his career—that great events were at hand.

His car rolled up, and he drove away with a farewell word to Costigan. He went straight to the Club, and felt a cold little shiver of anger as he realized that Nick and Martha were dining alone at the privileged table. He greeted them, however, with his usual cynical good humour.

"Doing anything to-morrow evening, either of you?" he asked, as he drew out his pocket-book.

"Not unless we're wanted," Martha replied. "You're going out, aren't you?"

He nodded.

"You won't be wanted," he promised. "I've a box at the opera. Care to use it?"

It's a modern Russian show—the only thing of their new music that's come West.”

“I should love to go,” Martha assented enthusiastically. “What about you, Mr. Nick?”

“I'm free,” the latter admitted. “I don't know much about music, but I dare say Miss Martha will explain it to me.”

Grant handed them the ticket. His eyes were fixed upon the girl.

“I should like you to be there,” he said calmly.

Martha knew what Grant had meant directly she read the brief extract of the third act printed on the right-hand side of the programme. She passed it in silence to Nick, who read it with some difficulty in the dimly-lit house, with the disturbing sobbing of the violins in his ears.

“Catherine decides after all that she will not yield to her lover's passionate entreaties to give up her jewels for the benefit of the Bolshevik cause, and informs him that it is her intention to wear them at the Opera House on the following night. She tells him that without her jewels she fears to lose her inspiration, and she reminds him that the few times she has sung without them the critics have found fault with her. The great rubies which hung around her neck had become like the blood of her body, the diamonds upon her bosom, the white passion of her genius. She loves him, but she fears to do as he wishes. If he insists, they must part. Kronzy receives the message just in time to rush to Moscow by car in his workman's clothes. He makes his way on to the stage where he is well known, as Catherine is singing her last and favourite song, tears the jewels from her neck, and strangles her.”

There was a glint of unwilling admiration in Nick of New York's eyes as he read.

“Major Grant has a sense of the dramatic at any rate,” he conceded.

“You think that he means to go for Midara's jewels?” she whispered breathlessly.

He nodded.

“Why not? Like a fool, she tells every interviewer who comes to see her that she wears her real ones on the stage, and that she possesses no imitation jewellery. You know, underneath all his cynicism, how conceited he is. He wants to outshine us all, and, upon my word, if he brings this off I should think he will have done it.”

The girl shivered.

“Midara’s such a great artist,” she murmured. “I never felt like it before, Nick, but I feel that I ought to do something. I can’t sit here and watch.”

“There is nothing that you can do,” he said quietly. “Whatever Grant’s plans are it would be too late to interfere with them now.”

The strange music burst convulsively into the final bars of the overture to the third act. The girl and the man in the stage-box listened to it with a sense of growing dread. The house was darkened. The curtain went up. Almost at once Midara was singing to an imaginary audience, singing with all the glory and thrill of a real *prima donna*, her voice swelling as the light grew till she stood in a grey, mystical twilight, pouring out her stream of tumultuous notes. There was not a sound to be heard in the great house. Every one was breathless, entranced. They waited for the tragedy to come, very close at hand, as indeed it was. From the left wings stole through the obscurity the tall form of her lover, still in his peasant’s clothes, crouching a little, his face screened from the footlights. She was suddenly aware of his presence. She stopped short in her song. The passionate question throbbed from her lips. She held out her arms. He moved nearer. There was silence. Had he missed his cue. The first violin drew his bow across the strings of his instrument gently, suggestively, a strange thread of melody in the silence—but without response. His few wild bars of reproach remained unsung. She waited for them, arms still outstretched. Then the embrace which she had been inviting was hers with a vengeance. He seized her in his arms. Her cry of agony rang out just as every light in the place was extinguished, and stage and auditorium alike were plunged in darkness. The figures upon the stage were unseen, but one had the strange and awful idea that a real struggle was going on there. A second terrified scream from Midara electrified the house, followed by the sound of shouting in the wings, a blaze of illumination, as the lights flashed once more into being. The audience, standing up, and many of them themselves shrieking, now caught a hasty glimpse of the descending curtain, and of Midara stretched upon the stage in no attitude of studied grace but a huddled up heap of bruised and unconscious humanity. The stage-manager, his left arm hanging helpless, was on his knees, bending over her. As the curtain was in the act of falling he turned to the audience, and not one of those who heard his cry will ever forget its hysterical, nerve-shattering excitement.

“She lives! Midara lives!”

A moment’s loss of nerve, a single faltering during the next five minutes, and Eustace Grant’s course was surely run, for the fortune which had led him through so

many dangerous enterprises for once turned her back upon him. His electric torch in his hand, he sped unerringly down the wings, with the roar of commotion in his ears, to where an apparent scene-shifter handed him a long coat. Through a seldom used door at the back of the box-office he gained the entry which led to the street, attracting in that bedlam of confusion no particular attention. He was less than forty yards now from safety, with no alarm given with which he could be connected, and he passed swiftly down the flagged way. On the pavement outside, however, he almost ran into a sergeant of the police, who, with a constable, was gazing up at the suddenly darkened Opera House. Under ordinary circumstances Grant might have passed unnoticed, but, with the uncomfortable sense of something being wrong behind that lack of illumination, the sergeant swung round and challenged him.

“Where are you going, my man?” he asked, blocking the way. “Queer sort of outfit, you’ve got on, haven’t you?”

“I’m in the chorus at the opera—just finished. Off home,” Grant explained, without undue haste.

Again the answer might have been deemed satisfactory, but at that moment a number of windows on the first floor of the Opera House were thrown open, and an eager clamour of voices rang out. The house was still in darkness. The sergeant laid his hand heavily upon Grant’s shoulder.

“You’ll wait a minute, my man,” he decided. “Constable, find out what’s wrong.”

The policeman turned away, running towards the entrance. The sergeant suddenly felt the dull pressure of metal against his side, and the faint, sickening pain of a mortal blow. He reeled around, struggling for action or speech, and finding neither possible in a world of wheeling lights and images, on an earth which seemed to be swallowing him up. He collapsed upon the pavement, and never moved again. . . .

Grant, making his unhurried way across the street, found himself, owing to the delay, caught now in the throng which was rushing up to the front of the Opera House, once more brilliantly illuminated. He pushed along as well as he could, but when at last he reached the opposite kerb he found himself face to face with a very ugly-looking red-headed policeman in whose eyes there was a determined gleam.

“You’ll come along with me,” was his greeting. “Don’t make any fuss about it, my lad. We’ll have these on, if you don’t mind.”

Grant’s answer was the quickest draw that red-headed policeman had ever seen in his life, and a bullet in the exact centre of his forehead. He staggered round for a moment, his mouth still open, a pitiful wonder in his questioning eyes. Then he collapsed heavily, and lay across the pavement, face downwards. Grant, now the

centre of observation from those who were not fighting their way into the Opera House, crept along the side of the wall, his gun still threatening, whilst the fingers of his other hand raised a slim, black whistle to his lips. The street was full of turmoil, half the people trying to get towards the Opera House, the other half, attracted by the shooting, looking over one another's shoulders, but keeping a fairly wide ring around the creeping figure. Suddenly the whistle rang out, and the old cry broke from Grant's lips.

“Hornets sting! Hornets sting!”

The crowd rocked and swayed upon its feet, its ranks broken by the little company of fierce assailants who seemed to have leaped up from nowhere. They were falling in around Grant, bustling him along. A sergeant and half a dozen policemen charged valiantly in. Steel flashed. There was the yell of a dying man, and the crowd dispersed in terror. Another shot rang out. Reinforcements for the police came rushing up. They made for the gangsters valiantly to find them melting away in every direction. They fought through to the wall, but there was no Grant. When they had finished searching for him there were no Hornets.

Back in the Opera House tragedy was perhaps as real, but scarcely so rampant. Kronzy, released from his bonds, declared that four men purporting to be his friends had visited him in his dressing-room, taken him unawares, drugged and bound him, and stolen the clothes which his dresser had laid out, and in which one of his assailants had promptly attired himself. After this he lost consciousness. Midara, with a terrible red patch upon her throat, her nerves, as she declared, ruined for life, screamed to every one of the fast-arriving journalists that her jewels, the saving of a lifetime, the inspiration of her genius, had been torn from her throat and arms by Kronzy. She valued them at two hundred and fifty thousand pounds and demanded the money that night in cash from the directors of the Opera House. Such directors as were present listened, and stole away in respectful wonder. Kronzy recited his adventure a dozen times to any one who would listen to it, demanded three months' salary, and pleaded for a railway ticket to Budapest and a loan to pay his hotel bill.

“You shall not go, for you are a thief!” Midara screamed. “No other man save you could have found his way on to the stage in your clothes, arranged for the extinction of the lights, and torn those jewels from my throat even in the moment when I held my audience spellbound. Give me my jewels! Give me my jewels!”

“A thief? You call me a thief?” he shouted. “You, Midara, whom I adore! I steal your jewels?”

“Where are they then?”

“Search me. I am penniless. I am ruined!”

Then the news of the street fighting came out, and as the directors were moderately kind, and the condition of Kronzy’s dressing-room bore out his story, she fell in his arms, and decided to forgive him. To the directors themselves, however, she was adamant.

“Never again in your country do I sing,” she swore, “until my jewels are restored.”

Nor did she.

Those were fierce moments with Grant in the car, cunningly driven to evade pursuit down the Mall, its number plates and lighting already changed. Off with the belted coat, the coarse shirt, the breeches and boots. In his silk underclothes the fugitive paused for breath for a single moment.

He spoke down the tube—a curt monosyllable. The answer was reassuring. Shoes and silk socks—the shirt—how the links mocked him!—collar—white tie—he had never tied a better bow—waistcoat—coat. He draped the silk-lined black cape on his arm, and once more the monosyllable down the tube. Still all right. He spoke again. The chauffeur pulled in to the side of the road under some trees, leaped down, opened the door, and held out his arms. Silently his master handed him the discarded garments. He flung them into the luggage case behind. Off again, and in another five minutes they pulled up in front of Flood’s Club. A moment later the car was rushed away, to be dismantled by skilful fingers in a secret garage. Grant strolled in to the vestibule of the Club, handed his coat and hat to a *vestiaire*, and pulled a bell.

“Anything in yet on the tape, Marks?” he asked, as he waited.

“Nothing for some time, sir.”

“Who’s at the table?”

“Mr. Chaplain Lane, sir—alone.”

A triumph! His ghost came silently down the room. Grant slipped into the lavatory and straightened his tie. Then he looked over his double, who, according to instructions, had entered from the other side.

“Quite good,” he approved. “Try the tie a little fuller next time. Get your clothes off like lightning now, and clear out. There’s a job on.”

Perfect staff work! The man disappeared as though into the bowels of the earth. Grant strolled into the restaurant with the air of one who had spent the whole evening there, and made his way to the round table under the musicians’ gallery where he took the discarded chair of his departed ghost. Chaplain Lane nodded to him in

perfunctory fashion. George, the waiter, approached. He seemed paler and more phantom-like than ever to-night, but his hungry eyes were agleam as he watched the new-comer.

“I was thinking of taking away the wine, sir,” he confided. “It will soon be time.”

Grant nodded, and held out a tumbler, which was promptly filled to the brim. He raised it to his lips, and set it down empty. The waiter silently refilled it, and glided away. Just then there was the usual little bustle at the doorway which indicated new arrivals. Martha, white as a sheet, entered, followed by Nick of New York. They came straight to the table. The girl’s eyes as she looked at Grant were full of a sort of fascinated wonder. Even the hardened young criminal from New York seemed shaken.

“Eustace Grant,” the girl declared, under her breath, “you’re the most amazing person in the world. But how I hate you!”

“What my personal feelings may be,” Nick Conklin said in his soft, precise voice, “I will not disclose. But I raise my glass to you, Eustace Grant, in amazement. A professional myself, I acknowledge your supremacy. How you got off the stage, got through that fight without a scratch, and reached here with your tie perfect, not a hair of your head disarranged, in less than half an hour, is a simple miracle. I could never have believed such foresight, such enterprise, such staff work, possible. No other man in the world, in your country or mine, could have done it. That is a painful but an honest confession, and I guess I’ve got to make it.”

Eustace Grant smiled—a long, joyous smile of self-content.

“Nick, my friend,” he said, “I accept your congratulations because I have a right to them. There was never anything planned in this world like my coup of to-night. Were there any special editions out when you came?”

Nick Conklin produced a seventh edition from his pocket—a news-sheet of a single page only. He read out the headlines:

“MIDARA’S PRICELESS JEWELS
STOLEN IN DESPERATE STRUGGLE UPON THE
STAGE AT COVENT GARDEN.

THIEF ESCAPES
IN TERRIBLE GANG FIGHT OUTSIDE OPERA
HOUSE.

SEVEN MEN KILLED AND MANY WOUNDED.

HOUSE TO HOUSE SEARCH FOR MURDERERS.
HOME SECRETARY AND CHIEF COMMISSIONER
ON THEIR WAY TO VISIT THE SCENE.”

“What about the tape?” Grant asked.

“Still ticking,” Nick answered. “I looked at it as I came in. There’s nothing more than in the paper, though.”

A little sandy-haired man appeared in the vestibule, and glanced around the place. He made his way nervously into the room, and spoke to several of the people seated at the tables. He drank a glass of wine with one of them, and presently departed. Eustace Grant summoned a *maître d’hôtel*.

“Who was that, Louis?” he asked.

The man shook his head.

“Only a restaurant guest, sir—comes here now and again—connected with one of the newspapers, I believe.”

“What did he want to know?” Grant inquired.

“Whether there was any one of note here, sir. He seemed interested in you—wanted to know whether you’d been here all the evening.”

Grant smiled.

“Well, there’s no doubt about that, is there?” he remarked.

“Not the slightest, sir. I was able to assure him that you hadn’t left the place since I arrived myself at eight o’clock.”

“Was he really a Press man?” Martha ventured, as the *maître d’hôtel* took his leave.

Eustace Grant shook his head.

“That was Inspector Gibbs in mufti,” he observed. “I was too close to him for his safety more than once to-night. That’s where our system of ghosts comes in, you see, Nick. You might ask one person and remain unconvinced, but when every one in this room assures you what some of them probably believe, that I haven’t left the place since eight o’clock, you’re done. You can’t work up a case against an alibi like that. You had your money’s worth out of those opera tickets, I hope?” he remarked, turning to Martha. “I wonder whether I shall get mine.”

She returned his gaze, and in his hour of triumph Grant’s heart sank.

“They say they’re worth at least a hundred thousand pounds, which ought to pay you,” she rejoined.

IX. RIVERSIDE SNOWBALLING

Eustace Grant came moodily up to the private bar in Flood's Club, and took a stool by Martha Dring's side. She looked at him with a gleam of curiosity in her beautiful eyes.

"Is it my fancy, Chief," she asked, "or are you not quite yourself these last few days?"

He ordered a cocktail. Nick of New York, famous in the criminal annals of his country, was on the other side of Martha, and Chaplain Lane was studying an evening paper a few feet away. He addressed himself to all three.

"I am suffering," he confided, "from an uncommon psychical disease. It comes on me at odd times in life. Incidentally it won me my D.S.O."

"Tell us about it," Martha Dring begged. "We forget too often that, after all, you're something of a hero underneath your villainy."

He tapped a cigarette upon the counter and lit it.

"You remember the third attack—or rather you wouldn't remember it," he began. "Anyhow, it was in 1917, and we were in a bad way. For some reason or other the German fire had slackened. Word had come down the line that all was clear. A staff officer telephoned we were to give our men a rest. It looked as though the Germans had had enough for a bit. I lay down myself, just as I was, for half an hour, but I couldn't sleep. I felt exactly as I am feeling to-night—exactly as I have been feeling all this week."

"You're becoming interesting," the girl acknowledged.

"I got up softly," he went on. "There wasn't a sound to be heard of any account—nothing but the distant firing down on the southern front. There wasn't a thing which seemed suspicious in any way, and do you know what I did? I had the alarm sounded down two miles of trenches, sent up flares, and called for supports. The colonel came up to me.

"What the devil's the matter, Major?" he demanded.

"That, sir," I told him, pointing.

"And, sure enough, there they were, working round our flank—half a division of them. We started the second battle of the Rivers that night—got at them before they were half ready, and gave them the worst trouncing they'd had for months, and I swear I hadn't heard a single thing when I called the men out."

"It sounds very thrilling," Nick Conklin said quietly, "but what's the connection?"

"There's something wrong here," Grant replied—"has been ever since Simon Flood was taken ill and disappeared. I don't know what it is, but I can feel it all

around.”

“Giving me the creeps,” Martha murmured.

“Let’s see,” Grant reflected. “Hungry John’s going out to-night, isn’t he? What sort of a job is it? Has he told any one?”

“He’ll tell us himself directly, I expect,” Chaplain Lane observed. “He’s upstairs now.”

“What’s Mason making of him?”

“I don’t know. Something marine, I think.”

“His show to-night then,” Grant observed, “and yours on Tuesday, Nick. I’m going to propose that after Tuesday, before we plan our American tour, we take a long, long rest, to prevent it being a longer one. I don’t mind telling you if my plans work out I shall be a thousand miles away a week to-day. I’ve signed all the cheques. Every one will get what’s coming to him, and any of you who have banking accounts abroad had better replenish them. I have arranged with Amos Grimmett to be here on Tuesday night, and the great competition can be wound up then. The lucky man can make his own arrangements as to where he has the stuff sent.”

“You haven’t any real cause for this wave of hysteria, have you?” Martha asked.

He looked at her, with a slight curl of his cruel lips, a facial gesture far indeed removed from any suggestion of mirth.

“I have no real reason,” he admitted. “That is why, if I knew what fear was, I should be afraid.”

“I’m getting really panicky,” the girl declared, knocking the cigarette from her holder. “Nick, stand me another cocktail, please. I’ve just paid my account here, and, with Major Grant feeling as he does about the place, I don’t think I’ll start a new one. Do you keep accounts under our names, Charles?”

The pink and white barman shook his head slowly.

“You are all numbers to me, madam,” he confided. “Number seven is yours, if you want to know.”

The door on the right-hand side of the bar was opened, and Frisby made his appearance. They stared at him for a moment in surprise. Then Martha clapped, and Nick beat the counter with the palm of his hand.

“Marvellous!” he murmured. “Mason’s done the trick this time.”

Frisby came slowly up to the bar. He was dressed in a shabby sort of blue uniform, which might have belonged to a steward on a third-rate liner. His cap was nautical, with a suggestion of the tropics in its white covering. He carried in his hand a bird-cage, in which was confined a parrot. He held out two fingers, and Charles supplied him with a drink.

“What’s the stunt?” Grant asked.

“There’s a small liner from the Straits Settlement dropping in this evening,” Hungry John said slowly. “She ain’t much to look at, but she carries valuable cargo. Some of them small steamers from the East do.”

Grant nodded.

“It’s dangerous stuff to handle,” he commented.

John Frisby sipped his drink deliberately.

“It’s worth it,” he confided, “and I’ve got a pull. The captain of the liner and I did a job together once. He offered to let me on board at Greenwich, but I think my way is as good.”

“Shall we see you later?” Chaplain Lane asked curiously. “It’s the sort of enterprise I’d like to hear about.”

“If I have any luck,” the other promised.

He saluted in nautical fashion, and left the room with a hornpipe step.

“Knowing what I do of riverside ways and haunts,” Chaplain Lane remarked drily, “I’d sooner dine where I am.”

To the edge of civilization John Frisby ventured upon a taxicab. For another two miles he rode in a bus. Then, for some time, he proceeded on foot through a district of noisy, squalid streets, where shops seemed to have given way, except at odd corners, to torch-lit stalls. There were Chinamen, and human beings of every race in the tangled and clustering crowd. He encountered bold glances from the women, and suspicious ones from the men, alike unmoved. Presently he plunged down a side-street, and turned up his collar as he met the breath of salt wind which blew in his face. At the end were dimly-seen masts rising above the houses, lights that rocked to and fro as the tide swept in. A little way out in the river a tug was screaming. A small steamer was slowly being dragged into harbourage. Frisby watched it for some time. Then he stole down to the edge of the dock, keeping well in the middle of the road, and glancing carefully around. He knew the neighbourhood. . . .

A man dropped from the steamer’s side into a small boat, and sculled across. He mounted the slippery steps and tied the rope which he had brought to an iron hoop. Frisby stepped carefully forward.

“Is Mr. Enoch on board?” he asked.

The man looked at him indifferently at first, then curiously.

“Yes, Enoch’s there,” he acknowledged. “What’s the sense of standing out in the middle of the dock with your b——y parrot calling for him? You know where he’ll

come.”

Frisby nodded. There was sense in what the man was saying. He crossed the dirty street with its fragments of rotting vegetables, odd morsels of refuse cast out from the river, to the foul corner of the wharf, and pushed open the door of the public-house which occupied that salubrious position. Inside was nothing but a small taproom with one heavy, blowsy-looking man fast asleep on three chairs he had dragged together. There was no one behind the counter, but voices in the inner room. Cautiously he crossed the sanded floor, drew himself up by the counter rail, and peered over the tattered blind. What he saw was startling enough. There were three men in the apartment, and one woman. One man was lying on his side, groaning, and the woman was endeavouring with a basin full of water, to stanch the blood from a wound in his forehead. Even more disquieting things had apparently been happening, though. There, in a dilapidated chair, tightly bound to it, with a gag in his mouth, the glitter of fear in his black eyes, sat Jacky Costigan, his get-away—Jacky Costigan who should have been in that little alley they both knew of, close at hand, waiting with his forty horse-power bicycle and carriage—and by the side of Costigan, looking extremely official, was a man in a dark suit, concerning whose calling there could be no manner of doubt—a plain-clothes police officer. Hungry John slipped back on to his feet, confident that no one had seen him. He turned to the sleeping man on the chairs.

“Hullo, you there!” he said. “Wake up!”

The man gave no reply save a stertorous groan. Hungry John advanced a few paces and looked at him.

“Shouldn’t wonder if he hadn’t been drugged,” he muttered to himself.

He stole away—his gun was in his hand now—thinking out the possibilities of the situation. The ’tecs were on to the landing then! There were probably more of them around waiting for the messenger from the Straits Settlement. Frisby’s brain worked quickly. He could release Jacky Costigan without a doubt by the usual method, and the river was handy enough for the grave of an odd policeman, but why was there only one of them? There must be more in hiding. The sound of his gun would bring them around. He listened for the splash of oars. There was no sound outside. Jacky Costigan could wait, he decided. He played a brave game. With a coin from his pocket he tapped on the zinc edge of the counter. There was a slight exclamation from behind the door, a moment’s pause. Then it was opened, and the woman swaggered out, large, ponderous of hip, lavishly decorated with the cosmetics of her Piccadilly sisters, her bold eyes flashing a welcome even as she came behind the counter.

“Well, you’re a quiet little mouse, aren’t you?” she demanded. “I never heard you come in.”

“Too busy behind there perhaps,” he grinned.

“Get on with you!” she rejoined. “There’s no one wants to take me in there nowadays.”

“Try me,” Hungry John proposed gallantly. “But what about a drink first?”

“I don’t mind if I do,” the woman accepted, with perfect sang-froid. “A glass of port’s mine, if you can run to it.”

“A chap just back from a voyage ought to run to a drink for a lady,” Hungry John assured her. “Make it a double glass, and give me half a tumbler of the best whisky you’ve got.”

“You’re a customer, you are!” she declared, serving him unhurriedly, and leaning forward so as to bestow upon him the full blaze of her attractions. “Where do you come from, I should like to know, and what do you carry that damned bird about with you for?”

He contemplated the parrot pensively.

“Thought I might sell it,” he confided. “It’s grey, and they’re a bit difficult to pick up nowadays.”

“You just landed?” she asked.

“Off the *Lily Jane* this evening. We got in before the *City of Rangoon*. Closish quarters up here.”

“A nice bit of mischief you did!” she said. “The *City of Rangoon* was due in hours ago. I don’t know anything about you, darling, but we’ve never had anything called the *Lily Jane* here before that I know of. Here’s luck!”

“My love, dear!” Hungry John replied, patting her pudgy fingers. “What, no wedding ring! This may be my lucky day after all.”

“You haven’t forgotten how to kid since you’ve been away,” the lady giggled.

“I forget,” he sighed, “but it all comes back to me directly I see a real English girl again. Why do you let that fellow sleep there?”

“He’s doing no harm. He’s going off at midnight, on a barge. Some of his pals are coming for him. I said they could leave him there for a time. He’s fairly stupid with booze.”

“Some of his pals, eh?” Hungry John reflected thoughtfully. “How many of them?”

“Three or four. I didn’t notice.”

“Shall I be able to find a bed round here?” he inquired.

She looked at him doubtfully.

“Well, that’s asking!” she meditated. “Fact is, things are upset with us to-night. Father’s had a bit of a stroke or something, and cut his head. I’ve just been seeing to it. Mind waiting a moment whilst I go and give him another splash?”

“Certainly not,” was the polite reply. “Don’t keep me too long, though. I’m an impatient sort of cuss.”

She smacked the side of his head pleasantly and withdrew, closing the door quickly behind her. Hungry John smelt the whisky with which he had been toying, decided that it was harmless, and drank some. He heard the gurgling of water on the other side of the door. Once again he glanced carelessly at the barge-man, and with cautious footsteps made his way outside. The night was dark, but it had ceased to rain. The steamer was practically docked now, and a man was standing by a small gangway. The deck was ill-lit, but one or two people were moving about. John Frisby glanced back through the bar window. The woman had not yet returned. He advanced to the end of the quay.

“Is Mr. Enoch on board?” he called out softly.

One of the two men who had been smoking together removed his pipe from his mouth.

“He might be. What do you want with him?”

“I came to meet him—brought him a parrot.”

The man spat over the side of the boat.

“Parrots ain’t going very well to-night,” he confided. “I guess Mr. Enoch thought the morning air would be better for him. I’ll let him know, though. Where are you?”

“In the pub there,” Hungry John pointed out.

The man slouched off. Frisby stepped back to the taproom, and was sipping his whisky when the door of the inner room opened and his enchantress reappeared.

“The old man’s all right,” she announced, “but I’m afraid there’s nothing doing here to-night, mister. Pity, because I rather like you.”

“I haven’t seen one of your sort since I can remember,” Hungry John declared enthusiastically.

She leaned across the counter.

“Tell you the truth, there’s been a bit of trouble here this evening,” she told him, dropping her voice. “We’ve had the ’tecs in.”

“Who are they after?” he demanded.

“They think some one’s trying to land stuff from one of those steamers,” she whispered. “Maybe they’re right; maybe they ain’t. I only know that they’ve turned awkward, and though I ain’t saying that you aren’t a likely sort of chap, you’d do better to sling your hook, and come back another day. You’ll find me here all right.

Bessie, my name is—Bessie Crumble. I don't get out much because of the old man, but I can do what I like here."

He opened his pocket-book to pay for the drinks. With slim, cautious fingers, from an inner compartment, he drew out, one after the other, five ten-pound notes, and palmed them.

"Would you like to earn these?" he inquired, suddenly opening his hand.

She stared at him in amazement, and as she realized the denomination of the notes her bosom rose and fell. She breathed heavily.

"You're not a 'tec?" she asked under her breath.

"No, but although they don't know it, I'm one of the men the 'tecs are after," he went on. "Set that chap loose in there, and you shall have fifty pounds."

"Gawd!" she murmured. "But what about the other chap?"

"I'll see to him," Hungry John promised. "You mustn't be squeamish though. He'll have to go out, I'm afraid."

She shivered.

"I've never seen a man killed," she said.

"Well, you're going to to-night, with any luck," he declared coolly. "You understand what I want you to do? Go back into the kitchen, or whatever you call your room, get a knife, and stand by. Then, as soon as we've settled with the policeman you can go ahead and I'll help you. Your dad won't interfere, I suppose?"

"Not he," she promised. "He ain't fit anyway. But what about the bobby you're going to do in?"

"I'll see to that myself. He'll be in the mud at the bottom of the Thames to-morrow morning."

In a crumpled heap the notes were disappearing down the bosom of her dress, smeared, each one of them, with the sweat from her plump fingers.

"Are you going to follow me in?" she demanded.

He nodded.

"I'm coming round behind the counter," he said. "Just take no notice of me. Keep clear of the cop, and get the knife. There's no one outside. We're perfectly all right."

Stooping a little to remain out of sight from the interior of the apartment behind, John Frisby stole along, and under the flap of the counter. The woman opened the door and hurried in in advance. Hungry John was suddenly revealed behind her, his gun in his hand. The man on the floor gazed at him blankly. The policeman sprang to his feet. The light of a desperate hope flamed into the eyes of the man tied in the chair.

“Put them up!” Hungry John cried sharply, knowing very well that he meant to shoot anyway.

The policeman hesitated. There was a stab of flame, a shot, and he went writhing back into his chair. The woman, with a knife in her hand, was already beginning to cut the bonds. Suddenly, Frisby saw the gleam of light fade from Costigan’s face. He struggled with his gag, rocking in his chair. One hand, already free, pointed to the doorway behind. He was too late. Without a second’s warning Hungry John found himself in the grasp of a man of many times his strength. His head was thrown back, his hands brought together so quickly that the gun rattled from his helpless fingers on to the floor. The handcuffs were snapped on to his wrist.

“Blast you, you murderer!” an angry voice shouted in his ears. “If I’d known you were going to do that——”

He broke off. Frisby looked slowly around. It was the sleeping man towering over him, all the lowzy sensuality gone from his face, his eyes blazing with anger. Curiously enough, partly from descriptions, partly because he had seen him once in uniform, Hungry John recognized him.

“Big Jim!” he muttered.

“Big Jim it is, you dirty little scoundrel!” the other snarled. “Leave off cutting those ropes, young woman. Throw down your knife.”

Her eyes spat fire at him. Instinctively she felt that her fifty pounds was in danger.

“What the hell are you coming in here for, interfering with everybody?” she demanded. “We’re honest folks, dad and I.”

“Throw down your knife,” the sergeant ordered.

She leaned over and cut one more cord. Costigan was suddenly on his feet, but Big Jim was too quick. His gun was out.

“Jacky Costigan, eh?” he said. “I only wish you had brought the whole of your gang with you. You’re under arrest, young fellow, and don’t you forget it. If you stir I’ll shoot you dead.”

Then the sound for which the man who for hours had been apparently sleeping on three chairs, Costigan, Hungry John, probably the girl, certainly the man upon the floor, had been waiting, was suddenly audible. They all heard it—soft, pattering footsteps, crossing that stretch of cobbled waste between the steamer and the public-house. The sergeant stooped quickly, picked up Frisby’s gun, and slipped it into his pocket. For a moment, indecision seemed to seize him. These others counted for little. There was nothing in the world he wanted so much as a brief conversation with the person to whom he believed those footsteps belonged. He looked round the room. There was only a skylight in the roof, no door, no means of

escape. He stood facing them, gun in hand.

“If one of you men so much as moves,” he threatened, “I’ll riddle you. Get out behind your bar, young woman. Attend to your customer. See what he wants.”

“Not so much of your lip,” she swaggered. “I’m not your young woman, and don’t want to be.”

“Get behind the counter,” he repeated.

Sullenly she obeyed. The sergeant studied the other two men. Costigan, he knew, carried no firearms. The pseudo-steward who, in his perfect disguise, was a stranger to him, was not only unarmed, but handcuffed. He turned his back on them.

“Don’t forget,” he warned them, “if you make so much as a sound, I’ll plug you both.”

He stepped through the doorway, and leaned over the counter. The pattering footsteps had ceased. The outer door was quietly opened and closed. A very spick and span little Oriental entered the place. He was liver complexioned, with narrow, dark eyes, and though his clothes were entirely European, and exceedingly good, he wore small gold ear-rings. He advanced a step or two, his bowler hat raised in his right hand. Underneath his left arm he carried a brown paper parcel of considerable size.

“Good evening, mees,” he said, speaking in slow but very correct English. “There was a young man who carried that bird,” he went on, pointing to the parrot. “He stood upon the quay, and he asked for me. I do not find him here. You can tell perhaps.”

Sergeant Big Jim seemed suddenly to have relapsed once more into the hulking lout. He looked meaningly at the small intruder.

“What do you want with him?” he asked.

The Oriental smiled.

“Private beeziness.”

“What is your name?” the sergeant inquired.

The little man looked around.

“My name is Enoch—Mr. Enoch,” he confided. “I have been here before.”

“What have you got in that parcel?” Sergeant Big Jim continued.

“It is very much my own beeziness,” the Oriental answered. “If the young man with the parrot will come, that is all that is necessary.”

The sergeant smiled.

“Very well,” he conceded, “I will show you the young man with the parrot, and you can proceed with your business.”

He leaned back and opened the door. The man lying on the strip of carpet was

still in a comatose state. Costigan, with the help of some blunt instrument, was working hard at Frisby's handcuffs.

"Stop that, you two!" the sergeant ordered sharply. "Break away!"

They obeyed sullenly. Sergeant Big Jim had produced his gun, and he had the reputation of being very fond of using it.

"Come here, you," he directed, laying his hand on Hungry John's shoulder. "Come and meet a friend."

He led him quickly through the door. The gaslight glimmered upon the handcuffs as he brought him to the edge of the counter.

"Well, here's your friend that you wanted to do business with," he announced, addressing Mr. Enoch. "Perhaps you'll understand now that the game's up."

But the game was not by any means up with Mr. Enoch. His Oriental mind worked swiftly, and with perhaps unusual directness. Throughout the whole force Big Jim's leading characteristic was well known, decried by his superiors, rather admired by his equals. He was a reckless and incautious man. He took risks when there should be none. To bring an affair to an end quickly he ignored danger. He held his gun in his hand, it was true. Costigan, behind, he knew was unarmed, Hungry John was handcuffed, the little man in front of him was about five feet high, beautifully dressed in shore-going clothes, and a pacifist in expression and appearance if ever one had existed. The sergeant stretched out his hand for the parcel.

"I'm going to examine this," he said.

Those were his last words on earth. Hungry John declared afterwards that Nick of New York was beaten by an eighth of a second in the draw of that gun. At any rate, one moment the Oriental's small hands were resting upon the counter, the next a gun, jet black, with a very stubby muzzle, had flashed into being. There was a spit of flame, and the sergeant collapsed with a crash, his head against the wall, one leg dragging after it a rickety stool. Twice his features twitched, twice he shivered, then he was still, and there were several seconds of amazing and awesome silence. The girl began to dab the counter with a duster which she had been holding in her hand, and sob at the same time. The least concerned of anybody was the little Oriental.

"It is a peety," he regretted—"a peety one has to kill, but one must be safe. You tell Mr. Goldmore, young man, this is a very fine consignment. You will find the papers inside. The forty thousand is in the bank, yes?"

"A long time ago," Frisby answered.

"He will read; he will find out. Another eleven thousand pounds is wanted. He will be content, yes? More merchandise. More profit."

Hungry John nodded. Costigan, who had been on his knees by the side of the sergeant, suddenly sprang up with a bunch of keys in his hand. In a moment Frisby was a free man.

“The sergeant had a whistle all ready to blow,” Costigan whispered. “I bet there are more of them about.”

“I had a word of warning,” Mr. Enoch confided, “that some unpleasantness might be about to-night. Therefore I shall not arrive at London. I have a tug here, and am going down the river. I shall board the South American boat of a friend of mine by arrangement. We meet next time, is it not so, young man, for the eleventh voyage? You shall know, and Mr. Goldmore shall be told, how much to pay in. The extra eleven thousand pounds worth came as a surprise, but why should we seek more than one customer?”

“Why indeed?” Frisby replied. “You’ll get your money all right.”

Costigan had stolen out of the place. In a moment they heard the sound of his motor-bicycle on the cobbles.

“All pretty clear,” he whispered, putting his head inside the door.

Hungry John took the passenger seat, and covered his packet with a rug. The bicycle shot away. The man in the back parlour had dragged himself to his feet and had reached the counter. He babbled when he saw the sergeant. The girl was still laughing horribly to herself and drinking brandy out of a full tumbler.

“Two dead cops,” the man gasped. “Who done this, Bessie?”

The girl felt the notes deep down beneath her clothes. She drank again.

“I don’t know,” she answered. . . .

Mr. Enoch stepped back to the water’s edge. A boat was waiting for him. He entered it, and boarded a small, swift-looking tug. The first person he saw there was a young man in shabby blue serge uniform with a steward’s cap and a very anxious expression. In his hand he carried a parrot in a cage. He was a wonderful tribute to Mason’s skill. The Oriental stared at him.

“Why you come here?” he asked.

“I’ve come for the stuff,” the other gasped. “Why have you kept me all this time? What did you land for? I told you I should come on board.”

The Oriental walked up to the young man, took him by the shoulders, and looked into his face. Then he turned round, walked to the edge of the tug, and jumped overboard.

It was twelve o’clock when Frisby, very carefully dressed in dinner-clothes, changed places with his double, and descended to the dining-table. Grant had one

look at him, and poured out a brimming glass of wine. Hungry John's face was not an expressive one, but his complexion seemed to have turned to granite. His lips refused to meet, and there was an indrawn look in his eyes as though he could see nothing but what lay behind him.

"Bad time?" Grant asked.

"Hell!" was the brief reply.

"Got the stuff?"

"Every bit of it—fifty thousand pounds worth. Any news?"

"Not a word. Any trouble?"

Hungry John moistened his lips and nodded.

"Big Jim's gone," he confided. "The little Easterner did that himself. Another man who took Costigan, he got his too. I had to see to that."

Grant moved uneasily in his chair.

"Good thing we're near the end," he muttered. "Any loose threads?"

Frisby shook his head confidently.

"Don't see how there can be," he answered. "I defy any one to recognize me in Mason's make-up. Big Jim knows me well enough. He was within a foot of me, and never had an idea. The old man had had a scrap, and was pretty well done in. The girl won't peach. She's got fifty quid down her stocking. The only chap who's likely to get into trouble for to-night's work is Syd Adams—discharged ship's steward—if he's fool enough to cart his parrot around."

"What about little Enoch?" Grant asked. "Did he fall for you?"

"Never hesitated. Looked at the parrot gave one glance at me, and handed over the stuff. He's a cool hand, the way he pulled that gun. I fancy he'll say a word or two, though, when Syd Adams goes on board."

"What's that mark on your wrist?" Martha Dring asked, leaning forward.

Even amongst crooks there is one ineffaceable disgrace. Hungry John wrapped his handkerchief carefully around the wound.

"Knocked my hand against Jacky's handle-bar when I got in," he explained.

X. THE PASSING OF NICK OF NEW YORK

The psychic moment was at hand. They were together—Martha Dring and Nick of New York, most famous of American gentleman gangsters—wedged in the little crowd, waiting to get into line, to pay their respects to the Duchess of Clarence, their famous hostess. Martha, who was unusually pale, drew her companion on one side.

“Mr. Conklin—Nick,” she exclaimed breathlessly, “you see that tall, dark man almost by the Duchess’s side?”

“I see him.”

“I know who he is,” she went on. “It is Superintendent Erasmus from Scotland Yard. That short man with whom he is talking is a detective too. They watch every one who speaks to her. Give it up, Nick, please,” she begged. “You can see that there isn’t any possible chance. Give it up—for my sake as well as your own.”

He glanced across the crowded space to where the Duchess, on a slightly raised dais, was receiving her guests. She was a tall, handsome woman, of very distinguished presence, who would have been noticeable anywhere apart from the amazing adornment she wore—a single diamond, “The Light of China,” the largest stone in the world, which flashed upon her bosom—a pear-shaped oval of glittering fire. The chain from which it hung was of platinum, encrusted with smaller diamonds of the finest quality, so that a narrow rivulet of flame seemed to run round her neck and disappear into the reservoir of brilliancy below.

Martha gave a gasp of wonder.

“It’s worth travelling round the world to see!” she exclaimed.

“It will be worth having,” Nick rejoined.

She laid her hand upon his arm.

“Dear man,” she pleaded, “can’t you see that any sort of an attempt would be simply suicide. You’ll give it up for to-night, won’t you?”

He looked at her with a slight frown. They had moved a yard further forward by this time.

“You must remember that I am not going into this quite blindly,” he said. “I have a scheme, which is, after all, an absurdly simple one. I can’t tell whether it will work out until I am within a few feet of the Duchess, but I promise you that if it is hopeless I’ll give it up. I won’t bungle anyhow. I promise you that. And I won’t get you into trouble.”

“Give it up, Nick,” she persisted. “It isn’t worth it. You’re clever, but you’re not a magician. Let’s think out something more practical.”

“What else could there be?” he reminded her. “Midara’s jewels will be valued at

something like a hundred thousand pounds. One can't beat that with trifles."

"Pay your five hundred pounds forfeit," she whispered eagerly.

He indulged in a little grimace.

"I should be the laughing-stock of England and America," he reminded her. "It was I who proposed the whole business."

There was another movement forward. Nick Conklin skilfully piloted his companion into the line.

"Miss Dring," he whispered gravely, "I have seen several things which you probably haven't noticed, and I have altered my plans slightly. I want you to push on ahead in the direction we have decided upon. You need not mind being alone. Heaps of people get separated from their escorts in this crush. I shall follow you in a few minutes, and I promise you this: I'll let the thing alone if I decide that it is hopeless. Will you be content with that?"

"I suppose I must," she sighed, "but I'd rather you promised me now to give it up."

"Listen," he went on, "for this is very important. You know how to reach your car?"

"Absolutely," she agreed.

"Walk straight away when you have shaken hands with the Duchess to where you left it, and drive round to the front entrance."

"To where?" she repeated, aghast.

"To the front entrance," he repeated firmly—"the one at which we arrived. Drive up as though you were bringing a guest. If I have decided to abandon the enterprise, or if I have had any luck, I shall be there. If I am not there, better just get away as quickly as you can. Don't wait. Mind that. I shall either be there when you arrive, or never."

She shivered a little, but she knew very well that her companion was immovable.

"Very well," she assented sadly.

She moved on, and Nick stepped out of the line for a moment. When he returned, she was some distance ahead.

Martha carried out her instructions to the letter. She duly made her bow, and received an agreeable smile and handshake.

"I am sure," the Duchess murmured, "that you are that clever Miss Dring who does those marvellous designs for book covers."

Martha pleaded guilty.

"So intensely modern and interesting," the great lady continued. "Do bring me

some to look at one day.”

Martha passed on, with scarcely time for more than one glance of amazement at the marvellous jewel upon her hostess’s bosom. She moved to the less crowded side of the room, easily found the door leading to the lift, and descended. The way out was perfectly clear, from the plan which she had studied, and she encountered no one who paid the slightest attention to her. Once she paused to listen, but, so far as she could hear, there was no disturbance behind. Her car was being guarded by one of Costigan’s Hornets, who left it immediately at her approach, mounted his motor-bicycle, and rode away to await her coming at the back entrance of the Club. She started her engine, and drove as slowly as possible down the side-street, turning into the Square with a sinking heart. She had scarcely a hope of seeing Nick. There were two cars ahead of her, setting down guests, which blocked her view. She loitered behind them, and, when her turn came, crept up to the great canopy which stretched over the whole pavement to the kerb, her fingers trembling as she felt for the brake. Her heart gave a terrific beat. There, standing alone on the bottom step, looking more than usually debonair in his black overcoat, silk hat and white kid gloves, stood Nick. Automatically she brought the car to a standstill. There was a blur before her eyes, a sob in her throat, which kept her speechless. He threw away his cigarette, and slipped in by her side.

“The Club,” he murmured.

She was in full speed almost at once. In the Park he checked her. She drew up by the side of the road.

“You abandoned it?” she whispered.

“No, I didn’t,” he replied. “You can have just one look.”

His hand stole out of his trousers pocket, his fingers slowly parted, and she gave a little cry. The car seemed filled with light, sparkling specks and gleams of fairy illumination. She was absolutely inarticulate as she sat with her eyes riveted upon the diamond. He replaced it in his pocket.

“I don’t see how it was possible,” she cried.

“Much that is impossible is accomplished in this world,” he remarked, with a banality so obvious that she looked at him anxiously. He was staring straight ahead, and for the first time she saw a hint of apprehension in his eyes.

“There’s something you haven’t told me,” she insisted. “Is there any danger I don’t know of? I can drive to the coast, if you like—I’ve petrol for a hundred and fifty miles—anywhere you choose. Don’t look as though you saw ghosts.”

“It is the ghosts that are to come I see,” he answered, with a certain new grimness. “Miss Dring,” he went on, in an altered voice, “you have always been very

kind to me. I want to ask you a last favour.”

“Why this finality?” she inquired.

“The Club’s in danger—on its last legs,” he told her. “They’ve been watching us for days. Grant knows that well enough. He’s off to Abyssinia to-morrow, and only praying that he gets there. We’ve run our course for the moment. He’s going to propose to-night that we scatter.”

“And what is this favour that you have to ask?”

“I want you to keep away from the Club to-night,” he begged.

She laughed scornfully.

“Do you really think that I am likely to?” she demanded. “I have a right to be there. I have worked for you all—more or less, if not seriously—and you know quite well what excitement means to me. Do you think I should stay away the night you are all going to sit round that table, with Amos Grimmett handling those marvellous jewels? Can’t you see him? He’ll be feeling at the same time the agony of pain at the idea of parting with the huge sums at which he will have to value some of the jewels, and the thrill of the enormous profit he will make when he sells. Stay away, indeed, and not see you win the prize! You must be mad to suggest such a thing.”

“Miss Dring——” he began.

“Oh, don’t be foolish,” she interrupted. “Don’t you know every one is going to tell his story? Eustace Grant is going to tell us exactly how he bound up that man in the dressing-room, how he stole those jewels in the face of a thousand people, and fought his way with the Hornets to safety. Besides, there’s your story to tell, Nick. I’m crazy with curiosity to know how you took that jewel from the Duchess to-night. Stay away, indeed! You’re mad!”

She started up the car, and they shot away. He kept silent for several moments. Presently they turned into the quiet little street at the back of the Club. She looked around her curiously.

“Nick,” she asked him, “is it my fancy, or is the street full of shadows?”

“It is not your fancy,” he groaned. “The street is full of shadows, but they are the shadows of men. Some of them were there last night. To-night, there will be many more. There’s your Hornet boy waiting. Miss Dring—Martha—for the love of God do as I ask you! Go home!”

“Why?” she asked simply.

“Because there is danger here to-night,” he urged—“danger from inside as well as out. You know Passiter, Chaplain Lane, the Doctor, and all of them. Do you think they’re going to part with a fortune for which they have risked their lives to me, a

foreigner, not even one of themselves?

“Don’t show it to them,” she suggested. “Say that you failed. Pay the five hundred pounds fine. I’ll take it home. No one will suspect me. I’ll keep it for you safely.”

He shook his head.

“It can’t be done. I must weigh in with the others.”

They were at a standstill now, outside the back door. The lad who had preceded them from Grosvenor Square was creeping up to the car.

“If you are obstinate, *mon ami*, so am I,” she declared. “Please get out. I am coming in with you. I am going to see the show to-night, and I am going to hear how you accomplished your miracle.”

He was back on his last defences.

“You’re going to do neither,” he snapped. “You’re going to do as I beg, as I implore, as I insist upon your doing. You’re going home now, and to-morrow you shall hear everything.”

She stood upon the edge of the rain-splashed pavement, with a faint gleam of watery moonlight shining upon her beautiful, angry face. The electric standard was out of order, as usual—Simon Flood’s men attended to that—but Nick could see her flaming eyes and the trembling of her soft lips. She scented danger, and she was athirst for it. To be pushed back to safety by the man who was probably himself in more danger than any one else—it was unthinkable!

“I am going to see the show,” she repeated doggedly, “and I am going to see it with you, if it is the last night of our lives. If I am in danger, you are in danger too, and I’d rather we went through it together. Chuck it yourself, and I’ll chuck it. Come back with me, and stay away from this place, and I’ll do the same.”

“I can’t do that,” he told her gravely.

“Then come along,” she insisted. “It’s supper-time, and I want a cocktail.”

Nick’s groan was bitter, but he raised his hand, and the haunting shadows of the place became very real indeed. Three stalwart men in dark clothes surrounded them.

“You will take this young lady in charge, Inspector,” he ordered. “Quick! Don’t let her scream.”

His own hand was the first upon her mouth, and she bit him savagely. Nevertheless, he was in time. She was furious, but speechless. He stuffed his handkerchief between her teeth, and withdrew his own bleeding fingers. She stared at him, and at the blood dripping on to the pavement. Then, for the first time in her life, she fainted.

“Take her in a police car to Marlborough Street,” he directed. “See that she has

a special wardress, a private room, and every comfort. I'll see about the charge in the morning. As a matter of fact, there won't be one."

"Very good, sir," one of the men answered.

They led her away. Nick Conklin took out his latch-key and entered the back quarters of the Club.

"Where are they all?" he asked Charlie as he mounted to the bar.

The man pointed upstairs.

"They're getting ready for supper in the private card-room, sir," he confided.

"They left word for you to go up at once."

Nick made his way above. They were all there, mostly gathered around the tape—Eustace Grant, the Doctor, Chaplain Lane, Passiter, Hungry John. Mr. Amos Grimmett was standing in the background in a state of considerable agitation. They swung round at his entrance, and there was a little half-suppressed gasp. The only spoken words were Grant's.

"My God, it's Nick!"

"I'm here all right," was the cool reply. "How much have they got on that thing?"

Grant handed it over.

"Only a line or two."

Nick read the few words:

"An extraordinary sensation was produced at the Duchess of Clarence's reception to-night by a rumour during the evening that the most famous jewel in the world—'The Light of China'—belonging to the Duchess, had been stolen. The diamond is valued at over a hundred thousand pounds."

"I'll accept that valuation, Mr. Grimmett," Nick remarked, with a smile. "It ought to put me a winner."

"I'll value it all right for you when you show me the stone," was the incredulous reply.

Nick's hand went into his pocket, and out came the diamond. There was a murmur of indrawn human breaths, like the southing of a south wind through a grove of cypresses. No one spoke; they crowded round, pushed and shouldered one another—all manners forgotten, the wild beast instinct predominating. One of the passions of the world had been let loose and become rampant. Nick was conscious of their hot breaths and greedy eyes, and he sensed a danger more imminent than

any he had foreseen. He returned the stone to his pocket.

“I see Charlie’s fixed a little bar up here,” he pointed out. “What about a cocktail before we settle down and get to business?”

George hurried forward with a beaming smile.

“Let me mix them, sir,” he suggested. “I’m very good at a Martini.”

Nick of New York shook his head, with his finger upon the bell.

“No one but Charlie’s going to mix me a Martini in this Club,” he declared.

The little waiter crept near. There was almost a piteous light of entreaty in his eyes.

“Let me look at the stone, sir,” he begged. “I couldn’t get near with all those other gentlemen.”

Nick drew out his prize and exposed it. The man’s eyes seemed as though they would fall from his head.

“I used to wait at some wonderful places in New York before my trouble came, sir,” he confided, “but I’ve never seen anything like that.”

“There isn’t anything in the world like it,” Nick Conklin told him, as he replaced it in his pocket.

Charlie appeared, and they made their way to the improvised bar. Nick drew back as he felt them pressing around him.

“Give me a little air,” he remonstrated. “I had a twisting this evening, and I need a drink quickly.”

They yielded him space—unwillingly, it seemed to him. For the first time Eustace Grant, who had held aloof from the others, spoke to him.

“Where is Miss Dring?” he inquired.

“All in,” was the regretful reply. “She’s gone home, but may come along later, if she feels like it. Our get-away wasn’t quite so smooth as usual.”

“Tell us about it?” Grant invited.

“Later on.”

The cocktails were served, and more than ever Nick was conscious that the attitude of his companions towards him was entirely changed. He was not a nervous person, but he knew very well that he was in serious danger. He was continually being hustled. They seemed to be trying to get him into the middle of a little group—and afterwards! He had seen gangsters ringing. He extricated himself, and turned to Grant.

“After we have had our supper and heard the valuations,” he announced, “I have something to say to you all. I desire to modify the conditions of our show.”

“This is interesting,” Grant murmured. “What do you propose?”

“It’s been a great sporting effort on the part of every one of you,” Nick continued, “but I’m not a greedy man. I don’t want all the boodle. Besides, there’s one more job I think we might tackle before we close down.”

Grant’s colourless eyes glittered.

“There’s one more I mean to tackle before I leave for Abyssinia,” he confided to Nick, and, although the latter affected not to notice it, there was a threat in the muttered words.

“We must hear what our friend Nick has to say,” Chaplain Lane suggested. “I am very glad that he has spoken. There is too much here for one man.”

“Every one has a personal right to what he risks his life for,” the Doctor declared sullenly.

Nick drank his cocktail without haste, but with the slow, casual enjoyment of the thoughtful drinker. Then he pointed to the table.

“I am hungry,” he admitted.

They all moved over and took their places. Nick was the first to sit down. He chose a chair in the corner, near the bar and with a view of the room. The others seated themselves at haphazard. It was a more or less unusual meal, but one in which the little company sometimes indulged during an all-night sitting. There was a large *pâté* of *foie gras* in the middle of the table, and two stone jars of caviare on each side. George, moving briskly about, passed the steaming hot toast, and opened the champagne. Grant, who seemed disquieted—for him almost nervous—rose from his place after the first glass.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” he begged. “I want to have a look down into the restaurant.”

The room was exactly above the one where they usually took their cocktails, and the musicians’ gallery was still below them. Grant stood looking downwards for more than a minute. When he returned, his face was clouded.

“Any news of Flood?” he asked.

“Not a word, not a line,” Passiter replied. “His house is shut up, and all the news was that he had been removed to a nursing home somewhere in the country.”

“Frankly, I can’t understand this place since he has been away,” Grant confided. “It’s almost full now, but I can see scarcely a face I recognize. Jacky’s there, with a new girl—I wish to the devil he’d keep clear of them—but except for him I don’t recognize any one. What do they all come here for? If we go on we shall have to chuck the restaurant altogether.”

“Damned expensive place to run like that,” Chaplain Lane observed. “I believe you’re fancying things, Grant. We do get a strange lot in sometimes, but we’re a

strange lot ourselves. I've been through to-night, and everything seemed to me to be as usual."

"Have a glass of wine, old chap," Hungry John suggested. "You're seeing things. George, cart the bottle round."

"I am not seeing things, nor am I a fanciful person," Grant insisted. "I still say that there is something queer about the place, and has been ever since Simon Flood went home ill. I feel it more than ever to-night, and I'm half inclined to send word to Jacky to have the Hornets up."

"It isn't a bad idea," Nick approved, as he deliberately buttered a piece of toast. "There were one or two unusual-looking loiterers around our stage door when I came in."

A message was sent to the restaurant, and in a few moments Costigan appeared.

"Notice anything out of the way downstairs, Jack?" Grant inquired.

The young man reflected.

"Well, I dunno," he replied. "There's rather a crowd, and not many of the old gang. Country chaps, I should think. I got a new donah with me, and I haven't been looking about much."

"Get the flying squad up," Grant ordered abruptly—"enough of them, at any rate, to hold the alley behind."

The young gangster's black eyes were wide open now.

"Is that straight, guv'nor?" he demanded.

Grant nodded.

"I dare say I'm all wrong," he admitted, "but there's been big business doing, and all London's swarming with detectives. The Hornets want work, they say, and they may get it. Anyway, they'll have their pay."

"This place doesn't seem quite right to the Chief," the Doctor explained. "Maybe it's fancy, but a ride won't do the boys any harm."

"I'll have a score here in half an hour," Jack Costigan promised, "and I'll come up again for orders. We had a glorious scrap the other night, but they're all ready for another."

"You're getting me rattled," Nick observed nervously, as the young man left the room. "Let's get on with this business and call it a night."

There was a little murmur of assent. Amos Grimmett adjusted his pince-nez and leaned across the table.

"I say, Major," he began, "and all of you, I'm willing enough to come here and do this job for you, and maybe I'll be a buyer afterwards of some of the stuff, but there's one thing about me. You know very well I don't belong to the gang. I've

never been in a rough house in my life, and, with my nerves, I'm apt to get a little scared. Now, I'm not imagining there's going to be anything of a rough house to-night, but why run any risks? If there's one thing I hate it's a gun. Hand them over to Charlie there. If there's any disagreement, let me settle it for you."

Every one looked doubtfully at the others. Grant, as he sat polishing his eyeglass, remembered that terrifying exhibition of Nick of New York on his first arrival. Unarmed they were seven men to one. Nevertheless, he appeared to hesitate.

"Let's have them where we can get at them, then," he proposed.

"Why not hand them to George?" Nick ventured. "Personally, having been out to-night, I'd rather keep mine, but I'll join the majority."

The waiter, with a grin of delight, brought round a tray. Even at the last moment Grant hesitated.

"Are the doors all locked, George?" he asked.

"Every one of them, sir. There's no one could get in here, short of battering the place to pieces."

Grant produced an automatic and laid it upon the table. The others followed suit. Nick, without a quiver, placed one of his famous flat automatics upon the tray, and then stooped down.

"Wait a moment," he begged, "I've got another."

He produced a second from a secret pocket. Grant's eyes brightened.

"Take them away, George, and put them in the closet," he ordered.

George held the tray some distance from him, eyeing the glittering collection apprehensively.

"Are they all loaded, Major?" he inquired.

"They're all at safety, you fool," was the curt reply. "Now, Amos, let's get on with the business, and then we'll discuss the distribution."

In the centre of the table stood a huge silver pot, once presented, half in jest, to the Club for a golf prize, and won every successive year by Grant. Amos Grimmett leaned over and drew it towards him. He removed the chased lid and thrust in his hand.

"First of all," he announced, "I have here the collection of old-fashioned jewellery contributed by a regretted friend, Mat Sarson. One or two of the emeralds are very fine, but the setting of everything was ridiculous. There are sixteen stones altogether. The reward offered was five thousand pounds. I value them at twelve thousand."

"You'll give that for them, Amos?" Grant asked.

The man writhed a little in his chair.

“Eleven thousand, Major,” he begged. “There’s going to be a glut of jewellery on the market, and I’ve had to pay for the knocking them out of their settings.”

“Agreed,” Grant decided. “The amount will go to Mrs. Mat Sarson, Number 17 Pollard’s Road, Newmarket. The money will reach her next week. Is that agreed?”

Amos Grimmett sighed.

“I ought to have made it ten thousand,” he said. “Still, little Mat was a good sort. The money shall go.”

“Next,” Grant enjoined.

Amos Grimmett drew out another packet. He undid the string, took off the lid from a box, and passed the contents round—the two rubies and the diamond from Kensington Museum.

“The most marvellous rubies in the world,” Passiter declared, handling them fondly. “These three stones were insured by the British Government for thirty thousand pounds.”

“Having regard to the magnitude of these sums,” Amos Grimmett declared, “I have been obliged to seek the assistance of some of my friends, and form a small syndicate. We will give twenty-five thousand for them.”

“H’m!” Grant remarked. “Well, that’s the first entry for the competition. What do you say about twenty-five thousand pounds, Passiter?”

Passiter’s lips opened in what could only be described as a snarl.

“The money might do,” he muttered, “but who gets it?”

There was an ominous silence. Amos Grimmett thrust his hand into the huge silver bowl and drew out a brown paper package.

“In this,” he explained, “Doctor Bradman’s contribution, I am not——”

“Wait!” Grant’s voice rang out like a muffled pistol-shot. He rose to his feet, his forefinger lifted.

“What the devil’s wrong?” Passiter demanded.

“You fellows have no sensibility,” Grant declared. “Can’t you hear footsteps in the street? I heard voices just now too.”

He stole over to the curtains and peered downwards. Bradman and Chaplain Lane followed his example.

“There are two or three fellows hanging about at the street corner,” the latter pointed out. “I never noticed that before.”

“I heard the footsteps of more than two or three people,” Grant said uneasily. “There’s no one out, is there? We’re all here.”

Bradman drew back from the curtains.

“If it were any one but you, Chief,” he rejoined, “I should imagine you’d been

drinking. The alley seems to me to be much as usual.”

Grant crossed the room, and stepped into the little recess, purposely built so that the room commanded a view of the restaurant.

“Look here, Doctor,” he said, beckoning insistently to Bradman, “there are fifty or sixty men down in the restaurant. Just look at them, one by one, from table to table. What do you make of them?”

“A very ordinary lot,” Bradman declared. “I’m afraid the restaurant’s going down.”

Grant gnawed his short moustache.

“I’ll tell you what I make of them,” he muttered. “To me they have the stamp of it. I believe at least half of them are plain-clothes men from the Yard.”

Bradman looked at his companion curiously.

“Major,” he suggested, “you’d better let me give you something for your nerves. We’ve had the greatest two months of our lives, and with the end of it naturally comes the break-down. Why, I can tell you the names of at least a dozen of those men. That’s Robert Dunn, the bookmaker—his son-in-law, a wholesale fish-merchant, at the same table. There’s Luke Hadley, the man who bought those three cinemas last week. Scotland Yard men, indeed! You’re crazy!”

Grant swung round on his heel.

“I suppose you’re right,” he admitted. “Come on back.”

They returned to the table.

“Go ahead, Amos,” Grant invited, helping himself to a drink.

“The brown paper parcel,” Grimmett announced, “is the contribution of Doctor Bradman. My only task in connection with it has been to reduce the various forms of currency to English pounds. It is a very wonderful haul indeed—very wonderful—but I understand that a lady who has become Doctor Bradman’s wife claims a certain share in it.”

“Not only that, but she’s got to have it,” the Doctor observed. “There’s sixty thousand there, but only thirty thousand available.”

“That will do for the present then,” Grant said. “We are going to discuss the matter of allocation presently.”

Grimmett drew out another brown paper packet.

“Thousand-dollar notes,” he announced—“Mr. Chaplain Lane’s contribution, duly counted out and on to-day’s rate of exchange worth seventy-two thousand pounds. Something has to be deducted here, however, for the original capital sunk, and for the lady who assisted our friend.”

“A marvellous recovery, that!” Grant murmured. “We owe something, always, to

our friends who bring in the cash. Put it down, Grimmiett.”

In went Amos Grimmiett’s hand once more, and with jealous fingers he held out a great string of diamonds, and again a more wonderful one of emeralds.

“The jewels of Midara,” he exclaimed huskily. “The world’s epic theft, gentlemen, the most dramatic episode of modern times. My friends who were helping me, Major, have stretched a point for these jewels. We value them at, and we shall give for them, eighty thousand pounds.”

“Listen!” Grant exclaimed suddenly.

They all turned their heads. The music was playing below. The distant hum of voices rose from the restaurant, together with the pattering of feet from the dancers.

“Listen to what?” Chaplain Lane demanded, for him almost irritably.

Eustace Grant rose from his place, walked to the door, unlocked it, and looked out. He lingered there for a time. Then he came back.

“Sorry,” he apologized. “Bradman’s right, I suppose—I want a nerve tonic, or else my ears have gone wrong. Get on with it, Grimmiett. The sooner we’ve finished the valuations the better.”

Grimmiett’s hand once more sought the bowl.

“Just one moment,” Grant interrupted. “Our friend John Frisby’s contribution cannot be shown, but, dangerous though it is to hold, it represents a wonderful enterprise. A firm of Chinese merchants in the City paid into the banking account of the Club this afternoon sixty thousand pounds, the result of the sale of a consignment of cocaine, heroin, and a drug which we do not mention by name. Enter that amount on the list, if you please, Mr. Grimmiett, as the contribution of our friend John Frisby.”

Amos Grimmiett thrust in his hand, and drew out the last packet. As he shook away the paper there was a little murmur. Amos Grimmiett himself was like a man moved to a state of ecstasy. His eyes devoured the diamond.

“My friends,” he announced, “however much we may regret it, this ends the competition. My syndicate will give a hundred thousand pounds for ‘The Light of China,’ and we shall make a better profit on it than on any of these other things. One hundred thousand pounds to Nick of New York.”

There was a strange little murmur of voices. It certainly did not indicate applause. It was more like a threat. Nick seemed to feel them edging towards him.

“Listen, gentlemen,” he said, “the competition into which we all entered was my idea. We were all over-apt to talk about our own exploits. In fact, as criminals,” he went on, “we’re in a queer position, for whilst our business is to hide in the secret corners of the world, our instinct is rather to live in the crowded places, and boast of

our success. I offer you atonement for an ill-considered scheme. I propose that each man should keep what belongs to him, as long as he may, or send it into the common fund and divide, whichever has been your custom.”

There was a stupefied silence. Eustace Grant drew a deep sigh.

“Our friend from the other side of the seas,” he observed, “has anticipated a suggestion on our part. As things are, we still have to remember, with deep regret and humility, that our friend Nick of New York has carried out the greatest enterprise of any. However, let us not go back upon our motto—crooks pay. We accept Nick of New York’s offer. Nick of New York, we drink your health.”

They all stood up. Suddenly a familiar, and yet a curiously altered, voice rang through the room. A dozen paces away, though they had seen him disappear down the stairs, and though every door was locked, stood George, and, more amazing than anything else in the world, he held in his hands, with an air of great familiarity, a pair of flat automatics.

“Well,” he said, “you want to drink my health. I’m here.”

“What the hell’s the matter with you, George?” Grant exclaimed. “Put those guns down, you fool.”

George grinned—a familiar and yet an altered grin.

“I’d be a bigger fool if I did,” he rejoined. “You ask who I am, and I’ll tell you. I’m Nick of New York.”

Passiter slouched across the table, sweeping two glasses on to the floor. Hungry John dropped on his knees. Amos Grimmett shook with fear. The Doctor rose from his place, and as he rose George’s left-hand gun followed his movements. Chaplain Lane found voice.

“What the hell do you mean by saying you’re Nick of New York?” he demanded.

“Because it’s the honest to God truth,” was the harsh reply. “I came over here meaning to leg in with you. Since I found out what was going on I’ve lain low. I’ve let you work for me. Your guns have gone into the dustbin, and if I kill the lot of you I don’t mind. I want the loot, and I’m going to have it, but I’ll tell you this before I’ve done with you. Call yourselves gangsters. Call yourselves classic criminals. You’re nothing but a pack of shallow-headed mugs, children, suckers. Nick of New York, indeed! Look at your Nick of New York, and ask him who he is.”

“I think,” Nick said pleasantly, “that our friend George must have been drinking.”

Grant sprang to his feet.

“My God, man,” he cried, “I’ve never been sure of you! Who are you?”

“Who is he?” George from the background mocked. “About time you asked. I’ll

tell you in five minutes. Clear off now the lot of you. Stand with your backs to that wall—my God, if you don't I'll pick you off one by one. Are you getting up, Passiter? I always hated you, you scowling brute. Get flat to the wall, or you'll have one of those through your middle, and not your arm."

A spit of flame, a snapping report, and Passiter's arm fell helpless by his side. He leaped to the wall. Amos Grimmett was already there, his hands high above his head. The others followed. Only the pseudo Nick of New York remained at the table, watching his companion stuffing his pockets with the jewels, lining himself everywhere with the thousand dollar bills.

"A very good hold-up, George," he approved, with a smile. "I wonder how far you think you're going to get away with that lot?"

"You hold your tongue," was the snarling response, "or you'll go to the wall with the others. I've bullets enough to send every one of you to hell. Try it!" he almost shouted, as he watched Grant quivering on his toes. "Try a rush, my soldier hero! There isn't a man of you could reach this table, and you know it. I've got what I want. I've taken what Nick of New York wants away from you set of braggarts. Stay where you are till I get to the door, and I'll tell you who your pal is."

The new George, with swift, slinking footsteps, went backwards to the wall. He turned the key. His fingers rested upon the handle.

"Come after me, if you want to, all of you," he jeered. "I plan these things better than you. I am just a waiter, and I'm going where I choose. There isn't one of you who's going to leave here except in the Black Maria. How I've laughed at you night after night when you've planned your schemes! Nick of New York indeed! He's Dickins, the detective, the man who pretended to resign from Scotland Yard!"

He plunged through the door, and they heard him laugh as he passed down the stairs. Grant came forward from his place. The others followed him. They had forgotten their fear. They were like a pack of wolves as they came back to the table. Grant took a seat by Dickins's side.

"We don't need a gun to kill you, Dickins," he said. "A gun would be too merciful. Have you ever heard of a man being broken into pieces, smashed into a jelly, slowly torn limb from limb? It's what's going to happen to you."

"I'm not so sure," Dickins answered.

His foot stole slowly backwards. The room was in sudden darkness, every light extinguished. There was an explosion at the farther end as though a bomb had fallen. Every one was for a moment paralysed. Then the lights flashed on again, and they stood aghast, looking at Dickins's vacant chair.

"Where the hell is he?" Grant cried.

They ran round the room like wild-cats. There was no sign of Dickins.

“He never reached the door, I’ll swear that,” Passiter shrieked. “I’ve stood with my back to it every moment.”

“Behind the counter,” Grant ordered.

Chaplain Lane was there first. He leaned over.

“There’s no one here,” he shouted, “but, my God, there’s a hole in the floor!”

They all rushed to his side. Suddenly, with a yell of horror, Chaplain Lane fell backwards, shrieking, and clutching at the empty air with his hands. Grant, who was close behind, made a valiant spring, cleared the counter even, sobbing and choking, and struck at the terrible object that had risen slowly from the circular black hole, only to fall crashing amongst the glasses, and lie there unconscious. Then, before their terrified eyes, the hideous apparition rose to its full height—a human being, clad in fireman’s helmet and gas-mask, encased in what seemed to be some sort of armour from head to foot, with sieve-like projections for the eyes. From the instrument which he held in his hands came pouring oily grey smoke. Both Frisby and Amos Grimmett staggered for the window, but reeled and fell prostrate before they could cross the room. In less than thirty seconds there was complete silence in the room. From below, in the streets, and on the stairs, came the blowing of whistles. The little company of plain-clothes policemen, wearing gas-masks until the windows were open, who presently entered the room, had nothing to do but place their prisoners on stretchers and carry them to the waiting van.

Dickins, perhaps for the first time in his life, was nervous as he crossed the floor of Martha Dring’s studio a few afternoons later. He knew very well, however, what was in store for him when she shook her head at his outstretched hand.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“So am I,” he answered.

“You are a brave man,” she continued, “and I know that you only did your duty. My brain tells me that I ought to join in with all the others, pat you on the back as a hero, and be thankful that you have rid the country of a terrible band of gangsters, but I can’t do it.”

“In war,” he pleaded, “the secret service man, the spy, ranks high enough. Surely criminals, the enemies of our own people, murderers, killing for lust of gain, are at any rate as bad as a foreign enemy? The country couldn’t honourably exist if gangs like Grant’s and men like Nick of New York were not rooted out. We tried our best to do it by ordinary methods, and we’d found out, what is after all the truth, that the odds are in favour of the intelligent criminal as against the ordinary science of

detection. One had to go into their own country to meet them at their own game. And the end—don't you think I'd sooner have had a fair fight, but supposing I had, what would it have meant? The death of twenty or thirty of my men at least. There wasn't one of that gang would have surrendered without emptying his guns into some poor policeman's body who was only doing his duty. Gas has been used before against criminals, and I claim that it was used mercifully. We took every member of the gang without a wound on either side."

She sighed.

"I suppose you are right," she said. "I only know how I feel. Since you are here, though, I must ask you one question. What happened to Simon Flood?"

"We arrested Flood secretly a fortnight before," he confided. "We had a band of workmen employed soon after the Club closed every night until eight o'clock in the morning altering the passages and exits and making the spiral staircase up for our gas man. . . . Oh, I know what you are thinking about it all," he went on, with a queer little burst of passion, "but can't you realize what my position was? For two months I had suspected Grant of being at the head of a band of gangsters and Flood's Club as being their headquarters. I tried by every possible means to get a line on them, and failed. Brain for brain, they were too clever for me. The day I walked into Flood's Club, and announced myself as Nick of New York, I made my will and left the world behind me. I never expected to come out alive. There wasn't a single moment when I wasn't in danger of my life. You must know that. You may say that I could have arrested them before some of the last adventures. So I could, but I should never have got the lot, and if one by one the men had disappeared the others would have taken fright and cleared out. I took risks. You may say that we paid a high price, when you think of some of those poor people who lost their lives, but we went for a great coup, and we brought it off. Grant's gang of civilized criminals has disappeared. Nick of New York is in prison. Costigan's Hornets are wiped out."

"My dear man," she said, resting her hand upon his shoulder, "I think you are one of the most brilliant and bravest detectives I ever knew in my life, but——"

"Well?"

"But some ghastly freak of nature put me on the wrong side."

He walked with her in silence to the door. At the last moment she paused.

"If it would really make you happier," she promised, "I would shake hands with you on one condition."

"It would make me very much happier," he assured her.

"Tell me how you took the Duchess's diamond?"

He smiled.

“The Duchess, as you must know,” he reminded her, “was the daughter of the Chief Commissioner. She lent it to me.”

She held out her hand.

“I wish I could give you all that you deserve, dear Nick of New York,” she sighed.

THE END

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TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.

[The end of *Inspector Dickins Retires [Gangster's Glory]* by E. (Edward) Phillips Oppenheim]