Nighthawks

John G. Brandon

Title: Nighthawks!
Date of first publication: 1929
Author: John Gordon Brandon (1879-1942)
Date first posted: May 5, 2018
Date last updated: May 5, 2018
Faded Page eBook #20180505

This ebook was produced by: Al Haines, Cindy Beyer & the online Distributed Proofreaders Canada team at http://www.pgdpcanada.net

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE BIG HEART
YOUNG LOVE
THE JOY RIDE

NIGHTHAWKS!

BY

JOHN G. BRANDON

METHUEN & CO. LTD.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

First Published in 1929

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

CONTENTS

‘If we knew all,
Then we might judge.’

Nighthawks!

PROLOGUE

TWO MEN

THE younger of the two men sitting upon their pallets in the end cell, Corridor D, of a New York prison, lifted his head with a quick start as a sudden shrill scream of agony rang through the long steel-grated passage. It was followed by the quick thudding of blows falling, the scuffling of feet, a second shriek dying off into a ghastly, long-drawn moan. Another heavier thud —then stillness.

From along the line of cells—cages to be exact, each confining its pair of delinquents, ‘suspects,’ or ‘remands,’ as it might be—came the murmur of men at the bars of their cells; low, savage cursing at the uniformed authors of this latest outrage upon helplessness.

With the first scream, this particular young man was upon his feet, his handsome face dyed with the crimson flush of anger; eyes blazing, fists clenched, his great torso heaving with the quick breathing of impotent rage.

‘Who are they doing that to?’ he demanded of his companion.

The elder, who had sat, apparently, perfectly unmoved, shrugged his thin, bent shoulders and gave a queer, hard laugh. He was a little gray-haired man of perhaps fifty, in whose deep-set eyes, peeping through enormous fringing eyebrows, there was not lacking a certain philosophic humour.

‘God, brother?’ he asked laconically. ‘What ’ud God have to do here? Never mind what they taught y’ in the caddychism, the on’y God there is here wears uniform. Yeh; an’ his angels is dressed in blue, an’ carries a gun in one hand an’ a night-stick in the other. They’re givin’ some poor guy the works. Some guys is sure born unlucky, and New York angels is heavy-fisted things t’ buck up against.’

The red anger drained from the face of the man standing rigid, leaving his

fine, frank-looking face a strange grey in the waning half-light and the reflection of the dead-white distempered walls.

'Ye—ye don't mean that they've . . . *finished*?' he asked in a strained, tense whisper in which the touch of the Irish brogue was very plain.

'He ain't the first acciden' that's happened here, an' he won't be the las'.'

'Who is he . . . but, of course, you've probably no more idea than I have.'

'But, of course,' the older man mimicked softly, 'that's just where you got it wrong. There's not much goes on we old hands don't get wise to. He's a poor guy the plain-clothes dicks had over at the Mulberry Street pen. Third-degreed him till he put 'em in wrong by goin' bug-house. Then they slipped him over here out of the way. The papers makes a squeal nowadays if they give anybody th' whole works. 'S afternoon he broke out clean crazy, so that makes him a 'refractory,' don't it? Sure it does. And don't they have to dis'pline a 'refractory'? You betcha—it's regulations. Well, he's had his, and that's the end of his story.'

'But, good God, they can't . . .'

The white-haired man's lips twisted amusedly.

'I told y' about Him jus' now,' he remarked. ' 'N' as to what they *can't* do . . . forget it, brother, forget it. 'N' I'm going to hand you out th' real dope on things here. I get your class; did the first second I lamped you. You're no nighthawk. You're in wrong, but you're no crook. You're as straight as a foot-rule; any damn' fool cu'd see that.'

'The magistrate, judge, whatever they call him, couldn't,' the other reminded him wearily.

'All those birds see is what they're told to. It's kinda tough, an' you're takin' it bad. You'll get over it—quicker'n y' think. I kinda took t' you right off when I came in t'day, and I'm goin' to put y' wise to things. For a start, sit down. If a guard sneaked along t' see who looked as if they'd been listening they might put y' through it.'

The man standing made a gesture of reckless contempt.

'I know,' the little man smiled. 'You'd be game for a dozen of 'em in a fair scrap. And you're built for th' job too. An' for all your good looks, you got a fightin' face. But they'd fix you, brother; get that straight. You're a grand lookin' fella now, but when they'd done with the rubber hose, and th' night-sticks, and the boots, your face wud make folks shiver t' look at. Y'see this?' He held up his right leg and rubbed it gently, 'Third degree. A young p'lice-lieutenant done that; done it with his own hands when I wouldn't sign up a nice c'nfess they'd got all wrote out for me. Yeh; while others held me down

on a table. A li'l' guy like me. Don't it beat hell? Twisted it right out till somethin' cracked. And they couldn't get a cheep out o' me. But they framed me for seven years up the river, jes' the same. No good squealin'—not unless you got some one behind ya with a pull. That's how I'm fixed now. I gotta shyster attorney who tells 'em where they step off. He could send one-half 'em up for life, and more'n one to the chair if he squeaked. He's the biggest crook of the lot, and they'd turn the guns on to him if it wasn't for papers he's got hid away—in case an' acciden' like that took place. It's on'y that he's outa town that my bail-bond's late coming through. I'll be out before y' can say knife. What they got you in on?'

'The worst crime in America that I can see,' came slowly from the big man's lips. 'Poverty.'

The little man cocked an acute eye upon him and nodded sympathetically.

'Sleepin' in Central Park, mebbe? Sure. Vag . . . ninety days. I know,' said he. 'Well, there's worse can happen you. Did they have you at Mulberry Street? In what they call "The Barrel"?'

'If you mean a place where we were herded for inspection by masked men —yes.'

'That's not so good. Now every plain-clothes dick in this burg has got your face tabbed. Take y'r dabs?'

'Dabs?'

'Finger prints.'

'Yes; they didn't spare me that indignity,' was the bitter answer.

The little lame man shook his head.

'There cert'nly is no shortage of indigniteries over at Mulberry Street,' he said. 'What do they call you?'

The other looked at him directly.

'Over there I refused to give any name,' he said through shut teeth. 'They threatened and I told them they could go to hell.' He uttered a grim laugh. 'But you're a friendly soul, the first I've met in many a day, and if it gives you any pleasure ye can call me . . . "Larry".'

'Larry'll do grand,' the little man said amiably. An' I'm "Limpy" Joe Swiggers. Maybe you've heard o' that name—read it in the papers maybe. They often have give me a write-up.' A certain naïve pride came into his voice. 'The Ace of Combinations', some bright newspaper boy called me. For combination safes, of course. That's me, Larry; "Limpy" Joe Swiggers!'

The other stared at him in unbounded amazement.

‘You,’ he uttered at a complete loss. ‘And I’d have staked my life you were just such another down-and-out unfortunate as myself.’

Quietly, very quietly the answer came back at him.

‘I was that way once, Larry. Just the same as you—straight as a foot-rule, like I said before. That was before they framed a crime on me I knew nothing about. After that, I thought if I was going to be booked as an “habitual,” I’d better get busy and do something towards deservin’ it. It so happened that I was a locksmith by trade—served twelve years with one of the biggest safe constructors in the world—so I became a safe *destructor*, as you might say.’ He chuckled. ‘Brother, what I’ve done to some steel boxes in this little old town is a crime. It’s a strange thing,’ he went on, musingly reminiscent, ‘in all I’ve done, I never took a turn on the one I was first sent up for breaking. I’ve never so much as seen it yet, an’ I done seven years for it. Funny that—in a way. But one day I’ll look it over—sure enough. I’m savin’ that—along with another job I’ve waited a long time to square up. It’ll keep a while.’ Abruptly he changed the subject. ‘So they gave y’ the full ninety, did they?’

The Irishman’s voice dropped to a tense whisper.

‘If they keep me caged here for ninety days and nights, I’ll either be a raving madman—or God knows what!’

The deep-set eyes of the little cracksman fixed upon him, alight with compassion.

‘I know, Larry,’ he said. ‘I’ve been through it before y’. It’s just hell raw. But it’ll wear off. I know what it is. Don’t forget it, I *know*.’ He made an effort, clumsy but kindly, to again turn the subject.

‘What in the name of Mike brought y’ t’ this side, Larry?’ he inquired. ‘One thing I’ll tell y’ fr’ nothin’: y’ never come by way of the steerage an’ Ellis Island. An’ it wasn’t like a good many—a jump ahead of the cops. I’d bet my lid on that.’

‘Ye’d win. My breed have always been a daredevil lot, but not in that way. Nothing to do after the war—and nothing in England to even try at. Still less in Ireland; and I thought that somewhere in this great country there’d be something for an out-of-work soldier of fortune hard-bitten by the bug of restlessness, who’d face the divil himself in a clean cause, with or without pay, if there was just bread and butter in it. But it doesn’t seem that there is.’ A whimsical sigh was forced from his lips. ‘And here’s me bould adventurer; here’s what’s come of the lunatic dreams of . . .’—he pulled himself up with a jerk—‘Here I am anyhow and . . . Ah, don’t let’s talk of it.’

There was a curiously reflective look in the half-shut eyes of his listener; an appraising look that searched down deep and through the man speaking so

simply and sincerely. The little safe-breaker knew his fellows—knew a quitter or a double-crosser when he saw one, anyway. There was nothing of either about this big fellow with the handsome face and the weary, anxious eyes. Yeh; he was clean right through and all over. And *game*—the blue eyes might be anxious, but they were steady, unflinching, looked straight at a man. A fighter's eyes. And he was bred right. The right sort and the right class to stand the gaffs. Not the kind to crumple up and kick-in squealing when the tight-pinch, the ugly corner came suddenly to be dealt with. An educated guy; brains, resource in a pinch—you betcha. The man "Limpy" Joe Swiggers had waited a long time—a helluva long time—to come up with. With this Larry boy he'd sort over the big job. The one he'd already done the time for—then skiddoo! Europe, maybe . . . and a nice, soft time; plenty of skads, nothing to do and plenty of time to do it in. The cops had just got him right to talk to.

He opened his mouth to speak but, whatever it was that was upon the tip of his tongue to put forward, it was not destined to be uttered at that particular moment at any rate. There was a noisy unlocking of the end iron grating and a bull-necked, heavy-jowled guard came along the passage, unlocked the door of their own particular grating and with a jerk of his thumb motioned Mr. Swiggers out.

'Your pass-out has come through, "Limpy",' he informed that gentleman jocosely. 'The Main Guys at City Hall has spoke nice for you. Beat it for the office an' get your little bo-kay from the Cap. He's over fr'm Mulberry Street and sure pleased; showin' all his teeth in one grand smile.'

'I'll bet he is, Mike,' returned Mr. Swiggers with equal affability. 'And when the Cap smiles, you don't have to look far for who's sufferin' grief an' pain.'

From his breast pocket he took a pocket-book stuffed with dollar bills of every denomination. Deftly stripping a ten from the wad he passed it across to the waiting guard.

'I want a private word in this laddie-buck's ear, Mike,' he whispered confidentially. 'One minute along the corridor, and I'm with y'.'

Without a word Officer Mike took the note and sauntered out of earshot.

'Larry,' whispered the little cracksman pressing something into his hand, 'there's fifty bucks against your coming out. Now, listen: I'm going straight to Lolinsky to pull the wires for you. Ninety days vag won't take him half an hour. As soon as you're free come to Casey's speak-easy on Hester Street. Any cop will show ye,' he informed him humorously. 'Just ask for me and pass one word: "Acid".' He made for the door.

'Yes, but,' began the other staring from the fifty dollar bill in his hand to

the departing Swiggers, ‘I can’t . . .’

‘Can’t nothin’!’ interrupted “Limpy” Joe. ‘Ain’t it th’ poor that helps the poor? Then, what the hell? Don’t forget, Casey’s on Hester Street. Mebbe, see y’ f’r supper.’ Then he was gone, dragging his lame foot with a peculiar action along the passage, and leaving a semi-stunned man staring through the bars after him with a keen sense of loneliness at his heart. Three o’clock rang out from some near-by clock as Mr. Swiggers passed the outer gates into freedom. Inside, a man stopped his incessant pacing of the cell to count the strokes.

It was scarcely three hours later when, under the magic of Mr. Swiggers’ shyster attorney, the small wicket set in the great doors opened to pass him once again into a world that, apparently, had no use for him. The Police-captain’s words to him at parting were not reassuring.

Turning strange ice-green eyes upon him from where he sat, his feet upon a desk, partly smoking, partly chewing a big green cigar, Captain Lanningan spoke his little piece. He was a young man for the position he held; long, lean, lantern-jawed and as hard as the mahogany his skin resembled. The unfortunate before him knew that never in his life had he seen so hard, so tough an individual. It needed but a look at the Captain to know that the quality of his mercy was not strained—it was entirely non-existent. Those pale opaline eyes were terrible.

In a tone as icy as his expression he began:

‘I’ve just stepped over from Mulberry Street to tell you this is your lucky day,’ he said. Without moving anything more than the direction of his eyes, he glanced at a paper upon the desk before him.

‘Name refused,’ he read slowly, then those horrible eyes travelled slowly back and fixed upon those of the man opposite.

‘I’m goin’ to wise you that names aren’t refused here,’ he continued, ‘not to get away with it. Not for long. Between this and daylight to-morrow you would have come across with yours. Get me? However, I’ve just had a call in from City Hall to say that your arrest was an error of judgment and you’re to be turned loose. So I’ll just say again that you’re lucky.’

He leaned forward and stared with horrible fixity. The pale irises of his eyes went almost white. ‘When you’re brought in again,’ he advised grimly, ‘you have that name handy. And that won’t be so long, either. Lolinsky is the boy that’s worked you free and whoever Lolinsky is behind is *crook*. We had nothing on you before. If you’d spat your name and done your ninety nobody would ever have remembered you were on earth when you came out. Now, it’s different. We’ve got you taped and indexed now, Mr. No Name. You’re one of

Lolinsky's birds. All right. We've got your prints and when we want you we'll have *you*. And next trip we'll see about any errors of judgment. Don't forget it. *Get!'*

'You sound as if you wanted to make a crook of me,' almost shouted a savagely indignant man.

'You'll find out what we want as you go along,' was the imperturbable retort. 'Beat it—while your boots are good.'

The big Irishman drew himself up, his eyes blazing, his breath coming quick and hard.

'Because my cell-mate seems to have escaped you, you're savage at me,' he hissed. 'I'm—I'm damned glad he did.'

The Captain yawned and stroked his meticulously shaved chin.

' "Limpy"?' he observed serenely. 'I'm not sorry myself. "Limpy" Joe Swiggers is about the only crook I'd lift a finger to save from the chair—you included. "Limpy" got a helluva raw deal once on a time, an' he never turned dirty on it. An' what's more, the man that give it to him wasn't fit to wipe his shoes. Anything "Limpy" puts up against us we've got no kick—except in the way of business. But he ain't you—you big sap.' He leaned forward again, a twisted grin at his thin-lipped, cold mouth. 'And if you're in sight in another ten seconds, you'll get tossed out on your skull first, then brought straight in again on a charge of assault. And we'll see what Mr. Lolinsky does with *that*! For the last time—*get*!'

The Irishman had moved but a few feet from the wicket door toward the big gates that led to the street when, almost inadvertently, he stopped to consider. Which way? To see the little man who had given him freedom—or to disappear out of this great city at once before further inspired mishap could befall him? Heavy-eyed and heavy-hearted he stood a moment endeavouring to make up his mind. A bowler-hatted man stepped out from a chatting group who, he had the feeling, had been surreptitiously eyeing him, and came close to him.

'Beat it, you big stiff,' he ordered; 'unless y' want to go in again.'

The man addressed made no answer, but moved off hurriedly. As he did so, his eyes fell upon a woman, a woman whom he could see was young, beautiful, perfectly dressed. Involuntarily his eyes rested upon her a moment; it seemed so long since he had known and been the friend of women of that class. A half sigh broke from his lips. 'Poverty,' he muttered, 'closes more doors than either folly or sin.' It seemed to him that in passing she turned curious, pitying eyes upon him, but he resolutely turned his head away and made for the street. He felt that she knew as well as he himself did what gate it

was through which he had just emerged.

At his very last glimpse of the main entrance, she was standing in the doorway looking after him.

He asked a direction to Hester Street and hurried away.

CHAPTER I

‘FOUR, NINETY-FOUR, WEST’

UPON that pleasantly, if entirely deceptively-named thoroughfare, Fashion Street, situate in the portion of the great jungle of London known as Spitalfields, the rain was beating down. Not, indeed, that all the other squalid tributaries of the main artery. Commercial Street, E., were not receiving precisely the same treatment; they were. For the matter of that, so, equally, were Mayfair, Belgrave Square and other sacrosanct places of residence in the West End. It was a general and entirely impartial deluge and had been since five o’clock, and Flower Street, or Blossom Street or *Fleur-de-lis*, or any other of the streets of fanciful nomenclature of the vicinity, were receiving no more than their fair share of it.

But it *seemed* worse there than in other spots more salubrious. They had so many other things in compensation, entirely lacking in the mean streets of Spitalfields; and so rain *was* rain down there—a hell-conceived business, never to be cursed sufficiently.

So upon this soaking evening the inhabitants of each side of Flower Street lounged dejectedly in their doorways, and glared at the other side as though it were responsible for the unwelcome liquid visitation. With the exception, that is, of the younger generation of both sexes. They, freed from factory and sweat shop, donned their week-end finery and, rain-coated, repaired to the broad pavement of Aldgate for the evening promenade, and would have done so were the heavens falling in one sheet. Adolescence in the East End is tough.

By half-past seven the rain had abated to an unpleasant drizzle, then slowly ceased altogether. A moment or two after that hour the front door of a house in Fashion Street opened, and a man hurried from it along to Brick Lane, and Whitechapel High Street. Or rather, he hurried out of Fashion Street and around the corner of Brick Lane; after that he sauntered in very leisurely fashion along to the main thoroughfare.

Even coated as he was from eyes down to heels, he made a striking figure; an anomaly in that particular neighbourhood of squalid streets. There was a certain native elegance about his movement entirely different to the people about him; soundless, graceful, and also in some indescribable way, stealthy, cat-like. A person this, one would judge who, when occasion demanded, could move with the rapidity of forked lightning.

Although nothing of his countenance was to be seen between the

conjunction of turned-down, soft-felt hat and upturned collar but his dark, fiery, and restless eyes, no one, meeting their penetrating glance, would have taken him for an Englishman, or, indeed, of Anglo-Saxon origin in any degree. A dominant personality this man, whatever his breed.

An acute observer would have noticed that, although turned up at the bottoms for protection from the mud, the trousers to be seen under the hem of his overcoat were those of conventional evening dress which made yet another thing to mark him out as a man alone amongst those about him, for by no possibility could he have been mistaken for a waiter going to late work—the only persons to be so garbed in that locality.

It would seem that the leisureliness with which he proceeded was not altogether a matter of aimlessness, for with every step he took, his eyes flashed hither and thither from one side of the road to the other, as though either seeking some one, or keeping close watch amongst those who moved to and from Commercial Street.

At the corner of that thoroughfare he paused, hidden in a deep shadow; yet not so obliterated but that after a minute or two a terrible-looking human derelict who looked to be in the last stages of dirt and destitution, mooched into and through that occupied blot of darkness.

‘When it rains, it snows,’ he muttered cryptically.

‘Four, ninety-four, West,’ were the equally cryptic words given him. He drifted on towards Aldgate and was lost in the crowd.

The tall man in the long overcoat moved, this time swiftly, across the road, and as a taxi crawled past with flag up, sprang lithely into it without the formality of hailing the considerably surprised driver. From the window nearest him he gave his instructions in the tones of a man used to giving orders and having them instantly obeyed.

‘Piccadilly Circus.’

‘Piccadilly. Right, sir.’

It was an entirely altered person who first stopped, then stepped from the vehicle in Shaftesbury Avenue, a hundred yards or so above the Circus. A man in immaculate evening dress, the overcoat now flung widely open. The soft-felt hat was gone—into the pocket of his overcoat probably; in its place he wore an opera-hat. He was also wearing a monocle.

Seen by him literally for the first time, the taximan looked askance at the face of the man who had so unceremoniously boarded him, and who now paid him his fare and a more than liberal tip.

‘An’ I don’t think I should run a long ways to ’ave a barge with you, Lord

What's y'r-name,' he muttered, as he cranked up again. 'You're free an' 'andy with your tips, but if you ain't a wicked 'ound underneath—then I never seen one.'

The object of this entirely unsolicited criticism proceeded leisurely along the north side of the Avenue, making, with his erect carriage, perfect tailoring and grooming, a distinguished figure that drew upon itself more than one curious, and admiring, feminine eye.

One who, outwardly at least, might have been taken for such an admirer, floated towards him along the pavement between Wardour and Dean Streets. She was an over-complexioned, vivacious-looking little lady dressed in the height of fashion and a little over, who seemed to have no aversion to exhibiting an extremely shapely pair of silk-clad knees below an excessively abbreviated skirt. Her profession was very, very obvious. As old, very nearly, as Eve herself.

She was humming a gay little French *chansonette* as she came along, her bright, strongly-blacked eyes roving questioningly, and keenly appraising, over such of the opposite sex whose course brought them into anything like juxtaposition with her. Then, suddenly, she saw the tall, monocled man with the coat upon his arm advancing.

The sight had, seemingly, a tremendous effect upon her. The bright, bird-like face paled under its coating of paint; the gay little song almost died from the red-ripe lips; almost, not quite; with an effort she steadied herself and came on with the same jauntiness as before, but there was the faintest tremor in her voice, and the look which had flashed into her eyes was unmistakably one of fear.

'*Bon soir, m'sieu*,' she greeted, sidling by him and giving him the arch, questioning glance of her trade.

His eyes, now cold, contemptuous, and menacing, took her in from little smart *cloche* hat to high French heels.

'Ah,' he uttered harshly, 'so the Mam'selle Leonie Malpage is a fool who does not know that when it rains, it snows. I will remember. Get word to the American, Devlin; the others have been notified,' then instantly added those strange numbers: 'Four, ninety-four, West.' He passed on, leaving her moving upon her way mechanically as might one not quite certain of what one is doing. Once she glanced back nervously, but he had crossed the road and turned down a side street. When she herself hurriedly turned a corner out of the Avenue, her breath was coming in quick convulsive sobs. The painted, doll-like face had suddenly gone drawn and haggard.

But whatever the meaning of the words the man had twice spoken that

night they had the effect, in this particular instance, of creating a hectically feverish excitement, greater even than the fear inspired by the mere appearance of the man who had uttered them.

For some minutes she stood thinking hard, then at an inordinately quick pace—so much so that at times the pretty silk-clad legs were remarkably near to running—set off by a devious, in-and-out route through ill-lit streets and back cuts.

It was upon emerging from one of them that the eyes of a tall, thick-set elderly man lounging in the dark doorway of a lock-up shop fell upon her. It was at first purely an idle glance, but as she stood hesitating a moment and glancing quickly up and down the street before moving, it changed to one of a deeper, more searching and speculative character.

'Know that woman?' he asked abruptly of some person still deeper in the shadowed doorway.

'Yes, sir. She's been about the West End for about a year or so now. One of the regulars.'

'Ever been in our hands?'

'Not that I know of, sir. I'm pretty sure she hasn't.'

'H'm! Wonder what made her run out of that lane like that. When a woman dressed that fashion starts running, there's either something happened or about to happen. H'm! I'll keep that lady's face in mind.'

The first disengaged taxi that came along she hailed, jumped in and was driven rapidly in the direction of Oxford Street.

The grey-haired man grunted.

'She'll bear looking into,' he asserted with the blunt finality of a person of consequence. Equally as bluntly he swung round upon his younger companion. 'Aren't you assigned to keep an eye on that wine-dive of Lambrino's?' he demanded.

'Yes, sir.'

'Very well. Get about your business. And don't give them a dog's chance to wriggle out. I want that place closed down; the sooner the better.'

Without another word he turned upon his heel and proceeded slowly towards Shaftesbury Avenue. The man he had just left heaved a heart-felt sigh of relief.

The Divisional-Sooper, Dallenby, in Detective Littlewood's opinion, was one of the things sent to try his men—and by the Lord Harry he *did*.

But the 'Soop' was apparently moving towards some ultimate destination

by devious ways though well-defined method. Time and again he debouched suddenly from a main thoroughfare and entered some dirty, half-hidden little rendezvous not worthy of the name of café, and there stood staring with cold, inimical eyes upon the assembled company. One by one he eyed them steadily, speculatively; and while he did so the falling of the proverbial pin might have sounded as the clap of thunder. Where the feminine sex graced the company the silent inquisition was often so protracted that had the fair recipients of his dour attentions screamed aloud from sheer over-taut nerves no one could have been greatly surprised. And then he departed as suddenly and silently as he had appeared.

There were not a few places infinitely more pretentious, places of softly-lit tables where the clientele ate their food to the soft strains of a musical trio or quartet, where the appearance of the stolid serge-clad figure in the doorway, his hard eyes moving slowly from individual to individual caused a sudden and complete cessation of conversation. Some few there might be, there by pure chance, who would stare back in annoyance at the excessively rude man to whom the manager was so obsequious, but not many. His departure, just as at poorer places, was usually the signal for very genuine sighs of relief.

Eventually his progress brought him to the corner of Old Compton and Wardour Streets. In another of those shadows he seemed so fond of he stood and glanced at the illuminated dial of his wrist-watch.

‘Nothing to-night,’ he muttered and turned slowly back into Wardour Street. Before he had gone a hundred yards a youth, a semi-ragged, wholly underfed stripling, caught up with him.

‘Missed y’ at the other place, guv’nor,’ he wheezed in a ghastly husk which spoke volumes as to the condition of his lungs.

‘You’ll do that once too often,’ was the uncompromising reply.

‘Couldn’t help it. I ’ad to get up from Aldgate.’

Dallenby shot him a keen, penetrating glance.

‘Well?’ he demanded.

‘I was nosin’ about the corner of Brick Street when I heard a ol’ *schnorrer* give the orffice to a bloke in a dark doorway. “When it rains, it snows,” he says, an’ t’other bloke says: “Four, ninety-four, West.” ’

The Superintendent’s brows screwed together.

‘ “Four, ninety-four West! When it rains it snows.” What’s that mean? Doesn’t sound sense.’

‘I’d never a’ took any notice of it on’y later I was pokin’ about Aldgate St. Mary Station keepin’ an eye out for that Becky Oisenbaum y’ want for . . .’

‘Shut up,’ snapped Dallenby.

‘. . . that girl y’ want, when I see the same ol’ *schnorrer* watchin’ about him. I took a good liker at ’im an’ then I spotted sunnink. His ’air an’ whiskers wasn’t real. They was a fake.’

‘Ah!’ It was a soft long-drawn note. ‘Well?’

‘ ’E ’angs about until a dark, foreigngy-lookin’ bloke comes along and I seen the old ’un give ’im a sign. ’E walks so ’e come close to ol’ whiskers an’ I ’eard ’im git the same orffice: Four, ninety-four West.’ “When it rains, it snows,” the other bloke says just same as before. Then ’e ’ops it up Whitechapel an’ the foreigngy-lookin’ bloke nips into the station and takes a tram for Oxford Circus. I’m in right be’ind ’im, so I ’ears where and tails ’im up. But ’e slipped me in one o’ them little streets be’ind Oxford Circus station. So I ’urried on to pick you up.’

‘ “Four, ninety-four, West.” “When it rains, it snows,” ’ the Superintendent repeated ruminatively. ‘H’m! You’d know the old *schnorrer* if you saw him in that get-up again?’

‘Pick ’im aht of a thousan’,’ was the confident reply.

‘Get a sight of the man who first passed the numbers, pass-word—whatever it is?’

The ‘nose’ shook his head.

‘Never ’ad a ’ope the way ’e was ’id, ’ceptin’ ’e ’ad on a slouch ’at that come down near t’ the collar of e’s overcoat. I on’y seen that when ’e ’opped acrost the road to a taxi. But the other two I’d know anywhere. And them was the words: “Four, ninety-four, West.” An’ the other blokes says, “When it rains, it snows.” ’

For the second time the Superintendent repeated them slowly, as though fixing them in his memory.

‘Right,’ he snapped. ‘Get back East and keep your eyes and ears open. And if you don’t want to find out what it’s like “*inside*” watch that the next man you tail doesn’t slip you as this one did to-night. The instant you hear this Four, ninety-four, West again, or pick up either of those men, *stick* to them and report to me when you can. Now clear out.’

Higher up the street from an ill-lit wine shop came the shrill, hysterical laughter of young women. Instantly Dallenby, his eyes narrowed, was on the move towards the place, taking no more notice of the weedy youth beside him than if he had never existed.

‘Well, blimey,’ apostrophized that miserable looking specimen after the long retreating figure, ‘if it ain’t a bleedin’ pleasure to work for you! You’re so

genelm'n-like—an' 'andy wiv y'r money! I *don't* think!'

But he took remarkably good care that the subject of his satirical observation did not hear him, and when the Superintendent returned to the street no sign of him was there to be seen.

CHAPTER II

WHICH INTRODUCES DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR DICK FRAYNE, C.I.D., AND ALSO SEVERAL OTHER HARD-WORKING PEOPLE

IN a very pleasant lounge-bar and buffet situate in a small street off the south side of Shaftesbury Avenue, Detective-Inspector Richard Frayne sat at a small table fortifying himself after the labours of a tiring and, in general, totally unsatisfactory day.

It had been a wearisome round, one which had dragged him to nearly every point of London's compass from the West End to Limehouse Reach, from there up-river to quaint old-world Strand-on-the-Green, by Kew Bridge, to finish up at about eight o'clock not so very far from Deptford.

A day of interrogation approached by every devious and tortuous angle the mind of the Inspector could mentally devise to extract information, but met in each and every instance by tortuosity equally skilled in evasion. Either that or a blank vacancy, as maddening as it was impenetrable.

And big things were at issue. Dope-running on the grand scale in quantities such as had never before been attempted. Customs and the river-police were at their wits' end. Ship after ship had been searched, avenue after avenue of possible means of distribution explored, but always the result was the same: so far only a blank wall beyond which there seemed to be no penetrating. Where it came from, how it was worked ashore, and into whose hands it finally went for peddling in small lots remained, after months of work, three insoluble mysteries. The whole working of the thing was sheer, undiluted genius, showing organization of the highest order, and co-operation of a kind not often found in criminal ventures. Everything pointed to the existence of a cosmopolitan gang whose ramifications spread over many continental ports but whose headquarters were in London. But, that admitted, not one single thing else pointed anywhere. As for one solid tangible fact to incriminate any single individual . . . nothing at all. After four months of the closest ferreting, Dick Frayne was no nearer applying for a warrant for any specific individual than he had been on the day he was given charge of the investigation.

Certainly, there was this; he must have got, unknown to him, close enough to the heart of things to have scared the runners. For a week or two there had been a complete cessation of the deadly white stream into the West End at any rate. The provincial police also reported a marked decrease of the supply. Had he only been able to know just at which stage of his probing around he had put the wind up them, there might have been some chance of following up. As it

was . . .

It was in a slightly dejected frame of mind that, somewhere approaching nine o'clock, he found himself deposited at the Charing Cross Road end of Shaftesbury Avenue. An unfortunate time, too late to dine at his usual restaurant, and too early by a good hour to take supper there.

Upon the horns of a dilemma, and with his inner man crying aloud the fact that, beyond a sandwich at a riverside pub along Greenwich Reach, it had received no attention since breakfast, there suddenly recurred to his mind mention of a place near by where he could get as good oysters as any in London, when the succulent bivalve was in season. A glance at his bus and tube crumpled clothes in the door mirror of a neighbouring *modiste*, made up his fastidious mind for him—he would explore the unknown. Which, it struck him, was an unusual thing for him in the West End where he lived, worked, and knew, he had thought, every square foot of ground. He expected when he did discover the place it would prove to be an old haunt, known to him but temporarily forgotten, where, doubtless, through mirrors or in any other way but eye to eye frankly, more than one of his old 'clients' would be furtively—and uneasily—eyeing his advent, and still more anxiously awaiting his departure.

Upon arrival, however, he found matters to be entirely the reverse of his anticipation. One cursory glance around the circular bar, the smaller one at the rear where edible delicacies were obtainable, the smaller tables occupied by a chattering crowd of both sexes, revealed to his keen eye no worse company than the smaller fry of the cinema world. Small-part people, 'extra ladies and gentlemen' of the better class, here an assistant producer (anxiously watched) on the look-out for 'types' called for by his director, there a little group of camera men discussing earnestly their particular angle of the business.

There were others to be seen of obviously a lower strata, professionally—dwellers upon the fringe of the silver screen. An animated and well-dressed people, youth and good looks predominating for the greater part; though here and there were to be seen older, careworn faces, male and female, whose owners had made careful and skilful effort to conceal the ravages hardship and the years had wrought.

Strange types, though, he found himself thinking as he loitered over his oysters; but he supposed that was only natural in a business where a person to be of any value at all had to be able to represent convincingly anything and everything but what he or she actually was. Decent people enough, they seemed; a bit too much given to the first person singular as a topic of conversation, perhaps, but otherwise . . .

It occurred to him also that they must be fairly good plucked 'uns, both men and women, to carry on their uphill battle day after day, year in, year out, even when all hope of ever achieving fame—or even reasonable security of living—must have long since vanished.

Precarious sort of existence; hard enough for men, but how the women managed in the long spells of unemployment he understood they periodically had to endure was beyond him. Yet they all seemed bright, jaunty, and well turned out . . . most of them, at any rate.

Here and there, though, the experienced eye of the Inspector caught bolder, harder ones; sisters of a profession as old as civilization, but in this place and company decorum itself. There, he thought pityingly, with possibly some vague hope, deep at heart, of exchanging the ghastly mockery of life which is the one trade, for the tawdry imitation of it which is the other. Poor creatures—no one knew better than he did the wretchedness of their bedizened existences.

But from his professional point of view all innocuous enough. Young or old, prosperous or otherwise, all harmless enough in so far as any predatory intention towards their fellow-man were concerned. None of the furtive-eyed brigade to be found here.

But you couldn't mistake them for what they were, he mused: a folk quite apart from the ordinary workaday world. Put them in a crowd and a discerning eye could pick them out one by one with absolute certainty. Their vocation was stamped upon them as it was upon—he was obliged to smile at the simile—the average policeman.

Of which it might be said that, could it be taken as a general rule, then most assuredly Detective-Inspector Frayne was the exception needed to prove it. For he might be anything in the wide world that a good-looking, meticulously dressed and groomed man of three and thirty might be—other than what he actually was.

Yet it was barely ten years—and after three years of active service abroad—that young Dick Frayne had set out upon his first 'beat' with L Division, Metropolitan Police, clad in the familiar blue uniform. Demobbed, jobless, and with a widowed mother to support—a mother, by the way, who had denied herself most things to give her son an education—he had joined 'the force' in sheer desperation. His rapid rise had been one of the romances of that not altogether romantic service.

He himself would have assured you that it had all been blind luck; 'the breaks,' to use a quaint Americanism, had come his way. But there were others, high up at Headquarters, who would have speedily demolished that modest theory; who would have assured you with much greater force that luck,

undoubted factor as it was in the careers of young men, did not take them out of blue and install them for intensive training for the Special Service Branch of the C.I.D. Luck might do that sort of thing at other Police Headquarters of great cities, but not at New Scotland Yard. Neither did luck jump a man to sergeant in three years and an Inspectorship in seven. Not so. To the red brick establishment upon Westminster Embankment not so many uniformed men were called, and of them few, mighty few, were chosen. Not, at any rate, for such delicate work as was the peculiar province of Detective-Inspector Richard Frayne.

Listening to the snatches of earnest conversation that drifted to his keen ears under the lighter chatter and badinage, he found himself comparing his present company with others of greater fame, or notoriety, that he had met. He had acquaintances of both sexes connected with the theatrical and other kindred arts, but they were amongst the more favoured of their kind; people to be seen, or read of, mostly in company of leaders of the smartest set, habitués of the most exclusive and expensive night-clubs. He rather fancied he liked these struggling brethren the better. They at least did not ape anything, nor did they exhibit any desire to be known for anything but just what they were.

Stray words he heard from here and there; words that told of desperate struggle not to be crushed out altogether. Of hard work, repaid often by failure, to recommence the fight again with aching, anxious hearts undaunted by whatever knocks their game brought them. Good luck to them, he thought.

Glancing around, his eye fell upon one whom he noticed for the first time. Not that she was not by far quite the most striking personality in that place, but she had been seated at a solitary table in a rather shadowed corner, and also a little party in front had obscured her completely from the angle at which he sat.

She was, even in this coterie of pretty and vivacious women, a thing entirely apart. There was nothing of prettiness about her, and of vivacity at the moment she showed little; but she was, beyond any question, one of the loveliest creatures he ever remembered to have set eyes upon. And she was not of this set; there could be no mistaking *that*. She no more belonged to it than did he himself—a more or less prosaic police-officer. There was about her an unmistakable air of breed—and something more. Her dress proclaimed her to be a woman of exquisite taste and, he would have wagered, considerable means. It was equally obvious, by the curious glances he saw flung at her, that she was as strange to the habitués of the place as he himself. Who was she and what was she doing there? Some social aspirant for film fame who had heard of this rendezvous, and fancied that here might be found some one to help her towards that end?

He saw that she had upon the table before her a small glass of some

liqueur; but it was as yet untasted. In all probability unwanted; merely an excuse for retaining her seat.

He would have said, principally from her clear yet rich olive-coloured skin and limpid, dark brown eyes, that she was foreign, or at least of foreign extraction. Spanish, perhaps . . . or, still more likely from the general perfection of her grooming and gowning, Vienna. The beautiful face had a sad cast at moments, though; a strained look—possibly nothing but preoccupation over the little batch of letters she had taken from her handbag and from time to time perused earnestly. Now and again she leaned back in her chair with half-closed eyes, a cigarette burning idly away in an unusual jade holder she held in a long and perfectly shaped hand. At such moments that strained look was more marked than ever. Well, whoever she might be, he thought, she was something right out of the ordinary.

Common politeness demanding that he should not sit there staring at her as though she were something on show, Dick Frayne very reluctantly turned his attention elsewhere, and in doing so made acquaintance with quite the most curious pair of ‘types’ he had noted up to the present. They were seated immediately behind the beautiful lady of his interest, so much so that when she leaned back in her chair, not more than a couple of inches separated the backs of their three heads.

These particular two, he thought, must also be something out of the ordinary, for a queerer looking pair of customers it would have been hard to find. The one was short, squat and fat; yet never for a moment did he give any other impression than that of a tremendously powerful man. The breadth of his shoulders was prodigious; topped by a neck that for wrinkled thickness and physical power, would not have disgraced a bull. But it was the extraordinary formation of the man’s head which constituted his greatest peculiarity. It was exactly the shape, from dome to chin, of an egg stood upright upon its thick end—and as destitute of hair. The face gave the impression of a broad, flat expanse, entirely colourless and equally expressionless, save for tiny black eyes that gleamed against the whiteness surrounding them like two black agates. Of either brows or lashes he was entirely destitute. A ‘type’ indeed, the Inspector thought, and wondered just what particular kind of parts he distinguished himself in portraying.

His companion was not so difficult to place, professionally. If the tall, thin man with the lean, tight, skinned, and more than ordinarily dark-complexioned face, were not usually cast for the villain of the piece, or picture, then Dick Frayne had not the first idea of such things. He was, so far as could be seen immaculately attired in evening clothes, over which he was wearing an overcoat. In one of his eyes a rimless and cordless monocle was worn; it

added, if anything, to their sinister expression, and they, in the opinion of the Scotland Yard man, wanted nothing additional to their natural appearance of cold hostility. Hard, glittering eyes; full of fire yet strangely inscrutable, cold as ice. To which was to be added the tightest-lipped and wickedest-looking mouth Frayne ever remembered to have seen.

Yet, curiously enough, there was nothing furtive about him; nothing of the usual attempt of the professional crook to hide both a criminal record and predatory intentions under a cloak of sleek, well-bred respectability. There was nothing of professional persuasiveness about the gentleman. Even as he was speaking, and vehemently at that, to his singular companion, his dark eyes kept roving about the room and there was no mistaking the emotion behind them: sardonic contempt for everything and every one upon whom they fell. Yet, Frayne ruminated, watching him, doubtless a most decent, hard-working chap if one knew him. But just on account of a freak of facial structure—and a natural air of crime and high misdemeanour upon, the grand scale—he was condemned to be the villain upon each and every appearance. Well, he most certainly looked the part, and apparently he was so saturated in his villainy that he carried it about with him all his waking hours.

At which point the Inspector permitted himself another glance at an infinitely more inspiriting subject; the unconsciously beautiful creature seated back to back to these two striking worthies.

CHAPTER III

THE INSPECTOR MAKES A MISTAKE—TWO, IN FACT

TO his considerable astonishment, the soft, limpid, dark eyes were fixed upon him, in them a strangely reflective light not untinged by what he could only read as perplexity—if nothing deeper. Which was strange, to say the least of it; but there was no mistaking the groove between them, or the more than thoughtful expression with which she was regarding him.

As two people with the one thought, both pairs of eyes were instantly averted as each met the other, but Dick Frayne would have had to be something more than human, which he was not, to resist a second surreptitious glance under his lashes to see if she had returned to her observation of him. She had.

Skilled in the art of keeping close surveillance upon people whilst apparently completely interested in some entirely different direction, he moved in his seat until he caught her in a friendly mirror in which, by turning himself nearly three-quarters away from her direction, he was rewarded by being able to study her without the slightest restraint.

He saw that no sooner had he altered his position than her interest in him became intensified. Leaning forward upon her elbow, her chin balanced in the hand that held the long cigarette-holder, she studied him intently. Then, as if of some impulse, she sat back again, the strained expression returning to her face, her eyes half closed in—what? Suddenly, she leaned forward again and taking one of the packet of letters before her, tore a blank sheet from one of them and placed the others in her bag. Slowly, thoughtfully, it seemed to Frayne, as though she were choosing her words with the greatest care, she began to write. Behind her as she bent over the table, he could see Villainy and Grotesqueness still in earnest conversation, discussing, he could fancy, some especially gifted performance achieved by one or the other of them, after the manner of their kind.

Without warning she suddenly got up, gathered her coat, or cloak, as he could see now that it was, about her, picked up her bag and moved slowly towards him, folding the paper upon which she had written into a very small compass as she came. With that trained sense of spotting instantly every detail, he noticed that her liqueur remained untasted.

Did she mean to address him, he wondered, considerably taken aback—until he noticed that his seat was directly in her path for the door. To get out at

all she must pass close by him—she had no choice in the matter.

Watching her advance, he marvelled at her grace of movement, the well-nigh regality of her carriage. She seemed to glide rather than walk. More than ever he wondered who she was, what she was doing there.

Never once, as she approached did she give even a glance at him, but just as she was passing his table, a crumpled piece of paper dropped from her fingers and fell by the side of his cigarette-case. She passed straight on and out of the place.

Inwardly he smiled; the cynical smile of the man whose profession has left him remarkably few ideals where such things were concerned. An old story—for all a lovely face and particularly well-bred manner had led him astray. Had probably sensed him out for the one person here, not of the 'profession'; in all probability picked him out for a person of some substance—some casual sightseer with money to spend upon pleasure. Again he smiled: at that moment, Detective-Inspector Frayne had about five shillings in his pocket. And she, in all probability, was waiting outside in a taxi to see if her bait had lured the fish.

He picked up the note and opened it—to sit transfixed with astonishment at its contents. It was written in pencil in the firm, refined hand of a woman of education. And by the quality of the paper which he had seen her tear from one of her own letters, her correspondents were of the same ilk.

It ran:

'*Mon cher* Inspector of Police,

'The two men seated behind me as I write are not only fully aware of your professional identity but from the tone of their conversation are anything but friendly towards you. I do not know, of course, if they are as dangerous as they sound, but, if so, you would do well to have great care for your safety. They mean harm to you. Please do not attempt to follow me, or question further. I have told you all that is necessary to warn you.'

Entirely disregarding this latter injunction, Frayne was upon his feet and at the outer door in quick time. Just what he proposed to do he had not the remotest idea, but the feeling was strong upon him that at the least he must offer some sort of thanks to this lovely creature who had shown such kindly interest in his personal safety. His thoughts of a moment ago concerning her smote upon him heavily. It only showed, he thought ruefully, that even a hard-boiled Inspector of C.I.D. can make errors as to people and motives as well as the next.

But of the lady in question, no sight or sign was there to be seen. A most casual-sounding inquiry concerning her from a uniformed commissionaire, elicited nothing but the fact that she had stepped at once into a taxi and been driven off. He had been lucky enough to slip and open the door for her for which he had been rewarded by a two-shilling piece; a most unusual grade of remuneration which left him in no doubt whatever as to her social status. She was, in his opinion, the perfect lady, and he wished that a few more of the same quality frequented the place. He had heard no direction given to the driver.

Was she a frequenter of the place? Commissionaire had never set eyes upon her before in his life—had not even observed her entrance; but he assured his questioner feelingly he would take remarkably good care that her next, and any subsequent entrances to the establishment, would be made under his direct personal supervision. Two-shilling pieces did not grow upon every bush, in fact, for giving-away purposes they were rare among the clientele of the place.

There being nothing in the way of serviceable information likely to be gained by further questioning, Dick Frayne returned to the saloon, or whatever it might be designated, and gave careful attention to the couple still in animated discussion at their table.

Looked at in the light of recent ‘information received,’ they presented quite different personalities to those his imagination had invested them with just a few minutes before. Stripped of the profession of which he had believed them to be ornaments, which covered a multitude of sins of appearance, they were, without question, as unpromising a pair of conspirators as any man wanted to run an eye over. And who were these worthies who knew who he was and, moreover, had something saved up for him?

Watching them through his friendly mirror, he ran his mental eye over such lists as had come in from European countries relative to visiting, or impending visitors of unpleasant proclivities. Nothing in any way answering to a description of them touched upon any part of his particularly acute memory. But, without question, they would stand looking into—unless the beautiful eavesdropper were a lady obsessed by that weird form of later-Victorian humour known as ‘spoofing.’ But this possibility he put entirely to one side after a moment’s reflection upon it; where would be the rhyme or reason in it—looked at from any angle?

His eyes went around in search of a telephone; and against the right-hand wall and at the head of some stairs leading downwards he saw a public box. So far, so good. There was plenty of time to have a reliable man along who would not let at least one of this pair slip him until he had tree’d him. As a preference, the Inspector fancied the lean, aristocratic-looking gentleman with the

contemptuous eyes; he had the idea that if any real villainy was afoot, this sinister personage would not be very far from the head of affairs. To consider him in any other light but leader was quite inconceivable. What the powerful-shouldered man with the egg-shaped head would prove to be, remained to be seen, but not, in Frayne's opinion, the one who supplied whatever brains might be called for in such nefarious schemes as they might be engaged upon.

But it was written down that his excellent intention was to be completely frustrated by one of the simplest commonplaces in the whole round of things: the 'phone proved to be out of order.

In a quandary, and noting that his men seemed comfortably ensconced where they were and showed no sign of moving, he determined on taking a chance. He must either make for the nearest telephone or slip across to Vine Street and commandeer the first available plain-clothes man he could lay hands upon. He decided upon the latter course.

Ten minutes later saw him returning post-haste across the Avenue, beside him Detective Harry Andrews, a gentleman known among his professional brethren as 'Harry the Slink.' He had not received this dubious-sounding cognomen on account of any slinking furtivity of either demeanour or expression, but on account of a natural genius for the shadowing of persons undetected. But at the first glance in the direction of the table at which they had sat, Frayne stopped dead. From between his lips came muttered sounds which his companion identified without hesitation as language of the class that most decidedly came within the meaning of the Act.

'Must have slipped off the instant I turned my back,' growled the Inspector.

'Can't have slipped far, sir,' Harry the Slink whispered, hearteningly. 'If you want to be away on other work give me the descriptions and I'll rout 'em out before they're so much older.'

Having received and digested the information required, he slipped out into Rupert Street, and when, a moment later, Detective-Inspector Frayne followed he had disappeared as completely as though he had never existed. Pursuing a thoughtful way towards Piccadilly Circus, the Inspector cogitated upon the singular events of the last half-hour. For some quite unaccountable reason it loomed far larger in interest than did the much more definite case upon which his whole day had been spent. But, then, in that there did not figure a very beautiful and mysterious female who looked like a princess in disguise.

Yes; she suggested very decided potentialities; as did also the Villain of the Piece and his *confrère*, the Man with the Egg-shaped Head.

CHAPTER IV

THE WOMAN OF THE NIGHT-CLUB

AS a matter of fact had you called Diantuolos' *caravanserai* a 'night-club' in the hearing of that ever-smiling, softly-spoken though somewhat oily Greek, he would, in all probability, have resented the term. Only inwardly, of course: Diantuolos never showed umbrage at anything—unless the offender were a person of small consequence, or known to be habitually tardy in the matter of spending.

In which case he might point out, with a shrug of his shoulders, that the rendezvous over which he had the felicity to preside was essentially a *Dance Club*, and as such was registered, and licensed by the proper authorities.

People—and people of consequence—paid their good guineas and became members primarily for the purpose of displaying their paces upon his perfectly-sprung floor, in conjunction with a band which experts in the modern Afro-American school of terpsichorean art declared to be one of the best in London.

The members dined and supped there quite a deal; though principally it was the latter meal most favoured at the brilliantly arrayed tables *à deux* set for the greater part in secluded little alcoves off the dance floor. And if his 'cover' and other charges were such as to appal any but the stoutest heart, that was an affair entirely between Diantuolos and the party concerned. The experience of many years had taught that wily Greek that the male, and usually paying animal, who in the home circle could question passionately as to the cost of the leg of mutton he ate in the company of his lawful spouse was not in the least likely to be captiously critical about the prices of the gastronomic delicacies he consumed with, quite possibly, the adventurous spouse of some other gentleman.

Again, as Diantuolos would have pointed out with particular pride, his membership embraced some of the social *crème de la crème*. Ladies and gentlemen of title graced his floor and tables; though generally not in the company of their peers, but of youthful lights of the stage and other kindred, and uncertain, arts.

Gentlemen also whose names were synonymous with High Finance were frequent patrons of his supper-table. Politicians, dignataries of the Law, Medicine and other learned professions were to be found there, recuperating after the labours of the day. The Services were, as a rule, fairly well

represented; generally by young gentlemen of tremendous *élan*, flawless tailoring, and impeccable taste in the matter of female companionship.

Of the unescorted ladies who assisted considerably in lending colour and vivacity to the scene, the best—or worst—the Greek could remark of them was that they both looked well and, in all circumstances, behaved circumspectly. When cold necessity demanded, they spent their own money quietly; but were gifted, each and every one, with a heaven-sent faculty for inducing temporary hosts to act in directly opposite fashion.

For the rest, a curious conglomeration of male sojourners in the Great Metropolis. Men as much at home on the Shanghai Bund as Piccadilly, Broadway, or The Block in Melbourne as Bond Street. Men, for the greater part, of easy bearing, fluent and often cultured speech, and the imperturbable *sang-froid* of citizens of the world. Human mysteries, in so far as antecedents went, but all possessing in marked degree the two virtues deemed by Diantuolos as absolutely necessary for an entrée to his circle: a sufficiency of manners not to bring discredit—or unwelcome police attention—upon his establishment, and money to spend when once admitted to it.

But of all there, unquestionably the apple of Diantuolos' glittering, agate-black eyes was his team of eight professional dancing-partners. When that transient glance of his—in which he could tell precisely what every soul in the room was up to—fell upon them, his soul knew perfect contentment.

They were not, as at present constituted, the original eight who had created such a stir upon the occasion of his opening night. Three of these had packed their vanity bags and stolen away into the outer night; but had done so in such fashion as to confer added distinction upon Diantuolos. For two had married younger members of the peerage, whilst the third had but three weeks before gone circumnavigating the globe on board the yacht of a gentleman whose power in the realms of Big Money was internationally acknowledged.

But in this last desertion, Diantuolos now accounted himself a fortunate man; for the one who had taken the place of the ash-blonde circumnavigatress, eclipsed by such lengths any of her companions that he had not yet recovered from his astonishment.

He had a vague, hustled sort of recollection of the girl, woman, whatever one was to call her, invading his office. Instantly he had appraised her to be one of very high degree; nor, singularly, did he revise that impression when she calmly informed him that she understood he had a vacancy for a professional dancing-partner and offered herself for the post. Nor, still more extraordinary, had he revised it since. There was some hurried adjustment of the financial side of matters—to which she seemed sublimely indifferent—and

. . . well, there she was. About this Jetta Marcein, as she chose to call herself (and whether Madame or M'selle, Mrs. or Miss, she had not enlightened him), there was, most indubitably, mystery.

She was, he appraised shrewdly, a woman of somewhere about six or seven and twenty; tallish, willowy-figured, with a grace of movement a professional *mannequin* would have given her soul to attain. She had straight, finely-moulded features and large, wide-set luminous eyes in which he had caught, at times, many and elusive expressions. Sometimes frank amusement, sometimes open mockery, and at others a glint he could not define. Her hair was, in these days, unique—a veritable crowning glory; in colour a rich, dark copper-red worn uncut. Plaited, and coiled about her small head, it might have been a coronet of burnished metal. And there was something about the poise of her not unsuggestive of coronets and the like; a dignity also, the observant Greek noted, which was perfectly natural, never assumed, but part and parcel of her most unusual self. Occasionally Diantuolos observing her covertly, found himself wondering just what was at the bottom of her being there at all. But being both by nature and business instinct a man who habitually minded his own business and left other people to do the same for themselves, he merely thanked his lucky stars that there she was. Still there were things about her upon which his acute mind could, and did, revolve.

As, for instance: that her gowns were perfection. Diantuolos knew far more of women's clothes and their cost than the ordinary male, and he was quite well aware that those she had appeared in so far were Paris models, the work of great designers. And every detail of her equipment was in keeping. And he paid her the sum of four pounds ten shillings a week! Additionally, of course, she could earn most liberal commissions; but these, so far, she had not troubled to pick up. Chits he would have cashed as readily as Treasury notes she gave to the waiters.

And again, the cloak in which, the last dance concluded, she left the building, was of Russian sables and never purchased for a penny under two or three thousand pounds. And always did this mysterious, this compelling Jetta Marcein leave the club alone. The commissionaire always called her a taxi, for which service she invariably tipped him handsomely and departed—alone. In which unusual fact lay, perhaps, the greater part of the mystery—for Diantuolos. Had it been otherwise, a man might comprehend. As it was . . .

And upon this particular early autumn night when, his floor and tables full and his band discoursing the very latest in syncopation, his eye fell upon her seated, most astonishingly, alone at a small table, he marvelled more than ever. For his first glance showed him a new, and arresting, side of her.

Her dark eyes were fixed upon space, betraying a woman lost in thought,

momentarily totally oblivious to her surroundings. In her fingers the cigarette in the long, jade holder burned away to ashes unnoticed. By the expression upon her face, the thoughts of this beautiful Jetta Marcein were sombre ones; those of a woman downcast, discouraged.

And it also seemed to Diantuolos—not without sympathy, for he too had wandered far and endured his share of the slings and arrows of fortune—that he was looking upon one who had travelled further down the road of Life than her years would suggest, and had found most of it barren. A woman turned impassive by disillusion; yet, somehow, still warm, alive, vital.

Some moments the Greek studied the beautiful face reflectively; but, lost in her *triste* reverie, she remained quite unconscious of his scrutiny. As unconscious of him as she was of the three other pairs of male eyes, each watching her intently from separate angles of the crowded room. Three men as different in type as it was possible to find, but each carrying upon his features the indelible signs of a distinct and aggressive personality.

A long, all-embracing roll of his glittering black eyes brought all three and their profound interest in his dance-partner under the notice of the watcher. Leaning against that mysterious apartment he designated an ‘office,’ he watched all for a few moments. There was something in the situation that interested, more, intrigued him. The interest lay in the personalities of the three men, the intrigue, as to his former knowledge of one of them.

That particular person, the tall, aristocratic man whose card bore the name of Count Eugene Ferrondo. There was something about him that the Greek, withal a really marvellous memory for names and faces, could not grasp. The man was an utter stranger to him; certainly in so far as London was concerned. Yet he had but that very night presented himself with a card of membership duly signed—not a doubt of it—with Diantuolos’ own sprawling signature. Had even complimented *M. le proprieteur* upon certain improvements made in the place within the last few weeks. But Diantuolos would have wagered a very large sum of money that this most commanding, albeit sinister-looking patron had never been inside his doors until to-night, for all his glib apparent familiarity with things.

His features were familiar . . . ye-es. But not in London . . . no . . . o. Where then? Diantuolos went carefully through the huge mental album of faces that had marked his peripatetic geographical road from erstwhile kitchen-boy of Athens, via half the world, to London, West End proprietorship. Rome, Trieste, Vienna, Budapest? No. New York, Boston? Perhaps even farther south—New Orleans? Somehow that struck Diantuolos as coming nearer. And he was of the type of the elegant French creole planters—yet, not altogether. Well, he was a mystery; and at that the Greek let him go for a moment.

CHAPTER V

THE HONOURABLE LARRY ADAIR MAKES FRIENDS

OF the two other men, the second, Mr. ‘Chick’ Devlin, was also, in a sense, a man of mystery; but the mystery about him lay only in speculation as to where the burly New Yorker got the money he spent with such delightful freedom. For the man himself, despite his complete and utter lack of any breeding, as Diantuolos understood that quality in this England (he had been, it was understood, a glove-fighter at one time, and certainly bore one remarkable ear as a souvenir of that strenuous profession), he was a jolly fellow and one of the most popular members of the *cercle*. To-night, Mr. Devlin was piloting a newcomer, a fluffy little yellow-haired thing of French nationality who, for some reason not apparent to Diantuolos, appeared to be scared to death of something or some one. She reminded him of a frightened canary.

But about the third of this trio, Captain, The Honourable Lawrence Fitzgerald Adair (‘Larry’ to his hosts of friends and acquaintances; and they embraced every social stratum from the flower-sellers of the Circus to the elect of the land), there was no mystery that could not be at once solved by a simple query put to any of the very best people.

A rich and debonair young Irishman with more money than he knew what to do with. A member of all the best clubs—and by which Diantuolos did not mean night-clubs, but those exclusive establishments along Piccadilly and in St. James’s Square, wherein none but the ultra-exclusive were permitted to sojourn even temporarily. What a high-spirited gentleman like the Captain could find to amuse him in such dismal-looking places remained for Diantuolos a matter of amazed conjecture.

However, at the present moment Captain, The Honourable Larry Adair was finding, if not actual amusement, then engrossing interest, in contemplating the thoughtful features of his, Diantuolos’, own especial mystery—the incomparable Jetta Marcein.

Then, simultaneously, as though each read the thought in the other’s mind, two of them stared towards her—Captain Larry and the tall stranger who called himself Count Eugene Ferrondo. It was the Irishman who reached her side first and stood smiling down upon her. The other halted abruptly, and after one long look at them through narrowed eyes, retraced his steps to his own table. But in that look the watching eyes of the Greek caught something—a gleam of deadly menace. And that sudden red light behind the black eyes brought their owner’s

features much nearer to touching that spot in the memory of Diantuolos than all his mental wanderings about this terrestrial sphere.

‘I’m wondering,’ began Captain Larry with that charming naïve smile that generally made him instant friends with everybody, and in his voice just a pleasant touch of the ‘comether’ inherited from his Kerry forbears, ‘I’m wondering, gentle lady, if you’ll take compassion upon a poor divil with the pip, and take supper with him?’

Slowly, very slowly, she lifted her eyes to his. Upon her lips broke an enigmatic smile which might have been that of the Mona Lisa herself.

‘And suppose,’ she returned slowly, ‘that I, too, am in a mood to make me the poorest of company for a fellow-sufferer? Always assuming it possible to take Captain Adair seriously when he speaks of being anything but the very moving spirit of irrepressible gaiety.’

‘Ah, now,’ he deprecated with a grimace, ‘I should have thought that a wise woman who knows her world wouldn’t make the mistake of taking an Irishman’s grin at face value. Didn’t some one write “Laugh and the world laughs with you”? It’s poor company a chronic sad heart gets on this earth—or deserves.’

‘A pleasant philosophy, but difficult at times to live up to,’ she said with a little sigh. ‘There are moments when gloom will persist. Captain Adair, no matter how bravely the will may determine otherwise.’

‘Sighs are only a form of indigestion, so I’ve read,’ he told her informatively. ‘Like most ailments in the world, mental or otherwise, the stomach is at the root of all the evil. And as every one well knows there’s more indigestion caused by going over-long without meals than anything else. And that brings us back to where we started—supper. Come now,’ he cajoled. ‘I have the most comfortable table in the room reserved. Diantuolos, for all the Greek pirate he is, knows how to cater for depression such as has us in its grip. And, besides . . . I’ve had the longing to talk with you from the first night you shed your lustre upon us ordinary night-club mortals.’

A sudden cold, proud aloofness showed in her calm face.

‘One of the rich Captain, The Honourable Laddy Adair’s whims, which all women—women who earn a living in such places as this—are expected by the Diantuoloses of this world to humour.’

For a moment he did not answer her. A frown formed between eyes suddenly gone clouded.

‘Ye want spanking for that,’ he said quietly. ‘Because you know it isn’t true, either of myself or Diantuolos. I may be a fool, but I’m not a cad. And, come to that, the fat little Greek doesn’t happen to be that kind of an animal

either. I'll say that much for him.'

'No, no,' she interposed quickly, 'I shouldn't have said that: he has been kindness itself, and treats me——'

'As the lady he or any other man here recognizes you instantly to be.'

Her lips twisted into a wry smile. 'Am I the subject of conjecture?' she asked.

'Could it very well be otherwise?' he counter-questioned pointedly.

She glanced about her.

'There are more than one woman of obviously birth and breeding earning a living here,' she reminded him.

'True enough,' he acquiesced readily, following her glance; 'and the Lord forbid that I or any other man should overlook it. But—there are degrees in everything, and their degree is not yours.'

'You have the true Celtic imagination, Captain Adair,' she said lightly.

'I have the true Celtic intuition, lady,' he corrected. 'And that's as certain as the next thing in this uncertain world. It doesn't let us down. And,' he added, with a whimsical twist of his quick, sensitive mouth, 'playing with fire is still the favourite sport of most Irishmen born south of Sligo Bay.'

Again she shot that quick questioning glance at him.

'Fire?' The word came from her in a low, strangely tense voice.

'Fire. I see the deep red glow of it over you as you sit, lady.' He bent lower towards her and continued in a voice almost as earnest as her own last utterance had been. 'Though, maybe, if I had the gift of my ould grandmother in the County Kerry, I could make it out to be of a deeper, even uglier colour than that.'

The faintest shiver rippled over her perfect white shoulders.

'Are you—are you "dreeing my weird," as the Scotch say?' she asked, and the shiver was, for the fraction of an instant, discernible in her voice too, for all that she still smiled amusedly at him.

'The Highlanders,' he corrected her. ' 'Tis only the true-blooded Celt or Gael who has the gift of second sight. The others——' He dismissed them with a gesture.

'And what, do you think, would that wonderful grandmother of yours in the County Kerry—wherever that may be—perhaps have to tell me?' she asked.

He noticed the tiniest tremor in the long, white fingers turning the jade cigarette-holder idly.

‘Well, now,’ he responded with a twinkle. ‘I have the idea that I could conjure up the old lady better at a table with supper before me. All that I can remember of her in my present hungry state is that she had wild red hair at fifty odd, and the divil’s own temper.’

‘More red,’ she laughed; then, as if upon sudden impulse, rose and moved in the direction of the table he had indicated.

‘I see red all about you, lady,’ he said quietly. ‘Take that from the grandson of a Macgillicuddy o’ the Reeks.’

‘And do they know everything?’

‘Their women do,’ he assured her, bowing her into her chair; then added whimsically: ‘At any rate they know far more than is good for them—or any one else, for the matter of that.’

It was quite an hour later when, indeed; she was gliding about the floor in his arms that, without warning, she shot at him a question.

‘Has your supper brought the red-headed witch of the County Kerry any nearer to your memory? And, if so, may I now ask just what you think she might unfold to me?’

It was a moment or two before he made any response, and the eyes that looked down upon her upturned face had gone strangely grave.

‘Sure, now,’ he began uneasily, ‘that would be hard to tell, for she was by way of being an outrageous old person herself, for all her wisdom. But I think she’d start something like this: “Princess,” she’d say . . .’

‘And pray why “Princess”?’ she interjected quickly.

‘Because that’s just the impression you create,’ he answered simply. ‘Just that. An old-world princess in—in trouble.’

‘Old world,’ she jested, ‘in these surroundings!’

‘They’re not yours,’ he told her with finality. ‘You’re here in them for good reasons of your own, but you’re not of them. As the Americans say, you “don’t belong”!’

‘But isn’t one forced to belong just wherever one has to get a living?’ she asked, again with that curious, elusive smile.

‘There’s that,’ he conceded grudgingly. ‘But, somehow, it doesn’t just ring true. You’re here, there’s no arguing *that*, anyway. But the why of it . . .’ He broke off with a long, dubious shake of his curly head.

She ignored the interrogation in his voice.

‘I’m still waiting to hear what Madame the red-haired grandmamma would have had to tell me?’ she reminded persistently.

‘I think,’ he answered slowly, ‘she would have told you that it’s not always wise for a woman, especially a woman like yourself, to play *too* much of a lone hand in the big games of life.’

‘And why should you surmise that there is any big game in my life?’ she asked, pertinently enough.

‘A woman without any profession, or even business ability, must earn her living, if it becomes necessary, by such social attainments as she has. I can’t do typewriting or shorthand or any of those clever things women nowadays can do, but I *can* dance and I can put my clothes on sufficiently well to make men wish to dance with me. Therefore M. Diantuolos is pleased to give me employment—just as the others—for the convenience of his unattached patrons. Where is that “big game” you have conjured up for me out of a vivid imagination, Captain Adair?’

He glanced down at her sideways.

‘Specious,’ he smiled back, ‘but not convincing. You’ll probably quarrel with me when I say that I’ve taken the quite unwarrantable liberty of watching you a good deal. There’s something in me that responds instantly to something there is in you.’

‘Am I,’ she asked politely, ‘to consider that as a preamble to your making love to me?’

He laughed; a frank, jolly and infectious sound.

‘Absolve me from any such idea,’ he declared, and added: ‘And that’s the rudest thing I’ve ever said to any beautiful woman. But that wasn’t in my mind at all. You’re what I’d call, for want of a better word, one of the uncapturables. For all your sweet graciousness there’s a wall of aloofness around you that would take a thicker-skinned man than myself to attempt to penetrate. No, it wasn’t that.’

‘Then what?’ she asked abruptly.

‘Because,’ he assured her, ‘there’s in you what there is in me—the spirit of high adventure. Only that yours is finding some outlet in something you’re engaged in, while mine is repressed, stifled down to live this humdrum existence; life *après la guerre*. Since the day I was demobbed in 1919, I haven’t known what to do with myself—except to spend money and act like a fool to convince myself that I’m contented. The older people say we young ones are all standing on our heads since the war. They’d be nearer the mark if they said that we’re all standing bogged in the mud, up to our knees in the clay of luxury-living and inaction. The war killed most things, but it gave us something to do, an ideal to fight for and think about. The peace has killed the rest—and left us with idle hands and not a decent cause under the sun, that an

incurably unrestful being like myself could fling himself into for either occupation or diversion.'

'A cause that would only be diversion to the Honourable Mr. Adair, might be life or death to—to other people,' she observed sombrely.

He seized upon her words with avidity.

'You were going to say life or death to you,' he asserted quietly. 'I know you were. And then you thought better of it—because you don't trust me.'

She lifted a quick, deprecating hand.

'Ah, now, let's be fair and honest with each other for a commencement. After all, why should you trust me in anything that's big—vital? You know nothing of me, and the little you do wouldn't inspire much confidence.' He smiled down upon her ruefully. 'That's rather Irish, I'm afraid, but it's what I mean.' He picked up his original thread again. 'But it only goes to show—your natural hesitation, I mean—that what I thought I saw in you was right: in some cause or other you're here, in London, because desperate needs drive. Needs'—he dropped his voice—'that, I quote you, may mean life or death to—to other people.'

She laughed nervously. 'You are taking me very literally—and seriously, Captain Adair.'

'Which, again, is just evasion,' he retorted quietly; then altered his tone to one of complete seriousness. 'I was watching you a little while ago as you sat at that table. You were a woman who, or I'm no judge, could see disaster, or at any rate a big check to some project dear to your heart. You were down in the dumps with a vengeance, and women, women of your qualities, don't lose heart for trifles.'

She glanced at him out of the corners of her big, dark eyes. A demureness, more elusive than any side of her had yet shown him, came into her voice.

'You are perfectly right, *el Capitan*,' she agreed seriously. 'A new frock not sent home that had been promised without fail is no trifle. Not to a vain woman who had particular reasons for wanting to look at her best upon this particular night.'

He stopped so suddenly as to almost cause a collision with a couple immediately behind them.

'Ah, now, there it is again,' he said with a reproachful shake of his head and the soft Kerry brogue strong in his earnestness. 'You're determined to keep me at arm's length and any cheap subterfuge will serve to do it. I'm sad at ye.'

Instantly the long, white hand closed about his sleeve in a quick,

spontaneous pressure and the brown eyes lit with a deep, warm glow.

‘Please don’t say that,’ she begged softly. ‘You are one to be trusted to any length, Captain Adair. Any one would know that; would feel it instinctively of you in an instant. But a woman’s secrets aren’t always hers alone to be parted with on impulse—no matter what the instinct behind that impulse might be. Don’t think lightly of me because many bitter disillusionings have made me doubt almost my own self. Please, *please*, don’t.’

The earnest entreaty in her low voice touched him, clearing instantly any lingering trace of ruffled serenity at what he had thought to be her most palpable distrust of him. He smiled down upon her in entire friendliness.

‘Is that likely,’ he reassured her heartily. ‘When it’s myself that’s been poking my nose into what, after all, is your business and yours only. But I beg you to believe that it wasn’t just the itch of impertinent curiosity behind it. I somehow had the feeling that there were things to happen, big things, that you and I would have our share in together. Rightly or wrongly, I still have that feeling—the Celt in me tells me that it will come true.’

‘Who can tell?’ she murmured in a voice that came to him as though from a long way off.

‘Not “who,” lady—what. Time can tell; sooner or later it tells everything.’

But it was not until much later on that night, long after he had left Diantuolos’ for his Jermyn Street rooms that a sudden recollection came back upon him.

‘*El Capitan*’ she called me. That’s Spanish. Now, I wonder,’ he mused, ‘if that’s any traceable clue to her own identity.’

CHAPTER VI

INSPECTOR FRAYNE RECEIVES A VERY UNEXPECTED ASSIGNMENT

IT was one of the axioms of ‘The Yard,’ at any rate amongst the lower ranks of the C.I.D. that a man who received from Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby an assignment to accompany, or in any way co-operate with him in any piece of departmental work, could bemoan his sour luck with considerable cause.

It was right enough doing an odd round, or even a special assignment with one of the big bugs, but when it came to a man who snapped his orders as if a fellow were a born fool, and answered a civil question with grunts which might mean anything, well, an hour or two of that was plenty and too much. Unquestionably Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby, though one of the cleverest men in the service, was a hard, rigid, unbendable man.

A character which would have received hearty corroboration from any of the unfortunate crooks in whom the grim-faced ‘Super’ had suddenly taken punitive interest. ‘Steely-eyed and steely-hearted,’ was their bitter, all-enveloping phrase for him. When Dallenby got his white, sharp-looking teeth into a ‘wanted,’ male or female, their squeals did not cause him any undue worry.

Which was a strange thing. With most men of the police, the apprehension of the law-breaker is purely a matter of business; just a job of work to be approached in a spirit of absolute impersonality, with a perfectly dispassionate mind. But Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby appeared to be imbued with a personal fanatic hatred of every individual of that class who came under his hands. Often those who worked with him speculated upon what lay behind this implacable hostility, but Dallenby was not the man to be asked questions.

Curiously enough, for some reason never discovered by Frayne, the Divisional-Superintendent showed more kindliness of feeling towards him than to any of his subordinates. Whether it was that as a keen and zealous officer himself, he respected the brilliant, special work which had brought such rapid promotion to the younger man, or, again, that it was one of those curious cases of attraction between exact opposites, he never could tell. But the fact remained that not only did he see little, if any, of the Superintendent’s unpleasant side; but, indeed, always found him ready to proffer a friendliness never exhibited in any other direction.

Having left the indefatigable ‘Harry the Slink’ to his job of locating the

whereabouts of one or other of the two mysterious strangers, Inspector Frayne strolled along in the direction of Oxford Street. Not that he had any particular motive in making that thoroughfare an objective, save that it had long been his custom, when possible, to give at least one hour of the evening to the vicinity where dwells the foreign sojourner in our midst. And as by far the most important part of his labours was occasioned by such sojourners, he liked to keep tail on them; in particular to know just what newcomers, male or female, had surreptitiously crept into the flock with what he humorously called 'home-made' passports. And such invaders were far more numerous than the uninitiated would have given credit for. For his purpose he usually worked leisurely along and through the gridiron of streets between Regent Street and Greek Street, Soho.

He was strolling along Frith Street when a quiet voice hailed him softly from a darkened doorway—a voice he recognized instantly as that of the Divisional-Superintendent. It was like him, he thought, to be out ferreting about personally upon some job he could have assigned to a competent man, and himself taken it easy. Whatever there was to be said about the 'Super,' he was no highly placed slacker. He knew his job and did it the whole of his waking hours.

'Well,' he inquired when Frayne had pulled up and joined him in the shadows of the doorway, 'anything fresh opened out in this dope business?'

In the darkness the younger man shook his head.

'No, sir. And in my opinion they won't attempt to run the next consignment. They've landed all their stuff and got it well away to the distributing points. The pedlars have got it. It will trickle back into London —*our* London through so many channels that a clear-cut case is impossible unless they make some big error. As I see it, we'll have to wait. I'm only putting in my time worming things out that I knew before, and following up new threads that I believe to be put out for us to follow. At any rate they lead nowhere. With all due respect, sir, I'm personally of the opinion that my stopping on the job at this time is a mistake. I'm keeping these dope-running birds on the *qui vive*, when they should be allowed to lull themselves into false security. They'll be far more likely to make a slip of some kind when the next lot is run if they're not harried all the time.'

It was a moment or two before Dallenby answered.

'I think you're right,' he agreed slowly. 'We'll give them rope enough to hang themselves before they run the next lot. There are plenty of other things on hand for you to get at. I'll walk along with you for a bit.'

At one corner he stopped suddenly, regarding with stony eyes a group of

vivacious, gesticulating foreigners. Which is to say that the feminine portion were vivacious enough; voluptuous, vividly-coloured young women, for the most part with glittering, bella donna'd eyes in which gleamed a variety of emotions. Their men were a raffish, oily-haired crew whose narrowly-set black eyes held that restless furtivity of expression, which left the experienced ones watching them in no doubt as to what quality of citizen they were. They moved along, voices rising gradually towards acrimonious heights, then drifted, two by two, into the doorway of what was no doubt licensed as a social club. Frayne, watching his superior curiously was amazed at the bitterness of his expression.

'You're not over-fond of those places, sir,' he ventured, as much for something to say as anything else.

'I'm not. If it wasn't that they're a kind of general address where we can round them up when we want them, there wouldn't be one open if I had my way. That kind of shop is nothing but a haunt for vicious continental criminals. Where would your dope pedlars be if it wasn't for places of distribution like that—and others higher up? And there are worse sides of them than just that.'

Frayne said nothing. There was something strangely fanatic in the Superintendent's manner, in the incisively driven words that bit in like acid to make a man wonder. Not for the first time Dick Frayne found himself wondering if there really *were* anything in that personal contention he had heard so often argued about the 'Super'? He studied the big, frowning face for a second or two. It was set, and sombre, with a far-away look in the eyes, as though some grim thought had momentarily taken possession of him.

His eyes wandered thoughtfully along the pavement. Coming towards them from the direction of Oxford Street was a girl of not more than five and twenty years, her handsome face thick with paint, her eyes surrounded with black smudges from her bedaubed lashes. Long, perfectly moulded, silk-clad legs showed to inches above her knees, and the flimsy material of her frock showed her form as plainly as though she were divested of every stitch. The upper part of her attire, equally scant, and perfectly sleeveless, revealed her firm, rounded breasts. They swayed from side to side with every mincing step she took upon ridiculously high-heeled shoes. Of underclothing one could have conceived her to be entirely innocent.

But it was her eyes that arrested instantly the attention of both men. Dead eyes, under heavy, sleepy-looking lids; yet eyes that glittered metallically, almost unnaturally, behind their dullness. The eyes of a drug addict—a cocaine fiend.

As she passed them she threw a long look, at once appraising and inviting

in their direction. Automatically her pace slackened and a long, white-toothed smile broke through her heavily carmined lips. The Superintendent thrust his big face forward and peered steadily into hers. It was not a gesture of sheer truculence, but that of a man who wanted to find her real features under the mask of paint and powder which bedaubed them. She gave a little startled cry, the smile vanished, the unnatural glitter fled from her eyes and into them came a look of terror. Without a word she scuttled on, as fast as the high-heeled shoes would carry her.

For a moment Frayne, wondering mightily, thought that Dallenby was going to follow and pull her up; but if any such thought had been in the Superintendent's mind, he checked it.

'You saw those eyes,' he said suddenly.

Frayne nodded. 'Cocaine,' he said. 'An English girl too by the look of her, and not more than one or two and twenty.'

'There's the whole point of these cursed places—these dance and drink dens,' Dallenby said, in his old gruff style. 'She's only a youngster. Not so long since she was probably a dearly-loved daughter; even, later, perhaps, a happy young wife. For all we can say to the contrary there may be one, perhaps two decent men eating their hearts out with anxiety to know what's become of her.'

'That's more than probable,' Frayne agreed; then tentatively, 'She seemed to know who you were, sir.'

The Superintendent grunted.

'She's seen me before,' he growled. 'Warned her more than once. Tried to scare her off, but it doesn't seem to work.'

'I suppose,' Frayne suggested slowly, 'that hunger can dominate even fear of the law.'

'Hunger!' The word came like an ejaculation; then a short, grim laugh left the Superintendent's lips. 'Aye; and some flash bully who lays low when trouble's about and who controls the cocaine supply can dominate *everything* for her. Everything on earth—poor wretch!' Again he gave that grim, ugly laugh. 'If the powers that be handled them the way I'd like, we'd soon have a cleaner London.'

'And what would your method be, sir?' Frayne asked politely, although he had a very clear idea of the answer.

'*Deport!*' He spat the word like the crack of a whip. 'No fines—they laugh at them; their profits are too big to worry about paltry fines. Sentence and deport. The ones that creep back again, *penal* and deport again. In under a year

there wouldn't be one of these dance-drink-and-dope dens, or an ounce of "snow" left in London. But,' he concluded grimly, 'we seem too scared of foreign countries these days to handle even their crooks without gloves on.'

He moved along grumbling under his breath in the direction of Regent Street. Frayne, as much out of curiosity as to what the 'Super's' next move would be, paced along beside him. More than once during their perambulation Dallenby half halted, eyeing inimically just such another group as that one which had at first aroused his ire, but beyond scrutinizing closely each and every female of them, he did nothing.

Opposite a certain well-lit and imposing-looking portico, from the suddenly opened doors of which came the strains of a jazz band, they stood still in the shadows and watched a young gentleman and two ladies bundle out of a taxi after a somewhat heated altercation with its driver. All three had supped with the maximum of enjoyment and the minimum of discretion. The first argument being satisfactorily settled, they moved inward—to be halted at the portals by an agitated commissionaire of huge proportions. He, it appeared, was entirely dubious in the matter of entrance.

Expostulation, argument, altercation—ending suddenly with the appearance of the short, fat figure of M. Diantuolos. A policeman strolled up, his eye open for possible eventualities. Those watching were left in no doubt whatsoever as to the Greek's opinion as to the argument in progress. He was finality itself—as immutable as the laws of the Medes and Persians. *No entrance.* Having delivered himself of this ukase, he turned upon his heel and disappeared. The gargantuan commissionaire blew for another taxi, herded the disgruntled trio into it and majestically waved the vehicle out of his sight.

'That's the first time I've ever seen money turned away from one of those dives,' grumbled the Superintendent. He beckoned the uniformed man to him. 'Who runs this place now?' he asked.

'A man named Diantuolos, sir,' he was told. 'Greek, I fancy. Runs it dead straight—so far. Big people go there.'

'Give 'em time enough and they're all the same,' growled the Superintendent. 'I'll take a quiet look over it one of these nights,' he promised grimly. He and his companion moved on. 'Though, come to think of it,' he amended, 'I think that's a job more in your line than mine. I don't cut much shine in evening dress. I'm plain policeman and look it, whatever I've got on. It's the last thing any one would take you for.'

It was a little later, at a conjunction of four dark alleyways that suddenly there came running into the road a policeman. He was a very young man, a fine, fresh-looking country lad, one would have said; but at the present,

moment in the light of the lamp-post he paused uncertainly under, his colour was blanched to a curious grey, and upon the youthful face was an expression of startled horror. Undoubtedly he had been suddenly brought face to face with something to momentarily unnerve him. The eyes of both C.I.D. men had instantly read the signs plain upon his features.

'What's wrong there?' Dallenby snapped.

'A young 'un. Scared to death.'

Before the officer could move they were across the road to him.

'What's wrong?' the Superintendent demanded.

The constable stared at him vacantly a moment. He had never encountered the C.I.D. Divisional-Super before. Then his eyes fell upon Frayne whom he did know by sight. Instantly he stiffened and saluted. To the Inspector who smiled in a friendly way at him, he addressed himself:

'I—I think it's murder, sir!'

'Murder!'

The ejaculation came from both men as one voice, then:

'Where?' from the Superintendent.

Silently the constable pointed back into the darkness out of which he had hurried.

'Part of my beat, sir,' he volunteered. 'I nearly tripped over—over it huddled in a corner of the wall. My sergeant's there now. He sent me to ring for the ambulance and surgeon—the sergeant, he thinks——'

But neither of his superiors had waited to hear what the sergeant thought. A moment later they were alongside that officer who was bent over a human heap, huddled, as they had been told, in a corner of the wall. The first flash of Frayne's torch showed him the broad back of a man with a bullet hole immediately below the left shoulder—shot right through the heart, he told himself, and at close range from behind. The cleanly-cut black hole in the coat, from which the black viscid blood still oozed slowly, was scorched for an inch or more around. The shot had been fired at less than a foot from the unfortunate man's back.

'Life extinct?' the Superintendent questioned.

'Yes, sir. But I should say not a minute before my chap stumbled on him. The hands were still warm when I got to him.'

'Shot in the back, point-blank,' Frayne ventured. 'Bullet must have penetrated the heart instantly.'

The Superintendent nodded.

‘Murder right enough. Your man would be on beat within fairly close distance? He heard no pistol shot fired?’

‘Nothing, sir. I couldn’t have been more than a hundred yards off myself. I heard nothing.’

‘For the matter of that, sir, we couldn’t have been out of ear-shot ourselves,’ Frayne reminded the Superintendent. He took another thoughtful look at that dark, ugly hole. ‘I’d swear this was never made by anything less than a thirty-eight calibre gun. That gives a loud report. If the body was still warm when the sergeant got to it, all three of us should have heard it—and the constable as well.’

‘That’s so, Frayne,’ the Superintendent agreed thoughtfully. ‘We certainly should have. Yet not one of us did. That’s curious.’

‘How about the murderer having a silencer on his weapon?’ Frayne suggested.

‘That will be about it, I fancy.’

By the Superintendent’s instructions they stood now in darkness waiting the arrival of the ambulance and medical man. Not that there was anything to be hoped for by the arrival of the latter gentleman—if ever anything was dead, this poor huddled heap of flesh and blood was. But the Super did not want the usual curious crowd to be attracted by a light.

Frayne, waiting, found himself wondering what the face of the unfortunate man would be like. They had not turned the body over, and in the position it had crumpled into the head had sunk face downwards almost to between his knees and still covered by a broad felt hat, completely obscured the features. As soon as the medico came and professionally pronounced the man dead, they would move him, of course.

It looked like a pretty case, this. Unquestionably a deliberated, cold-blooded and, by the shot in the back, treacherous murder. And in the spot chosen for it, there would be nothing to help. The wall against which the murdered man had sunk was of brick; the very lane itself was cobble-stoned down to a drain in the centre. No finger-prints here; no spoor of a boot or shoe to aid. And, somehow he questioned if any later search of the man’s clothes would reveal any clue to identification. Yes; it would be a case after his own heart.

The light of the motor ambulance showed at the bottom of the alley, he could hear the voice of the constable directing from the running-board. He touched the Superintendent upon the arm and drew him a little apart.

‘You were agreeing with me just now, sir, about leaving the dope case stand until they try to run another shipment,’ he said quietly.

‘Well?’

‘I’d very much like to handle this case, sir—unless, of course, you wish to take it yourself. There are certain things about it that appeal to me strongly—if you think well of the idea.’

A moment or two Dallenby thought in silence.

‘Murder in the division is up to me, of course,’ he said presently. ‘But with what I have already in hand, I don’t see how I’m to give the time to it. Very well, Frayne—go ahead. There’s one thing, you’re on it right from the start. You know as much about things as any one else does.’

But with the coming of the doctor and the careful straightening out of the body which followed, Inspector Frayne found, to his intense astonishment, that he knew just a little more than any one else there did. For the man who had been shot down from behind was no other than the Man with the Egg-shaped head!

CHAPTER VII

DICK FRAYNE OVERHEARS A QUEER STORY

IT was late, very late—or rather very early the next morning—when Dick Frayne left the mortuary where he had been given opportunity of a close inspection of the body and clothing of the murdered man. Beyond that his belief that the shooting had been done with a .38 calibre pistol or revolver had been corroborated upon the extraction of the bullet, also that it had been fired from, at most, a few inches' distance, nothing whatever had been revealed of the slightest interest to him.

The clothes, though of continental tailoring beyond question of doubt, bore no maker's tab or button; nothing whatever by which the identity of the person wearing them could possibly be traced. The pockets had been stripped of everything—so much so that it suggested a systematic clearance by whoever had committed the deed. That he had been, physically, a man of the prodigious strength that Frayne had appraised him to be, was amply proven. From that thick, bull-like neck to the very heels he was one mass of bulging muscle. Stripped, the unfortunate man looked far bigger than when clad; to use the term common amongst athletes, he 'buffed' well. For all his middle height, he made the burly police officers who handled him look like striplings. He looked, as one of them concisely put it, as though at one time he might have been a professional strong man, or one of those solid persons to be found in continental teams of acrobats, carrying graduated pyramids of performers upon his own shoulders, and for that reason known in the variety profession as 'bearers.' Two suggestions made a mental note of by the Inspector, as possible avenues of inquiry. There certainly *was*, come to examine it closely, something of the 'pro' look in the big, fat, clean-shaven face.

Making for his rooms at somewhere towards two o'clock in the morning, he reviewed the whole of the events that had taken place since he had landed in the West End the night before from his fruitless trip up and down river. It had been a long day but he was not tired; nothing, indeed, could have been further from him than sleep at the present moment. His active mind, ready at any moment to start functioning at high pressure upon any sudden new development, was keenly alert now upon this, the first murder case entrusted to him. For in all the special and highly intricate work that had come his way, this was the first chance he had ever had of unravelling a tangled skein upon which human life or death depended. Had he not had the luck to chance upon the Superintendent that night, such a case as this most certainly would not have

been handed over to him—good man as he admittedly was.

Since he had been alone in the world he had given up the quiet surburban house in which his mother and himself had lived so many years. A man whose work was mainly in, about, and of the West End, needed, he considered, to be somewhere handy to his own ground. Many a whisper, damning to some long-sought 'Wanted,' hidden, rat-like, in a pest-house of Soho or Bloomsbury, comes to the hunter who is always on the ground; the man who lives, eats, sleeps and, in general, has his being in the same atmosphere as the hunted.

And Dick Frayne, unlike many of his fellows never employed, or made use of 'narks' or, to employ the term commonly used in police vernacular 'noses' to carry to him the first breath of persons, or plottings deep down in the well of the Cosmopolitan Underworld. He had all the straightforward, fair-minded man's contempt for the creatures, crooks themselves for the greater part, but virtually immune in return for treacherous information of their fellows. And no man, usually, has a greater contempt for them and their kind, than the one who uses the information. But, from his earliest beginnings in the Department, Dick Frayne had had no time for such gentry—or their female counterparts.

Some years before, he had ensconced himself in two comfortable rooms with an old Swiss couple who had an apartment-house in Frith Street. After five years these simple people were firmly of the impression that their gentlemanly first-floor was some scion of nobility, forced by circumstances to go forth and earn his daily bread, by some means not altogether clear to them. In the opinion of the old lady, Mr. Frayne could be engaged in no occupation of a lesser social distinction than banking—this as much as anything else, from the regularity with which he met his household commitments. Upon the other hand, M'sieu held firmly to the idea that bakery provided the principal of subsistence for their star lodger. This theory doubtless emanating from his extremely nocturnal, though quiet, habits. Dick Frayne did not enlighten them.

It was towards this house that he was proceeding, racking his brains as he went upon the mystery of the Man with the Egg-shaped head and, even more, if anything, the personal warning he had already received from the extraordinarily beautiful unknown against both him and his aristocratic-looking companion. As a concatenation of events, it easily eclipsed anything that had ever before come into his experience.

In the first place, who were these two foreigners and what was their business in London? That it was outside the law was fairly obvious by their inimical references to himself—as reported by the mysterious lady of the bohemian café. People, he reflected, do not discuss the police inimically unless they have some private and personal reason for either hating or fearing them. But why he should have been especially favoured by these worthies, he was

utterly at a loss to conjecture: he could have sworn that neither of them had at any time crossed his professional path, which needed a bit of thinking out.

To leave that particular—and highly personal—point for a moment, here, scarcely an hour later, one of these dubious gentry was found murdered; and, at that, in a *cul de sac* which apparently led nowhere. That was a curious side of it; one that opened up a further query: What were the murdered man and, unquestionably, his slayer doing in that particular spot at the time that they must have been there? It seemed to suggest that one man, the victim, was less acquainted with London than was his companion. He had doubtless believed that he was being taken to some particular destination, and had been piloted into that *cul de sac* by some person he must have trusted implicitly. By that person he had been ruthlessly murdered.

One thing became instantly certain: Harry the Slink had not picked up the trail of *this* particular one of his two quarries; had he done so the poor devil would probably have been alive now. Whether he had struck upon the trail of the other, the Villain of the Piece, remained to be seen. Upon that point quite a number of *possible* theories would hang.

He was moving leisurely along lost in a brown study when two voices just ahead of him brought him back to earth: two voices so entirely dissimilar that he glanced curiously at the speakers ahead of him.

He was, he noted, again passing that haunt of which the ‘Super’ wanted information: the club run by the Greek, Diantuolos, and from which they had evidently just emerged. The male of the pair was a burly American who, for his size and weight, moved with remarkable springiness of tread. The light from a lamp-post falling upon one bulbous and wonderfully serrated ‘cauliflower’ ear, gave instant enlightenment. The large American gentleman was, or at any rate had been at some time or other, a boxer; in all probability professional.

His companion was cast in totally different mould. A small person, slim and elegant of figure, whose tiny feet, perched upon extraordinarily high heels literally twittered along the pavement, beside the honest tens in patent shoes worn by her bulky escort. Under a light scarf he saw that she had an aureole of corn-coloured golden hair which, he guessed shrewdly, to have arrived at that particular golden shade by the art of the perrequier. She was obviously, from the bird-like chirping that came back to him, of French nationality—a Parisienne, he would have said without hesitation. The West End, he thought grimly, seemed particularly full of foreigners to-night—not that there was ever any shortage of them in this particular locality of it.

To judge from her gesture-laden volubility, the peroxided daughter of Paris

was in a condition of considerable excitement about something. At one point and obviously labouring under intense emotion, she broke out into her native tongue at so rapid a pace that her companion held up a huge, chamois-gloved, protesting hand. At the little distance separating them it looked to Dick Frayne as much like six-ounce boxing glove as anything else.

'Cut out the *parlez-vous*, Bright Eyes,' requested Mr. Devlin. 'You got a pretty good line on this Ferrondo bug and I'm sure interested; but I'm the horse's wish-bone when it comes to idle chatter in any other spiel but English. You're a pretty good kind of li'l' skirt what I've seen of yuh, an' when you get t' know me better, you'll find I ain't such a bad li'l' ol' guy neither. Put me wise to this Ferrondo bird. You know him, and you're scared of him right up to the back teeth. Well, this is the first time he's rolled into my young life, and I can't say I'm so shook on him. He's at the head of a mighty big thing all right, but he's got that "Come here, dawg" style, that don't make for nice smooth workin' with 'Chick' Devlin. We're all in the same game, as I get it, we do our stuff and collar our rake-off. That kinda stuff gets me peeved, an' when I'm peeved, babe, I'm just *hell* in pants. He'll, mebbe, get wise to that before he's such a much older.'

There was a tremble in the voice that answered him, Frayne noticed.

'Oh, M'sieu Cheek,' it warned, 'in the name of *le bon Dieu* be careful! Othaires, they 'ave spoke like that, but . . . One there was in particular . . . so brave, so strong. Out of the Seine they took him. It was in Paris that I . . . I became one of them. Because I am alone, and 'ungry and ah! so wretched! A man I . . . Bah! That does not mattaire . . . not now. I am nothing . . . onlee so small in it, but I am afraid of 'im just the same. His word, it is law. Those who do not obey, or make the blundaire . . .'

Dick Frayne, a considerably puzzled man, noticed that again she broke off upon that unmistakable note of fear.

Then the genial, utterly imperturbable voice of the gentleman who called himself 'Chick' Devlin wafted back to the Inspector's ear. This was a decidedly interesting conversation and he made no bones whatever about listening to as much of it as he could possibly bear. Just who Mr. 'Chick' Devlin and his Parisian, 'Bright Eyes,' or the person alluded to as 'This Ferrondo bug' was he had no more idea than the dead, but he would most assuredly give them his attention at the first possible moment. They sounded a remarkably interesting company.

'Those who don't jump to it snappy,' Mr. Devlin was saying, 'get in all wrong with the Main Guy, hey? Well, well. He cert'nly looks a hard-boiled egg, but they never tol' me in New York I was teamin' up with a killer-man.

I'll say it's a shame!'

'But it is not 'e 'imself, per'aps, who do these things, M'sieu Cheek. There are others, the Chinamen, per'aps, who do what 'e orders. Ah, so terrible they are, those men. I shiver even to see them.'

'Aha,' Frayne thought, his ears tensed now for every word, 'so there are yellow men in this bright little amalgamation.'

'Yeh,' Mr. Devlin drawled back, 'someway I got it in my bean *he* didn't shine out as the star performer when the rough stuff was about. So far as Chows go, babe, when I was on'y fifteen year young I useta go up Mott and Pell Street, and take a bite or two outa their half-caste fightin' men. I sh'ud worry about *them*. That's one of th' ways me an' Ferrondo don't mix. I like a guy who does his own fightin'. Got no time f'r a bimbo that wants other folks t' go 'round and slug some other guy for him. Like he tries t' put it over on me t'night with the big Irish feller.'

'You mean the one they call Capitaine La-ree?' she inquired quickly.

'That's the boy. Over that Ritzy dance-queen. Ferrondo turned dirty when that elegant jane went an' took the eats with Adair. Wants me t' go out and get him on th' quiet, for keeps. I told him some stuff he'll think about in a day or two, mebbe. I told him I didn't pack a rod to bump a guy off t' suit some other guy's game who was sittin' pretty round the corner.'

'Pack a—a rod, M'sieu?' It was plain that the expression was absolutely unintelligible to her.

Mr. Devlin laughed.

'Well, if I don't keep on forgettin' you ain't wise t' good li'l' ol' New York's language. Packin' a rod, means carryin' a gun. Anyway, I tell this Ferrondo pretty straight just where he steps off. And I spill him some more that's good listenin' for a wise guy. And that's that Adair, I'll tell the cock-eyed world, is one tough bird who can take all that's comin' his way and reach out f'r more. I'm ain't a soft bimbo myself, babe; but I dunno I would be achin't' carry the trouble to him on a tray. 'N', anyway, he's a straight kind of a guy an' he's Irish an' my old man was a Harp from the County Tyrone, so I'm half a Mick myself. So Ferrondo better lay offa that Adair bozo or I might take a share myself. All you gotta do, Bright Eyes, is sit nice an' quiet, gum your lamps on li'l' 'Chick', and keep y'r ivories clamped tight.' He changed the line of conversation.

'And what d' they figure is your line in the big scheme, kid?' he asked curiously.

It was a moment before she answered him, and her yellow head drooped. He did not notice it, but a dull, red flush crept under the paint of her face. Then

her head lifted suddenly again and, with a little hard laugh, she stared up at him defiantly. But she could not hide from him, or from the silently moving eavesdropper behind them, the tears that were in her voice.

'My part is to—to find out things,' she said jerkily; then added with a little catch in the throat, 'From men. If not in one way . . . then in anothaire. *Mon Dieu!* How tired I am of it all, how sick of the heart, how weary! But if one once commences, it is to go on to the bitter end—or to pay the penalty. And so, M'sieu Cheek, if one is only a woman, and not of ver' great courage, one goes on . . . until the finish it comes . . . to release.'

With a quick involuntary sob, she turned a corner and darted off along the street leaving her escort standing there—paralysed astonishment printed across his big face. Before he could move in pursuit she had hailed a taxi passing by and, with a wave of her hand, towards him, sprang in and the cab started off. Dick Frayne, catching a glance of the big fellow's face as he came sauntering casually along, noticed that there was a certain softness about the humorous blue eyes as they followed her course; a softness that as suddenly went as her vehicle disappeared from sight and, turning, he caught sight of Dick Frayne close upon him.

When opposite Mr. Devlin, the Inspector came to a halt.

'I wonder could you oblige me with a match?' he inquired.

Some few seconds the big New Yorker eyed him without response, then an expansive grin broke upon his decidedly pleasant, if somewhat pugnacious looking face.

'Brother,' he announced quietly, 'I cert'nly can oblige with a match. An' seein' you ain't showin' no signs of anythin' to light, I can present youse with a cigar which is no *flor de cabbage leaf*, neither. 'N', same time I can pass youse out some mighty good advice. If this is th' pr'lim'nry round to a hold-up, I can do youse more dirt in a couple of minutes than what 'ud happen t' you in ten wars.'

Dick Frayne grinned in return.

'Scarcely,' he observed, and in response to the match-box handed to him, produced his cigarette case.

'Try one,' he suggested. 'Fair exchange is no robbery.'

'Get a bit and give a bit,' agreed Mr. Devlin, taking one; then added, 'It's th' poor that helps the poor.'

Whilst these friendly amenities were in progress, a burly, heavy-footed figure moved from a doorway across the street, in which it had evidently been ensconced, crossed the road and proceeded along, keeping in the shadows in

an opposite direction to them. Frayne would have picked that footstep out of a hundred—Dallenby. What the deuce *was* it the Divisional-Superintendent kept on the prowl after, all hours of the day and night?

'They's one thing,' a voice beside him chuckled, 'you couldn't miss that guy f'r a cop, not if he wasta get himself up in a lady's weddin' dress.'

A criticism which Dick Frayne had to admit to himself was absolutely unarguable.

CHAPTER VIII

IN WHICH TWO GENTLEMEN OF LEISURE CONFER

IN the something more than merely comfortable bachelor suite he maintained in Jermyn Street, the Honourable Larry Adair stood before his cheval-glass struggling with a refractory dress tie.

Behind him, and making no effort whatever at assistance in the delicate business, was the extraordinary individual known to the Captain's male visiting list as, Scaddan his *major-domo* in general and valet in particular. But never a one of such visitors had ever beheld the little man with the limp and the terrier-like eyebrows engaged in the duties generally accredited to such service; though beyond all question Captain Adair's establishment was run so perfectly as to call forth spontaneous approval of Mr. Michael Scaddan. Considered as an American of no social antecedents whatever, his idea as to how a London bachelor's *ménage* should be, and was run, did him the highest possible credit.

It had been noticed that, whilst always perfectly civil to Captain Adair's guests never had he been known to give any of them the 'air' of custom. But as it had also been perceived that not even his employer himself was so favoured, and, moreover, seemed to take no umbrage at the omission, it was put down as an expression of sturdy American independence exhibited by a most competent person not quite *au fait* with the delicate nuances of English servitude.

'That's the fourt' yuv mucked up,' this most original valet remarked as another dishevelled piece of white linen joined others, equally bedraggled, upon the floor. 'Why th' hell y' can't buy one already fixed up beats me.'

The Honourable Larry Adair took another from his box, eyed it as though it had been some particularly unpleasant species of reptile, and proceeded again to the encounter.

'There are some things, Joe,' he returned through gritted teeth, 'that a man *can't* do. The laws governing them are immutable. A man can knit the socks he wears, if he knows how, and there's no social tenet to say he can't design and make his own shirts—if he's brilliant enough. But Lord help the man who appears in any dress bow but one he's tied himself. He's outcast—beyond the pale. They're the curse of my life, "Limpy".'

'I'd go easy with the old nickname, Larry. I'm not saying walls have ears, as th' song says, but the man who can tell a police "snitch" from an ordinary

citizen or citizeness these days is cleverer than me.' He moved, with surprising speed and lack of sound for a lame man, to the door and jerked it wide open. There was no one within sight.

'Managed it this time,' announced the Captain triumphantly, and exhibited a particularly neatly-made bow upon which he gazed with admiration.

'Grand! Fine!' ejaculated Mr. Scaddan in plainly satiric tones.

'You go to the divil,' was Captain Adair's response. He proceeded with his dressing. 'Come to that you're running to the magnificent yourself these days. I saw you out the other day in a tail coat.'

'There's nothin' like lookin' as different as y' can fr'm—fr'm other days,' was the instantaneous retort. 'And I spend most of my evenings in a little saloon where butlers an' valets and the like take their poison, don't forget. Well, they wear them kind of duds, and I gotta turn out like them. You betcha. These lords, dooks, an' earl birds that come here, don't matter. They don't notice things. But these servant ginks are quick to spot if one of themselves don't get in line. There's times when I get that claw-hammer coat on an' a black strangler that I feel like an undertaker out scoutin' for a payable corpse. But there's one big thing to it: nobody's takin' Mr. Michael Scaddan, by any chance, to be the classy little Ace of Combination Safe Openers, "Limpy" Joe Swiggers of New York.' A reminiscent smile came into the keen, lined little face. 'Will y'u ever f'get th' last job we done, Larry? The gran' slam before we beat it for London and the High Life? Boyo, that get away'll be a mystery for all time.'

But the other slowly shook his head. Into his face there crept a grim, hard look, and the Captain's dejection showed in his attitude.

'Nothing is a mystery for long in these times, "Limpy",' he said quietly. 'One of these days, when we're least expecting it . . .' He stopped with a long-drawn sigh.

'If ever it comes we'll hope to be tried here,' the little lame man said jocularly. 'It's a grand country and I'm havin' the time of me life.' But a certain expression on the handsome face opposite him put a quick end to his humour. The laugh died out of the keen eyes and into them came a gleam of genuine concern and affection.

'Larry,' he said quietly, 'something's eating at you, boy. Has been for a day or two. You've tried to hide it under that what-the-divil manner of yours, but my lamps've got mighty quick to see when anything's got you wingin' inside. What is it?' he demanded abruptly. 'The feenance . . . the skads? Have we come to th' end of the wad? If it's that way, I gotta coupla grand lay-outs mapped in this li'l' ol' burg. You an' me'll clean 'em up without turnin' a hair.

One is down in th' city and . . .'

'Man, there's thousands left. It's not money.'

There came a shadow of regret into "Limpy" Joe Swiggers' voice.

'Well, if that's so they can stand for a bit. Though I don't mind tellin' you, Larry, my fingers are just itchin' to get the tools on a good safe again. This livin' on Easy Street an' doin' nothin' ain't all honey to an old guy that loves his job. Well, if it ain't the skads, it's the skirts. Nothing surer. Some clinger that won't take the fare-ye-well nice and kind.'

The Captain gave a little troubled laugh.

'They're not all that kind, "Limpy",' he returned with a half sigh. 'Some are almost unapproachable. A man's only thought may be to help them—but there's a wall around them that never lets you get any nearer.'

'All the same,' persisted Mr. Swiggers adamantly, 'for every dame a laddie like you can't make a date with, I'll show y'u a thousand y' couldn't give the shake in twenty years. It ain't the Lady Hermione What-is-it—the one who's always callin' up on the 'phone?' he inquired anxiously.

Adair shook his head.

'Some other jane of the idle rich an' grand?'

A second time the curly head moved negatively.

'No, "Limpy". Though a better bred woman, or a more beautiful one never trod shoe leather; at the present moment she is earning a living as a professional dance-partner at a night-club.'

At which information both the mouth and eyes of Mr. Joseph Swiggers opened to their widest extent.

'A . . . a dance-jane,' he gasped at length. 'A—a p'fessional *hoofer*! By heck, Larry, for a tip-top Ritzy guy like you t' fall solid for a . . . Goddam, boy, I'd sooner we'd went weak in the skads. Whadda you know her tale and jus' a tall spiel t' get you in the weak spot? An' you're just the soft-hearted buck t' fall f'r any 'cuties low, sweet line of bull about the tough breaks which has fell on her. I've struck them hen gimmes before, and I'm wisin' you . . .'

'That will be sufficient!' The words spat out suddenly, icily—underneath them unmistakable threat. The little safe-breaker stopped as though he'd been struck. Adair moved slowly to the window and stood looking down into Jermyn Street. Swiggers' eyes followed him, a pathetic, dazed expression in them.

'Why, Larry,' he murmured, 'why, pardner, if I've got your goat anyways I shouldn't about this frill . . . lady, I'm—I'm sure sorry. It's on'y in a way, knowing what class of a high-bred ejicated tip-topper you are, Larry, an'

knowin' what a big-hearted guy you are all th' time . . . I sorta was scared. . . .'

Adair impulsively swung around and clamped a hand down upon the thin stooped shoulders, his face alight again with his usual cheery smile.

' "Limpy",' he said, 'forgive me snapping at ye like a surly cur. And that's what I'd have to be to forget all you've done for me.'

'Aw, where's the sense in bringin' all that up again?' the little grizzle-haired man protested. 'All I thought then was y' looked too good t' me to be made what they made me. Made *their* way, I mean. Hunted about cold and hungry until they forced y' into somethin' they could send y' for the long stretch on. I never meant t' teach y' my game—t' make y' what y' axe Larry—one of the finest cracksmen that ever put the "juice" on a safe. I on'y meant gettin' y' out o' their dirty hands.'

'D'ye think I don't know that and love ye for it, ye old fool!' came in a husky voice. 'You've the best heart in the world, "Limpy", and there's not a crook bone in you that they didn't make in one prison or another. But I could wish to-night, "Limpy", that you'd never, never taken compassion on me. That I'd done my ninety days for "no visible means" and started again with nothing against me but a streak of bad luck. There's nothing in that—it can happen to the best and most honourable.'

'It can that,' agreed his listener sympathetically, and added: 'It's mostly them it does happen to—th' others just go on pullin' their snide stuff an' rakin' in the skads as they go. It's a rum world, Larry; it's not th' good that gets the goold.'

'Hard luck means nothing to a good woman, but a dishonest man can raise nothing but a feeling of abhorrence in her.'

'It all depends,'observed "Limpy" Joe imperturbably. 'I've known some good ones stick like glue t' the dirtiest blagyards unhung. And if there's any smart Alec livin' who c'n say what a woman'll say or do where a man is concerned, he's too clever t' be real. An', anyhow, he put pertinently, 'who's gonna wise the lady up to just how you stand?'

'Who?' Adair stared at him amazedly. 'Why, myself, of course! Ye don't suppose I'd let her, we'll say, care for me and keep the truth of myself from her, do you? Man, I'd as soon think of picking her pocket.'

Information which, to say the least of it, considerably staggered the recipient of it. Here was a quixotic, damned-fool kind of a notion that, carried out, might land any one anywhere.

' 'S far as puttin' this swell ja—lady wise to where you stand, Larry,' he began haltingly, 'why, if them's the ideas your class has got, go to it, boy, just when you think the goin' good. Now in my section of society, anybody who

felt it come on him bad t' run round and wise up some lovely dame that he was on'y a fake dude, and really a high class safe-buster he would mos' like get his mouth shut quick, slippy, an' permanent by some of th' oncultured gents he'd worked with some time or other. Case'n he got to throwin' names about too free—get me? But so far as you an' me goes, Larry, that stuff don't count. You was drove into it, an' never liked the game. So when it looks good t' you t' open out t' this lady, let it go. If she spills it an' we're nabbed, we'll stand the gaffs t'gether, Larry, like we've done ever since we teamed up.'

The big man eyed him with a strange smile.

'Before I'd say anything that would incriminate you, "Limpy",' he said quietly, 'I'd . . . I'd keep my teeth shut altogether and just clear out—no matter what it cost me. We none of us know what the world has in store for us; if we did . . . Ah, what th' divil 's the good of wishing! It's too late and the thing done. But it's a woman who, knowing nothing, has made me feel the rottenness of all this.' He waved a hand about the splendid room. He turned heavy clouded eyes upon the little figure who returned his look with eyes well-nigh as miserable as his own. 'And that,' he concluded, 'must sound like base ingratitude to you, "Limpy".'

'Why, as far as that goes, Larry, a guy can't help what he feels inside him. There's jes' one thing I was goin' t' ask, an' th' on'y thing. If I hadn't run inta y' that afternoon in th' Tombs, would y' ever have met the Ritzy dame at all?'

It was instantly evident that this aspect of his tangled love affair had struck home upon the person most concerned with great force. After a moment's consideration of it, he shrugged his shoulders and smiled his usual cheery smile.

'There's that,' he admitted, 'divil a doubt of it. If it hadn't been for you I'd never have seen her, never have known she was on the earth. Ah, well, care killed the cat—and 'twill work out as it's going to without me making a Doleful Dan of myself. But what's worrying me most, "Limpy", is that I'm certain in my own mind that she's in that place on some desperate game, and she's in danger. She's playing a lone hand—and here's me that would give my right hand to be with her against whatever threatens, forced to stand idly by. For not one word can I drag from her of her affairs. And she's one of the great ones of the earth, "Limpy"; nothing she could do would disguise *that*.'

'An' she's up against rough stuff, you're thinkin'?' Mr. Swiggers asked musingly.

'Every instinct I have warns me of it.'

'So far as this danger stuff goes, I'll say you an' me is gonna be the buttinskys. We're gonna gather roun' an' make it a sour job f'r them who is

stackin' up a raw deal f'r the lady. What monnaker does the lady travel under, Larry?'

'She is known as Mademoiselle Jetta Marcein,' he was told.

'And she hops it at the Greek bird's night-joint. Right!'

'What d'ye think you're going to do, "Limpy"?' Adair asked, smiling in spite of his depression.

'Me? Nothin', pard, nothin'. On'y get round just a bit more'n I been doin'. Do a bit of scouting round in dumps you never even heard of. If there's anythin' workin' underground against the lady, you leave it to me.'

The Honourable Larry shook his head.

'London isn't New York, "Limpy",' he reminded. 'What you could bring to light there in a few minutes, you'd never learn here in a year.'

Mr. Swiggers waved an amazingly long-fingered and capable looking hand in complete repudiation of this pessimistic theory.

'F'get it, Larry, f'get it! In our world, London, N' York, Paris, Berlin or Vienna is all the same. There's a branch of the Lodge of the Ancient Order of Crooks in every burg in the world. No matter where it is, or what's the language spoke, a brother can get the news *pronto*. If any o' them dangers you been talking about is known deep down under, you stand pat on your ol' side-kick, Past Master o' th' Order "Limpy" Joe Swiggers ferretin' it out.' Abruptly he switched from the subject. 'You're takin' th' eats with th' rich an' grand t'night, ain't y'?'

The Honourable Larry made a grimace.

'With the Duke and Duchess of Llanleithy in Belgrave Square,' he said. 'After that I go on to the Countess of Aniscarthy's dance. And boring entertainments they'll be to suffer, I'll bet my hat.'

'They's thousands 'ud give their eye-teeth t' be sufferin' in th' same company,' was Mr. Swiggers' acute observation.

Larry Adair now fully clad and with that impeccability which had earned him the reputation of being one of the best-dressed men in London, gave one final touch to that tie, then passing towards the door, gave a casual glance down into the street. He stopped still, a frown of perplexity upon his forehead.

'Now that's strange,' he murmured, entirely to himself. 'It almost looks as if . . . but that can't be.'

'Any guy who'll bet on what *can't* be in this ol' world,' observed Mr. Swiggers placidly, 'is open t' gamble high, wide an' handsome. What's strange an' can't be?'

He also moved to the window and looked down, but moved back again with much greater celerity. For a split second there showed upon his lean, wrinkled visage the expression of a man who might have just received one of the shocks of his existence. It passed instantly, leaving nothing in his face but a complete blandness in which no man might read anything.

'Is it that big fella buzznackin' up and down like he was lookin' f'r somethin'?' he asked.

'Yes. Now what would he be hanging about here for, "Limpy"?'

Mr. Swiggers became instantly the very spirit of utter casualness. 'Search *me*! Why shouldn't he? D'ye know him?'

Adair paused before answering.

'Yes—and no. He's one of the regulars of Diantuolos! I've never spoken with him myself, but he's quite a personage there. Spends a lot of money and enjoys himself in a hearty kind of way. I'd say he was a New Yorker. Seems to be a decent sort of fellow, but by the look of him about as tough as they make them.'

'Yeh,' Mr. Swiggers responded in a curious voice, 'he cert'nly looks one hard-boiled guy, that. What's he called?'

'Devlin. 'Chick' Devlin. By the size of him, the 'Chick' part of his name is a form of humour.'

Again Mr. Swiggers advanced slightly and surveyed the figure down below, but he said nothing. Beyond question, the person under discussion was giving considerable, though covert attention to the main entrance of the building in which they stood. There was a certain irresolution about him, as might be shown by a man who has made up his mind to a certain action, the result of which he stood in considerable doubt. Suddenly he took from his pocket a book, tore from it a page and with every sign of profound distaste for the science of calligraphy, wrote upon it laboriously.

'But, of course,' Adair went on, 'he might know any amount of people living here. For a rough sort of diamond, he's a great favourite with some of the very best.'

They watched him complete his epistle, cross the road to the entrance, then for a brief space he was lost to sight, to appear again recrossing the road and hurrying off in the direction of the Haymarket.

'Whatever he's come to do,' observed the little man, 'he's done it. And by the way he's skyootin' off, it's a bomb he's planted.'

Which, though in a totally different sense to that meant by Mr. Swiggers, was perfectly correct.

At a knock on the door he crossed the room and took from a maid a small piece of carefully folded paper.

‘A gentleman left it with the hall-porter to be delivered to the Honourable Captain Adair at once,’ she informed him.

He carefully closed the door upon her, waited a moment and then casually opened it again. There being nothing suggestive of eavesdropping visible, he again closed it and handed the missive to his amazed companion.

‘Girls is right enough in their way,’ he said explanatorily, ‘on’y y’ never know who has the loan of their ears when they’re off the job.’

The Honourable Larry opened the twisted piece of paper and read its message with a furrowed brow. It was not the easiest thing in the world to decipher, for Mr. Devlin had his own and entirely original ideas as to orthography. He did not permit his style to be cramped by adherence to the usually-accepted laws of spelling.

It was an extraordinary document which, with considerable effort, he translated aloud to his waiting henchman.

> ‘Dear Honourable, I don’t know you to speak to, and you don’t know me, but I am putting you wise to dirt which is framed up for you hot and soon. There’s a bad guy around town who has it on you over that lady in the Greek’s dance dump. Said bad guy is in with a mighty tough gang, so pack a rod and if they crowd you any time cut loose quick because they’ll be out to bump you off. Squint hard and often on all foreign guys hanging about—get me? I’m tipping you off on the level, Honourable. He has something on the lady too, so tell her to watch her step. ‘A Friend.’

‘Now what,’ demanded Captain Adair, tossing the letter upon his dressing-table with a gesture of utter bewilderment, ‘what the divil does that mean, “Limpy”?’

Mr. Swiggers, who had followed the recital with profound attention, paused a moment before replying. In the half-closed eyes under the terrier-like brows, was the expression of a man who was cogitating this strangely acquired information from every angle.

‘How’d it be,’ he suggested at length, ‘if you was to bail that big boy up and put it to him straight what’s the strength o’ things?’

Adair shook his head.

‘I can’t do that, “Limpy”. He’s done me the good turn. I can’t drag him into the open against his will. Particularly if I happen to be a watched man, myself. If he belongs, as I think is certain, to the same gang he speaks of, I

don’t want to perhaps land him in trouble with them.’

“Limpy” Swiggers shook his grizzled head.

‘No,’ he agreed, ‘gettin’ him in all wrong ain’t gonna do you any good, Larry. So they’s on’y one thing—keep your eyes skinned like he says, and carry a gun handy.’

The other gave a contemptuous laugh.

‘I’ve never carried a gun, even when working,’ he said. ‘I’m not going to start now. My fists will look after me.’

‘They can’t punch bullets back,’ Mr. Swiggers objected.

‘Foreigners rather suggest cold steel. The knife’s their weapon, “Limpy”.’

‘Not so much nowadays. They’re more ejicated. Steel means gettin’ close, and you’re not the kind they’d fancy gettin’ too near. The guy that misses you, Larry, is gonna get handled mighty bad. About this lady—if y’ take this as on th’ level, they’s something steepin’ in the brine for her. What’re you gonna do about that?’

A deep flush crept over the face of the Irishman. The usually merry blue eyes went suddenly a cold, hard grey.

‘God help the one who tries it,’ he said, in a low, still voice. ‘He’ll get no mercy from me.’

Late that evening, at the very time, to be exact, that the Honourable Larry Adair was sparkling at his brightest and best at a ducal table in Belgrave Square, Mr. Swiggers, in the privacy of his own room, made a sinister addition to his personal appurtenances. From a locked trunk he took a small automatic pistol, loaded it carefully, then deposited it in a singular place, suspended by a narrow strap immediately beneath his left arm. A practised searcher would have run his hands over “Limpy” Joe’s pockets and never discovered that weapon. Then re-donning the black Prince Albert of respectable upper-servitude, he sallied forth into Jermyn Street and, by way of Piccadilly Circus, towards Soho.

‘Foreigners,’ he observed to himself as he limped his way across that circle of bewildering traffic, ‘is called for when a guy like Big Chuck Docherty—he hadn’t got such a long way from the old name in ‘Chick’ Devlin—passes th’ word. No originality, but then Chuck never had been any Edison when it came to grey matter under his lid. Anyhow, when a guy of his sort comes across with a spiel like that, “business only” was what was meant. It’s up to me t’ come up with Chuck and get the whole works of this frame-up. Pardners like Larry on’y comes oncet a lifetime, but I never see th’ place yet where a foreigner more or less mattered a damn!’

CHAPTER IX

WOMEN IN SORROW

TO say that Detective Harry Andrews was a disgruntled man was to entirety underestimate his dejection.

'I wouldn't have cared a cuss if I'd never picked either of 'em up,' he bewailed to Dick Frayne the next morning. 'That's just luck o' the game. But to get my eyes on one of them and lose him within five minutes is the frozen limit. If your description was right, I'd got the short, thick-set chap beyond any shadow of doubt.'

'The one I called, for want of a better name: The Man with the Egg-Shaped Head?'

'If he'd been christened it, he couldn't have been better fitted,' averred 'Harry the Slink' with finality.

'And you picked him up in Lisle Street?'

'Right at the back of the Hippodrome, sir. He was standing reading one of the bills. After a minute or two he strolled on, turned the corner by the Cranbourn Hotel and stood at the front corner of the theatre, reading another of the bills. And a funny thing happened then, something there might be more in than I'm certain of.'

'What's that?'

'While he was reading, a man came up and stood beside him reading the same bill. It was a Chink—poshed up to the nines. And I could almost have sworn—mind you, I say, *almost*—that something passed from the Chink to your man. I can't say what, but something—a packet, I believe.'

'But they never spoke?'

'Never even looked at one another.'

'Are you fairly sure about that packet?'

The detective considered a moment.

'Short of actually going into the box and swearing positively to it, I'd bet every cent I've got.'

Frayne said nothing, but his mind reverted instantly to the absolutely empty pockets he himself had helped to turn out.

'And then?' he put at length.

'Then the Chink just drifted on around the corner and along towards

Leicester Square. And that's what made me so sure about the parcel. My mark never seemed to move a finger until the Chink had gone, then he shuffled something into his breast pocket. When he took his hand away from the pocket, he had a handkerchief in it and blew his nose. A man doesn't carry a handkerchief in his breast pocket as a rule.'

'I've known men do it,' the Inspector demurred. 'Men who were faddy about the fit and hang of their clothes.'

'I wouldn't have said there was much of the dude about *him*,' was Detective Andrews' opinion.

'No. I only wanted to point out that it is done.'

'Harry the Slink' rubbed his chin musingly.

'Maybe. Looking back on it afterwards I thought of something quite different. You mustn't forget, Inspector, that I've got no lead on the man at all. Don't know anything about him or what you wanted him tailed for. So, really, I'm all in the dark as to what his next move is likely to be. Well, being certain in my own mind that something was passed, it struck me afterwards that the handkerchief and blowing his nose business might have been a signal to some one handy that he'd got whatever it was that the Chink gave him.'

The Inspector nodded thoughtfully.

'There's quite a possibility in that idea, Andrews,' he said. 'And after that?'

Andrews ran his hand through his hair worriedly.

'It beats me,' he confessed. 'There was a moment's disturbance on the corner—a bag-snatching job—and I took my eyes off him for one moment. When I switched around again, he'd gone; disappeared in a flash! It didn't take me twenty seconds to work that crowd through, but he wasn't in it. I thought of the saloon bar of the pub—had he slipped in there? He could get through and back into Lisle Street that way if he'd tumbled that he was being foxed. But why should he? He'd never seen me before, if he noticed me then—which I'd lay a lot of money against. However, as luck had it, there he was. He'd gone around the saloon bar, through a curtain and to the end of the side bar—near the Lisle Street entrance. He was ordering a drink. I did too, and waited. In a minute or two he drank up and left by the Lisle Street door. I gave him not more than half a minute start—he couldn't have got twenty yards—before I followed. For the second and last time he'd vanished—I never set eyes on him again.'

Dick Frayne ran his mental eye along Lisle Street from that corner.

'There's a small restaurant across the street a few doors up,' he suggested.

‘My first move—and drew blank,’ was the instant reply.

Dick Frayne gave the point another moment’s consideration.

‘Did he seem at all nervy, or suggest in any way a man who had something to be feared hanging over him?’

Andrews grunted.

‘He was about as un-nervy as a pig with a stomach full,’ he returned. ‘Wasn’t so unlike one either with that shaven head.’

Frayne leaned forward making weird hieroglyphics with a pencil upon his blotter.

‘We’ll just suppose,’ he put suggestively, ‘that there was nothing more in his reading those bills. . . .’

‘Twice,’ the other reminded him. ‘And the same bill each time.’

‘That rather helps the idea I’ve got,’ Frayne responded, ‘that he really was interested in the show. That he left the hotel and in the start you gave him simply turned quietly in at the gallery or amphitheatre stairs, either of them within a few yards, walked calmly upstairs, sat down and saw the show.’

But Detective Andrews shook his head with the very finality of negation.

‘I lost him all right,’ he said grimly, ‘but I don’t let them slip me as easy as that. I picked up another man and we watched the exits as they came out. He couldn’t have got past us without being seen. It’s got me beaten.’

‘It certainly was bad luck,’ Dick sympathized. ‘But worse luck for him by far. For if only you had picked him up he’d undoubtedly have been alive now, poor devil!’

Detective Andrews stared at his superior in unbounded amazement.

‘You—you don’t mean to say he’s—he’s been done in, sir?’

The Inspector nodded.

‘At about the very time you were watching for the Hippodrome audience to come out, he was shot down in a *cul de sac* not far from Oxford Street. Shot in the back,’ he added, ‘and by a gun that had a silencer on it.’

‘Well, I’ll be . . . !’ Detective Andrews’ astonishment was beyond the niceties of departmental discipline. Had the Chief Commissioner been present he would have had to let fly just the same. ‘Well, that takes the biscuit with a vengeance,’ he gasped.

‘Always assuming,’ the Inspector pursued with very marked emphasis, ‘that the man you picked up is to be identified as the man I saw in the café. We know what extraordinary doubles exist, even with the most singular and striking people. So you’d better go along to the mortuary and make that point

absolutely certain first.'

'Why in that case, sir,' Andrews was quick to point out, 'if you've already run the rule over the body, you'd know whether the man had anything like a packet on him?'

'There was nothing whatever found on the murdered man's clothes. Nothing *whatever*. Everything had been cleared from his pockets.'

'He had a watch, sir. He looked at the time while he was standing in front of the theatre reading that bill. That was one of the things to give me that idea that the meeting between him and the Chink was timed.'

'Then his watch went with the rest,' Frayne remarked. 'Get along and identify if you can, then 'phone me. We've taken the dead man's prints and telegraphed his anthropometrical measurements to Paris, Berlin and Vienna.'

Detective Andrews was in the act of closing the door upon himself when the Inspector hailed him again with an afterthought.

'By the way,' he asked, 'did you happen to notice what the man drank in that bar?'

'Yes, sir. Saw it poured out. Hollands gin, out of a J.D.K.Z. bottle.'

'Thanks. 'Phone me verification of identity as soon as you can.'

Some little time the Inspector sat in thought after Andrews had departed.

'I'll try Amsterdam with those prints and descriptions,' he decided. 'That build, and Jan de Kuyper and Zoon as a beverage seems to point in that direction as a likely chance.'

But Amsterdam had no prints of the dead man, nor had Paris, Berlin or Vienna. Whatever he had been then, he was not openly known as an international rogue. He had certainly never been through police hands in the countries of those capitals. The only thing certain about him was Andrews' identification. That the dead man was his bill-reader of the night before—the man who had so mysteriously given him the slip in Lisle Street—he was prepared to swear in any court; which again identified him positively to Frayne as the Man with the Egg-shaped Head.

But there was at least one individual in London who could tell not only who the dead man was, but in all probability what his business had been in London. Business, it recurred to him, that had in it something inimical towards at least one member of the Criminal Investigation Department.

For some little time he sat endeavouring to think which one of his cases of recent months was in any way likely to have aroused the enmity of these gentry towards him personally. For the life of him he could not place them in the setting of any one of them.

The Beemahn-Shapiro case? No—and besides, he'd cleaned the whole gang out there; no 'left-overs' to start the game afresh. The Communist, Valudski? Plenty of foreign gentry implicated there; a whole crop of deportation orders, but nothing in the ostensible class of the villain of the piece, or even half so respectable to look at as the man who had been murdered last night. In the forged passports traffic case, the two Herveys and their co-workers had been all Americans, though working from Paris. Scotland Yard had nabbed the major portion of the gang, and the *Service de Sûreté* the rest.

Of course it had always to be remembered that men speaking almost any European tongue could also be of American nationality. Many languages were common usage amongst sections of that great nation of admixtures. But the Americans, except of the extremely moneyed class were extraordinarily conservative as to their clothing, especially the men. There was no mistaking American tailoring in London and, beyond question, those of the dead man were Continental and fairly recently made at that. And there was another thing: whatever nationality the villain of the piece might prove to be, it most assuredly would not be American. No one had ever seen a citizen of the U.S.A. wear a rimless monocle with the air he had worn it—if one ever saw an American wear a monocle of any kind, or with any sort of air.

Which thought upon Americans and their ways brought his memory back to the decidedly original one he had made acquaintance with in the early hours of the morning. The cheerful gentleman with the magnificent cauliflower-ear who called himself 'Chick' Devlin, and upon occasions 'packed a rod'! who worked with a person whom he scathingly alluded to as 'that Ferrondo bug'; a person who had it in for a certain Captain Larry, whoever he might be. Altogether, an illuminating conversation to listen in on.

And the golden-haired little lady from Paris, whose job it was to find out things, and who had suddenly broken down and run away. The lady who was terrified of this Ferrondo person and also of the Chinamen. What Chinamen would she be likely to come into contact with? That was a particularly interesting point for elucidation—later, of course; when he'd got his first murder case off his hands. Truly, London could show its fair quota of queer people.

Returning to this murder and to the two men whom he had personally seen together in the café, he came to the conclusion that his best line of action was to circularize a description of the unnamed villain of the piece around to all West End and West Central stations 'for purposes of identification only.' Inside that radius, somewhere or other, that elegant if sinister-looking personage would unquestionably be located. The grim thought occurred to him as he commenced to write the description, that but for the luck of Andrews

setting eyes upon the dead man *alone*, very different instructions would by now have been telephoned around the stations. As it was, he was forced to admit the probability that the man was in total ignorance of the fate of his companion of last night—particularly as any news of the crime had, for the moment, been kept sedulously from the Press.

Reading the first draft over, it struck him, though a laborious catalogue of the man's features and general appearance as he remembered him, how totally inadequate it was. Despite extraordinarily individual characteristics of feature, he was as elusive to portray in words as a man could possibly be. To come really down to it, his high-bred look and open, supercilious contempt for everything he saw was his most pronounced characteristic, but you couldn't put that down in words. That, his wicked eyes—and the monocle.

Well, a man could substitute a pair of lensed glasses for the monocle and away went both the monocle and the expression of the eyes. As to height, he had no lead whatever. Dress, even less; dress-clothes are unidentifiable, in any case only worn by night. As to olive skin and raven black hair, out of the eight million of London's population probably half a million answered that portion of the description perfectly. From what Frayne could read of his compilation, thousands of perfectly innocent and unwanted citizens could be taken 'inside' and interrogated upon it—and the devil to pay later if some of them chanced to be of any particular importance. And yet, the man he had attempted to describe had one of the most vivid individualities he had ever come across. However, after three revisions, and the profound feeling upon him that with each one he was getting further and further away from anything remotely like a good description, he gave it best and had it sent as it stood! Then put on his hat and walked out into Cannon Row to make a start somewhere or other. But just in what direction . . . ?

Chance, at times, plays some curious tricks; for all that it is claimed that destiny is immutable and our lives move steadily along the lines preordained that they shall move. In which case it must have been written down that Dick Frayne after considerable debate within himself as he moved up Whitehall, should do a thing he had never done in the hundreds of times he had passed up and down that street. A thing that never before had even suggested itself to his mind. Into an old-established restaurant just below the Admiralty Arch he turned and ordered some afternoon tea.

He was not, he felt, tired or anyway in need of stimulant, for all that his bed had seen but little of him the night before. Indeed, as the waiter set a tray before him he found himself wondering just what the deuce he wanted with it, and what assinine impulse he had obeyed to have set foot in the place at all. However, there was the tea and there was only one thing to be done with it—

drink some of it, pay up, and get on about his job.

Sipping slowly at the beverage, he looked curiously about the long room in which he found himself for the first time. There were very few there: it was rather outside the zone of fashionable afternoon tea takers, those who were there gave rather the impression that they knew it as a quiet spot at this hour where things of great consequence might be turned over. Then Frayne's eye fell upon two women sitting together in earnest, whispering converse; two women behind whose sad, tear-dimmed eyes seemed to lie all the sorrows of the world. And one of them, the elder he would have said, though she, herself, was little more than a girl, was the woman whom Dallenby had terrified last night before they had come upon the tragedy. The woman he had warned before in one of those strange nocturnal wanderings of his—the girl with the dead, hopeless eyes of a drug fiend.

But at this moment they were neither dead and hopeless with drug hunger, nor glittering with unnatural brilliance. In the look fixed upon her younger companion—a thin-faced girl not long since of at least great prettiness, if not actual beauty—her dark, sombre eyes were irradiated with nothing but compassion, that compassion for the helpless which comes from the soul.

For in the thin, white face upon which showed two hectic flushes, in that incessant, hard little cough that shook her frail body, in the wasted, almost transparent hands that held a handkerchief to her pale lips, her story was but too apparent. Unless he was greatly mistaken the unfortunate girl was not very far from the last stages of consumption. While he watched he saw that tears had begun to steal slowly down her face. He saw that the other laid a softly caressing hand upon one thin white one which lay upon the table. It was, he saw, a gesture of infinite pity and tenderness; the painted face was illumined as by a light divine.

Some words he had read once came back into his mind

'If we knew all
Then we might judge.'

He found himself wondering what Dallenby would have said about the almost spiritual look upon the street-walker's face. Some cynical and brutal sneer, no doubt. His bitter hatred of nighthawks, of any and every kind obsessed everything in him. It was a strange side to an otherwise just, if hard, man.

Frayne was careful, except for the most guarded surreptitious glances, to show no open sign of interest in the two. He was particularly anxious not to be recognized by the elder woman as the man who was with the Divisional-Superintendent last night. Her look of absolute terror as she scuttled away from them was vividly before him; and he could swear that if Dallenby had warned

her once, as he had said, it would have been in particularly unpleasant terms. There would be no mincing words about him. The marvel was that he would take the trouble to give her any warning. Far more like Frayne's knowledge of him to have had her taken in and charged forthwith.

But this very evident tragedy going on before his eyes intrigued him. It was plain that the elder girl was trying to induce the younger to some course of action of which the other was afraid. He could hear her voice, low and musical it was, lifted in fervent supplication; and as she spoke the pitiful tears of her companion fell faster and faster, indeed she was making little or no effort to hide them now. Curious eyes were beginning to throw glances in her direction. The elder noticed them and, bending towards her companion, whispered something. At once the girl made a palpable effort to steady herself and conquer her tears. A moment or two later the elder beckoned for their bill, paid it, and they left the place. As they passed him he saw that the stricken girl was very weak and leaned heavily upon the arm of her friend as she walked.

When he left the place a minute or two later, he found, to his astonishment, that they were outside, within a yard or two of the door. The elder woman was still endeavouring to persuade, the younger meeting her arguments with the same hesitant objection. He noticed how very white and strained the young face looked in the all-revealing sunlight. This unfortunate creature, he thought, was going through a hell of doubt and fear.

And then, suddenly and with a desperate little gesture, she appeared to acquiesce in whatever it was that was being asked of her, but how great that effort was showed plainly in the wan, hectically flushed face. Instantly the other hailed a taxi crawling past and gave an order that held Frayne transfixed with astonishment, though he never moved an eye in their direction.

'Scotland Yard, please.'

And as the door was closing upon them he distinctly heard the younger girl say in a thin, tearful voice: 'But he may not be there at this time.'

Who was it that might not be at the Yard at this time? The utter incongruity of the situation he had stumbled upon struck him with force. This poor bedizened young drug-fiend whom Dallenby had warned off the streets, paying a call at C.I.D. Headquarters! Though it was obvious that the visit was on behalf of the invalid girl she had with her. And she could be what she might, and have, as Dallenby had suggested last night, the worst kind of vile bully behind her, hounding her on by virtue of his power to obtain the drug she craved for, after that one poignant scene he had inadvertently witnessed he would never believe that she meant anything but good to that girl.

But there was one thing he meant knowing more about, and that as quickly

as possible. That the girl was a cocaine addict any man who knew the first thing about the outer signs of its havoc could have told at a glance; just as he could have been equally positive that the younger was entirely free of the habit. He must find out where her supplies of 'snow' came from. It might possibly open up a new avenue of investigation.

The taxi was just rolling away from the kerb when his eye fell upon a young gentleman, of whom it might safely have been said that Solomon, in the heyday of his sartorial triumphs, had little, if anything, the better of his rig-out. He was sauntering along down Whitehall at a pace which suggested that whoever might be in a hurry to get anywhere, he most assuredly was not.

But catching the quick signal from the Inspector, he instantly became a very different person; in less than a moment he was at his side, the very personification of human alertness.

'Broadley,' Frayne instructed, 'get after that car moving away. It's making for the Yard, so you're not likely to miss it.'

Soundlessly Mr. Broadley's ebony stick went up in front of a passing taxi. It slowed down and pulled in and he sprang inside it.

'Don't interfere with the two women in it,' Frayne continued quietly, 'in fact, lay low. When they leave the Embankment hang tight to them until you can tell me for certain where the elder of the two lives. Both, if possible; but the elder without fail. 'Phone me what you've got to Vine Street at about seven o'clock this evening. Hop off!'

Crossing to the Haymarket, a queer thought suddenly impinged upon his mind: the last man he had had shadowed was murdered within two or three hours of his setting a man after him. Were Broadley's efforts likely to result in similar tragedy? He dismissed the idea as too utterly ridiculous for consideration—as a matter of fact a girl of the class and connexions of the drug-fiend was probably far safer with a C.I.D. man on her heels than without. Last night's affair could be taken as sufficient proof of *that* fact.

But all the way up to Piccadilly Circus the red-rimmed stricken eyes of the consumptive girl haunted him. Slowly there was growing up in him an uneasy feeling about her; a feeling he could not have defined into any logical fear. But there it was, and he could not shake it off. He found himself trying to formulate reasons why her companion was so urgent in her efforts to get her to go to the Yard. And, again, why the other was so fearful as to doing so. Was it a case—a common enough one, alack!—of her being in the clutches of some brute, and the elder, fearful for her safety, wisely endeavouring to get her to seek police protection against him? That sort of thing was one of the commonplaces of the daily round at the red-brick castle upon the

Embankment.

But . . . somehow he doubted it. The women who came there upon that quest were not her type. That could be judged by externals; for she had nothing in common with them. Had it not been for the company he had seen her in, neither he nor any other man would ever have dreamed of placing her in any dubious category.

And then again—they were going there seeking one particular officer. That tearful 'He may not be there at this time,' put that beyond any argument. Well, it was a queer mix-up and he gave it best—at any rate until he got Broadley's report. But that cocaine had to be run to earth. For all that the Divisional-Super had let him have this murder case, drug-smuggling and peddling still remained his especial province. His real work of rounding up and breaking the great drug-smuggling ring was only in temporary abeyance. Not one grain of it that showed above surface which must not be traced right to the source.

Crossing the Circus he noticed a big, heavy-footed figure stumping around towards Glasshouse Street . . . Dallenby.

'Good Lord,' he almost exclaimed aloud, 'doesn't that man *ever* rest, day or night!'

CHAPTER X

‘PAPA’ SNITZLER HAS TWO CALLERS

THERE were not many who had much that was good to say for the Signor Antonio Boccaro, though quite a number of the cosmopolitan citizens of Soho would have admitted that he had a variety of uses.

He was a squat, thick-set man, the Signor, with a crop of dubious-looking curly hair, a swarthy countenance completely covered with pockmarkings, a ghastly squint of one eye, and, in general, was cast in so hangdog a mould that had a life sentence been given him on his appearance alone, no one could have felt that any particular injustice had been done him.

Upon more than one occasion the bolder of his more respectable neighbours had written Scotland Yard urging upon the authorities the immediate closing down of Antonio’s place of refreshment as a benefaction for which the vicinity could never be sufficiently grateful. But as nothing, so far, had eventuated in response to these entreaties, the majority of the suppliants had come to the depressing conclusion that the police were as much afraid of Antonio and his principal clientele as they themselves were. Self-preservation being in Soho very much the same as it is in Sweden, Sydney or Syria, the first law of nature, they let the matter drop.

But the authorities of the C.I.D., particularly of the Special Branch, could have given you quite other, and sufficient, reasons why Signor Boccaro was permitted to remain undisturbed—for the moment.

As a matter of fact the point had been brought up by the Home Office more than once, to be violently opposed by the police. Not in all London was there a place over which the devil could cast his net at almost any hour of the night, and collect up such a haul of his children as at Tony Boccaro’s. And that in the public eating-room alone. Tony, by the way, called it a restaurant and café.

And of those other rooms away at the top and towards the back of a building curiously deceptive in size? Rooms heavily shuttered from the outer world and approached by a long, narrow, dark staircase that, along the first floor, was always in Cimmerian blackness. A good place this, for any but the toughest of the *cognoscenti* to keep out of. And in those rooms, as Scotland Yard was well aware, lay the true inwardness of Signor Boccaro’s premises.

It would have seemed that his establishment must have been known all over the world as a sanctuary; at any rate from the Balkans to Latin America. A Frenchman wanted for the murder of a native girl in Papiete, Tahiti, was

taken two years afterwards in Signor Boccaro's—or, rather, some two or three minutes after leaving it. No one was ever arrested in Boccaro's actually. When the rats are coming confidently into the open, why drive them all underground and scattered again?

And there were times, not often, but there were moments, when Antonio himself *could* become informative; would, at any rate, answer a question, if put politically—and the asker were an officer of sufficient rank to make it troublesome for Antonio. For before the mental vision of Signor Boccaro one word was always written in pillars of fire—DEPORTATION. The mere sight of Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby—whose views were as well known in Soho as they were at the Yard—glancing in at his establishment as he passed, gave Boccaro shudders for a week. Had the Superintendent stepped inside and interrogated him in his own peculiarly persuasive manner, Antonio, bully and desperado as he was, would have 'shopped' his own mother out of sheer funk. A weakness upon the part of the Signor, of which Detective-Inspector Frayne was well aware.

It was this bourne of the predatory stranger in our midst towards which the Inspector was eventually making; but he went via his Frith Street rooms and there made very considerable alterations in his attire. For Dick Frayne was not known to Tony Boccaro as an Inspector of the Criminal Investigation Department, but something quite different. That is to say that he *believed* himself to be known to him as something quite different; moreover, he sincerely hoped so; but he would have been the first to agree that what the Signor actually knew, and what he would ever *admit* that he knew, were two horses of very different complexions.

An old suit, kept for such visitations as the one or two he proposed making this evening, and which had seen decidedly better days, a black slouch hat worn with a degree of raffishness his normal headgear never knew, an equally raffish thing in flowing ties and a pair of shoes of which the principal feature was their worn-down heels. A gaudy silk-bandanna handkerchief hanging down the breast pocket of his coat, and a rough tousling of his carefully-groomed hair completed the picture.

It was extraordinary the transformation these simple preparations made in his appearance—and entirely without the aid of grease paint or make-up. From what might have been an ultra-smart young man about town, and of unquestionable Anglo-Saxon ancestry, there emerged this slightly dissolute, not quite disreputable young man, who might have been of any nationality whatever, or any fusion of them except the Oriental.

He was particularly careful not to fall under the eyes of M'sieu or Madame, his landlord and landlady, as he left the house. His appearance at the moment

might have supported M'sieu in his theory of the plebeian nocturnal baker; but it would have completely exploded the aristocratically-bred bank official idea nursed by Madame. Nor did he linger long in the vicinity of his rooms but crossed Oxford Street and turned into the Tottenham Court Road. He did not intend dropping into Boccaro's to eat until the evening was further advanced and a representative selection of the clientele was to be seen. Not at any rate until he had 'phoned and received Broadley's report at Vine Street. Meantime, there was another visit to make which, conceivably, could bring a little grist to the punitive mill. A rare roost of the peripatetic nightbirds of alien origin.

It was before a particularly dingy-looking lodging and apartment-house in a back street that he stopped and gave a peculiar knock, then immediately began to whistle a shrill little melody. To this place he occasionally addressed letters to himself in the name of Albert Rimmel, calling at odd times and retrieving them at a cost of twopence per epistle. And there was well-thought method behind this seeming madness.

The odorous place was run by one 'Papa' Snitzler, a methodical old German whose finger-prints were still carefully preserved in most of the capitals of Europe and also America, who regularly made out a list of his lodgers (by whatever alias they happened to be favouring at the moment), male and female, their room numbers and how long the said apartments were let, and paid for. This was further supplemented by a list of letters, *poste restante*, awaiting people and an occasional perusal of both these were well worth the pence involved. They hung in a room just inside the front door which Snitzler designated his 'office' and where he sat the day through, keeping a wary eye upon both comers and goers—particularly the latter, in case their account did not balance to his liking.

Thanks to those lists more than one person had been taken out of his or her or their joint bed just in time to upset some nicely planned *coup* or other.

At times—not often, for to a fastidious man it was a frightful ordeal—Dick Frayne had stayed a few days there in the character of the elusive Mr. Rimmel; upon each reappearance allowing it to be thoroughly understood that he had been temporarily sojourning in one of His Majesty's prisons. A naturally good German accent, improved by two ghastly years in one of the worst of the German prison camps, enabled him to sustain the character without any difficulty, even to 'Papa' Snitzler. Indeed, he was something of a favourite with the old ex-criminal.

The door opening suddenly a few inches to reveal the bespectacled eyes of 'Papa' viewing him cautiously, he cut off his whistle and greeted the old German exuberantly; to be cordially welcomed in return. Yes, there were letters for him—three. Of a London postmark and been there some little time.

All of which Dick Frayne could have told him. Had he been ‘inside’ again? Oh, yes. ‘Papa’ sympathized, but mentioned that for a smart fellow, he seemed to be particularly unlucky in his collisions with the police. In his day, young fellows were more astute; though, certainly, the London police were sharpening up sadly. New York was better these days, he thought. And, anyhow, the young women seemed to have the best stuff in them nowadays. To which semi-consolatory jeremiad the Inspector responded amiably or jocularly as he considered best suited to the character of the pseudo Herr Rimmel.

But while the elderly German was short-sightedly going through a finger-marked and dog-eared bundle of letters, his eyes were running carefully down the two lists so obligingly compiled by ‘Papa’ Snitzler. He found there many items of considerable interest to him; generally of the strayed who had returned, at any rate temporarily, to the London fold. Two or three whom both Paris and Berlin had reported only a week or two ago as back on the old dunghills, had evidently taken fright and returned again. And there were one or two names very frequently occurring in transatlantic police cables who would seem to have decided that the English air was healthier at the moment than that of Broadway. He noticed, however, that nothing suggestive of the mastadonic Mr. ‘Chick’ Devlin or ‘that Ferrondo bug’ was among them. Not that he had expected to find them there for an instant. Devlin, at any rate, to judge by appearances, was to-day a good many rungs higher up the ladder than Snitzler’s, whatever may have been his beginning.

But the man of whom he was the most eager to pick up even the faintest glimmer of identity was the man who had been killed last night.

He also, again to judge solely by appearances, had been a cut above Snitzler’s, but you never could tell—especially with a Continental, as he believed the murdered man to have been. Any one of these names or aliases, unknown to him, could turn out to be that of the dead man.

Eyeing ‘Papa’ Snitzler as he slowly went through his letters, he wondered if he could draw the stolid old rascal into talking about his lodgers. Sometimes he would, and at others no power in the world could get him to emit more than the most non-committal grunt in the world. It was worth trying, anyhow.

With an engaging grin and in his very best German, he commenced:

‘Has Yvette Montbran been in London since I have been—been away?’ he asked casually.

He was perfectly well aware of the fair, or, rather, dark Yvette’s present address, having received official notification of it but two days before from the *Service de Sûreté* of Paris. Yvette would remain at it for precisely two years—

unless her visit were shortened by virtue of remissions for good behaviour.

'Papa' Snitzler made not the slightest sign of having heard the question. With bovine stolidity he plodded slowly through to the very last one of the letters; tied them up again with a piece of string, picked up three he had placed to one side and said:

'Three. Sixpence.' Taking the coin tendered, he carefully placed it away, then with a heavy pencil scored the name of Albert Rimmel from the *poste restante* list.

'You asked me something, Albert?' he inquired mildly, the ritual completed.

Quite certain in his own mind that 'Papa' had heard him perfectly at the first time of asking, Frayne repeated his question.

'Papa' Snitzler shook his bald head slowly.

'No,' he answered. 'She may have been in London but she has not been here.'

'But she always lives here, doesn't she?'

'Papa' shrugged his heavy shoulders.

'Always,' he observed sententiously, 'is an easy word to use, but difficult to be certain of. If she has been in London,' he repeated stolidly, 'it has not been here.'

The Inspector made an exclamation of disappointment. He gave a quick glance towards the door, then lowered his voice:

'I've a scheme in view that I would have liked to work with her. In her own line Yvette stands alone.'

'Papa' smiled blandly.

'It should be so,' he acquiesced. 'The little Yvette learned her work with the greatest forger of notes Paris ever knew. *Himmel!* what a one! I remember him coming to New York years ago and in a week turning out the American bills so that even the bank cashiers could not separate them from the real. And you think she would work with you, Albert—if she were here?'

'I could put to her a proposition.'

'Papa' Snitzler again shook his head dubiously.

'What a fool she would be to listen!' he observed mildly. 'A woman like her to work with a young man who seems to be taken every job he tries.'

An Oliver so remarkably trite, according to his own story, that Dick Frayne was completely stumped to find a Roland for it.

'But, indeed,' 'Papa' went on, 'M'selle is not here—nor has she been for

months.’

‘There was one man I met here once that I would like to pick up again,’ Frayne began tentatively. ‘We had several talks over big jobs he’d worked on the Continent. I can’t remember his name; though I could describe him. Unusual-looking man. Short, thick-set, tremendously broad across the shoulders.’

Snitzler, he could see, was thinking back with a puzzled frown.

‘The strangest part about his appearance was his head, though,’ Frayne resumed quietly. ‘Extraordinary shaped head he had—like an egg standing upright on its broad end. Not a hair on either face or skull. That’s what made it look like an egg.’

‘Papa’ Snitzler still maintained his puzzled, frowning silence.

‘There are so many,’ he said at length. ‘They come; they go. Except old friends, and mostly from America, those, I forget. What time you come to stay here last?’ he asked.

‘March,’ Frayne told him. ‘I remember the date, it was the day of Saint Patrick as they call it—the seventeenth. I stayed four days.’

Snitzler nodded: ‘I remember that,’ he said, ‘but the other you speak of . . . no. And I do not forget who stays here. It was not here you meet him. Somewhere else.’

Was Frayne wrong, or was there indeed a furtive look of cunning behind those thick, semi-concealing lenses?

‘It may be, but I am pretty sure I am right, ‘Papa’,’ he persisted.

The queer expression in ‘Papa’ Snitzler’s eyes became even more pronounced, but he still shook his head stubbornly.

Dick Frayne took a long shot.

‘That’s strange,’ he said quietly, ‘because I myself saw him turn into this street only yesterday morning. I was coming for my letters then, but I spotted a man I knew to be a police “nose” watching me, so I gave the place a miss. If it wasn’t here what other place in this street is there that he would be making for?’

That ‘Papa’ Snitzler was visibly perturbed by this wholly fabricated information was not to be mistaken. Frayne saw that he had penetrated his armour of elusiveness at some point or other. ‘Papa’ knew something about the man, and at that fairly recently. But whether he would be drawn or retire again behind that stubborn mask of amiable ignorance remained to be seen. One thing was certain: no one but the police and the actual murderer had first-hand knowledge that the man was dead. If Snitzler, or any in that house had any

inkling of the crime, then in some way or other the knowledge must have percolated through from the murderer himself. A thought which opened up very distinct possibilities.

But ‘Papa’ Snitzler was a wily old fox. Whatever the cause of that sudden perturbation of mind which had shown transiently in his eyes, he was evidently not prepared to make this dashing young gentleman of conspicuous ill-fortune as wise as he was himself. But Frayne noticed that more than once his eyes wandered about the room in what seemed to be indecision.

‘You think,’ he asked reflectively, ‘that police “nose” you saw, he might be watching this house? Perhaps, yes?’

Frayne became equally as reflective. The tone he answered in was a masterly imitation of intense thought.

‘It *might* be so,’ he admitted. ‘I thought it was me at first, but it wasn’t or he would have foxed me. He just stood where he was, his eyes moving up and down the street. And it was just then that the man I asked after came into the street, and he *looked* to be making for here. If the other had not been perched where he was I would have caught him up.’

The German, rubbing his chin with his hand, digested this, his uneasiness becoming more apparent every moment.

‘Suppose,’ he put slowly, ‘it was he who was watched, and they nabbed him. Yesterday, some time; last night, perhaps.’

‘Then he’s disappeared?’ Frayne snapped eagerly. ‘Not got back here again?’

‘Papa’ Snitzler wagged his head negatively.

‘No,’ he said tersely—and added: ‘And I am worried.’

So that was *that*! He had drawn the fox at last. It was in this kennel of thieves, and worse, that the murdered man had stayed. Frayne could scarcely keep the exultation out of his voice as he asked his next rapidly-considered question. He put it in a low, almost whispered voice equalling in seriousness the cast of ‘Papa’ Snitzler’s features. And first he noiselessly closed the door against possible eavesdroppers.

‘On what could they have nabbed him, d’ye know, ‘Papa’?’

For a moment wavering irresolution showed in the light blue eyes of the German, his thick lips half opened to speak, Frayne would have sworn. Then they closed tightly and the heavy head wagged a negative.

‘You don’t know?’ Frayne persisted.

‘No.’

‘You know his name though, ‘Papa’?’

‘I know the name he gave me when he came. Any one can know that.’ He jerked his head towards the list of room-holders. ‘Number Thirteen.’

Running his eye down to that fateful number, opposite it Frayne read the name: Jan Yonkers. ‘A Dutchman,’ he commented, thinking how nearly he had come to it in his guess over the man’s drink. But then Amsterdam had no record of the dead man’s prints, which seemed strange.

‘The name, it sounds Dutch, certainly,’ agreed ‘Papa’ Snitzler cautiously; back apparently in his most non-committal mood.

‘Is it an alias, though; that’s the thing.’

The German shrugged his bent shoulders.

‘How many that are not?’ he demanded. ‘In this house, in this street, all this Soho? He comes here and gives Jan Yonkers as his name. All right—that is his business. You come here and you tell me, Albert Rimmel. All right. That is your business. I myself am Herman Snitzler. All right. That is my business. All I know of this Jan Yonkers is that he takes his room a five—six days ago and paid for it in advance. Yesterday afternoon he went out; not yet has he come back.’

‘Give up his key?’ the Inspector asked quickly.

Snitzler looked at him in some surprise.

‘No. Why should he give up his key while his rent is paid? His things are here; he is the one to have the key. His time is not up until to-morrow; after that if he is not here I take his things out, lock them up where they will be safe and let the room again. But I think, yes, I think he comes back again before that.’ The light blue eyes fixed upon his questioner as though seeking some direct response, yea or nay, to this statement of belief.

But Frayne passed no comment. He was thinking quickly and hard. What had become of that key? It must be in the possession of the murderer with the rest of the contents of the man’s pockets. And locked in that room were things that would in all probability give some clue, not only to identification, but also to persons with whom he had dealings of some kind. And after to-morrow they would be taken out, and locked away where they would be safe—and when ‘Papa’ Snitzler said ‘safe’ that was what he meant. He might, of course, use police in demanding the stuff; but the result of that would be two things not at the moment desirable. The first to make the murder public property; the second, to throw something more than doubt, after this chat, into the mind of ‘Papa’ Snitzler as to the bona fides of Herr Albert Rimmel. And just where that might end was a considerable problem.

A knock came at the outer door; the same that Frayne himself had given. It, too, was followed by a whistle, but that quite a different one to the queer melody the *cognoscenti* of the place were in the habit of using. Its effect upon Snitzler was startling. His eyes bulged behind their glasses, his mouth opened wide, his whole expression that of a man suddenly confronted with some one, or something, out of his past, believed to have been left behind for ever. Frayne, watching him covertly, saw the bland Teutonic face twitch nervously once or twice upon his exceedingly slow progress to the front door. 'Gott in Himmel!' he kept muttering under his breath, almost as though bleak catastrophe had fallen upon him from the clouds.

As he moved to the front door, Frayne stepped quickly behind that of the 'office,' and from the coign of vantage given him by the crack of the door, saw without being seen.

What met his eye when Snitzler eventually got the door open was a mild-looking little man of middle age, with a keen but humorous face and twinkling eyes under the heaviest brows he ever remembered seeing. He was most respectably, even sombrely, dressed in black morning-coat and vest, striped trousers, and wore a black tie. He looked for all the world like a butler in some well-regulated establishment. When he stepped into the hallway, as the moment the door opened he did without any ceremony, the detective saw that he walked with a heavy limp. Who in the name of all that was wonderful was this most respectable-looking little personage who could put the wind up 'Papa' Snitzler, with a knock and a whistle?

But if his musical effort had that effect, it was as nothing to that encompassed by the sight of the *siffleuse* in person. The big, flaccid face of the German underwent an extraordinary transformation; his skin, usually a pasty white, changed to a strange greenish-grey. He looked a man half stupefied.

The voice that greeted him was unmistakably that of an American.

'Well, Heinie,' it hailed, 'an old friend has come along t' see y'—at *last*.'

' "Limpy"!' was the staggered exclamation that broke from Snitzler's lips. ' "Limpy" J . . .' But he got no further.

'Don't know him,' Mr. Swiggers retorted imperturbably, 'but if you've forgot your old friend Michael Scaddan of N' York City, well . . . he hasn't forgot *you*, Heinie.'

'Scaddan! Sure!' the German's voice was faltering as he responded . . . 'Mike Scaddan!'

'So, being on a visit to Eu-rope, when I heard where you were located these days, Heinie, I say to myself, I sure gotta look that ol' dachshund up. F'r ol' time's sake—like th' song says.'

Was it imagination on the part of the listener, or was there a note of very decided menace behind the affable, even jocular tones of this Mr. Michael Scaddan. “Limpy” by the way, and “Limpy” Something quite other than Scaddan, Frayne had no doubt. From his post of observation he could see that the pudgy hand Herr Snitzler had at last extended in greeting was trembling; though, by dint of great effort, he had forced something like a grin of welcome to his face.

‘Dere iss on’y one thing, Mike,’ he said in his very guttural English and in a low voice that, palpably, he hoped would not reach his office. ‘Der name, you haf it wrong. Herman, not Heinie. *Herman* Snitzler.’

An extremely acute look came into the face of Mr. Scaddan.

‘Herman, I’ll tell the world,’ he agreed instantly. ‘I always was a guy f’r gettin’ names all, anyhow.’ His eyes swept over the delapidated and dingy hallway. ‘You sure gotta swell place here, Herman,’ he observed, but whether satirically or not it was impossible to tell from his countenance; ‘but it ain’t such a much of a place to hold converse with an old friend.’

Thus spurred towards the social amenities, ‘Papa’ Snitzler, though with very forced enthusiasm, invited his visitor inside. But upon the point of entering that ‘office’ he suddenly halted, and led Mr. Scaddan along the passage to some apartment at the back.

‘There iss a feller in dere, come on business,’ Dick Frayne heard him explain.

Mr. Scaddan and the mysterious “Limpy” out of sight, he stepped quickly to the front door and called out:

‘Good night, ‘Papa,’ till I see you again. Look after my letters.’ Then disappeared into the dusk of the street and made back towards Oxford Street.

He had several newly-gleaned facts revolving in his mind as a result of this visit. The first and most important of them was that Herr Snitzler, for all he had shut down at the finish, had been bluffed out of the information that the murdered man was known to him; moreover, that he had lived there. And, still more important, that his effects were locked up in his room. Somehow, by hook or by crook, he had to get at those and before Heinie locked them away.

He wondered as he went along what was at the back of the visit of this elderly American, Mr. Limpy Something Scaddan—or whatever his real name was. Some echo out of ‘Papa’s’ American career that, by the look of him, he would have infinitely preferred not to hear again. A queer house ‘Papa’ Snitzler’s, and still queerer people in it. The closest observation of any one found there was invariably handsomely repaid.

At half-past seven he rang Vine Street from the Tube station. The elegant

Broadley was waiting him there.

‘It’s rather a queer business,’ he reported. ‘My taxi pulled up in front of the Yard exactly as theirs did. They got out, no doubt with the intention of entering the building, but apparently the sick-looking one jibbed at the last moment! Got almost hysterical, then had a shocking fit of coughing. Terrible to see her. The other one was crying and looked scared to death, but managed to get her back into the taxi. They drove first to a house in Frith Street, where the taximan and the other helped the sick girl out, and inside. As the taximan went off as soon as he came out, I got rid of my cab and kept observation. Ten minutes later the buxom wench, the one with made-up face and dopey eyes, came out, went first to a public telephone and rang some one up, then went on to Antonio Boccaro’s place.’

‘Boccaro’s, eh?’

‘At least, passing that place she disappeared. I took a look in but she wasn’t in the café. Must have slipped up those side stairs. She hadn’t shown up again when I left there five minutes ago. But as soon as I picked up a man to keep watch for her, I slipped back to the ’phone call box, got Exchange and got her call. She’d rung Victoria 7000, sir.’

‘Us?’

‘Yes, sir—I got through to ‘Phones’. He said he had not long since taken a call from a woman whose voice sounded to be pretty upset. He couldn’t make out who she wanted, and when he asked her to repeat, she rang off. Funked it a second time, sir, by the sound of it.’

‘Yes,’ Frayne said thoughtfully. ‘It would look like it. All right, Broadley, relieve your man at Boccaro’s. I shan’t want any more from there. Good night.’

Thinking over Broadley’s report as he went along it looked to him as though the elder girl, frightened by the serious collapse of her friend, had intended ringing up without her knowledge, but at the last instant had lost courage and seized upon the loop-hole of escape offered by ‘Phones’ not at once catching the name she asked for. Who the deuce could it be those unhappy looking girls wanted (or rather the one wanted the other) to get in touch with at the Yard?

He was so engrossed in his speculations upon this and other points arising from the events of the day that he was almost outside Boccaro’s when it occurred to him that he had not taken the address of the house in Frith Street to which the sick girl had been taken.

CHAPTER XI

DOPE

DIANTUOLOS was a worried man. From that favourite vantage-point against the corner of his office, he surveyed his guests with fast growing uneasiness. The one thing he hated, and dreaded more than another, was making its presence visible, if not actually to his eyes then most certainly in the demeanour of some of his patrons.

Cocaine! There was ‘snow’ about again.

Where was it coming from? Above all, and what alone concerned him was, who was passing it over; ‘peddling it on his premises?’ Some one was; it was being passed from vendor to victim in that room under his very nose, but not one trace of the exchange could he detect, for all his lynx-eyed watchfulness. Could he have done so, out the vendor would have gone then and there, be he or she duke or dustman, marchioness or *mannequin*; and, moreover, gone for all time.

For his fear of the stuff was very real. Things happened under its influence that would never have been caused by drink, no matter in what quantity or of what quality. More than once, in his lifetime, he had seen drug-maddened men at each other’s throats, without word or warning. Wrecked tables, battered glassware, wicked weapons snatched at in insensate fury; men shouting, women screaming, then the police—and *finis*! And women addicts were infinitely the worst. What they would do at times was beyond the calculation of any man.

For some time past he had been watching one girl; one of his regular members, a young woman of social position and seemingly ample means. She was one of a party of her kind, but unlike them, in no mood for gaiety, to eat or drink—for the night was still young—or for anything but to sit glowering upon every one who came within her vision. While her party danced she sat alone at a corner of the table, one arm hanging listlessly by her side, her young face incredibly drawn and haggard and twitching, her carmined lips rolled back into a grin of pain, her eyes lack-lustre, dead; yet in them an agony of suspense, of apprehension. All the time her sleek, shingled head kept turning jerkily from one part of the room to another. He would have sworn that the strained, despairing eyes were trying to seek out some particular person or other. He knew what was the matter with her—knew only too well: she had used up her drug and until she could get more was doomed to suffer horrible mental and physical misery.

Upon a plate, beside a thin hand that kept tapping incessantly with a cigarette-holder upon it, was a Bank of England note. After watching her for some time, he had been called for a minute or two into the office by one of the waiters touching the cashing of a patron's cheque; when he returned his first glance showed a remarkable change in her whole attitude. She was slipping something into her gold chain-bag—and the Bank of England note had disappeared. She got up and crossed slowly to the Ladies' Room. Three minutes later Diantuolos saw her dancing a Charleston with wild abandon, her eyes rolling wildly, the pupils narrowed down to pin-points. Her thin, scrawny limbs—Diantuolos recalled that three months ago she had been rounded with the soft, full curves of girlhood—flashed at incredible speed almost as though she was dancing on air and had lost all control of them. Her partner, a meticulously garbed, groomed and monocled young man, looked slightly scared of her.

Oh, yes, there was 'coke' or dope of some sort being peddled in the place. This girl was not the only one showing the bad signs of unnatural and suddenly-acquired vivacity. He began to watch his patrons anxiously.

Men of his particular business know many things not given to the general public. Those from whom their living comes are many and varied; embracing every strata from old nobility to the flash thief—and worse. Strange whispers come at times from nowhere, bringing considerable enlightenment. Information comes their way that certain men at Scotland Yard would give much to have passed on to them. 'When the wine's in, the wit's out,' is a sound old axiom, none more so in their experience. And Diantuolos in his London years had listened to a good many babblers, temporarily *minus* the wit that kept them out of the clutches of their mortal enemy, the law.

The key to more than one mystery which had long baffled the police was stale news to him and others such as he. Many men, and women, had vinously imparted to the fat Greek and others of his profession that which, passed on, could have sent them to penal servitude. But the Diantuoloses of this world are discreet; anything other and their means of subsistence were gone. To no persons did the first portion of the old Yorkshire saying apply with greater force: 'Hear all—say now't.' Any other way lay madness—and the sudden and unheralded vengeance of well-dressed, politely-mannered gangsters. In the matured opinion of M. Diantuolos speech was given us to gloss over our own weaknesses, not to expatiate upon those of others.

But he and those of his kind were perfectly well aware of the existence of a great dope ring—and cursed it heartily as the cause of more trouble and close surveillance of their premises than any other thing. For the greater part they wanted neither the buyers nor sellers of the stuff. One addict spotted entering

or leaving in one of their drug-born exaltations and the place was suspect. And once suspect with men such as Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby and the rest was only a matter of time.

But in these last few weeks the proprietors of straight clubs had been intensely relieved to find that the ring was getting scared. The whisper had gone around that special men were out on the dope-runners' tracks. The cream, so it was whispered round quiet secluded tables not favourably placed for eavesdropping, of the Special Branch. But of one thing not the faintest glimmer of light had been picked up by even the most astute of them—the identity of one solitary soul connected with the ring.

Unhappy dope-fiends there were, of course, who *could*, an' they would, let slip from whom they got their supplies, but never slave more terrified of slavemaster than the drug addict to he who can say 'No more for you.' Could say, and do, other things too, if tortured nerves and shrieking little devils in the brain drew from the ostracized too vehement a protest or, worse still, threats. And now, after a brief respite, the game had begun again.

It was with a harassed frown upon his fat olive face that Diantuolos beckoned his lieutenant to him; as keen a young gentleman this as the whole of Soho and its vicinity could produce. Cradled in one West End restaurant, brought up in a dozen more of varying degrees of respectability—and some of no degree at all save as dives for the sale of sour wines and equally unpalatable comestibles to slinking undesirables of his own nationality. Kitchen-boy, waiter, barman, young Luigi Fratello had been everything that a youth could be in the profession of his forefathers from time immemorial.

In the hectic days of war, Luigi broke into the fast opening night-clubs where tips were such as would have staggered his grandfather. In two years he had been the round of a score of such places and knew every one. He saved money fast, and all the time watched the way of things. At four and twenty he was a head-waiter in one of the liveliest and most payable of those peripatetic establishments. At that day it was said of him that if a proprietor was Dora'd out of the clubs over-night, with Luigi at his elbow he could be in another and a roll of membership all ready for him to take money from by ten o'clock of the next. And now Luigi was permanently right-hand man to M. Diantuolos—which, perhaps, was why his *caravanserai* had made the instantaneous success it had achieved. And now Diantuolos paid Luigi big money and a percentage of his profits; and any one to whom Diantuolos did that was a good man.

Incidentally, Luigi was a personable-looking fellow who wore irreproachable dress-clothes with quite an air, and could speak three European languages fluently and 'listen-in' to quite that many more, and what he did not know about his fellow-denizens of Soho from cosmopolitan nighthawks and

their familiars to respectable tradespeople who sent shining-faced children across to Saint Peter's school in Saffron Hill, was not much worth knowing.

'Luigi,' Diantuolos said worriedly in his excellent English, 'there is "snow" out to-night. You notice?'

'Quick. Been watching for some time but can see nothing pass. One or two of them are getting frisky.'

'There is no one strange here—no new member, not introduced?'

Luigi shook his head.

'No one not introduced.' He gave a quick nod of his head towards a table at which two Chinamen were seated. They were both perfectly dressed in conventional dinner clothes. Between them was a large bottle of champagne. As Diantuolos looked, one of them filled the other's brimmer, then his own. Both seemed to be perfectly at home in places such as this, indeed no two persons in the room were calmer or more self-possessed. They sat drinking their wine and watching the dancers with faces that held not the faintest trace of expression of any kind. The Sphinx was not more inscrutable than were they. Perhaps at the whirling by of some particularly voluptuous or gracefully undressed woman, one of them would turn his head and pass some remark to his companion, to be answered in a monosyllable; then their faces returned immediately to the same inscrutable immobility as before. But in either their glances or demeanour there was nothing in the slightest degree offensive. The quick eyes of the Greek noted that the wine they were drinking was the most expensive in his cellar.

'And that,' observed Luigi as though instantly reading his principal's thought, 'is their third bottle. Makes as much difference to them as—as water.'

Diantuolos nodded pleasantly. As long as they continued to purchase that particular vintage they could sit there like graven images for all time—so far as he was concerned.

'Though it is a strange thing to see Orientals drink wine,' he observed to himself. Then: 'Who introduced them?'

'The Count Ferrondo,' he was informed. 'They brought his card with a personal introduction written across it by the Count. I take their fee—of course.'

Again that frown knit the forehead of the Greek.

'That man,' he said slowly. 'There is something about him I cannot get to the bottom of. Something I know about him in the past—somewhere. One of these nights it will come to me. These Chinamen he sends, they speak to any one here—seem to know any one?'

‘No. When I saw that there was “snow” about I watched them. But they just sit there and drink their wine. Never open their lips beyond what you see.’

‘They speak English?’

‘As well as we do.’

‘Ferrondo, he is not here to-night.’

‘Not yet. Very few of the real *élite* are here yet.’

Diantuolos suddenly snorted.

‘*Elite!*’ he exclaimed amazingly. ‘Bah! Some, a few, yes. The Captain Adair and one or two like him. The rest . . . bah, again! They have the clothes and the money and there it finish.’

The doped girl, wilder looking than ever now, swung past them. The sight of her brought Diantuolos back to the subject of his anxiety.

‘I would like to know,’ he observed ruminatively, ‘whether it is only here that “snow” is being unloaded, or if the other places are getting it as well. Whether it is just a chance lot here, or if the ring has let a parcel out everywhere. If it is only spotted here, it is bad; but if it is everywhere it is not so bad.’ He pondered the question a moment, then suddenly: ‘Take some money, Luigi, and go around a bit.’ He mentioned two or three clubs of the rather more notorious class. ‘Try them. If there is any there, try to keep an eye for who is passing it. It is as well to know.’

Without a word Luigi turned into the office; to return presently overcoated and slouch-hatted.

‘I think,’ he put thoughtfully to his disgruntled chief, ‘that when I have done those places, I slip along to that dive of Tony Boccaro’s for half an hour. Lots of things begin there, and if one knows everybody of these nightbirds as I do, sometimes a thing happens that tells the story. *Sapeti*?’

To which suggestion Diantuolos grunted his entire approval.

The indefatigable Signor Luigi having departed, Diantuolos gave his troubled attention to the floor and the glittering little tables *à deux* at which couples sat chatting and drinking his wines, occasionally rising to dance to some favourite lilt of syncopation. It was, he noted, a particularly full house to-night; for the early hour, extraordinarily so. Here and there he spotted couples whom, though members, had not been in for weeks. And, in the main, they were of the class of people he wanted to see there. It was early by a good hour for the theatrical and bohemian set and their followers. He liked to see them too; they were a jolly lot and brought good spenders in their train—except writers and artists; they had no money, and very few friends who had any, either. Still, they all went to make up something that the police could not fall

foul of without there was flagrant contempt for the decrees of the Home Office. And that Diantuolos would not permit to happen for all the importunate best-spenders of London, Paris and New York rolled into one. When he said it was time, no one could have procured another drink under that roof for all the wealth of the Indies. And should there be any particularly obstreperous objectors to this immutable ukase, it was also time for them to go home—or anywhere else they preferred.

But to-night this unusually early gathering of the clans only served somehow to accentuate his uneasiness. More than one counterpart of both sexes of the young lady of the rolling eyes and excessively abundant energy was beginning to come under his notice. Upon such he frowned in gloomy apprehension. Had the touts of the dope ring let it be known amongst their clients that Diantuolos' would be the venue for a release of drugs to-night? He had known that happen A mysterious whisper that floated hither and thither with lightning rapidity, a club packed out as this would be before so long—and all night long the criminal traffic going on without one trace of the principals engaged in it. Had something similar been planned to take place in his club to-night? He did not know, but he had the profound certainty that something was afoot which would stand close watching. He wished he had instructed Luigi to report to him after leaving each of the places he was visiting. After all there was some consolation in company—and safety.

And then coming down the centre of the floor towards him he saw that vision of graceful loveliness the very sight of which had always an almost tonic effect upon him—his beautiful employee, the incomparable Jetta Marcein.

He studied the really wonderful gown she was wearing with almost a personal pride. The flawless perfection of her whole turnout, from the tips of her toes to the coils of her burnished-copper hair, was something he was never tired of beholding. As she came through the couples with her slow, stately movement, he thought to himself, for the thousandth time, that she made all these other women, whatever they might be, look like awkward dowds; of some he had been known by Luigi to use the expression 'bedizened hags' in comparison.

Yet there was nothing of love or gallantry in his attitude towards his professional dance-partner, nothing but the most profound respect and admiration. He was a business man who had had the good fortune to engage a woman of beauty and breeding to assist in his venture; and more than ably did she use her every effort to make his business a success. That she was something considerably more than he paid her to be, he knew instinctively. The dignity, the manners, that air of distinction she wore without pose or

affectation—and never lost even in those trying moments unavoidable in even the best supervised of such places—were things born and bred in her, things Diantuolos, an old-fashioned man for all his modern enterprise, held in the deepest respect.

As she approached him he bowed to her as he would have done to the most important of his guests.

'M'sieu,' she said in her low soft voice, 'I have a favour to ask.'

'Anything I can do, M'selle,' he returned simply, 'consider it is done.'

'I would ask your permission to absent myself for an hour, perhaps an hour and a half to-night. It is business of the utmost urgency, M'sieu, or I should not ask, particularly when the night promises to be so very busy.'

'That, M'selle, will be their loss. And an hour, two hours . . .' he broke off with a shrug and a little gesture which seemed to say that, one and all, they could wait her pleasure.

With murmured thanks and a dazzling smile she passed on to the cloak-room used by the professional ladies of the club. Diantuolos, resuming his previous moody contemplation of certain of his members, discovered something: that if the Celestial gentlemen vouched for by Count Eugene Ferrondo had found no topic for conversation up to the present, they most certainly had done so since their first sight of Mademoiselle Jetta Marcein. Their heads were close together now, both pairs of oblique, almond-shaped, black eyes were fixed intently upon her as she crossed to that door of the dressing-room. They were jabbering together in low, quick, eager voices. When she had disappeared a meaning look passed between them. One of them beckoned their waiter and took a note-case from his pocket. But even as the man paid the bill, his eyes, as were those of his companion, remained fixed upon that doorway. And in both pairs of black, glinting orbs, was to be seen a gleam that had not been there before.

'Aha, my Mongol friends,' he murmured softly, 'the sight of M'selle has stirred you. Another figure of beauty to conjure up in your opium dreams.'

Wrapped in the gorgeous furs she invariably wore at night, and the soft beauty of which added, if that were possible, to her own, she came from the dressing-room door and slowly, since more than one man first bowed, then held her in a moment's conversation, she moved towards where the Greek stood, a little way inside the main entrance. He did not, for the moment, observe her coming, being still engaged in contemplation of his Chinese guests. It was their own action that warned him of her approach.

With a second of those quick, meaning glances one of them produced from his pocket what Diantuolos instantly recognized as his own cloak-room

checks, and gave them to the waiter with a sharp order. The waiter moved instantly towards the men's cloak-room. Diantuolos, wise to most moves of the eternal sex-chase, stiffened.

'You mean mischief,' he apostrophized them inwardly. 'You mean following her.'

As she passed by him, without turning he laid a restraining hand upon her arm.

'Do not turn around. Look anywhere but at the Chinamen on my right hand. They are watching you. As soon as they see you ready for the street, they order their coats and hats. They mean to follow you, I am certain. Is there no one here you could take to escort you? I do not like the look of them. Luigi is away for an hour or I would be honoured to escort you myself. The commissionaire, Blaggett, he can change his clothes and go. I will attend upon the door myself rather than you should be molested, per'aps.'

The smile she gave him over her shoulder might have turned the head of a younger, less practical-natured man than he was.

'Dear M'sieu Diantuolos,' she said softly, 'how very kind, how very thoughtful of you! But it may be that their going is merely a coincidence; that they should have looked at me first, perhaps more than once, is not altogether unknown with new guests. And even if it is not so, I beg you to have no fear for my safety. I am very competent to protect myself, believe me.'

Diantuolos gave a dubious grunt.

'No one who knows you, M'selle, could ever doubt that you are a brave woman. But . . . I did not like the look that these men gave you.' He hesitated a little. 'It was not just the look of admiration,' he began again diffidently, then she checked him with a little amused gesture.

'Many men give me looks I do not particularly care for,' she said quietly, 'but I do not find that there is much to be afraid of in them. For the present *au 'voir*—and thank you for your concern.' She passed placidly through the door and into the outer portico.

But Diantuolos was a stubborn man. He followed, and to the astonishment of Blaggett, the gigantic commissionaire, whistling furiously for a taxi, pushed down the two outer bolts of the door. Then smiled grimly at his intrepid dance-partner.

'That holds them until you are well away from here,' he informed her. 'That much one *can* do.'

'Clever M'sieu Diantuolos,' she smiled, then as a cab drew up and the commissionaire opened the door, entered it and waved a hand in farewell.

‘Tell him’—she hesitated a moment—‘Victoria Station,’ she decided. The taxi swung around and darted off.

‘Where did she say?’ demanded M. Diantuolos who had heard perfectly.

The huge commissionaire shook his head.

‘Didn’t catch it, sir,’ he answered stolidly. ‘Make it a rule never to ’ear directions to drivers, sir. It don’t pay.’

‘That is where you are wrong, commissionaire,’ his employer said softly. ‘It does pay.’ Then presented him with a most unexpected two-shilling piece.

Behind them the door was giving unmistakable evidence of some person or persons attempting to effect immediate exit. It was shaken, it was tugged inward, it was pushed outward and violently, but the bolts wanted something more than that to make any impression upon them. Then angry voices were heard behind it; a waiter shouted loudly for the commissionaire. But not a stir from M. Diantuolos until he had not only watched the rear lights of M’selle Marcien’s taxi well around its corner, but seen quite a dozen others cross its tracks in every direction.

Then he turned and, stooping, lifted the bolts. He found himself confronted by two immobile-faced Chinamen who emitted no sound at all, and three jabbering waiters who were making row enough for twenty.

‘M’sieu, the door is stuck upon these gentlemen,’ one exclaimed with dramatic fervour.

The Greek bent his stomach in apology for his unruly portals.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, ‘your pardon. At times it *does* behave so.’ He turned fiercely upon the commissionaire. ‘How many times have I ordered you to have it seen to?’ he demanded irately.

‘I keep forgetting,’ ex-Sergeant Blaggett countered stolidly. ‘I’ll see to it in the mornin’, sir.’

‘Before I ar-rive let it be done,’ thundered M. Diantuolos, ‘or there will be a new face at this door to-morrow night!’ He turned again to the two Chinamen whose black, inscrutable eyes had never left his histrionically-agitated countenance. ‘You wish a cab to be call-ed?’ he inquired.

The one nearest to him bowed and thanked him politely.

‘No, thank you. It is only that your room inside became rather close. My friend and I will walk for a little while. And,’ he added softly,’ in all possibility, return for supper.’

Just for one tiny fraction of an instant the veil lifted from the yellow man’s eyes, and in that instant there flashed out at the Greek a gleam of such cold, malevolent and baffled rage that he stood transfixed at the sight of it. But he

was too old a soldier of fortune to permit his face to show either his thoughts or feelings.

‘That will be very pleasant,’ he responded evenly. ‘Any friends of the Count Ferrondo will be always welcome amongst us.’

As the Chinamen moved from the foyer of the club to the pavement a taxi ran into the pavement and stopped.

From it alighted Captain, The Honourable Larry Adair. An instant he glanced at the mask-like faces of the two departing Orientals, and from them to the somewhat agitated features of Diantuolos.

‘What’s up?’ he asked with his cheery smile. ‘Trouble with our yellow brothers?’

But Diantuolos only shook his head and smiled.

‘The wise man does not meet it half-way, Captain,’ he observed philosophically, holding open his door wide.

True for you,’ Adair answered, then added whimsically, ‘I find it waiting at every corner for me.’

Diantuolos made no response. From around one side of the Captain’s stalwart frame, he saw that his late guests had crossed the road and then paused, looking back and talking quickly together. But it was plain to him that it was not himself they either looked at or discussed. The slanting black eyes were unquestionably fixed upon the elegant figure of Captain Larry Adair and even at that distance Diantuolos was not particularly enamoured of the expression in them. Peculiar persons these two Chinese friends of the Count Ferrondo; for all their correct Occidental dress-clothes, correct and polite English, there was chill, subtle menace—just as there was, Diantuolos reflected, underlaying the gentleman whose card of introduction they had brought. Diantuolos withdrew into his office to do a little quiet thinking upon things in general and the Count Ferrondo in particular.

He had not proceeded very far when his telephone bell whirred violently—at the other end of the line the welcome voice of Luigi assailed his ear.

‘Is there—is there any stuff, you know what, to be seen about?’ he inquired eagerly.

Signor Luigi left him no doubt whatsoever.

‘It’s *everywhere*’ he announced grimly. ‘I should think they’ve unloaded a whole ship’s cargo of it this time. I’m just off to Boccaro’s to see if I can pick up anything there.’

CHAPTER XII

TONY BOCCARO'S

THINGS had got nicely into the usual nightly swing at Boccaro's when Herr Albert Rimmel sauntered in, discovered a disengaged table not far from the main door and also one that opened on to that side staircase and ordered *chianti*. He looked twenty degrees more dissolute than when he had left 'Papa' Snitzler to his old friend Mr. Michael Scaddan—*née* "Limpy" Something. There was a vacant look in his eyes that, read aright, seemed to spell either drink or 'dope.'

His hat down over his face and a cigarette hanging slackly from equally slack lips, he surveyed the company. It was an eminently characteristic gathering of both sexes; in neither of which would any sane person have reposed great trust solely upon appearances. They were what they were and looked it.

But there was no one there as yet that the Inspector believed would prove of interest in so far as the murder was concerned. There were present sound representative artists of international repute in every branch of crime—except murder. Women were there whose records would have made the angels weep, but never would the word 'murder,' or any connection therewith, be found in their *dossiers*. The real, workmanlike criminal takes as much pride in his work as any tradesman. He has a vanity in his 'jobs' that is the cause of one-half his trouble. But the man who, even in such a company as this, admitted to murder as his line, would be branded as a dangerous madman and shunned like a plague.

No one knew better than Dick Frayne that killing among habitual criminals is invariably the work of gangs, and not individuals; on the rare occasions that it does occur otherwise, it is generally the answer to personal treachery, or else that age-old cause—the lady in the case. But wild-eyed and gesticulative as many here were, bold enough ruffians when put to the test, they were not the type that led an unsuspecting ally into a trap and there foully shot him in the back. No; it wanted some one worse than any to be seen at present in Tony Boccaro's.

To be seen; that was the point. What was hidden above the blackness of that side staircase? Who used these rooms? Dim, amorphous shapes of men and women who crept up and down them soundlessly and never faced the light. A sudden and unheralded visitation from divisional headquarters had a year or so ago revealed nothing in them but little cliques, players of card

games and dominoes, who preferred a small room to themselves to the open café. But more than one officer had doubted whether it was not a set-out for their benefit; had firmly believed that Tony had received warning of their coming.

And no woman had been found amongst the company of these rooms; yet more than one had been seen to disappear into the darkness of that staircase. Where, then, were they? In answer, Antonio, with a magnificent gesture, opened a door leading from the staircase to the café. Ladies, he explained, are shy—some of them; they prefer to enter from the staircase, to using the main entrance—especially when unaccompanied. Hence the doorway—as also the seeming disappearance. The disappearance which, according to Signor Antonio, was not one. His explanation would have been quite acceptable but that shrewd eyes noticed that the ladies who had been seen to go up those stairs a few moments before, were not in the café. A slight discrepancy that flung more cold official doubt upon Signor Boccaro's words generally. But that the police kept to themselves. Wiser, sometimes, to appear to be gulled, than to disturb the complacency of the Tony Boccaros who have to be dealt with. The crook who really believes in his own ability to hoodwink the police in times of crisis takes many chances—and gives them.

But there was one new arrangement at Signor Boccaro's which most certainly had been installed since Herr Albert Rimmel had last paid him a visit. Over that door by which the timid of the fair sex were supposed to prefer entrance was a fairly large bell-register which ran from Numbers One to Ten. Which contraption mutely argued that *somewhere* under this roof of Boccaro's were ten rooms, the temporary occupants of which were personally always in communication with the café—and Antonio.

Ten? But if Frayne's memory functioned as it usually did, there were but *three* rooms upon that upstairs floor at the head of that side staircase, and they, according to Antonio, the only ones so used. He was positive that such had been the report of the sergeant and two men who had carried out the sudden visit of inspection. The rest of the place was purely the private bachelor apartments of the Signor Antonio and such of his staff who lived upon the premises.

It struck Dick Frayne that it was not the custom of *restaurateurs* to connect such apartments with their cafés, and still less so with the bar portion of them. Where, then, he demanded pertinently of himself, were rooms Four to Ten, inclusive. It was a pretty point. He noticed that the indicator gave out no particular sound to call the attention of the general public unto itself; just a faint droning, buzz that would reach the ear of the bar-attendant; and also that when in work the white number-card agitated violently behind its glass.

Moreover, it was very plainly to be seen that Antonio himself—upon this particular evening at any rate—was keeping a personal eye upon his new gadget. Clad in his usual wine-and-gravy-stained dinner suit, he had perched himself against a corner of the bar from which the red-shot squinting eyes could command not only every table, but each and every person either seated at them or entering or leaving the café. His elbow rested upon a flap opening to the bar itself; underneath it was a swing door, through which proprietor or waiters could transfer themselves from front to back in the minimum of time.

The more Frayne pondered these new arrangements the more intrigued as to their actual use he became. Boccaro was no man to spend good money upon modern improvements, as such. Deftly disposing of his *chianti* into an aspidestra-laden *jardinière* upon his table, he got up and strolled casually towards the bar. The signer greeted him cordially enough, but seemed preoccupied; though he relaxed so far as to partake of a benedictine at Herr Rimmel's expense and even to pass a pleasantry. But his mind, it was plain, was upon other things; one of them, indubitably, a brand new set of bell-pushes numbered exactly as was the indicator: from One to Ten. Below them was a little house telephone and a plugged switchboard. Antonio, then, could communicate instantly with any one of those mysterious hidden apartments without leaving the café, and their occupants with him.

Even as he stood there that droning buzz struck upon his ears, and a swift upward glance showed him that the white figure of Number Seven was vibrating swiftly. That Boccaro had cast just such another glance up at it he knew, but the big Italian made no move towards his switchboard. The man behind the bar picked up the receiver, plugged into Number Seven and listened intently, then carefully enumerated an order he had just taken. The attitude of Boccaro towards the operation appeared to be one of complete indifference—rather too complete, it struck Frayne. There was something more behind it all than this perfectly legitimate use of a house-'phone system.

Scarcely had the man hung up the receiver than the buzz recommenced, and the figure card of Number Four began to vibrate just as had the other a moment or two before. So, Frayne thought, both numbers Four and Seven of those mysterious rooms were already occupied. But he saw that the barman did not hasten to attend upon this one as he had the earlier ring. Instead he most unmistakably gave Boccaro a covert, questioning look. That worthy instantly lifted the flap and gave the occupants of Room Number Four his personal attention—and there was a most decided air of furtivity about him as he did so.

But despite all Boccaro's care—and he spoke into the 'phone in a voice scarcely audible a yard from him—two things became instantly apparent to Frayne. The first, from the fairly fluent broken-English the signor employed,

that the company in that room were not Italians. The second, that they were persons of considerable consequence—in the eyes of Tony Boccaro, at any rate. It was not often that note of utter obsequiousness was heard in the voice of the big, braggart Neapolitan, especially upon his own dunghill. Which gave Frayne considerably to think, for Boccaro's was always regarded in the police world as essentially a rendezvous of the European Latins—with, occasionally, one or two from South America. But Latins, invariably.

Whoever they were, there was no mistaking that Boccaro was being particularly guarded not only in his manner of speaking, but in what he had to say. Beyond that it was no order he was taking, his monosyllabic words were so camouflaged that to gain any lead as to the subject-matter of his conversation was perfectly hopeless.

Realizing this, and being particularly anxious to arouse no suspicion in the breast of the particularly acute Boccaro, Frayne slouched back to his table and ordered a further supply of *chianti*. A moment or two later a young gentleman wearing a fashionably-cut overcoat over dress-clothes, and with a turned-down felt hat performing much the same office for him as Frayne's was for himself, strolled in and seated himself at the same table.

He was a nice lad; always had been since his advent as a very juvenile waiter in a suit six sizes too large for him. Just how many sixpences Dick Frayne had left under plates at one establishment or another for little Luigi Fratello would be impossible to compute. But that, of course, was before the precocious Luigi had invaded night-club realms and become a minor capitalist in the amazing way common to the adventurous of his kind. What Luigi was doing at the present time he had not the faintest idea, but he would have bet quite a considerable amount that Luigi knew perfectly well what *he*—Frayne—was doing. At the present moment he could have wrung that knowledgeable young gentleman's neck with the utmost cheerfulness.

That Signor Fratello was well aware of the identity of his raffish-looking neighbour was at once made evident by the portentous wink he bestowed upon him. From under the turned-down brim of his hat his dark, flashing Roman eyes lit with quick and unholy curiosity, but if there was any one thing more than another Luigi had learned, it was that circumspection when officers of police, plain-clothed or uniformed, were concerned was an anointed gift. Beyond that wink he took no notice of his table companion.

But Frayne, not knowing quite the degree of his young friend's discretion, thought it better to get in a word of caution.

'Luigi,' he shot under his breath.

'*Si*, Signor,' came back in the same tone, though neither lips nor so much

as a muscle of Luigi's face moved. His eyes wandered anywhere but in the direction of the person addressing him.

'I'm here on business. Mum's the word as to who I am, now or afterwards —understand?'

'The word, it is mum,' came ventriloquently from Luigi. '*Sapeti*. Not good is it to speak of the business of the signer. In a place like Tony Boccaro's—not so indeed.'

'Know much of it?'

Signor Fratello's dark eyes browsed, metaphorically speaking, slowly but searchingly over the occupants of the many tables.

'Pretty good,' he answered with an absolutely expressionless face. 'One time, when I ver' little bambino feller, I work here in the kitchen. Peel p'tato, wash the greens, clean knives. Upstairs I scrub the floors—plenty floors upstairs for small boy to scrub in spare time for t'ree shilling a week. Oh, yes, I know Tony Boccaro's—though he forgets little Luigi. Ver' nice place a small boy to work. Ver' nice, kind man small boy to work for—I *don't* theenk.'

The dark eyes flickered a moment, in them a hot, red gleam turned upon the unpleasant features of the wholly unconscious Signor Boccaro. Dick Frayne, catching that look, was left in no doubt as to what would happen to Tony Boccaro if his erstwhile minion of the kitchen had the dealing with him. And his brain was working hard upon what Luigi had voluntarily emitted of his humble beginnings. Here was where the lay of that mysterious land up the side staircase might possibly be extracted. But cautiously, very, very cautiously. In the cosmopolitan quarter of Soho hatred of a man is a common enough emotion; but *talk* of his affairs is a horse of a totally different complexion. There were doubtless many in that assembly who, given sufficient indemnity against unpleasant results, would have slit Signor Boccaro's throat for a shilling—or nothing. But of any incriminating private affairs of his, the rack would not have dragged one whisper. Such is the unwritten law of the Underworld.

Not that Frayne connected Luigi with the submerged element for one moment. Though not aware of his present sphere of activity, he knew that whatever it was it was honest—and prosperous; one glance from a man who knew good clothes was sufficient assurance of the latter fact.

'What are you doing now, Luigi?' he inquired casually, but in a cautious undertone.

In a voice pregnant with considerable honest pride, and the dark, roaming eyes never once turning in his direction, Luigi gave him the information desired. Considerably astonished at the heights the ex-dishwasher and potato-

peeler had scaled unaided, Frayne listened attentively; the more so as that night-club he had been assigned to visit featured largely in the lad's recital.

'My word, Luigi,' he said in quite genuine admiration, 'you've done things with a vengeance. Diantuolos,' he murmured, as though at a loss. 'I seem to have heard that name quite recently. The club hasn't been in trouble, has it?'

A suggestion upon which M. Diantuolos' right-hand man poured such vehement scorn that it seemed to Frayne he had momentarily forgotten just where he was. M. Diantuolos was *the* club, the one and only club that never, not for the richest in the land—and such were members—that never, under any circumstances, was one law permitted to be broken. He reeled off a list of members that sounded like a memorization of Debrett or Burke's Peerage; though admitting freely that there were other members also, who were not of quite so exalted a status. But not there could money purchase a drink one minute after licensed hours. As for dope! . . . and then Luigi stopped, a troubled look coming into those ever wandering eyes of his. His expression was not lost upon the Inspector.

'It seems strange, Luigi,' he put tentatively, 'that a clever chap like you should leave such a smart show to put in even an hour in a thieves'-kitchen like this?'

Signor Fratello did not at once answer. His troubled expression deepened. He shot several of those quick, searching glances about him, then settled back in his chair and stared fixedly at some rather startling specimens of the art of the poster just come in from Naples.

'Signor,' he whispered out of the corner of his mouth, 'I also am here upon business. For this place, to amuse myself I would not be found dead here, as the saying is.' A hand holding a cigarette stole to his mouth and covered it. Behind its shelter his lips soundlessly formed one word that made Frayne start . . . DOPE.

'Dope,' he echoed in a quick whisper. 'Where?'

'Ever'where. The West End clubs are full of it to-night—"snow." And in not one can it be seen where it comes from—who is passing it. There was no sign of it in our place early this evening, the dopeys were hungry—any one could tell. Then, all of a sudden, in a minute they have all got plenty. M. Diantuolos, he gets ver' worried . . . he thinks the dope ring they unload on our place to make trouble because he will not stand for the stuff to be peddled there. I go out to see if it is us only. *Dio mio!* I go half-dozen places—it is the same ever'where. We had a spell but they are unloading big again.' His voice dropped to the faintest murmur. 'So I came on here. Many things they begin here, but—' he shrugged his shoulders, 'this is the only place I have been that

there is no sign of it. All the time I watch, but there is nothing to see.'

Frayne made no comment, but he was thinking hard. Of all the devilish luck that, just as he had got his first murder assignment, the dope-runners who were his real job should open out again and in unmistakable fashion. It would only be a matter of time until Dallenby pulled him off this case and sent him back to the old hunt. It occurred to him grimly that he hadn't given them many hours' respite before they had taken full advantage of it. His judgment had, seemingly, been all out of gear regarding them. Well, so far he was still on this murder, and while it remained his job, he'd send it along for all he was worth. And stranger than ever was the hunch upon him that it was here, in this place of Boccaro's, that he would pick up his first definite clue. Not in that public café, but somewhere in those mysterious regions where rooms Number Four to Ten were hidden.

He came out of a brown study to find that Luigi was again addressing him in that motionless, ventriloquial way.

'At first,' he was saying, 'I think it must be coming, from the Chinamen who present a card of introduction from one of our members, the Count Ferrondo.'

Something, a sudden shaft of memory impinged upon Frayne's brain like a dart. 'That Ferrondo bug' of the big New Yorker, Mr. 'Chick' Devlin? The Chinamen of whom his fair-haired little escort had declared herself to be terrified?

'These Chinamen were strangers at Diantuolos, Luigi?'

'Yes. That is why I watch them. But no; they know no one there, to not one person do they address a word. Just sit by themselves and drink wine—the best.'

'What class of yellow men were they?

'Ver' well dressed. Evening clothes. Ver' well educate and speak the so good English. Plenty money. By the way they speak I think they American Chinamen. They speak English like Americans.'

'They were still there when you left?'

'*Si.* They looked to be there for the night. They per'aps wait for Ferrondo to come.'

'Didn't attempt to dance or mix with the white members—the ladies in particular?'

Signor Fratello gave a short laugh.

'Signor, they look at nobody. There are six young ladies there, professional partners, the pick of the most beautiful in England. Do they ever turn their

slanty eyes on them? No. They just sit there like as if they were sentenced to do so by a judge, grunt a word at one another and drink the bes' wine. I expect they sit so at this moment.'

An expression of opinion which, could he have read the troubled mind of M. Diantuolos across the intervening space, Luigi would have revised considerably.

Frayne, his mind centred upon one thing, took a chance.

'Luigi,' he put in an almost soundless voice, 'how many rooms are there—private rooms of Boccaro? How does one get to the others? Where, for instance, are the rooms numbered Four to Seven?'

Again a silence. Luigi, more thoughtful looking than ever, removed his attention from the posters to their squinting-eyed owner.

'There is ver' many things can be found in Tony Boccaro's, if one looks hard,' he observed pointedly. 'Especially on the landing you speak of, Signor. The walls there have secrets, like ever'thing else here. Oh, yes; the man who does not mind a knife in the back could find things up there. But all I, Luigi Fratello, would find up those stairs would be the *cammorristi*. And that would be the quick finish of Luigi. Not good, that, I think, Signor. *Sapeti?*'

Frayne understood. To a man who knows his Italians of Soho, a nod is as good as a wink when the *Camorra* comes into question; and he could quite believe that Tony Boccaro's was a stronghold of that dread Neapolitan brotherhood. But Luigi was making it plain that he was willing to help so far, if no further; which in the light of his bringing-up, and environment generally, was a very great deal.

'There is a saying,' Luigi continued, a far-away look in his eyes, 'about the way to part your hair. You will remember it per'aps?'

'Can't say I do,' Frayne responded puzzledly. What was Luigi trying to put him wise to?

'The saying is: "The right side, it is the *wrong* side." Why it is so I do not know, but such is the saying.'

'Then the left side,' Frayne responded in a tense whisper, 'must be the right side. I understand.'

'And where there is a light switch upon the wall that does not work any lamp, then per'aps it works some other thing—some other thing not to be seen by the eyes until one *knows*.'

Frayne nodded.

'Thanks,' he said under his breath. 'I shan't forget.' He lit another cigarette and leant back, inhaling deeply. Out of a cloud of thick smoke Luigi heard a

whisper.

‘Any time I can do you a turn, Luigi, let me know.’

A grim little chuckle came from the Italian.

‘There is one turn I would make ver’ sure to do for myself, Signor, if I were you. Before I go to seek the way into those rooms I make ver’ sure there is some one near you can trust. Some one if you don’ come back soon who will jump for a certain gentleman and say: “Produce him, *quick*! or I blow your goddam head off!” ’

It was Frayne’s turn to emit a little laugh.

‘I don’t think our friend would go *quite* to those lengths,’ he said.

Signor Fratello shrugged his slim shoulders, got up and buttoned his remarkably smart coat tightly about him, preparatory to leaving.

‘Oh, yes,’ he said politely. ‘Per’aps you know best just how far would he go. *Buona*. . . .’

And then he suddenly stopped and sat down again, with a quick, almost startled gasp upon his olive-skinned face, the look of a man who has just received the shock of his life—been mentally sandbagged, in fact. Following his stricken stare Frayne also was equally transfixed with astonishment, though he hoped he was not staring in quite the wide-eyed, open-mouthed bewilderment as was the youthful Signor Fratello. For being bowed in by the huge, beetle-browed ruffian who combined the dual position of commissionaire and chucker-out at Boccaro’s, was the very beautiful young lady of the bohemian oyster café; she who had warned him against that strange pair, The Villain of the Piece and the unfortunate Man with the Egg-shaped Head. So, once again, it seemed, they were to cross each other’s path—perhaps this time to meet personally. He meant it to be so if the slightest opportunity offered. And there was another good side to this chance meeting. Whoever this most beautiful lady might prove to be, beyond question her identity was known to Luigi Fratello.

CHAPTER XIII

MADEMOISELLE MYSTERY

IT was perhaps quite as much the *manner* of her appearance in that place as anything else that served to completely mystify, indeed dumbfound, young Luigi Fratello. Though, had he been asked as to the very last lady on earth to demean herself by appearing in that den of crime and criminals, here beyond all others of his acquaintance, was the identical one. His amazement was unbounded.

And what a metamorphosis was there in her appearance! Within the hour, literally, he had left her, the cynosure of all eyes upon the dance floor at Diantuolos, arrayed in perhaps the most striking dress creation she had as yet worn there—and that was saying something. Yet now, here she was, quite ordinarily dressed in what looked like a smart tailor-made, and wearing a close-fitting little hat that completely hid her glorious hair. He had never before seen her out of the magnificence of evening gowns or furs, and the difference it made was amazing. Not that it took in any way from her striking beauty; far from it, the severe lines of her tweeds and stiff little felt hat suited her just as did anything else she wore—to perfection.

But in some indefinable way her whole expression was altered, there was a firm, determined set upon her features that Luigi had never seen there before. She seemed to be a woman of action; reminding him far more of some alert business woman about her affairs than the elegant creature who walked the floor of the night-club like a princess.

Her self-possession in such a place was amazing: the same thought struck both men who watched her move calmly to a secluded table partly concealed by a large tropical palm, beckon one of the waiters, give an order, and then take from the bag she carried the long jade cigarette-holder Frayne remembered so well, light her cigarette and lean back, her face hidden in shadow. To him it argued that she had ventured here before to-night.

Frayne wondered what Boccaro thought of this new arrival. A glance at that worthy, however, showed him to be wholly busied with his new telephone; his back had been turned as she had entered and apparently he had no knowledge of her arrival. Who or what, in the name of Heaven, was she expecting to find or see in this cesspool of most of the iniquities? For that she was seeking some one was plainly evident from the way her eyes moved keenly from table to table scanning each occupant closely, then, as though satisfied that the person she sought was not as yet present, fixed them upon the

main entrance, waiting.

But if her advent had been made unnoticed by Boccaro, there were several of his male *clientele* to whom it had not. One of them was a dapper young Frenchman dressed slightly over the height of fashion, one of the groups of four at a table some few yards away. Though for the moment he could not recall his name, Frayne was fully cognisant of his police record—it was not an enviable one upon either side of the channel, though just at the moment he was enjoying a little well-paid for liberty.

With compressed lips the Inspector watched him eagerly pantomime the new arrival to his companions, then get up, adjust his tie and smooth his varnished-looking hair in one of the side mirrors. With a graceful, indolent movement he moved and took a seat at the opposite side of her table. One long, appraising, and altogether insolent smirk he gave her, then ordered wine.

But there was apparently another Richmond in the field for whatever favours this beautiful new visitant to Boccaro's might possibly dispense. Almost simultaneously one of the hardest-featured men Frayne ever remembered to have seen vacated his previous solitary position and, with a long, cat-like stride, moved to the table immediately at her right hand and seated himself there.

He was a man in the forties, of some six feet three or four inches in height with tremendous, bulging shoulders, and lean as a greyhound from the chest down. He had inordinately long and powerful-looking arms at the end of which were huge, gnarled fists that looked as though they could fell the proverbial ox. A deeply-bitten scar ran down one side of his face and added nothing of beauty or softness to his forbidding ensemble. But it was his eyes that fascinated Frayne when once he got a square look at them. They were a pale ice-green that seemed to have one set, fixed stare from under heavy frontal bones. Baleful, unblinking eyes that said for their owner as plainly as could any speech: 'Keep clear of me if you don't want trouble.'

Unlike M'sieu, whom he favoured with one ironical glance and an ugly, dog-like snarl from one corner of his mouth—an attention, by the way, not wasted upon either the ex-apache or his companions—he made no immediate attempt to ingratiate himself with the lady. He depended, Frayne thought whimsically, upon his fatal beauty to do what was necessary in that direction. Instead he took from his pocket a newspaper and proceeded to scan its columns diligently. Frayne saw that it was a late edition of one of the evening papers and also, and still more interesting, that the horrific-looking gentleman was reading it upside down, which suggested happenings in the not distant future. Another thing he also noticed was that the fair object of these attentions appeared to be not one whit perturbed; indeed, with her large brown eyes fixed

immovably upon the entrance, she seemed to be totally unconscious of them.

'I think,' Frayne said with an almost imperceptible movement of his head in the direction of the three, 'there will be something happening across there, before long.'

The worried look upon Luigi's face was sufficient testimony to his opinions or feelings in the matter.

'*Dio mio,*' he gasped under his breath, 'what does she do here in this place?'

'What, indeed?' Frayne shrugged his shoulders. 'Who is she?'

But at the question Luigi stiffened.

'That I cannot tell you, Signor.'

'By which you mean that you won't?'

The Italian made the faintest gesture of deprecation.

'That is not so—not altogether. I know her as of one name—that is all. Is it the right one? I do not know. That is her business. That she is here is her business also. It is strange, per'aps, that she should be, but no one of us knows the business of the other. She is a lady; we think of much greater quality than she permits us to know. That also is her business.'

'We?' Frayne shot in quickly.

'M. Diantuolos and myself, and—and those who have the honour of her acquaintance.'

'She is connected in some way with Diantuolos' Club?' The very unwillingness of the other to speak made Frayne all the more insistent. 'She is perhaps a frequent visitor there—possibly even one of the aristocratic members you were speaking of.'

But Luigi's dark face was set as stubbornly as—as that of the gentleman with the ice-green eyes a few yards away. With all his friendliness, and though inwardly considerably perturbed at the company in which he found her, he was answering no questions whatever concerning that most admirable, if mysterious lady, M'selle Jetta Marcein. And opposite him was a gentleman equally as tenacious where information wanted was concerned.

Just how Luigi would have fared under an insidious and intensive pumping at the hands of the Inspector is difficult to say, for at that moment a digression occurred in the shape of two newcomers whose arrival drove, momentarily, at any rate, other matters from the minds of both of them. The front door revolved slowly, and the villainous-looking commissionaire gave salute to two completely occidentalized and important-looking Chinamen. Both were above the ordinary height of men of their race, and thick-set with it. Upon their

impassive faces was that indefinable but unmistakable something that marks the features of men used to command. That they were also of considerable means was equally to be inferred from a good many exterior points.

Luigi was the first to break the silence in which they entered.

'Signor,' he whispered, 'it is they, the two who were at the club when I left.'

'The world seems to be coming to Boccaro's to-night, Luigi,' Frayne said dryly. 'The point is *why* are they here?'

Almost unconsciously he gave a quick glance from the backs of the two yellow men now advancing with slow dignity along the café towards the bar, to the mysterious woman watching in the shadow of the palm, sandwiched between her two gallants. Who the deuce *was* this woman and what her game here? And by 'here' he did not mean Boccaro's or that other place where she had given him the warning and, incidentally, let him know that she was aware of his identity, but London altogether.

She had drawn back, he saw, until there was little to be seen of her face but the dark eyes, glowing beneath the brim of her hat; the hand that held the cigarette-holder to her lips covering the lower part of her features as completely as any mask could have done. And those eyes were fixed, as were Luigi's, and as had been his own, upon those two figures moving along between the tables towards Tony Boccaro. Was her interest just the curiosity that strange and unusual personalities compel in such a place, or had she any personal knowledge of these occidentalized Celestials? The rigidity of her gaze suggested something more than mere curiosity.

A faint touch upon his sleeve aroused him from his thoughts.

'Signor,' Luigi whispered, 'watch Boccaro!'

He did. If the manner of that worthy had been fawning when speaking through his 'phone to the occupants of Room Number Four, it was as nothing compared with his demeanour when the red-shot, squinting eyes fell upon the two utterly immobile faces of the persons approaching him. His big, pock-marked face wreathed itself into one vast and greasy grin, his stubby hands writhed in and out of one another in a perfect frenzy of slavering obsequiousness. He bent towards them until his face almost touched the mahogany of the bar; then slid out from behind that rampart with the celerity of an eel. A monument of human oiliness, Tony Boccaro at that moment, if ever man was.

He pressed his guests into seats at an unoccupied table adjacent to both the bar and that door beloved of ladles of an excessively shy temperament, and over which was now set that brand new bell-register, and there for a couple of

minutes bent over them in whispered conference. His furtive, perhaps involuntary, glances up at the figures of his contraption gave Frayne the clue to their conversation.

'Luigi,' he said, 'work along to the bar and have a drink there. I'm fairly positive Boccaro will go to that precious telephone of his in a moment or two. Put yourself where you can see what number he plugs in. If it's Number Four light a fresh cigarette—I'll keep a sharp watch for it.'

And surely enough in less than another minute, Signor Boccaro was again behind his bar and fumbling with the instrument. Almost simultaneously Luigi Fratello lighted a cigarette.

'Ah,' breathed Frayne to himself, 'so there are Chinamen in the group that holds its deliberations in Number Four. That may be worth the knowing.'

He noticed that as Luigi threaded his way back to his seat, he was particularly careful to allow no stray glance of his to turn in the direction of the lady of the glowing eyes. 'Loyal little sport,' he thought. 'Whoever you may be, Luigi will never give you away if he can help it.'

There was a puzzled expression upon that young gentleman's face as he resumed his seat. In his absence a waiter had taken up his stand a foot or two away from his chair, and Luigi promptly sent him to the bar for another drink.

'I hear a funny thing when Boccaro spoke,' he whispered quickly. 'All I could catch, though I listened hard. When he took off the receiver the first thing he said into it, very clear, was: "Four, ninety-four, West." He repeated it just the same clear way so I make no mistake. *Four, ninety-four, West.* Then he waits until the other end speaks before he went on. But I could not hear any more. What do you make of that, Signor?'

'Can't make anything of it—unless it's a password to this particular crowd, gang, whatever they are that are up there. Repeated it twice, you say, carefully.'

'Twice. Mos' careful.'

Frayne nodded.

'That sounds like it—in case by any mistake he'd got through to the wrong room. They'd O.K. him before he said anything that mattered in the wrong place. Mentioned names or something like that.' Slowly he repeated the cryptic words through soundless lips as though committing them to memory. 'Four, ninety-four, West. Four, ninety-four, West. We're moving,' he told himself pleasantly. 'Oh, yes, we're moving. Not very far, perhaps, and not very fast, but we're decidedly under way. We know that there's a pretty powerful gang working from Room Number Four of Signor Antonio Boccaro's restaurant and café. Must be powerful to have Tony licking their boots. We know that there

are two high-grade Chinks in it, if not more. And we believe we have what might quite easily prove to be their password. Yes, we're moving, right enough.'

Had he but owned one tiny fraction of that remarkable gift ascribed by the Honourable Captain Larry Adair to his late lamented grandmother in the County Kerry, and been able to read a little ahead in the Book of Fate, he would have there seen that within a very few moments it was ordained that he was to travel faster and further in this business than ever in his wildest dreams he had conceived possible in one evening. But as that occult power was not his, he sat back and ruminated upon events as far as they had gone.

And as he sat thinking, his eyes drifted about until they came to settle upon that silent, almost motionless trio not far behind his shoulder. It seemed to him that the woman had never moved so much as one muscle of her beautiful face —her eyes were glued upon the two yellow men. The long, scarred-faced gentleman was still reading his newspaper upside down as though he had been petrified in the act. The Frenchman was undoubtedly doing his best, though now in a desultory, uncertain kind of way, to attract the notice of his fair neighbour. His three friends were watching, not him or his projected conquest as might have been supposed, but the tough-looking figure reading the paper. There was very little doubt by their several expressions that, if trouble started, they were quite ready to do their share of it. It took Frayne a moment or two to get the Gallic Lothario correctly placed in his mental *dossier*, but at last he did so. Benoit Legas—alias Lefevrier, alias Ducheny, and one time quite well known in apache circles as Benny the Rat. His friends were of similar kidney though scarcely so distinguished in crime.

A sudden, tense involuntary movement upon the part of the lady, the quick emptying of her jade cigarette-holder and slipping it into the solid little leather bag about her left wrist, brought his attention instantly to where hers had been centred. Boccaro was opening that door which led to the staircase, and by word and gesture was plainly inviting his Celestial guests to pass through. And even more marked was his anxiety to get them through quickly and unnoticed. And then something happened.

Just what or how it started, Frayne, all his attention riveted upon the two yellow men, never did quite know. He heard a voice, the low, tense voice of a woman, indignantly ejaculate the words 'How dare you!' It was followed by a ferocious snarl that would not have disgraced the throat of a wild beast.

He turned in time to see the owner of the ice-green eyes make one spring upon the Frenchman of many aliases, pounding him with blows that would have sent a trained heavyweight boxer down. From one terrific chopping blow that landed squarely in his face and split it as might have done a much more

lethal weapon, Benny the Rat, something remarkably like terror in his eyes, went reeling back against the wall. There was a quick shift of his lightning-moving hands, and then in one of them something glittered wickedly.

His three companions were on their feet jabbering wildly when the long man jumped the table and landed on the figure crouching, knife in hand and poised, by the wall. But Benny did not drive his blade up in that long-perfected and inimitable stroke that had made him a terror in the Place Pigalle. Instead he was seized and swung in the air as though he had been an infant or a puppy, then the long man whose face was now distorted by a demoniac frenzy, hurled him bodily at his three friends. They went down like ninepins, taking the table and the next with them. Only two got up again—and Benny the Rat was not one of them.

Then pandemonium began. Boccaro, his face gone a sallow, blotchy white, ran back into the café, shouting, leaving that door wide open; standing in it, watching the scene, their faces as expressionless as graven masks, were the two Chinamen. As Boccaro, waving his hands wildly and bellowing orders and curses in one breath, came from one end of the room, the huge commissionaire ran from the other. Men were shouting, women screaming; the sight of one who just flung up her hands and went to the floor in a dead faint brought Frayne's mind back with a jerk to that particular fair Helen whose beauty had unquestionably been at the bottom of the fracas. She was nowhere to be seen.

His eyes darting here, there and everywhere in the now hopelessly-tangled crowd gave no sign of her. With scant ceremony he pushed through towards the top end of the café, thinking she might have taken refuge there out of the way of the minor scuffles which seemed to have arisen out of the first Homeric onslaught. Whilst at that end of the room he seized the opportunity of taking a good steady look at the two figures framed in the doorway. About the taller and heavier of the two there was something that struck him as familiar, but as to how, when, or where he had ever come across him before there was not the slightest trace left in his memory. And as he was obliged to admit, all men of the yellow race looked to him astonishingly alike.

He worked his way back to Luigi, who was still where he had left him, gazing open-mouthed upon what looked imminent as the second clash of the forces of Boccaro's and the iron-fisted stranger.

The big commissionaire was standing before him, arms akimbo, waiting apparently the word from Boccaro to begin. But that worthy was nervously debating with himself. Of all places in Soho his was the last one to court police intervention. And to-night in particular. . . . His squinting eyes swung to that open door and to the stolid yellow faces in it. And in Number Four they were waiting. . . . Quite a number of things criss-crossed Boccaro's dishevelled

mind, and to the acute observer watching him no small amount of them were registered quite plainly upon his distorted features. In particular, that anxious glance towards the yellow men at the door spoke volumes.

But it seemed to Frayne that in all this the ice-green eyes were also darting around to find something; they most certainly were not upon either Boccaro or his bulky henchman. Suddenly he saw them fix upon some object just behind him, in them a most unmistakable question. Cautiously, he too turned his head in that direction, to find once again the lady he had been seeking; and in her dark eyes he could have sworn there was an answering light. Her hand he saw was actually upon that nearest door to the side entrance; indeed she had it open an inch or two. Was she too intent on secretly reaching one or other of those mysterious rooms? Was there collusion between herself and this doughty cavalier? Was this a put-up show to cover her attempt? That, only time could show.

But Antonio Boccaro had evidently made up his mind as to his course of action. The quicker this savage-looking man-eater was out of his place the better.

‘Get outa da place?’ he bellowed, pushing his big face forward, his eyes squinting horribly.

It was not a well-advised gesture. Without further ado the long man hit it, and Boccaro went reeling back across one table and from that position on to his head upon the floor. Before the commissionaire could lift his hands from his hips, two terrific punches took him upon each side of the jaw. They landed with the solid clap of bone against bone. The recipient of them went down like a log. In a stillness of remarkable profundity the long man adjusted his hat, brushed some imaginary dirt from his hands and walked calmly to the revolving door. There he turned and the ice-green eyes swept the paralysed company.

‘So long,’ he said in a slow American drawl. ‘Next time any o’ you louse feels like insultin’ a lady, make sure I ain’t around.’ Then the doors slowly revolved and he disappeared from view.

In the noisy release from pent-up tensity that followed, Frayne’s eyes went again to that spot where she had stood. She was gone. He nodded with grim understanding. The beautiful lady, whoever she was, had made her attempt, and if his suspicions were correct her exit had been worked up magnificently. Without a second’s hesitation he slipped through the door and, closing it carefully after him, stood at the bottom of the staircase in a blackness absolutely impenetrable.

Slowly, cautiously, he began to ascend. Step by step, each foot placed to

make no sound upon the carpeted staircase. Up on to that landing, to survey it in the blackness with his finger tips. The left side was the right side—and a switch that worked no light. After that . . . ?

Then without sound or warning, something descended upon the skull of Detective-Inspector Dick Frayne; something that sent him down silently upon his knees against the wall, with a million lights dancing before his eyes and a horrible roaring in his ears. Then a long, peaceful slide into and down what seemed to be a tunnel of soft, smooth black velvet. Then nothing.

CHAPTER XIV

IN WHICH "LIMPY" JOE SWIGGERS HAS GLOOMY THOUGHTS

JUST how many times between the hours of eleven and twelve o'clock Diantuolos had come out of his office, scanned anxiously the crowd upon the floor or at his tables, glanced at his watch, then passed out through the front entrance to peer up and down the street, he had not the faintest idea, but a good many. For neither M'selle Marcein or his trusted lieutenant, Luigi, had, so far, returned to the fold.

That Diantuolos was not without misgivings as to the safety of the lady, he would have confessed freely. Not that he did not believe Mademoiselle to be perfectly capable of looking after herself in the ordinary way, but the episode of the two Chinamen had considerably disturbed his equanimity. He did not like men of their race—in fact he very much disliked them. Not to put too fine a point upon it, he was mortally afraid of them. There was always something so deadly quiet and menacing about them. And in his wanderings he had seen some little of the yellow men; in queer places and under queer conditions. He had noticed too that they generally got what they wanted in the long run.

And the veiled threat behind the stolid manner of at least one of this particular pair was not to be mistaken. He had smiled, yes; so also had Diantuolos, but the Chinaman's smile merely politely masked something of a totally different nature. And the more he thought of it, the less he liked either their introduction or the man who was sponsor for them. With each night that passed his distrust of the mysterious Count Ferrondo grew deeper and deeper. Strive as he would to place him in that niche of memory to which he rightly belonged, always did the elegant, saturnine-looking gentleman evade him. Another man of menace—and one who did not always take the trouble to conceal it. As witness his undisguised enmity of the Honourable Larry Adair. One of these days that slumbering volcano would erupt Vesuvius-wise. When it did—if it were an open and above-board quarrel—he was of the opinion that the Count Ferrondo would live to regret it. Diantuolos was no fighter, but he knew the genuine article when he saw it.

To Luigi's defection he did not give a thought. If there were any who could tell that bright lad anything about the West End of London, Diantuolos had yet to meet that person. But, knowing his lieutenant's keenness when 'house-full' was the order of the night, and particularly when there was anything afoot to cause anxiety as to police regulations such as this flagrant dope-peddling going on under their very noses, he was surprised. There must be some especial

excitement at Tony Boccaro's filthy dive to keep Luigi there all this time.

It was somewhere upon the road to midnight, when in the course of one of these exterior visitations, his eye was struck by an unusual figure passing slowly by upon the opposite side of the street; unusual, that is, for this particular part of town at this particular time of night.

He was a little man of middle age, with a keen, clean-shaven face and particularly heavy eyebrows. His dress was most eminently respectable, in the opinion of M. Diantuolos, funereal; consisting, as it did, of a colour scheme entirely black, including a morbid-looking bowler hat and tie to match. He walked with a marked limp.

The mind of Diantuolos being focused as it were upon other matters, the little man would have received no more than the most casual notice from him, but that the commissionaire moved across and in a guarded voice volunteered some information.

'That's the fourth or fifth time that little man's been up and down, sir, and always got his eye on us. Seems like as if he was looking for some one who might be here. Once I thought he was going to ask me something. Did stop a moment, then changed his mind and went on again.'

M. Diantuolos, now taking considerably greater notice of this tenacious passer-by who kept turning up again, pondered this piece of news.

'That is strange,' he said ruminatively. 'He would not appear to be the kind to have any connection with such as come here.'

'Y' never can't tell, sir,' the ex-sergeant retorted profoundly. 'They're pretty smart and togged up when they get here, but I dessay if we could get a quiet squint at some of their fathers and mothers an' uncles an' aunts, we'd get a bit of a shock.'

A truth of such profundity that it left Diantuolos, after a glance down his own impeccable evening clothes and having very distinct recollections of his own immediate forbears and kin generally, in perfect agreement with his bulky henchman. Certainly it was quite possible that the eminently respectable-looking little man with the limp might be the skeleton in any of the gay patrons' cupboards. Which was their affair, and not his. After his usual search of the street he retired again and cynically amused himself watching his guests and wondering just which one of the champagne-drinking *élite* the little lame man might be paternal parent to.

But upon his next restless visitation to the front he found the little patroller standing immediately opposite to the entrance and making no secret of the fact that his interest in that street lay in Diantuolos' Club and *Dansant* and in no place else. Somewhat nervously the Greek eyed him. Was he there to kick up a

scene over some junior or other who might be passing the fleeting hour inside? He most sincerely hoped not; this was the type of person, solid and respectable, with whom, rightly or wrongly, the police invariably sided in the event of anything in the nature of a street disturbance.

He and the commissionaire watched him take a card from a bulky pocket-book, replace the latter carefully, then cross the street towards them. He addressed himself—in quite pleasant and quite friendly tones, the Greek was intensely relieved to hear—to Diantuolos himself, though his greeting was general.

'Evening, friends,' he began in one of the strongest New York East-side accents Diantuolos had heard for a good many years. A thought flashed to his mind that here, perhaps, might be the papa of the gay Mr. 'Chick' Devlin, come to hale him back to the simple life. Though physiologically the two did not seem to fit in with that theory; savouring rather of a small terrier being sire to an out-size in mastodons. Still, strange things happen in that way and no one knew so better than M. Diantuolos. An experience of night clubs prepares a man for anything.

The salutation having been heartily returned he continued: 'Am I talking to the Main Guy—the Boss?'

M. Diantuolos bowed and was understood to murmur that such was his status. The little man presented him with the card.

To the Greek's amazement he found it to be that of Captain, The Honourable Lawrence Fitzgerald Adair.

'That gentleman in the club just now?' the little man demanded.

Instantly M. Diantuolos froze. Not that way was he to be caught. Oh, dear no. But he was suave; politeness itself. He waved the card with a little deprecating gesture.

'You will understand, sare,' he began saccharinely, 'that to answer your question is not possible. Not at all. I regret. Ah, yes, I regret. You will perceive that not to any person could I . . .'

Two humorous eyes glinted suddenly at him from a grey head, cocked acutely to one side. One corner of an equally humorous mouth twitched an instant, then went suddenly into a remarkably firm, straight line.

'Greek,' its owner observed whimsically, 'you sell a sweet line of bull. It might go down with the young and green, but not with a li'l ol' bird like me. Just step inside and spill it to the Cap, that his confidential valet, Mr. Michael Scaddan, is here and would be glad of a word with him, quick, fast, and private. Step, brother; high, wide and handsome. Whilst you're about it, me and the big boy here will tell each other about the fights we won in our youth.'

But the mere mention of any confidential servitor of the Captain was quite sufficient guarantee for Diantuolos. His invitation to step inside and wait in his private office until he could lay hands upon the Honourable Captain was as cordial as if Mr. Scaddan had himself been scion of the nobility. Before departing in the wake of the intensely relieved proprietor, Mr. Scaddan performed a rapid sleight-of-hand with a half-crown, in return for which he received from the sergeant-commissionaire a salute fit for a brigadier-general at least.

Once inside, he appeared to be struck with violent admiration for all he beheld. The glittering, softly-lit tables, the glass-floor, the magnificent plush-clad and white-wigged footmen who ministered to the wants of the guests, all came in for a praise that might have been considered fulsome by any but its proprietor.

'You cert'nly have one elegant place, and I've seen most of the best in N' York City,' he assured a delighted M. Diantuolos. 'There's nothing over there got anything on this.'

'Ah! and my band,' the Greek exclaimed ecstatically, 'no better in New York that ever I heard there.'

'You been in N' York City?' Mr. Scaddan asked quickly.

'Some years I live there and other places in America,' M. Diantuolos informed him. 'Two years I was at Rectors' on Broadway.'

'I knew them guys when they run a shell-fish shop for actors in Chicago,' said Mr. Scaddan. 'But that was in the happy days of me youth, when we never took music with the eats.'

Diantuolos' artists were at that moment in the throes of a slow, dreamy waltz into which the violinist, under the warming influence of a brimmer of champagne just handed up to him, was pouring out such soul as he possessed. Diantuolos, who really loved music of the kind, kissed his fingers towards the virtuoso.

'Ah,' he murmured, 'that violin, how it sobs!'

As far as "Limpy" Joe Swiggers was concerned it sounded to him much the same kind of stuff that he could and had heard anywhere in li'l' ol' N' York, from Looey the Wop's on Water Street to the opposite end of the scale, Texas Guinan's on Broadway. He could well remember when a certain German who called himself Snitzler these days, had a *rathskellar* and dance hall not a thousand miles from the Tombs prison. Did well, too—until greed led him into the bad habit of taking the thirty pieces of police silver in exchange for knowledge of the whereabouts of some of his friends. Only managed to get out of New York a jump ahead of the gunmen put on to square the account, the

breaks were with Heinie—that time. But what really was in “Limpy” Joe Swiggers’ mind in this connexion was that unless his musical ear was out of date and on the blink, Heinie’s band had this Weepy Willy fiddler down for the count, any time. But he dissembled:

‘He sure is one swell sobber,’ he conceded graciously.

Left alone in M. Diantuolos’ office he went over things with a keen professional eye. If that galvanized-iron ice-box painted green and black was the safe the skads were kept in until removed to the bank, one of these nights it would be a gift for somebody. Some young beginner would get in and bust it up with a tin-opener. A thing like that was as good as a bonus to enterprising industry. He chuckled at the idea of real money, stuff you could spend and get change for, being kept in a thing like that.

But at the hurried entrance into the room of Captain Larry, his face straightened into a calm, benign, but quite unreadable mask.

The door shut, the Captain crossed to him quickly.

‘ “Limpy”, he demanded in a low, anxious voice, ‘what’s wrong?’

The little man looked mildly surprised.

‘Why, nothin’, Larry,’ he answered. ‘On’y I’ve been just makin’ a little tour round a place or two, and when I find myself passing the dump, I thought I’d just like y’ to point the Mam’selle out to me.’ He paused and eyed the other benignly. ‘Not for her to see me, of course,’ he added quietly, ‘but just so I’d know her looks if I was t’ run across her any time. Hope I’m not crashin’ in at a bad time, Larry?’

Adair regarded him with troubled, dubious eyes.

‘That’s not all you’ve come for, “Limpy”,’ he said quietly. ‘There’s something else in your mind, something you’ve found out to-night. Concerning her, perhaps?’ he put tentatively.

Mr. Swiggers paused a moment, rubbing his shaven chin thoughtfully.

‘She here to-night, Larry?’ he asked abruptly.

The Captain made a worried gesture.

‘No—that is, not at the moment,’ he answered. ‘She has been—and went again for an hour or so upon some business, Diantuolos tells me. But she’s not back yet.’ It was very plain, to the acute eyes of Mr. Swiggers, that the Captain, like M. Diantuolos, was far from easy in his mind.

‘You fidgetin’ about it, Larry?’ he asked.

The Captain gave anything but an assured little laugh.

‘Well, I—it’s damned silly, I suppose—but I can’t get that warning out of

my mind. It read straight to me.'

Mr. Swiggers nodded in agreement.

'It was sure straight stuff, Larry. The guy that passed you that was on the inside all right, all right.' For a moment Mr. Swiggers relapsed again into silent thought. The Captain paced restlessly up and down the office.

'What time would it be when the lady took the air?' "Limpy" asked in the same musing way.

Adair shot a quick look at him.

'I couldn't say exactly, but I can find out. Somewhere about ten o'clock, I think. Why?'

'Yes,' Mr. Swiggers responded entirely to himself, 'that 'ud be about it.'

'What d'ye mean? Out with it,' the Captain demanded irritably.

'Nothin' to "out with" just yet, Larry, Mr. Swiggers responded equably. 'I'm just try'n to put one or two things together, things I've heard one place and another. Some is, mebbe, the goods, and some is, mebbe, the bunk.'

'What things—and in what places?

'Places you never heard of, Larry—an don't want to. Places that, whatever happens, you gotta keep clear of. There's big things doin', boy—big and dirty. And there 's a dirty bunch doin' them. There's big pickin's going, and the nighthawks are here from all over the world.'

The Captain made a gesture of impatience.

'What have they to do with her? Man, ye're talking in parables.'

'Come again?' Mr. Swiggers requested politely.

'Parables. A story to point a moral—a story of something that never happened or of some one who never existed.'

'These birds exist all right, Larry, and don't you forget it. They ain't here to see the sights, like a pack of schoolmarms from Kalamazoo. Not so, they are here with their hooks wide open to rake in th' skads. What they've got to do with that swell dame is the thing I gotta get wise to.'

'Who says they've anything to do with her—whoever they may be?'

But once again Mr. Swiggers seemed to have lapsed into reverie. The shaggy brows drew together and frowned upon M. Diantuolos' safe as though its flimsiness were a matter of personal affront to himself and his craft. And when he did resume, it was to change the subject completely. He jerked his grey head in the direction of the dance floor.

'Plenty of "snow-birds" out there to-night, Larry,' he remarked with most damnably irritating casualness. 'When the Greek was showin' me the dump, I

spotted plenty that had partook of their evenin' sniff of coke and was ready for more. Pretty good crowd here that carries the little phial and the salted water. Women, at that.'

The Captain shrugged contemptuously.

'Those poor dope fools! Yes, there are plenty of them to be seen. Diantuolos is worried about it. He tells me that he's had word that it's the same all over Town to-night.'

'Is that so?' Mr. Swiggers said musingly. 'Well, whadda y' know about *that*! This Greek bimbo, he don't have any truck with the coke and morph merchants, does he? Y' don't think he lays low and takes his rake-off, do y'?'

The other stared at him.

'I do not, indeed,' he said bluntly. 'Diantuolos is as straight as running a night-club will let a man be. I think that if he had his way he'd hang all the dope-peddlers, as he calls them. He's frightened of their stuff and them as well.'

'Which shows that Greek is sure a wise boy,' was Mr. Swiggers' grim comment. 'There's somethin' t' be scared of—and bumpin' a guy like him off the map wouldn't worry them no more than drinkin' a bottle of his swell hootch. But if you got it right, Larry, and he ain't standin' in, why I got to skin round a bit and look some other place, before we get tangled up in an almighty mess.'

'We? What the divil has it to do with us, "Limpy"?'

But upon this point Mr. Swiggers had no intention of being communicative. Whatever the idea churning about in his acute brain and arising out of his interview with the knowledgeable Heinie, he apparently meant keeping it there at least until things developed into solid tangibility. At the moment, his one thought was the evasion of Larry's direct questions whilst himself picking up such fragments of information as he could to fit in with that curious network, suddenly flung from nowhere, that he saw slowly enmeshing them. And the key to it all, he was positive, was to be found here in this dance-club, in the person of that mysterious lady for whom Larry had, in his own vernacular, 'fallen hard.'

'Why, as to what it has to do with us, Larry,' he equivocated, 'nothing, boy. Up to the present date and as it leaves us at present we're sittin' on the top of the world. On'y, like a learned guy I once did a stretch with at Joliet once told me, this ol' world is goin' whoopin' round millions o' miles a minute and we gotta watch points we stop that way. Guys like you an' me, Larry, has gotta see we don't lose our seat and find ourselves sittin' on nothin', and a long, long way from home, as the song says.'

To which informative peroration his companion answered with a gesture of despair.

‘Man,’ he cried, ‘for the love of Mike will ye say something that a man can understand. For all I can make out of what you’re telling it could be Erse—or Choctaw.’

Mr. Swiggers sat up erectly, particularly shrewd and keen his grey eyes showed under their heavy brows at this moment.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Then I’ll ask you a question or two any man can understand. Are there any Chows members of this club—or do any come here, members or not?’

‘Chows?’

‘Chinks, Larry, Chinks. The ones I have in my mind would come from N’ York.’

‘Chinks! Good Lord, what do you take this place for, “Limpy”?’

‘A flash dance-joint run by a cute Greek,’ was Mr. Swiggers’ serene but exceedingly terse answer. ‘And in any joint, flash or take-it-easy, ever I struck run by one of those birds there was always a helluva sight more deep down than y’ c’ud see on the surface.’

‘I’ve never seen anything of it.’

‘Takin’ it as a rule,’ “Limpy” observed mildly, ‘when a guy falls hard for a jane, th’ only thing he can manage to see about the place is the lady. He goes short-sighted on all the rest. So there’s no Chow members here, or comes here?’

The Captain was about to once again repudiate any such suggestion when there suddenly recurred to his mind the two he had seen leaving the club as he was entering—the two who had been the occasion of some trouble to Diantuolos.

‘ “Limpy”,’ he said, ‘I was wrong about any Chinamen ever having been here, for there were two came to-night. But they’d never shown up before, and they left as I came.’

‘Look at that now,’ observed Mr. Swiggers, somewhat ambiguously, but with tremendous interest. ‘What like were they, Larry?’

As well as he could, for his glance at them in passing had not been one of any particular interest, the Honourable Captain described Diantuolos’ unwelcome visitors. Mr. Swiggers hung upon his every word.

‘Togged to the nines, and looked as if they’d got as many dollars as a monkey’s got fleas?’ he asked eagerly as the Captain finished.

‘Yes,’ he was told, ‘that *could* describe them.’

‘You bet you it could, Larry,’ Mr. Swiggers went on excitedly. ‘And it wouldn’t tell a pack of lies, either. No, sir.’

‘You know them?’ Adair asked in astonishment.

‘Heard of ’em,’ the little man admitted cautiously. ‘One of ’em was a mighty big bug in Chinatown, N’ York one time. Is now—maybe. His name’s Shu Cheng, but he was best known on Mott and Pell Streets as the Opium King. It was him that got most of the sticky stuff into New York for the yeller pipe-dreamers. He was a big Tong-boss and bad as they build ’em. The other’s a Frisco Chow, T’ao Yo. Son of a rich merchant and shipowner, I’ve heard ’em say. Owns a steamer or two and sailed one himself. He was the boy who used to run the stuff into Frisco from the Farrallones. Other things as well—yeller girls bought on the Chinese coast for a few dollars per and sold to the rich slant-eye men for thousands. He’s another gang-boss, an’ if there’s anything livin’ worse than Shu Cheng, it’s T’ao Yo. Now, how did those two birds get into this swell joint, Larry?’

Taken considerably aback by this very full recital of the Chinamen’s identity, the Captain could only stare at the little man perplexedly.

‘I—I couldn’t tell you, “Limpy”,’ he said. ‘*Some one* must have introduced them. That’s a hard and fast rule here.’

‘An’ they was somethin’ wrong when they went, y’ think?’

‘Quite sure of it.’

“Limpy” Joe considered a moment.

‘Larry, without spillin’ a word of what I’ve wised y’ to, you pump it out of the Greek who intreydooced them two yellow high-binders here. Get me? And then get a line on what was the trouble before they went. Don’t give him no idea of what you know.’

‘But I don’t know anything, “Limpy”,’ the Captain protested. ‘You’ve talked a devil of a lot—and told me nothing. Nothing at all.’

‘Well, now, Larry boy, that’s all to the good,’ Mr. Swiggers placated emolliently. ‘What y’ don’t know, nobody c’n get out of y’. That’s sure fact. ‘N’ while you’re at it, word the Greek has he ever heard something that sounded like Four, ninety-four, West, passed about this place any night?’

‘Four, ninety-four, West?’ Adair repeated, openly at a loss to make head or tail of the combination. ‘What does it mean, “Limpy”?’

“Limpy” Joe got up and put on his hat.

‘That ’s what I gotta find out between this and goin’ home time. You get what I want out of the Greek. Later on to-night we’ll get together an’ count up

how many two and two makes.'

'It'll make the same four as ever,' said the Captain with a trace of weariness.

'With one of them two's yeller, of Shu Cheng and T'ao Yo's class,' Mr. Swiggers rejoined with great positiveness; 'you can stand pat on me, pard, they might make a helluva sight more'n you got any idea of. I'll beat it on my rounds.'

'But . . .'

But Mr. Swiggers was through the door and expeditiously making for the front entrance, leaving behind him a man about as uneasy in mind as could well be. For a moment it was in his thoughts to dash out after the little cripple and demand some explanation of his enigmatic and totally unsettling words, but with a weary sigh he gave that idea up. Never in this wide world was there a more pig-headed obstinate old mule than "Limpy" once he'd made up his mind that his line was the mysterious and non-communicative. But that he was a veritable wizard at digging into the secrets of the Underworld—the Nighthawks, as he called them—his aristocratic partner was equally well aware. The *cognoscenti* of crime could hide what they liked, bury it deeper than the ocean itself, but once "Limpy" got his nose to the ground, secrets were secrets no longer—save that the grave was not more silent than the little cracksman upon the affairs of other men, or women.

And there was another thing about "Limpy", that experience had taught the big, handsome fellow whom the little man had once on a time plucked from an inevitable ninety days in the Tombs prison for the crime of poverty in, to-day perhaps, the richest city of the world. He was utterly fearless and could dominate even the worst passioned of his world. He had seen men known to have been guilty of acts of appalling ferocity quit cold when this insignificant little lame man had called their bluff. And never with any show of violence or menace, never with outflung threats of what he himself or any gang might do; and indeed he had a hatred and contempt of gangsters as cowardly rats without even the courage to do their own jobs of private vengeance single-handed.

The truth of "Limpy" Joe Swiggers was that he was that strange anomaly in a world whose only law was lawlessness and whose only doctrine, success, a highly respected man. In New York, even that lame foot—souvenir of a third degree at the hands of a certain Police-captain in a futile effort to make him incriminate others—was pointed out as the price of being a square man; one whose word, come what might, was his bond, who did a good turn where he could, and limped his way along the subterranean track the world, and the police, had forced him into, with unfailing cheerfulness, humour and

philosophy.

No, better, he thought, let “Limpy” have it his own way and find out for himself what was at the bottom of this menace to himself and, a thousand times more important, the threat towards her. If he could not, then no man could.

As the Captain left Diantuolos’ office he saw Luigi enter breathlessly, a very disturbed look upon his face. Idly he wondered what he had been up to.

Meantime the subject of his moody thoughts was proceeding slowly along with his halting, uneven gait towards a quarter considerably less savoury than that in which the fashionable rendezvous he had just left was situated. But as he went, his lean, heavily-lined face was marked by something far graver than that humour and philosophy upon which Larry Adair had been reflecting. Had the gallant Captain seen him at that moment he would not have needed a second glance to know that his mood of the moment was not far removed from despondency.

‘The whole works,’ he was saying to himself, ‘is in which way this skirt of Larry’s is playin’. If she’s in it on one side it’s gonna hit Larry good an’ hard. But if she’s in it on the other’—the grizzled head shook sombrely—‘my pardner is gonna get cured o’ love mighty quick.’

Around one dark corner there suddenly stumped, almost upon him, a burly, heavy-footed man who seemed at the moment lost in his own thoughts. Mr. Swiggers gave him ‘Good night’ civilly, to be answered by a piggish grunt. But as though the man had been shaken out of his brooding thoughts by the sound of his own voice, he gave this friendly accoster that keen, hard glance which so many in this neighbourhood dreaded to fall upon them. Possibly the harmlessness and unmistakable respectability of the sombrely clad little cripple touched some spot in a harsh, unyielding nature, for he belatedly returned the friendly salutation. One square look “Limpy” Joe Swiggers got at the big, seamed face, before its owner stumped on and out of sight down the darker side of the street.

‘An’ you got your bunch o’ trouble, brother,’ he apostrophized the retreating figure, ‘and by the look of you it’s no light load t’ lump about, neither. Well, that’s how trouble goes. Either y’ got it, or it’s waiting for y’ just round the corner.’

A piece of pessimistic philosophy with which Detective-Superintendent Dallenby, had it carried to his ears, would, no doubt, have morosely agreed; though even Mr. Swiggers, hardened as he was to the vicissitudes of mortal existence, would have been considerably perturbed to know just how much trouble was waiting for him around the very first corner he was to turn.

CHAPTER XV

CONCLAVE

IN a room that seemed to have been built into the house with the sole idea of concealment from prying eyes, the man known to habitués of Diantuolos' as the Count Eugene Ferrondo sat at the head of a large table. Upon his right hand was the man "Limpy" Joe had indicated as the San Francisco Chinaman, T'ao Yo; beside him the big, thick-set dope-boss of New York's yellow quarter, Shu Cheng. Further along was a small, thin, keen-eyed and hook-nosed Semitic, addressed variously as either Baumann or Abe. He, like the rest, was clad in immaculate evening clothes in which he looked slightly ridiculous. But that was the only ridiculous thing about him, for anything more cunning of feature it would have been difficult to find. With his little beady eyes fixed, greedily covetous, upon a magnificent brilliant worn upon one of T'ao Yo's yellow fingers, he looked like a very sleek-coated buck rat.

At the end of the table sat a benevolent-looking old gentleman of about sixty with a round, fresh-coloured face and very weak blue eyes. They probably accounted for the dark glasses beside him, though not for the perfectly-made grey wig and beard upon which they rested. He spoke with a decidedly foreign accent.

In a corner of the room, his chair tilted back against the wall, was a thickly-built Dutchman, his obese, heavy-jowled face glowering upon all there, his stertorous breathing sounding like a prolonged muttering. It was plainly evident that he was in an evil mood and inclined to be quarrelsome. Indeed, to judge by their faces, none of the occupants of room Number Four were in a particularly amiable frame of mind.

It was distinctly noticeable that in this conference of hard-eyed, and with the one exception of the weak-eyed man, ruthless-faced men, the Count, whether by chance or design, dropped entirely that supercilious, contemptuous air which was his principal characteristic. Indeed he seemed rather to be labouring under some restraint beneath the utterly expressionless, basilisk stare he was receiving from the oriental members of the conclave. The benevolent-looking man alone seemed to be filled with the milk of human kindness towards all men, but the Dutchman scowled at his aristocratic coadjutor—or any one else who met his sullen, rheumy eyes.

Upon the table there was no shortage of liquid refreshment; the beverages, like the consumers, were of decidedly cosmopolitan origin. The Dutchman was drinking Schnapps in copious quantities, the Chinese still stuck to the bubbling

wine of France, the gentleman of the wig and beard was imbibing a light Rhine wine, and before Ferrondo stood a bottle of brandy out of which he poured himself a stiff tot and drank it off at a gulp. In his dark, restless eyes there was plainly to be seen the result of the several that had preceded it. As he set down his glass he made a gesture, intended, doubtless, to be one of amiability.

'Where is the sense in our quarrelling amongst ourselves?' he asked placatingly, though the effort behind his words showed plainly, as if it had been exceedingly difficult for him to adopt any such role as that of pacifist. 'Dirck, here, seems to have come across especially to make trouble. If we listened to him we'd pack up and clear out at a moment's notice. I tell you he's scared of nothing—nothing at all. Things are as safe here as they can be anywhere. In every city in the world they're on the watch now; have been ever since that cursed Geneva arrangement. We've got a good hold everywhere that we can do business, the Continent, America, here, and we've a perfect secret service. There is nothing that can threaten from any angle but we get warning at once. We've got the game absolutely in our own hands. For all your pig-headedness, you must see that. Van Blooch.'

A quite ordinary student of his fellow-man would have noticed that in his eagerness to satisfy the captious Dutchman, the grand manner of the Count Ferrondo was entirely non-existent. The cold, polished European veneer had gone by the board; that which took its place suggested a Latin-American of perhaps some education and breeding, who spoke considerably better English than most of his kind. The black sheep, possibly, of some good Latin family of highly-bred European ancestry or a man who had travelled considerably. Had Diantuolos heard him at that moment, it is possible that he would have instantly filled that empty niche in his memory with its rightful, but persistently elusive, personality.

But apparently Mynheer Dirck Van Blooch was *not* to be lifted out of his stolid native obstinacy by any argument of a spirit-heated Ferrondo. His jaws set as stubbornly as those of a bull-dog, and his only answer was a pig-like grunt.

The mild-eyed owner of the detachable hair and beard stepped in to pour oil upon what could not be mistaken for anything but troubled waters; the Chinamen said nothing, but their slanting black eyes never left Ferrondo's face.

'There is much truth in what Gene says,' he commented placidly in halting English. 'What iss it you haf in mind to trouble you, Dirck? You yourself say you can handle all the stuff at Rotterdam that you can get hold of. The Paris and Belgian buyers will take the lot at your own price. That iss how it iss wit' me. I haf only to say I haf it, and from the Rhine to Budapest the buyers flock

in. There iss no question of price—good money iss all ready. Ver' well, then, what iss wrong?'

'If id is so safe as he zays, Shroener,' the Dutchman retorted in his heavy gutturals, 'why was dere no stuff for dree weeks when dere was plendy hid away? Thad is one t'ing I wand answered. Dere are odders.' The truculence of his tone was blatant.

'At that time it was *not* safe,' Ferrondo answered abruptly. 'Scotland Yard had put one of their best Special Branch men on—Frayne. More than once he got too close to be pleasant. We'd got the whole of the last lot T'ao Yo's craft smuggled through at Cardiff safely buried in Tiger Bay and, thanks to this swine, Frayne, I daren't bring a grain of it into London. The river-police were going through every ship in the river from keel to truck. Some of them three or four times over. Up to now, Cardiff and Bristol have never even been suspected as the port of entry. It would have been madness to have chanced bringing the slightest suspicion on them.'

'Dree weeks,' Mynheer repeated obstinately, 'we have no stuff.'

Ferrondo's eyes showed their red gleam.

'You got all the bigger price when it did come,' he snapped.

'When it *did* gome,' the Dutchman repeated in a queer musing voice. 'Yah!' For a moment there was a pregnant silence, then he began again from an entirely different angle. 'Whad is begome of Jan Yonkers?' he demanded directly of the man at the head of the table.

Ferrondo stared at him coolly.

'Become of him?' he repeated, then shook his head. 'How should I know? Has he been in London? If so, I've seen nothing of him.'

Slowly the Dutchman lumbered to his feet. Seen standing he was an extraordinary figure. It was little exaggeration to say that he was, within very few inches, as broad across the shoulders as he was in height. His head, except for one or two heavy folds of flesh at the base of his skull, seemed to grow directly out of his shoulders. As for the shape of it, had Detective-Inspector Frayne viewed him at that moment solely from behind, he might have been excused for thinking he was looking at the Man with the Egg-shaped Head. Like that unfortunate personage, the Mynheer Dirck Van Blooch had also not only the build of a bull but, without doubt, the strength of one. To the end of the table he came and stood there glaring along its length at Ferrondo.

'You zay you have not zeen Jan Yonkers,' he growled, then smashed a heavy fist down upon the table. 'That is one *verdammed* lie, undt I gan broove it! You *did* zee him, you were wit' heem and he lefd a zertain blace I know, to meed you to gome here. Thad is the lasd ever seen or heard of heem. I ask

again, Verrondo, whad begome of Jan Yonkers?'

Ferrondo, his eyes glittering like those of a wild cat, made a move to rise; one long, white hand stole towards his hip. Then a yellow hand locked firmly upon it and that strangely soft voice of Shu Cheng broke in.

'Sit down,' he said smoothly, adding as the other relaxed back into his chair: 'And keep off weapons—if you are wise. That is a fool's way—amongst men who work together.'

Ferrondo shrugged his shoulders, then his set face broke into a tight-lipped smile more pregnant with meaning than a snarl.

'What is he trying to accuse me of?' he asked.

'We will hear,' Shu Cheng responded stolidly.

'Lisden, all of you,' Van Blooch broke out, breathing hard with suppressed rage. 'Id was I myzelf who zend Jan across begauze I have a brivate deal on with a buyer vrom Amsterdam who wanded a big parcel. I wired you to Gardiff, T'ao Yo, that I wand the stuff send up to London by one of your men. Is dat zo?'

T'ao Yo nodded assent.

'That is so, Dirck,' he confirmed.

'Alzo we arrange where your man is to meet Jan, undt it is fixed dat he will be ere do-night to bay you der money vor me, begause id is nod likely I can gome myzelf. Is dat zo?'

And again T'ao Yo nodded and responded: 'That is so, Dirck.'

'Excebt you undt me undt Jan one man only knows der deal—Verrondo. He says he never saw heem. I zay thad is a lie. Jan did not know London ver' well; not for many years he had been here, undt then only for a vordnight on professional business. Bud it is strange thing there is one of his family here, his brodder Carl, an acrobat wit' a troupe thad perform at the Hibbodrome. You remember, T'ao Yo, I make thad the place for your man to meet Jan? Thad is begauze I know Jan can find thad blace for certain, begauze he is to go dere to see Carl. And thad is how I know thad he was with you, Verrondo. He told his brodder so, and thad he was to meet you again, lader. He god the stuff from T'ao Yo's man, bud fancied he was followed, and slipped indo der stage-door of der Hibbodrome for a while. He lefd to meed you undt he had fifdy ounces of "snow" on him undt five hundred pounds in English money of mine, undt more than thad of his own. From thad minute he has never been seen or heard of.'

'I tell you I know nothing of him,' Ferrondo declared passionately.

Again the Dutchman gave his pig-like grunt.

‘You knew Jan very well, Dirck?’ Shu Cheng intervened.

‘Zo well as I know myzelf,’ he said slowly. ‘He was my brodder too.’

‘Your brother!’ It was a general exclamation of astonishment from all in the room.

Slowly the Dutchman inclined his head.

‘Yah! Undt Carl Yonkers ad der Hibbodrome now is alzo my brodder.’ He leaned across towards Ferrondo, a curious mocking smile upon his heavy face. ‘Undt der Count Verrondo did nod remember us . . . no? And yed we have worked on more dan one Music Hall bill togedder, both on der Gontinent and in America. Undt in der circus, when der Gount Verrondo was just Jose Fondera, a half-breed ring masder. You had vorgot the Nederlanden Trio of strong men undt acrobats? They were der three Van Blooch, though we call ourzelves Yonkers in der business. Well, dere was one of dem had not vorgod *you*; although it is a long way vrom Jose Fondera who murdered der liddle trapeze artist in Texas undt got across der border into Mexico und der Gount Verrondo.’

T’ao Yo held up his hand:

‘What a man does or has done has nothing to do with us,’ he said in an unusually sharp tone. ‘That is his business. None of us came into this dope game clean handed.’

The Dutchman gave him a long penetrating look through half-shut eyes.

‘Thad is so,’ he agreed in the quietest tone he had yet used. ‘Undt all I wand to say is, thad I will vind out whad begame of Jan if I spend every gulden I god in der world to do it. Undt if it broves to be whad I think it will’—a sinister, ominous note came into his heavy voice—‘*I will know yoost what to do*. Undt thad is all.’

‘Is that a threat to any one here?’ T’ao Yo asked slowly.

The Dutchman stared him straight in the face.

‘If der one who killed my brodder is in this room,’ he returned slowly, ‘it is a threat to heem . . . yes.’ A low, ferocious growl came from deep down in his throat. A threat! *Donner undt Blitzen*—yes! To dell him thad before he is so mooch older, I, Dirck Van Blooch, will cut der heart out of his body.’ He took from a heavy pocket-book a roll of Bank of England notes and tossed them across the table to T’ao Yo.

‘Thad is der money for der stuff your man delivered to Jan outzide der Hibbodrome as we arranged,’ he said gruffly.

T’ao Yo picked it up and balanced it in his hand.

‘Would you not sooner let it stand until we see . . .’

‘There is noding to see, T’ao Yo,’ the Dutchman interrupted curtly. ‘The stuff was delivered to my brodder—take der money.’ He poured himself a good half-pint of Schnapps, tossed it neat down his throat, then lumbered back to his chair, sat heavily and seemed to lose himself instantly in his own brooding thoughts.

A momentary silence fell upon the room. Abe Baumann shuffled uneasily in his seat as though all this talk of murder and violence frightened him—as indeed it did. There was nothing of a desperado about him. The oblique eyes of T’ao Yo were fixed upon the ponderous figure of Van Blooch glowering at the floor. Ferrondo, too, kept glancing in that direction, but covertly, nervously. Only two men there appeared to be perfectly placid as though nothing had occurred to shake them in the slightest degree out of an habitual calm, Shu Cheng and the placid Shroener. In the case of the Chinaman it would seem that nothing could disturb his racial and natural impassiveness; in that of the other it was as if his benign, philosophic urbanity was proof against any onslaught, however unexpected. Then the silence was broken by Ferrondo.

‘There is one thing that has happened,’ he began in a low, vicious voice, ‘that is of far more importance than all this, and needs dealing with *at once*. To-night, if it can be managed.’ He looked meaningly at Baumann. ‘One of the women you use to distribute, Abe, has taken to paying visits to Scotland Yard.’

Had he suddenly drawn a gun and fired at him, his words could not have had a more galvanic effect upon the Jew.

‘Scot—Scotland Yard!’ he gasped, the colour slowly receding from his face. ‘You—you are sure about it, Gene?’

‘Positive. She and another girl were followed from Soho, first to a café in Whitehall, and then on to Scotland Yard. But, so far, I think it’s safe. Outside the place she seemed to lose courage, so it was reported to me, and they came away without seeing any one.’

‘Vhich one of them?’ Baumann asked, the quaver of fear in his voice.

‘That smart-looking youngster they call Netta or Nessa.’

Baumann stared at him in undisguised amazement.

‘Nessa!’ he exclaimed, then shook his head. ‘Some vhere they is a mistake. Vhichever of them should squeal, it vould not be her. For one reason vhich is a plenity—she is a hopeless dopey. Take “coke” avay from her and she vould be a loony in three days. Is it she should squeal to stop th’ on’y thing which keeps her goin’? It ain’t sense.’

‘She went—sense or no sense.’ He gave an ugly laugh. ‘No sense, it will prove for her. Who is the other one? A girl with a bad cough—sounded like consumption, my report has. Know anything about her?’

‘In a vay—yes,’ Baumann answered in a troubled way. ‘She ain’t got nothing to do vith us—or nobody else. Nessa, she found her in some lodgin’ place where she stayed. Sick and almost starving. Some feller desert her and her baby an’ the lodgin’s voman she is goin’ t’ turn ’em out on th’ street. Nessa looked after them. Then the baby, it die—an’ a doctor says the girl she has consumption. So Nessa she goes on lookin’ after her. That is the lot. But I doin’t believe Nessa squeal on us—the dope vouldn’t let her. And, anyhow, she is a good goil.’

‘Walks the streets for the rest of her living, doesn’t she?’ Ferrondo sneered.

A rumbling sound came from the Dutchman’s throat.

‘Dere is plendy good womans is vorced to go on der streets,’ he blared.

The smooth voice of T’ao Yo intervened—in it an icy, deadly ring.

‘There are also plenty of women, good or bad, who do not visit the police, that can be got to do our work. This one will be seen to at once. You know where to find her?’ he questioned Ferrondo.

‘Within an hour I can put hands on her.’

‘Then put them,’ T’ao Yo said significantly.

Again for a moment or two a silence fell.

‘Why is ‘Chick’ Devlin not here to-night?’ Shu Cheng inquired suddenly of Ferrondo.

It was apparently a perfectly innocent question, but it brought a dark flush to the face of the man it was addressed to.

‘Because I don’t trust him, Shu Cheng,’ he snapped irritably.

‘So?’ The little word was one sibilant whisper, and the oblique eyes gleamed suddenly like black agates, but Shu Cheng’s face never moved by so much as the flicker of a muscle. ‘Yet I sent him over here, Ferrondo,’ he went on. ‘He is *my* man. *I* trust him.’

‘You’ll please yourself,’ Ferrondo retorted, ‘I don’t. And therefore I did not want him here until things were straightened out. There is no reason for him to know as much as we do.’

‘No?’ The Chinaman looked thoughtfully at each of them, then his eyes fixed again with that basilisk stare upon the other.

‘What was there to be straightened out that you did not want my man to hear?’ he inquired in the same still way.

‘That was not what I said,’ Ferrondo protested angrily.

‘No, that was not what you *said,’* Shu Cheng agreed softly, but there was a world of meaning in the accent he placed upon the last word. ‘What have you

and Devlin got against each other?' he asked.

'He does not take orders,' Ferrondo informed him sullenly.

'What orders? Orders to do what?'

'There was some one that I thought—better out of our way,' Ferrondo explained in a constrained way. 'Devlin told me to do it myself.'

'He was quite right,' Shu Cheng said coldly. 'This is not New York or Chicago.'

The big frowning face of the Dutchman shot forward.

'Undt who was that you wanted oud of der way?' he demanded.

'That is my business and mine alone,' Ferrondo snarled back at him. 'I run this London end—not you.'

'If it is your business alone,' Shu Cheng pointed out quickly, 'then it was your job to do for yourself. Our business is dope. Always excepting where it is absolutely necessary for safety,' he amended. 'If this detective Frayne was giving trouble, why was he not . . . moved on?'

Ferrondo shrugged his shoulders.

'Because, in your own words, this is not New York or Chicago.'

'C'mit a moider here,' intoned Mr. Baumann hollowly, 'an' you sving for it. *Oi Gevault!* You cu'd bet it a t'ousan' t' one. An' to moider a policeman, a detective . . . oh dear, oh dear!'

'At the same time, had he not dropped us, he would have been dealt with,' Ferrondo assured Shu Cheng savagely. 'But he would have been hard to corner,' he added, 'and it would have made our game risky for a long time. But if he breaks in again. . . .' He let the suggestion in his words stand.

'Who was the man you wanted Devlin to fix?' T'ao Yo asked curiously.

Again Ferrondo hesitated.

'Oh, a man I see a lot of at Diantuolos',' he answered evasively. 'I got the idea that he was connected with the police in some way and was watching for dope—and other things. I wanted badly to ingratiate myself with that woman there.' A sound suspiciously like the grinding of hard, white teeth came from him. 'He balked me.'

'You mean the one you sent me there to see?' T'ao Yo questioned eagerly.

Almost as though glad to change from the previous subject Ferrondo turned upon him quickly. 'Yes. She is the loveliest woman in London to-night. What would she be worth under lock and key on your steamer? Why, they would fight for a woman like that amongst the rich Chinese merchants in 'Frisco. She would bring a fortune.'

T’ao Yo nodded. His face broke for one instant into an evil grin. It could have been the model for some legendary Chinese demon.

‘The *Kiang-si* will be around in the Thames in four days,’ he said. ‘As a blind I have instructed my London agents to accept a small general cargo for ’Frisco via Panama.’ The evil curl showed at his lips again. ‘I have a little trade to do at New Orleans, so it will suit me. There will not be a grain of dope on the ship when she comes in here, so that the river-police can search all day and every day if they want to—The night before we go out——’ he paused significantly, eyes a-gleam. ‘This white moonbeam of a woman? You think it can be done?’

Ferrondo thought a moment.

‘Yes,’ he said at length, ‘with a little help from your own men, I think so. What do I get?’ he asked bluntly.

‘Two-fifty, when she is on board.’

Ferrondo nodded. ‘All right. She is yours,’ he said. ‘I owe her something. Leave it to me.’

Mr. Baumann moved still more restlessly on his chair.

‘Ain’t it we are here to discuss bis’ness—real bis’ness?’ he asked plaintively. ‘What I want to know is—what is doing with cocaine, morph, heroin and the rest? I got to place it with the distributors. Risk—all risk is my job. I don’t vant I should come here to talk about kidnappin’, and buyin’ *women*! They ain’t my line—an’ they ain’t ours. And some more I would tell you,’ he added warningly. ‘It is a game not woith it the candle.’ He pointed at T’ao Yo who sat watching him with a face the Sphinx might have envied. ‘You can have it a clean ship for dope, but you let those rotten river-policemens find a white woman held on board her an’ your address for the nex’ five years it vill be Dartmoor, vhether you are yellow, or white or pink or blue, up you will go, T’ao Yo. And if they start out then to look up your back numbers, up the *lot* of us vill go. I say it some more times, it aint voith it. It is damn foolishment!’

Without warning a long arm shot out across the table and a powerful yellow hand gripped the speaker by the throat. One startled gasp he gave, then the sinewy fingers cut off his breath. No move or word came from any of the others; every eye was upon the now rage-distorted face of the yellow man. That of his victim was changing fast to a death-like white; his eyes bulging horribly out of it. Without moving from his seat, slowly, inexorably, by the sheer muscular strength of his arms he drew the limp, unresisting figure across the table until his stony, merciless face was within one inch of that of the helpless wretch in his grip.

‘Dog!’ he hissed. ‘Ever again open your mouth on anything I say or anything I intend to do, Jew, and I will tear the tongue out of your dirty throat with my own hands. Or worse; I will have you shanghaied and take you to sea with me and before you see land again—if ever you do—I will show you what that hell you whites believe in must be like. Listen, little pig-eater, slum-vermin—and *take heed*! We Chinese do not forget!’

He released his hold and in a flash the back of his big, beringed hand struck the Jew full across the face, knocking him clean off the table to the floor, against which Baumann’s head struck heavily. He lay still, drawing in great sucking breaths, the blood streaming from an ugly gash that crossed both lips where the big brilliant he had coveted had cut through to the very gums. Still no man moved or spoke. T’ao Yo struck a match and lit another cigar. From Ferrondo came a little forced, nervous laugh. Slowly Shu Cheng turned his head and looked at him. Ferrondo quickly turned his eyes away.

Slowly, weakly, and palpably trembling in every limb, the unfortunate Baumann got to his feet and stood swaying a moment, then reeled until the wall stopped and supported him. From his split mouth the blood trickled slowly, dripping from his chin down the crumpled white shirt front and his clothes. The dark, vivid stain gave to his ghastly white face an even deathlier pallor than it already possessed. He touched the cut upon his mouth with a trembling hand and looked with a strangely child-like expression at the stain that instantly dyed it. From it his eyes went slowly to the set, expressionless mask that was again the face of T’ao Yo; into them came a something that no living soul had ever before seen there—a bitter and unquenchable hatred which would be kept keen in him as long as life lasted. Through his mangled lips there came slow, hissing words in an undertone, and spoken in a language no man there could understand. Strange words, that were of no national speech of any continent of the world, yet could be heard in the very remotest corners of it—the Yiddish of his race. Then, hatless, coatless, blood-bespattered as he was, he turned and lurched unsteadily towards the door.

A quiet yet inexpressibly mocking voice halted him.

‘Wait,’ it ordered softly, ‘not quite so fast, little Jew dog.’

Baumann stopped and turned his bloody face again to the speaker, his eyes those of a man possessed of a thousand slow-moving, patiently-waiting devils.

Leisurely T’ao Yo got up from his seat, placed his cigar carefully upon the edge of the table and moved a step towards him. Shu Cheng sat with almost lifeless stillness, his eyes fixed upon the wall opposite him.

A second voice, quiet, even apologetic, was heard.

‘I wouldn’t if I were you, T’ao Yo,’ Hans Shroener observed mildly, ‘and

put your hands near your clothes and you will be in hell in one leddle second. If it iss that murder iss to be done here, then it will be myself that will do it. One more or less, yellow or white, will make no difference to Hans Shroener.'

For the first time since Baumann had uttered his protest against T'ao Yo's projected kidnapping, Shu Cheng seemed to awake to the slightest interest in what was going on around him. Calmly, perfectly dispassionate, almost as though he were completely detached from everything and every one there, he turned his head and his eyes moved steadily from one to the other. Upon reaching the mild, benevolent countenance of the owner of the wig and beard, they came to a halt, for in the hand of that worthy had most miraculously appeared a glittering revolver. It was trained squarely upon the heart of T'ao Yo. And the watery blue eyes of the European had undergone a complete change of expression; at the moment they were as hard and implacable as those of T'ao Yo himself.

'Why wait for that, Hans?' Shu Cheng asked quietly. 'What use is a savage fool in this world, to himself—or any one else?'

Narrowed blue eyes stared squarely into almond-shaped black. A quick, involuntary breath came from Ferrondo and he made a half movement to rise; then sat again staring fascinatedly into a steel barrel that with the faintest movement suddenly menaced himself. T'ao Yo stood still and silent. The Dutchman's hand had dropped swiftly into a side pocket of his jacket—there was little doubt as to what his hand grasped. From the little Semitic, great broken sobs were coming, but whether of pain or rage no one could tell.

'Shroener bent his head in agreement.

'That iss so,' he responded quietly. 'And T'ao Yo iss a fool—and worse. Baumann wass quite right. Ever'ting he said iss true. Iss it come then that a man must not speak hiss mind without'—his weapon moved the fraction of an instant towards the pitiful figure of the little Jew—'without this? If so, it iss the finish. It iss well we should know. For myself,' he pursued evenly, as though discussing some quite abstract question, 'I think it iss better so; No man here iss master, and the rest slaves to cringe before him. And T'ao Yo iss a big cur. Abe iss a weak man, and no fighter; he had no chance. Would he haf done that with Dirck here, or me?' The soft voice turned steely hard. 'It would haf been the last thing ever he did on this earth. But there it iss, and now—what?'

But no answer came from Shu Cheng. He stood there as though rooted to the floor, his eyes boring into those of the man who had been speaking to him. Through them the brain of the yellow man could almost be seen working at its highest tension. Then without a word, he flung round upon T'ao Yo and glared at him; the glare of a red rage almost bestial in its ferocity. As yet he had not

spoken; the man seemed tongue-tied with the intensity of his surging passion. His big, square jaws clenched together until the veins upon his forehead swelled out until they seemed about to burst. His huge fists were clenched until they must have been of the solidity of iron. His face, a hideous distorted mask of demoniac fury, worked horribly; beads of sweat breaking out upon both forehead and Up. The skin had changed from its usual amber-yellow, to a muddy, brownish tinge, and in a moment from being round and full-cheeked it had become lean, drawn and tight-skinned. A terrible figure the Tong-boss made standing there; one that the others watched in sheer fascination. For the first time in their association with him they were seeing the real stark barbarian that lay under, and only *just* under the smooth, impassive skin of Shu Cheng.

And then there poured from his lips a burning spate of words. What he was saying they could not tell, for he spoke in their own Chinese; but he poured upon T'ao Yo's head all the vials of a wrath such as none there had ever before encountered. Frenzied words, uttered in a voice that ranged from a low, snake-like hissing to a gibbering, incoherent shrieking: words under which T'ao Yo shrank and cringed as though each one were a steel-barbed whip. No doubt now, in the minds of those who listened which of these two yellow men was master. Come to the show-down, Shu Cheng held the other in the hollow of his hand.

As abruptly as he began, so he stopped. Turning away, he pulled out a handkerchief and wiped the now freely-running perspiration from his face. He breathed heavily, as though the paroxysms of rage had exhausted him. T'ao Yo sank into the chair nearest to him, every sign of truculence or even assertiveness gone from him. Though his black eyes still gleamed dully, the man was cowed. Whatever the threat Shu Cheng had held over him, it had been sufficient.

In a minute or two the twitching of Shu Cheng's face stilled and the old, immobile impassivity returned to it. In a voice as calm as though nothing had happened he addressed them.

'What I have told T'ao Yo in my own language, I will say again that you all can understand. I have told him that the next thing he does or says to risk our safety, that will be the end—for *him*. And he will not just die—death is nothing to a fatalist—but he will die at the hands of the Tong. He knows what that means, lingering days and weeks, and perhaps months, of torture such as you whites could never realize in your most horrible dreams. But *he* knows, *he* realizes—and he knows that Shu Cheng will keep his word. For the rest of the rotten business there is only one thing to do. . . .'

He stepped across and, seizing T'ao Yo's hand without ceremony, dragged from his finger the great brilliant. T'ao Yo made no attempt to prevent him.

‘Fools,’ he observed placidly, ‘must pay for their folly. They say this is worth a thousand pounds, English money, Baumann, perhaps it will help to heal that cut.’

Carelessly he tossed it across to the blood-streaked figure, who caught at it avidly and peered into the beautiful stone with an involuntary cry of delight. Then the flame blazing at his heart and in his brain proved stronger even than his cupidity. His eyes turned from the stone to the figure seated silently by the table, and his face went livid again. With a hoarse cry he spat upon the ring and hurled it in T’ao Yo’s face.

‘On’y a few minutes ago,’ came hoarsely through the already terribly swollen lips, ‘that ring was the mos’ beautiful thing in the woild. I would have sold body an’ soul to get it. Now’—he passed a dry tongue along his mouth—’ something else there is I vant more. Something I vant it so much I can scarce speak. You call it to me Jew dog, pig-eater, voimin; you tell it to me you vill have me shanghaied on your ship and you and your Chinamen vill put me through hell. Oh, yes?’

‘I tell you that he will do nothing,’ the quiet voice of Shu Cheng assured him. ‘And the man aboard his ship who lifts a hand against you, *I* will deal with.’

Baumann took no notice whatever of him. He pointed a long, skinny finger, shaking like an aspen, straight at T’ao Yo.

‘You say it to me,’ he went on, ‘ve Chinese, ve doin’t forget. Now I tell it to you something, *yeller* dog: ve Jews, ve doin’t forget neither. And you voin’t touch this girl, Nessa. She is not a squealer. The foist that hoits her, I vill bring men out of Aldgate that vould tear you and all the yeller men in Limehouse to pieces. Jew men! The race gangs from th’ East End. Ve vill see before so long vhich is the one that wins.’

He picked up his coat and turned again to the door.

‘Which means, Abe?’ came quietly from Shroener.

‘Vhich means, Hans,’ Baumann returned steadily, ‘that I am through—finished.’

Through inscrutable eyes Shu Cheng studied him meditatively, then slowly, very slowly shook his head in an adamant negation.

‘I think not, Abe Baumann,’ he said quietly. ‘The Dope Ring sinks or swims together, so far as we are concerned.’

At which juncture there sounded three sharp peremptory buzzes from the little telephone. The next instant the lights went out, leaving the room in inky blackness.

‘Trouble!’ Shu Cheng exclaimed tersely. ‘Something is wrong!’

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH CHARITY DOES *NOT* BEGIN AT HOME

PROCEEDING along upon that ceaseless nocturnal round of which it would seem he never wearied, Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby came at length to the head of a black *cul de sac* off Greek Street into which, with that curious lurking habit of his, he withdrew a few feet back from the level of the street and then leaned against the wall, waiting.

He seemed to have an uncanny instinct for the whereabouts of his men, for scarcely had he stood there two or at most three minutes when the super-elegant Broadley meandered slowly along. As if by some instinct he paused a moment at that point to light a cigarette. Considerably to his astonishment—for he had as yet no experience of the peripatetic and ubiquitous habits of his Superintendent—he heard his force number hissed out of what was apparently empty gloom. Considerably intrigued, he followed the direction of the sound to find himself confronted by the most august person he had to do with.

‘Seen anything of Inspector Frayne?’ Dallenby asked curtly and without any preamble of social amenities, or even for the matter of that, common civility.

‘Not since early this afternoon, sir,’ Broadley told him. ‘He gave me a small assignment; and I had to report to him over the ’phone from Vine Street at seven o’clock.’

‘Oh!’ Being quite as much a question as an observation, Detective Broadley was rather at a loss how to act. As to whether the Super desired him to give details of this assignment or keep them to himself, he had no more idea than the dead. It was an awkward moment.

He was helped out of it by his superior officer in the most convincing manner.

‘Well?’ he snapped, ‘what assignment and bearing on what? Let’s have it, man!’

Thus encouraged Detective Broadley very speedily made the Superintendent acquainted with all he knew of the mysterious ladies of the afternoon. He was gratified to find that the great man was giving his narrative the keenest attention.

‘And you say no one molested them, or in any way influenced them against going in when they’d got there?’

‘No one at all, sir. There was no one sufficiently near them.’

‘Humph. Did the Inspector say why he wanted them shadowed?’

‘No, sir.’

‘And one of them looked ill, you say?’

‘Very ill, sir. Advanced stage of consumption, I’d say. A very refined-looking girl. I’d have said a lady obviously—only that she was in strange company.’

He felt rather than saw the Superintendent turn sharply towards him.

‘The other looked—no class?’ Dallenby asked.

‘I’ve seen her about the West End streets a good many times in this last year, sir. She’s not much more than a youngster, but a dope-fiend, if I’m any judge.’

Oh!’ A curiously interested note came into the Super’s voice. ‘Young and a doper, hey? H’m! What was she like? Describe her.’

Broadley did his best. Knowing microscopic observation to be dear to the heart of all superior officers of police, he did it with a wealth of detail that surprised even himself. He was rewarded on concluding by hearing a low whistle of surprise break from the Superintendent’s lips.

‘*That* one!’ he exclaimed, and there was no question of doubt about his complete surprise. ‘What the devil,’ he asked, and undoubtedly asked himself and not young Mr. Broadley, ‘would bring *her* to The Yard of all people under the sun?’

‘I feel certain, sir,’ the younger man ventured, ‘that it was on behalf of the other that she’d gone there. If you remember, sir, it was the other, the sick one, who turned back, not her.’

‘That doesn’t give any lead as to what took ’em there,’ Dallenby growled in his surliest manner. It had a decidedly chilling effect upon Detective Broadley. He ventured nothing further in the way of either observation or elucidation.

‘And you say you tailed them back to a place in this street?’ the Superintendent resumed after a moment’s thought.

‘Yes, sir, at the Oxford Street end.’

‘What kind of place—decent?’

‘I’d scarcely call it that, sir. Very mixed crowd live there. Been some awful rows there at times. The—er—lodgers take in who they like when they like. I fancy . . .’

‘Don’t “fancy,” lad!’ Dallenby snapped. ‘Either you know facts, or you

don't know them. One or the other for me.'

In the darkness Detective Broadley felt himself flush to the roots of the hair. Of all the surly, flinty-hearted pigs . . . !

'The house has a very bad reputation, sir,' he said stiffly.

'It would be difficult for it to have any other with that particular young woman living there,' was the grim comment. 'Did the Inspector happen to drop any hint as to what line he was following to-night?' he asked.

'I understood him to say that he had a rather particular call to make at Boccaro's place, later. He said that if by any chance I was in and saw him, I was not to take the slightest notice of him under any circumstances, no matter what should take place.'

Again it was unquestionably to himself that the Superintendent spoke musingly.

'Boccaro's, eh? Why Boccaro?'

A question which the other made no attempt at answering. Once was plenty of that—and too much. But he did gingerly pass on one piece of information, the correctness of which he could vouch for with his life if necessary.

'There's been one row at Boccaro's to-night, sir.'

'Oh!'

'Maudsley told me about it.'

'That Sergeant Maudsley?'

'Yes, sir.'

A grunt came from the Divisional-Superintendent.

'When you're speaking to me,' he grunted, 'give an officer his rank. Well, Sergeant Maudsley told you . . . ?'

Downed again by his harsh, autocratic chief, Detective Broadley, subdued beyond words, proceeded.

'A man started a rough-house over some woman. According to Mau—er, the sergeant, he knocked them about like skittles, thumped Boccaro, put the chucker-out on the floor cold, and then calmly walked out and left them to it. When the sergeant got there he'd disappeared, and everything was quiet again.'

'It *would* be,' the Superintendent growled, a world of sarcasm in his harsh voice. 'Did he mention having seen anything of the Inspector there?'

'No, sir.'

A constrained silence followed; constrained, that is, upon the part of Detective Broadley, C.I.D. If there was any such feeling in the mind of the

Superintendent, it was not observable.

'All right,' he snapped abruptly. 'If you're on duty, get on about your job.'

A dismissal which Detective Broadley jumped at gladly. In the next two minutes he had put as much space between himself and his Superintendent as ever his long legs could manage, muttering as he went things that, if uttered publicly, a disciplinary board would have speedily relieved him of his warrant-card.

But it was some considerable time before the subject of his silent but heart-felt objurgations moved from his position in the blackness against the wall. In the traffic of Soho night, many passed and repassed, amongst them at times men of his own division about their duty, without the slightest knowledge of the grim figure lurking there watching—all the time watching—for some one who seemed never to come. From his coign of vantage he scanned every face that passed; peered out into every group; then, as abruptly as he did most things, he stumped suddenly into the street again and moved heavily across Soho Square.

Repassing the corner at which the respectable-looking little lame man had given him friendly salutation he paused a moment, as though uncertain just in which direction to turn next; an irresolution which many of his men who had, perforce, tramped around with him said was eminently characteristic of him. He never did seem to know, they swore, just where he was going next. He might *say* one direction; but just the sound of voices along the street in a totally opposite direction and he would be off towards them like a shot. But that was the only weakness they or any one else had ever detected in the make-up of the Divisional Super. For the rest he was hand-forged steel, physically and mentally.

For some reason or other—why he could not have told, for human beings, unless 'wanted,' aroused no interest in him whatever—his thoughts came back to that civil little figure so utterly unlike the denizens of these streets. A respectable middle-class tradesman, artificer or perhaps something in the line of a senior clerk, he thought. A man with a comfortable home, perhaps a growing or grown-up family about him, comfortable means, self-respecting and respected.

A miserable specimen of outcast humanity came mooching along, with flapping bootsoles upon the edge of the gutter, his bleared eyes fixed upon the ground in a ceaseless hunt for cigarette ends. His clothes were a mass of filthy rags a farmer would have hesitated to put upon a scarecrow, his grey hair and beard greasy and unkempt; his whole being the very epitome of dirt and incipient disease. Dallenby knew his record for over five and twenty years;

‘inside,’ out again; ‘inside,’ out again with monotonous regularity. Vagrancy, petty crime, loitering with intent, begging, more serious crime, penal—and on through the sordid list. To-day free—and starving. To-morrow . . . ? The wretched creature caught the Superintendent’s eye upon him and with a scared look flapped away out of sight hurriedly. The Superintendent sent a grim laugh after him. His thoughts instantly reverted in comparison to that other little grey-haired figure. And then they said crime *paid*! The hell it did! There went an example of how much it paid!

That never-failing magnet, the sound of women’s voices, drew him instantly in the wake of the destitute object he had laughed at, with the effect upon the poor creature that he almost broke into a run to escape contact with his dreaded enemy. But had the Superintendent followed his original intention and turned in the direction the little lame man had gone, he might have seen an occurrence to interest him greatly.

From an ill-lit doorway the raucous voice of some harridan poured forth an unceasing stream of denunciation and personal vituperation; garnished, quaintly enough, by both tearful appeals to the Almighty and some of the most lurid blasphemy “Limpy” Joe Swiggers had ever heard inside or out of gaol. And underneath it all, the sound of a woman coughing; a hacking, tearing cough, each paroxysm of which ended upon a ghastly, indrawn breath, each repetition of which made the kindly-hearted Mr. Swiggers, watching events from a deep shadow, shake his head sadly.

He saw, literally supporting herself by two iron railings that stood at each side of the old-fashioned door, a waxen-faced girl with great haggard eyes, heavy with despair. Her painfully slight body was still shaking from the last heavy fit of coughing, and he saw that the handkerchief she held to her mouth in one wasted hand was badly stained. And although the stricken eyes were turned piteously upon her, the hard-faced woman inside the door kept on mercilessly, yap, yap! rising in a vicious crescendo to a screech, mostly incoherent but unending.

Then “Limpy” watched another slight, but strongly-built young figure come along the passage to the door, carrying two heavy grips. Her face he saw was heavy with paint over which was the smear of hastily wiped tears. She would have been pretty without paint, he saw, but her eyes, big and brown, were at the moment blazing with anger, hard and defiant. Her jaws were tensed square and her over-reddened mouth pressed into one hard line. Before the woman she put down one of the grips and gave her something Mr. Swiggers could not distinguish.

‘There’s your key,’ she said in a low voice trembling with suppressed rage. ‘You’ve done a filthy thing turning that poor girl out as she is, and I hope to

God you die in the gutter for it.'

'Oh, Nessa,' he heard the other call frightenedly, 'Nessa, don't have trouble with her—*please*.'

'Bringing disease like that into this house,' the other began again, but the girl cut her short with an ugly, sneering laugh.

'This house! Is there any one in it that isn't diseased—body and soul? Or both?'

The woman's voice went up in an eldrich screech.

'You should talk about any one here,' she shrilled. 'You, a dirty dope-fiend! You . . .'

'Nessa!' came again in an anguished voice from the pavement.

The girl, eyes ablaze, thrust her face close to that of the lodging-housekeeper.

'You say one word more, one word that she can hear,' she hissed, 'and I *will* have something to say of this house and what goes on in it. And I'll say it where I'll be listened to—the *police*.'

The other shrank back, fear in her hard, cunning eyes.

'You—you wouldn't dare!' she whispered aghast.

'You say too much what I am and you'll find out how much I dare,' was the low-spoken, steady answer; then the girl picked up the second grip and stalked out, head erect. The door shut upon them with a slam.

'Nessa,' faltered the sick girl, 'I've brought this trouble upon you.'

'You're not to blame for a wicked wretch like that, dear,' the other said gently.

'I—I haven't a penny,' the other said in a frightened voice, 'and I know you. . . .'

'We'll manage somehow,' the painted girl returned doggedly. 'I'll find a way, somehow.'

'And you're a good game kid,' "Limpy" Joe apostrophized her admiringly from his shadow. 'They ain't got *you* beat yet.'

But if not already defeated, the events of the next few minutes were to bring her very, very near to it. A quick, deep sob reached his ears, followed by an awful spasm of coughing. It tore and racked at the frail body until even such strength in desperation as her companion had could not prevent her from sinking slowly to the ground. A sharp cry of horror came to him. It galvanized him into action. He limped quickly forward. The painted girl was kneeling upon the ground, the sick one's head pressed to her bosom. Her eyes, he saw,

were dilated with fear. From one corner of the bloodless lips of the girl now panting with exhaustion, a little dark trickle was running slowly.

'Hæmorrhage again!' the other said in a frantic whisper. 'Oh, God, what's going to happen?'

'Easy, kid, easy,' "Limpy" Joe gave back quickly, kneeling beside her. 'You know this neighbourhood. Beat it for a doctor. I'll stay with her. Quick!' He took the light, painfully light burden from her arms.

For a moment the girl stood stock still.

'I—we haven't a shilling in the world,' she said strickenly.

Into his pocket Mr. Swiggers dived a hand, and brought forth a handful of money—silver mostly, but with a treasury note or two among it.

'Go to it,' he ordered curtly.

In two minutes she was back again accompanied by a bald-headed man who was puffing heavily. He was hatless and in slippers. With a quick, inquiring glance at the anxious-looking man supporting the fallen girl, he also knelt and proceeded to a quick, businesslike examination. Thank Heaven, "Limpy" thought as he watched him, he seemed to know his job, but he noticed that almost at his first glance the doctor's face went grave, very, very grave.

Suddenly he threw a glance at the little man.

'Are ye connected wi' her?' he asked peremptorily, and in a strong Scotch accent.

'No,' he was answered with equal brevity; then: 'That makes no difference, though. Do all you can for her jus' the same. I can find the skads to pay for it.'

'It's no a question of payment. There's verra leetle *can* be done—at any rate here, ye'll understand. She must be got to her home at once. Where does she live?'

His question was directed up at the girl who had called him out. Mr. Swiggers, following his glance, saw that she gave him back a dull, almost uncomprehending stare; then, for the first time through this wretched business, her paint-smeared face began to quiver and the big tears forced themselves from each smudged eye and trickled slowly down her face. But she made no reply; just stood still, her long, supple fingers twined together in an agony of despair until the knuckles showed white as uncovered bone.

'Th' poor li'l kid,' "Limpy" Joe thought, 'the poor li'l' kid is sure toein' a tough line.'

It may have been that the doctor, grown to nearly an old man in the service of a poor and not overgrateful locality, was case-hardened to human want and

misery. Or that out of his vast experience of women in some crisis or other of their not uneventful existences in this quarter where he lived and laboured, he saw that the girl before him was carrying a load beyond her strength and on the verge of an hysterical breakdown. No need for him to look twice at her face to know her besetting weakness, and a breakdown at this point would be hopeless to stop—quite beyond her control. Therefore, it may have been that the sharp, utterly unfeeling tone in which he addressed her was in the hope that it might shake her out of the Slough of Despond into which she was sinking, and arouse again the stubborn fighting spirit he was certain was normally her dominant characteristic. Whichever it was, his words came harsh and dour enough for any result. Far too much so for Mr. Joseph Swiggers' fortitude.

'Come, come,' the doctor challenged, 'ye're daein' nae good by standin' greetin'. Answer my question, woman—where does she live?'

Before the red mouth of the young fury that had suddenly been galvanized into life could utter the one savage word "Limpy" Joe saw formed upon her lips to fling back at the medical man, he had intervened.

'You just take hold of this poor li'l' thing, maidie, while me an' the doc has a quiet word,' he requested quietly. 'Ain't gonna do her no kind of good youse two startin' a Kilkenny cats' act.' Gently relinquishing his burden to her, he drew the doctor out of earshot. Before he could speak the doctor forestalled him.

'Ye'll be thinkin' I'm a callous swine to speak the lass like that?' he demanded.

'I've heard things put softer to a girl in trouble, sure,' Mr. Swiggers responded with equal frankness.

'Aye. And but for that, we'd have had a woman on our hands ravin' in hysteria. The sharp word to that one was like the flick of a whip tae a blood horse, it made her fightin' mad and pulled her together. I'm no more callous than the next.'

'I—I get you,' said Mr. Swiggers, considerably surprised—and relieved.

'Well, what I wanted to ask you, Doc,' he went on, 'ain't there some place, hospital or something, where that poor li'l' kid could be took right away an' paid for till the breaks go a bit easier for her. The other's used to battlin' for herself. A game kid. With a bit of help—she'd assay out all gold.'

The doctor shook his head.

'Man, at this time of night, I have nae mair idea than the dead where I could get any one with her complaint in—even to pay. If she were a casualty, now, there are a dozen places I could send her to for attention—and then sent home. Ye'll see the point.'

‘I see it,’ answered Mr. Swiggers in a thoughtful voice. ‘She’s in a mighty bad way, Doc, I take it?’

The Scotsman rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

‘Aye,’ he said, ‘she’s about as bad as she can be. And undernourished to an extent that’s no help. Mind ye, I’d not say it’s a hopeless case. Given the right air and treatment and food, I’d no say that. But without it . . . well, without it I’d not gie her four months, the puir lassie.’

Again the coughing started, the voice of the other girl drifted to them gently, firm, consoling, encouraging.

‘Ye hear that?’ the medico asked quickly.

‘The coughin’? Yeh, I hear it.’

‘I meant them both,’ said the other turning towards them.

And as he moved “Limpy” Joe made up his mind, and having so made it, those who knew him could have told you, that no argument, cajolement, threat or any other form of inducement, would have deviated the little lame man from his purpose one iota.

‘You get her fixed up, Brother,’ he said abruptly, ‘while I hustle up a taxi. I’ll see to them, but you’ll see her fixed up right in bed and fix about the medicines and all that. To-morrow we’ll have one of the big medicine men in an’ we’ll all gather round an’ confer.’

The other stared at him almost incredulously.

‘Ye mean that ye’ll take the care o’ the puir wee lassie on y’sel’?’

‘Near enough,’ “Limpy” Joe responded. ‘I couldn’t leave a dog helpless in the street. Either I’d do somethin’ for it—or put it out of its misery. I’ll beat it for a taxi.’

As that considerably over-taxed vehicle swung around a corner into Dean Street, there was only just averted a serious accident. A heavily-built man, his thoughts evidently far away, stepped from the pavement almost in front of it. With a screaming grinding of brakes the driver by a miracle skirted him, slowed down, then pulled up. He was so close upon the man he could have sworn he had struck him. A moment later a harsh voice sounded alongside the vehicle, demanding to know what the devil the driver meant travelling at that pace. Wild protestations from that harassed person in which he asserted that he was both upon his right side and only going his proper speed; though he might perhaps have been a tiny shade over the odds as he was driving an urgent sick case under doctor’s orders.

Mr. Swiggers, with no other intention but adding his quota of oil to the troubled waters, leaned towards the window to speak to the irate and

authoritative-voiced person outside. He had scarcely moved when his wrist was seized in a vice-like grip by the girl opposite him—the girl with the painted face.

'Don't speak,' she whispered hoarsely, 'don't, for God's sake.'

And then almost as if even that subdued sound had penetrated to his keen ears, Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby turned sharply and stared full in her face. With a startled cry she shrank back in her corner.

'Who says that you're driving the sick at this speed?' he demanded of the driver in a queer voice.

Instantly the head of the doctor was out of the window.

'I don't know who you may be, sir,' he began frigidly, 'but——' then stopped abruptly and changed his tone. 'It's quite right, Superintendent,' he said affably, 'it's a case of mine and urgent—most urgent. Indeed, at the present time, the young lady is unconscious.'

'Doctor MacDougal, isn't it?'

'Quite right, sir.'

There was a moment's pause before the Superintendent spoke again.

'Drive on,' he ordered, 'and at a less dangerous speed. I'll let it go this time.'

The cab moving on Doctor MacDougal discharged from its window another affable 'Good night,' to which he received no response whatever.

'A surly dog,' he growled. 'I wouldn't be under him for something.'

'He cert'nly sounds some gloom-hound,' Mr. Swiggers agreed; but his eyes and his mind was upon the crouching figure who had held him back from the window. What was the tale behind that, he wondered?

And not twenty yards behind, the Divisional-Superintendent was following up in another cab. Out of Dean Street into Shaftesbury Avenue, across Piccadilly Circus and into Jermyn Street. There, before a magnificent block of flats, the first cab stopped.

Dallenby was out of his, and ensconced in his usual shadow before his driver had it at a standstill.

There was a decent light from the hall way and a uniformed doorman came out immediately. He saw the doctor, assisted by the burly servant lift from the cab and carry in between them an inanimate form whose face was not to be seen. That much of it, he thought grimly, was true at any rate. Then from it, carrying a suit case, stepped the girl he had had one good look at in the cab, the dope-fiend he had warned off the streets, the girl he believed to be the one who

had paid a visit to Scotland Yard that very afternoon. Then, to his intense astonishment, and also bearing a heavy suit case came the respectable, little lame man upon whom his thoughts had turned more than once that evening. For a moment or two the little man conferred with the taxi-driver, and gave him some money, then hurried after the others. The taxi still waited.

Dallenby crossed the street and went up to the driver.

‘You know who I am, so don’t attempt any lies,’ he snapped. ‘Where did you pick up your fare?’

The man told him.

‘The doctor was there with the sick woman then—and the other woman?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Whose flat is it you’ve brought them to, d’ye know?’

‘The Honourable Captain Adair’s, sir.’

‘Who is the little man in the black suit—the lame man? Any idea?’

‘I heard him tell the doctor that he was Mr. Scaddan, butler to the Captain, sir.’

The Superintendent nodded.

‘You needn’t mention I’ve followed and asked any questions,’ he said. ‘In fact I’d advise you very strongly not to.’

Back at his own cab, he stood at the door reflecting.

‘I wasn’t far out about his respectability,’ he mused, ‘but Captain, The Honourable Mr. Adair’s butler keeps damned bad company.’

CHAPTER XVII

THE STAIRCASE—AND AFTER

WHEN Dick Frayne reopened his eyes upon this world, it was to find himself in a blackness so dense that he might have been down an unlit mine-shaft. His head throbbed badly but, passing a hand gingerly over it, he could feel neither lump nor cut.

'And that means,' he muttered to himself, 'that they've got me with rubber —a truncheon, or a piece of old cab tire. But rubber, whatever the actual weapon.'

In the darkness he sat up and ran his hands slowly over his clothes; nothing appeared to have been touched. His main thought was his warrant-card, carried always in his pocket-book. That gone, meant that the identity of that raffish unfortunate of the Underworld, Albert Rimmel, was known; out of which could quite conceivably come—in this den of Boccaro's—serious results.

But no, his pocket-book was intact not only for his card, but for the few Treasury notes he always carried in case of emergency. Even his own rubber truncheon was still in its slip, down the inside of his coat.

But there was always one thing to take into consideration; whoever had dropped him so neatly and silently on that staircase could quite easily have gone through his pockets, found what there was to be found, and replaced everything just as it had been. Tony Boccaro was a wary bird. As things stood, when he got out, he had nothing tangible on any one. He had dashed up a dark staircase into what might be defended as an entirely private portion of the building and was then laid out by some person or persons unknown—but most certainly not Antonio Boccaro. He had been—and despite his aching head and the possibility of finding himself in an extremely ugly situation, Frayne was forced to grin—having the same gentle attention bestowed upon himself down below at the hands of the bellicose gentleman with the ice-green eyes. Just how long he had been in the land of enforced slumber he had not the faintest idea.

No; it wouldn't do. Something considerably worse had to occur before he could legitimately deal with Boccaro—on that charge at any rate. And, up to now, all he knew of that Room Number Four would scarcely suffice to apply for a warrant.

As he sat, but for his head, he felt perfectly well; though undoubtedly whoever had landed on him had done it in workmanlike style. Had they used anything more solid than rubber . . . ! Whatever else might be obscure in his

mind, that much was dearer than day.

And then came the point—and a big point too—of that beautiful and mysterious woman. Where had she disappeared to? She could but have been little more than seconds ahead of him upon the staircase; had she, too, come to the same abrupt end as himself; been downed and made prisoner? That was a disturbing thought, considering the kind of hands likely to be holding her. And, whoever she was, she had endeavoured to do him a good turn not so long since.

As noiselessly as he could he got upon his feet and with the tips of his outstretched fingers endeavoured to make out just what kind of a place he was in; but the extraordinary blackness baffled him. Once around it, however, touch told him several important points. For a beginning, that there was neither window nor fireplace in the room, and if there was a door it was so skilfully concealed that he could not find it. However, that there must be some mode of ingress and egress was certain, if only by a trap-door in the floor. He also found that there was no light switch about any of the four walls; it was lit from elsewhere. But one thing there was that told its own story—a small telephone, its receiver hanging at one side of it was screwed firmly into one of the walls. Not a doubt in his mind but that he was in one of the hidden rooms numbered from four to ten. And the smell of tobacco and stale spirits was strong in it; it had been used not so long before. Further investigation, except of such furniture as there was—a small square table and four chairs—was hopeless, and useless.

He was considering his next move when suddenly there fell upon his ear a soft, even sound; so faint that when he first caught it, he thought it existed purely in his own imagination. The sound of stealthy, creeping, unshod feet. Quickly he stretched himself again upon the floor and, closing his eyes, listened intently. From that position, his ear pressed to the ground, he could hear far more distinctly.

Yes, some one was stealing about, not inside that room, but very close to it. Though it was not a definite step he could hear, but rather the faint creak of flooring boards made by the even pressure of the pad of a foot upon them. And whoever was moving, was an expert in soundlessness. And then there seemed to come a slight scratching upon the wall to his right hand; some seconds this lasted, then a draught that blew suddenly upon his face told him that either a concealed door or panel in the wall opened, then closed again. Some one was in the room with him. He closed his eyes and lay waiting.

It was possible that they might turn on a light and give him the chance to see them. Then, some one moved gingerly over to his side in the darkness. A strange, an uncanny feeling this, he thought, stretched there still whilst an

utterly unknown and unseen enemy moves towards you in an inky blackness. But, and he shut his teeth grimly at the thought, the unseen enemy was just as blind as he was in the dark, to make sure of his man he must either feel his position or use a light of some sort—and that was the precise moment when trouble was going to come to him without stint. Frayne lay perfectly still, both fists clenched ready to strike.

And as he waited still and tensed ready for instant action something else began to make itself manifest; a soft and insidious perfume, not sickly or cloying, but such as might be used by a woman of ultra-fastidious taste and delicacy. It was carried to him by a rill of draught from that mysterious entrance, and strengthened perceptibly as the person approached, which brought him swiftly to one conclusion, that the person who had been stealthily moving about and who was now coming towards him was a *woman*! He opened his clenched fists again and gave an inward sigh of relief. Great Scott! . . . if she had touched him and he had let fly two-handed to her! Phew!

'I hope you are quite all right again now?' quite the sweetest, most musical voice he had heard breathed beside him.

'Fine, thanks,' he returned in a whisper. 'Just trying to take stock of things.'

'It was I who dragged you here,' she told him.

'After they slugged me? I say, that was awfully good of you—and game. I—I suppose you couldn't tell me who did it,' he asked with a grim inflexion. 'I'd like awfully to meet them later and have a chat.'

'Oh, yes,' she answered quite calmly, 'that no doubt will be possible, though the present is scarcely the time. I did—with a rubber black-jack. You were moving on to certain death within a moment or two. It was the only way that I could see to save you. You are an intrepid man, Inspector, but courage will not avail against a man with poisoned blow-pipes. Another yard farther and he would have seen you. The end would have come for you, swift and certain.'

'You!' he gasped in sheer astonishment. 'By Jove, you must be terribly strong.'

In the darkness she smiled. 'You should know better than I what it is not strength that counts in such things, but knack.'

'That is so,' he agreed, still utterly befogged at the turn things had taken. 'But—I must have made the deuce of a row when I went down. I'm no light weight.'

'So I discovered when I tried to get you here,' she said dryly. 'But you made no sound—none whatever. I hit you, and then let you slide quietly to the

floor. You became unconscious instantly.'

'I say,' he said quietly, 'I'm awfully grateful to you—if it was as close a touch as you say.'

'You were as close as you have ever been to death,' she told him sombrely. 'The man watching was of the type of a Mexican or South American Indian crossed with Chinese. A half-caste. He had his blow-pipe in his hand. One poisoned dart from that, my friend, and . . .'

'Yes,' he said slowly. 'I can see that I've a good deal to thank you for. You are the lady who slipped through to the stairs a moment or two before me,' he stated positively. 'The one who was kind enough to warn me a few nights ago of another danger.'

For a moment she did not respond, then: 'I did give you a warning, Inspector,' she said slowly, 'and what I asked you then, I do again now. Please ask me no questions concerning myself. I have been able to render you some little service again to-night. I make the same request. You may be quite sure,' she added, 'that I am not here to break any law of your country.'

'I'm quite sure of that,' he said heartily. 'And, as my Super would tell me, that is all my business calls for inquisitiveness upon, I'll shut up.' He thought a moment, then commenced again in a constrained way: 'Er—without inquiring in any way as to your business in this more than dubious den of Boccaro's, there is one question I'd like to ask which purely touches this place alone.'

'Yes?'

'Are you, by any chance, trying to do the same thing as myself—find a way into a certain Room Number Four?'

'Yes,' she answered hesitantly.

'And after planting me here, you were not able to find the entrance to it?'

'No,' she said. 'After the half-caste disappeared, as he did by some way I could not see, I searched about the walls of the landing. By the merest chance I came upon the entrance to this one and hid you here while I made a closer search. But I have failed. I can find no way that leads deeper into the place.'

'Upon which side of the landing does this room open from?' he asked quickly.

'The right side; through a panel in the wall.'

Luigi's enigmatic words raced through his head.

'The right side is the wrong side, and the left side is the right. And where there is a light-switch upon the wall which works no lamp, then per'aps it works some other thing—some other thing not to be seen by the eyes until one *knows*.' But he did not mention what he knew to this beautiful creature who

had for the second time befriended him.

‘When you came back here just now, what was in your mind?’ he asked. ‘Did you mean—giving up?’

‘There is no such thing as giving up,’ she answered steadily. ‘No, I came to see if you were all right and—show you the way to get clear.’

‘And did you suppose I should have left you here?’ he asked gently.

‘Why not?’ she returned. ‘We all of us have to work out our own salvation. You have your work to do. I, mine.’

‘Without venturing to ask who or how,’ he said slowly, ‘I’ll just say that mine happens at this moment to be entirely concerned with that room Number Four. And yours, it seems, is the same. Very well, then, we’ll see it through together, like Mr—what was his name?—Mr. Britling.’

‘You know whom you seek there?’ she asked him slowly and in a strange manner, he thought.

‘No,’ he said frankly, ‘not definitely. But I *believe* that I’ll find there a man that I want—badly. It may be a foolish thing to do,’ he went on, ‘though I don’t think so, but I’ll trust you with some police information that is not made public as yet. You remember the two men you warned me of in the café—their descriptions, I mean.’

‘Quite well.’

‘You will recall the thick-set man with the curiously-shaped bald head—the Man with the Egg-shaped Head, I always called him to myself.’

‘Yes, of course.’

‘He was murdered later that same night in an alley not very far from where we are. He was treacherously shot in the back and not one thing to identify him was left upon the body? I have the firm belief that his murderer is at this very moment in that room Number Four we both are seeking for.’

It seemed moments before she made any response. He could feel, without seeing her face, that his news had taken her completely by surprise.

‘If Jan Van Blooch was murdered,’ she answered amazingly, ‘and in the treacherous way you say, then you may be quite positive that the man who killed him is in that room to-night.’

It was Dick Frayne’s turn to be astonished.

‘You—you know who the man was?’ he questioned eagerly.

‘I do now,’ she said. ‘The other night I did not. But from something that I saw with my own eyes to-day,’ she pursued, ‘you will have to be quick in making an arrest if you want to take the murderer alive.’

‘Alive? Why, who threatens him?’

‘I saw his brother, Dirck Van Blooch, in town this afternoon. He is over from Holland. That is who will threaten him when he knows.’

‘In that case,’ he said, ‘the quicker I am at my job, the better.’

‘We have yet to find the way into that room,’ she reminded him.

‘That, thanks to a few judiciously invested sixpences, left under plates for a small waiter who was once a sort of child-slave here and who is by way of becoming a magnate of sorts these days, I believe I know. It is on the right hand and worked by a light switch which has no lamp.’

‘You know!’ she whispered eagerly. ‘Quickly, quickly, before they have the chance to break up!’

Frayne thought a moment.

‘I think I’d better follow your example and take off my shoes,’ he said.

‘That will be quite unnecessary, my friend,’ a soft, mocking voice assured him out of the darkness. ‘You are a little too late.’

Before either could make one move towards the direction from which it came, there was a sharp click followed by two heavier sounds as a pair of concealed bolts shot into place.

The woman was the first to move or speak.

‘Shu Cheng!’ she cried, then groped to the wall to find that the opening by which she had entered was again flush with the wall and absolutely undetectable to her finger tips. She returned to his side. ‘The opening is locked from the outside,’ she said, for the first time a trace of alarm in her voice. ‘That was Shu Cheng’s voice and he has us trapped here.’

‘Shu Cheng?’

‘One of the leaders, if not the head of the international dope ring,’ she whispered. ‘He and another Chinaman called T’ao Yo—an unspeakable beast. The men I warned you against were also in it. That was why you were marked out—they knew it was you who had been harrying them so closely lately, and Ferrondo meant putting you out of the way. But he wanted another man to do it.’

‘Ferrondo! That name is somehow familiar to me.’

‘That was the tall, dark, aristocratic-looking man who was with Jan Van Blooch in the café.’

‘Ferrondo?’ And then it came to him. ‘That Ferrondo bug’ of the big New Yorker, Mr. ‘Chick’ Devlin. The gentleman who also wanted a certain well-known London man. Captain, The Honourable Larry Adair, ‘bumped off’ as

well.

‘Is a man named Devlin, a New Yorker, in the combination?’ he asked.

‘Yes; but he has not long come over and done nothing so far. I do not think he likes the dope game. He is the best of them all. Crook, but not vicious. A happy-go-lucky fellow who has gone wrong at first through hard luck I should say.’

‘And the little French lady with the golden hair?’ he asked her.

‘Another that is not bad. Held by terrorism. You have been closer to them than ever they have dreamed,’ she told him.

‘I have been close to the organization, never the individuals. And now that I am——’

‘Now that you are,’ came the mocking voice again, make the most of it, Inspector. The lady is quite right; you have been very close to the organization —too close for our safety. And now you have come close to the individuals.’ Shu Cheng’s voice dropped to that soft, silky purr. ‘Too close, I think, for your own.’

Frayne laughed. ‘Are you trying to scare me with a trick door and a black room?’ he asked contemptuously. ‘If you think your threats or those of any other crook like you worry me, you’ve mistaken your man. I’ll give you a sound tip, Mr. Shu Cheng, if that’s your name. You’d be better advised making your getaway out of London, *if you can*, than standing barging the point with me. And you better take Signor Antonio Boccaro with you—if he’s in London to-morrow there are a few things we’ll want him to explain.’

‘We?’

‘Scotland Yard.’

Outside that door they could quite plainly hear frantic whispering and protestations; stilled at last by what sounded like a savage threat.

Boccaro had evidently been passionately urging *his* point of view.

Again Frayne laughed. ‘When rogues fall out,’ he quoted.

‘Wise rogues do not let fools get the upper hand,’ was the sententious retort that came back to him from the Chinaman.

‘Have it your own way,’ Frayne jeered. ‘You’ll very soon find out who will be holding the upper hand. *And* a tight one,’ he added significantly.

‘That will be as it may,’ Shu Cheng answered nonchalantly. ‘But one thing is very sure—*you* will not be the owner of the hand.’

‘Is that wisely put little prophecy a gentle hint of murder?’ Frayne inquired. ‘Because if it is, you’re not half the clever man I gave you credit for

being. You don't live up to your wonderfully ingenious organization at all—that's if you're responsible for the clever part of it, of course. At the moment you don't sound like it. Well, I'm to be done in, we'll say. And the lady?'

From Shu Cheng there came a soft, chuckling laugh.

'Her future,' he answered in a voice as soft as silk, 'is already arranged for. She is very beautiful—an object of desire, as you Occidentals put it. A person wishes to buy her and take her abroad. He will get his wish. She is sold.' Under the calm suavity of the man, his utter ruthlessness, once aroused or thwarted, was very apparent.

Frayne felt himself stiffen with rage. 'You yellow swine!' he gave back. 'And utter fool!' he added. 'It takes more than one to make that sort of bargain.'

'Oh, no,' the Chinaman assured him quietly, and quite detachedly. 'For a little while—perhaps. But only for a very little while. You underrate the mastering qualities of cocaine upon a woman. An injection into a vein say twice a day for a week, and the drug has seized upon its prey. The craving is born that will never die. Withhold for two days until the starving nerves all over the body are shrieking into the brain like a million fiends for more. You think that the drug is not stronger than any mere repugnance of the body, Inspector? You are quite wrong. The lady will give herself willingly, and quite gladly to silence the craving of those million little devils. And, if not, the solution is quite simple. Withhold another twenty-four hours, and ten million becomes a billion. And that is the end of resistance, repugnance—anything. Cocaine is the master, not the body that lives to his orders.'

'I've no doubt you are a competent authority,' Frayne said with a contemptuous carelessness he was far, very far from feeling. Indeed, the slow, calmly-uttered recital had appalled him to a degree he had scarcely deemed possible. It was all, he knew, so horribly true. The yellow man was not in any way exaggerating the power of the terrible drug—given the victim once in their hands. He felt the cold perspiration break out on his forehead; clammy, icy. Yet this windowless, airless coffin of a room was absolutely stifling.

And she, the beautiful courageous, creature listening beside him in the darkness, what were her thoughts? What must they be! He turned to her to whisper something reassuring when suddenly she spoke, her voice as calm and as steady as that of the yellow brute who had just addressed them, not a tremor in it, that he could detect.

'And is the gentle T'ao Yo my purchaser?' she asked steadily. 'And his steamer, the *Kiang-si* my prison—when it is brought from Cardiff to London?' she added significantly. 'We shall see.'

Outside the door a savage snarl was heard, then further hurried whispering.

'In any case, Shu Cheng,' she went on, 'thank you for your explicitness. I have no doubt that, if it came to pass, I should be only following in the footsteps of many other unfortunate women. I shall remember this, Shu Cheng. You will probably be called on to repeat it when, having escaped from this country back to America, as you propose, you are taken from the Tombs prison *en route* to your last public appearance before *the chair*.'

Shu Cheng's voice was still smooth and unperturbed as he answered her.

'You are quite mistaken, beautiful lady—and the Tombs prison is a long, long way from here.'

'Nearer than you think, Shu Cheng—much nearer. For both yourself and T'ao Yo. In return for your gentle prophecy concerning myself, I will make you one in return. Neither of you will ever sail again in the *Kiang-si*. Inspector Frayne was quite right when he told you you would be wiser making your getaway instead of uttering vain threats here. He spoke truer than he knew. You are wasting precious moments, Shu Cheng, moments of time that before many hours you would give all to have again on your side. That . . .'

The smooth, suave voice of the Chinaman interrupted her, but this time the smoothness was that of ice, the calmness that of set diabolical purpose.

'In that case, beautiful lady who knows so much, we will waste no more of the precious moments you speak of so surely. Whoever it may be to question Shu Cheng by the morning, it will not be either of you. For you two, the end is quite in sight.'

'Don't talk like a damned fool,' Frayne broke in abruptly. 'The first one that steps into this room, armed or not, won't forget it in a hurry.'

Again outside the door wild protestations broke out. Once more a now thoroughly frightened Boccaro was endeavouring to point out the danger to himself of any such act as by now no one could mistake Shu Cheng meant accomplishing.

'Not here, cur,' the Chinaman snapped at him suddenly. 'Am I so big a fool as that! They must be got out of here unseen and without trace of their ever having been here. We will smuggle them into the east. To-morrow, to-night, you go on with your business as though nothing has happened here at all. If any question you, the man, this Frayne, he has not been here at all. If he has, you know nothing of it and he must have slipped out during a brief disturbance there was. The woman you know nothing of at all; she came, a stranger, caused the trouble and got out quietly. It is simple, easy. You are the safest of us all.'

Frayne, listening eagerly, gave vent to a hard laugh.

‘Ingenious, Mr. Shu Cheng—but too late. There is one man who knows I was here, who knows my identity and spoke with me. A man who knows nearly as much of Boccaro as he does himself. Who also knows this lady and saw her here also. What do you do now?’

‘You will see, my clever friend,’ was Shu Cheng’s grim answer. They heard him give abrupt orders about him. ‘Let Hans have a taxi here in half an hour. We can take them so far in that, get rid of the man and take another on to the end of the journey—the end for them,’ he added with what seemed to his listeners like complete certainty.

‘Don’t boast,’ Frayne advised. ‘The last trick is not taken yet.’

‘Trick?’ the Chinaman returned, the inflexion of polite inquiry in his voice. ‘Ah, yes, cards. I will show you a trick, Inspector Frayne, which is not of cards. You Western peoples think that all the knowledge of the earth is yours; I will show you something that is of the old China of my fathers—China that was learned in science when your people painted your skins with dyes.’ He laughed, a low, sardonic chuckle not pleasant to hear.

Frayne frowned.

‘I can’t make out what his game is,’ he whispered to his companion. ‘He’s up to some devilment.’

‘I did my best to scare them into making a quick run for it,’ she said, ‘but they are tenacity itself, these Chinese.’

‘You bluffed wonderfully,’ he told her in an admiring whisper. ‘You spoke as though you had the book in your hand. Splendid!’

‘Bluffed?’ Her tone was one of complete surprise. ‘I? Of course, of course; I was forgetting.’

‘Forgetting what?’ he asked her.

‘That,’ she told him firmly, ‘was one of the things you were not to ask me.’

‘Sorry; quite unintentional. I wonder what the deuce they’re up to now. No sound out there at all.’

‘Be prepared for anything,’ she whispered in an awed voice. ‘Really, I’m desperately frightened, though I’d die before I would admit it to them. But they’re a terrible people; cold, crafty and merciless. If by any bad chance we are irrevocably in Shu Cheng’s power, I’d—I’d agree with him that the end is not very far off for us.’

‘Oh, I say,’ he hastened to reassure her, ‘don’t you get that idea into your head. There are more hopes than one. Luigi might turn the tables.’

‘Luigi!’ It was a startled exclamation.

‘Luigi Fratello,’ he told her. ‘It was he I was speaking of when I told Boccaro there was some one who knew we were both here to-night. He was frightfully worried about seeing you here. There’s just a chance he might mention it to some one, and if you don’t go back in reasonable time it might set the ball rolling.’

‘Yes,’ she said in a low, thoughtful tone, ‘there is some one I know who, if he learned, if he dreamed I was in any danger, would have me out of it—or die trying. There is just the hope that he may learn *in time*.’

‘I’d like to know what they’re up to out there,’ Frayne observed. ‘They’re very quiet. Could almost imagine they’d gone.’

‘Not very far,’ she responded with a little sigh. ‘If you think Shu Cheng is likely to have relinquished anything he has against us, I am afraid you are very mistaken.’

‘Very,’ came with startling suddenness from the wall. ‘You understand me, beautiful lady, better than the Englishman.’

‘You’ll discover that English law will understand you and your accomplices clearly enough,’ Frayne snapped.

But there was no answering retort; no sound of any kind came from beyond the wall. Even the two inside lapsed into watchful, waiting silence, each concerned perhaps, with their own troubled thoughts.

‘What’s that?’ Frayne demanded suddenly. Something had taken him on one catching, choking breath full in the throat. A horrible burning sensation was in his mouth, his eyes smarted, his head reeled.

‘Do you—do you feel anything?’ he gasped with a tremendous effort.

‘I’m suffocating,’ she managed to get out weakly. ‘I—told you——’

‘It’s gas of some sort,’ he whispered, horror-stricken. ‘Somehow or other they’re injecting gas into the room.’

‘Absolutely harmless,’ the calm voice of Shu Cheng came in answer. ‘It will neither kill, nor blind, nor choke. But it will answer my purpose—for the time.’

It seemed to Frayne that a tight cord was about his forehead being screwed tighter and tighter; great splurges of fiery red came out of the blackness and danced before his straining eyes. He felt himself unsteady upon his feet, lurching here and there like a drunken man.

Suddenly, with a low moan, he heard her collapse upon the floor and lie perfectly still. The feeling that he too must succumb before many seconds passed, seized upon him and drove him nearly frantic. With every ounce of his will he fought against it; fought desperately, madly; but even as he did he

knew the hopelessness of it. They had got him—and her. That was the ghastly, torturing thought; they'd got this woman, already condemned to a shocking fate at their hands, and he could do nothing to help her—absolutely nothing.

In a muffled kind of way he heard rather than felt his head strike the ground, knew that he rolled over into semi-unconsciousness. Was in a dim way cognisant of a light about him, saw in the same helpless way her body lifted from the floor by amorphous, unreal-looking shapes and borne from the room. The light came nearer him, and a face peered down into his—the dark, sardonic face of the man he had called the Villain of the Piece. The man he believed to have murdered Jan Van Blooch. With one last, despairing effort of his failing consciousness his right arm shot up and he gripped at his throat and clung to it. Then something beat him savagely about the head and everything went dead black and silent. For the second time that night Detective-Inspector Frayne had received his quietus.

* * * * *

It was a lean, pale-faced and hungry-eyed mortal who looked as though he might be perhaps twenty years of age and had eaten nothing for the last five of them, that the gentle-voiced and mild-eyed Hans Shroener beckoned from an opposite corner, and holding up a shilling offered it as *douceur* for the immediate fetching of a taxicab.

He did not notice—except in so much as that any London weed of the gutters will open his eyes at a shilling to be had for so little effort—that the wolfish, hungry eyes of the lad stared at him as though an apparition had suddenly arisen out of the ground and confronted him.

And if he had stared a hundred times harder, Hans under the secure disguise of his benevolent-looking white wig and beard would have taken no notice of it. It took sharp eyes, knowing what they sought, to penetrate the identity hidden under those.

The taxi fetched, the shilling taken and spat on for luck, the owner of the gleaming eyes, in them now an agony of feverish anxiety, watched two figures, wonderfully drunk and totally incapable in his opinion, led, or rather dragged across the pavement to it.

'Why the *'ell* don't 'e show up?' he muttered feverishly to himself. 'It's allus th' bloody same! When y' find 'em, 'e ain't 'ere, and if y' lose 'em, y' get naht and 'e threatens y' wiv *inside*. 'Ere's my bloke with the fake wig an' beard an' I can't see a sign of the Soop!'

In a despairing way he carefully took and memorized the number of the cab when it started off, as something towards it, however small.

At any rate,' he whined, 'we'll find out where 'e gets took to,' which was

precisely the very object clever Shu Cheng had provided against, in arranging for a change into another cab.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN WHICH SHOCKS AND SURPRISES ARE THE ORDER OF THE DAY

IT was long past midnight when Diantuolos, having many times observed Captain Larry Adair seated moodily alone at his specially reserved table, his eyes never off the door, decided to take that gentleman into his confidence concerning the most mysterious defection of M'selle Jetta Marcein. He was fully aware that the Captain was going supperless awaiting her advent.

But to a man who habitually minded his own business it was a ticklish business. He might, so far as he knew to the contrary, be committing some terrible *faux pas*. Gentlemen who have ordered suppers, highly expensive suppers with special wines, particularly for the delectation of one fair she, are apt to be in no pleasant mood when that lady simply disappoints upon the feeble pretext of other 'business.' And Irishmen, in Diantuolos' experience of that race, were peculiarly touchy and hot-headed persons. Not that the Honourable Captain looked so at the moment; indeed from the time of his interview with that entertaining and perspicacious valet of his, Mr. Michael Scaddan, the Captain had wandered about the place with about as much life and vivacity generally as—as a Russian *émigré* looking for a job. He seemed to have gone down into the deepest depths of dumps; restless gloom was imprinted upon every line of his handsome features. But bad-temper did not seem to be, at any rate, in the ascendant.

In any case, this strange story told by Luigi seemed to call for desperate measures of some kind—just what, Diantuolos had no idea. But for a lady of the class of M'selle Jetta Marcein to suddenly disappear in a place like Boccaro's, something needed doing, and urgently. Gingerly, then, he approached the Captain and requested the honour of a private word with him in his office. That gentleman at once arose to graciously comply with the request, but the quick-eyed Greek noticed that he was as nervy as a cat.

'By the way,' the Captain observed abruptly as they worked a way through the dancers towards that bourne which was solely managerial, 'I don't see our exuberant friend, Mr. Devlin, here to-night.'

The Greek shot an acute, all-seeing glance about the place. Nowhere was that bulky person to be seen.

'No,' he rejoined, 'and that is strange. The first night that I can remember since he came here first. And the little canary lady from Paris. She is not here either. A strange little one, that. Bright, vivacious, but always frightened.'

‘Shouldn’t have much to be frightened of with our cauliflower-eared friend about,’ Adair observed.

‘Sometimes I watch her,’ Diantuolos said. ‘It is not my business, but in a place like this one has to keep an eye on—on certain people, you understand.’

‘Oh, quite, quite,’ Larry Adair responded absently, and with but the haziest idea of what Diantuolos was now talking about. For “Limpy” had left behind him a trail of disturbing thoughts; menacing thoughts that refused to be got rid of. What was this *aura* of mystery and menace that seemed suddenly to be enveloping them all—even to this woman he loved, innocent of any evil as he and “Limpy” and others there knew it. Who was at the bottom of it? What had been the beginning, and what was to be the end? Not a doubt of it Captain Larry was in a dolorous frame of mind when he stepped into Diantuolos’ office, and that gentleman carefully closed and locked the door upon the three of them.

‘Luigi,’ commanded M. Diantuolos without any preamble, ‘tell Captain Adair this strange story you told me. About Mademoiselle and Antonio Boccaro’s.’

And faithfully and well, and with a wealth of gratuitous detail that nearly drove the man eating his every word mad, Luigi did so. At its conclusion the Honourable Captain Adair was staring at him grey-faced.

‘Why, in Heaven’s name,’ he demanded fiercely, and not altogether reasonably, ‘did you not come to me with this before now? Man, anything may have happened to her.’

‘It could, of course,’ Luigi answered dubiously, then added rather over-cheerfully, ‘but not, I think, Signor, with my friend the great detective there.’ A description which would have made Dick Frayne grin had he heard it—and was at that moment capable of assimilating and enjoying any form of amusement. It seemingly did nothing to allay Captain Adair’s fears. In his pockets he searched and found a metal cloak-room check which he tossed over to Luigi.

‘Get me my hat and coat, Luigi, like a good chap,’ he ordered, his face twisted into that same ugly expression the steely Police-captain Lannigan had noticed upon it the day in the Tombs prison when he had proffered some advice to the real primeval man behind the social mask. ‘I’ll go along and see this Boccaro,’ he growled, ‘and if he tries any lies or queer tricks with me, the Lord help him!’

‘He has had one punching to-night, Signor,’ Luigi informed him as a tit-bit overlooked in his previous eagerness to tell all he knew of M’selle Marcein. And with great gusto he related the aftermath occasioned through Boccaro’s

personal intervention in matters. ‘This looks like that it shall become his lucky night,’ he exclaimed gleefully. In which Luigi spoke greater truth than ever he dreamed.

His coat and hat brought, Captain Adair was upon the point of hurried departure when Luigi made a quick move between him and the door.

‘Signor,’ he said earnestly, ‘my friend the detective Frayne, he was mos’ anxious to get into one room there which is hidden away. I know the house well and told him how. I cannot say *why* he wanted to get there, but it may be that the lady, Mam’selle, she wished to go there too, and something may have gone wrong. It is just an idea, of course.’

Adair nodded.

‘There may be something in it, Luigi. We’re all in the dark, anyhow. What was the number of the room?’

‘Number Four. It is got at by the staircase at the side. On the landing there is a light switch on the right-hand side. Switch it on. No light will come, but the signor will see something.’

‘Four! Four!’ He stared at Luigi intently a moment. ‘Some one else said something to me to-night about the number Four.’ He looked from one to the other as though seeking assistance. ‘Four—four . . . I’ve got it. I was asked to inquire from you, Diantuolos, whether you had ever heard the words “Four, ninety-four, West” spoken here at any time?’

The Greek screwed his face into a frown and pondered the question.

‘No-o,’ he answered slowly. ‘What does it mean?’

Adair shrugged his broad shoulders helplessly.

‘That, I know no more than you do,’ he replied. ‘But it has a meaning, and, I fancy, a mighty important one if we could only unravel it.’

‘Four, ninety-four, West,’ Luigi repeated slowly, not so much in the tone of one befogged, but more that of a man adding two and two together.

‘I believe I know what that means, Signor,’ he said at length. ‘Boccaro’s number is Ninety-four. It is printed up over the door. Put before that the number of that mysterious room and the district; and it would read: “Room Four, Boccaro’s, West”—just as one might say: Room such and such, So-and-so’s, *East*.’

Adair brought his hand down on his shoulder with force enough to nearly send the lightly-built Italian to his knees.

‘By the holy Patrick, Luigi,’ he almost roared, ‘I believe you’ve hit it. At any rate, I’ll be into this Number Four if I have to leave a dead dago across the door of it,’ he added through shut teeth.

But the Fates in that very definite way they have of settling big issues without consulting the people most interested, had one or two surprises for Larry Adair, before he was to come face to face with Signor Antonio Boccaro. His hand was upon the very handle of the door when, without any assistance from him, it suddenly opened and the huge bulk that was Mr. 'Chick' Devlin stood framed in the doorway. And that gentleman was, most unusually at this hour of night, not arrayed in evening attire, but in tweeds and travelling coat. In one of his huge hands he carried a heavy grip. It was instantly apparent to the meanest intelligence that Mr. Devlin was about to become a bird of passage. And by the very unwonted seriousness of his features the migration could be conceived to be a hastily planned and fairly urgent one.

'Howdy folks,' he greeted, then stepped inside and closed the door. 'Howdy, Cap,' he continued with a nod towards that savage-looking individual. 'Just the man I've come along to have a word with, and as I'm kinda pinched for time, the luck's with me.'

'It's but a few minutes since you were in my mind,' Adair said in a low voice.

'That's how I reckoned it might be,' Mr. Devlin responded calmly, then turned to Diantuolos.

'Greek, slide your hoofs out amongst the customers for a bit. Loogi, go with the boss an' see he don't pinch nuttin'. Grease, boys; me and the Cap wants t' go into session a few minutes.'

Thus, bluntly, even though humorously, invited to make themselves scarce, M. Diantuolos and his assistant withdrew as gracefully as possible; though the former threw more than one inquiring eye in the direction of Mr. Devlin's suitcase. But that gentleman did not respond to the covert interest in his movements—if, indeed, he noticed it.

'Where's Mam'selle?' he began abruptly the instant the door was shut tightly upon them.

'I was just going to find out for myself when you came in,' Adair told him, grim-lipped.

Devlin looked at him curiously.

'Say,' he said, and there was a certain note of sarcasm in his voice, 'I'd have said you were a guy that didn't want tellin' a thing twice. You had one wise-up that there was trouble framed for that lady.'

'The one you sent me,' Larry said quietly.

Mr. Devlin nodded: 'We'll let it ride at that,' he said curtly. 'I reckoned I was bankin' on a classy guy that would show the bunch stacked up against this

lady his speed. If a whisper I got t'night is true, Cap, you've left it too late. They've got her.'

'They! Who?'

But Devlin shook his big head.

'That's up to you. I've pulled out from the gang, but I'm not squealin'. I don't like them and I don't like their game; but I don't reckon on squawking out names!'

Adair came quietly up to him, a hard glint in his blue eyes.

'You'll tell me *something*, Devlin, that will give me some lead. You went out of your way to warn me once and I'm grateful for it, though you mustn't forget I had no idea from which angle the danger to her was coming from. But as it stands now, by God, you *must* speak, or . . .'

'Don't crowd, Cap,' Devlin advised equally quietly, 'and don't pull threats. You're a pretty tough bimbo, put to it, I'd bet good money. So am I, you can lay your whole wad on that. Come to a show-down it 'ud be a useful sort of fight—to look on at. But you got me wrong, Adair. Yeh, I'll tell the world. I liked that lady. She always spoke nice to a guy whether he was in her class or not. And I'm one of the "or nots." So, when I get wise that there's a raw deal stacked for her, I tip you off on the quiet, thinkin' maybe you're the boy friend. Just a bit ago, I get it she's been dam'n fool enough t' jump into th' trap—an' youse that ought to' been lookin' after her, has fell down on the job. Y' better jump to it and make it snappy.'

'Is it at this Four, ninety-four, West, they'll have her?' Larry asked quietly. 'At this den of Boccaro's. That's where I was making for when you came in.'

Mr. Devlin eyed him, not without a certain admiration.

'That's none so worse,' he conceded. 'There's been a meet there to-night,' he went on. 'I'd a been there, only one of the Main Guys double-crossed me. Which suited me, pretty good. I told you I'm through—well, that goes. They got me over here on a wrong line. I got no time f'r peddlin' th' "happy dust" t' kids. An' so far as th' other game they're up to goes—not for 'Chick' Devlin on your life. I ain't such a much but white-slavin' women is no game of mine. So me an' the girl-friend, the little M'selle Leonie, we went an' got married-up this afternoon and we're beatin' it for Paree on the night boat. She's a mighty good li'l' kid and she's had a tough line most of her life. They got nothin' against me here or Paree, so we're gonna give th' straight stuff a go. We might run a club or I might pr'mote a fight or two. Anyway, the kid, she made me say I'd give the level a go, before I get the li'l' ol' steel-burnin' tools out again. An' that's how it goes.'

Adair thrust out a hand which the other gripped heartily.

‘I’m sure,’ said Larry earnestly, ‘that I wish Mrs. Devlin and yourself all the luck in the world.’

Mr. Devlin grinned. ‘I’ll sure tell her,’ he said, ‘She’ll be tickled to death. She reckons you’re one hell of a society bug.’ Then suddenly he changed to a hard, alert man of the Underworld. From the pocket of his overcoat, he drew an automatic pistol which he thrust into Adair’s hands.

‘Park that away in your clothes,’ he ordered grimly, ‘you’ll mebbe want it before th’ night’s through. One tip I’ll give y’—without squealin’. If things is on th’ blink at the wop’s joint, Boccaro’s, and the dame ain’t there, hunt out a li’l’ Yid called Abe Baumann. He’s the boss peddler in the burg and you’re bound to hit him up in some of the clubs. They got places down East End, too; one of ’em’s a old warehouse by the river; but they never let me on to it. If she ain’t hid away at Boccaro’s that’s where they’ll have her. I don’t figure Boccaro knows where that dump is, but Abe’ll know because that’s where they plant the dope. He ain’t a bad li’l’ guy and he’s dead again the woman side of th’ job. Beat it to the joint—quick. I gotta date that won’t keep.’

Before Adair could move he had picked up his grip and had his hand upon the door handle. Some thought which flashed to his mind turned him for an instant, the whimsical grin again upon his good-humoured face.

‘Nex’ time ever it comes in to your mind, Cap, that big ‘Chick’ Devlin is a bird that’ll squeak on’ anybody,’ he said slowly, ‘I’ll tell y’ somethin’. D’ye remember the day that good li’l’ ol’ bird “Limpy” Joe Swiggers passed you a fifty-buck bill in th’ Tombs, N’ York City? the day they give that poor bug-house guy th’ works? Things wasn’t so gran’ then as they are now, Cap—hey? Well, I was one o’ the bright boys in th’ opposite cage t’ you and “Limpy” that day, an’ you got one o’ them dials a guy don’t forget quick. Any time after I seen the Honourable here I coulda tossed a monkey wrench into th’ works, but I never squealed on nobody, no time; an’ I don’t reckon t’ start. So long, Cap, an’ all the luck f’om me an’ Mrs. ‘Chick’. So long.’

And then he was gone. By the time a petrified Larry Adair had reached the pavement all that was to be seen of the departing Mr. Devlin was the rear light of the taxi he had waiting. Instantly the Captain called another and set out for Antonio Boccaro’s. To his astonishment a slight figure came suddenly from nowhere and slipped into the seat beside him.

‘Luigi,’ he exclaimed.

‘*Si*, Signor. I know Boccaro’s better than you—and I owe him something for a leetla boy I once used to know.’

That ubiquitous and nameless person, Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby's East End 'nark,' or 'nose,' was still at his place in the shadows opposite Boccaro's after the car with its over-loaded cargo of the man with the false wig and beard, one other toff unknown, and two helpless drunks had departed. A second cab passing had been stopped, and into it from that side door of the café stepped two other people; this time an argumentative Dutchy and a Chinaman toffed up like a lord. This vehicle darted rapidly after the other. Automatically, and through a veritable tornado of vituperation against his absent employer, he took the number of this one as well.

Then a curious thing happened. From out of that side door there slipped quite the strangest looking little man the 'nose' had seen about London, and at his own end of the town contiguous to the shipping there were a goodish many strange specimens of the genus *homo* to be observed. At first he would have sworn that he too was a Chinaman, then, for some quite different formation of the face seen at another angle, a nigger. He was very small, with queer, hunched shoulders, to which his lank, black hair almost reached. Under the brim of a pulled-down slouch hat, from the lobes of his ears showed quaint, beaded ear-rings.

But it is questionable if, even in his semi-professional ardour, the hungry-looking eyes would have followed him far but for the strangeness of his movements after leaving Boccaro's. Instead of proceeding upon whatever might be his way, he moved a little way up the street, then, in a flash, dived into a pitch-black doorway and there waited the coming of some one or other.

Scarcely was he thus concealed, than a further two persons emerged from that staircase entrance. One of these was unquestionably a Chinaman, and one, the 'nose' knew enough of the yellow men of Pennyfields and its purlieus to be fully aware, of considerable consequence. No laundry-keeper, or *fan tan* and *puk-a-pu* gaming-house keeper this. A heavy, powerful-looking man in dress-clothes, he might have been a rich merchant, but if so, was not one that lived Limehouse way. And with him was a little undersized Jew whose appearance in that company made the eyes of the Aldgate youth boggle. He knew *him* right enough; quite a familiar figure upon Aldgate and the Mile End Road, where he was reputed to be the owner of vast wealth acquired by horse-racing, was Mr. Abraham Baumann. And apparently, to judge at any rate by the blood-stained handkerchief Abe Baumann was holding to his mouth, he had been in a *shlemozzle* of some sort.

Also, it was very palpable to the shrewd eyes watching them, that the big Chinaman and little Abe Baumann were engaged, even in the street, upon pretty big business, for the Chinaman was speaking very earnestly to Abe, and Abe was gesticulating with an energy that could only mean affairs of great

moment. Once there sparkled in the hands of the yellow man a huge diamond that must have been worth a pretty penny; but which Mr. Baumann seemed to repulse with altogether unnecessary vigour. The Chow must be wanting too much for it, he thought. All the change he'd make out of Abe Baumann wouldn't do him much good.

And then with a short wave of his disengaged hand, Mr. Baumann walked away and crossed the road. For some moments the 'nose' watched the big Chinaman stand looking after him thoughtfully, but Baumann never turned his head. Then the Chinaman with a lift of his hand made a signal.

From out of his dark hiding-place the queer-looking little man darted, crossed the road and followed noiselessly in the wake of the Jew. A taxi dropped two passengers, a semi-drunken man and an over-painted woman at the corner by which the 'nose' was watching; the Chinaman took it and the keen ears heard distinctly the direction: Narrow Street, East. Narrow Street—by the canal entrance to Limehouse Basin! The taxi slipped away before he had a chance to get its number.

But in the trailing of Abe Baumann by the queer little man in the doorway there was something wrong—something there that the Soop would want to know about. And the little man had been set on by the big Chinaman.

In a few moments he had caught up with Baumann's trailer; caught up, that is, upon the other side of the road and at a respectable distance. The little man was moving very warily, darting almost from shadow to shadow and making no sound whatever. Once he stopped, listening, then moved on again in the same stealthy way. Baumann seemed to be making for the Charing Cross Road, and getting to it by as many devious ways as possible. All the time, the 'nose' saw, he kept that handkerchief pressed to his mouth.

Then suddenly the little man began to quicken his pace. With a long stride that was almost a lope he gained fast upon the man ahead of him. Out of his pocket the watcher saw him take a small tube—it looked as much like a tin-whistle as anything else. Ahead of him a few yards Baumann was hurrying along, talking aloud to himself. Suddenly the other put the tube to his mouth, then stopped, turned back and hurried away. A second or two later Baumann ceased to hurry. He staggered from side to side, reeled and, without a sound, slithered against a wall to the ground. Of that other, the man with the blow-pipe, there was no sight or sound.

Nervously the other crossed and crept up to the form upon the ground.

'Mr. Baumann!' he said in a frightened whisper, but no answer came back to him. Coming nearer, he touched the fallen man's arm; the head rolled over towards him showing an ashen white face over which a horrible green tinge

was settling. The split mouth hung open, almost vacuously. Out of it came a faint whisper.

‘T’ao Yo,’ it said. ‘Blick . . . Blickmann’s old ware-warehouse, by Limehouse Basin.’ The great panting breaths came out of the heaving chest. ‘Mur . . .’ he gasped out, then gave a great shudder and lay perfectly still; pain-tortured eyes staring blindly into the night above him.

‘Croaked!’ the ‘nose’ whispered in the awed voice of sudden fear.

He got up and ran like a mad thing. Passing an alley a dark shadow moved quickly and he caught the glint of that metal pipe. Involuntarily a cry of terror broke from his lips. With the agility of a cat he ducked and swerved. Something not unlike an angry wasp buzzed past his face but did not strike him. Around that corner opposite Boccaro’s he dashed like the wind; out of the shadow he himself had so lately occupied, an arm shot out and clutched him by the shoulder. A shriek of mortal terror broke from his lips.

‘What the devil are you carrying on like that for?’ demanded a harsh, but at that moment most welcome voice in all the wide world. ‘Have you gone mad?’

For a moment the eyes that might well have belonged to some distraught thing stared into the steely ones of the Divisional-Superintendent.

‘Murder!’ came in a wheezing voice from the thin, heaving chest. ‘Murder! For God’s sake save me!’ Then he collapsed unconscious at his employer’s feet.

CHAPTER XIX

AN APPARITION APPEARS OUT OF THE PAST

IT was not the habit of Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby to purchase brandy for such of his subordinates as appeared to be in *extremis*. But well aware that this particularly insignificant one of them would at no time be received with open arms by any reputable insurance company, and, moreover—and also of considerably greater interest to the 'Super'—that his condition was due to some very solid shock sustained not so many minutes before, he decided that would be perhaps his best course towards the white-faced figure huddled at his feet.

Whatever that happening might prove to be, was certainly fairly acute to land him in that state. He was a weak, degenerate and whining rat without the real courage to follow his own criminal instincts, but he was pretty case-hardened when it came to unpleasant happenings, to other people. Once revived, his yarn was going to be interesting.

Across the road he eyed the establishment of Signor Antonio Boccaro. It was nearly, if not altogether empty, being within a minute or two of closing time—a business which had been hastened, had the Superintendent but known it by the harassed Boccaro himself: nothing he wanted more upon this particular night than to get his café emptied and the doors barred tight against a cold, suspicious, official world. For Boccaro, albeit knowing nothing of what was happening to Abe Baumann, was scared to his very marrow. Already he was at the door, ready and anxious to speed the last guest.

At the very moment that the Superintendent was about to cross the road upon his enforced errand of ministration, a taxi ran swiftly up to the door, and before it had stopped a big, particularly handsome young man was out of it and confronting Boccaro. There was very little doubt in the Superintendent's mind, not only from his immaculate dress but from the unmistakable note of command in his voice, that he was a person of some social consequence. He was followed by a dark-eyed, sallow-skinned youth, also in evening dress, of whom Dallenby seemed to have some recollection as habitually about the West End. He stepped back into the shadow and watched events.

The big young man tossed a note to the taxi-driver.

'Be kind enough to go straight to Fawcett's Garage and ask them to run Captain Adair's car to this place at once,' he requested. 'Will that pay you?'

'It'll pay me double fare, sir, and thank you. I'll have it sent right off.

G’night, sir.’

‘Goodnight.’

From his vantage-point Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby whistled. So this was the Honourable Captain Adair, was it? The gentleman whose lame American butler kept such queer company. Not only kept it but took it into the Captain’s own flat upon occasion. He smiled sourly to himself: the swagger gentleman would probably hear something that wouldn’t please him overmuch before the night was out. He wouldn’t trust his servants quite as much in future.

‘Are you Boccaro?’ Adair demanded bluntly of the swivel-eyed gentleman who confronted him at the door.

That worthy smiled, bowed, and washed his hands with invisible soap.

‘That is my name, Signor. But I regret I cannot permit you to enter. It is closing time and the law——’

‘I don’t want to drink. I want a word with you in private.’

‘To-morrow, with pleasure, Signor. I close the doors now.’

‘*Now!*’ Before he knew it, Boccaro was well inside his own door, and the face of the handsome aristocratic gentleman confronting him seemed to have strangely altered. It wore now a very ugly expression; the eyes in particular had gone cold and hostile. And the signor had had a sufficiency of cold-eyed gentlemen for one evening. The face of the young man with the aforesaid gentleman seemed vaguely familiar, but for the moment he could not place him.

‘Get out,’ he ordered with a show of truculence. ‘Get out or I call the police.’

‘Go ahead,’ the other told him. ‘They’ll be wanted here before long, I don’t doubt.’

The signor wilted. This was a most unexpected prophecy in his place. It startled him.

‘The police are not wanted here, Signor,’ he retorted stiffly.

‘They’re here whether they’re wanted or not,’ came in a harsh voice from the entrance: a voice Boccaro hated to hear far, far more than he would that of the foul fiend. ‘What’s all this about? Time your door was shut,’ its owner snapped at Boccaro.

White now to the lips, Boccaro commenced an impassioned explanation. The Divisional-Superintendent cut him short.

‘I don’t want to hear anything from you, just yet,’ he growled, then turned

on Adair: ‘I saw you practically force an entrance into this place,’ he said coldly. ‘I suppose you’ve some explanation?’

‘A very sound one,’ Adair answered. ‘Who am I addressing?’

‘Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby, C.I.D.,’ he was told.

‘Thank you. I am . . .’

‘I know just who you are,’ Dallenby grunted, and then at the other’s look of surprise grudgingly explained: ‘You gave your name fairly loudly to the taximan outside. I happened to be within ear-shot, that’s all. Perhaps you’ll explain.’

‘I will,’ Adair responded with equal brevity. He turned on Boccaro fiercely.

‘I have every reason for believing that a lady, a friend of mine, came to this place to-night upon some business or other entirely to do with herself. She has disappeared. I want to know from this man where she is.’ A sardonic gleam in the Superintendent’s eyes stopped him. His face flushed angrily. ‘She was a respectable woman—a lady.’

A declaration of faith to which Luigi was understood to add a most emphatic corroboration.

Dallenby looked at him coldly.

‘What was she doing in this den?’ he demanded bluntly, and added in a tone that made Boccaro quail. ‘Respectable women, we’ll leave “ladies” out of it, don’t come here.’

‘This particular one did,’ Larry retorted icily. This surly animal in authority was beginning to irritate. He turned to Luigi. ‘You’d better repeat your story of what happened here, then possibly this gentleman will begin to realize that something is radically wrong.’ There was an inference behind his words not to be mistaken.

But singularly enough—any man who worked with him would have been stricken with amazement—Dallenby did not flash back with his usual snarl. Instead, he looked at the handsome, irate face before him some seconds with a tolerant, if not an amused smile. ‘If you knew your own business as well as I know mine,’ he observed quietly, ‘you’d perhaps be a wiser and a sadder man. And as for thinking something is not radically wrong, it’s my experience that very little else ever happens here.’ Without waiting for any response, apologetic or otherwise, he swung round upon the listening Luigi. ‘Now let us have your story,’ he grunted. ‘And you can cut out all frills and come down to hard facts I can deal with.’

Thus bluntly exhorted, Luigi, for the second time that night, began his

narrative; but this time he began with what he had since learned from Diantuolos—at the frustrated following up of Mademoiselle Marcein by the two Chinamen. Intently the Superintendent listened; occasionally shooting in a quick question that hauled the narrator back to hard concrete the instant he seemed disposed to diverge from it. And with every word that Luigi uttered, what fragment of courage Antonio Boccaro was still possessed of ebbed to its lowest possible point—which, like most of his kidney, was best represented by the single word, *nil*. He knew now who the speaker was and with the knowledge came the certainty that the outstanding debit account of many kicks and few ha'pence was about to be paid in full. Once he started in upon a wholesale disparagement of his erstwhile kitchen slave, but the savage glare he received from Dallenby instantly reduced him to silence.

And from the first mention of Inspector Dick Frayne, the Superintendent had interjected no more questions. He stood still, his forehead grooved by a deep frown of thought. But he seemed to accept Frayne's friendliness of feeling for Luigi as evidence of his respectability, and ceased to treat him as a man suspect of anything. Particularly at the mention of those hidden rooms in which the Inspector had been so interested did his big, ungainly head come around in acute attention. At Luigi's mention of his assistance to the detective in the matter of that *open sesame* to them, he growled distinct approval.

'We'll have a look at these rooms. Particularly the Number Four that Inspector Frayne was interested in. He didn't want to get into it for nothing. If this young man's story is true,' he literally shouted at the now mortally-stricken Boccaro, 'you've got rooms here not shown on your register and used as a meeting place for criminals.'

'It is not so,' Boccaro wailed, beside himself with fear.

'Wop,' a strange voice drawled slowly from behind them, 'you lie like the hell-fried rat you are.'

As one man they turned; saving Boccaro, who facing the newcomer stared as though he had been suddenly confronted by the devil. Involuntarily his hand went to one swollen and badly contused eye-bone and he stepped back quickly. His totally unexpected advent was not without its effect upon the stolid Superintendent. He, too, stared hard at the interrupter—his eyes wide with astonishment.

'Why,' he gasped, 'I'd no idea you . . .'

The stranger thrust out a hard, bony fist and gripped that of the Superintendent in the friendliest manner.

'Just let it go at that, Supe,' he said meaningly. 'I just blew into your li'l' ol' town on a mix-up of holiday and business. Both of 'em brought me along

to this devil's-kitchen to-night and—' a wicked grin broke upon his thin, hard mouth—'and all present had a good time.'

He gave a nod of some sort of salutation to one man there who was staring at him, not in mere astonishment but with a horrible, sinking fascination—Captain, The Honourable Larry Adair. For in the lean, hard face, in those ice-green eyes, in the very slow, drawling, yet crisp cadences of the voice, Larry recognized the Police-captain of the Tombs prison, the man who had just stepped across from Mulberry Street to have those final, parting words with him. Captain Lannigan, he remembered that "Limpy" had called him.

Was he remembered? There was nothing in those cold, fixed eyes he recalled so well to indicate even the faintest gleam of recognition. Yet, it was with a stark premonition of evil that he carelessly returned the nod and turned again towards Dallenby.

'So far as what happened here goes,' the man from New York continued, 'and as to the lady concerned, what the dago lad says is all right on the bull's-eye, Supe, you can stand on me for that. As for her being a lady, like this gent says, well, you can bet every dime you got on that, too. I happen to know that her business here was about as straight as you can get it—if it hadn't been she wouldn't have been here. That's her class. That's why I bust th' laws of this land and slugged some guys that got fresh—includin' this bird'—he nodded towards Boccaro whose squinting eyes were fixed upon him as might those of a rabbit before some snake about to devour it. 'And his rough-neck chucker-out. And she has *not* come out, Supe. There's some other bright guys that has, but not her. This high-toned gent is sure givin' you the goods when he tells you that.'

Whether Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby read in this a form of hint that he might do the honours cannot be said, but he turned with an uncouth nod towards Adair.

'This gentleman is the Honourable Captain Adair.' But Larry noticed he did not carry the amenities so far as to mention the icy-eyed American by name. So far as he personally went there was no need; no one who had ever seen that face, particularly under the cap and behind the desk of a police-captain, was ever likely to forget it. All it needed was the half-chewed, half-smoked cigar dangled out of one corner of his mouth to make that ghastly memory complete. Despite his forebodings, and the doubt whether the other were not quietly mocking at him, Larry bowed courteously to him.

From head to foot the other eyed him over in unmistakable admiration.

'Well, say,' he ejaculated, 'I am sure glad to meet you, Honourable. Many's the time I told myself when I go to that ol' country on business I must

cert'nly take a once-over at some of the real ol' aristobility; but, so far, I never caught up with any. And now here we all are. How's the breaks?'

Larry was about to answer with such patience as he could summon up that he was perfectly well, when some instinct of self-preservation gave him warning. Had this New York slang been put suddenly to him to trap him into making a colloquial, unthinking answer to it.

'I'm afraid I'm not very *au fait* with Americanisms,' he returned quietly, then went on. 'And if you'll forgive my saying so, at the present moment the safety of Mademoiselle Marcein seems to be the most important thing.'

The man with the ice-green eyes stared at him blankly for a second or two.

'Mam'selle,' he began, then the light of understanding apparently broke upon him. 'I get you, Steve,' he said, 'and I guess you're about right.' Without further to-do, his long, gorilla-like arm shot out, and his hand gripped Boccaro by the throat. 'The lady,' he snarled, 'where is she? Come across and quick if you don't want to go out right here and now.'

Boccaro's squinting eyes had already begun to swell to altogether unnatural proportions and looked as though one ounce of further pressure would start them altogether from his head when Dallenby laid a hand on the American's wrist.

'Steady,' he said quietly, 'they won't stand for that this side the Atlantic. Anything happened to him he'd be more trouble than he's worth. And he *can't* speak while you throttle him.'

The dapper Luigi, albeit considerably scared, intervened still further and with considerable wisdom. At his words the New Yorker relaxed his grip and Boccaro staggered back, gasping.

'Signor,' Luigi said, 'why waste time upon *him*? Is Boccaro the man to speak truth, anyhow? Not so, I *think*. Start from this Room Number Four that my friend the great detective Frayne he searched for. I can show you, and does it not all fit? These words of theirs: "Four, ninety-four, West." Just think. As I put it to the Honourable Captain: Four, for Room Four; ninety-four, for Boccaro's—the number in the street of this place is ninety-four; West, for West, and there it is, so plain for every one to understand.'

'What's that?' Dallenby rasped out suddenly. 'Four, ninety-four, West? Why, that's what my . . . wait a minute!' He turned and stumped out of the place, returning two minutes later with the now conscious but considerably washed-out looking figure of his East End nark.

Without any preamble whatever, he put him to the interrogation.

'What were those words you reported to me the other night as having heard

passed on to a man in a false wig and beard down the Mile End Road?'

Still considerably shaken, his informant responded instantly. ' "Four, ninety-four, West," it was, Guv'nor. On'y it were Whitechapel 'Igh Street, corner o' Brick Lane. I seen the bloke wiv the fake wig an' beard again on'y a bit ago, but I couldn't see nothink o' you, nowhere.'

'Never mind about me. *Where* did you see him?'

' 'E come out o' the side door o' this kip not 'arf 'our ago. 'Im an' another bloke put two drunks into a taxicab an' druv off with 'em. A man an' a woman, so blind drunk they couldn' walk!'

'Ah!' For sheer downright savageness no wild animal could have bettered the snarl that came from the throat of the American.

'That's it,' he barked, 'they've got them—either doped or outed. Spit it out, man, spit it out. What then?'

'There was a Chink went wiv' them. Two Chinks they was altogether; on'y the other, the big one, never come till later.'

'T'ao Yo and Shu Cheng,' the American snapped. 'Which of them went in the cab with the woman?'

'Not the big 'un, the other.'

'T'ao Yo. The swine! Women are his line.'

'That's the bloke Abe Baumann named when 'e was dyin'!' the nark exclaimed and rushed on. 'It was a bit after when the other come out, the big un wiv' the diamond ring. It was him that had Abe murdered in the street. I seen the little man wiv' the penny whistle do 'im in. An' 'e must 'a seen me an' laid f'r me an' summink on'y shaved me an' I run like 'ell, an' . . .'

'Wait a minute. Wait a minute. Let's get this rigmarole of yours straightened out a bit. From a plain tale it's getting nowhere.'

It was Dallenby who nipped his underling's rising hysteria in the bud; at the same time answering an impatient exclamation from the American with a lift of his hand. 'It's no good us dashing off on some wild-goose chase to one end of London while the people we're after are in danger at the other. You want to find the lady. All right. I want to find the best inspector I've got. You can take it from me I shan't lose any more time than I can help.' He turned again to the wide-eyed nark. 'Now, let's have the lot again—and watch what you're saying. This mush up of Chinamen, doped men and women and murders won't do for me. Get on.'

And in a stillness only broke by quite futile groaning of Signor Boccaro, the witness from the shadows of the departure from Boccaro's of the company that had met in that mysterious Room Number Four, told his story. When he

had finished, he sank limply into a near-by chair.

‘An’ he scared ’ell out o’ me seein’ what I seen,’ he concluded. ‘I thought my number was up, sure enough.’

‘And Abraham Baumann said to you,’ Dallenby questioned insistently, ‘the name T’ao Yo, and then “Blick . . . Blickmann’s old warehouse, by Limehouse Basin?” ’

‘Them was ’is last words, Guv’nor, an’ then ’e slung seven,’ was the awe-stricken answer.

‘Right, now we’ve got something to go on.’ Dallenby took from his pocket a small nickel whistle and blew upon it an ear-piercing blast. Almost instantaneously it seemed—they might have sprung up through the pavement so speedy was their appearance—a sergeant and three men of the C Division, Metropolitan, were through the doors.

‘Let one of your men get a taxi, Sergeant,’ Dallenby instructed. ‘Wait a minute—better get two. Lend me your cuffs a minute.’

From under his tunic the sergeant produced a pair of glittering cuffs. With almost the swiftness of a feat of legerdemain the Superintendent had snapped them about the wrist of the grovelling, beseeching Signor Boccaro.

‘I’ve wanted to do this for you for a long time, Boccaro,’ he said slowly. ‘Everything comes to him who waits.’ Then to the sergeant: ‘Take him inside. No bail. No communication with any one. Tell the Inspector I’ll be in and charge him between this and daylight. And you might tell him to put four plain-clothes men on to watch this place. There may be men try to break back here for refuge. Take the lot. And say I’d advise him to give them something more than truncheons to do the job on. This gang won’t stop at much.’

Two taxis ran up to the door and pulled up; a policeman on the running-board of the one leading.

‘Taxis, sir,’ he reported. ‘And there’s a big private car just come up.’

‘Mine,’ the Honourable Captain Adair informed them.

‘Right.’ Dallenby turned to the New Yorker. ‘You coming in with me?’ he inquired.

The man with the ice-green eyes stroked his chin thoughtfully a moment.

‘Well, say,’ he said after a moment in which his strange eyes had lingered over the figure of the Honourable Captain Adair.

‘It ain’t often I get the chance of minglin’ amongst the aristobility, and as the Cap has his swell buzz-can, if he’ll cart me along I’ll be tickled to death to travel along with him.’

It was a direct question, one that left no possibility of avoidance. Larry Adair bowed.

‘I’ll be delighted,’ he responded and led the way slowly towards the door. As he passed out into the street, his eyes fell upon Boccaro being propelled along by a rigid arm and clutch upon each shoulder. A wild gesture of appeal from the Italian showed those glittering cuffs about his wrists.

A moment Larry stood looking after him, a sigh upon his lips, a leaden weight at his heart. How long would be it before he was being moved along in the same way? And “Limpy”?

The thought of the little lame man steadied him. His strong jaws came together with a dogged snap. By hook or by crook, come what might, he must get word to “Limpy” to make a break for it. His ill-fated love affair must not be the means of sending *him* back to the hell of prison again.

CHAPTER XX

THE WAREHOUSE ON THE THAMES

IT was not until they were running along Cheapside that the New Yorker uttered his first word in Adair's car. A brief pause had been made at Holborn Police Station where the Superintendent had rung up the River Police for assistance at the other end. Already he knew that speedy launches were backed out in the blackness of the stream, and men whose eyes were used to penetrate the fogs and mist of the river were watching the water frontage his 'nark' had told him the old warehouse possessed. The shore end they could manage themselves.

Larry, turning his head suddenly, had found the American studying him attentively, an absolutely unreadable expression upon his face.

'You got a cigar parked in your clothes?' he inquired. 'I seem to have c'nsumed all my stogies.'

Larry drew his case from his overcoat pocket and passed it over.

'You Americans are great cigar smokers,' he observed.

'Yeh,' the other admitted laconically. 'I feel kinda lost when I ain't got somethin' t' champ my jaws on. Whether I'm either eatin' it, or smokin' it, I seem to plan things out better, an' I am most cert'nly not so sour in the temper by a helluva long sight.'

And Larry, ruefully remembering one poignant interview he had had with Police-captain Lannigan when the black cigar had been well to the fore, found himself wondering just what he must be like upon such occasions without.

Lannigan bit one end off the cigar, lit the other and inhaled deeply into his lungs. 'Class,' he said admiringly. 'No ten cent throat-burner about your brand, Cap, I'll tell the world.' He examined the monogramed and crested initials upon the gold case. 'What might these stand for?' he inquired.

'Lawrence Fitzgerald Adair,' he was told in a curiously strained voice.

'It cert'nly is an elegant article,' Lannigan commented, and handed it back.

'Have it with pleasure if it pleases you,' Larry said, carelessly, unthinkingly.

The other shook his head negatively: 'Sounds funny from a New York cop, I daresay,' he said quietly, 'but I never take presents from people I do business with.'

Without a word Larry took it and dropped it carelessly in his pocket. All

over him he felt a certain, hot, nervous tingling. Was the blow about to fall? Had the man been just playing with him as a cat might a mouse? For "Limpy's" sake he'd have to bluff out somehow—gain time enough, at any rate, to get the old chap clear.

'Business?' he repeated in a slightly uninterested voice.

'That's what I said, Cap,' Lannigan rejoined in the same casual tone, then lapsed into thought a moment or two. As suddenly as a shot out of a gun, he spoke again.

'The li'l' ol' fella wears wonderful well, don't he? His foot don't seem t' have done him no harm in the health.'

'Little old fellow . . .' Larry repeated vaguely.

' "Limpy". Wonderful smart that ol' safe-bustin' guy looks these days.'

Crash! The tin-trumpet of a New York Police-captain had brayed and the edifice that surrounded a pillar of London society was toppling to the ground. It was the end of things—of the life that mattered, of everything that "Limpy" and he had built from a desperate dream into a reality; the pleasant world in which they had lived happily and peacefully—lulled by distance into a false security. "Limpy's" Easy Street, in which they were to dwell the rest of their span. And if Lannigan had actually seen "Limpy", where was the use of bluffing? Unless, recognizing him and having inside knowledge at the American end of their double work—that one gigantic haul in Chicago that "Limpy" had planned during years of gaol solitude to repay him for his wrongful imprisonment; unless he himself were bluffing for knowledge of "Limpy's" whereabouts. There was always that possibility. His chance, Larry thought, a hard twist at his mouth, was a poor one.

But one thing kept stabbing at him as keenly as could any dagger—*her*! And yet he knew that, sooner or later, she must know; in honour must be told. And the bubble would be pricked then, just as now. Perhaps better now, when at least she could have nothing to accuse him of towards herself. But he sat motionless, his eyes upon the rear light of the Superintendent's taxi.

'Funny, the way things come to pass,' Lannigan went on musingly. 'You can do a glide and lay low, you can cover your tracks till you'd have Van Dine or Sherlock Holmes or old man Pinkerton rattled, but one day up somebody rolls along and the game is wide open. Yeh, it's a small world all right, and there's th' helluva lot of people in it. And out of the herd there's always some one pops up who knows you. 'Member that day in the Tombs when I bawled you out and told y' next time we got t'gether you'd come across with your name all right? Well, y' see, just like I tipped it off, it's come true, sure enough. Lawrence Fitzgerald Adair,' he repeated with considerable relish.

‘Pretty high-toned kind of a monnaker. Don’t know that I blame a man much keepin’ it dark in a place like The Barrel at Mulberry Street. But I’d have come over with a name for business purposes, if it was only George Brown, or something elegant like that.’

But nothing came from the man he was talking to—or was it *at*?—nothing at all.

‘But it surely was one on me when I seen “Limpy”,’ the American continued in no way abashed by the silence of his companion. ‘With his doodah black Prince Albert coat an’ that dinky li’l’ black tie, I think me, “Limpy” is sure goin’ out to attend a funeral—only they don’t plant the stiffs at night. But he cert’nly looked all wool an’ one yard wide guaranteed.’ He leaned back and drew at his cigar luxuriously. ‘Just like I told you that day in the Tombs when you squealed I was sore on you because “Limpy” had slipped the bracelets, I got a kinda soft spot for “Limpy”. And I said th’ guy that gave it to him wasn’t fit t’ clean his boots. Well, that was about right too, I guess.’

Still nothing from the man he was speaking to.

‘This new law mixes it up a bit,’ Lannigan pursued meditatively. ‘Seems tough that li’l’ ol’ guy has gotta go in for life, when he’s carted back!’

‘*Life!*’

That one terrible little word broke Adair’s silence. *Life!* For such days as he had left to him, kindly-hearted, generous-souled “Limpy” would be done with freedom and would be locked away from sight and sound of his fellow-men, saving only those unfortunates in as sorry a plight as himself. The thought was cataclysmic—stunning.

After a moment a bitter laugh came from Adair’s lips.

‘The police made him what he is, you admit; and now they propose caging him up for ever for being it.’

‘Not the police,’ Lannigan corrected, ‘the politicians. According to the bill he can’t even get a Kathleen Mavourneen—an indeterminate. He’s a convicted crook over a certain number of years—don’t matter how he come to be one, or what’s his class—he’s booked for a “lifer.” Speakin’ personal, I’d sooner pen th’ guy up that framed the statute, but that’s how it goes. This cert’nly is one gran’ cigar, Cap.’

But there was no response from Adair and silence fell between them, until the red light ahead drew in at the kerb and stopped.

‘I guess,’ Lannigan observed as casual as though they were going to a party, ‘I guess this is where the fun begins. Do you pack a rod?’ he asked suddenly.

‘By chance to-night—yes. Why?’

‘This lot are a bad bunch,’ he said, ‘I guess you’ll do with it before we’re through.’

Adair’s hand dropped a moment upon the weapon in his pocket and he looked at the other, a queer smile playing about his lips.

‘What would happen, I wonder, if it were to go off now, by accident, Lannigan?’ he asked grimly.

‘The answer’s easy. Cap,’ that gentleman answered imperturbably. ‘My troubles ’ud be over—and yours ’ud begin. And “Limpy’s”, he added, as though in an afterthought.

* * * * *

Twice the woman who called herself Jetta Marcein had whispered to the man bound and helpless by her side and received no reply. The first time had been when the Chinaman she knew as T’ao Yo had come noiselessly into the room—if it could be given that designation—where they must have been taken unconscious from the cab. For some time he had stood and looked down upon her, then the man ’Gene came upon tiptoe to him and the pair whispered furtively together. Nothing of what they said could she hear, except the name repeated a number of times, Van Blooch. Then they went away together as silently as they had come It was at this first attempt to rouse him that she discovered that the detective was not only tied up securely as was she herself, but additionally, was gagged. They had made particularly sure of Detective-Inspector Frayne, she thought.

The place in which they were seemed to be an old, ramshackle warehouse or store of considerable size, but there were not wanting signs that it was many a long day since it had been used in the capacity for which it had been built. Certainly there were cases of all sorts and sizes littered about the place, but the condition of most of them suggested that their day of use as conveyors of merchandise was long over. Somewhere below, and not very far down, she could distinctly hear the lapping of water, which suggested that the place, or at any rate this particular portion of it, was built out over a river—in all probability the Thames itself.

Nothing whatever could have been seen had it not been for a dull light that came from the open door of what looked to be an inner office. It had a window that looked out into the warehouse; no doubt built that an eye could be kept upon ingoings and outgoings and also work people. Through it and the open door, the interior was quite plain to her from the position in which she had been laid upon the floor. In it the five men were arguing fiercely about something but, so far, their voices had been lowered, so that what they said

was quite inaudible to her. But one thing was quite plain to her, the Dutchman seemed to be nursing some grievance and to be in very quarrelsome mood. The Bavarian, Shroener, looked to be endeavouring to placate him; but with no very great success. Ferrondo seemed to be nervous and sullen; indeed the only one who remained his calm, inscrutable self was the big Chinaman, Shu Cheng. His face showed nothing of what dark and bloody thoughts might be working in his subtle brain.

And then, as suddenly as a match applied to a hayrick, passion flamed between them. She saw the Dutchman upon his feet, his heavy-jowled face working with rage, his fat, stubby finger pointed at the man who was known as the Count Ferrondo.

‘You, half-bred mongrel it was who killed my brodder, Jan,’ he bellowed. ‘You murdered heem, vor der cocaine, undt der money he carried. No one else knew he had it.’

Wild and passionate denials broke instantly from Ferrondo’s lips. Without warning the Dutchman, now beside himself with fury, sprang at him, the gleam of steel in his hand. It was T’ao Yo who interposed, but the thick-set Van Blooch flung him aside as though he had been a lightweight. To Shu Cheng T’ao appealed, but that personage only shrugged his shoulders and stood immobile, watching.

From beside her she could hear strange little grunts coming from Frayne. His writhing told her that he was struggling unavailingly to free himself of his bonds, but she knew that, like her own, they were too cunningly knotted for that. Nor, as she was tied, could she help him even to the extent of getting the gag from his mouth. But she could at least speak to him.

‘You hear them quarrelling?’ she whispered. Dirck Van Blooch is accusing Ferrondo of murdering his brother.’ He grunted back an answer of some kind.

Suddenly Shu Cheng spoke. At his voice there came an instant quiet—even Van Blooch released his grip upon the man he had by the throat. But Shu Cheng spoke in his ordinary unperturbed tones and what he had to say did not carry to her.

Straining her ears to listen, she caught another sound, not emanating from that room. Something that sounded as though rats were gnawing at the woodwork quite close to them. That there were plenty of them there she knew, for almost her first experience of consciousness was the feel of a monster river-rat scuttling across her feet in the blackness.

And then she heard something infinitely more definite: that which was working upon the wood behind them was human, not rodent. A window black with ages of accumulated grime, and opened for the first time perhaps in many

years, slid creakily upwards . . . then silence. But the hubbub of voices in that office drowned all sounds near them, and nothing happened. Quivering in every nerve she lay listening; not daring to whisper Frayne lest even that might scare off possible and most unexpected aid.

And yet, not altogether unexpected. There were two men in London, that night, she knew, who once having picked up the trail of the gang, that had her, would follow them into the very nether world, if need be. The one she had left giving Boccaro a taste of his quality; the other would be waiting her coming at a certain supper-table at Diantuolos'; or—despite their plight a smile was forced to her lips—raging up and down by the entrance, a monument of human despondency and impatience.

Then something pulled her out of her thoughts with a jerk. From the window, a softly shaded light was stealing slowly across the floor. She knew that it came from an electric torch shrouded by a white linen handkerchief—the illumination of a professional cracksman! Who could that mean, other than a chance marauder—or the man who knew all the tricks of the fraternity, Lannigan. Steadily the light moved around until its soft, shadowed ray rested a moment upon her face. Then some one dropped from the sill to the floor as noiselessly as any cat could have done. A moment later a man was unpicking with quick, deft fingers the lashings about her feet and ankles.

'You don't have to worry, lil' lady,' he whispered as he worked, 'There's a mighty tough bunch gatherin' round outside—on'y I must be th' clever Alec and butt in first. Y'see, I kinda promised a big boy you know that I would find out all the works of this frame-up against you that Big 'Chick' Docherty wised us—wised me about. So when I got it t'night where this bunch was like t' break for if things went wrong, I jumped in quick as I c'ud.'

'You're the most welcome person we've seen in some time, "Li . . ." she checked herself suddenly. 'I know your voice quite well, Mr. . . .'

'Michael Scaddan, my name is, lady,' he informed her gravely. 'I'm butler to the Honourable Captain Adair.'

'Why, of *course*, Mr. Scaddan.'

He turned to Dick Frayne and, rolling him unceremoniously over on to his face, relieved him first of the gag that was biting into his very jaw bones.

'Thank God for that!' the Inspector gasped in very real relief. 'Whoever you are, Mr. Scaddan, you've saved me going potty. Another five minutes of that and I'd have screamed aloud.'

'You couldn't,' Mr. Scaddan observed laconically. 'They made too good a job of it. By the feel of these knots they meant givin' you no chance, brother.'

'They'll get none, either,' Frayne hissed through shut teeth.

‘If I was you, I’d go slow,’ the little man whispered, ‘the word’s out where they are and if they ain’t rung round, then I’m missin’ my bet on one man that’s hanging on, somewhere about.’

‘How did you get to know of this place?’ Frayne asked, stretching his arms with a grateful sense of freedom.

‘By stickin’ a gun in a German’s ribs and countin’ three, kinda slow and persuadin’,’ was the grim answer he got. And if the thought occurred to Inspector Frayne that this was a somewhat unusual procedure for the butler of a scion of aristocracy, it passed speedily in the excitement of the moment that followed his standing upon his feet a free, untrammelled if horribly stiff man.

From below there came a sudden crashing at a door. Above the din one voice he knew well was roaring out orders—Dallenby. Simultaneously a figure dropped through the window by which “Limpy” Swiggers had forced entrance.

‘Jetta,’ it called frantically, ‘where are you? If you can, answer me!’

‘I’m here, Larry, my dear,’ she said quietly. A moment later he had groped his way to her and for the first time she was strained passionately to him.

‘Acushla,’ he murmured, lip to lip. ‘After this, it will be my job to look after you. Promise me!’

‘Yes, Larry,’ she answered simply.

Of a sudden he released her. ‘Ah, I’m forgettin’,’ he said heavily; then she heard him mutter and quietly cross the dull ray of light that came from the office door.

‘Larry! F’r the love of Mike,’ “Limpy” Swiggers cried in horror. ‘They’ll get y’, boy.’

‘Hell!’ returned Captain Adair fiercely. ‘What does it matter?’

From the group that, caught in a trap whichever way they turned, and huddled by the open doorway, came a shot. They heard it splat through a slate of the roof. Two shots instantly answered; one from the window in the wall, the other from “Limpy” Swiggers. One of them—the man who had fired—gave a sharp, painful little cough and went to the floor with a thud.

‘That’s Shroener got his,’ the casual voice of Captain Lannigan announced from the window.

Casting all caution to the winds Larry Adair charged in at them, but quick as he was, another man was quicker.

‘Ferrondo ’s my man,’ Frayne shouted as he passed him. ‘I want him for the murder of Jan Van Blooch.’

‘It is a lie!’ a voice screamed out of the gloom. ‘I did not kill him. It was

T’ao Yo!’

A roar that might have broken from a maddened bull elephant came from the Dutchman. In a flash he had hurled himself upon the Chinaman. A cursing, struggling pair locked together, they fought into the blackness, among the smashed up debris of the old place. Every thought but vengeance seemed to have left the Dutchman—T’ao Yo was fighting for his life and knew it.

The even, unemotional voice of Shu Cheng was heard but once.

‘Fools,’ he cried scornfully, ‘is not death near enough, but that we must kill one another?’ Then Larry came to grips with him.

The trampling of many feet was heard upon the wooden stairway after the crashing down of the main door. Adair, held like a vice by the big Chinaman, marvelled at the strength of the man. Every trick of wrestling or rough-house fighting that he knew, he used with lightning rapidity, but always Shu Cheng met him with equal cunning, and equal, if not greater strength. And yet fight though he was forced to, Shu Cheng did not seem to show any particular animosity towards the man opposite him. It struck Adair, in a sort of subconscious flash, that here was the born fatalist, accepting whatever end the Fates had in store with calm fortitude.

A terrible and horrible groan came from out of the darkness. Thrice in an instant it was repeated, then the crashing of a body through broken woodwork followed it. In the light of fast approaching torches they saw Van Blooch rush to a point in the wall, fling open two double doors and spring through them into the night. The splash of water from below told them that he was in the river.

‘Never mind him,’ Dallenby ordered. ‘The river men will pick him up.’

‘Cuffs, sir,’ Frayne called from the floor where he had Ferrondo pinned.

In that second in which the awful cry of the dying T’ao Yo had taken his attention, Adair found himself picked up and then hurled to the ground. In the next instant the big Chinaman had darted into the office and slammed the door. Adair upon his feet again and charging it with all his weight found it bolted, immovable.

A quiet, mocking voice came from behind it.

‘Too late, my friend,’ it said. ‘My end is not for you to decree.’

Dallenby, upon the floor, pointed at the stiff body of Shroener.

‘Who killed this man?’ he demanded.

‘Well, y’ see,’ “Limpy” began, coming forward.

Lannigan shouldered him out of the way.

‘Me,’ he said bluntly. ‘He fired at the Cap here, an’ I got him.’

‘You’re not allowed to shoot people here—even criminals,’ Dallenby growled. ‘The man mightn’t have known he was resisting arrest.’

‘If I’d have had a card on me,’ Lannigan retorted satirically, ‘I’d cert’nly have strolled up and shown it to him before he plugged me. Not havin’ one, I just got him first. And if you’ll take my tip,’ he went on grimly, nodding to where Larry Adair was vainly hurling himself against the door of the office, ‘you’ll keep mighty clear of the line of fire from that door when the Cap bursts it in. There’s a boy behind that who won’t pick and choose who he bumps off.’

Without further formality and gun in hand, he too threw himself upon the door beside Adair. With a sudden crack and rending of timber it burst open under their combined weight. A strange sight met their eyes, one before which they halted dead.

Seated in a chair at a ricketty table, Shu Cheng sat as calmly and placidly as though he were in his own Mott Street home awaiting the arrival of guests. Beside him upon the table was a little silver box of delicate Chinese workmanship in which were two or three little greenish pills. His amber skin had gone a strange death-like grey, his black inscrutable eyes were dimmed and misty. As they stopped before him, he looked from them calmly to the faces that over their shoulders he could see in the doorway. Then he smiled at them all, an enigmatic, baffling smile that held them in fascinated silence. It was to Lannigan he addressed the few quiet words he spoke.

‘Too late, Lannigan,’ he said, ‘too late.’ Not for Shu Cheng the gallows of this country, or the electric chair of the Tombs.’ His long-nailed fingers made a little gesture towards the box upon the table. ‘I had always with me a far simpler way than that. In one more little moment . . . You see what one fool can do to the finest organization of its kind in the world. The dope ring is ended—smashed. With me who created it, it dies.’ The big head drooped a little, but with an effort he brought it erect again.

‘T’ao Yo?’ he asked.

‘Dutchy ripped him,’ Lannigan told him bluntly.

Shu Cheng nodded.

‘Justice,’ he said. ‘He it was who actually killed Jan. Followed the drug up from Cardiff. Ferrondo planned it, but had not the courage to carry it out. They were equally guilty. Ferrondo only laid it on T’ao Yo to save his own skin. They were both cowards—and traitors.’ Again his head sank towards his chest but, and this time with a great effort of will, he lifted it again.

‘The lady?’ he asked.

‘I am here, Shu Cheng,’ she said in her quiet voice.

The fast-filming black eyes turned upon her.

‘You are very clever,’ he said, ungrudging admiration in his tired voice. ‘In America you hunted us from one end to the other. Here, where I reckoned upon safety, you win outright.’

‘The law must always win outright in the end, Shu Cheng,’ she told him gently. ‘It is inevitable.’

‘It seems so,’ he replied in almost a whisper.

Then his eyes closed and he sat perfectly still. Slowly and this time unchecked his head dropped again.

‘Shu Cheng,’ she called sharply.

But there was no answer. The head of the dope ring had passed on to join the shades of his revered ancestors.

CHAPTER XXI

IN WHICH JERMYN STREET IS INVADED BY STRANGE PEOPLE

IN the handsome dining-room of the Jermyn Street flat, "Limpy" Swiggers stood staring moodily down into the street. Up and down the room the Honourable Captain Adair paced with that same nervous, restless tread that the older man had once seen him perambulate a prison cell; certain indication of his stress of feeling.

'It seems,' Adair said suddenly, 'that *everything* is up to Lannigan. We can do nothing. If he says what he knows of us, it's all up.'

'We cu'd make our getaway, maybe,' the little man suggested reflectively.

'I wonder. If Lannigan means business, I doubt it.'

Swiggers nodded in agreement.

'He's a queer bird, that fella. There was times last night when I cu'dn't make him out at all. I'd have said if Captain Andy Lannigan was layin' low or holdin' back on any one he was playin' some graft of his own. But las' night'—he shook his head completely baffled, 'he sure had me wingin' about what game was he playin'. Larry, as sure as you an' me are here, it was my shot got the German that fired at you—th' guy with the wig. Lannigan knew it, but when that Scotland Yard bull started mouthin' he jumped in and takes it. What for? Search *me*, Larry.'

Adair sighed. 'It's all beyond me, "Limpy". Above all I can't realize that she . . .'

'The minit I got my lamps on her tied up on that floor I cu'd have told you, Larry. She's one o' th' real big bugs of th' Federal Police. Y' don't forget that sort; anyway, I don't. She used t' come up t' the hospital at Sing-Sing an' bring books and things t' th' poor devils that was stretched out. Many's the odd book or newspaper she's brought me; and, for all she was official, many's the letter she smuggled in and out, to or from some poor guy's wife that was strugglin' along somehow. She's as pretty as they paint 'em, and as good as they grow 'em. And she knew me right off—all but spoke my name, then pulled up in front of the London dick, Frayne. And y' heard what Shu Cheng said: it's been her that's broke up the dope ring—hunted 'em all-ways and cornered 'em here. It's just the sour luck it had to be her you'd fall for, Larry, an' nobody can help it. There's no law that say how these things is gonna happen, though'—a touch of his old whimsicality flashed out—'it wouldna be a bad idea if there was.'

‘I’ll never regret it, “Limpy”,’ Adair said quietly. ‘Whatever is to come, I’ll never regret having met and loved her.’ With an effort he shook the thought from him. ‘These other poor things,’ he said worriedly. ‘What’s to become of them? How is the sick one? Have you heard this morning?’

‘She’s better,’ Mr. Swiggers, himself not without a trace of worry, hastened to inform him. ‘That Scotch pill-twirler brought one of the real million-a-minute gazebo’s from that Harley Street “where they grow ’em” this a.m. and his report is none so worse. She’s got to go into the country to a crematorium or some such, and—well, Scottie is seein’ to the fixin’-up for us.’

‘And what happens to the poor thing if we . . . ?’ Adair did not finish his sentence, there was no need.

‘Now, about that,’ “Limpy” hastily answered, ‘we don’t have to worry. Her pal—some dead game kid that, Larry, an’ don’t forget it—breasts up t’ me ’smornin’ an’ starts a thank-ye-kindly stunt. I give her the word such stuff wasn’t my line. Larry, y’ would never know that kid now she’s took to decoratin’ her face with plain soap an’ water. Surprisin’ the difference. She don’t look like an elevated sign now she’s cleaned the paint out of her pores. Anyway, I was sayin’. I passed her out the bunk we might have to leave London on the jump owin’ t’ important business, but she was t’ follow out all the doc says about her li’l’ pard.’

‘How is she to do it without money?’ Adair asked. A certain preoccupation was suddenly noticeable in Mr. Swiggers’ demeanour. He did not answer the question. Persistently Adair repeated it.

‘Well, y’ see, Larry,’ he pointed out diffidently, ‘I always keep a pretty solid bunch of skads where I can clamp my hooks on ’em on the jump. Kinda habit. In case of havin’ t’ make tracks a jump ahead of the cops—see. Most ol’ hands is th’ same. We can’t tell th’ day, Larry; come to that, never know the minute we won’t have t’ haul our freight. So, natcheral, I seen it all right for the two kids, see. I cu’d see youse didn’t want botherin’ with th’ feenance just now, so. . .

Adair clamped both hands down on the thin, stooped shoulders.

‘ “Limpy”,’ he said fondly, ‘ye’re the grandest ould humbug ever the world knew. All the time I’ve been moping here, stewing in my own miserable thoughts, you’ve been running round thinking of everybody but yourself. And yet,’ he added sombrely, ‘if what we dread *does* come to pass, it’s upon you the blow will fall heaviest of all.’

‘That’s why I bustled things along, Larry,’ the little man said simply. ‘I mightn’t never get another chance. Once Lannigan says: “You an’ me is travellin’ t’gether, “Limpy”,” it’s all over so far as I’m concerned.’ For one

little instant, there was a quiver in his voice. ‘ “Life” is a helluva long stretch, Larry.’

Adair dropped his hands and turned away a moment.

‘ “Limpy”,’ he said suddenly swinging round. ‘We’ll make a break for it.’

‘Not on your life we won’t,’ Mr. Swiggers snapped with equal determination. ‘A damned fine thing that would be for you! Put y’ in wrong everyway; with th’ lady—with everybody. No, Larry; I ain’t lettin’ you do that f’r me. An’ it wouldn’t work for long. Sooner or later they’d come up with me, and then you’re all t’ th’ bad as well. Not on your life. I’m standin’ pat till Lannigan shows his hand. There’s one thing, Larry, exceptin’ that vag charge in N’ York, nobody can hang anything on you f’r what we done. I worked too clever f’r that. No; I’ll wait for the boy from Mulberry Street.’

‘And then it will be too late.’

‘It’s too late now, Larry. I wasn’t thinkin’ when I said we might.’

Almost as if in direct corroboration of this pessimistic opinion, a knock came to the door and, answering it, Mr. Swiggers was presented with a card upon a salver. One glance at it showed him the ominous words. ‘Divisional-Superintendent Dallenby. New Scotland Yard.’ Without comment he passed it to Adair.

‘Show the gentleman in here, maidie,’ he said quietly.

‘What’s *he* after?’ Adair asked quickly when the door was closed upon them again.

‘We’ll soon find out,’ “Limpy” answered.

In the doorway the heavy, ungainly bulk of the Divisional-Superintendent halted a moment and his hard eyes shot keenly from one man to the other.

‘Good morning,’ he commenced abruptly, though both tone and manner suggested that the exact opposite was in his mind.

Adair, nerves keyed to the highest pitch, smiled his brightest upon him.

‘Good morning,’ he responded pleasantly. ‘Come in and sit down. What can I do for you, Superintendent?’

One moment Dallenby looked at the silent figure of “Limpy” Joe Swiggers before answering; that cold hostile look his subordinates knew so well when delinquents were before him.

‘I want a word with you alone, Captain,’ he said gruffly.

For one split second the eyes of Adair and “Limpy” met; the latter moved silently towards the door.

Then Adair slipped forward: ‘I don’t think you quite understand,

Superintendent. Scaddan is my confidential valet—my friend, if it comes to that. So far as I'm concerned he is at perfect liberty to hear anything you may have to say to me. Indeed, if it should prove to be any matter that needed conference, I most certainly should ask his advice.'

At which the Superintendent stared a little; then shrugged his thick shoulders.

'Just as you please,' he returned grimly. 'It's all one to me.' Leaning forward he pointed a challenging finger at the debonair figure before him.

'How long have you been acquainted with or employed Joseph Swiggers, an habitual criminal, better known in New York as "Limpy Joe"?' he demanded.

For one moment Larry Adair's heart ceased to beat; in the next he had steeled himself up to meet anything. It was fight now to the last ditch, or see "Limpy" go under for ever. "Limpy" himself never moved a muscle; just stood there smiling urbanely upon the threatening figure confronting him.

'Swiggers? Swiggers?' With an air of blank amazement Larry stared from one to the other. 'I haven't the faintest idea of what you're talking about. As for habitual criminals I'm not in the habit of consorting with them. This is my valet and butler, Michael Scaddan.'

'You *think* so. And I did not accuse you of *knowingly* consorting with criminals, Captain Adair. But unless I make a very great mistake you've been harbouring one unconsciously.'

'You do make a great mistake,' Larry retorted stiffly. 'A very great mistake, indeed.'

'We'll see. I had some suspicions last night over something I happened to see, that everything wasn't quite all right with regard to your butler, valet, whatever he is, but I kept them to myself until I got a chance to look one or two things up in the Records Department of The Yard this morning.'

Larry, by a tremendous effort smiled at him amusedly.

'And having done so?' he asked.

'Having done so, Captain Adair, I am of the opinion that this man you call Scaddan is no other than a man wanted by the New York police called Joseph Swiggers alias, "Limpy Joe". I ask you how long you have been acquainted with him, and how long he has been in your service.'

Before Larry could give any answer to this horribly definite question there came again the maid's knock at the door. Without any reference to Dallenby Mr. Swiggers stepped forward and attended to her.

'You needn't leave the room,' Dallenby shot in quietly as the other's hand

was upon the handle.

"Limpy" gave a queer chuckle.

'I should run away from nothing,' he retorted equally quietly, then opened the door.

Standing in the doorway, upon her beautiful face a look of considerable concern, was the lady the Honourable Larry Adair knew as Mademoiselle Jetta Marcein. For the second time in a few moments his heart stood still. But something in the bright, friendly way she smiled upon "Limpy" reassured him—until behind her, leaning against the doorway in a most characteristic attitude, appeared the long lean form, and hard-bitten face of Police-captain Andrew Lannigan. His hopes dropped to zero. What could Lannigan's visit mean but . . .

And then was born in him the desperate resolve to go under game, smiling, and unbeaten; to go under with "Limpy"—no matter what he might have to say about it.

'Oh, Mr. Scaddan,' *she* was saying, 'a most unconventional call this to thank you for your help last night. Captain Adair, you look very bright this morning. I have you to thank too, I hear, for following me up to Boccaro's.'

He took her hand and led her to a chair, but did not, could not, speak. All the time he was conscious that she had taken in the situation, was questioning him with her eyes to find out its significance—if, indeed, she did not understand fully already.

'I don't just know what the quality does on these occasions, Cap,' Lannigan drawled, 'but I'm catchin' t' just drop in an' say "Howdy" before I go. 'N' also, I was figurin' on pryin' you loose from a few of those elegant smokes of yours. I've hit a few good bits of rolled leaf in my time, but those you favour are cert'nly the nux vomica, all the time.'

His strange, cat-like, eyes—never, it seemed to Larry Adair, more sardonic and merciless in expression than during these facetious observations—roved slowly about the room, first settling upon the Superintendent whom he favoured with the curt nod accorded to a man thoroughly disliked. Then they fixed upon the unmoving, silent figure of "Limpy" Joe Swiggers.

'And here,' thought Larry miserably, 'is where the *débâcle* begins. For even if she had not grasped the true inwardness of this morning conclave *à trois*, beyond any question of doubt Lannigan had. At the mention of his return to New York, Larry had felt a very real shiver of apprehension pass through him, though he smiled bravely back at the speaker. Upon "Limpy's" face not one muscle stirred enough to show that he had even heard of the imminence of what meant practically life or death to him. He noticed that all the time, Jetta

Marcein's eyes were fixed upon Lannigan, and that in them was a smile of distinct encouragement. What, he wondered, did that mean? Was she too . . . ? But he forced the thought out of his mind.

And then, suddenly, as though he had sized up the whole situation to a nicety and planned his personal line of action, Lannigan showed his hand.

Towards "Limpy" Swiggers he moved, and upon the narrow shoulder his mighty raw-boned fist dropped with a resounding clap. Larry felt the blood recede from his face; knew that he had gone grey as dead ashes. For one instant a stricken, haggard look showed in the eyes under the heavy brows, in the next it had gone and they were smiling bravely back into the unlit ice-green ones.

'Mike,' declared Captain Lannigan amazingly, 'Mike, ol' sonny boy, I never see you in those doodah duds but it sets me wondering is th' corpse gonna keep long this sultry weather?'

'It cert'nly is a kind o' solemn rig-out, Andy,' agreed Mr. Swiggers without a moment's hesitation, 'but that's what's called th' decrees o' fashion.'

'Th' hell it is,' observed the man from Mulberry Street elegantly. 'You look like you oughta be marryin' people in it—or buryin' 'em.'

'Sometimes, Andy,' the little man remarked oracularly, 'one's as kind to 'em as th' other.'

'You said a mouthful, Mike.'

Inwardly a great warmth of unspeakable relief flooded through Larry Adair. Lannigan, for some reason that could only be marvelled at in utter and unquestioning thankfulness, was not going to send "Limpy" up. And then, in *her* face, turned upon that of the long, ugly man, in her eyes the light of a deep and abiding gratitude, he read the truth. She had saved them, had begged them out of his clutches, had melted into mercy the insoluble stone that was his heart.

The harsh, abrupt voice of the Divisional-Superintendent broke suddenly upon a momentary silence.

'You've known this man some time, Lannigan?' He pointed, in his strangely uncouth manner direct at Swiggers.

'Good long time, Mike, ain't it?' Lannigan asked the person spoken of. 'Twenty years about, I'd put it, since we first met.'

'And you've known him all along?' Dallenby persisted.

'Off and on. If I didn't run into Mike on the street when I wanted him, I knew just where I could drop in and take a look at him.'

Which, Larry reflected, was only too painfully true.

‘I’ll ask you a straight question, Lannigan,’ Dallenby snapped. ‘Do the New York police want this man on any charge?’

‘If they did, am I the sort of guy t’ be slappin’ him on the back an’ makin’ a fuss of him?’ was the uncompromising question. ‘Anyway, if y’ don’t believe me, ask my chief.’ He gave a jerk of his head towards the beautiful creature sitting silently in the chair by the window.

‘Your—your chief?’ Dallenby gasped in utter amazement.

‘Sure thing. If a man is detailed off on an assignment to assist in every way, take orders from and act instantly on same, any person or persons in charge of certain investigations, that said person or persons is their chief for the time being, ain’t they?’

‘Certainly.’

‘Well, then, there’s my chief there. Who is it you’re figurin’ old Mike to be?’

‘A man named Swiggers, whose . . .’

Lannigan interrupted him with a loud, raucous laugh. Coming from him it sounded far worse than a string of curses from another man.

‘ “Limpy Joe”! Well, I’ll tell th’ world! Have y’ ever *seen* “Limpy” Joe Swiggers?’

‘No,’ Dallenby snapped irritably.

‘An’ you don’t want to,’ Lannigan continued, entirely unabashed. ‘That guy has got a face that would frighten a dromedary. He cert’nly is one tough-lookin’ bimbo. He don’t look like he oughter be marryin’ or buryin’ people. And I can tell you another thing, Supe: “Limpy” Joe Swiggers *ain’t* wanted by th’ State or City Police of N’ York. He worked out his last stretch. And if he was, y’ want t’ watch out y’ don’t collar some bird like old Mike an’ ship him across. It’s gonna cost your department some real money bringin’ him back an’ passing out the compensation cash. Stand on me, brother.’

Dallenby got up and addressed himself to Adair. ‘That being so,’ he said, ‘I’ll apologize for intruding upon you.’

‘No intrusion, Superintendent,’ Larry responded heartily, a load off him that left him a hundred years younger. ‘Both Scaddan and I understand that these things have to be cleared up. It’s unfortunate when it’s a case of mistaken identity, that’s all.’

Dallenby gave a hard, little laugh.

‘There’s just one piece of advice I’ll give Mr. Scaddan that will be worth his while to take at any rate during his stay in London. If he doesn’t want to be suspected of being a wrong ’un, let him keep away from the company of them.

We've a saying: "Birds of a feather!" And particularly does he want to keep them out of other people's houses—if the houses want to be considered respectable. I suppose you know you're harbouring two prostitutes here, Captain Adair?'

Something very like hatred surged up in Larry Adair towards this unnaturally cold, malignant-natured man. He opened his mouth to speak, but "Limpy" had forestalled him.

'Why,' he said in his very quietest voice, 'that ain't altogether true, Soop. One of those poor kids has cert'nly been a tough l'il' line of frill; but I reckon she had it mighty tough t' start her. Nobody, in my way of thinkin', is so hell-fired good they can heave bricks about without they know it all right from the jump. 'S like a judge, sendin' a guy up without hearin' the evidence. But th' other li'l' kid ain't done no more harm round this world than be a lunger and have dirt done to her by some mean guy. Anyway, it don't say she's gotta be let die on th' side walk an' nobody lift a finger if she was a hundred times a—what you said she was an' I say she ain't.'

'I suppose you know one of them is a hopeless drug addict—a cocaine fiend?'

"Limpy" Joe smiled amiably upon him.

'Well, about that,' he returned, 'there's kinda good news about that. She ain't so hopeless she can't be broke of it. D'ye know she ain't had a shot since she came into this house. That ain't hopeless. Scottie reckons that if things breaks a bit even f'r th' poor kid she can be cured. Reckons it was just plain misery kept the kid on the dope. An', anyway, Soop, ain't there a plenty more swell people c'mittin' the same crime in this li'l' ol' burg of yours that you wouldn't dare lay your hooks on, no matter what they did?'

Dallenby smiled his cold, wintry smile.

'You're a specious arguer, Scaddan,' he said.

'While we're swoppin' sayin's, Soop,' Mr. Scaddan retorted gently, 'we got one that says: "If y' can't boost, don't knock." It ain't such a bad one t' get through on.'

'Possibly. We happen to look at things from different angles.' He turned again to Adair. 'While I'm here I want to see this girl. She made a call at Scotland Yard yesterday—both of them, in fact—that I want to interrogate her about. You have no objection?'

Adair stiffened.

'No,' he said slowly, 'as long as it's said here. Frankly, I'll stand for no terrorization, Superintendent.'

Again Dallenby gave his hard, little laugh.

‘You’ve got some curious ideas, Captain Adair,’ was all he said.

‘Perhaps I have,’ Larry returned shortly and rang the bell. ‘Ask Miss . . . Miss . . .’ he looked at “Limpy” inquiringly.

‘Her name is Netta,’ Mr. Scaddan supplied.

‘Ask Miss Netta to be kind enough to come here,’ Adair instructed. ‘Just for a moment,’ he added meaningly.

‘And you won’t know her,’ “Limpy” confided to the Superintendent. ‘Since she’s took a shine on th’ soap an’ water, she’s got an *alibi* that wants beating.’

She stood in the doorway for a moment looking about her in a nervous, constrained way. No sign of a smile upon her young face; nothing but a set, dogged look, that might be read as waiting to combat whatever new vicissitudes the Fates might have in store for her.

Adair, strangely struck by the tragedy dominant in the still child-like, oval face, hurried to the doorway to put her at her ease.

‘There is nothing to alarm you in any way,’ he assured her. ‘It is simply that Superintendent Dallenby heard that you were here, and wished to ask you a question or two.’ He cut the ground from under Dallenby’s feet. ‘It is purely relating to a call he understands that you made at Scotland Yard yesterday. Please sit down.’

But the girl continued to stand, her eyes fastened upon those of her old enemy with almost hypnotic intensity. Only once did they move from him—when “Limpy” uttered some half-audible words of encouragement. The look of passionate gratitude she gave the little lame man was plain for any to see.

‘You went to Scotland Yard yesterday,’ Dallenby began brusquely. ‘You and another woman. What for?’

‘That was her business,’ she answered him steadily. ‘You’ve heard, perhaps, from these gentlemen that she’s very ill. She would have died in the street last night but for the kindness of this one’—she spoke his name diffidently—‘Mr. Scaddan, I think his name is. So you will see I can’t tell you anything of her business.’

‘Which of them is it?’ Dallenby questioned. ‘Claret Annie, or . . .’

A dull flush crept over the unpainted skin, her naturally big eyes grew very large and dark and a sudden hard glitter came into them. Larry Adair ground his teeth in choked-down rage and made to intervene, but the soft touch of a gloved hand upon his stopped him. Looking down he met *her* eyes. They smiled at him steadily, then turned again upon the girl, loaded with deep

compassion. She had not answered.

'Come, come,' Dallenby growled. 'You needn't play the innocent maiden here. These good people know just the strength of things. No good play-acting here. Who was the woman you took to the Yard and who turned tail at the last minute? I want an answer and I'm going to have it. Either here—or *somewhere else*.'

The dark wide eyes lifted to his and looked, it seemed to those watching, right through him.

'Dallenby,' she said quietly, so quietly that it seemed little more than a tiny, acid whisper that bit its way through the air. 'You're a low-down dog and a brute beast to those who're at your mercy. Any one of us poor devils know that—and know that you're proud of doing it—glory in it. You prowl the streets night after night, laying in wait for us, hunting us, frightening us as though you took sheer delight in our misery and degradation.'

'It's my business,' he said quietly.

'*And* your pleasure,' she flung back at him savagely. 'You're lucky; you can combine both. It's not every one that can. There's one thing I can tell you,' she went on bitterly with a haggard smile, 'it's more than the women you persecute can say. There's no pleasure in our pretty trade.' Her voice lifted to a poignant cry. 'Nothing but shame, degradation, torture of mind and body, till the end comes in some foul gutter!' She steadied herself again. 'Think of that sometimes when you're doing your . . . business!'

Dallenby turned away and picked up his hat.

'I'll talk to you when you're not hysterical,' he said coldly.

But he did not go. Something in this strange girl's manner held him, even against his will. It was not that she was making him appear in a bad light—that troubled him not one whit. Many years had passed over him since Superintendent Dallenby had cared one jot what people thought about him. But there was something elusive, something mysterious about her. Something that baffled him.

'What I wanted to say,' she went on, utterly disregarding him, 'was that if you meant that the girl I took there—the girl who is ill here now—was anything but the best and purest in the world, you were a liar. She is just one of those who haven't the strength to fight on through poverty and distress like I've had to. And when she lost her baby, she . . . she caved in. It was up to me to help her. But she doesn't know—doesn't dream what I am, how I've earned the money for us. She thinks I'm—I'm like herself,' Her voice sank to that thin whisper again. 'And if ever you tell her, Dallenby, if ever you tell her what I am, I'll *kill* you. I don't know how—but, somehow or other, I'll find a way to

do it.'

'I?' he said and in a strangely changed voice, 'Why should I tell her? I've no personal vindictiveness towards you—towards any of you. If I could drive you off the streets, I would—for your own sakes. That I'm always prowling about at night is true enough. I can't sleep, can't rest when night comes; but that has nothing to do with you women. That's something . . . something that entirely concerns myself.'

She looked at him steadily, her eyes a little softened.

'There's a story told amongst us—us street-walkers,' she said quietly, 'that you had a daughter who ran away and married some brute, then disappeared. And why you're always hidden about in the night shadows is that you're always hoping to find her. Is that true?'

He stared at her in a dull, uncomprehending way.

'It is quite true,' he admitted slowly. 'We all of us, I suppose, nurse our own griefs.'

'When you get her back,' she said, 'give a little thought to the griefs other people may be carrying about with them. Even my kind.' She made a little gesture towards "Limpy" Swiggers and the big eyes filled for the first time with tears. 'You can thank this gentleman that your daughter Lila is alive now, and the doctor says will get better. It was her I tried to get to Scotland Yard . . . I knew she was gone beyond anything I could do, though I'd have gone on selling body and soul to have kept her with me—the only thing in the world that loved and trusted me.'

With one terrible heart-rending cry she turned and rushed from the room.

Some seconds the big, ungainly figure stood without moving—a man stricken, hopelessly stunned. Inch by inch the big face drained slowly of blood until its lividness was that of death itself. Into the hard eyes there came a haggard, hungry look, then the muscles of his face began to twitch and work spasmodically. He looked around upon them with a helplessness that was strangely pitiful.

'God forgive me,' they heard him whisper under his breath.

"Limpy" Swiggers moved forward and laid a gentle hand upon his arm.

'Y' see,' he said quietly, 'there's good in 'em all, brother. Nobody is rotten *right* through.'

* * * * *

'Larry,' *she* was saying as they stood by that window which overlooked Jermyn Street. 'Isn't it time, now that these good people's affairs seem settled. . . .'

‘Thanks to “Limpy,” ’ he interjected.

‘. . . Thanks to “Limpy”,’she agreed readily. ‘Isn’t it time that we began to think of our own. You asked me to promise you something last night. Do you want me to repeat it to-day?’

‘You know I do,’ he said earnestly, ‘The only thing is that I’m not in any way worthy of you. You know what I am—what I’ve been.’

She smiled.

‘Yes,’ she whispered, ‘I know just what you are—and I know just what a few hard words Andy Lannigan once spoke turned you into becoming. But that’s over. Shall I tell you something, Larry—make a confession?’

‘An’ it pleases you,’ he answered.

‘Do you know when I first fell in love with you?’

‘I don’t. You were at pains to keep me at a distance long enough. I know that.’

‘I first fell in love with you, as I passed you coming out of the gate of the Tombs Prison that afternoon. You looked just like a big frightened boy who had all the sorrows of the world crushed down upon his shoulders. Do you remember?’

‘I do indeed,’ he told her in amazement. ‘And though I couldn’t see your face, I remember wondering what kind of super creature you could be that all those hard-faced, plain-clothes detectives would lift a hat to. You looked back at me once, and . . .’

‘And you fled for your life,’ she reminded him. ‘And it took me all the years until Diantuolos’ place to catch up with you.’

A soft knock came at the door.

‘Come in,’ Adair called.

It was Mr. Swiggers who appeared. A smiling, benign-looking Mr. Swiggers who was unquestionably at complete peace with such of the world as he had anything to do with.

‘How are things now?’ Adair asked. ‘Has the Superintendent gone?’

‘He’s comin’ back at seven t’ sit with his daughter a bit. Larry, he’s learned his lesson if ever a man did.’

The beautiful face at the window smiled upon him.

‘Sooner or later wisdom comes to all of us, “Limpy” ’ she said.

‘Sure enough—only it seems t’ take longer t’ come to a cop than any one else. Look at that guy Lannigan? Did any one ever see him act like he did t’day? Wisdom has sure took a holt of him at last.’

‘You know why he did that, “Limpy”,’ she said in a low voice.

‘You bet I do, ma’am,’ he told her. ‘You made him.’

She shook her head.

‘Honour where honour’s due,’ she said. ‘He knew Dallenby was coming here and wanted to square up the old debt.’

Mr. Swiggers waved the subject away with a gesture.

‘Aw, f’rget it, f’rget it,’ he urged ‘Any young fella c’n do a foolish thing and be sorry f’r it afterwards.’

‘He was, “Limpy”,’ she assured him earnestly. ‘He has told me so more than once.’

‘Would you like to do something for me, “Limpy”?’ Adair asked suddenly.

‘Any old thing, Larry boy, any old thing. Give it a name.’

‘Skip around and find out where the nearest registry office is situated.’

‘Anything t’ promote th’ peace an’ harmony of the world,’ said Mr. Swiggers, one vast smile and departed.

Together they watched him cross the road down below and make off upon the other side of the street. Once he glanced up and waved a hand at them.

‘What did you mean by saying that Lannigan did what he did to-day to square the old debt with “Limpy”?’ he asked.

‘Don’t you know? Hasn’t he ever told you?’

‘No. What was there to tell?’

‘It was Lannigan who in a mad moment of fury, broke “Limpy’s” foot,’ she answered. ‘He really was genuinely sorry afterwards.’

‘Do you know,’ Larry said musingly, ‘I thought he cleared us because he—well, because he was in love with you and he knew you wanted it.’

‘He’s been that this ten years or more,’ she said.

‘Did he tell you so?’

She smiled and shook her head.

‘No; but he third-degreed me into admitting that I was hopelessly in love with a ninety-day “vag” man that I’d only seen once and never spoken to, and that was enough for Andy.’

He drew her closer to him.

‘And now, my dear, dear one,’ he said . . . ‘but that’s their business, not ours.’

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
WYMAN AND SONS, LTD.,
LONDON, FAKENHAM AND READING.

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur. Numerous variations in the text for ‘Limpy’.; ‘Limpy.’; ‘Limpy”.; “Limpy’.; “Limpy.”; and “Limpy”.; have been standardized to “Limpy”.

[The end of *Nighthawks!* by John Gordon Brandon]