

BY THE PRINCE OF STORY-TELLERS

The **EX-DETECTIVE**



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E. PHILLIPS

OPPENHEIM

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THE EX-DETECTIVE

By
EDWARD PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

First Published 1933

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I

THE KILLING OF MONICA QUAYLES

Cynthia Gossett, even in the flamboyantly furnished, eight-roomed house of Medlar's Row, Hammersmith, at eight o'clock in the morning, was an extraordinarily beautiful young woman. Her hair was one of those rare shades between yellow and golden, her eyes were of an alluring blue, her lips invited continual caresses and her slim body was exactly of that outline which the devil and a certain male dressmaker invented to make more difficult the life of a man with righteous inclinations. She sat on the arm of her husband's chair at breakfast time, the newspaper slipped from his hand, and he forgot that the toast was slightly burnt.

"Malcolm," she murmured, "I do wish that you were not a detective."

Malcolm Gossett, who was rather proud of his profession and his rapid progress in it, would under any other circumstances have frowned. As it was, his smile was chastened.

"Why, my dear?" he demanded.

She patted his carefully brushed but obstinate hair.

"I don't think that it is a nice profession, dear. I don't think the neighbours like it. When I go out to tea, I am always served last and at Mrs. Richardson's I always get the worst place at the bridge table."

"That may be because you are the youngest," he suggested.

She considered the matter.

"I don't think so," she decided. "Yesterday there were two girls there younger than I am. They made an awful fuss over a girl whose husband was only a tramway inspector."

"That shows how stupid they were," Detective Gossett pointed out. "A Scotland Yard man is anyway a government official."

"So is a prison warder," she reminded him, "but they don't count for much, do they?"

He caressed his wife's hand. He was still, of course, ridiculously in love with her.

"What am I to do about it?" he demanded. "Tracking criminals is about the only work I'm good for."

"I don't believe it," she rejoined. "You're dreadfully clever, Malcolm. If only you were a little more ambitious."

"Ambitious!" he exclaimed. "Why, my dear, I'm full of ambition. I'm going to be a commissioner in no time and a commissioner often gets

knighted. Then you'll be Lady Gossett, we shall move to Kensington and you can cut out all this crowd."

"How heavenly!" she sighed. "Wipe your lips, dear, and promise to take me to the Rialto to-night and I will give you a kiss."

Malcolm Gossett complied and five minutes later boarded his bus for the Embankment.

Conferences had recently come into favour at Scotland Yard and the administration indulged in them freely. There was one proceeding on this particular morning, and Malcolm Gossett, although his recent successes almost entitled him to a place in the councils of his superior officers, was flattered at being invited to join. The Chief himself was there, dark-browed and angry. A great deal of useless talk was in progress and Chief Commissioner Sir Henry Holmes was a man who had scant sympathy with such. He pulled up no less a person than Chief Inspector Betterton, one of the redoubtable seven, in the midst of a rather long-winded argument.

"You're not pointing anywhere, Betterton," he complained grimly. "I didn't call this conference to gloat over our successes. Murders with an obvious motive are easy enough to solve. In time, I admit, we generally put our hands upon the guilty person. What I'm concerned about is the growth of these apparently purposeless murders. The murder of Colonel Forsythe down at Godalming, for instance, and the young Oxford undergraduate, Alexander Hurlby, who appeared not to have an enemy in the world. Both crimes three months old and not an arrest. When I ask questions, the answer usually is that you haven't been able to discover a motive. The men were killed, all the same, and under very similar circumstances."

"Are you connecting the two, sir?" Chief Inspector Betterton demanded.

"I'm not attempting to," was the gruff reply. "I'm simply pointing out that it's rather remarkable that two men apparently without an enemy in the world should have been deliberately murdered by some one who has evidently made a business of crime and who has succeeded in leaving not the slightest clue. If I ask you why no arrest of any sort has been made, you will reply at once that the lack of any apparent motive has frustrated all your efforts. Be careful of that line of argument, gentlemen. There has already been an article in the *Police Gazette* of Paris commenting upon our methods. What we need in the Force just now, it seems to me, is a modern Sherlock Holmes, who can consider the case of a dead body and how it became a dead body from its more immediate environment and not from studying the family history of the victim. You all seem to me, gentlemen, if I may say so, to be putting the cart before the horse. You look first for motive and secondly for circumstantial evidence, and by the time you've finished searching for the one, all traces of the latter have disappeared. . . . Tell me exactly what you're thinking, Betterton."

The man hesitated, but his Chief's eyes were upon him.

"I was thinking that you were becoming a trifle academic, sir," he ventured.

"And you, Grinan?"

"I agree with you only in principle, sir," the Inspector replied. "During the whole of the instruction I have given to younger men, I have laid great weight upon their concentration upon the immediate environment of the crime. It is only after such circumstantial evidence as we have been able to collect is in our hands that I have opened up the subject of motive."

"And you, Arbuthnot?"

A small sandy-haired man made prompt response.

"I leave the scientists and the finger-printing book to do their work," he admitted, "and come back to them afterwards. I go for the motive."

The Commissioner looked down at his papers with something resembling a sneer on his hard face.

"By this time to-morrow morning," he said, "let me have a hundred-word digest from every one of you on the Forsythe and the Hurlby murders. The other cases you are all making a fuss about should be automatic. A traffic policeman could deal with most of them. Don't waste your time. The two murderers I want to see in the condemned cells are the murderers of Forsythe and Hurlby. That will do for this morning, gentlemen."

The conference at an end, Detective Gossett made his way back to his room, shared by two other fellow workers in the crusade against crime, and looked through his diary. There were various enterprises to which he was partly committed. He might have gone out after a wife beater, investigated a reputed case of smuggling in the neighbourhood of Deptford, or spent an hour or two in the West End haunts of one or two well-known criminals, just to keep them under observation. He did none of these things. He filled in that vital and ominous form requesting an interview with the Chief of the Staff, to obtain which he had to make his way into the main office, and as it happened that the Chief of the Staff himself was rather at a loose end, the interview was accorded in half an hour's time.

The Sub-Commissioner, a wizened looking man with beadlike eyes, a tired mouth and a rasping voice, received him with no special favour.

"What is it, Gossett?" he demanded. "I can't see anything in the daily reports or the diary which necessitates an interview. Staff work only here, you know."

"Quite so, sir," Gossett replied. "My business is simple enough. I wish to leave the Force."

The Sub-Commissioner, Richard Moody his name was, stared at his

visitor.

“Got into trouble?” he asked.

“No trouble at all,” Gossett assured him.

“You want to leave the Force?” the Sub-Commissioner repeated, his voice sounding more rasping than ever. “You—a rising young detective, probably an inspector before you’re much older, pension fund creeping up all the time. What the devil do you mean by such nonsense?”

“Just what I say, sir.”

“Why do you want to leave it?”

“I’ve just come from a conference, sir, with the Chief Commissioner,” Gossett replied. “Considering myself as already a free unit, I will beg leave to say that I never heard so much nonsense talked in my life.”

“God bless my soul!” the Sub-Commissioner murmured.

“I joined the Force,” Gossett went on, “because the study of crime had always been a hobby of mine and I thought it would be a wonderful thing to pursue it officially. I have come to the conclusion that I am only wasting my time. We have a magnificent establishment here and everything to help, but if our science belongs to to-day, our methods are a hundred years out of date. I have written out my resignation, sir. I should be glad if you would accept it.”

The Sub-Commissioner had seldom been more puzzled. He was also a little angry.

“Have you any special case on, Gossett?” he asked.

“None at all, sir.”

“As a matter of curiosity, are you proposing to embrace any other walk in life or have you come into a fortune?”

“Neither,” was the quiet reply. “I am going to remain in my present profession unofficially.”

The Sub-Commissioner groaned.

“Don’t tell me that you are about to become one of those loathsome excrescences of cheap modern fiction—a crime investigator?”

Then for the first time Gossett smiled.

“Under another name, sir,” he replied, “that will be my future avocation.”

The Sub-Commissioner shook his head sadly.

“Last year,” he lamented, “it was flies and midget golf. This year it is fools.”

Malcolm Gossett spent a busy but not profitless afternoon. He took over the lease of a small office in that nest of small streets in the neighbourhood of the Adelphi, together with a Turkey carpet and various articles of office furniture, once the property of a commission agent who had gone abroad for the good of his health. He ordered a small brass plate, a supply of stationery,

and engaged the services of a smart errand boy. These preliminaries completed, he turned up for his evening meal at Number Twelve, Medlar's Row, at the accustomed hour, to receive a rapturous greeting from his beautiful but crafty young wife, who came flying down the stairs, looking as much like Marlene Dietrich as any one else in the world could.

"Thought I'd dress first," she explained. "Susan's looking after the dinner. You did say something about a cinema this evening, didn't you?"

"One of us did," Malcolm assented.

"Let me give you a drink," she proposed hastily. "The evening paper's just come and you can have a quarter of an hour's rest. Any news?"

"Great news," he answered. "The criminals of the world are laughing in their sleeves. I've laid down my career upon the altar of sacrifice. I am no longer a Scotland Yard man."

"Malcolm!" she gasped. "What are you then?"

"Well," he replied, as he shook himself free from his overcoat and, linking his arm in his wife's, made his way into the sitting room, "I did think of being a coal merchant. Uncle Henry's business is just being wound up, you know. I decided, however, to live by my wits. I am a gentleman at large, Cynthia, with a brass plate upon his door which means nothing."

Cynthia, as full of prejudices as most women but with little curiosity and immense confidence in her man, gave him first her lips and, after a decent interval, a glass of sherry. Then she led him towards the easy chair.

"Nothing will prevent our going to the cinema to-night?" she asked.

"Nothing in the world," he assured her. "I feel just like it."

"Then I will tell you my news," she decided. "You know the Tower House opposite?"

"Of course."

"Monica Quayles was murdered there this afternoon."

Malcolm Gossett was a man of his word and after dinner the evening was duly spent at the neighbouring cinema. He held his wife's hand most of the time, watched her consume an incredible number of chocolates and sympathised whole-heartedly with her breathless appreciation of the film. Afterwards he took her to a little supper place close by and, on their return to Medlar's Row, they lingered only for a moment outside their house to glance at the brilliantly lit edifice opposite.

"Shot," Cynthia confided. "Through the heart, they say. How some one must have hated her."

He knocked out the ashes from his pipe.

"You have to hate to kill," he remarked a trifle didactically. . . .

On the following morning, after a substantial breakfast and an affectionate

farewell to his wife, Gossett's curiosity seemed for the first time to be aroused. He crossed the road and accepted in friendly fashion the salutation of the policeman standing at the gate. The latter stood on one side to let him pass.

"Inspector Grinan's inside, sir, if you'd like to see him," he announced.

"Thank you," Gossett replied. "Any arrest yet?"

The policeman looked knowing.

"They've got the chap, all right, sir," he declared. "I think the Inspector is waiting to bring him in himself. Sure you wouldn't like to go inside, sir?"

"Not in my line now, thanks, Constable. Good-morning, Grinan."

The Inspector, solemn and ponderous, came swinging down the garden path. He was smoking a cigarette and had the air of a man content with himself and the world.

"Hello, Gossett," he exclaimed; "what's all this about your having left us?"

"It's quite true," Gossett acknowledged. "I live just opposite, though, so I couldn't resist coming across to make a few enquiries."

"Call of the blood still, eh?" the Inspector remarked, with a chuckle. "Well, this case wouldn't give you many thrills. Plain as a pikestaff. I shall be tapping the young man on his shoulder within an hour. I hope that will take the Chief off his grouch for a time. Can I give you a lift?"

Gossett accepted and, following the Inspector into the car, seated himself by his side.

"Clear case?" he enquired, proffering his cigarettes.

"Can't even make it look difficult," the other confessed. "Young man in a furious state of jealousy admitted by the only servant a few minutes before the shot was heard. From the moment he entered the room nothing was heard but angry voices and then the shot. The servant saw the young man running down the stairs, saw him throw his revolver away, climb into a car and dash off. There wasn't another soul in the house."

"Sounds all right," Gossett observed.

"The young fellow seems to have been determined to hang himself," Grinan continued. "Left one of his gloves in the room, his cane and an anonymous letter addressed to himself, which you'll hear about in court. On the evidence I have, I could go straight to Number Seventeen, Malvern Chambers, and bring him in. I'm going to get a warrant first, though. It looks better and I have men posted on the spot."

"By the by, where is Malvern Chambers?" Gossett enquired.

The Inspector pointed across the street.

"That block of flats there," he indicated. "One of our slops outside."

"Can you put me down here?"

The Inspector leaned over and touched the chauffeur on the arm.

"Pull up for a moment," he directed.

Malcolm Gossett descended, crossed the road, looked in a shop window for a moment, passed two plain-clothes policemen without recognition, entered the vestibule of the Malvern Building and, ringing for the lift, mounted to the second floor. A worried-looking manservant admitted him into a suite of rooms, and Gossett found himself confronted by the most terrified-looking young man he had ever seen in his life.

“My name is Cunningham,” the latter remarked. “What do you want? I can’t see any one. I’m ill. I’m waiting for the doctor.”

The cup of tea which he had been holding slipped from its saucer on to the floor. The young man himself, scarcely noticing it, sank into a chair. His hands gripped the tablecloth, the sweat was standing out in little beads upon his forehead.

“What do you want with me?” he called out. “I can’t have people here. I’m not well, I tell you. What do you want?”

“I want to know whether you shot Monica Quayles?”

“I knew that some one would ask me that before long,” Cunningham groaned. “I shouldn’t be surprised if the police come to ask me. I can’t help it. Of course I didn’t shoot Monica. She was my girl. We never had even a serious quarrel.”

“Who let you into the house?”

“I let myself in. I have a latchkey. I went into her room just as usual and there she was, lying dead.”

“Why didn’t you call for the police?”

“I was too frightened,” the young man confessed. “I’m not very strong. I get nervous fits. When I saw her lying on the floor, I couldn’t bear it. I just ran out.”

“You’re sure you didn’t shoot her yourself?” Gossett persisted.

Cunningham burst into a stream of incoherent denial. Gossett watched his face and listened.

“If you didn’t kill her,” he asked, “can you think of any one else who might have done it?”

“How could I tell?” the young man gasped. “I knew none of her friends.”

“It was your revolver, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, but I gave it to her a week ago. She said that she felt frightened at night sometimes.”

Gossett glanced at the clock and sighed.

“If you find yourself in trouble about this business, I should send for Littledale,” he advised. “He’s the best criminal lawyer I know.”

The young man gripped the back of his chair as he swung round. Ghastly fear shone out of his eyes. He was white almost to the lips. His hands were twitching in agony.

“I didn’t do it,” he called out. “I didn’t kill Monica. How can they arrest me?”

He collapsed and his unofficial visitor slipped quietly away.

A coroner’s inquest was held upon the body of Monica Quayles. There were only four witnesses of any importance, the first of whom was Hannah Miles, the housekeeper and sole domestic of the dead young woman. She gave her evidence clearly but with some natural reluctance, and she kept her head sympathetically turned from the ghastly-faced young man who was seated between two officials of the Court. She did not admit him into the house that afternoon, because he had a latchkey of his own, but she watched him enter her mistress’ room. She admitted that he was in a state of great agitation. She heard the sound of loud and angry voices, she heard the shot, and within five minutes of his arrival she saw him rush out of the house, throw the revolver into a small shrubbery, jump into his car and drive off. Mr. Cunningham, she thought, had always been very fond of her late mistress but he was of an exceedingly jealous disposition. She admitted reluctantly that there were times when her late mistress had secretly received other guests. . . . She was followed by Inspector Grinan, who produced an anonymous letter of the usual type, addressed to Ernest Cunningham, Esquire, at Malvern Chambers, containing a brief record of visits paid to the deceased by various men. That letter had been found by the side of the dead body, as though the young man had forced it upon her attention. The revolver with which the deed was done, and from which only one bullet was missing, bore the initials ‘E. C.,’ and the bullet from the discharged chamber corresponded in every way with the one by which Monica Quayles had been killed. The other two witnesses, the chauffeur and a passer-by, merely testified—the former with the utmost reluctance—to the distracted appearance of the young man and the fact that he was carrying the revolver when he left the house. Cunningham, when arrested, appeared to have been half stupefied with drugs and drink; he vehemently protested his innocence but could give no coherent description of the tragedy. The coroner’s summing-up was merely a matter of form. The jury, without leaving the box, found that the deceased had met her death through a bullet wound inflicted by Ernest Cunningham. The verdict was, in short, one of wilful murder against Cunningham. . . .

Detective Inspector Grinan and ex-detective Gossett left the Court together. The former, according to his custom, paused to light a cigarette.

“That,” he remarked, as he caught up with his companion, “should be a case after the Chief’s own heart. There is circumstantial evidence enough there to hang any man and a perfectly convincing motive to clinch the matter.”

“It seems a snip,” Gossett agreed.

“A snip of the rope for Mr. Ernest Cunningham, I imagine,” the Inspector rejoined. “Can I give you a lift anywhere?”

“If you’re going back to the shop, I’ll come with you, if I may. The Chief told me I might have the run of the place and there are some records I should like to look up.”

“Come along and welcome,” the Inspector invited. “It’s a department I don’t often visit myself, but I daresay it has its uses.”

“Short of a miracle,” Gossett confessed, “I don’t think it’s going to do me any good.”

George Littledale was a busy man and he rather grudged the quarter of an hour which he knew he must give to ex-detective Gossett who was next on the list of his waiting callers. He welcomed him pleasantly, however, and installed him in a comfortable chair.

“Sorry about this poor young chap Cunningham, whom you advised to send for me,” he began. “Nothing to be done, of course. I am briefing Julius Read, with Pennington for junior. Can’t do better than that for him and I understand there’s plenty of money.”

“You look upon the case as hopeless, I suppose?”

The lawyer looked at his visitor in surprise.

“Well, my dear fellow, of course it is,” he answered. “He’s just the type who would deny everything frantically at first and then come out with a confession when it’s too late. As a matter of fact, his chauffeur would swear that he was half tight and would swear that he didn’t take the revolver with him, which, of course, would do away with a murderous intent, but even then I don’t think it would help him a tinker’s dam to plead guilty. The case is too flagrant. Don’t you think so yourself?”

“I suppose I do in a certain way,” Gossett admitted. “Still, one gets queer sorts of hunches sometimes. The young man doesn’t seem to me as though he’d have the courage to go and shoot a woman in cold blood, when he must have known that there was no getting away with it. However, I don’t want to take up your time, Mr. Littledale. You’ll be seeing him now and then, of course. There’s one thing I did want you to ask him. Does he know much about Mrs. Miles, the housekeeper?”

“Scarcely anything at all,” Littledale replied. “Naturally I don’t believe in leaving a stone unturned, so I’ve asked him that already. She’s over sixty years of age, she was a stranger to Monica Quayles when she took the position but had the most excellent references, and she seems to have had not an interest in life except doing her work and doing it, I should think, extremely well. She was always perfectly civil to Cunningham but they scarcely ever met.”

“You’ve considered the question of her having let another man into the

house, I suppose?" Gossett enquired.

"My dear fellow, it's untenable. Both the back and the front doors are open to public observation, and do you suppose if any one else had been seen about the place we shouldn't have heard of it at once? Besides, the way she gave her evidence was altogether convincing, and there are numberless little points we won't go into now which are dead against such a theory."

"It does seem rather far-fetched," Gossett acknowledged. "A man's life, though, however loose a lot he may be, a man's life is a big thing, Littledale."

"Don't we realise it in my profession?" the lawyer replied. "I make it my chief object in a case like this not to leave a stone unturned. The Crown are perfectly satisfied with their case, and I'm a lawyer, not a detective. If you want to make any enquiries along any other lines, Gossett, I'll guarantee your expenses, but I tell you at once that I'm convinced it's hopeless."

Gossett rose to his feet and shook hands.

"I'm afraid you're right," he admitted.

The Spaniards, in their devotion to a somewhat bloodthirsty sport, have at least sufficient sporting instinct to adopt a lukewarm attitude towards a bull fight in which the animals concerned are hopelessly outclassed. The English public who frequent the famous murder trials have never learnt the same spirit. They like a killing for their money. After the hours in the stuffy court and the occasional patches of dullness, they want their final thrill, they like their victim thrown to the sacrifice. Therefore, although the odds freely offered amongst the white-bewigged gentry in the front of the Court at the trial of Ernest Cunningham were at least a hundred to one on his conviction, the Court was still packed from floor to ceiling and the usual hundreds of pairs of greedy, libidinous eyes hung on the face of the slim, white-faced man, twisting about in the dock with the air of a caged animal. The final thrill they knew was a certainty!

The Crown case was presented almost scornfully. It was not until the great Julius Read himself rose to cross-examine the principal witness for the prosecution that any one was conscious of a new sensation of interest. Sir Julius had suddenly the air of a man who had something lurking underneath his silken tones and his air of gentle consideration with this elderly and most respectable witness. One or two in the well of the Court, people of quick perceptions, remembered the telephone messages that had been streaming in during the last half-hour, remembered too the entrance of a weary-looking man with strong features but tired eyes, a man who had been found a place at the solicitors' table next the famous lawyer for the defence and who, during a brief interval, had been admitted to a conference with the great Julius Read himself. Others had noticed something even more significant—a briefly pencilled note

had been passed up by his lawyer to the prisoner himself, who was standing with dazed eyes fixed upon his counsel. The latter was unaccountably silent for several moments after he had risen for purposes of cross-examination. Mrs. Miles, indeed, would have left the box but for the kindly restraining hand of the policeman.

“Mrs. Miles,” the great King’s Counsel said at last, and his tone was gentleness itself, “you were in service with the deceased lady, I believe, for about one year.”

“A little longer than that, sir.”

“You came to her, as my learned brother for the prosecution has elicited, with the highest of characters.”

“There has never been any question as to my character, sir, so far as I know.”

“Quite so. You gave us to understand, I believe, that the prisoner was a stranger to you.”

For the first time this quietly spoken, responsible woman seemed to hesitate. There was a faint sensation of interest in the Court not yet wholly born, the mutterings of the passion to come.

“I had never seen him before I came to take service with Miss Quayles.”

There was a change in Julius Read’s tone. He leaned slightly forward. Every word he spoke now reached the farthest corners of the Court.

“But you knew who he was. You knew that he was the young man who had seduced your daughter three years ago and who had lived with her until he transferred his affections to the deceased.”

Then there was a shiver, a rustling of half-spoken words and half-drawn breaths. The woman in the witness box clutched at the ledge in front of her. Her face was suddenly grey.

“You must answer my question,” the Counsel said sternly, and this time there was a stab in his voice. “You knew that Ernest Cunningham, who was visiting Monica Quayles day by day, was the man who had betrayed your daughter. You knew that Monica Quayles was the woman for whose sake he had deserted her.”

The witness’ hand groped for the glass of water which lay by her side. Her fingers shook so that she could barely carry it to her lips. She set it down.

“Yes, I knew that,” she acknowledged faintly.

There was a strange sound of voices in the Court. It seemed as though every one was speaking at once. It was quite half a minute before order could be restored. Then again the silence became momentous.

“I am sorry, Mrs. Miles, to have to ask you this question. I myself know, but I want you to tell the Court. Where is your daughter at the present moment?”

The pilloried woman seemed incapable of speech. The barrister's gesture was one of scornful compassion.

"I will put my question in this fashion. Is your daughter now an inmate of the Wandstead Lunatic Asylum?"

The woman's voice came back to her. There was the fury of a demon in her face as she pointed across the Court to Ernest Cunningham.

"She's where that hound sent her!"

Again the sea of voices was beaten back into silence only by threats to clear the Court. Julius Read was in no hurry. He waited calmly and patiently. When he spoke, there was no mercy in his tone or in his words themselves.

"And therefore, Mrs. Miles, because the prisoner at the bar was guilty of the seduction of your daughter, and because it was the woman you served, Monica Quayles, who had supplanted her, you murdered your mistress and hoped that the young man there who had wronged you would hang for a crime he never committed."

"He deserved it—God knows he deserved it!" she screamed, and collapsed helpless in the arms of the policeman who had rushed to catch her.

The rest of the proceedings were purely formal, but Ernest Cunningham, although he was not a popular criminal, had to wait four hours before the crowds would let him leave the Court. . . . Julius Read took Littledale and ex-detective Gossett across to his rooms in the Temple. He produced tumblers of an especial size, whisky of great age and a syphon of Schweppe's soda. His arm rested almost caressingly upon Gossett's shoulder.

"Gossett, my friend," he declared, "you've given me absolutely the most thrilling moment of my life."

"And pretty well of mine," Littledale echoed. "I'm not claiming one atom of the credit for this. I never doubted but that Cunningham was guilty. I never saw a gleam of hope anywhere. I don't wonder at the Crown thinking their case was overwhelming. Circumstantial evidence and motive both there. I can't think what made you persevere, Gossett."

Gossett took the longest drink he had ever taken in his life.

"After all," he said, as he put his tumbler down half empty, "there were no complications. Either Cunningham was guilty or the woman knew all about it and was playing false. The more I've seen and heard of Cunningham, the more I dislike him, and yet somehow I didn't believe him guilty. Very well. I explored the hundred-to-one chance. I went for the woman. Every one of her references was genuine. She's been in two places over fifteen years. There's never been a thing against her. Yet I wasn't convinced. I was almost giving up when I got Grinan to let me see the envelope of that anonymous letter. That corresponded with a packet I found in the flat. I took the letter to a handwriting

expert. He compared it with Mrs. Miles' account books and found a marked similarity in the capitals. I discovered a box of the cartridges in a drawer of the murdered woman's bedroom—not the room in which she was found. This seemed to indicate that Cunningham was telling the truth when he said that he had given her the revolver and that he had not brought it with him that day. I found out that Mrs. Miles used to take a day and a half off every three months—she was in service then with an old-fashioned family in Harley Street, where she had been for twelve years; I found out where she went—to Wandstead. I saw the girl she visited there—I even took a snapshot of her. I took it to the theatre and the rest was easy. Every one recognised it. It was the girl whom Cunningham used to fetch from the theatre every night, before, by some evil chance, he met Monica Quayles. Some months after Cissie Miles had been certified insane, her mother took service with Monica Quayles. The rest is horrible to think of, but it is one of the most complete and devilish schemes of revenge on the part of a distracted mother which one can possibly conceive.”

“What a fiend of a woman!” Littledale murmured.

A clerk entered the room and whispered to his master. Julius Read listened gravely.

“A message from the hospital,” he confided to the others. “Mrs. Miles has been there for two hours now and they say she's raving mad. She'll never have to stand her trial.”

Gossett set down his glass empty. He was anxious to get home to his wife.

“The whole thing,” Littledale summed up, as they parted, “goes to prove how wise you were, Gossett, to have left the Yard. A few men like you are needed outside. Scotland Yard has only one job and that is to hunt for criminals and prove them guilty. The defending lawyer like myself is on the other side, of course, but a lawyer is not a detective. Gossett here, for instance, had a hunch that the man was innocent. I've talked to him for hours at a time and I would have laid a hundred-to-one that he was guilty. Bring me a few more cases like this, Gossett, and I'll squeeze you into the firm.”

“And let me have the briefs for them,” Julius Read promised, as he shook hands, “and etiquette or no etiquette, I'll divide my fees with you.”

Cynthia wore blue for the night of the celebration, blue the exact shade of her adorable eyes, crêpe de Chine with a floating scarf. Gossett wore his rarely used tails, a white tie and a white waistcoat. They were really rather an unusually good-looking couple.

“Cynthia, my dear,” her husband said, as he raised his glass, “you are indeed my inspiration. You can tell your friends that I am no longer a policeman. A lawyer has very nearly offered me a share in his practice and a barrister is only too anxious to divide his fees with me.”

“You dear, clever man,” she murmured, as she raised her glass to his. “And

wasn't it nice," she added, with a little sigh of content, "I was at the Meadows' this afternoon—the doctor's wife, you know—and he insisted upon my playing bridge at his table and his wife made me sit next her at tea. They were all so interested to know that you had started a new business on your own account."

"Very kind of them, I'm sure," he murmured, with a twinkle in his eyes.

"You haven't told me about the fee yet," she reminded him.

He felt for his pocketbook. She beat expectantly upon the table with her hands. Very slowly he rolled out an unmounted photograph.

"What on earth is that, Malcolm?" she demanded.

"Dearest," he confided, "I am a cautious man. I wanted to bring you the cheque to see but I wanted also to cash it. I compromised, had the cheque photographed, then cashed it, banked the money and here we are."

He stretched it out in front of her. She read it until her voice faded away in wonder.

BARCLAY'S BANK

November the Seventeenth.

Pay to the Order of MALCOLM GOSSETT

FIVE THOUSAND POUNDS STERLING.

CUNNINGHAM.

"Malcolm," she gasped. "It can't be true! Have we all that?"

"Every penny of it," he assured her.

"Just for a fortnight's work!"

"It is also," he reminded her, his thoughts straying back for a moment to the crowded Court, "the price of a man's life."

Cynthia looked cautiously around. They were dining very early, as they were going on to a theatre, and their table was in a secluded corner. No one was looking. Her hand stole out towards him. He bent his head. She kissed him on the lips and Malcolm Gossett was very happy.

II

THE MAN ON THE WATER-LOGGED KETCH

Ex-detective Malcolm Gossett stood upon the edge of a crumbling and rudely constructed wooden dock and decided that with infinite pains, skids, misdirections and discomforts he had found his way into the most God-forsaken and dreary hole upon the face of the earth. Behind him, mist-ridden and rain-soaked, stretched many acres of marshland, across which wound the narrow track by which he had come. Facing him on the fog-hung horizon was the sombre glow of the East End lights. The curve of the river, marked by the gaunt buildings, factories and warehouses which rose here and there in stark and portentous ugliness, stretched to the limits of his obscured vision. The stink of some chemical works poisoned the air. Between him and the river itself was nothing but a blank sea of mud. Immediately below him was his destination—a miserable inlet or backwater of the river—and secured to some iron rings at his feet was a dirty and ill-looking ketch, with untidily furled sails and sloppy deck. Nothing but the reflection that it had cost him an hour and a half to get here, and that if he returned with his mission unaccomplished he might be compelled to make the journey again, kept Gossett from turning his back upon the whole inferno and hurrying back to the corner beyond which his taxicab driver had refused to attempt further progress.

There was a sound of movement below, a flash of light. Presently a head only half seen presented itself from the cabin below. Even then Gossett had to struggle with the inclination towards prompt and undignified retreat. He held his ground unwillingly.

“Who the mischief are you and what do you want?” asked the presumed owner of the ketch.

The voice startled Gossett almost as much as the hideousness of the place had chilled and depressed him. A torrent of oaths and threats would have seemed in keeping with the surroundings and with so much of the man as was visible; the slow Oxford drawl, the gentle weariness came as an incredible shock.

“My name is Gossett—Malcolm Gossett. I came down to have a few words with you on business.”

“What sort of business? Who sent you?” was the startled enquiry.

Gossett leaned down. He was about four or five feet above the level of the deck.

“A stranger to me, I must confess,” he acknowledged. “A lady called

Truslove.”

“Bella Truslove! Like her damned cheek. I don’t know who you are, sir, but do I look like receiving visitors here?”

“You appear to me,” Gossett admitted, “to be in a thoroughly unsuitable place for anything, except perhaps to commit suicide.”

“Or murder,” the other laughed unpleasantly.

“Precisely,” Gossett agreed. “With your permission, I shall make my apologies for disturbing you and take my leave.”

“You will do nothing of the sort,” was the unexpectedly firm reply. “Since you are here, you will remain long enough at any rate to tell me your business.”

“I do not find your reception encouraging,” Gossett observed.

“Any other criticisms?”

“Since you invite me to be frank, I find your environment disgusting and your boat, to say the least of it, uninviting. Good night.”

“Oh, no, I can’t part with you just yet,” the mocking voice replied. “You may change your opinion before you go. You haven’t seen my cabin yet.”

“If it is as filthy as the rest of the boat, I haven’t any desire to,” Gossett said. “Good night or no good night, I’m off.”

A tall figure, a man in rough, blue serge trousers, a fisherman’s jersey and without tie or collar, suddenly loomed into shape. His hair was unkempt but his features matched his voice. What kept Gossett for the moment motionless, however, was the fact that he was looking into the barrel of a shotgun.

“This, my friend,” the tenant of the ketch confided, “is chiefly for show. I do shoot a duck sometimes, at this hour of the night, and I was, in fact, just loading my gun when you arrived. It would pain me to use my weapon for any less lawful purpose. I cannot endure curiosity, however, so I am compelled to ask you to descend into my cabin and, so long as you have found your way here, to tell me why you came and what you want.”

Gossett considered the situation for a moment. In a loosely hanging little pocket easily accessible through the slit in his mackintosh, he possessed a much deadlier lethal weapon than the carelessly held shotgun which he was convinced the man on the ketch had no intention of using. He shrugged his shoulders, therefore, and gave in.

“If you will give me a hand,” he suggested.

The man kicked some steps into position. Carelessly though he held his gun, he evidently had no intention of parting with his apparent advantage. Gossett scrambled down and followed his host into the cabin. The latter inspected him curiously under the hanging oil lamp.

“Well,” he decided, “you look a bit of an athlete, but I daresay I could deal with you if you proved troublesome. I have an inherited aversion to a loaded

sporting gun.”

He broke it and, extracting the cartridges, slipped them into his pocket and stood the gun up in a corner. Then he seated himself opposite his visitor and leaned across the strip of table.

“Well, my mysterious friend,” he asked, “now what do you think of my temporary habitation?”

Gossett’s eyes wandered round the place in a curiosity which he took no trouble to hide. The ketch had evidently been used as a yacht, for the cupboards were of thick mahogany and had been kept in decent repair. On one side were bottles, mostly whisky and brandy bottles and unopened; on the other side were books, books of extraordinary variety and quality. There was an exquisitely bound copy of Verlaine’s poems, half a dozen volumes of Alfred de Musset, a rare edition of Shelley and a Chiswick Press Shakespeare. On the table itself was the *Times*, the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Nineteenth Century*. Sprawling across them, half-opened, was an outrageous copy of *Le Sourire*.

“Time you answered my question, isn’t it?” the owner of this megalomaniacal abode demanded. “What do you think of my habitation? What do you think of me? What made you take account of the possibly idle words of a somewhat *passé* streetwalker and risk your life in such an *entourage*?”

“To tell you the truth,” Gossett observed, “I think your abode *is* horrible and you are probably mad. However, the fact remains that, whatever her profession may be, the lady whose name you recognised managed to rake together ten pounds, which she handed over to me as a fee to come down here and see if I could help you out of your troubles. I have already, I must confess, lost my desire to do so. You probably don’t deserve help and don’t want it.”

The owner of the ketch leaned forward. His mouth had lost its half-humorous curve, his expression was somewhat more unpleasant.

“Before we go any further,” he insisted, “tell me precisely who you are and what your profession is.”

Gossett reflected for a moment.

“It is perhaps a reasonable enquiry,” he admitted. “I was once employed as a detective at Scotland Yard.”

The other man’s muscles seemed to stiffen and there was an ugly glitter in his eyes. Gossett continued, however, indifferently:

“For various reasons, I found the limitations of my position irksome. I decided that the suspected criminal, or even the actual criminal, if he become so through no fault of his own, deserved some measure of help in the world and could probably afford to pay for it. I struck out a profession of my own. I have not found a suitable name for it yet, but outside my office, Number Seventeen, Macadam Street, you will find a brass plate bearing the name of

Malcolm Gossett and nothing else.”

The owner of the ketch appeared to relax.

“You’re a quaint bird, anyway,” he observed. “Take a spot of anything?”

“Another two minutes without such an invitation,” Gossett replied, “I should have considered a breach of hospitality. You seem to be very well supplied. I should like a whisky and soda.”

Gossett’s host produced a bottle of a choice brand, a syphon, and two glasses. He sneered at his visitor’s modest portion, filled a tumbler half full of whisky for himself and splashed in a little soda water.

“There is no one in the world who could help me,” he declared, “but that isn’t your fault. Here’s how!”

“If you drink whisky like that for long,” Gossett remarked, as his host set down the glass empty, “no one will have a chance of helping you.”

“Don’t be rude to me—you streetwalker’s tout,” was the sullen retort.

Gossett half rose to his feet.

“If you say that again,” he threatened, “I’ll give you such a hiding that you’ll be glad to jump into your own filthy little backwater.”

There was a moment’s silence. From outside came the gurgling from the backwash of a passing steamer. There was no other sound. The two men seemed equally tense, their eyes fixed on each other. It was the owner of the ketch who relaxed.

“All right,” he said. “Bella isn’t a bad sort, after all. She has a conscience. Earn your ten pounds.”

“I can only earn my ten pounds,” Gossett explained, “if you can tell me of any way in which you require help. Otherwise, I shall deduct my expenses and hand back the balance of my fee to—your lady friend.”

“*Touché*,” the owner of the ketch acknowledged. “You can’t help me, Mr. Gossett, if that is your name. You’ve got the smell of the policeman about you still. You’d be off to Scotland Yard if I told you my story.”

“That is precisely where you are wrong,” Gossett said firmly. “I am in no way connected with the Yard or the police. You can tell me your story, if you have one, as you would to a lawyer. If I can help you, I shall tell you so. If I can’t, not a word of what you have said will ever be repeated.”

“New sort of game this, isn’t it?”

“Absolutely. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you.”

The owner of the ketch reflected.

“Bella’s no fool,” he soliloquised. “I expect she knew what she was up to. Ever hear the name of Alexander Hurlby?”

“It’s a name that’s pretty nearly driven Scotland Yard mad,” Gossett confided. “The Alexander Hurlby murder was our *bête noir* for months. It was one of the reasons why I left the Yard.”

“That’s flattering, at any rate,” the other observed. “Well, that’s my name.”

“What do you mean?” Gossett demanded. “Hurlby was the name of the man who was murdered.”

“Captain Alexander Hurlby, Dragoon Guards,” his opposite neighbour put in quickly. “Here I am. I am dead enough. This is my burial place and you’re sitting in my coffin. Have a drop more whisky?”

Gossett rose to his feet and swung the chain-hung oil lamp so that the light shone full into his neighbour’s face, then he resumed his seat.

“My God!” he murmured. “That may be the truth of it, after all. Yes, I’ll have a drop more whisky. On one condition, though. Drink like a human being—two fingers and not more.”

The man opposite laughed bitterly as he filled the glasses.

“Why should I drink like a human being?” he demanded, serving himself, however, to only a reasonable portion. “Haven’t I told you that I’m not a human being? I’m a corpse and this is my coffin. Nothing left for me in life but to get drunk here or to steal out in one of those back streets, on the other side of the river where the police don’t come, and look for my fun there. Much more respectable to get drunk like a gentleman here.”

“You won the Newdigate Prize at Oxford,” Gossett reflected. “You have published three volumes of verse and one of criticism. In the war, you got your D.S.O. and several foreign decorations. When you retired—”

“Soon afterwards, anyway, I was murdered,” the owner of the ketch interrupted. “Since then I’ve solved the mystery of purgatory—just a little worse than hell, that’s all.”

“Listen,” Gossett said earnestly. “You’re worth helping. When I was at the Yard, I was assistant to the man who had your case in hand. I know all about you. I’m rather glad I took Bella Truslove’s ten pounds.”

“You forget,” the other remarked, with a sudden flame of despair in his tone. “You forget one thing.”

“What’s that?”

Captain Alexander Hurlby rose to his feet. He leaned across the table which the flat of his hands were clutching. There was something portentous in his face, as there was in his tone.

“If I’m not the murdered man,” he shouted, “I must be the murderer!”

Gossett’s office boy came into his master’s private room to make his announcement, a few mornings later, with a subdued chuckle.

“There’s that dame again that was here Tuesday, sir,” he announced.

“Show her in and mind your manners,” was the severe reply.

Bella Truslove in her halcyon days had been called a flaming blonde. Nowadays the light had faded from her eyes and from her hair, and she had

acquired the patient, drab humility of the partially submerged. She was dressed as quietly as she knew how, and she had reduced to the last possible degree the perfumes and cosmetics on which she relied. Nevertheless, she entered Gossett's plain little office almost shyly and she was obviously ill at ease when he rose to his feet and himself placed her chair. As soon as the door was closed, however, a certain eagerness came into her face.

"You have been to see him?" she asked.

"I was there the day before yesterday," he told her.

"He wasn't too—fierce?"

Gossett smiled.

"Well," he replied, "at one time I think I had a narrow escape from coming away with a few slugs in my legs. Afterwards we got on all right, though."

"Can you do anything to help?"

Gossett's expression was very grave. The Alexander Hurlby case was already beginning to trouble him.

"It is difficult," he admitted. "I shall try, of course, but it seems to me there is one insurmountable barrier."

A spot of colour burned through the pallor of her cheeks, the light in her faded eyes was almost of fear. She had drawn off her gloves and her thin veiny hands, overladen with sham jewellery, were clenched nervously together.

"Is there nothing to be done?" she pleaded.

"Is it for you to ask me that?" he ventured. "I think we both know that there is only one person who can set him free."

Something of the old hopelessness was back in her face. Gossett sighed as he counted out a little packet of notes which he had drawn from his pocket.

"In any case," he told her, "there was no need for this money. I did not understand when I took it. Everything that can be done will be done without that."

He passed it into her trembling fingers.

"You are sure?" she asked wistfully.

"Absolutely."

She opened her bag and slipped in the money. The packet found its place amongst three sixpences, a few ha'pence and an overperfumed but none too clean handkerchief.

"If the money really isn't necessary," she said, "for me it will be wonderful. I stole some of it," she added faintly, "and God, how I struggled for the rest! Mr. Gossett," she went on, her voice suddenly hysterical, "they told me you were such a clever man. Can't you help? Can't you drag him out of all that? Don't tell me there is only one way. He never did anything wrong. He was too great a gentleman."

Gossett moved uneasily in his chair. He felt that the words which he should

have spoken would have been the last refinement of torture. He rose to his feet and led her to the door, his hand upon her shoulder in friendly fashion.

“Come in and see me again soon,” he begged. “You shall know then how I’m getting on.”

“Next week,” she promised.

Bella Truslove made no further appearance, however, at Gossett’s office, and in the Sunday papers, which seem to have a flair for hitting upon such items of news, he learnt the reason. He came upon the following paragraph quite by accident.

Woman of bad character ejected from Cabinet Minister’s house. Attempts to fight her way in to study of well-known peer. Given into custody by Lord Hurlby.

There followed a brief report of the case, in the course of which it was stated that a woman giving the name of Bella Truslove, whom the police described as being of bad character, was brought before the magistrate and remanded. Gossett’s face darkened as he read. The next morning he sought an interview with the Chief Commissioner at Scotland Yard.

“Sir Henry,” he said, “during the last week when I was in the Service you expressed yourself very forcibly on the subject of several undiscovered murders. The Alexander Hurlby affair was one of them. I believe I have a chance from outside of bringing you information which would clear that matter up.”

Sir Henry nodded.

“I’ll look after you, Gossett, if you’re able to do that,” he promised.

“What I want from you at the present moment, sir, is just a bald letter of introduction to Lord Hurlby. Just tell him that I am a respectable man who has left the Service here of my own accord. I want an interview with him. He can please himself if he sees me, of course, but a letter from you will give me the chance I require.”

Sir Henry nodded and summoned his secretary. Gossett left the building with the letter in his pocket. Even then there were difficulties. It was a week’s time before Gossett was ushered into the magnificent library of Lord Hurlby’s town house in Grosvenor Place. The secretary who had escorted him in advanced to his master’s desk with a few explanatory words.

“Mr. Gossett, sir,” he announced. “He sent us a letter from Sir Henry Holmes last week and you agreed to see him this afternoon at half-past six.”

Lord Hurlby looked up from his desk.

“Come directly I ring, Chaplin,” he directed. “I’m hoping that Mr.—er—Gossett will not keep me very long.”

The secretary passed into the shadows of the great room and out of the door. Gossett, his purpose gained at last, was in no hurry to begin. He found himself studying with avid curiosity the grey, masklike face of the man whom the illustrated press of the country had made so familiar. A long face with straight hard features, sombre grey eyes and immobile expression. Not in the least like the man in the shabby ketch on that filthy backwater.

“You are not going to keep me for very long, I trust, Mr. Gossett,” Hurlby said, with the faintest note of impatience in his tone. “I gathered that your business was personal, not political.”

“My business is personal,” Gossett admitted. “Until recently I have been a junior detective at Scotland Yard. I was assistant to Inspector Grinan who took charge of the investigations concerning your brother’s murder case.”

“Investigations which scarcely reflected much credit upon Scotland Yard,” Lord Hurlby said coldly.

“I am not concerned to defend their methods,” Gossett replied, “because I am no longer connected with them. I might remark, however, that they were perhaps unduly handicapped.”

“In what respect?”

“Insufficient information.”

“Is your business with me connected with the circumstances of that tragedy?” Lord Hurlby asked. “If so, let me tell you at once that I do not choose to discuss it. It is a painful subject and closed forever, so far as I am concerned.”

Gossett shook his head.

“I can understand, Lord Hurlby,” he said, “that you are unwilling to reopen the subject. It has, however, become necessary.”

There was a brief silence. A solemn grandfather’s clock, a *chef d’oeuvre* of one of the famous makers of the Georgian epoch, ticked ponderously. From outside all sounds of traffic, almost the honkings of the motor horns, were smothered by those closely drawn curtains.

“Is this,” Lord Hurlby asked quietly, “an affair of blackmail?”

Gossett made no indignant denial. He appeared to be considering the matter.

“You might perhaps look upon it as such,” he acknowledged. “Blackmail in kind, perhaps. I’m not here to demand money or anything that money could buy.”

“Who is your principal? In other, words, who is your inspiration for this visit? Are you acting for yourself or for some one else?”

“I am acting for the woman who forced her way in to see you the other day and whom you sent to prison,” Gossett confided. “Courageous but a little risky, don’t you think?”

Lord Hurlby tapped lightly with his finger tips upon the desk. His indifference was magnificent.

“I suppose you know what happened to the other blackmailer?” he asked.

“I can guess,” Gossett assented. “The conditions, though, were different.”

“Not so different as you might think. However, will you forgive me if I suggest a little more directness? My time, as you probably know, is not wholly my own.”

“I will put the situation before you.” Gossett promised, “in as few words as possible. Eighteen years ago, Lord Hurlby, when you were second secretary in the Embassy at Berlin and known as the Honourable Philip Hurlby, there was some trouble concerning a very large sum of money which it was understood had come into your possession in a very questionable manner.”

“That will do,” Hurlby said calmly. “You are so well-informed that you doubtless also know that there was a secret enquiry as a result of which I was completely exonerated.”

“Owing,” Gossett reminded him, “to the absence of the principal witness. That principal witness has since had from you about fifty thousand pounds in blackmail. Two years ago he travelled down to one of your country homes in Cornwall with the usual demand. You confided in your brother, who was staying with you. Whose idea it was I don’t know, who did the actual killing I don’t know, but between you, you murdered George Passiter.”

“A very logical way of dealing with blackmailers,” Hurlby remarked.

“You got rid of Passiter, all right, but the situation had its dangers. There were members of Passiter’s household who also knew your secret and who knew that Passiter had come to see you. Naturally his disappearance would make them suspicious. However you disposed of the body, they were likely to discover it, and you were still more than ever liable to blackmail. The scheme you hit upon for getting out of the trouble was quite ingenious. This Passiter seems to have been a man of about your brother’s height and build. Your brother and he exchanged clothes and identities. Your brother, as George Passiter, made a successful disappearance. Passiter was buried as Captain Alexander Hurlby. A hospital nurse who was in attendance on your wife, but who was also a particular friend of your own, helped you with the details. She was the Bella Truslove you sent to prison the other day. There was no trouble about the death certificate. The body was practically unrecognisable and your local doctor who signed it was over seventy years old. It was an excellent scheme for you, because Passiter’s family, who naturally believe him the murderer, dare not come near you and, in fact, have all left the country. What you didn’t seem to have taken sufficiently into account was the very terrible position in which your brother was placed. He cannot go to his clubs, he cannot mix with his friends, he cannot indulge in the usual sports which men in

his position enjoy. The whole civilised world is closed to him. I don't know which of you killed Passiter, but it is very clear which one of you is paying for it."

"Where did you hear this amazing but interesting narrative, Mr.—er—Gossett?" Hurlby asked.

"To be quite frank with your lordship," Gossett replied, "it is very largely a matter of reconstruction. I have heard a part of the truth, of course, and I have seen your brother. I may have made mistakes in the story, but on the whole I believe it to be very near the truth."

Lord Hurlby reflected for several moments, then he looked up suddenly.

"There are inaccuracies, Mr. Gossett," he remarked, "in your—what did you call it?—your reconstruction, but on the whole the salient facts are true. What are you here to say to me? Did my brother send you?"

"He does not even know of my coming."

"Where is he?"

The tone was callous, almost indifferent. It seemed to Gossett in those few seconds that the whole ugly story was flung out before his eyes in black and white. The brutal selfishness of the man seated a few yards away from him, with a suppressed sneer hovering always around the corners of his lips, was mercilessly apparent.

"Your brother is living alone in supreme misery and discomfort in a ramshackle ketch, tied up in a backwater of one of the foulest stretches of the river. He is drinking too much and I should say that if he is allowed to remain where he is, under the same conditions, he will probably go mad before many months are past."

"And what business is all this of yours, Mr. Gossett?"

Gossett restrained himself with an effort. He could almost realise the thought, not to say the hope, which was framing in his companion's brain. Madness! Not a bad way out of the situation. Death, of course, would be better.

"I have been paid a fee," Gossett confided, "to study the existing situation with a view to changing it."

"Really! And what do you suggest?"

"First of all, I think that you should go down and see your brother and see how he is living. If he is to bear the whole brunt of this affair, it seems to me that he should at least be allowed to do it in comfort."

"Are you proposing," Lord Hurlby asked, "to take what you call your reconstruction to Scotland Yard?"

"I certainly am not," Gossett declared. "When I enter into investigations for a private client, I forget that I ever was a policeman."

"Very proper," the other murmured. "There is just one of your suggestions

which seems to me practical. You say that the spot which my brother has selected for his temporary abode is a lonely one?"

"Hellishly."

"Write down the address and the means of getting there. I will pay him a visit."

Gossett did as he was asked. Then he rose to his feet.

"If I might presume to make a further suggestion, Lord Hurlby," he said, "it would be that you have the prosecution of this unfortunate woman stopped."

"Your friend and client, eh?" the other sneered, "From what you have told me, I should think the safest place for her was in prison."

"Safest for you perhaps," Gossett retorted. "That seems to be the only thing you think of in life."

Lord Hurlby smiled slowly, as though he had been paid a compliment. His finger was upon the bell.

"Indifferent health and the exigencies of public life," he remarked, "may have made something of an egoist of me. In the characters of any one of us there is always likely to be one defect. . . . Parkins, the door for Mr. Gossett."

Into the somewhat chaotic field of Malcolm Gossett's reflections and theories came, towards the end of the fourth day after his visit to Lord Hurlby, light from an unexpected quarter. At the sound of the latchkey in the door of his Medlar's Row villa, Cynthia came into the little square hall, a whirl of draperies and flashing feet.

"Malcolm," she exclaimed breathlessly, "the most wonderful young man is in the study, waiting to see you. So impatient that he scarcely looked at me. He came in a most marvellous car, too."

"I saw something that looked like a pantechnicon outside," Gossett remarked, as he allowed himself to be helped out of his overcoat and duly embraced his wife. "Lead on, my dear. Let me deal with this prodigy of my sex, who scarcely looked at you. I have only just left the office and I didn't know any one had my private address."

Cynthia led him into the small room at the back of the house which they called the study. A young man of distinguished presence rose eagerly at their entrance. Gossett recognised him at once. It was Lord Hurlby's private secretary.

"You perhaps don't remember me, Mr. Gossett," the visitor said. "You called by appointment to see Lord Hurlby last Tuesday. I am Lord Hurlby's private secretary—his social secretary, perhaps I ought to say. Sinclair looks after him in the House, of course. My name is Wilfred Chaplin."

"I remember you quite well," Gossett acknowledged, with a quick thrill of

interest. "Sit down, won't you? What can I do for you?"

The young man glanced at Cynthia, who was hesitating in the background.

"I should be glad, Mr. Gossett," he said, "if you could spare me five minutes upon a strictly private matter."

Gossett nodded to Cynthia, who was already on her way to the door, which the young man had hastened to open for her.

"So sorry," the latter murmured. "A little matter of business. I shall not detain your husband long."

She bowed pleasantly and passed out. Chaplin closed the door with care and returned to the chair which he had vacated.

"You must forgive my looking you up here, Mr. Gossett," he begged, "but I felt that I wanted to see you at once. You will remember your visit to Lord Hurlby the other afternoon."

"I remember it quite well," Gossett acknowledged. "I found his lordship a trifle difficult."

"Scarcely so difficult as the position I find myself in at the present moment," the young man groaned, leaning forward in his chair with clasped hands and speaking with unusual earnestness. "Let me try and explain. I had some matters to discuss with Lord Hurlby directly after your departure and I couldn't help noticing that he was far from being his usual self. He is so precise in his statements and habits of thought that I became convinced something had happened to upset him very much. In the House that night, my colleague Sinclair told me that he very nearly broke down in the midst of a very simple speech. I know that he had no sleep that night, and Tuesday and Wednesday his manner was so unlike his usual self that I ventured to persuade him to see a doctor."

"Is he ill?" Gossett asked.

"The doctor said not. Found nothing the matter with him at all. He gave him a sleeping draught and prescribed a tonic. The next day, however, Thursday—yesterday morning—his lordship went down to Downing Street, where he transacted some business with Sinclair. Afterwards he sent the car home and left Downing Street on foot. Since then, no one has seen a thing of him."

"Do you mean that he didn't return home at all last night?" Gossett demanded.

"He neither came home nor telephoned nor sent any message," the young man declared. "I am forced to take you into my confidence in this matter, Mr. Gossett, but I do beg for your entire discretion. I beg that you will have nothing whatever to say to any member of the press."

"I can promise you that," Gossett consented. "But where am I concerned?"

"I wish to God I knew," Chaplin replied with emphasis. "All I do know is

that you asked for an interview with his lordship on private business, and since that interview he has not been himself for a single moment. Last night he was due at a dinner party with his wife, at the house of some private friends, the Duke and Duchess of Lechester, which he neither attended nor did he send any excuse. There were a good many papers waiting for his signature at his room in the House, and he had three appointments for this morning, not one of which did he keep. In fact, we have none of us seen him. We don't know where he is. All the telephones are going continually, her ladyship is in great distress and we are beginning to receive enquiries from the newspapers. So far as I am aware, his lordship had nothing on his mind nor any business on hand likely to afford him anxiety. I come to you, therefore, hoping that you can give me a hint. In plain words—did you bring him any disquieting news?"

"I brought him nothing which could be regarded as news," Gossett said gravely. "The subject on which I came to see him, however, was a serious one."

"Then can I beg for your confidence?" the young man asked eagerly. "Tell me at least the nature of it and I shall have something to work on. We are all in the dark and I cannot keep Lord Hurlby's disappearance a secret any longer."

Gossett rose to his feet and paced the room restlessly. Already a sinister foreboding was forcing itself into his mind. He pushed it back. There was the present to be dealt with. Hurlby had challenged action by his disappearance. This young man must be told a measure of the truth.

"How long have you been with Lord Hurlby?" he asked abruptly.

"About a year and a half."

"You came to him, then, after the tragedy in which his brother, Captain Alexander Hurlby, was concerned?"

"I know nothing about that, except by hearsay," Chaplin admitted. "There was a great deal, of course, that never came out. We understood that the police were holding back information until they had found the man Passiter, who was suspected of being the murderer."

"My visit to Lord Hurlby concerned that case," Gossett confided. "You may remember a woman who tried to force herself into the house a few days ago. Well, she was connected with it too."

The young man's eyebrows contracted. His pleasant expression for the moment left him.

"Were you trying to blackmail the Chief?" he demanded.

"Don't be an ass," was the curt reply. "I am an ex-Scotland Yard officer and when I was in the Force I was engaged in a junior capacity upon the Hurlby case. I brought Lord Hurlby some information concerning it. When you speak of his disappearance, I can imagine it possible that he may have decided upon a course of action which would induce him to pay a visit to a certain

place.”

“To discover the murderer?” Chaplin asked eagerly.

“That,” Gossett replied, “is for later on. I did suggest to his lordship that he should visit a certain person. He may have done so and it may have led to trouble.”

“Don’t waste time,” the young man begged. “Who is this person and where can I find him?”

Gossett reflected for several seconds.

“I shall offer myself as your guide,” he decided.

A still night, dark with drifting mists. In the distance was the yellow halo of blurred lights on the river way, beyond a blanket of hazy red, where the lights of the great city struggled against the everlasting fog. Beneath the feet of the two men was black and oozy mud.

“Take care,” Gossett warned his companion, drawing him away from the edge of the rotting quay.

“What particular corner of hell is this?” Chaplin demanded. “You’re not going to tell me that Lord Hurlby came here to pay a visit of his own choice—of his own free will.”

“I don’t know whether he did or not,” Gossett answered. “I only know that he announced his intention of doing so.”

“What brought you here before?”

“The woman whom Lord Hurlby locked up sent me,” Gossett confided briefly. “Don’t waste your breath. You may want it later on.”

“But there are no houses here: nothing out this filthy backwater from the river,” the young man pointed out.

“Half a dozen steps farther,” Gossett grunted.

The tall mast of the ketch loomed up out of the darkness. She was unlit. There was no sign of any human presence on board. This time, too, she was not lying flush with the dock. She was attached by ropes to the same ring but she was drawn a couple of yards away and fastened on the other side to what seemed to be a floating buoy. As she lay, there was no method of boarding her. Chaplin looked around him, aghast.

“You’re not going to tell me,” he protested, “that the Chief—that Lord Hurlby ever came down to this loathsome spot to visit any one on a foul craft like that!”

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” was the grim reply.

Gossett walked alongside the ketch, upon the quay, peering down and trying to look in from every point of vantage. There was no sign of any light, no indication of any human presence; neither was there any sound except the soft gurgle of the water lapping up against the mouldering woodwork.

“There’s no one on board,” Chaplin declared.

“I am not so sure,” his companion muttered.

The latter lowered himself on to his stomach and stretched out toward the ketch. He was just able to reach the rail but the fastening on the other side was too secure and he could draw her no nearer. Suddenly he saw, lying a few yards farther down, an old dinghy with a punt pole. He lowered himself into it as silently as possible, followed by Chaplin.

“We’ll board her from the other side,” Gossett whispered, pushing the pole into the mud.

They made dangerous progress, but finally scrambled on board. Gossett laid a restraining hand upon his companion’s arm and pointed downwards. There was a thin line of light underneath the cabin door below.

“There’s some one there,” he muttered.

They made their way cautiously down the steps. With a sudden jerk Gossett opened the door. Both men stood on the threshold aghast. On the settee before the fixed table was seated the Right Honourable Lord Hurlby, his pen in his hand. Before him was a cunningly shaded light and there were at least a dozen sheets of paper, scattered about, covered with his thin, decisive handwriting. He showed no surprise at the entrance of his visitors, but he dropped his eyeglass and frowned.

“I don’t remember giving you instructions to come down here, Chaplin,” he said coldly.

The young man was completely taken aback.

“I—well, no, sir. I don’t suppose you did, but I thought—this man Gossett too—”

Lord Hurlby replaced his eyeglass and contemplated the latter.

“So you have turned up again, have you?” he remarked. “Well, since you are here, you may as well both make yourselves useful. Chaplin, fold up these sheets, place them in an envelope and address them to the Home Secretary. Gossett, grope about behind you there and see if you can find me another bottle of whisky. I finished the last one in twelve hours.”

Both men stared at him. A terrible conviction was creeping into Chaplin’s mind. He reached for the papers with trembling fingers. Gossett, on the other hand, dragged down a bottle of whisky, drew the cork and filled the glass by Lord Hurlby’s side.

“Any soda water,” he asked quietly, “or water?”

“Not for me, thank you,” Lord Hurlby answered politely. “In the days when I used to drink whisky, we thought it a mistake to dilute it.”

He raised the tumbler to his lips and drank nearly half of its contents without flinching. The two men looked at him in amazement. Gossett was all the time on his guard. His companion was trembling.

"I hope you were not ill-advised enough to bring the Rolls Royce down here, Chaplin?" Lord Hurlby said. "The most disgraceful road I have ever been on in my life. Alick—"

He stopped short. There was a puzzled look in his face. Gossett drank a liqueur glass full of the neat whisky.

"Where is your brother, Lord Hurlby?" he asked.

The latter coughed.

"Rather unfortunate," he acknowledged. "Alexander and I used to agree so well. Yesterday I'm sorry to say we couldn't hit it off. I don't know why, but he has become peevish. After all we have been through together, that is foolish. Listen to him now."

The two visitors held their breath. Distinctly they heard from the cabin behind a low groan as though of a man in deadly pain. Gossett took a quick backward step and opened the door. Stretched upon the small bedstead was Alexander Hurlby, a ghastly sight. Blood had congealed upon his face from a wound at the side of the head. His arms were bound to the bedstead with stout cords, his legs were tied together. His eyes were glazed and bloodshot. His breath came with difficulty.

"Water!" he faltered.

They found a pail standing outside and Chaplin held some to his lips whilst Gossett cut his bonds. Even when he was free he was unable to move. They fetched him some whisky, which he drank cautiously. Strength came back to his voice. He began to move his limbs slowly. He thrust his fingers into the pail of water and bathed his eyes. Suddenly terror flashed back into them.

"Look out," he muttered. "He's coming—and he's mad!"

The warning was just in time. Lord Hurlby, who had lounged into the cabin with a cigarette between his lips, suddenly flung himself savagely upon Gossett, bore him down on to the floor with his hand upon his throat and shook him like a rat. Chaplin dragged the aggressor off from behind, his arms linked around his neck, but it took the two of them to hold him. As soon as Hurlby felt himself overpowered, he ceased to struggle. A cunning gleam came into his eyes.

"Chaplin," he remonstrated severely, "you forget yourself. I came down to pay my brother a friendly little visit. What do you mean by following me here and bringing this ex-detective with you? I don't like him. He's got hold of some cock-and-bull story. Keep him away from the newspapers."

The man upon the bed had struggled now to a sitting posture. He touched Gossett on the arm.

"He went off like that—raving mad—yesterday afternoon. He hit me with a hammer when I wasn't looking and tied me up when I was unconscious."

"All for the best, my dear Alick," his brother said, in almost his old tone.

“You were reminding me how I killed Passiter. You shouldn’t have done that. Blackmailers were made to be killed. I’m not so sure about you,” he went on, with a snarl in his tone again, struggling to get free and with murder in his eyes, as he leaned towards Gossett.

They were obliged to tie him up, and even then they had to call for the chauffeur before they could get him into the dinghy. In the car, he rolled over to face the mirror.

“I don’t like my collar,” he complained. “Am I speaking to-night, Chaplin? It’s the Holdings Bill, isn’t it? You must get me another collar.”

“Everything is in your lordship’s room,” Chaplin assured him, with a little break in his voice.

One of the marvels of the whole affair, as it crept into the knowledge of a certain limited number of men and women in privileged official circles, was the beautiful accuracy, the unerring logic contained in those seventeen pages of foolscap which were duly perused by the Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard, the Home Secretary and an even higher official. In those moments of incipient lunacy, Hurlby had recorded his exact sensations as he had killed the blackmailer who had tormented him for ten years, and accepted his brother’s sacrifice. His brother’s career, as he incisively pointed out, brilliant though it had been, had no future. He himself, in a few years’ time, already the leader of his party, was bound to become Prime Minister. All might have gone according to plan if the hospital nurse on her downward path had not felt that mortal affection of pity and sought out first Gossett and afterwards Hurlby himself. The latter, with his concentrated selfishness, would never have given another thought to his brother. Alexander, having passed his word, whatever depths he might have sunk to through the slow growth of debasing instincts, would never break it, and the Right Honourable Lord Hurlby, whose peerage was fortunately an Irish one, would, without a doubt, have become Prime Minister of England. As it was, the Press, Scotland Yard and the Home Secretary between them had to exercise all their cunning to bring back to life and reputation Captain Alexander Hurlby, D.S.O., to demonstrate the existence of Passiter, the blackmailer, in his coffin, and to draw a veil over the mental breakdown of one of England’s great statesmen, now an inmate of a private asylum. Shell shock accounted more or less plausibly for Captain Hurlby’s flight into hiding, and anyway, the year of his reappearance was a busy one, and the tendency of the world is to talk the most sensational event threadbare in twenty-four hours. The man who had to keep his tongue the stillest was ex-detective Gossett, but that, after all, was his job.

III

THE BATTLE OF THE SUITES

From the first moment Gossett disliked and yet was fascinated by the man. Disliked the bland smoothness of him, the hairless face, the childlike complexion, the carefully chosen, ingenuous words. At a chance remark the smoothness of him had suddenly disappeared, his rosy cheeks had puckered up, his eyes had narrowed. He was like the disinterred satyr of a pagan, sung-but-forgotten, posterity. Then a moment later he was Mr. Augustus Merrilies, who came from God knows where and who fenced all the time about his mission like a man living in the shadow of mysterious things. Gossett pulled himself together.

“Mr. Merrilies,” he said pleasantly, “you have occupied my best office chair for a quarter of an hour. At any moment another client may arrive and you have told me nothing. If I can help you, I want to. If you have business to put before me, I shall be glad to consider it; but my time, although it may not be worth much, is too valuable to be wasted in generalities.”

The little man made a movement as though to reach for his brown Homburg hat which lay on the carpet by his side. He checked himself, however, and looked steadily across at Gossett.

“My trouble, Mr. Gossett, is a simple one,” he acknowledged. “What exactly is your present connection with Scotland Yard? Mr. Littledale told me that you could answer that question better than he could. Before I offer you further confidences, I wish to be assured of your complete independence.”

“There is no shadow of connection,” Gossett said firmly, “between my small establishment here and the national institution of Scotland Yard.”

Mr. Augustus Merrilies flicked a morsel of dust from his sleeve and his eyes, fixed upon Gossett’s, were suddenly the eyes of a ferret, twisting, compelling, consuming.

“Supposing I tell you a criminal secret; how long would it be before Scotland Yard was on my tracks?”

“If you are a criminal,” was the blunt reply, “I don’t want you here. If you are suspected of being a criminal and seek for aid in escaping the law, I will help you to the best of my ability. I do not deal with self-confessed criminals. I don’t think I can speak plainer than that.”

“I don’t think you can,” the other admitted. “Very well, then, this is my commission. There are forty pounds for you if you attempt it and eighty pounds if you succeed. Do not think that I am foolish with money, because I

am not, but Mr. Littledale says that if any one can succeed you can, and if you succeed, eighty pounds will not be too much.”

“You’re not asking me to get an option on the Crown jewels or anything of that sort, are you?” Gossett enquired.

“I am not. I am asking you to visit Emmeline, Countess of Blessbury, and induce her by any means which present themselves to you to sell a curious yellow emerald which is in her possession.”

“But I don’t want a curious yellow emerald,” Gossett objected.

“Of course you don’t,” his visitor snapped. “Some one else does, though, and if he doesn’t get it, there’s going to be trouble. Very serious trouble. I gather that your professional inclinations, Mr. Gossett, are against any serious infractions of the law. Very well then. I want to tell you this. If the woman I have spoken of refuses to sell that emerald, then some day or other she will be killed. There will be no chance of escape. She will be killed. And if the next of kin refuses to sell it, he or she will be killed too. You should listen to me earnestly, Mr. Gossett. I am just a poor tradesman from down Wapping way, but there are things which I have come to know, and this is one of them. I am spending my own money and I come to you in order to save bloodshed.”

“Sounds very philanthropic,” Gossett murmured.

“Fifty thousand pounds is the price the man in the background is willing to pay for that emerald,” Mr. Augustus Merrilies went on, “and, to leave off beating about the bush, there will be a commission to you of one per cent, if you succeed, apart from the eighty pounds.”

Malcolm Gossett was suddenly more serious. He had not associated his strange visitor with such a sum of money.

“Who is there who wants to spend fifty thousand pounds upon jewellery nowadays?” he asked incredulously.

“What does that matter?” was the suave reply. “There *is* some one. I can assure you of that. You are foolish not to see that there is money in this commission which I am offering to you. Do I look like a millionaire? I am a small tradesman in an East End neighbourhood. I am not one of those who give forty pounds away for nothing.”

“If you are a small tradesman in an East End neighbourhood,” Gossett asked, “how is it that you have come into touch with people who are willing to pay fifty thousand pounds for a single jewel?”

“I trade with the East,” was the cryptic reply.

“I thought the East,” Gossett observed, “was more often a seller of jewels than a buyer.”

Mr. Augustus Merrilies rose to his feet.

“I propose to call upon you at the same time to-morrow,” he announced. “You will acquaint me then with the decision of the Countess of Blessbury.”

“If she decides to sell,” Gossett asked, “will the money be there in cash?”
“Any hour, any minute,” was the confident reply.

The Countess of Blessbury turned out to be unexpectedly easy of access. On sending up his card to her flat in Cadogan Square, Gossett was only asked to wait a few minutes and was then admitted. She was a remarkably pretty blonde American, indulging in her first widowhood.

“I don’t understand your card,” she said, looking at Gossett curiously, “so I thought it best to see you. You announce yourself as ‘Late of Scotland Yard.’ You have nothing to do with the police now, have you?”

“Nothing whatever,” Gossett assured her. “I am a humble follower in the footsteps of your own Pinkerton, with a slight complex against the law rather than for it.”

“A private detective?”

“I might be called that.”

“Have I done anything wrong?” she asked, laughing.

“No, but you own a yellow emerald.”

She looked at him with wondering eyes.

“Why shouldn’t I?” she demanded. “I have a lot of odds and ends of jewellery, of course. Mostly heirlooms, worse luck.”

“Is the yellow emerald an heirloom?”

She shook her head.

“No. Gerald, my late husband’s cousin, brought it home from India. I don’t like it very much.”

“You wouldn’t mind selling it then.”

She raised her eyebrows curiously.

“Isn’t that queer?” she murmured.

“Isn’t what queer?”

“You’re the second person who’s tried to buy the yellow emerald from me within twenty-four hours.”

“You didn’t sell it?”

She shook her head.

“I am no good at business,” she confessed. “I referred the jeweller to my lawyer.”

“But your lawyer may not know the value,” Gossett pointed out.

“Neither do I. Mr. Gresham, he’s the lawyer, can find out. It seems to me that after all the taxes have been paid, we shall be glad of the money.”

“How much do you expect to get for it?”

“It depends,” she answered, “who wants to buy it.”

“Would fifty thousand pounds seem a large sum to you?”

“Enormous,” she gasped. “No one in their senses would dream of giving

it.”

“You would sell it for that?”

“Certainly I would,” she assented, “unless the trustees or the executors or any other silly people like that tried to object.”

“You haven’t a copy of your late husband’s will, have you?” he asked.

“Why on earth do you think that I should keep such a gloomy document?” she replied.

“If I saw it,” he told her, “I could tell whether you had a right to sell it or not.”

“And your client would give—”

“I pledge myself to nothing,” he interrupted, “but he has told me that he would give you fifty thousand pounds.”

She moved to the telephone.

“Come back at seven o’clock,” she begged, “and we shall have a look at the will together and a cocktail.”

It appeared that the late Lord Blessbury had been dead for over a year, which probably accounted for the fact that his widow received Gossett, when he called soon after seven o’clock, in a very charming smoke-coloured negligée and insisted upon making the cocktails herself, according to the old-fashioned recipe of two thirds gin and one third French vermouth. The will lay on the table by her side but she did not at first offer to show it to her visitor.

“The yellow emerald,” she told him, however, “is not amongst the entailed jewels. Have you brought me my fifty thousand pounds?”

“I’m afraid the affair has not progressed quite so far as that,” he told her. “My client is calling to-morrow morning to know if the sale is possible. He assured me that if it was, the money would be forthcoming at once.”

She gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

“It will be quite a wonderful thing for me,” she assured him. “Of course, when everything is cleared up, there will be plenty of money but fifty thousand pounds cash like that will make all the difference.”

“It seems to me to be a ridiculous price for one stone,” Gossett observed. “How is it set, Lady Blessbury? Do you ever wear it?”

“I never have done,” she admitted. “You see, my husband only succeeded three years ago and it came to him with the rest of the things his cousin, the late Earl, had collected in India. Would you like to see it?”

“Immensely.”

She rang the bell, and, with the butler and another man whom she sent for to be in attendance, they made their way into a smaller apartment at the rear of the house. In the corner of the room was the door to the safe. She disappeared for a moment and came out with a plain wooden box in her hand. It opened with a spring and inside was a rather dull-looking stone of deep orange yellow.

She rubbed it lightly on her gown, however, and it began to glow with a dull sudden fire.

“It’s quaint,” Gossett observed, after a brief examination, “but I shouldn’t call it attractive.”

She replaced it in the box and locked up the safe.

“Neither should I,” she answered. “Not half so attractive as fifty thousand pounds!”

She led him back into the larger room and they finished their cocktails. Gossett glanced towards the will.

“I suppose your title is clear enough?” he asked.

“The whole of the jewellery was left to me,” she assured him.

“And there was no particular mention of this yellow atrocity?”

She was silent. She evidently found the question annoying.

“Why must you ask me that?” she protested.

“It seemed natural.”

She fidgeted for a moment with her fingers, then she flung herself back in her chair and looked at him defiantly.

“Read for yourself,” she told him. “It is at the bottom of page two.”

Gossett picked up the will and easily found the paragraph.

With regard to the rare and very curious yellow emerald which it is understood was presented to my late cousin by an Indian potentate, whose name was never revealed, my advice to my wife would be not to dispose of this until she has made certain enquiries through our agents in India as to the source through which it came. I desire to offer this advice only to prevent any trouble that might arise later, and I do not wish to make it in any way binding upon my wife, in case she chooses to disregard it and sell the gem. I have no definite reason for believing that it came into the family treasures in any but an orthodox manner.

Gossett laid down the will. She had sprung to her feet and was standing by his side, with her hand resting upon his shoulder. Gossett was looking very thoughtful indeed.

“Tell me what you are thinking,” she begged.

“I was thinking,” he confided, “that a present of a stone worth fifty thousand pounds must be a very unusual thing, even amongst Indian Princes.”

“My husband’s cousin was a very unusual man out there,” she declared. “He had great power and influence and there is no certainty that it was a gift. The advice does not prevent my selling it, does it?”

“Not legally,” he replied.

“If there is to be any trouble,” she pointed out, “it is upon me it will fall. I shall take the risk. To-morrow I shall expect to hear from you. You won’t be horrid, will you, and back out?” she asked him, her hair brushing his cheek as she leaned forward to look into his eyes.

“It is scarcely my business to interfere,” he assured her. “I am only an agent in the matter. . . .”

It was a quarter to eight when he parked his car, mounted the stairs and, opening the door of his office with his latchkey, reached out for the switch of the electric light. It was ten minutes to ten when he sat up on the floor with a groan, aware of a frantic headache and a queer odour of mingled sandalwood and some heavy narcotic hanging about the room. The light had been kindly turned on for him, and by his side, in a neat little pile, were the contents of all his pockets with nothing missing. There was also a square piece of paper on which was printed in his own violet ink:

You are warned to keep away from Blessbury House and to have nothing more to do with the purchase or sale of the Blessbury Yellow Emerald.

In a very irritated frame of mind and with the remains of his headache still troubling him, Malcolm Gossett received the next morning the expected visit of Mr. Augustus Merrilies. The latter had hurried up the two flights of stairs and was consequently out of breath, but he was still able to ask the crucial question.

“She will sell the emerald?”

“She will sell the emerald, all right,” Gossett replied with a sour smile. “You had better take the fifty thousand pounds with you and go and fetch it. If you take my advice, you’ll wrap up your head in cotton wool afterwards.”

A rapid change of expression transformed the appearance of Mr. Augustus Merrilies. His smooth skin seemed all puckered up, his mouth wobbled, his eyes almost disappeared in creases of fat.

“Something has happened?” he gasped.

“Something happened, all right,” Gossett acknowledged grimly. “I did your errand with Lady Blessbury, she agreed to sell for the fifty thousand, I came back here to lock up, and that was the end of me for a couple of hours.”

“What is this that you say?” Mr. Augustus Merrilies demanded.

“Some one must have got into my office,” Gossett went on, “waited for me in the darkness, clapped a hideous anæsthetic over my nostrils directly I entered, searched my pockets and left me lying on my own carpet with this little message.”

Augustus Merrilies’ fingers were trembling so that he was barely able to

hold the square of paper which Gossett passed over. He read it, however, with consternation.

“The others are here!” he groaned.

“If it was ‘the others’ who visited me last night, they certainly are here,” Gossett acknowledged, “and to be frank with you, Mr. Merrilies, I don’t want anything more to do with them or your beastly emerald. Five hundred pounds is a very nice little fee to earn, but I like a whole skin. If what happened last night is a foretaste of what I’m going to have when I handle the damned emerald, I don’t mind telling you as man to man that I’m off the whole business. I’ll keep the forty pounds. I consider I earned it. But you can go around and get the emerald yourself from her ladyship. She’s expecting you at Blessbury House and I daresay a few others are expecting you afterwards.”

The would-be trafficker in yellow emeralds became a depressing sight. He buried his face in his hands and rocked slowly backwards and forwards in his chair. There were beads of perspiration upon his forehead and even his knees trembled.

“I am a shopkeeper,” he moaned. “A ships’ chandler, shopkeeper, and occasionally I do commissions for some of my friends from foreign parts. It is all in a peaceable way, however. I have never been in trouble with the police, I have never made an enemy amongst all the Eastern cutthroats who do their little business with me. For once I became ambitious. I thought beyond myself. There was so much to be gained. Now the others have come. It is all spoilt.”

“It’s spoilt, all right,” Gossett agreed. “Pull yourself together, Mr. Merrilies. The yellow emerald is in Lady Blessbury’s possession. She is willing to part with it for fifty thousand pounds. It will take you five minutes to get there, unless you have to call somewhere to get the money. Then it may take you a little longer. I should advise you to be off.”

“Yes, and half an hour afterwards ready for the cemetery,” Mr. Augustus Merrilies moaned. “I shall be like you, Mr. Gossett. You are a wise man. You know that your skin is worth more than money. I shall resign too. I’m going back to my shop.”

He picked up his hat from the floor and held a pudgy hand across the table, a hand which Gossett somewhat reluctantly clasped.

“Good morning, sir,” he said. “Perhaps I should not have come to you. I think I did not tell Mr. Littledale enough. I wanted to be safe. I am not a fighter. The others can have the yellow emerald for all I care.”

“It’s a rotten-looking jewel, anyway,” Gossett assured him consolingly, as he shambled off.

A more or less busy morning passed on, unmarked by any disturbing incident. Mr. Gossett’s headache cleared up, and the idea of an *apéritif* and a quiet chop somewhere in the neighbourhood was beginning to present its usual

attraction. His office boy entered with a highly glazed card and an awed expression.

“There’s a Prince to see you, sir,” he announced.

Gossett took the card and studied it.

H.R.H. The Maharajah of Cornpoer, Prince Ali of Mysore.

“Show the gentleman in,” he directed.

Gossett, who was not very well up in such matters, expected to be confronted by a personage wearing a jewelled turban and at least partial Oriental robes. A slim and elegant young man presented himself in a dark blue suit and wearing an Eton tie. He was beautifully dressed and turned out, his smile was ingratiating and his English perfect.

“Mr. Gossett, I believe?” he said. “May I beg for a few minutes of your time?”

“Certainly,” Gossett acquiesced, a trifle nonplussed. “Sit down, won’t you?”

The young man handed his hat, cane and gloves to the office boy with a royal gesture. The latter departed, stupefied, and the Prince sank gracefully into the client’s chair.

“It is possible, Mr. Gossett,” he said, and the latter realised for the first time what the real Oxford accent was, “that you have already surmised the object of my visit.”

“I regret to say that at present I have no idea—unless by chance it concerns the matter of a yellow emerald,” he went on quickly.

“The yellow emerald certainly,” the Prince acknowledged. “You permit me to smoke?”

“With pleasure,” Gossett assented.

The Prince lit a cigarette which he withdrew from an elegant platinum and gold case, rose to his feet and gracefully offered the same to Gossett.

“I feel more at home when I smoke,” this somewhat surprising visitor confided, as he resumed his seat. “I was distressed to hear, Mr. Gossett,” he went on, “that while acting in my interests last night you were subjected to a wicked and unpardonable assault.”

“Your interests?” Gossett repeated. “Of course, that makes the affair more interesting. I thought I was acting for a Mr. Augustus Merrilies.”

The other smiled apologetically.

“My mistake was in going to such a personage,” he admitted. “If I had had the privilege of knowing you, sir, I should have come to you direct.”

“Pardon me,” Gossett said, “but I wish to have this matter quite clear. It is you, Prince, who wish to acquire the yellow emerald?”

“It is my fervent desire.”

“Then why not go to Lady Blessbury yourself, hand over the money and receive the emerald? She is only too anxious to sell.”

The Prince waved away a little cloud of smoke with which he was surrounded.

“There are some transactions,” he confided, “which cannot be carried out with so much simplicity. My life, for instance, is a matter of the greatest importance to several millions of my subjects in India. For their sakes there are certain risks which I must avoid.”

“I see your point,” Gossett remarked drily. “The man who collects the emerald from Lady Blessbury is, in a way of speaking, ‘asking for it.’ ”

“It is perhaps a brave man’s task,” the Prince admitted, “but it is one which would be well rewarded. That little rascal, Augustus Merrilies, had, I believe, the impertinence to speak of a one per cent. commission. You must forgive the avarice of a shopkeeper, Mr. Gossett. My idea would be fifty thousand pounds which I would hand you to pay for the jewel and five thousand pounds for yourself when you delivered it to me at some fixed rendezvous.”

“That certainly sounds better,” Gossett acknowledged. “But may I ask you one question?”

“Certainly,” was the gracious reply.

“I have read of your kingdom and of your treasures. Why, with such an enormous store of jewels as you already possess, are you so anxious to obtain this yellow emerald of somewhat ordinary appearance?”

The Prince’s fingers toyed with his little black moustache.

“A pertinent but not altogether a wise question, Mr. Gossett,” he said. “The yellow emerald came from my country. It is numbered amongst the precious jewels there and for certain reasons its return is very much to be desired. The question is, are you prepared to accept my commission?”

Gossett considered for several moments. Five thousand pounds was a marvellous fee but of little use if a portion of it had to go in funeral expenses.

“I should almost suggest,” he ventured, “that this is a case to hand over to Scotland Yard. Why not buy the jewel from Lady Blessbury and then hand over the transport of it to the police?”

The young man shivered, very delicately but with genuine horror.

“Mr. Gossett,” he said gently, “there are certain matters connected with our caste and what you might term our superstitions which you could scarcely be expected to understand. The course which you suggest would be impossible.”

Gossett reflected further for several moments.

“You agree with me, I suppose, Prince,” he said, “that the person who leaves Blessbury House with that jewel in his possession runs certain risks?”

“He runs a grave risk,” was the frank admission. “Hence the five thousand

pounds.”

Gossett relapsed into a further brief interval of consideration. Then he made up his mind quite suddenly.

“If you will let your secretary ring me up at four o’clock,” he promised, “you shall know my decision.”

The young man smiled and rose to his feet. He held out his hand to Gossett.

“I know that you are a brave man, sir,” he said. “I feel quite convinced that you will accept the mission.”

Gossett returned from lunch, however, without having fully made up his mind. He had scarcely lit his first cigarette when his office boy knocked at the door and entered. There was a scared expression upon his face. He passed the card which he was holding directly to his master.

“There’s another on ’em, sir,” he announced. “I thought it was the same back again, but I dunno.”

“Show him in,” Gossett directed.

The boy obeyed and Gossett also received a shock. The young man who came in, smiling and imperturbable, resembled the visitor of the morning to an extraordinary degree. The only difference seemed to be that he was wearing a dark grey suit instead of blue, and a Harrow tie. He shook hands with Gossett, relapsed into the client’s chair and began deliberately to take off his gloves.

“It is very good of you to see me without an appointment, Mr. Gossett,” he said. “You can perhaps divine the reason for my visit.”

“Something to do with a yellow emerald?” Gossett suggested.

“You are correct,” the visitor acquiesced. “I have the misfortune in this instance to be second to my brother. He has, I believe, already approached you with regard to the purchase of the jewel.”

“He has,” Gossett admitted.

“I feel convinced I am right,” the Prince declared, with a flash of his dark eyes, “when I say that you declined to deal with him.”

“Well, you’re neither right nor wrong,” Gossett replied. “I promised to let him know at four o’clock.”

The Prince breathed a sigh of relief.

“Then I am in time,” he murmured.

“You’re in time, all right,” Gossett assented, “but in time for what?”

“To prevent your committing an act of gross injustice.”

“Look here,” Gossett remonstrated. “I flatter myself I’m as clear-headed as most people, but I confess you’ve got me guessing. If you or your brother want that ugly emerald so much, why don’t you go yourself or send a Bond Street jeweller in to purchase it from Lady Blessbury? Why do both of you come and

seek to employ an almost unknown private agent?"

The Prince shivered very much in the same way as his predecessor.

"In the first place, Mr. Gossett," he said, "if an accident were to happen to me, it would be a disaster for millions of my subjects."

"Stop a moment," Gossett begged. "That's exactly what your brother said to me."

"The situation for the moment is the same for both of us. Is it possible, Mr. Gossett, that you do not know the story?"

"It's more than possible," Gossett declared. "It's a fact. I don't know what either of you wants that yellow emerald for."

The Prince sighed.

"It is no secret in my own kingdom," he remarked, "but, after all, why should you have heard of it? We are not a country of newspapers and gossips. My people too have a sense of reverence. It may have been whispered in the bazaars but to have printed it would have been an outrage."

"Take it easy and tell me," Gossett begged. "It's only a quarter to four, as you can see."

The Prince leaned forward in his chair. He was very grave indeed.

"It needs, after all, so few words, Mr. Gossett," he said. "When my father died last year, a situation arose which has never been known in my country before. My brother and I were his only two sons; we were twins. To whom then should go the kingdom?"

Gossett nodded understandingly.

"I can quite understand that there were difficulties," he sympathised.

"After many long discussions," the Prince continued, "the matter was referred to the High Priest of our kingdom, a very holy man with no leaning towards either of us. He took a month to think it out, and then he decided that the throne should go to the one of us two who should bring back the eye of the Sun Buddha, which had been thoughtlessly and injudiciously given away by my father to a nobleman of England. My brother and I were apprized of this decision on the same day. We started at once for England. We are here. The eye of the Sun Buddha is, we know, in the possession of this Lady Blessbury. My brother and I both want it. We have our suites here to protect our interests. Is there anything more I can tell you?"

"Only this," Gossett replied. "Can you give me any reason why I should favour you more than your brother or your brother more than you?"

The Prince reflected for some time.

"There is no reason," he acknowledged, "but I should warn you of this—that should you favour my brother and telephone him at four o'clock that you are buying the emerald for him, some one of my suite will at once take toll of your life."

"I see," Gossett murmured. "And in the event of my deciding to get the emerald for you, one of your brother's suite will then put me out of the way!"

"The situation would appear to work out like that," the Prince admitted. "It, however, is redeemed by one contingency. There is just a chance that you might escape. In that case, the emerald would find its way into the hands of one of us and the wretched uncertainty of this business would be at an end."

Gossett clasped his head for a moment. The whole situation was confusing.

"On what sort of terms are you with your brother?" he ventured to enquire.

The Prince's silky black eyebrows were slowly lifted. He looked at his questioner in surprise.

"The very best," he answered. "We spend a great part of every day together. We travelled over by different steamers and we are staying at different hotels, but there are two reasons for this. One of them is that it is absolutely necessary for both of us to insist upon premier rights; the other is the slight difficulty connected with our suites."

Gossett nodded understandingly.

"Jealousy?" he murmured.

"It is a far more important matter to the various members of our native suites," the Prince confided, "who shall be declared Maharajah of our kingdom than it is to ourselves. My brother and I have become largely Europeanised. Either of us could support exile with dignity and pleasure. To the members of our suites, however, it is different. If they are attached to the reigning Maharajah, they become immediately people of great consequence and their position is of countless benefit to their relations and dependents."

"I begin to appreciate the situation more every moment," Gossett declared. "This is really a battle, then, between your suites rather than yourselves."

The Prince smiled amiably.

"You are an exceedingly intelligent man, Mr. Gossett," he admitted.

"One more question and I will see what I can do," Gossett promised. "I still do not see exactly where I come in. Why bother about a third person at all?"

"I will endeavour to explain. The yellow emerald is part of the sacred relic. When it is recovered, it will be handed over to the High Priest himself. There are many ways in which it cannot be recovered. For one thing, no blood of its present owner or guardian must be spilt in its actual acquisition by either my brother or myself or any one of our blood. The intervention of a third person is therefore necessary. I was recommended," the Prince continued, "to a Mr. Littledale—one of your famous lawyers. My brother, on the advice of a member of his suite, consulted a person who is really only a bogus shopkeeper—a certain Augustus Merrilies. Mr. Littledale recommended me to you as a likely person to deal with the business. Mr. Augustus Merrilies was also told to

approach you, as I have done myself.”

“I see,” Gossett murmured. “Your methods naturally sound a little roundabout to a Westerner but I can understand that you have been a good deal handicapped by conventions. May I without offence make a proposition to you?”

“With great pleasure, Mr. Gossett.”

“If my suggestion is a liberty, do not hesitate to tell me so at once. I wondered whether you and your brother would do me the honour of dining at any restaurant you might select at nine o’clock this evening. I will then discuss the matter with you both and do my best to satisfy you.”

The Prince sighed.

“Mr. Gossett,” he said, “my brother and I are well trained in the democracy of the West, and so far as we are concerned, it would give us great pleasure to accept your invitation. We are delighted to accept the hospitality of any English gentleman and to return it when he visits our country, but unfortunately there are the members of our suites. No one of my own suite, for instance, whose attendance I might command, would permit me to sit anywhere but on the right of my host. The same thing would apply to my brother’s staff.”

“Then why not,” Gossett suggested, “come incognito and leave your suites behind you?”

“The idea appeals to me,” the Prince admitted. “I will see my brother and if he consents, we will meet at the Milan Restaurant at nine o’clock this evening. You will understand that we shall be entirely incognito and nameless. I will now venture to take my leave,” he concluded, rising. “Your proposition intrigues me greatly. I am convinced that my brother, who thinks always as I do, will feel the same emotion.”

The Prince shook hands and took his leave.

For a single minute after the arrival of the two brothers in the foyer of the Milan Hotel, Gossett fancied that his scheme was doomed to failure. They stopped short at the sight of the very beautiful blonde lady who was standing by Gossett’s side, and amongst the little train of their followers one or two at least, English military men by their appearance, hurried forward to whisper cautions to their august masters. Gossett himself always fancied that it was the faint smile at the corner of her beautiful lips, the cryptic lure of that single glance which she ventured in their direction which decided the matter. The two brothers waved back their followers, they advanced in dignified fashion towards their host, they accepted his carefully spoken introduction to the Countess of Blessbury. Gossett then took the bull by the horns.

“I fear, Prince,” he said to his earlier acquaintance, “that your entourage

and your brother's do not altogether approve of my plan. It seemed to me so sensible. The Countess is in possession of something which should, historically and religiously, find its way back to your country. It seemed to me that a little friendly discussion might simplify matters."

"I'm sure," Lady Blessbury murmured, with the sweetest of smiles, "that it would make me very unhappy to keep for a moment anything whose home was really in your country."

The Prince Ahmed bowed low. He got one in well ahead of his brother.

"It is only surprising, Countess," he said, "that all the jewels in India have not been laid at your feet."

Prince Ali came in a good second.

"Countess," he added, "we came to Europe—my brother and I—searching for the eye of a god and we find the eyes of a goddess."

"Mr. Gossett," Lady Blessbury murmured, "I think that I am going to like your two friends." . . .

They dined, a *partie carrée*, sedately, with dignity but also with much gaiety, in a discreet corner carefully watched over by head waiters, by personal servants of the two Princes and occasionally in the background by an English A.D.C. When in due course, that is to say at half-past twelve, the *sommelier* tendered confused apologies for the non-production of further bottles of champagne, Prince Ahmed beckoned the A.D.C. towards him.

"Countess," he said, "you will permit that I present my aide-de-camp, Colonel Chalmers—the Countess of Blessbury—Mr. Malcolm Gossett."

Due civilities were exchanged. The Prince continued:

"The party pleases us, Chalmers. We wish to prolong it."

"Your Highness knows the stipulations of this ridiculous country of ours," the young man ventured.

"Too well," his royal master sighed. "See the manager at once, Chalmers. Engage a private room where we can dance and as many of the orchestra as are advisable. Have the same wine served there."

"Your Highness desires other guests?" the aide-de-camp enquired a little drily.

"Certainly not," was the cold retort. "You must not forget," the Prince went on, turning to his host and Lady Blessbury, "that my brother and I are very English. It is our intention to, as you say, make a night of it."

It was four mornings later when Gossett, fully recovered from his headache but intensely curious in view of the fact that he had received no further communication as to what might have happened to his royal friends, received a visit from Colonel Chalmers.

"I'm afraid you don't recognise me, Mr. Gossett," the latter said, re-

introducing himself. "My name is Chalmers. I was bear-cubbing one of those young Indian Princes the other night, and I'm afraid I wasn't too agreeable about your party."

"I remember you perfectly," Gossett said, waving his visitor to a chair. "I'm sorry if I offended against etiquette in any way, but those two young men consulted me and I had to give them the best advice I could."

Chalmers opened his pocketbook and handed over a crisp little packet.

"Five thousand-pound notes," he announced, counting them over. "His Royal Highness desired me to express to you his sincere acknowledgment of your very brilliant solution of his difficulties."

"Capital!" Gossett exclaimed. "They came to terms with the Countess then?"

Chalmers smiled.

"You have not read your newspapers this morning," he observed.

"Quite right," Gossett admitted. "I haven't."

"His Royal Highness Prince Ahmed, my particular charge," Colonel Chalmers narrated, "was married yesterday afternoon by special licence to Lady Blessbury. I have just come back from seeing them off at Tilbury."

"And the yellow emerald?"

"Needless to say, they have taken it with them."

Gossett leaned back in his chair and smiled complacently.

"Well, isn't that, after all, an excellent solution, Colonel?" he asked.

"It certainly justifies in an amazing way," Colonel Chalmers said, with unexpected seriousness, "the prophecy of the old High Priest. All through this trouble he has maintained that it would be a woman who should decide which of the two Princes became the lord of the country. Both of them proposed marriage to Lady Blessbury. She chose my master. She brings him the yellow emerald and he becomes Maharajah and monarch of the richest of the Indian States."

"These old chaps out there seem to know something, after all," Gossett remarked.

"And some of you young ones too," Colonel Chalmers said politely, as he rose to take his leave.

IV SOMETIMES JURIES ERR

Malcolm Gossett, hard-boiled in all matters of sentiment, except as regarded his beautiful young wife, was conscious of a sense almost of reverence as he was ushered into the presence of the great man whom he had come to visit. The latter's environment was sufficiently impressive. The butler who had escorted the caller into the room had the air and voice of a high ecclesiastic. The library itself, with its warm air of seclusion and the faint mingled odour of old Russian calf and roses, possessed a subtly distinctive atmosphere, and the famous Judge who received his visitor with a courteous word of apology for remaining seated was notably one of the most attractive personalities of his day.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Gossett," the latter said, holding out his hand. "You will be so kind as to forgive my not rising. I am not in the best of health just now."

"I hope your lordship won't disturb yourself," Gossett begged, taking the chair which his host had indicated. "I was sorry to see from the papers that you were a temporary invalid."

Lord Harlowe had certainly the wasted appearance of a man who was suffering from some disease. His face was almost waxlike in its pallor, but his voice, for the qualities of which he had always been famous, was still clear and pleasant and the strength of his features remained.

"You were once attached to Scotland Yard, I believe, Mr. Gossett?" he said.

"For seven years."

"Were you by any chance ever interested in the case of Peter Morton?"

"The man who was sentenced to death for murder and then reprieved?"

The Judge acquiesced.

"I am glad you remember that much of the case, at any rate, Mr. Gossett," he said. "I am going, if you will permit me, to make a confession to you. It will perhaps make the remainder of our conversation more intelligible."

"As your lordship wishes," Gossett murmured.

"A legal career," the Judge went on, "is supposed, in course of time, to strip a man's mind of any tendencies towards superstition or sentimentality. In my case it has never been so. I have all my life, trusting chiefly of course to my judgment, been influenced by what, for want of a better word, I must call inspiration. That is to say that there have been times when, in dealing with a

prisoner, I have been largely influenced, not only by the proven facts of the case but by my own sentiments as to whether I believed the man guilty or not guilty.”

“That is very interesting,” Malcolm Gossett said.

“I am at the present moment,” Lord Harlowe continued, “engaged in the task of writing my memoirs. I am there making frank admission of what many people would no doubt consider a weakness in my mentality. It exists and that is all there is to be said about it. It never existed more strongly, Mr. Gossett, than it did in the case of Peter Morton.”

“There were curious differences of opinion concerning that case,” Malcolm Gossett reflected, “even at the Yard.”

“The man was not an attractive personality,” the Judge went on. “I suppose it is difficult for a man to make the best of himself when he stands in the dock on trial for his life. Nevertheless, from the very first I was troubled with a haunting sense of the man’s innocence. I must tell you, Mr. Gossett, that ever since I received my preferment as one of His Majesty’s judges, I have always had the shadow of one fear lurking in the back of my mind, and that was that some day in the course of my duties I might sentence to death an innocent man.”

“It is a terrible responsibility,” Gossett agreed.

“Towards the close of the trial of Peter Morton,” Lord Harlowe continued, “I felt that fear more strongly than ever before in my life. When the time came for my summing up, I think every one in the Court was surprised at my earnestness. No one has ever accused me of partisanship—no one has ever accused me of not realising that the summing up of a judge must be neither an appeal to the jury on behalf of the prisoner nor a demand for his conviction. I tried to realise that, even on that day. On the other hand, my summing up, the result of my personal convictions, was so much in favour of the prisoner that I never for a moment believed in the possibility of their not being shared by the jury. Yet, to my horror, after an absence of two hours, they brought in a verdict of ‘Guilty.’ I had no alternative. I had to assume the black cap and sentence Peter Morton to death.”

“He was not hung, though,” Gossett murmured.

“As you remark, he was not hung,” Lord Harlowe assented. “That he was not, as is well-known amongst my colleagues, was due to my own strenuous endeavours to obtain a reprieve. At the last minute and yielding entirely to my persuasions, the Home Secretary changed his sentence to penal servitude and his reprieve was forwarded to the prisoner. Now let me tell you a curious thing, Mr. Gossett.”

“All that you are saying is very interesting,” Gossett acknowledged.

“Well, with the reprieve,” the Judge continued, “my personal interest in the

case declined. I was spared even the chance of the great horror of my life. In the midst of a very strenuous life, the fate of Peter Morton faded into the background of my thoughts. Now comes the time when, in writing my memoirs, I reach his case, and Mr. Gossett, I want you to sympathise with me as a human being and not from our official point of view, when I tell you that directly I went into that case again, I felt a complete return of my convictions as to the man's innocence. Here is a strange thing for one of His Majesty's judges to admit to you, Mr. Gossett, but it is the truth. On paper, the man would appear to be fairly condemned for the crime of murder. To-day I am as convinced that he is innocent as I was during that awful moment when I was forced to sentence him to death."

Gossett was somewhat perplexed. The evidence in the case, so far as he remembered it, was fairly conclusive. He waited in silence to hear what further the Judge had to say.

"A few nights ago," the latter concluded, "I dined with one of my greatest friends, George Littledale, the criminal lawyer. So far as I remember, we did not even mention the Peter Morton case, but we did continue one of our old arguments as to the position of a man, say a murderer, who has the whole of the detective force of Scotland Yard against him and nothing but a criminal lawyer without any staff or prestige on his side. In connection with this, Littledale at once mentioned your name. He told me that you had started for yourself as a private detective, with the avowed object of acting chiefly for the accused person. I wrote you a letter the same night and asked you to come and see me. I have ventured to make out a cheque, Mr. Gossett, for five hundred pounds. I am going, if you will allow me, to commission you to investigate once more the immediate circumstances which practically decided Peter Morton's fate. If you come across any fresh facts, you can rely upon my seeing that they are put before the proper authorities, and if anything happens that I am not available, I know that Mr. Littledale will do what he can."

Lord Harlowe held out his hand. There was a slight air of exhaustion about his manner.

"You accept the commission, Mr. Gossett?"

"I accept it and I shall do my very best to throw a different light upon the case," was the emphatic reply.

Malcolm Gossett spent the best part of the following day reading from a Scotland Yard file the full account of the case *Rex versus Peter Morton*. When he had finished, he half regretted the fact that he had already sent Lord Harlowe's cheque into the bank. There was scarcely a loophole anywhere. The case for the prosecution seemed cast-iron. Gossett, who had been somewhat impressed by Harlowe's calm and convincing air, could, now that he had

studied the affair carefully, find no shadow of reason for it. There was no doubt, however, that Harlowe had been in earnest. His summing up, in the cold light of the facts disclosed, seemed almost absurdly in favour of the prisoner, so much so indeed that Gossett found himself wondering whether the jury might not have been adversely affected by such an obvious attempt at misdirection. Whilst Gossett was still wondering whether he would be justified in spending any of that five hundred pounds upon investigations which seemed foredoomed to failure, the telephone bell at his elbow rang. He took off the receiver and listened.

“Private secretary of Mr. George Littledale speaking. Mr. Littledale wants a word with Mr. Malcolm Gossett on most important business.”

“Malcolm Gossett speaking.”

“Wait one moment, please.”

Presently Littledale’s voice came booming over the wire.

“That you, Gossett?”

“Speaking.”

“I’m sending you down a caller—just tucked him into my own car. He’ll be with you in a few minutes. Probably I shall look in myself afterwards. Don’t take any definite steps as regards him until you have seen me.”

“You sound very mysterious,” Gossett remarked.

“Can’t help it. It’s a quaint piece of business. See you presently.”

Malcolm Gossett had not very long to wait for his visitor. According to instructions, the latter was shown in immediately on his arrival. He was a man of medium height, thin, dark and obviously very nervous. He was dressed in an ordinary grey suit, but Gossett, who was observant, noticed with curiosity that everything about him from his necktie to his boots was new. He wore gloves which he apparently was not anxious to remove.

“You have come from Mr. Littledale?” Gossett enquired.

“Yes, he sent me here,” was the quiet admission. “Where are your clerks?”

“I haven’t any. Only an office boy,” Gossett confided. “Why do you want to know that?”

The man laughed shortly, a hard, mirthless gesture. He had noticed the direction of Gossett’s straying fingers.

“I’m not going to rob you, if that’s what you’re afraid of,” he said, with a faint smile. “I’m not really a criminal, although I have just come from prison.”

Gossett suddenly realised the meaning of his new clothes and gloved hands. Simultaneously he recognised the man.

“My God, you’re Peter Morton!” he exclaimed.

The man frowned and looked nervously around.

“I should leave that name alone,” he said sharply. “I have been Number One Hundred and Ninety-eight at Dartmoor for six years. They do their best to

kill the human there, blood, bone and sinew.”

Gossett leaned across his desk.

“I thought you were in for life,” he said.

“So I was.”

“Then after all Harlowe was right. You’ve been pardoned.”

The man grunted scornfully.

“I escaped,” he confided. “I have been a free man for over a week, if you can call this skulking about the slums of London freedom.”

Gossett shook his head.

“It’s bad work, as a rule, this,” he said. “Can’t think why we haven’t heard about it. Was any one—hurt?”

Peter Morton shook his head.

“I’m not that sort of a fool,” he declared. “Probably no one before in the history of the prison ever escaped as I did. No one had the chance.”

“Tell me about it,” Gossett begged.

“I’ve never given any trouble,” the other explained. “I’m not that sort. I had all the good marks possible. They used to send me with a warder to the farthest edge of a new road they were making. I was useful, as I was a bit of a geologist. One day about a fortnight ago, we were just sitting down to have our lunch when Old Harry—we called him—the warder, just toppled over from his seat and had a fit. I stayed with him and did everything I could—fetched water for him, and I waited until he recovered consciousness. When he came to, we found he couldn’t move. We’d always been rather pally, and it was he who really put it into my head to try and get away. I took off his outside clothes and left him with mine. He let me take what money he had and his pipe and tobacco, and he wished me luck. I certainly had it too; I bought some more clothes at an outdoor market in a small town, and after that I’ve taken no particular pains at all to hide or disguise myself, beyond shaving. I came up to London by train, I’ve been staying in a small hotel Poplar way until this afternoon, when I came up to see Mr. Littledale, who has money of mine.”

“Funny I haven’t seen anything about it in the papers.”

“Mind if I smoke?” Peter Morton asked. “I’m simply crazy for tobacco these days.”

Gossett handed over a box of cigarettes, and for a moment or two his visitor was silent through sheer bliss. Then he went on.

“They’re too cunning to have those little paragraphs in the papers nowadays. Any one who was trying to make a get-away was helped all the time by reading his own description and the sort of clothes he was supposed to have got hold of, and what direction he was supposed to be making for. I knew Old Harry would give me a start, because he was going to tell them that I’d made for the moors which nearly all of them do. I didn’t. I made for the

nearest small town and the railway station.”

“Had you ever thought of escaping?” Gossett asked.

“The idea never even occurred to me,” Morton replied. “I’m no fighting man, although I’m supposed to be a murderer, and I should never have thought about it then, if Old Harry hadn’t been grateful to me for doctoring him round, and put it into my head.”

“You said just now that you were supposed to be a murderer,” Gossett said gravely. “Didn’t you kill Bealby?”

“I certainly did not,” was the firm reply.

“Then you’re a very unlucky fellow,” Gossett declared. “Why, you’d have been hung, if it hadn’t been for your judge.”

“I know,” the other assented. “I couldn’t make out why, but he knew I hadn’t done it.”

“Who was the murderer?” Gossett asked.

Peter Morton laughed in somewhat hollow fashion. It was curious that his speech and his gestures were alike—unsettled and uncertain. Six years of prison life and the complete cessation of all social amenities had left him in a sense floundering.

“I doubt whether I shall ever tell you that,” he announced. “I have to make a few enquiries first.”

“If there is anything to be told which could prove your innocence,” Gossett told him earnestly, “now is the time to do it. You may be in prison again before many hours have passed.”

The man shook his head. A strange colourless creature he seemed to Gossett, uncomfortably poised in his easy-chair, smoking cigarettes furiously.

“No,” he said, “I sha’n’t go back to prison. I’ve made up my mind about that. I tried to buy some poison, but they were too inquisitive at the chemist’s shop. I’ve got something else in my pocket that will do the trick, though.”

“Listen to me,” Gossett begged. “Take my advice. Get it right out of your mind that you can stay free and escape capture. It can’t be done. Sooner or later, believe me—I’ve been in the Force and I know something about it—you’ll feel a tap on your shoulder and the clink of handcuffs before you’ve had time to get your little plaything out of your pocket. I’m not an expert myself, and I couldn’t be in your company for five minutes without knowing that you’d been in prison lately. Some of it may wear off, of course, but don’t for a minute believe that you can make a clean get-away.”

“Of course—” Peter Morton began, with a gathering scowl upon his face.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Gossett interrupted. “Mr. Littledale and I are privileged people. We are neither of us obliged to give you away and we certainly sha’n’t. But for the very prestige of the prison, they’ll get you back again. I can promise you that. On the other hand, you have a friend in a very

unexpected quarter—the man we’ve spoken of before, the Judge who tried you, Lord Harlowe. For some reason or other, he believes you innocent. Now put us on the right track to prove it, or even to make your innocence seem plausible, and he will take the matter up with the Home Secretary.”

“In which case,” Peter Morton observed bitterly, “I might perhaps get a free pardon for a crime I never committed.”

“If you never committed the murder and have kept back evidence incriminating some one else,” Gossett said severely, “it serves you right, and a free pardon is more than you deserve, or quite as much, anyway.”

The escaped man looked across the table curiously. The hard lines of his face became somewhat relaxed. He even permitted himself something that sounded like an apologetic laugh. He was distinctly struggling on the way towards a return to humanity.

“No maudlin sympathy about you, anyway,” he remarked.

“You’re not the man to want maudlin sympathy,” was the blunt reply. “As soon as you get to be yourself again, you’ll resent it. Now tell me the truth about this business, in case we should be interrupted. If you didn’t kill Bealby, who did?”

The man shook his head.

“Not so easy,” he replied. “If I didn’t tell Littledale that when I was in danger of being hanged, I’m scarcely likely to give the secret away now, to have let my six years’ agony go for nothing.”

“You’re running a risk by not telling me the truth,” Gossett warned him.

“I’ve run greater ones,” was the calm reply.

“Can’t you give me a line and let me make some investigations for you?” Gossett asked. “As I daresay Littledale told you, I am holding five hundred pounds in trust for you—a gift from Lord Harlowe—to try and get at the truth of that night.”

There was a momentary gleam in the man’s eyes.

“Thank God,” he exclaimed fervently, “there was one person in the world who believed in me besides the one who knew. I don’t really need the money, Mr. Gossett, but keep it for the present. In the meantime, is there any advice you can give me as to keeping out of the way of the police?”

“There certainly is,” was the confident reply. “Plenty of advice. As you are dressed at present, and judging by your appearance generally, the youngest detective in the Force would have a guess at you. Don’t you realise that you have everything new, from your shoes and socks to your collar?”

“I couldn’t very well help that.”

“No, but we can do something better for you,” Gossett declared, rising to his feet. “I have three or four changes of clothes in my room here and I should say we were very much of a size. Your present clothes will be perfectly safe

here. I don't know exactly where you're staying but I shouldn't go back there. I'll pay your bill, if you give me your address, and collect your luggage, and while you're changing your clothes here, I'll slip out and buy you a second-hand dressing case and a few toilet things. Mind you," Gossett said, as he took the other by the shoulder and led him towards an inner room, "I don't think any one in the world could keep you a free man for a long time, but just for the few days you need to clear things up, we'll try and manage it."

"I sha'n't be getting you into trouble, I hope?" the fugitive asked a little awkwardly.

Gossett smiled.

"No, I'm safe enough. There you are—three complete outfits. Help yourself. They are none of them too new and they are none of them conspicuous. I'll be back in a quarter of an hour. If you feel like a whisky and soda, well, you'll find everything in that cupboard. A glass of sherry, if you prefer it."

"You're very kind to me, Mr. Gossett. For all you know, I'm still an escaped murderer."

"I'm taking a chance on you," Gossett told him, smiling. . . .

A quarter of an hour later Peter Morton reappeared, looking a very different person. His dark blue serge clothes fitted excellently, the glaring brown shoes were replaced by black ones, smartly polished but with some faint show of wear. He carried a bowler hat and in his hand was a cane and a pair of chamois leather gloves not obtrusively new. Gossett set down the telephone receiver which he had been holding, and nodded.

"Capital!" he approved, "and just in time too."

"Something wrong?"

"I'm afraid they're on your track," Gossett admitted. "That was almost a certainty, you know, Morton. I warned you of it."

The latter's face was suddenly the face of a man again.

"Whatever happens," he said sternly, "I'm going to see my wife again before they take me. It means everything in the world to me, Gossett. Don't try and stop me."

"I'm going to stop you leaving this place for a minute, Morton," was the firm reply, "but I shall do all I can to help you see your wife. Now listen to me patiently. Mr. Littledale has just rung up. Scotland Yard have telephoned him the news of your escape. For some reason or other, they didn't ask him the question whether he'd already seen anything of you. They told him that they were having your house in Whiteley Avenue watched and also his offices."

"I don't care," the hunted man said doggedly. "I am going home."

Gossett laid his hand upon his shoulder.

"Listen, my friend," he enjoined. "You've got to keep your nerve. If you

start out from here, you'll never cross the threshold of your home. You will be on your way back to Dartmoor before midnight. I am helping you, remember. I want to keep you free for a time, but you must do as I say. They don't know at headquarters that I am interested in your case or of my visit to Lord Harlowe. Fortunately I also told Littledale not to mention it. I have been downstairs and I have had a good look round. I have the one man I keep for watching purposes in the street now. This place is free from observation. And listen, Morton. Your wife is in a taxicab at the present moment on her way here. It is the one meeting place possible. She will be here in five or ten minutes. You must go into the room where you changed your clothes—sorry it's all I have to offer you—and I shall be on the spot, if you need me afterwards. Now, is that all clear?"

Morton was shaking like a man in an ague.

"It's clear," he muttered. "I haven't seen her all this time. You say she's coming? You're sure she's coming?"

"She's on her way. She may turn up at any moment. Look here, Morton, get into the back room at once and wait for her. I'll send her in and stay here. Better for you to be alone when you meet. But remember, man, a good deal depends upon the next few hours. You can do a lot while free that you'll never be able to do once you've had that little tap on the shoulder."

Morton nodded.

"I understand," he said. "Don't be afraid, Gossett. I won't let you down."

The latter took him by the arm and almost pushed him into the back room. He heard the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

"You won't keep her," Morton begged.

"Not a second," the other promised.

Gossett had not expected to see a beautiful woman, but there was no time for surprise. He tried to keep his tone as emotionless as possible.

"I am Mrs. Morton," she began eagerly, holding out her hands. "I want to see my husband."

"You are going to see him at once," Gossett promised. "Come with me and listen carefully while we cross the room. It is most important that you should have a conversation with him. You see, his escape was rather a miracle, but he may be recaptured at any moment. It is best for you to know that. Say what you have to say to him as quickly as you can and then we will all three talk together."

"Yes, yes. Let me see him, please," she faltered.

He opened the door and pushed her gently in. He closed his ears to the little cry which broke from her lips as he turned the handle.

Gossett sat down at his desk, mopped his forehead and lit a cigarette. Then he summoned the boy from the small office outside.

“Go downstairs, Richard,” he directed, “and get me an evening paper. You’ll see Strangeways about somewhere. Ask him whether any one was shadowing the lady who has just arrived, and get back as quickly as you can. Don’t answer a single question of any sort from any stranger.”

“That’s all right, sir,” the boy promised, hurrying away.

Gossett sat alone within a few feet of drama, his ears resolutely closed to the rise and fall of voices. The boy returned with the paper and made his report.

“The lady wasn’t followed, sir,” he announced. “Strangeways told me I could assure you that everything is O.K.”

“Fine,” Gossett murmured. “Give me the paper.”

He read the first news of the escape of a convict from Dartmoor with the addendum that the escaped man was supposed to have reached London. Presently the hum of voices from behind the door ceased. The door itself was opened sharply. Gossett swung round to face the two approaching figures. He found in their attitude something incomprehensible. The traces of tears were still on the woman’s cheeks, but she was dry-eyed now and clutching feverishly to her husband’s arm. Peter Morton walked like a man in a dream, yet to Gossett he seemed to have gained an inch or two in height. The latter sat on the edge of the table and tried to keep his tone as matter of fact as possible.

“Look here, you two,” he began, “I want you both to make an effort. We are perfectly safe where we are for some time to come. Now, Mrs. Morton, you sit down there,” pointing to a chair, “and you, Morton, by her side. That’s right. I wish you’d smoke. It all helps, you know, and we want a few minutes of plain, sensible talk.”

“You’re right, Gossett,” Morton replied, a new agitation in his tone. “But let me tell you this—no two people in the world have ever gone through what we have gone through in the last five minutes.”

Gossett strolled across the room with the cigarettes.

“Well, it’s up to you both to tell me all about it,” he declared. “Your husband has a very powerful friend, Mrs. Morton, and what we want is to keep him from going back. Now then, please, your story.”

In those first few moments it was the woman who was the more self-possessed. It was she who replied.

“Mr. Gossett,” she said, “on that hateful afternoon, as was proved in Court, my husband entered the block of flats where Mr. Bealby lived and was established on the first floor, with the object of paying him a visit. His story to his lawyer was true, as far as it went. He found the flat door open and walked in. Mr. Bealby was lying dead, half on the floor, half against the divan. A

revolver belonging to my husband was found thrown into a corner of the room, a telegram addressed to me was found in my husband's pocket, making an appointment for me to be at Mr. Bealby's rooms at four o'clock. Furthermore, although my husband never mentioned that even to Mr. Littledale, as he mounted the stairs, he passed a woman rushing down. That woman was me. As I passed, I said one thing—a thing which has always puzzled him. I sobbed out, 'Don't go back.' ”

“Wait a moment,” Gossett said. “Let me get this. Your husband received a telegram addressed to you, inviting you to call at Bealby's rooms at four o'clock. He went there at about that time and passed you coming out. When he got to the rooms the door was open and Bealby was dead. What was your idea of the situation, Morton?”

“I thought that my wife was having a slight flirtation with Bealby—had indiscreetly promised to go to his rooms. I went there to fetch her away, knowing what sort of a man he was. When I met her coming down the stairs, she seemed agitated. I didn't stop to speak to her. I meant to have it out with Bealby. When I got to his rooms, I found him dead and my revolver lying in plain view.”

“What did you make of the situation?” Gossett asked.

“I took it that there had been some sort of affair between my wife and Bealby and that she had shot him.”

“And that was why you were so dumb all the time?”

“Naturally. I didn't wish Florence's name brought into it. My business quarrels with Bealby were quite sufficient motive for anything I might have done. The man was dead. I believed that Florence had shot him. That was the end of me.”

“And when you passed your husband on the stairs coming up, when you were going out, Mrs. Morton, what was your idea?”

“I knew that Peter had had the telegram,” she replied. “I knew that he was inclined to be jealous, although there was never the slightest cause for it. I was to have met Cecil Bealby that afternoon. He owned the King's Theatre. I thought that Peter had been before me, had shot Bealby, suddenly remembered his revolver and was going back for it.”

“Then neither of you shot Bealby?” Gossett exclaimed.

“Before God I didn't,” the woman cried. “He was on the floor dead when I got there.”

“And before God I didn't,” Peter Morton declared.

“And you both believed the other had?” Gossett concluded. “Now this is important. I believe your words. You neither of you shot Bealby. Then who did?”

Gossett and Mr. Littledale spent a somewhat distracted hour together on the following morning. Littledale especially seemed to find the situation almost impossible.

“Granted all that you say, Gossett,” he pronounced. “Granted that Peter Morton is innocent, that Florence his wife is innocent, we are still face to face with the fact that within a few minutes of their hurried departures and arrivals at the flat the man Bealby was murdered. Now, in the building—I have it all here in the papers—there should have been present the hall porter and his wife; General Glide, who had a hospital nurse with him at the time, was unconscious, incapable of movement and died three days afterwards; and Miss Maureen Fitch, on the top floor, the deformed typist who did a little work for Bealby now and then, or any one else in the building, but who very seldom left her room owing to her infirmity, and who hadn’t been downstairs, except when she was carried, for two years. Now how do you expect me to find the guilty person out of these?”

“Miss Maureen Fitch,” Gossett repeated reflectively; “I forgot her evidence.”

“You’ll find it there,” the lawyer said, pointing to a roll of papers. “The murdered man was practically unknown to her, except as an occasional client. She lived entirely in her room, she could have had no possible grudge against the man. She faded out of the picture almost as quickly as she faded out of the witness box.”

“Nevertheless, this session is adjourned for half an hour,” Gossett decided. “I have talked to the hall porter. I’ve talked to his wife. I have even spoken to the hospital nurse who was looking after the poor General, but I have never had a word with Miss Maureen Fitch. What was this young woman’s evidence in Court?”

“She never left her room that day,” Littledale recounted drily, “or the week before or the week after. She had scarcely ever seen Mr. Bealby in her life, and all that she knew of him was that he paid a fair price for the typing.”

“Nevertheless, Miss Fitch is clearly my responsibility,” Gossett declared. “I’m going to see her at once.”

“Come straight back,” Littledale enjoined him. “If I’m in Court, send for me.”

“I sha’n’t be long. It seems absurd to go, but after all some one must know who murdered Bealby.”

The girl was seated at her desk typing, when Gossett entered the room. There was a rubber-shod stick by her side, and while she was actually typing, her eyes seemed half closed. She was terribly thin, her black hair was streaked with grey, her cheek bones protruded, her chin was almost pointed, her dark

eyes had a starved look, as though the light of life were only a flickering thing. She left off typing as Gossett entered and turned her head.

“Who are you?” she asked. “I haven’t worked for you before, have I?”

“I haven’t come to see you about work, Miss Fitch,” Gossett replied. “I have come to ask you a few questions about a very sad event which took place here some six years ago.”

She looked at him strangely.

“Will you please wait five minutes?” she begged.

She finished the page that she was typing, collected the loose sheets, pinned them together and covered up her typewriter.

“Now what is it you wish to ask me?” she enquired.

“I want to know whether you can tell me who killed Mr. Bealby?”

“Aren’t you a little out of date?” she asked.

“Not at all,” he assured her. “Peter Morton is out of prison and the whole case is being reopened.”

She sighed.

“I suppose it had to come some day,” she remarked. “Well, if you want to know, I did.”

Gossett had been standing with one hand leaning on the edge of her desk. He was conscious of a sudden shock. He almost collapsed into the cane chair by her side.

“You?” he exclaimed. “But why?”

“Quite sufficient reason,” she answered. “In those days I used to do some typing for him. Once he was in a hurry and came up for the copy himself. It was seven years ago and my shoulder wasn’t so bad then. I remember,” she went on dreamily, “I had on a summer frock and some one had sent me some red roses. He pitied me, or pretended to, and asked if he could take me out in his new car. No one had asked me such a thing before. It was like heaven. He took me out four or five times. Then I went down to a little cottage he had in Sussex.”

There was a silence. Gossett was looking out of the window vacantly and hopelessly.

“After that,” she continued, “I saw less and less of him. There came a day when I wrote him a foolish note. I told him I couldn’t live unless he came to see me sometimes. You know his reply. . . . But of course you don’t. He sent me up a terrible-looking weapon and a few joking words. ‘I am sending you a present,’ he said, ‘which was given to me a few days ago by a friend, but for which I shall never have any use. It is my idea of a suitable reply,’ he went on, or something of that sort, ‘to any one who says they can’t live any longer without a certain thing.’ He didn’t mean it, of course, or he wouldn’t have dared to write it, but I took off my shoes, and with my stick I went down the

few flights of stairs by myself—a thing I hadn't done for a year—and I went into his room and shot him. Then I came upstairs again, leaving the door open, I remember, and went on with my work. My shoulder was bad, however, and I had to go to hospital a few weeks after that.”

“But, my God,” Gossett exclaimed, “do you realise that if it hadn't been for a Judge who had a presentiment, a man would have hung for the crime you committed?”

“I didn't much care,” she answered indifferently. “No one has ever shown me any kindness in life. I have done nothing but suffer since I was born. Why should I care about other people? However,” she went on, after a moment's pause, “you see I hadn't the courage of my convictions.”

She opened a drawer and threw two packets upon the table.

“If the man had been sentenced to be hanged,” she proceeded, “there is my confession. You see it is addressed to the Home Secretary and was to be sent in, the day after the trial. In the other envelope is a copy of it. That was to be sent in seven years after the first day of his imprisonment, provided he went to prison. That was quite a fair bargain, you see. I was willing to share what was left of my life. There you are.”

She tossed the packets to him. Mechanically he thrust them into his pocket.

“What are you going to do?” he enquired.

“Oh, I shall stay around until something happens,” she replied. “Life went out for me the day I killed him, although God knows he deserved it. I'm tired of typing.”

There was no trouble about the free pardon for Peter Morton, but the question of Maureen Fitch was a little more difficult. She settled the matter for herself, however, by voluntarily entering a mental sanatorium for criminals. The whole affair forms a startling episode in Lord Harlowe's forthcoming memoirs.

“It will give people a loose idea of what goes on behind the scenes, I'm afraid,” Lord Harlowe protested mildly.

“But after all, your lordship,” Malcolm Gossett pointed out, “it would be hard luck to try two different people for the same offence, and capital punishment for a crippled woman would be quite out of the question.”

“You detectives always get the last word,” the Judge sighed.

V

THE WISE MAN FROM THE PAST

Cynthia Gossett, a little excited by her social success that evening and looking more radiantly beautiful than ever, chatted to her husband all the way home in the taxi from Raughton Gardens to Medlar's Row. Owing to a slight measure of fatigue after a long day's golf, and parking difficulties in the neighbourhood of Piccadilly, Gossett had decided to leave the saloon car at home in the garage and, with Cynthia in one of her most affectionate moods and a drizzling rain falling, he was well content that he had done so.

"Malcolm dear, wasn't it wonderful that Sir George Littledale should have taken me in to dinner? There were such smart people there too."

"Very nice of him," Gossett agreed. "At the same time, you are still comparatively a bride, you know, and it was our first visit to the house."

"Well, I liked it, anyway," she sighed. "Why was he made a knight, Malcolm?"

"Oh, distinction in his profession and various public offices," Gossett replied. "No special reason that I know of. I think he was rather surprised himself." Her arm tightened around his neck.

"Malcolm dear," she whispered, "do you think there's any chance of your ever being knighted?"

"Not an earthly," he assured her. "You see, I don't belong to one of the learned professions."

"But still you do things," she protested. "Two people this evening have told me how clever you were. What sort of things would you have to do to be made Sir Malcolm Gossett?"

He considered the matter with a humorous glint in his eyes.

"Well," he said, "I might perhaps save a prince from being blackmailed or —"

She drew herself a little away from his arms.

"Malcolm dear, isn't it extraordinary you should say that?" she exclaimed. "You noticed the man I was sitting with, after we'd finished dancing? I called you over but Lady Littledale was talking to you."

"I saw him," Gossett assented. "Nice-looking fellow, I thought, but much too interested in his companion."

"Stupid!" she laughed. "But isn't it queer, Malcolm? His name is Prince—Hamilton Prince—and he's coming to you to-morrow morning at eleven o'clock, to see if you can help him out of some trouble or other."

“Heavens! Have you been touting for me?” Gossett exclaimed, with mock consternation.

“Not at all,” Cynthia replied with dignity. “He asked me whether you were the Mr. Malcolm Gossett who had an office near the Adelphi, and then he wanted to be introduced. You were talking to people all the time, though, and he was obliged to leave. He told me that he was coming to call on you tomorrow morning, and I just said that I thought eleven o’clock would be a good time.”

The taxicab turned into Medlar’s Row and Gossett sat up with a sigh.

“I’m afraid that’s not the sort of prince I meant,” he remarked, as he collected his hat and stick from the floor. “No knighthood to be got out of your friend, I’m sure, but we’ll go halves in the fee, anyway.”

“You ought to take me out with you always,” Cynthia said, as she smoothed her hair. “I’m sure I could bring lots of fresh business to the firm.”

Mr. Hamilton Prince, rather to Gossett’s surprise, duly presented himself at Macadam Street the following morning at a few minutes after eleven. He was a tired but pleasant-looking man, apparently about thirty-five years of age, and on his arrival he seemed to be suffering from a fit of nervousness. Gossett, however, with his naturally sympathetic manners, had the knack of putting his clients at ease, and this particular one, with a box of cigarettes at his elbow, soon found himself talking without embarrassment.

“I won’t beat about the bush, Mr. Gossett,” he said. “I am in the devil of a mess. I’ve come to see whether you can think of any possible way of helping me.”

“What is it?” the other enquired. “Blackmail?”

“No, I shouldn’t call it that. It’s a very awkward piece of business and, although I’ve come to you for your help, I can tell you only a portion of my trouble.”

“That doesn’t sound very promising,” Gossett remarked.

“Do you mind if I ask you about fees?”

“That depends upon so many things. I don’t even know that I should be able to take on your case.”

“Put it this way,” Mr. Prince suggested. “What remuneration would you expect for a whole working day devoted to making certain enquiries for me?”

“That’s the sort of question I can answer,” Gossett replied with a smile. “About thirty pounds and my expenses, if there were any.”

“Very well,” Mr. Prince agreed. “Let us start with that day. Here,” he went on, taking three ten-pound notes from his pocketbook and pushing them across the table, “are thirty pounds.”

Gossett placed a paper weight upon them but made no immediate effort to

possess himself of the money.

"Very well," he said. "Now let me hear what you expect me to do."

"I expect you to give a whole day—to-morrow preferably—to keeping various appointments on my behalf," Mr. Prince explained. "At eleven o'clock to-morrow, for instance, you call upon The Ixion Syndicate, Number Ten Cannon Row, Cannon Street, and ask to see the manager. You will be told that the manager is out. Then ask to see Mr. Nissim. Nissim will enquire what your business may be. You will tell him that you've come from me, that I have called you in to my assistance and that I have sent you to him for information. He will probably take you with him to somewhere the other side of the river—it may be Bermondsey. You will meet me back here again at three o'clock and make your report. That will be your day's work."

Gossett made no movement towards taking up the thirty pounds.

"I was never offered a commission," he confessed, "which appealed to me less."

"My dear fellow, it isn't my fault," his visitor insisted. "The reason I'm so dumb is because what you must hear, before you decide to try and help me or not, will sound so much more convincing if it comes from some one else. The whole affair must seem deadly to you now, of course, but remember what Conrad once said—'It is the darkest way which leads into the lightest street.' You may be toying with the golden ball of adventure when we meet to-morrow afternoon."

Gossett picked up the notes.

"Well," he remarked, "I have never before accepted a commission of which I knew so little, but I'll go and see your friends in Cannon Row, at any rate."

"At three o'clock to-morrow afternoon here," Mr. Prince said, rising to his feet.

"I sha'n't forget," Gossett promised.

Number Ten Cannon Row was one of a block of buildings, half offices and half warehouses, of modern and prepossessing appearance. The brass plate upon which was engraved THE IXION SYNDICATE shone like gold, and it was rather a shock to Gossett, when he pushed open the swing door, to find himself in a small, perfectly bare warehouse. A youth wearing a white linen smock came forward to meet him.

"I should like to see the manager," Gossett announced, according to instructions.

"The manager is out for the moment, sir," the youth replied.

"Then can I see Mr. Nissim?"

"Step this way, sir."

Gossett was shown into an office which contained several surprises. In the first place, there was a rich carpet upon the floor but not a single article of furniture, except a covered-up typewriter, obviously brand new, standing upon a small table with an empty chair in front of it, a cupboard presumably holding stationery supplies, and an easy-chair on which was disposed one of the most beautiful young women of Oriental type whom Gossett had ever seen.

“A gentleman to see Mr. Nissim,” the youth announced and took his leave.

The young lady smiled but remained silent. Gossett hastened to explain.

“My name is Gossett and I am here on behalf of a Mr. Hamilton Prince,” he said. “I was told if the manager was out to ask for Mr. Nissim, who would probably take me down to Bermondsey, and that between you all I should then begin to understand a matter in which Mr. Prince is interested and concerning which he is asking for my help.”

The girl flicked the ash from the cigarette which she was smoking. She continued to recline in her chair and scrutinised Gossett through half-closed eyes. She reminded him rather of a photograph he had recently seen in an illustrated paper of a group of young Turkish women who had just been released from the duration of the harem.

“We are in terrible trouble, Mr. Gossett,” she confided in a soft, velvet-like voice. “Do you think that you will be able to help us?”

“When I know what your trouble is,” he answered, “I shall certainly do my best.”

She glanced at a shipping calendar which hung upon the wall—its sole adornment.

“There is very little time,” she sighed. “Are you an old friend of Mr. Prince’s?”

“I saw him the day before yesterday for the first time,” Gossett told her. “My assistance, if I am able to offer it, would be more a matter of business than friendship.”

She looked at him with a faint smile on her slightly protruding, very red lips.

“I like the way you talk,” she said. “You seem to have so much—what do you call it?—energy. In Singapore most of the English we meet seem tired.”

“Do you come from Singapore?” Gossett asked.

“I have lived there and in Saigon all my life, except for one year when I was at school in Paris. My father was born in Singapore.”

There was the sound of a chair being moved in the inner room. The girl pointed with her cigarette to the door inscribed “Private.”

“Just knock and walk in,” she invited. “You will find my father a little difficult. He is in one of his bad moods to-day. That is why I came down to the City with him.”

Gossett did as he was bidden and passed on to his third surprise. He entered a luxuriously furnished office with a beautiful Eastern rug upon the floor, a mahogany table and several easy-chairs. Before the table was seated a sallow-faced man, tall and slim, with high cheek bones, hooked nose and brilliantly dark eyes. His exact nationality it would have been impossible to determine, but he was obviously an Oriental. He too was smoking and the atmosphere of the room was heavy with the smell of countless cigarettes. He half rose to his feet and Gossett saw that he was taller than he had imagined.

"My name is Nissim," he said. "Did you wish to see me?"

"I come from a Mr. Prince, whom I think you know," Gossett explained. "He told me to ask here for the manager, and if the manager was out, for Mr. Nissim. He said something about your taking me down to Bermondsey."

"Are you a Government official?" Mr. Nissim asked.

"Certainly not. I have once or twice been able to help people in difficulties and I met Mr. Prince the other night at his lawyer's."

Mr. Nissim threw out his hands. His eyes were like coal-black diamonds.

"People in difficulties!" he repeated. "My God! Have ever people been in greater difficulties than we are? You know my name—but you know who I am perhaps?"

"I have not the faintest idea," Gossett assured him.

"I am the head of the Asiatic Leather Trust," Mr. Nissim announced, punctuating his words with a long, wagging finger. "You are a business man, Mr. Gossett?"

"I am sorry to say that I am not," the latter acknowledged.

"The Asiatic Leather Trust is one of the greatest mercantile companies in the East," Mr. Nissim declared. "We have branches in China, in the Malay States, in the Dutch East Indies and in Madras. The whole of our business is conducted with England or on English soil. You come with me now and I show you something."

Mr. Nissim rose to his feet. Some one had apparently told him that in London all the business men wore silk hats, for he clapped on his head one of the latest of Scott's productions. He struggled into an elegantly cut Chesterfield overcoat and wrapped a scarf around his throat. Then he filled both pockets with cigarettes from a box upon the table and seized Gossett by the shoulder.

"Come with me," he invited. "I show you something."

The beautiful young woman glanced up as they passed her. She smiled directly at Gossett.

"You will come back again?" she asked.

"Very likely," he answered. "At present I don't even know where I'm going."

She folded up her newspaper.

“I am lunching at the Savoy Grill with Hamilton, Father,” she told him. “Don’t forget his telephone message. You are to take Mr. Gossett on there.”

Mr. Nissim groaned.

“Lunch,” he muttered. “How is it that one can think of such things? We have cables this morning?”

“Seven,” the girl answered nonchalantly. “Van Gylden is coming over with the rest.”

Mr. Nissim led the way out of the empty warehouse, wringing his hands.

“Tooley Street Wharves,” he directed the taxi man whom he summoned.

They drove off towards that unlovely district.

“Couldn’t you,” Gossett suggested, “give me some faint idea as to what this is all about?”

“The words choke me,” Mr. Nissim confessed. “At the Singapore Chamber of Commerce last March I spoke for an hour. Words and phrases came to me as easily as the rain seems to fall in this terrible city. To-day there is something in my throat. There is tragedy always before my eyes. For nights I have not slept. There was a Hindu skin collector in one of the near provinces. He went mad last year because three thousand of his goatskins were declared to have the scab. He wandered in and out of the warehouses all day, waiting for the news. When it came, it was bad. I am like that.”

“You’re a dealer in skins, I gather?” Gossett asked.

“I am the most important dealer in Asia,” Mr. Nissim declared. “I am chairman of all the companies. I collect the Singapore hides, the Madras hides, sheep and goatskins from the hills of India and the interior of China. They come down the rivers to me in great bales. There are four hundred natives who work in my warehouses alone in Singapore.”

“You don’t seem overstaffed here,” Gossett remarked.

Mr. Nissim only groaned.

“When you understand,” he muttered. “It will not be long now.”

They arrived at their destination and Mr. Nissim led the way on to the crowded wharves. On the one side were enormous warehouses, on the other the river, with a long line of steamers discharging their cargoes. Whistles were blowing, cranes were creaking and groaning, men were shouting, huge open drays were being driven up the rails with clanging of gong and horn. His guide led Gossett up to some of the vast ground floors of the various warehouses. From floor to ceiling they were stacked with hides and with countless bales of dried skins. The whole atmosphere seemed impregnated with the rank odour of partly tanned leather. Mr. Nissim pointed up and then he pointed down. There was half a mile of merchandise, a long row of warehouses which seemed to be bursting and groaning with their stock.

“Is this what I have come to see?” Gossett asked in bewilderment.

“You have come to see in order that you may realise that we speak without exaggeration,” Mr. Nissim declared passionately. “For the whole of this—have I not told you that I am the greatest collector in Asia?—I, the great Singapore merchant, Nissim, am responsible. I directly, and behind me indirectly Hamilton Prince.”

“All this has no significance whatever for me,” Gossett complained, a little wearily, puffing hard at his cigarette, “except that it seems to me that you must be millionaires.”

This time Nissim’s groans seemed to shake every bone in his thin body.

“To deal with this holocaust which has fallen upon us,” he confided, “I should need to have the wealth of the Nizam of Hyderabad, and to escape the knives of those on whom the truth is even now dawning, Prince would need all the magic of all the fakirs of India.”

“I don’t want to see or smell any more leather,” Gossett insisted, lighting a fresh cigarette. “Supposing we get back to that lunch Prince telephoned about, and if you don’t mind,” he added, “I should like to call at London Bridge Station on the way and drink something.”

Hamilton Prince and Selah Nissim were seated in the small lounge of the Savoy Grill, drinking cocktails, when the two men arrived. The girl looked at Gossett with a gleam of curiosity in her languid eyes.

“Well?” she asked. “Has the wise man from the West solved our great dilemma?”

“It hasn’t even been put to me yet,” he told her. “Personally I have only two anxieties in life—to wash the odours of that loathsome place from my face and hands and try what one of those cocktails can do for my thirst.”

She waved him on.

“You will never be able to live in Singapore,” she sighed. “When the wind blows from the harbours, we are very thankful for our rose gardens and our sweet-smelling shrubs.”

“I’ll order Martinis,” Prince suggested.

“Dry,” Gossett called back over his shoulder.

They were a strange quartette when they took their places in the distant corner where Prince had reserved a table. Nissim’s Savile Row morning coat hung strangely on his thin limbs, his eyes were almost wolfishly anxious, his movements nervous and eager. Selah, his daughter, was dressed in one of the latest of Chanel’s models. She moved with all the exquisite grace inherited from a long line of Oriental ancestry and was admired by every one in whispers and surreptitious glances as she passed to her place. Hamilton Prince, except that his face was haggard and drawn with anxiety, was just the typical

young Englishman who has lived in the East. Gossett was self-possessed and alert as usual, an Anglo-Saxon of bluffer and healthier type.

“I chose this table,” Prince explained, after luncheon had been ordered, “chiefly because my friend here, having had his object lesson, should now be given the explanation of it. I tell you frankly, Mr. Gossett,” he went on, as he crushed a piece of Melba toast in his fingers, “I don’t see how you or any one else can help us. I expect to feel a knife in my ribs before ten days have passed, but I don’t mind so much about that, if only it wasn’t for you others.”

Mr. Nissim indulged in his now familiar groan. It seemed to Gossett that there was a shade more humanity in the girl’s glorious eyes as she smiled across at Prince.

“What you need, dear Hamilton,” she murmured, “is a little of our Eastern quiescence. I had an old Malay nurse who had a wonderful proverb. ‘Never put your umbrella up before the rain begins to fall.’ ”

“Perhaps now I may be told,” Gossett suggested, “why I was taken down to see the ghastly outsides of those millions of carcasses.”

Prince drank the whole of the glass of wine with which he had just been served and settled down.

“You know as much as this, I think, Mr. Gossett,” he began. “I have been for six years on the Governor’s Staff at Singapore. I have held the post of Chief of the Commercial Bureau during that time, and on the whole, I think I have kept in the good books of the Governor himself and of the authorities at home. When the elections came and Great Britain voted clearly enough for tariffs with Empire preference, you can understand, I daresay, that it was a busy time for British officials in centres from which a great deal of raw material was exported. Almost at once I received by air a long and confidential communication from a certain department, giving me a list of the duties it was proposed to impose upon the hides, dried skins and manufactured leather of other countries, and pointing out where the imports from our own dependencies could be hugely increased. Now, I don’t want to creep into cover anyhow, Gossett, and I don’t want to excuse myself in any way. This was a strictly private and confidential document for my consideration. I studied it carefully, and I cabled back home signifying my complete approval of the suggestions as a whole and their particular provisions.”

There was a brief silence. Prince toyed with the continuation of his lunch. Selah was glancing around the room, absorbing without a quiver the homage of countless eyes. Her father was drumming with his long finger nails upon the table.

“As you may or may not know, Mr. Gossett,” Prince went on, “Singapore is the centre of a large skin-collecting industry and also of the tanning of a great many hides. In other words, it is the great leather centre of the East, and

most of the skins and leather are collected from British dependencies. Mr. Nissim here is the most important figure in the business. He has the reputation of possessing great wealth. He certainly has control of this industry in India, Hong Kong, Saigon, the Dutch East Indies and many other places. He has also always been a large purchaser of Chinese goatskins, which he has stored in Singapore and which have become accepted as British produce. Here was the situation then. The document in my possession was, on the face of it, sufficient to ensure an enormous fortune to any one who knew its provisions and acted promptly. I myself, like every other man in Singapore, was desperately in love with Miss Nissim, whilst her father here—to put the matter quite frankly—didn't consider me quite good enough. I am a comparatively poor man, certainly a poor man compared to many others of Miss Nissim's suitors."

The girl smiled at him across the table, and again Gossett felt a curious little sensation of pleasure in her obvious sincerity.

"But I always cared for you more than any one else, Hamilton," she murmured.

He returned her smile and went on.

"Now whether my friend Mr. Nissim here came to me or I went to him need not transpire," Prince continued. "I had it there in my safe—a huge fortune—and Mr. Nissim was the only man who could make it. In a sense, I broke my faith. In any case, I acted contrary to the etiquette of my department. I gave Nissim a copy of the Government proposals and Mr. Nissim sanctioned my engagement to his daughter."

"Very lucid," Gossett murmured, "but I may perhaps be forgiven for saying I appreciate the temptation. And now where's the catch?"

"It transpires," Prince continued, "that Mr. Nissim here has had a lean time for years and, with a courage which the Oriental business man nearly always possesses, he went out for an enormous fortune. He formed a small syndicate, including some of the native farmers and dressers, and they practically swept Asia for material. It is there on the Bermondsey wharves in bonded warehouses—waiting."

"Why waiting?"

"Because it is six weeks beyond the date and the new tariffs have not yet been announced," Prince explained. "Because the Americans are still rolling in hundreds of cases of manufactured glazed goatskins."

"Have you been to your Department?" Gossett asked.

"Of course I have," Prince answered. "They received me very courteously—cigarette and chat and hope I'll enjoy my leave—but as to why the schedule they sent me isn't already in force they're simply vague. The whole question of tariff reforms and quotas seems as though it had to go through the mills, and what makes the thing worse is that it's America that would be hit the hardest

by our particular schedule and we want to keep friendly with her. I daren't be too pressing. They realise quite well that all Asia's been gambling, but they don't know that the gambling has been based on a private view of their statement."

Lunch for a few minutes became a thoughtful meal. It was Mr. Nissim presently from whom came the final lament.

"Two hundred thousand pounds," he groaned, "has been paid in cash and there are nine hundred thousand pounds' worth of goods in those warehouses. Next week the bills of exchange which we accepted at sixty and ninety days begin to fall due, and next week on the steamers come the men who, when they are ruined, kill. There will be a hundred knives for Prince's chest when they know. Maybe there'll be one or two for mine."

Selah drew out a cigarette with her dainty fingers from her marvellous gold and enamel cigarette case. She lit it from a briquet to match and leaned back in her chair.

"So now, Mr. Gossett," she asked pleasantly, "what is it that you will do for us?"

"How much longer are you going to be in that bathroom, Malcolm?" his wife asked, with a faint note of peevishness in her tone. "I should think you must be using the whole of my bath salts."

"My dear," replied a partially choked voice, "I needed them. Be out in five minutes."

"Did you see my friend Mr. Prince to-day?"

"I did indeed. I went down to the City on his behalf."

"Are you going to be made a knight?"

There was a rush of water for a minute. Gossett was standing under the spray.

"Not for anything your Prince can do," he gurgled.

There was a little exclamation of disappointment.

"Anyhow, you won't forget you're taking me to the cinema to-night?"

"I'm looking forward to it," Gossett declared, stepping out and beginning to rub himself vigorously. "The atmosphere of a cinema will seem to me like ozone from the sea after the places I've visited to-day."

All the same, the cinema was a trifle dull. It was not until the interval that Gossett felt a thrill of interest. The time was being filled in with various pictures of more or less political interest. Amongst others was a pictorial representation of the Honourable Reginald Harlowe, M.P., member of the Asiatic Leather Commission now sitting in one of the committee rooms of the House of Commons. Gossett held his wife's hand tightly during the remainder of the performance but he took no further interest in it.

“It’s a very great favour I’ve come to ask your lordship,” Gossett confided the next morning, as soon as he was ushered into the presence of the distinguished Judge, “but it would help me immensely in one of my cases. Your son, Mr. Reginald Harlowe, and his wife are giving a reception to-night to celebrate the winding up of a commission upon which he has been working.”

“I believe that is quite true,” Lord Harlowe assented. “My son, I am glad to say, has taken quite a fancy to committee work in the House.”

“I have a friend over here,” Gossett went on, “a Mr. Hamilton Prince. He is attached to the Government Staff at Singapore in a commercial capacity. I lunched with him and his fiancée, a Miss Nissim, who has lived out there all her life, the day before yesterday. It would be an immense help to me, Lord Harlowe, if your son could be induced to give cards to my friends and to myself for his reception. I know it’s a great liberty to ask,” Gossett concluded wistfully, “but Hamilton Prince and Miss Nissim might be interesting to your son and I do not count, anyway.”

“Don’t say another word, my dear fellow,” Lord Harlowe begged. “Reginald will be delighted, I’m sure. Write down their names, please, and your own and your address, and you shall have the cards before seven o’clock this evening.”

Gossett did as he was bidden and his august ex-client was as good as his word.

Reginald Harlowe, the moment he was relieved from the somewhat strenuous duty of welcoming his guests, looked eagerly around the room, then hurried up to Gossett, whom he had met before at his father’s house.

“My dear Mr. Gossett,” he begged, “for the love of heaven, tell me who is that divine beauty you brought with you this evening?”

“She is the daughter of a very wealthy merchant prince from Singapore,” Gossett replied. “She was at school in Paris but this is her first visit to England.”

“She’s going to make a tremendous sensation then,” Harlowe declared. “Lavery and all that crowd will be crazy to paint her. Where is she now, Gossett? Stranger in England and all that sort of thing I must show her a little attention. I’ve just time for one dance.”

Selah was easily found. The one dance became two and a certain amount of time was also taken up by the tête-à-tête and a glass of champagne afterwards. Harlowe resigned his charge to Prince with reluctance and took Gossett by the arm as he led him away.

“That young lady, if she spent a season in London, would create a furore,

Mr. Gossett," he said impressively. "Intelligent too. Most interesting. She told me all about her father—who is a naturalised Britisher by the way—collecting the skins and hides from all the small English dependencies and shipping them over here. They used to be enormously wealthy, it seems. Lately America's cut in at them and even China. The tariffs will do them a bit of good, I should think."

"I expect so," Gossett replied. "I believe Mr. Nissim has lost large sums of money lately, trying to support the local industries. It ought to interest you, by-the-by, Mr. Harlowe. You should have a talk with Prince about it. He's on the Governor's Staff at Singapore—head of the Commercial Bureau, I believe."

Harlowe nodded.

"Dismal-looking fellow," he remarked. "I'd rather get a little more information from the young lady later on."

A very great man stood in his private room in the House of Commons, interviewing one or two of his fellow workers who had just come up from the Chamber of Commerce. It was an hour of relaxation after the real work of the day was finished and he was permitting himself a cigarette.

"Having decided upon this principle of launching our thunderbolts separately," he observed, "the question we have to settle now is which we shall announce first. You're ready with your Singapore and Eastern Asiatic list, aren't you, Harlowe?"

"Absolutely, sir," the young man answered. "Been heartily approved by the Governor."

"And what about Africa, Reynolds?"

"I am ready too, sir," a fair-haired man of middle age assented.

"There we are, then," the great man reflected. "It's a question which we shall launch first."

"If I might be allowed a word, sir," Harlowe begged, "I have had an opportunity quite recently of talking with some one who is just back from the East. I believe the leather exports from our own dependencies there have been terribly hit by competition during the last few years, and I have heard rumours that a British firm, most important people, are on their last legs. Publication to-morrow morning of our list would probably save them."

"Have you anything to say to that, Reynolds?" the great man asked.

"Nothing at all, sir, so long as my list comes next," was the prompt reply. "I can't pretend that there's any special urgency about mine."

The matter was decided. The great man took his leave.

There were two hundred drays at work on the East Thames Bermondsey wharves the following morning. Mr. Nissim spent a month in London and put

on a stone in weight. The small army of agents and creditors who had followed him to Europe, after one interview at Cannon Row, forgot all their evil intentions and attached themselves to him commercially for life. The marriage of his daughter to Mr. Hamilton Prince was one of the events of the season, and Mr. and Mrs. Gossett enjoyed themselves ecstatically at the dance that followed. Malcolm Gossett, although he would never admit that he had earned it, was also thoroughly well satisfied with his fee.

VI THE CINEMA MURDER

Aberrations from the strict business of watching and listening on the part of a tense cinema audience are seldom expressed more definitely than by muffled gigglings and whispers. The scream therefore which suddenly split the tobacco-hung air, a scream of agony from a human being apparently stricken with mortal pain or fear, was paralysing in its effect, a thunderbolt startling and harrowing. Among the several thousands of closely wedged together persons who comprised the audience of the Pagoda Palace Cinema, there was not one who could escape the sound, who did not feel the thrill. Cynthia threw her arms around her husband's neck.

"Malcolm!" she cried in terror. "What is it?"

He held her reassuringly to him. Like most of the audience, he had sprung to his feet and was facing a corner in the back row of the stalls, a short distance removed from where they were. Electric torches were flashing like fireflies in the gloom, dark shapes of men were visible, gathering together in a cluster around one particular spot. The screen was suddenly blank. The picture had ceased to operate. Then the lights flared up and every one stood on their stall or chair, whatever they could find, to look in one direction. Perhaps no one saw more in those few seconds than Malcolm Gossett, whose profession had taught him to take in swiftly the impressions and externals of an unexpected happening.

"What is it, Malcolm?" his wife cried again, clinging desperately to him.

"I think that a man has been hurt," he explained. "He has either been hurt or he has been taken ill."

"No one who was taken ill could cry out like that," she gasped, shivering. "It sounded like a man being killed."

"I'm afraid that may be so," Malcolm Gossett agreed. "You see, they are taking him away."

The whole thing was admirably handled. A limp, inert form, completely covered by a sheet, was carried out on a stretcher by two of the attendants, escorted by a policeman. Others of the Force, who seemed to have arrived miraculously from nowhere in particular, had made a little cordon around the spot from which the trouble had come. One young man who tried to take his leave was gently detained. The manager of the Picture Palace, which was one of the largest and most splendid in London, came hurrying down to the sergeant.

“What is this, Officer?” he exclaimed breathlessly. “For heaven’s sake, don’t detain the performance longer than you can help.”

The sergeant was a trifle unsympathetic.

“There has been a murder committed here, Mr. Hamshaw,” he announced. “The lights must remain up until I have the names and addresses of the two persons on either side of that vacant place and the young man seated exactly behind.”

“Do you mean that the man whom they have carried out is really dead?” the other demanded incredulously.

“He is as dead as you or any one else would be, with six inches of cold steel in the top of your back. Excuse me, if you please. I will send you word when you can go on with the performance.”

The sergeant completed his task. The two men on either side of the vacant place and the man seated immediately behind accepted the sergeant’s invitation to retire into an anteroom with him. A few other precautions were taken and the whole affair was finished. The lights went down, the showing of the picture recommenced. Among the few persons, however, who had had enough for the evening were Malcolm Gossett, the consulting detective, and his wife. They took a taxicab home, and Cynthia, at any rate, gave a cry of relief as she sank into an easy-chair in their comfortable study.

“Oh, what a joy to get away from that awful place,” she exclaimed. “Malcolm, I shall never forget that cry as long as I live.”

“It was pretty bad,” Gossett admitted, as he mixed himself a whisky and soda. “Can I bring you anything, Cynthia?”

“A glass of port,” she begged. “The decanter is in the sideboard there.”

They settled down for a comfortable half an hour. Cynthia before long was sitting on the arm of her husband’s chair.

“Tell me why you are so thoughtful, Malcolm,” she asked. “Are you trying to think out a theory?”

“Not exactly,” he replied. “I was trying to memorise the faces of those three men whom the sergeant took out to question.”

“They seemed very harmless-looking people,” Cynthia remarked.

“They were none of them known criminals,” Gossett observed.

“Which do you think did it?” Cynthia asked. “They all looked terrified to death.”

“I mustn’t risk my reputation by guessing so early in the proceedings,” her husband answered, smiling. “There’s one thing you must remember—the man who had the best chance of doing it unobserved was the man seated immediately behind him. There was no one else on his row within a couple of places. Further than that, why did he choose that particular seat? As a rule, a man with a whole row to choose from takes either the outside one or the one

nearest the middle.”

“I don’t think it was he,” Cynthia declared firmly. “He had such a nice expression and although he looked frightened—well, who wouldn’t be?—he didn’t look as though he’d done anything wrong.”

“Well, inspiration is a great thing,” Malcolm Gossett observed. “I’ve learned to trust in it more than I used to. But tell me, was there nothing odd that you noticed about that young man? You seem to have made a careful study of him.”

“Odd? In what way?”

“Well, his appearance or dress or anything.”

“There was one thing,” Cynthia acknowledged. “He was wearing gloves.”

Gossett patted her on the back.

“Good for you, little lady,” he declared. “Those gloves may hang him.”

The murder in the Pagoda Palace Cinema captivated the imagination of the whole country. This was no ugly crime in a low-down neighbourhood, committed by some miscreant who fled into the darkness. It had in it every essential of horror and drama. Whoever the guilty person may have been, whoever was responsible for that awful death cry which many of the audience swore they would never forget to their dying day, must have remained stolidly in his place. Deliberately he must have driven the knife home in that one vital spot with almost superhuman skill and ferocity and then, without movement or any attempt to escape, have joined in the general throb of consternation. The more people read about it, the more inhuman and impossible the thing seemed to become.

The dead man was easily identified by his immediate neighbours. His name was Julian Brest, his age fifty-four. He was a retired diamond merchant of comfortable means, living in a bachelor flat on the heights of Hampstead. He belonged to two quite respectable clubs and also a golf club within easy distance of London. His neighbour on the right, Samuel Johnson, had been for years his partner in the business which he had taken over at the murdered man’s retirement. They were Saturday partners at golf, dined together once a week, and Julian Brest had been a frequent visitor at the other’s villa in Golders’ Green. There was not the slightest evidence of any ill feeling of any sort between them. A man who sat on the left was apparently a stranger to the other three. He rejoiced in the somewhat singular name of Carnforth Dent. He had a watchmaker’s and jeweller’s shop in the City, and from everything which could be learnt seemed to be a most unremarkable person. He was a married man, living happily with his wife and two children in a block of flats just over Hammersmith Bridge. He declared that he had never spoken to the dead man and had taken no particular interest in him. The name of the young

man in the seat behind, who had won Cynthia Gossett's sympathy, was Edward Sims. He was a manufacturing chemist with a small but prosperous business, single, and lived in rooms by himself in Kensington. Asked why he had chosen the somewhat indifferent seat behind the dead man, he explained that he suffered at times from claustrophobia, and he chose that particular seat because there were two empty ones on either side. There is no evidence that he had ever known or spoken to the dead man. These, with Johnson's wife, who was seated on his other side, were the four people who were in the immediate vicinity of Julian Brest when his death cry had brought that awful note of tragedy into the crowded house. It seemed difficult enough for any one of them, but almost impossible for any one else, to have delivered that death blow unnoticed. On the other hand, the exigencies of the film demanded that it should be shown in as near complete darkness as possible, and the corner where the tragedy happened, being underneath the balcony, was perhaps the darkest spot in the whole auditorium, for which reason, although popular with flirtatious young couples, it was not as a rule in great demand with the staid section of the public. In the case, however, as the manager pointed out, of a film so hugely popular as the one then being shown, people were glad to get places anywhere. By some means or other, by accident or design, these five people, two of whom professed themselves entirely unacquainted with the other three, had come together in the only spot where such a tragedy could have passed unseen. One of the five had died in agony. From the other four the Press, the man in the street and the whole world in general demanded a victim.

Five days after the coroner's inquest, at which the only possible verdict had been returned, Mr. Edward Sims was shown into Gossett's office. The latter glanced at the card which his office boy had brought him with curiosity. He studied the young man who followed it with even greater interest.

"Mr. Edward Sims," he repeated. "Won't you sit down, Mr. Sims, and tell me what I can do for you?"

The young man accepted the client's chair. In the daylight he appeared to greater advantage than under the garish lights of the cinema. His clothes were well cut and showed off his athletic figure to advantage. He wore the tie of a well-known public school, his bearing was frank and he endured Gossett's rather close scrutiny without embarrassment.

"I ought, perhaps," he explained, "to have brought you a card from Sir George Littledale. It was he who suggested my coming to see you. You can ring him up, if you like."

"I'm quite willing to take your word for it," Gossett replied. "Go ahead and tell me what is the trouble."

"The trouble is," the young man went on, "that I am one of the three

persons who are suspected of having murdered Julian Brest at the cinema the other night. You heard about it, of course.”

“I don’t suppose there is a man, woman or child in London who hasn’t. However, reading over the evidence, I see that you deny having seen or heard of the murdered man before in your life, that you drifted into the place you sat in entirely by accident, and that you are, to cut the matter short, absolutely innocent of the crime.”

“That was my evidence.”

“And you told the whole truth, of course,” Gossett remarked, with the air of one speaking almost carelessly.

The young man remained silent. He was looking down at a particular spot on the carpet and twisting his bowler hat round in his hands.

“I don’t suppose you’ve attempted to realise the situation, Mr. Gossett, as it must present itself to one or two of us,” he said at last. “If we leave out the woman—you probably noticed the evidence which declared that it would have been impossible for her to have driven that blow home—there were just three of us who might have killed the man. His partner, the other young man whose name I’ve forgotten, or myself. Naturally, if the police can scrape together a single thread of motive on the part of any one of us three, that one would be done for.”

“It would certainly be a very awkward position,” Gossett assented.

“For some reason or other,” Edward Sims continued, “they seem to be trying to work it up against me. I can’t move without being shadowed. All sorts of questions are being continually asked about my past. I am quite certain that my rooms have been searched twice in my absence.”

“If your story,” Gossett pointed out quietly, “is absolutely and entirely true, there is nothing they can discover. The police have their faults, but they would never go so far as to try and inculcate a perfectly innocent person.”

“Perhaps not,” the other assented, “but there is unfortunately—Before I go any further, Mr. Gossett, I must ask you a question.”

“Go ahead.”

“I went to Sir George Littledale to ask him several questions about criminal law and, to tell you the truth, to ask him if he would defend me, if by any chance I should be charged with this horrible thing.”

The young man paused to wipe the perspiration from his forehead. He had become more nervous.

“I must ask you this, Mr. Gossett. Supposing I were to confide in you a certain fact which might be considered almost as evidence against me in this case, should you feel yourself called upon to pass it on to the police?”

“Certainly not,” was the emphatic rejoinder. “I work not for the criminal, but for the possibly innocent man who is accused of being a criminal. Of

course, if you told me you were guilty, I cannot say what would happen, but so long as you declare yourself innocent, no confidence which you might make will be broken. I work outside the police and more often against them than with them.”

The young man drew a breath of relief.

“Very well then,” he confided, “I am going to tell you this. The knife which was found in the dead man’s back is mine.”

Gossett for once in his life was entirely startled.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “That’s rather a terrible confession, Mr. Sims.”

“It isn’t a confession, it’s a statement,” the other man declared. “I’ve got it off my chest to one person at last, thank heavens. That knife was or rather is mine. I bought it in the Caledonian market four years ago. When I changed rooms a year ago—I moved from Bayswater to Kensington—the knife disappeared. I’ve never seen it since until that night. I examined it again at the coroner’s Court. There is no doubt whatever about it. It is my knife. It is a Spanish design and a portion of the filigree work just above the hilt is missing on one side; also the knob at the top of the handle is slightly bent. It is my knife, Mr. Gossett.”

“Is there any one likely to be able to identify it?” Gossett asked gravely.

“I can’t tell,” Edward Sims answered wearily. “It was hanging up in my rooms for at least two years. The police have got it up against me so badly that they might try some of my acquaintances or friends, to see if they could identify it. There are several who could, I am sure.”

“I suppose you realise how serious a business it would be for you if they did?”

“It looks horrible, I know, but I didn’t do it,” the young man declared. “I never heard of Julian Brest. I didn’t care whether he lived or died. . . . I’ve come to you for advice, Mr. Gossett. What should you do if you were me? I have three intimate friends who used to visit me frequently. Should you go to them and tell them the whole story and beg them not to identify the knife, if they’re asked, or should you leave it to chance? That’s what I want to know. I can’t make up my mind. Which should you do?”

He wiped his forehead again. Face to face with his self-propounded problem, he seemed terrified.

“First of all, let me ask you something else,” Gossett said. “Why did you keep your gloves on all the time that night at the cinema? You have them on now, I see. There’s no reason why you should take them off here, but it isn’t often one keeps on a pair of thick doeskin gloves inside the cinema.”

The young man exposed his bared hands. There were dark-red stains on both.

“Sintric acid,” he confided. “I broke a bottle in my laboratory. That’s why I

was wearing gloves that night.”

Gossett made no immediate remark. There was a sudden light of horror in the young man’s eyes. He rose to his feet, trembling.

“You think—” he began. “You think—”

“I thought it was so that you should leave no finger prints on anything you touched,” Gossett admitted. “So, I daresay, did the police. That is, no doubt, one reason why they have suspected you.”

Edward Sims seemed as though he were on the point of completely losing his self-control. He made a great effort, however, and replaced the gloves. He looked half fearfully across at Gossett.

“I believe,” he muttered, “that you think I’m guilty.”

“Whatever I think won’t do you any harm,” was the quiet reply. “I have seen too much of this sort of thing to be led away by entirely circumstantial evidence. I shall keep an open mind, I promise you. With regard to your first question, I should do nothing. Don’t seek out any of your friends who might identify that knife. I don’t think you’re called upon to claim possession of it, unless you’re asked the question point-blank. If things get worse, your only chance is to tell the truth.”

“You’ll help me if the worst comes?”

“Certainly I will,” Gossett promised. “I should like the address of the rooms from which you moved in Bayswater and the address of the man who moved you.”

The young man took a piece of paper and scribbled down the names.

“You have told me that you knew nothing of Julian Brest, the murdered man,” Gossett continued.

“I never saw or heard of him before in my life.”

“Does the same apply to his three companions?”

“Absolutely. They were just members of the audience to me. I was very tired and I took little notice of them.”

“You realise, I suppose,” Gossett pointed out, “that it seems almost incredible that any one should have been able to commit that murder, practically under your nose, without your having seen anything.”

“I know,” was the dreary assent. “That’s another of the horrors, of course. The truth seems so bald and stupid. I was tired out with work. The atmosphere was stuffy and heavy; I’d gone off into a doze twice before at the beginning of the film, and I was dozing when I was awakened by that awful cry.”

Gossett nodded sympathetically.

“I’m like that myself sometimes,” he admitted. “It’s reasonable enough. The only trouble is that this time it becomes linked up with those other two horrible coincidences. You have no objection to my making a few enquiries, I hope? I expect the police are doing the same thing.”

The young man shivered.

"If you think it necessary," he agreed. "You are not like the police, though. I should be a fool if I came here and told you lies."

"Glad you realise that," Malcolm Gossett said, touching the bell. "What time will you come in to-morrow?"

"Any hour, any day," was the prompt reply. "I'm no good for work. I can do nothing. I sit and shiver every time the bell of my door rings. I daren't even answer the telephone."

"Remember this," Gossett said, as he nodded his farewell. "Under our present system, an innocent man is very seldom, if ever, punished. Keep on telling yourself that. Innocent men are never hung."

The young man turned away with a groan.

"I'll try," he promised, as he made his uncertain way towards the door. "That last word, though, has made cowards of better men than I."

Malcolm Gossett, on his return to his very comfortable study, threw himself into an easy-chair with a little groan. Cynthia, in a very pretty afternoon toilette, busied herself at the sideboard, making him an *apéritif*. He sipped it gratefully.

"You look very smart," he remarked, smiling. "More bridge?"

"At Mrs. Selwyn's," she told him. "They're the new people who took Number Seven. And Malcolm, do you know who was there?"

"No idea."

"The woman who sat in front of us the other night at the cinema, when that horrible thing happened."

"The Mrs. Samuel Johnson?"

"That's her name. Yes. It seems she's a very old friend of Mrs. Selwyn's."

"She didn't talk about the murder, I suppose?"

Cynthia shivered.

"She couldn't talk of anything else. I did wish sometimes that she'd leave off. Are you still interested in it, Malcolm?"

"Couldn't help myself very well, could I? I should think you were too."

She looked at him with earnestly enquiring eyes. His face had become like a mask. Only his eyes held her, and they seemed at the same time compelling yet empty of expression.

"When I said 'interested,'" she went on, "I meant, as you would say, professionally. Have you been consulted by any one?"

He shook his head gently.

"Better for you not to ask me that sort of question, dear," he warned her. "Detectives in the eyes of the law have no wives, you know."

"I asked you," she told him, "because from something she said, I believed Mr. Samuel Johnson, her husband, might be coming to see you."

“What about?” Gossett asked, without moving a muscle.

“This case—the murder.”

Gossett finished the contents of his wineglass and set it down empty.

“What on earth could he have to do with it? He and his partner seem to have been on excellent terms.”

“Nothing, I suppose, directly,” Cynthia replied. “But you see every one seems agreed upon one thing—the murder must have been committed by either the man who sat in the seat behind, or the man who sat on the other side of Julian Brest, or by Mr. Johnson. As Mrs. Johnson kept on saying, the only thing the police have to look for is some sort of a motive. That’s why Mr. Johnson is worried.”

“Better not tell me any more,” Gossett advised.

“But Mrs. Johnson didn’t make any secret of it,” Cynthia went on. “It isn’t anything very dreadful, after all. It was just a business arrangement made between Mr. Johnson and Mr. Brest, to guard against capital being drawn out, if you know what that means. They each insured their lives in favour of the other for ten thousand pounds. That means that now Mr. Brest is dead, Mr. Johnson will draw ten thousand pounds.”

The telephone bell out in the hall rang. Cynthia went to answer it. When she returned, she was looking thoroughly scared.

“Malcolm,” she cried, “thank God it was only you. That was Mrs. Samuel Johnson. She rang up to tell me that her husband was simply crazy with her because she admitted she had told us about the insurance, and whatever happens, she implores that we don’t tell another soul. She has rung up the others and they’ve promised. Of course, I told her we wouldn’t.”

Gossett tapped a cigarette upon the arm of his chair and lit it.

“I should think that Mrs. Samuel Johnson must be one of the biggest fools in the world,” he observed.

Cynthia laughed as she threw her arm around his neck.

“Aren’t you glad I’m not like that, dear?” she whispered. “I never repeat things!”

Major Moody, the Sub-Commissioner, and Chief Inspector Arbuthnot were together, when Gossett was ushered into the former’s room at Scotland Yard. They greeted him cordially, installed him in an easy-chair and offered him cigarettes. Arbuthnot remained lounging against the table. Moody leaned back in his place and regarded his visitor with a smile.

“Gossett,” he asked, “who murdered Julian Brest?”

“I wish to God I knew,” Gossett answered seriously enough.

“But I gather that you were within a few yards of the whole show,” Moody observed.

“So I was. But you know how dark they get these modern cinemas nowadays, and he was in the darkest corner of it.”

“Yes, I appreciate that. Arbutnot and I and a few of the others have been down there on the reconstruction. We had two dummies in your seats too. Must have been almost impossible to have seen anything definitely. Queer business, though.”

“Very queer.”

“Are you working upon it?”

“In an indefinite sort of way,” Gossett admitted. “You know very well how I conduct my business, Major. If a man comes to me whom I have sound reasons for believing guilty, I don’t talk with him. If it’s an open matter and he makes no confession, then he becomes my client, and after that I’m dumb.”

“Quite sound,” the Sub-Commissioner murmured. “Would it be a fair question to ask you if one of the three possibilities in the Julian Brest murder case has become your client?”

“One of them has approached me,” Gossett acknowledged. “I have not yet adopted him as a client. I am making a few enquiries as much to satisfy myself as on his behalf.”

“It’s a queer business altogether,” the Sub-Commissioner reflected. “We are rather hoping that the guilty person will get nerves and confess. If he doesn’t, the one thing you used to fight against so strenuously may come to pass. A man may be convicted and hung on circumstantial evidence alone.”

“I sincerely hope not.”

The Sub-Commissioner shrugged his shoulders.

“But an eyewitness to this murder,” he pointed out, “would be an impossibility.”

“Granted,” Gossett acknowledged. “But what about the natural corollary to circumstantial evidence—motive?”

“Just the point I was coming to,” Major Moody observed. “We’ve got a line out, Gossett, but we’re not getting on with this case as well as I had anticipated. I hope you’re going to look upon it as a compliment, but we really sent for you to see if you could help us. Have you any idea as to who the guilty person is?”

“I think so, Major. I should like to hear a little more about the life insurance before I make up my mind absolutely.”

“You have no certain conviction then?”

“None. You see, if I had certain convictions about any one, I shouldn’t be talking to them.”

“You’re no use to us to-day then, Gossett,” the Sub-Commissioner said good-naturedly but with a curt little nod of dismissal.

Gossett picked up his hat.

“I’d interfere to save an innocent man, if I was convinced that he was innocent, or I’d give you all the information I had about a guilty man, if I believed that he were guilty,” he declared, as he took his leave. “As it is, I don’t think I am of any use to you for the moment.”

“There’s a man in the waiting room,” the office boy announced, on Gossett’s return. “Been waiting for you some time. Name of Dent. There’s something else to it but I couldn’t catch it all, and he hasn’t got a card.”

“Carnforth Dent?”

“That’s right.”

“Show him in as soon as I’ve taken my coat off,” Gossett directed.

Mr. Carnforth Dent was not an attractive unit of humanity. He was small and slight, with a mass of grey-brown hair and a thin moustache. He wore steel-rimmed spectacles of an ancient design and his black clothes had seen better days. The most attractive things about him, Gossett decided, as he waved his visitor to a seat and took mental stock of him, were his hands, with their long muscular fingers, nervous but prehensile.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Dent?” Gossett asked curiously.

“Do you know who I am?” the man enquired.

“I think so. I was within a few places of you the other night at the Pagoda Cinema.”

“Well, I’m glad I haven’t got to explain all about that, anyway,” the other went on, in an unexpectedly deep voice. “They tell me you’re a kind of detective but nothing to do with Scotland Yard or the law. How much do you charge for a bit of advice?”

“Nothing at all to you,” Gossett answered. “I’m too interested in the case.”

“Nothing is the price that suits me all right,” Mr. Dent declared, “because that’s just what I’m earning since that beastly night.”

“How is that?”

“Nobody won’t come in my shop,” Dent confided. “There’s boys looking through the window all day, trying to catch a glimpse of me. I stand in the doorway and I can hear them talking. ‘That’s him,’ they keep muttering, ‘what sat next the bloke that got the knife in his back.’ Then one of them will say—‘I guess he done it all right.’ And another one—‘He’s the only bloke that could have reached him proper.’ And then they go and fetch their friends to come and stare. It’s enough to drive a man crazy.”

“It’s very bad luck,” Gossett acknowledged. “Let’s have the matter clear to start with, to prevent any misunderstanding. I suppose you didn’t kill him, did you?”

There was a brief silence. The man’s face seemed to have become somehow or other convulsed, twisted a little on one side. He was a very ugly

person.

“That’s a new game, that is,” he remarked, “asking a question all in a moment like that. A Scotland Yard game, eh? Did I kill him? I didn’t come here to answer questions.”

“All right,” Gossett said good-humouredly. “No offence. What do you want to know?”

“I wanted to know this,” the watchmaker explained, leaning a trifle forward. “I have been reading the papers about this case. They seem to have made up their minds that one of us three must have done it—either me, or the young man wearing gloves that sat behind, or the elderly chap who was his partner and sat next to him. One of us three, all the newspapers say in their smug way. The only thing to do is to find the motive. Now here’s my question, and if you’ll answer it free, I’ll be obliged to you. Supposing I’d come across that chap Brest some time in my life and things hadn’t gone well with us—supposing, for instance, he’d sent me to prison, whether it was justly or unjustly, so that I had a grudge against him; supposing the police found out that—what about me?”

“If the police knew as much as you’ve just told me,” Gossett confided, “you would be placed under immediate observation and every effort would be made to obtain some circumstantial evidence, such as the knife, or threat, or something of that sort. If they succeeded in getting hold of a thing, you would certainly be arrested and tried for murder.”

Mr. Carnforth Dent’s expression was not a pleasant one. He sat in his chair, brooding.

“What made me go into that blasted cinema I can’t imagine,” he muttered. “Then to find myself next to him, of all men in the world! Is there any reward for finding the cove that stuck that knife between his shoulders?”

“Not that I know of,” Gossett answered.

The visitor rose slowly to his feet.

“I’ll be going,” he announced.

“I’ll give you another word of advice free, if you like,” Gossett said. “Stick where you are and get on with your job. If you bolt, you’ll never get clear. The police will have you, and then, if there has been anything between you and Julian Brest in the past, they’ll dig it up. They’re probably watching you now—and the others.”

The man picked up his hat viciously.

“Seems to me,” he muttered, “I’ve got to stay at home and starve or clear out and hang. I don’t think much of your advice, Guv’nor.”

“It didn’t cost you much,” was the cool reply.

Sub-Commissioner Moody looked up from the file of papers which his

secretary had just laid before him.

“Hello, you’re soon back again, Gossett,” he remarked to his subordinate. “Is it the Julian Brest affair again?”

Gossett nodded.

“If ever during my lifetime,” he said, sinking into the chair which Moody had indicated, “I come across another case like this one, I think I will break stones on the road sooner than go on with my job.”

Moody laid down his cigarette and stared at his visitor in astonishment.

“What’s the matter with you?” he asked. “You look as though you had seen a ghost.”

Gossett laughed hardly.

“I have seen three ghosts,” he answered. “All the ghosts of men who were hanged for a crime they didn’t commit. Don’t look at me as though I were drunk, sir,” he went on, his tone becoming a little more natural. “There never was a case like this before and never will be again. There’s a man murdered, with his partner by the side of him, and two other men within a yard or so, apparently strangers. How much you know, Major, of course isn’t my business. I haven’t even heard what information the Department has, but I’m going to tell you this because I know you’re a human being, and this might be one of the worst pitfalls of your life. There is circumstantial evidence backed with motive sufficient to make out a clear case against two of these men and, I believe, the third, only I simply refused to listen to his story. I couldn’t bear any more of it. I’m telling you the truth, Major. Only one man killed—Julian Brest—but nine juries out of ten would bring in a verdict of guilty against two of them and perhaps three.”

“You don’t need to worry, Gossett,” the Sub-Commissioner said kindly. “We’re not blood fiends here. We want the guilty man, of course, but there’s no framing-up done, as you know very well, in this country. We don’t put a man on his trial for murder unless—”

The telephone bell rang. Major Moody broke off his sentence and took off the receiver. He listened for a moment imperturbably, then he spoke.

“Show her up,” he directed.

He laid down the receiver and looked across at Gossett.

“I’m beginning to agree with you that there is something uncanny about this case, Gossett,” he said. “Here’s the woman now—Mrs.—what’s her name?—Mrs. Samuel Johnson, asking for an interview. I’m not very keen about it. We can’t put her in the box against her husband.”

He swung round to where his secretary was seated in the shadows.

“Move behind the screen,” he directed, “and take down what this woman has to say. Don’t go, Gossett. Sit in the Inspector’s chair there. You’re one of the staff for the moment.”

Gossett did as he was bidden. The door was opened. A strong waft of perfume heralded the arrival of Mrs. Samuel Johnson. The Sub-Commissioner rose to his feet.

“Good afternoon, Madam,” he said. “Will you take this chair and tell me what I can have the pleasure of doing for you?”

Mrs. Samuel Johnson wore expensive furs and a fashionable hat. She had used cosmetics freely but she was still, of her type, a handsome woman. She was perhaps a little out of breath from climbing the stairs, however, for she was a moment or two collecting herself.

“So this is Scotland Yard,” she remarked, looking round her.

“A very unimportant part of it, Madam,” was the courteous reply.

“And you’re one of the head policemen,” she went on.

“I am the Sub-Commissioner.”

“The same thing, I suppose,” she continued. “Well, you know who I am—Mrs. Samuel Johnson. I am the woman who sat next but one to Julian Brest that horrible night at the Pagoda Cinema. I have come to tell you who killed him.”

There was a brief silence. Gossett found himself gripping the sides of his chair. Major Moody leaned forward.

“Madam,” he enjoined, “I hope you will be careful before you speak. This is a very serious matter.”

“I am not a fool,” she answered scornfully. “I have been hysterical for several days, but I am calm enough now. You can send for one of your doctors presently, if you like, to tell you whether I am sane or not. First of all,” she went on, opening her bag and drawing out a letter, “read that. Read it aloud, so that the other man can hear.”

Major Moody adjusted his eyeglass and spread out a square sheet of paper. The printed address at the top was Brest & Johnson, Number 17a, Hatton Gardens. He read very slowly and turned his head slightly to where the secretary was seated.

“My dear old Susie,

There has been enough of this nonsense. You must please understand that this time I am definitely in earnest. I am leaving Samuel the business and I am going back to South Africa next week. You will have plenty to live on, and once and for all I cannot spare another penny. We have had some good times together but I’m through. You and Samuel will be all right. The business is still worth something, and if anything happens to me, there is the ten thousand pounds life insurance which will come your way. I am proposing to Samuel that we dine at the Trocadero to-night for the last time and

go to a cinema afterwards—the three of us. I'll send you a line sometimes, old girl, and I hope we shall part pals.

Julian.”

The Sub-Commissioner finished the letter and looked up. She met his enquiring eyes.

“Yes,” she said, “that’s the way a man gets rid of his sweetheart after eight years. Now you want to know who killed Julian Brest. I did.”

The Sub-Commissioner regarded her doubtfully.

“But my dear Madam,” he protested, “what you tell me is practically an impossibility.”

She laughed scornfully.

“Why?”

“In the first place,” he pointed out, “you were not even sitting next to him. In the second place, it would take a surgeon to know the exact spot in which to push that knife. In the third place, it would have taken a man’s strength to have driven it home like that.”

“You’re not such clever folk up here as I fancied,” she scoffed. “Listen now, and I’ll answer you. In the first place, it may have occurred to you that my husband is a slim man. I ask you,” she went on, “to look at the length of that arm.”

She slipped off her fur coat, disclosing her really magnificent though too ample figure, imperfectly concealed by a tight-fitting cloth dress. She extended her arm with a smile.

“I had this around his neck all the evening,” she went on, “that’s nothing for a cinema, as I dare say you know. I could have had it round Julian’s too without exerting myself. That should answer your first objection. In the second place, before I was married, I was a qualified nurse at one of the best hospitals in London, and I know as much about anatomy as any surgeon. In the third place, give me a knife and I’ll drive it as far as you like into your own desk, or give me your arm—there, just like that, I could break it if I wanted to.”

Major Moody drew away from the reach of her fingers with a stifled cry of pain.

“But the knife?” he enquired.

“I bought it at a second-hand shop in Bayswater,” she told him. “It had been left behind in some apartments there. I took it out with me that night deliberately and I did what I meant to do. It was easier than I had dreamed of. The man behind with the gloves on was asleep. No one else could see.”

“I am to take this seriously,” he asked, with a new note of gravity in his tone, “as your confession of the murder of Julian Brest?”

“What do you suppose I’m here for?” she demanded.

“No one has suspected you,” he pointed out. “Why have you come here with this confession?”

“To stop my poor old husband from going mad,” she replied scornfully. “It’s just dawned upon him that the deed was done with the knife that dozens of people have seen in our house, and that Julian Brest’s life was insured in our favour for ten thousand pounds, and that it was he who was sitting next him at the Cinema! He’s off his head. He’s too crazy even to realise that it was I who did it. Let him live. I haven’t been such a good wife to him. This will put matters straight.”

The Sub-Commissioner stretched out his hand towards the little row of bells which stood upon his table.

“I suppose you realise, Madam,” he said, “that I shall have to place you under arrest, that you will have to spend the night in the cells here, and come before the magistrate in the morning?”

“Not on your life,” the woman scoffed. “You can touch another of those bells for one of your doctors, if you like. I saw to that before I came out. Another half an hour I may be good for. I’m not sure I’ll last as long—Now I’ve finished.”

Her head fell back. Both men noticed at the same time the ghastly pallor beneath her rouge. She was unconscious before the doctor arrived, and dead before he could complete his examination. From behind the screen came the click of the machine, as the secretary began to type out the confession.

VII CAPTAIN BRONSEN'S CARGO

The man's progress across that tangled mass of streets and squares was at times furtive, at others breathless. That he was in a desperate hurry was apparent. Where the street lights were few and the streets themselves were empty of passers-by, driven into shelter by the pelting rain, he broke into a shambling but eager run. When the lights warned him of coming traffic, he pulled his hat a little farther over his forehead and essayed a more nonchalant form of progress. So far, he kept on telling himself, striving to feed his waning courage, he had kept free from observation. His luck had been well in during that feverish Marathon. Another mile, at the most another mile, and he would be safe. An empty square! He broke once more into his curious, shuffling trot.

"You appear to be in a hurry, my friend."

The blood seemed to turn to water in his veins. There was a thumping at his heart. He pulled up short and looked over his shoulder. The way was still clear enough ahead, but a smoothly running automobile with heavily shaded lights had crept up to his side from behind. The driver was looking down at him curiously. He was alone in the car. That was something.

"What the hell business of yours is it whether I am in a hurry or not?" the fugitive demanded.

Malcolm Gossett, homeward bound, was careful to avoid the curt tone of authority which he would have used in former days. His reply was perfectly good-humoured.

"I admit," he said, leaning a little sideways, "that it is no business of mine. On the other hand, I hate to see a human being distress himself when I am riding in an empty car. You see, I paused two streets away to light my pipe, and you were running then. Afterwards you came to the lights and you appeared to forget that you were in a hurry. Now you are running again. You probably want to get somewhere. Can I be of any assistance?"

The man struggled with his loss of breath. He kept his face, so far as possible, turned away from his questioner.

"I do not need any, thanks."

The tone was milder but the fear was still there. He began to edge away. The car stole along by his side.

"Are you going to follow me?" he asked savagely.

"If I feel like it," was the still good-humoured reply. "You see, I have had some experience of people who are in such a hurry as you seem to be in, close

upon midnight.”

The fugitive swung around.

“The streets are free, aren’t they?” he snarled. “What right have you to ask me questions? You’re not a policeman.”

“I am not,” Gossett admitted, “and I have no right to ask you questions. There is nothing to prevent my following you, though, if I want to.”

The man came a step nearer the car. He was weedy of build and unathletic in appearance, but there was danger in his panic-stricken, glaring eyes.

“Is there anything,” he demanded, “to stop my bashing your head in, if you stick around when I don’t want you to?”

“Nothing except your inability to do anything of the sort,” Gossett answered, still pleasantly.

Then this man who was hurrying through the night committed a very ill-advised action. He sprang at Gossett with all the fury but without the nimbleness of a wildcat. He struck ineffective blows which Gossett easily parried. In a very few moments he was helpless, his wrists held in a grip of iron, he himself forced into the vacant place by Gossett’s side.

“Unless you have been up to mischief,” Gossett said, “you are a very foolish person. You leave me no alternative now. I shall either whistle for a policeman or take you to a police station myself.”

All the resistance seemed to go out of the runagate even as Gossett spoke. His muscles relaxed. He crumpled up. Gossett, with experience behind him, knew that whatever sort of malefactor this might be, he was not a fighting man.

“I’m done,” he groaned. “I was mad. I see now you are a young man and strong. I was crazy.”

He sat meekly on the seat and Gossett looked him over. He was older than he had imagined. He had the air of being between forty and fifty, with unwholesome pallid complexion, narrow shoulders, unshaven chin and streaks of grey in his black hair. His clothes were passable, his linen well chosen. One fact about him, however, was so outstanding that everything else was reduced to insignificance—he was the victim of overwhelming, paralysing fear. It lurked in the depths of his shadowed eyes. One felt that it was responsible for that oozing, dank perspiration, for the mouth that failed to close, the continually twitching lips. Gossett, who had seen something like this before, in the ugly vision of a man about to be hanged, abandoned his first impression that this was some ordinary sneak thief on his homeward way. He slipped in the third gear and drove slowly off, one hand only on the wheel, the other ready for emergencies.

“Are you taking me to a police station?” his captive asked.

“Not for the moment,” Gossett replied. “I am not sure whether I ought to or

not.”

“Put me down,” the other begged. “I have done nothing wrong.”

“Why are you in such a state of panic then?”

The very question seemed to throw the man into a fresh frenzy of fear. He would have rolled out of the car into the muddy street but for Gossett’s restraining hand.

“I—I don’t know. Where are we going?”

Gossett thought the matter over for a moment.

“We are close to my house,” he confided. “If you will come in with me and tell me your story, I will consider the matter of what to do with you.”

“You’re not a magistrate or a detective—nothing to do with the law?” his companion asked with feverish wistfulness.

“I hold no official position whatever,” Gossett assured him. “I am an independent person.”

“I will go to your house then,” the other decided. “I will tell you what I have done—what I ought to have done—why I am afraid. Perhaps you will make up your mind then to let me go. I have other things to fear besides the police.”

It was because of those things, of which Gossett heard some half an hour later, that he broke the promise which he had made to his wife when he left the Force, and entered upon the most dangerous adventure of his career.

To the end of his days, Malcolm Gossett never wholly forgot that half hour which he spent in his comfortable library, listening to the broken stream of words from his terrified visitor. He had established him in an easy-chair, given him whisky and a small pile of cigarettes. At first he had ignored both and sat breathing like a frightened animal, glancing around the room with fearful eyes, as though still in terror. Gossett, who had assured himself that his strange guest carried no weapon, sat between him and the door and waited patiently.

“At least, you can tell me your name,” he suggested at last.

The frightened figure raised himself in his chair, drank some whisky and toyed with a cigarette which he did not at first, however, attempt to light.

“My name is Cecil Shawn,” he said.

“Any relation to—”

“Yes. My father was made a bishop last week. That is part of the horror of it all. I was a clergyman myself for a few years—just a curate. I’ve been unfrocked. I’ve been in prison three times—no character, no morals, a horrible example of forcing a young man into a profession for which he isn’t suitable. I ought to jump into the river, I know. I’m too much of a coward. I daresay you’ve noticed that I’m a coward.”

“I’m not surprised to hear it,” Gossett agreed. “Get on with the story.”

"I've tried every sort of job. Some time ago a man called Harry Desmond, a theatrical agent whom I met in a bar, took pity upon me, thought he could make me look like a gentleman in a suit of his old clothes, and put me in his office to answer the telephone and get rid of undesirable callers."

"A theatrical agent," Gossett reflected. "I don't remember the name."

"All a fake," Shawn declared. "He hadn't any legitimate business. I found that out to-night. I'll tell you how."

He leaned over towards the tumbler of whisky and took an eager gulp. His voice became firmer, although not the slightest tinge of colour returned to his cheeks.

"Desmond has callers sometimes," he continued. "Mostly young women and mostly from the country. I used to think he tried to find them jobs, although we never had a call to or from a London Music Hall that I can think of. The walls of his office were plastered with bills, but they were all of theatres and music halls in the Far East or in South America, and some of the names of the stars upon them made me wonder whether they were all genuine."

"I don't want to hurry you," Gossett remarked, "but the events of to-night are really the only things that interest me."

"I'm sorry," Shawn muttered. "My brain is all confused. This evening he—Desmond I mean—seemed worried and anxious. He kept the telephone on the extension and answered it all the time himself. He made me stay overtime—said he would have a letter for me to take. About seven o'clock, he called me into the inner office. He had to call twice, because I'd gone to sleep on my stool. He handed me a letter and gave me directions where to take it. I said good night to him and, coming out of my office on my way downstairs, to my surprise I met a man coming up. He was a big fellow and looked like a countryman. I stood on one side, but he beckoned me to follow him back into my office.

"'Where's Desmond?' he said. 'I want to see Desmond.'"

"'Mr. Desmond is in his office, sir,' I told him.

"I think I added something about it being rather late for visitors, but he pushed me away, walked straight across my office, turned the handle of the door and entered Mr. Desmond's private room. He closed the door after him. I hung around. I scarcely knew what to do. . . . This is going to be difficult."

He drank more whisky. Drops of sweat broke out on his forehead.

"I am a coward," he went on, "but presently I had to go into that room. It was terrible! You may pray to your God, sir, I don't know your name, that you never see what I saw. I saw a man being beaten to death."

Shawn drank whisky again. On his forehead the drops of sweat were multiplying. The horrors were looming up before his eyes.

“The man had come in without any weapon,” he went on thickly. “He had got hold of Mr. Desmond’s stick—a malacca with a heavy, horned handle. When I got in, Mr. Desmond was crawling round the room like an animal—they must have been fighting before—there was blood all over his face. He was trying to find his way to the door. I did my best. I’ve told you I’m a coward, but I went for him. I don’t know how long it was before I opened my eyes. It seems to me that I heard crying and every now and then the sound of blows, but when I tried to open my eyes, I fainted. When at last I sat up, Mr. Desmond was lying on the floor, perfectly still, with his arms stretched out. The man who had been beating him was seated in his chair, smoking a cigarette, with the telephone receiver in his hand. I heard him speaking as I staggered up.

“‘Is that Scotland Yard at last?’ he asked. ‘Pretty slow, aren’t you? You’d better send some one round to Number 127a, Shaftesbury Avenue, third floor. A Mr. Harry Desmond, Theatrical Agent. I’ve just killed him. But you needn’t worry. I shall wait until you come. Got the address all right? Good.’

“He put down the receiver and looked at me. Then he drew out a pipe from his pocket and a pouch, filled it, struck a match and lit it.

“‘How much did you know about Mr. Harry Desmond’s business?’ he asked.

“‘Nothing at all,’ I told him.

“‘You seem a harmless sort of chap,’ he went on, looking across at me. ‘If you don’t want to be mixed up in this, you can hop it.’”

“And you?” Gossett asked.

“I got out somehow,” Shawn answered. “I had two shillings in my pocket. I found myself in a bar—I don’t know where it was. I put a shilling down. I asked for the strongest brandy they had. I drank it all. With the other shilling, I stopped a taxi. I told him to drive as far as he could in this direction for a shilling and then put me down. Afterwards I started—running when I thought people weren’t looking—getting along anyway.”

“And then I picked you up,” Gossett murmured.

“Then you picked me up,” Shawn echoed.

There was a brief silence. Gossett leaned across to the telephone.

“Don’t be afraid,” he said. “I’m only going to verify your story.”

Gossett asked for a number and spoke for a few minutes into the receiver. When he laid it down, he turned back to his visitor, and the shadow of incredulity had gone from his face.

“Well, your story’s all right,” he said, “except that Desmond isn’t dead. They’ve taken him to hospital—in a shocking condition, they said, but still alive. The other man’s a shopkeeper from the country. He’s in custody.”

“Did they say what he did it for?” Shawn asked.

“Bogus Theatrical Agency,” Gossett replied. “Rotten business, sending these girls abroad. The man had a sister whom they sent with a supposed company to China. She just got back alive.”

The fugitive shivered in his chair.

“Mr. Gossett, sir,” he begged feverishly—“you said your name was Gossett, didn’t you, just now over the telephone?”

“That’s right.”

“If you have any influence, sir, with the police or the Press, remember I had nothing to do with that business. I sat in the outside office and I knew nothing. There’s no need to mention my name. I couldn’t tell them anything.”

Gossett nodded shortly.

“I’ll remember what you say,” he promised. “Don’t hurry off. Help yourself to whisky. There may be something else I want to ask you.”

Shawn grabbed the decanter. His capacity for drink seemed to be returning with the passing of the shock. Gossett had forgotten his whisky and allowed his cigarette to burn out. He was piecing together certain items of gossip. Suddenly he turned to his visitor.

“You said something about a letter.”

“That’s right,” Shawn admitted. “Here it is. He’s been worrying about it all day. There’s some money in it, I believe. I shall put it in the post. I’m going somewhere to hide as far from my old lodging as possible.”

Gossett took up the letter and looked at it. It was addressed to Captain Bronsen, S. S. *Malaga*, Bluebell Public House, Corner of Epping Street and Main Street, S.E.

“Quaint sort of friend for your late employer,” he remarked. “I wonder—Any of the young ladies been in lately?”

“Two or three,” Shawn answered. “There was a tour starting almost at once.”

Gossett lit another cigarette and smoked thoughtfully for a moment or two. Then he turned the letter over in his hand.

“Listen, Shawn,” he confided. “If I did my duty, I should send this letter in to Scotland Yard and let them deal with it. In that case, I think that they would touch the reward of a thousand pounds which has been offered by a certain philanthropic lady for a certain discovery.”

“A thousand pounds,” Shawn gasped.

“My profession is that of a private detective,” Gossett went on. “I propose that we deliver this letter together. I’ll keep you out of trouble, if there is any. I don’t go into those parts unless I’m fully armed. I’ll put you in a safe place, but I may want you to verify the letter. If we bring it off, we’ll divide the reward. That means five hundred pounds for you.”

Shawn shook his head.

“The money would save my life,” he groaned, “but I am afraid. I want to get out of it.”

“On the other hand,” Gossett answered, smiling, “I shall see that you don’t. Can you handle a gun?”

“Yes,” Shawn muttered. “I know all about that well enough.”

Gossett handed him over his own weapon and replaced it with a second revolver, which he withdrew from the top right-hand drawer of his desk.

“Come along,” he enjoined. “I’ll lend you an overcoat. We’ve got to hurry up or the Bluebell Inn will be closed. Help yourself to any one of those overcoats,” he added, pointing to a row in the hall, “and then go out and get into the car. I must just speak to my wife for a moment.”

There was an almost complete and ominous lull in the conversation when, at twenty minutes before closing time, Malcolm Gossett pushed open the door leading into the private bar of the Bluebell Public House in the neighbourhood of the Commercial Docks. From the moment he entered, he knew that it was an unfriendly crowd who had turned to scowl at him. They were mostly river men, barge owners and the rougher kind of seamen, and they were all in a more or less advanced stage of intoxication. Gossett threaded his way between the crowded tables, called for a Scotch whisky at the bar, and leaned forward to speak to the man who had served him a trifle unwillingly.

“I have a note,” Gossett confided, “for a Captain Bronsen. I was told that I should find him here.”

“Who told you that?” the man asked suspiciously.

Gossett drew the note from his pocket and exhibited the address. The man’s surliness declined somewhat.

“Well, if you take my tip, Guv’nor,” he advised, “you’ll leave the note with me. I’ll see that he gets it. The Captain ain’t in a friendly mood to-night and he’s off down the river on the tide.”

“Sorry,” Gossett replied. “I’m under orders. Got to give it into his own hands.”

The barman pointed down the room to where a burly giant in semi-nautical attire was seated alone at a small table, his head fallen upon his folded arms.

“That’s the Captain,” he said, “but I’m warning you he’s in no mood to talk to strangers, and though he’s an old customer, we’ll be glad to see the back of him ourselves to-night. He threw one man half across the street a while ago.”

“I’ll be careful,” Gossett promised, as he turned away.

Many curious eyes watched him as he approached the distant table, eyes in which there was already in some cases a glimmer of anticipation. Gossett, with every nerve keyed up and prepared for any emergency, slid into the vacant chair in front of the dreaded man. With one hand he set the tumbler of whisky

which he had carried from the counter upon the table. The other was less peacefully engaged.

“Wake up, Captain,” Gossett exclaimed cheerfully. “Got a note for you.”

Without undue haste, the man opposite lifted his head. Gossett, to whom fear was an unknown sensation, felt a little shiver as he met the malignant glare in the other’s red-rimmed eyes. An ugly menacing face too, with a week’s growth of grey beard. A brutal mouth and jaw with a great scar near the left temple. His rasping voice betrayed a slight Scandinavian accent.

“Who are you?” he snarled.

“I bring a letter from Mr. Harry Desmond,” Gossett explained. “It does not matter who I am—nobody in particular. Will you have a drink while you read it or have you had enough?”

There was a stream of untranslatable language for several moments, then a shouted command to the barman.

“Bring me a double whisky. This man here will pay. You pay—that’s so?” he added, turning abruptly to Gossett.

“I will pay with pleasure,” was the prompt assent. “I hope it will do you good.”

The Captain tore open the envelope with thick, clumsy fingers. He counted the roll of notes enclosed and spat upon the floor. He read the few lines slowly and grunted. Then he thrust everything into his pocket.

“Do you know anything about this business?” he asked.

“A little,” Gossett assented mendaciously.

“What is it he does, this Desmond, blast him? He sends me half the passage money for twelve. Says his agent will pay at the end of the voyage. How do I know that he will pay?”

“You need not land your passengers until he does,” Gossett suggested.

“Bloody lot of use that would be,” was the muttered reply. “You’ve given me the letter, young man—what are you hanging around for?”

“I thought you might invite me to have a look at your ship,” Gossett ventured.

The Captain’s ugly mouth, wide open, revealed uglier possibilities.

“And what the hell gave you that idea?” he roared.

“My friend Shawn outside,” Gossett replied. “Mr. Harry Desmond’s clerk.”

“Clerk?”

“Yes. The man who sits in his office and writes his letters sometimes. He is outside in the car, waiting for me now.”

The Captain finished his drink. He presented the appearance of a person of low mentality seeking to understand something outside the grope of his intelligence. He rose to his feet—a huge, shaggy figure full of pent-up malice.

There was something in his eyes which should have warned Gossett.

"I'll show you over the ship," he promised. "Maybe you'd like a cruise with us."

"That depends," Gossett remarked cryptically.

The scattered groups of drinkers made way for the Captain deferentially, as he swaggered out of the place. Already the barman was at work closing up. Outside, Gossett's car was waiting, drawn up to the kerb, its lights still flashing. Gossett stepped into the driving seat and held the door open for the Captain who, with some difficulty, disposed of his huge body in the spare seat.

"Where's Shawn?" he demanded.

Gossett glanced over his left shoulder to the back seat where he had left Shawn. The place was empty. His passenger had disappeared.

Gossett was fairly well assured from the moment he passed up the gangplank of the steamer that he was in for an adventure. If he needed further proof, the way the Captain slammed the door of his private cabin, after having left him alone for nearly half an hour, the way he threw himself into the seat opposite to the one which he had indicated for his guest, the way he folded his arms on the table and looked across, would have warned him of what was to come.

"And now," the Captain demanded, "what the hell's the game? What are you doing prying down here? Strangers are not popular, let me tell you, on my steamer."

"Well, you needn't worry," Gossett replied, "I have changed my mind about going on a cruise with you."

"Have you?" the Captain chuckled. "And why?"

"Because your boat is dirty," Gossett confided, "your crew are filthy and I should hate to sleep even in your best stateroom."

"What are you here for then?"

"Sheer curiosity."

"And what the hell are you curious about?"

"I should like to see over the ship," Gossett admitted.

The Captain laughed—again a horrible sound.

"What for?"

Gossett's right hand strayed downwards towards his hip.

"I am interested in your passengers," he declared.

The Captain seemed to be relapsing into a more agreeable frame of mind. He grinned broadly.

"In my passengers," he repeated. "A good many young men at different ports, they like to see my passengers. They want to see my birds. When they have got over their seasickness, they are worth seeing. You like birds, mister?"

“Very fond of them in their proper place,” Gossett assented.

“I think,” the Captain said, with that malignant glare back once more in his red-rimmed eyes, “it is not birds you want to see. You want those thousand English sovereigns, yes?”

Gossett’s fingers had reached the opening of his hip pocket. The Captain’s grin only became a little wider.

“If you want to see a gun,” he said, “look to your right.”

Gossett obeyed, turning his head cautiously. Then he received a very great surprise. In the aperture of a door leading to the upper deck, which must just have been stealthily pushed open, he looked into the barrel of a very familiar weapon. It was pointed straight at his chest and the fingers which held it were remarkably steady. The fingers were the fingers of Mr. Shawn!

“You must not move your hand another inch, Mr. Gossett,” the latter said, and somehow or other his voice seemed to have gained strength. “I am very frightened of firearms. If my fingers tremble, this might go off.”

“As for me,” the Captain observed, “I don’t use a gun against little men like you. I pick them up between these arms”—he stretched them out—“and I knock their heads against the table until they split.”

There was a rattling of chains outside. The gangway was being drawn up. The siren was blowing. The steamer leaned a little on one side.

“So I am a passenger, after all,” Gossett remarked coolly. “I may turn out to be an expensive one.”

“You will go only a short distance with us,” the Captain grinned; “then you make another journey. You want to see my passengers?”

“That was what I came for,” Gossett admitted.

The Captain rose ponderously to his feet. There was the sound of the gurgling of waters. The whole ship seemed to be straining and trembling as they moved away from the dock in reverse.

“The birds keeping pretty quiet, Shawn?” the Captain asked.

“All except Number Four.”

“What’s she want?”

“Oh, the usual thing. She wants her box of clothes that we promised her, she wants her parts, she wants to be with the other girls, she says it’s a beastly steamer and she was promised a first-class passage.”

“Herd ’em all into the saloon,” the Captain ordered. “We’ll look ’em over.”

“I think,” Shawn suggested suavely, “it would be advisable to deal with our friend first. Don’t forget what I told you when you came on board. I think that he is dangerous. He is very friendly with those unpleasant people at Scotland Yard.”

The Captain’s ejaculation was more like a snarl than anything.

“If you’re going to take the voyage on my ship,” he warned him, “you’ll

have to leave off giving advice to the skipper. I'll deal with this blundering jackanapes myself in time. A leetle fun with him first, I think. I sha'n't need a gun, either. Get about your job."

The menacing gun was withdrawn, the door was closed. Soon there was the sound of the fluttering of skirts, women's voices, cries of relief, anger, terror, against the background of Shawn's smooth reassurances. One voice in particular, the most frightened of all, stirred Gossett's blood. His right hand moved back again towards his hip pocket. The Captain, with an unexpected swiftness of movement, stretched out a hairy hand and for a moment Gossett thought his arm was broken in two. In a fury of helplessness, he felt the gun taken from his pocket and thrown into a distant corner of the room.

"We will fight presently, if you wish, my friend," his captor remarked, with a grin, "before you go to the fishes. It might be amusing. I have killed a good many men with these two arms. More than you with your leetle gun!"

"I think," Gossett reflected, "I ought to have killed you when I had the chance."

The other smiled, and again it was no pleasant grimace.

"There are a great many," he confided, "who have wished that afterwards."

They squeezed their way along the narrow alley into the saloon. At the further corner, about a dozen girls were huddled together at the end of the long table. Shawn, with a cigarette in his mouth, was endeavouring to answer a stream of terrified questions.

"My dear young ladies, one at a time, I beg of you," he pleaded. "You none of you seem to like your quarters. Well, you only stay on this boat as far as Havre, after which you'll move on to a big liner—*La France*—with beautiful decks and saloon and reading rooms and over two hundred passengers. Surely you can put up with this for two days."

"You're a liar," one of the girls screamed. "Everything you have told us has been a lie. Put us ashore."

"Don't be foolish," he protested. "Can't you see that we have started on the voyage?"

He leaned over and caressed one of the girls. She sprang away with a shriek.

"Don't come near me," she cried.

"Who is this horrible man?" another one demanded, as the Captain patted her on the back and laughed hoarsely. "Don't touch me. Do you hear? Don't touch me!"

"That was stupid of you, leetle girl," the Captain warned her, with a scowl. "I am in command of this ship and you will all have to do what I tell you. If you are friendly and pleasant, there might be some wine to come—wine and the dance, yes, and a gay time. But you must all do what you are told. I am the

master here, and what I choose I take. What I do not want, the little man who brought you”—he jerked his hand towards Shawn—“can have.”

The company of young women suddenly saw Gossett. Two of them sprang to their feet. They leaned towards him as a possible deliverer.

“Are you a passenger?” the nearest cried breathlessly. “Tell me, is it all right on this steamer? We’re supposed to be going out to join the Desmond Comedy Troupe somewhere in East Africa.”

Gossett shook himself free from the Captain’s terrible fingers. For a moment he thought of dashing back to the cabin for his gun. Then he caught Shawn’s eye and abandoned the idea. He heard, too, a pleasant sound—outside the open porthole the beating of a Thorneycroft engine!

“I can’t tell you anything about the tour, except that I don’t believe it exists,” Gossett said, raising his voice so that they could all hear. “I can tell you this, though. You have no cause for fear. You will all be back on land within an hour, and free to go where you will.”

“What is this nonsense you talk?” the Captain demanded furiously.

Gossett shrugged his shoulders. He was trying all the time to edge nearer to Shawn. There were unfamiliar noises on the deck. Shouts. A trampling of feet and a shot. Not only one shot but a quick volley, the rapid crackling of a Maxim. The Captain swung around just in time to confront a terrified mate.

“A police boat across the bows, Captain,” he shouted.

“Run them down,” was the bawled response.

Another man came rushing in.

“They’re sweeping the decks with Maxims,” he cried. “They’re boarding us.”

“Full speed ahead,” the Captain thundered.

Too late. The engine had stopped. The river police streamed down, in their familiar peaked caps and dark uniforms. In the distance Shawn was creeping towards the saloon exit. Gossett was too quick for him, however.

“Do you really fancy hanging?” he asked, as he looked once more into the barrel of his own revolver.

Shawn paused irresolutely.

“I might go with you,” he muttered.

That moment’s hesitation, however, lost him his chance. There were a dozen clinging arms about his neck, dragging him backwards, arms of the women whom he had loved all his life. This time, though, they were embraces which were to cost him his liberty. The handcuffs were on his wrists before he could shake himself free.

“Come for your share of the swag, Gossett?” the Sub-Commissioner asked him a few days later at Scotland Yard.

Gossett shook his head.

“I sha’n’t put in a claim, sir,” he said. “It seems to me that I made nothing but mistakes all the time.”

The Sub-Commissioner stroked his chin.

“I can’t see even now what you wanted to blunder onto the steamer for,” he acknowledged, “even though you did telephone to us beforehand. It might have made a widow of that pretty little wife of yours at any moment. However, the Chief’s decided this morning it’s fifty-fifty. You can have your share when you like. We put the whole thing before the old lady who offered the reward, as a matter of fact. It was her decision as much as ours.”

“Very generous of everybody,” Gossett declared. “What about Desmond?”

“He’ll live, they say, but it’ll be a long time before he’ll be charged.”

“And the man who gave him the thrashing?”

“He is out on bail already. He’ll get something light in the second class.”

“And that little devil who humbugged me so?”

The Sub-Commissioner smiled. The frank acknowledgment pleased him. He had sometimes fancied that Gossett was a little too self-assured.

“You mean Shawn,” he replied. “It turned out that he was the one who did all the dirty work in that business. He it was who made the excursions into the country and brought the young women to town. He’ll get fifteen years.”

It was Gossett’s turn to smile.

“Sorry for his father, the bishop,” he remarked.

VIII THE MYSTERY TICKET

Malcolm Gossett and his beautiful young wife were standing under the outside canopy of the Opéra Comique, watching with true Anglo-Saxon composure the driving rain in the boulevard and the frantic struggles on the part of every one to secure some sort of vehicle. Gossett, who was rather good at such things, had already sent off the commissionaire in search of the car hired for the evening and, with the certainty of his imminent return, smoked a cigarette in comfort, with Cynthia's hand tucked under his arm.

"Sure you're not cold, darling?" he asked.

"Not a bit," she answered, with a little squeeze. "Isn't it fun watching all these people?"

"Rather," he agreed enthusiastically. "Queer types, some of them."

The outward flow was becoming thinner as the theatre emptied. In the distance Gossett could see their car making slow but sure progress towards the front. A brawny, thick-set man in opera hat and evening clothes, with a very resplendent lady on his arm, pushed his way past them. Gossett looked after him with mild distaste. Suddenly his expression changed. It seemed to him that something might be about to happen.

"Look how angry those two men seem to be," Cynthia exclaimed.

"I hope there isn't going to be a fight. Let's get away. Quickly."

For once Gossett was inattentive. His professional instincts were aroused. The woman with the man who had annoyed him were in the act of stepping into a very luxurious limousine when two passers-by—Englishmen—flashily but badly dressed, and having the appearance of second-rate bookmakers, accosted the latter. They were only a few yards away and their voices were easily audible.

"Strike me lucky—it's Ned at last," one of them shouted, catching hold of his disengaged arm. "Say, young fellow, we've got to have a word with you."

"Don't let him get away, Sandy," his companion cried in excitement. "Gawd, look at his togs and the sparklers on Bella!"

The stalwart man whose progress had been interrupted swung around with an oath. He was coarse of visage and had the features of a prizefighter. He wrenched his arm loose with a force which sent his assailant reeling back. It was curious, however, that he answered not a syllable.

"Don't have anything to say to them, Ned," the woman advised, as she stepped into the car. "We don't want any trouble."

In Paris, things go ill with shabbily dressed foreigners who try to force themselves upon limousine-riding gentlemen in evening dress and with hastily produced fifty-franc notes in their hands. Two commissionaires hindered the further approach of the would-be disturbers of the peace. The door was slammed. There were respectful salutes and good nights. The limousine drove off. The last Gossett saw of the two baffled aggressors was that they had boarded a taxi and, leaning out of the window, were furiously signalling to the chauffeur to follow the fast-disappearing limousine.

“There’s a little drama in real life for you,” Gossett remarked, as he almost carried Cynthia across the wet pavement into the car. “The gentleman in the magnificent attire, I should say, had done his pals in the eye some time or other.”

“Horrible people, all of them,” Cynthia exclaimed, nestling up to her husband. “I’m glad there wasn’t a fight, though.”

“I shouldn’t be surprised,” Gossett reflected, “if the fight was to come.”

Back in his office a week later, cheerful as a man should be who has enjoyed a brief holiday in Paris with his wife, Gossett took up his book of “cases” and glanced them through to see if there were any loose ends which needed attention. In the midst of his task the telephone rang and Littledale, his lawyer friend, announced himself at the other end of the wire.

“That Gossett?”

“Speaking.”

“How was Paris?”

“Fine.”

“The little lady as beautiful as ever?”

“They seemed to think so over there.”

“You’re a lucky fellow,” the lawyer continued. “Listen. I’m sending you round a rummy cove to talk to.”

“Is he in trouble?”

“I should say roughly, from what I know of the gang who are annoyed with him, that he very soon would be. Like a wise man, he wants to take precautions. It isn’t a police job. He and his pals have all been across the line. I don’t know whether you’ll see a way of helping him or whether you’ll think it worth while. Please yourself. I’m afraid it will be a roughish business, anyway.”

“Money good?” Gossett asked.

“It’s queer money but there’s plenty of it,” was the somewhat cryptic reply. “See you later.”

Gossett replaced the receiver and continued his task. In less than ten minutes his office boy appeared.

“A gentleman to see you, sir,” he announced. “Says he comes from Sir George Littledale.”

“Show him in,” Gossett directed.

The newcomer swaggered into the room, bringing with him a vivid memory of the crowded boulevard outside the Opéra Comique, the florid lady covered with diamonds, a glittering limousine and two angry but thwarted aggressors. He was dressed in a dark blue suit which was well enough in its way, but he sported with it a brown bowler hat, a magenta tie and tan shoes of too vivid a shade. One arm was in a sling, which was perhaps the reason why he did not offer to shake hands. His features were coarse but not strikingly unpleasant, and he had the determined jaw of a man who likes and gets his own way.

“You’re Mr. Gossett, I suppose,” he said. “I’m Ned Burroughs—you may have heard of me. I was in the boxing game till last spring.”

“Yes, I’ve heard of you,” Gossett acknowledged. “You were a middleweight, weren’t you? Beat Jenks at the National two years ago.”

“I can see you’re a sport,” Mr. Ned Burroughs observed, with a grin, as he sank uninvited into the visitor’s chair. “Littledale, the lawyer, sent me here.”

“A good friend of mine,” Gossett observed. “What can I do for you?”

“The Lord knows what you or any man can do for me,” was the somewhat gloomy reply. “I’d a mind to struggle through the business myself, but Bella—that’s my missus—she was all for my going to the cops. I didn’t tell her, but they would be looking up my sheet. Old Littledale did a neat job for me once, so I went and told him my troubles. He sent me on to you, and here I am.”

“I’ve seen you before,” Gossett confided. “Two men tried to stop you coming out of the Opéra Comique in Paris about a month ago. You got away from them, though.”

Mr. Burroughs leaned back in his chair and whistled.

“Lord love us, but it’s a small world,” he declared. “They were two of the gang I got mixed up with when I was in the game. They’re kind of sore now. Don’t know as I wonder at it.”

“Try and tell me your story as briefly as you can,” Gossett begged. “I’ll ask you any questions that are necessary.”

“Got to do it my own way,” Mr. Ned Burroughs insisted, “but I’m all for cutting the cackle down myself. This business started in the private bar of the ‘Golden Calf’ down in Aldersgate.”

“And what happened there?”

“Me and those two you saw in Paris and a few more pals were in having our afternoon sluice, when in comes Billy Dawson, the bookmaker, all in a sweat and hurry. Gatwick was just over and the favourite had romped home. He put out his arms and he tried to draw us all together.

“‘Boys,’ he cried, ‘I’m in it up to the neck. I’ve paid out nearly two hundred quid on the course, so ‘elp me God. I got a lift home—never a drink or a bite—and I’m a fiver short for the little bugs round here. They’ll be after me in a minute. For the love of Gawd, cough up a fiver between you.’”

Gossett moved uneasily in his seat.

“I suppose all this is necessary,” he ventured.

“Sit you tight and hold your jaw,” Mr. Ned Burroughs enjoined. “You’ll see how necessary it is before you’ve another grey hair in your head. This is the truth I’m telling you. We didn’t feel like parting. Billy was outside our clique and we didn’t quite see why we should worry about him. Then down he slaps on the table a book of sweepstake tickets for the Grand National, and a paper or two along.

“‘There you are,’ he said. ‘All paid for and verified. Five quids’ worth. You can surely squeeze up the money between you for them.’”

“That doesn’t sound so unreasonable,” Gossett remarked.

“We coughed it up, all right,” Burroughs continued. “There was ten tickets in the book,” he told us. “Two he’d already given his wife. The five of us took two each—at least, that’s what we thought—and when the evening crowd came in, there was Billy with a pint of the best we’d stood him, in front of the bar, paying out like a bloomin’ lord. All serene, you’d think. So it was. This is where the jim-jams commenced, though. When I got ‘ome, I found I’d got three tickets instead of two. He’d only given his Missus one and there was two stuck together as natty as could be.”

“Well, what did you do about that?” Gossett asked, beginning to be mildly interested.

“Well, I signs up the first two of ‘em,” Burroughs confided, “that is to say, I did all that was necessary, and in they went to the pool we’d agreed on. The odd one I nursed a bit. You might not think it to look at me, but I’m a superstitious sort of chap, and that odd ticket looked to me worth all the rest put together. I went about the matter a trifle cunning. I used a different—what do you call it? make-believe name for it—called it Mr. Holborn, and I put it away by itself.”

Gossett shook his head.

“Bad business that,” he murmured.

Ned Burroughs was almost truculent.

“Who are you getting at?” he demanded angrily. “There wasn’t one of the other chaps who wouldn’t have done the same. The only question was which could do it the cleverest. You hold on a bit. I guess you know what happened.”

Gossett sat suddenly upright in his chair.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “That was what the papers called ‘the mystery ticket.’”

“You’ve got it right, Guv’nor,” the other admitted, with a chuckle. “Well, the time went on, and, blow me, on the day of the draw, I was down at Tom Merry’s gymnasium, training in a bit for a Saturday-night bout down in Bermondsey, when I got a telegram—Mr. Holborn had drawn the favourite, Kilkenny Cat.”

Gossett was interested enough now. He had purchased a book of tickets on every race since the sweepstakes were started and never yet drawn a horse.

“It’s lucky I’m a clear-headed sort of chap,” Ned Burroughs went on complacently. “I thought this out cool and proper. The ticket I’d won with was the one over, and it ‘adn’t got nothing to do with the pool. What I done was this. I legged it off to Littledale and I put it up to him. I wanted to step clean out for the moment with a view of coming in later on. You get me?”

“I’m afraid I do,” Gossett assented.

“What do you mean, ‘afraid’?” Ned Burroughs demanded, again with a note of truculence in his tone. “Never you mind about that. I gave Sir George Littledale what you call a Power of Attorney, but I gave him also the straight word. That odd ticket was a gift to me and it meant something. I’m not greedy as a rule, but I wanted the whole scoop. Not a quarter share was he to sell. I wanted the lot. And I got it. You know that. Kilkenny Cat won by the last jump and a hundred yards, and two hundred and eighty thousand quid came my way!”

“And I often wondered,” Gossett said half to himself, “whether any one knew the truth about that missing ticket.”

“Well, there it is,” Burroughs declared. “Of course, I didn’t waste no time. I was up at the Golden Calf making as much noise as the others. ‘Where’s that blasted ticket?’ was what we were all asking one another. We got Billy Dawson right on the spot and we put him through it all right. He didn’t know nothing about it, poor chap. How should he? The ticket that won was one of the two he said he’d given to his wife, but she up and swore she’d only had one, and one was all our boys were able to trace. I don’t reckon any money went their way, and money smells in our parts, and there ain’t a snitch of it around them folks. All that Billy could say was that he must have dropped it in the street, but whoever had got hold of it was blasted artful. And with all the different tales, there’s none of the newspapers yet got it right. I put it about before the trouble began that I’d backed the first and second with all I’d got, so they didn’t think anything of my being a bit flush. However, in the long run, there was whispers that got about, and it wasn’t likely I was going on with twenty-pound scraps with a quarter of a million pounds in the bank. Then them two saw me in Paris, and the fat was in the fire.”

“I don’t wonder at it,” Gossett remarked coolly.

“I reckon they’d tumbled to it,” Mr. Ned Burroughs went on, after a brief

pause, “that Mr. Holborn was me and that I’d got hold of that extra ticket. Anyway, three of ’em—Sandy Ladd, Dick Fuller and that Malay chap who does a bit of doctoring—Ali Marka, he calls himself—they fetches up one day at our new flat in Hampstead. Better get it over and done with, I thought, so I has ’em shown into the drawing-room and when they were all sitting there in a row, with their hats in their hands, I went in and opened up the business.

“‘What’s it all about?’ I asks. ‘Supposing I have gone up a bit in the world, what with my wife having come into money and one thing and another, where’s your grouse?’

“That Ali Marka is the man who answers me. He went to some sort of European University and he talks like a kind of toff.

“‘Ned Burroughs,’ he says smoothlike, ‘it’s our opinion that you got hold of that third ticket.’

“‘What if I did?’ I asks.

“‘The tickets in that book,’ he went on quietly, ‘belonged equally to those of us who found Billy Dawson the money and made the pool.’

“‘You think so,’ I says. ‘Anyway, it’s right so far as our two each was concerned. The third ticket was a chancy one. It came up from the floor or fluttered down from the ceiling, whichever you like, but it warn’t in that pool.’

“‘You mean that you’re not going to divide up?’ Ali Marka asks softly.

“‘There ain’t nothing that belongs to any one else to divide up,’ I answers. ‘That third ticket belonged to me, and no one else had even a smell of it. There isn’t another one of you would have had the pluck to give it a run. Anyway, I did. I won the money and I’m bloody well going to stick to it.’”

Gossett whistled softly to himself. Despite his disgust, the man’s story was thrilling.

“How did they take that?” he asked.

“They was frothing at the mouth,” Ned Burroughs grinned. “But how do you suppose they was going to take it? I could have knocked any one of them into mincemeat any moment, if he’d cut up rough. And they darned well knew it. They argued a bit but I wasn’t having any. I offered ’em a drink, for the sake of old times, but they wouldn’t act pally. This Ali Marka he spoke up quiet and dangerous like.

“‘Ned Burroughs,’ he said, ‘justice is justice. We believe that you drew over two hundred thousand pounds on your ticket. That should have been divided into five sums of forty thousand each. We want our money.’

“Well, Mr. Gossett, you being a gentleman, I won’t tell you what my answer was because, maybe, we others do use our tongues a bit rough at times, but I let ’em know that there was nothing coming. Then that there Malay chap spoke up again.

“‘Ned Burroughs,’ he said, ‘we’ve talked this over a great deal and we’ve

come to a very final and definite conclusion. You're right in one thing you've said—we should never have kept the ticket. We should have sold for the thirty thousand pounds. Fives into thirty thousand pounds is six. We don't want trouble. Give us our six thousand pounds each and we'll leave you alone with the rest.' ”

“I should call that a very fair offer,” Gossett declared. “I hope you agreed.”

“No b——y fear,” Ned Burroughs exclaimed contemptuously. “I'm not parting with any thousands of pounds to any scum like that. I'm doing what any one of them would have done. I'm holding on to the lot, and I'm telling 'em if they want it, they can come and fetch it.”

“So far,” Gossett remarked, “you seem to have a mind of your own and the whole affair seems to have gone your way. Now what is your trouble?”

Mr. Ned Burroughs slipped his arm out of the sling and took off what seemed to be half a glove and half a bandage. An exclamation of horror escaped Gossett. Where the little finger had been, there remained only a stump, barely healed over.

“That's the beginning of my trouble,” the ex-prizefighter observed. “Done in my own flat—three o'clock in the morning. I was a bit squiffy when I went to bed. I know that, because Bella wouldn't have me near her. I don't know exactly when it happened. I was kind of sleeping and I went off, smelling that sort of sickly stuff they give you in hospitals. When I woke up—sick as a dog I was too—there was my hand bandaged up with the little finger missing and a printed note on the pillow—‘This is Number One. The others in rotation.’ ”

Mr. Ned Burroughs, with the aid of his teeth, bound up his hand again. Gossett, not often taken aback, was feeling somewhat stupefied.

“But what have you done about it?” he asked. “Have you been to the police?”

Mr. Ned Burroughs had the air of one about to spit upon the floor. Apparently he remembered where he was just in time.

“Police,” he scoffed. “I'm not quite a big enough fool for that. If I gave them boys away to the police, I might be in worse trouble than this myself. You've got your way of living, Guv'nor, and we've got ours. If we're up against trouble from one another, it isn't the police that's going to help us. What I've done is what Littledale advised me to do. I've come to you instead.”

“You want my advice?” Gossett asked.

“That's what I'm here for, Mister.”

“You can have it quick,” Gossett assured him. “Pay up those six thousand pounds to each of your friends and end the trouble.”

Mr. Ned Burroughs scratched the side of his head. He was both bewildered and scornful.

“Guv'nor,” he said, “if I'd been willing to pay up all those chaps want

from me, what would have been the sense in coming to you?"

"Ask yourself any riddles you like," Gossett replied. "I say they're letting you off lightly and you ought to pay. If you come home drunk nights and you daren't go to the police, it seems to me you might find yourself in a pretty bad way before long."

"You can't help me set about those chaps on the quiet like?" Mr. Burroughs enquired, reaching down for his hat. "I can tell you their runs."

"I certainly cannot," Gossett told him emphatically.

Mr. Ned Burroughs stood up.

"How much do I owe you for what you calls your advice?" he asked surlily.

"Nothing at all, except your absence," was the curt reply. "Make it quick, please, and don't let me see you again."

Mr. Burroughs for a minute looked threatening.

"Do you want a clout on the ear'ole?" he enquired.

Gossett's hand had stolen into his right-hand drawer, and with a little click he released the safety catch of his revolver.

"I keep this for bullies," he observed.

"You've got to," the ex-prizefighter remarked, as he turned away. "You'd 'ave to grow a bit before you could fight for yourself."

Under the circumstances it was a complete surprise to Malcolm Gossett when, a month later, his clerk announced that Mr. Ned Burroughs was outside and would like a few words with him. Gossett's first impulse was to refuse to see him. He changed his mind, however, and his visitor was promptly ushered in. Gossett could not refrain from an exclamation of dismay at the first sight of him.

"They've got me down, you see, Guv'nor," Mr. Burroughs remarked drearily, as with the help of a stick he sank into the waiting chair.

Gossett was genuinely shocked. For all his coarseness and swagger, Ned Burroughs had been a fine figure of a man. To-day he was, or appeared to be, a complete wreck. He must have lost at least two stone and his clothes hung limply about him. The puffiness of his cheeks had all gone, his face was drawn, and under his eyes there shone the reflection of some inward and haunting fear. His arm was still in a sling.

"What's happened to you?" Gossett asked kindly. "You look as though you'd been ill."

"What's 'appened to me?" Burroughs repeated in a hollow tone.

He touched his bandaged arm.

"Two more gone," he went on hoarsely. "One at Monte Carlo. Can you beat that? Staying at a big hotel under another name, with my wife in the next

room! The other in Cornwall. Cornwall!" he repeated. "The most God-forsaken bit of country I've ever struck. You'd have said any man might 'ave got lost there. Not a bit of it. The second night it was. I did have a week's peace at Monte Carlo."

"Look here," Gossett insisted. "I don't know what your code is, or anything of that sort, but this has got to stop. It's the most brutal thing I ever heard of. If you won't go to the police, I shall."

There was no answering light of hope in the other's face.

"If you go to the police," he croaked, "that's the end of me. I can't stop you. I'm not man enough these days, but I tell you that if you go I'm done for."

"Better run a little risk than die by inches like that," Gossett pointed out.

Burroughs shook his head.

"Look here," he confided, "I've been to Sir George Littledale. He can't act for me. I don't blame him. He couldn't deal with criminals unprofessional—that's the sort of swab he handed out to me. I want to save my life, Mr. Gossett. You're outside that professional touch, ain't you?"

"I certainly am," Gossett assented. "At the same time—"

"Don't let's waste breath," Burroughs interrupted. "I ain't got too much these days. There's four of them blokes. There's Sandy Ladd, there's Dick Fuller, there's Dagger Clemson—they three don't count. They're dumb. There's only one devil who's working this on me—that's Ali Marka. He's the devil—he's the devil incarnate."

He moved his arm with a spasm of pain and looked down at the many bandages.

"There ain't nobody but a devil could have thought this out," he groaned. "I'll never be able to hit a man again. I'm done—for the Ring—for anything. I wish that bloody ticket had blown away before it got gummed to the other. You've got what they call 'a nerve,' ain't you, Guv'nor?"

"I think so," Gossett admitted.

"You've got to go and see Ali Marka. You've got to make terms with him. Any terms. They can have their six thousand each and welcome. They can 'ave more. I'll go 'alves. I would do more than that. They'll have to leave me enough to live on, because I'm no use now for anything. They can have the rest. I've got to sleep at night, just now and then, or I'll go crazy. It's got so as I fancy if I 'ear the wind blowing that it's a footstep coming soft, just treading on a cushion of air or summat like that, then I get a jab of pain and my finger begins to twitch. Gawd, it's torture!"

"Look here, Burroughs," Gossett said. "I will do what I can to help you, but the first and most important thing I have to say is this, and don't you forget it. It is a police job now, whatever it may have been in the old days. I will

handle it for you through Scotland Yard. You won't need to go near the place yourself.

"If you talk that way till Doomsday, Guv'nor," Burroughs insisted, "it won't make any difference to me. If the police step in, they will know where the information came from and I'm bust. Ali Marka's address is Number 131, Commercial Street. He does some doctoring there. Lord have mercy upon his patients! You go and see him. I was a bit fresh to you last time. Sorry. There's a fifty quid note I brought with me. That'll pay for the time before too. You go down there, Guv'nor. You see how I am. The money, most on it, is in the bank. There need be no delay—Bank of England notes to-night, if they want it. You can drop a hint to that blasted Asiatic if he's difficult. I'm not feeling like waiting for his next visit. I've got my left arm still; though I ain't got much strength left, I've got enough to squeeze the life out of a mangy packet of bones like him."

"I'll hint at something of the sort, if I feel it necessary," Gossett promised. "In the meantime, leave me your address."

"We're at the Waldorf 'otel," Burroughs confided. "We did try the country out Godalming way, but it was a bit quiet for the Missus. I ain't had the heart to enter a public house for weeks, but I likes to know that they're round. Bring me good news to-night, Guv'nor, and you shall have another of those notes and a skinful of the best thrown in."

"I'll do my best," Gossett promised.

The hour which Gossett spent waiting in that perfectly bare, squalid little apartment, behind what Ali Marka chose to call his surgery, was, he decided afterwards, one of the most miserable he had ever spent in his life. The limits of his endurance were almost reached when the door was quietly opened and Ali Marka, in a brown duster, his black hair brushed straight back, his black eyes like sloes gleaming in their sallow setting, entered the room. He was perfectly composed except that he seemed a little breathless. Gossett looked him over and he had hard work to repress a shiver. He was not in the least inclined to waste words.

"You are Ali Marka?" he asked sharply.

"That is my name," the other replied. "You wish to see me—yes? You came at an unfortunate time. I have many patients—because I treat some of them for nothing. It is a poor neighbourhood and they appreciate charity."

Gossett half closed his eyes. There were things which he had heard during the last hour.

"They receive charity from you?" he asked scornfully.

"Indeed, yes," was the suave reply. "You have perhaps thought I am not qualified. I may not put my brass plate outside, but for skill, I might find my place in Harley Street. I am an M.D. of London."

“An ‘unfrocked’ one, I should think,” Gossett observed.

The shot told. The man stood as though turned to stone.

“The laws in this country are strange,” he said, after a brief pause. “One suffers for helping the unfortunate. What is your wish?”

“I came on behalf of Ned Burroughs,” Gossett announced. “He offers an arrangement.”

A terrible smile, very thin and very faint, parted Ali Marka’s cruel lips.

“So he has had enough,” he murmured. “It is early. He has still a finger and a thumb upon his right hand.”

“Let us have no misunderstanding,” Gossett went on coldly. “If it lay with me, you would be in prison in half an hour. I am only an agent, however. I have accepted my client’s confidence and I have to preserve it. What cash sum will satisfy you and your partners?”

The Malay stroked his chin.

“A gross act of deceit,” he said, “is hard to pardon.”

“How much?” Gossett persisted.

“What has Ned Burroughs left out of the proceeds of that stolen ticket?” Ali Marka asked.

“The greater portion of it,” Gossett replied. “He offers you the half.”

“Dear me, he becomes more generous! The half.”

“The whole thing can be arranged this afternoon. Make up your mind. Burroughs is penitent. He knows he did a foolish thing. After all, though, it was not a crime.”

The Malay lifted his eyes. He met Gossett’s and the first sign of emotion escaped him. He shivered very slightly.

“Often,” he murmured, “a doctor is called a criminal when he is doing his best to save a life.”

“And often,” Gossett retorted, “he is called a criminal when he is doing his best to extinguish it.”

The Malay rubbed his hands together slowly. His head was downcast.

“I shall not deal with you,” he said. “I will see my friends. At eleven o’clock to-night Burroughs can come here. I will give him his answer.”

“I think—” Gossett began.

Ali Marka opened the door.

“That is all,” he said.

Sir George Littledale, for the first time in his life, called in to see Gossett on his way to his office on the following morning. He carried a morning paper in his hand. Gossett was already poring over his. They studied the headlines together.

BARBAROUS MURDER IN THE EAST END
NATIVE ASIATIC DOCTOR STRANGLER
AND BEATEN TO DEATH
NO TRACE OF THE ASSASSIN

Gossett lifted his head. Littledale was watching him with a question in his eyes. The former leaned back in his place and pushed the paper away.

“No business of mine,” he observed.

Littledale was faintly troubled.

“It’s a horrible affair,” he said gravely.

“So, I believe,” Gossett rejoined, “was the Asiatic doctor.”

The end of the whole affair, so far as Gossett was concerned, came a few months later, when he was taking a hasty meal with his wife in one of the crowded grillrooms of theatreland. She leaned over and touched him on the sleeve.

“Malcolm,” she whispered, “do you see those very funny people a few tables away? The big man keeps on looking at you—I don’t know how to express it—almost wistfully. You see, he’s wearing a glove on his right hand, and I can’t help thinking that those are artificial fingers. He uses them quite naturally, though. I wonder whether it was the war.”

Gossett turned his head. A partially transformed Dick Fuller and Sandy Ladd, with womenkind to match, were apparently being entertained by Mr. Ned Burroughs and his more than ever buxom and resplendent spouse. The former, soberly attired in dinner clothes and of much improved appearance, was discreetly toying with his wineglass, and in his eyes was a curious expression half—as Cynthia had put it—wistful and half deprecating. He raised his wineglass a little and Gossett at once seized his own and followed suit. Mr. Ned Burroughs grinned. Everything that was decent and good-humoured in his face seemed to come to the surface, and there was something of silent gratitude in his reception of Gossett’s smile and little nod, as he set down his empty wineglass and turned away.

“You did know him then,” Cynthia exclaimed. “He has been watching you for such a long time.”

Gossett nodded.

“An old client,” he confided. “He cost me a good deal of thought at one time. I think I came to the right decision, however. You are right about the fingers, but it wasn’t the war.”

IX A SPORTING GESTURE

The man seemed to bring with him into the sedate atmosphere of Malcolm Gossett's simply furnished office an alien note of vibrant emotion, a queer impression of drama close at hand, likely to blaze up at any moment. In his person he was difficult to place—a long, gaunt human being, who might be either an habitual invalid or recovering from some recent illness. His cheeks fell in a little, there were hollows under his eyes, and his black hair was faintly streaked with grey. Whatever or whoever he might have been, Gossett never for a moment believed that he was Mr. Herbert Amos of Sydney, or that he followed any such unenterprising profession as that of an agent for various steamship lines. There was a lurking fear behind those restless eyes, an utter lack of everyday poise in his continual change of attitude. Gossett was not in the least surprised at his abrupt question.

"I have been told, Mr. Gossett," he said, "that you are not connected in any way with the police?"

"You have been correctly informed," the other assured him. "My hobby is to work for innocent people who are in trouble through no direct fault of their own."

"Through no direct fault of their own," the visitor repeated reflectively. "Well, I suppose that's as good a way of putting it as any. At the same time, it's not very often that an utterly innocent person walks into misfortune. My name isn't Herbert Amos, Mr. Gossett."

"I never thought it was."

"I have never been to Australia in my life."

"I am not surprised."

"I know nothing about steamship lines. My profession was something quite different. You are sure that you don't recognise me?"

"To the best of my belief I have never seen you before," Gossett declared.

"Does it help if I tell you that I was a tutor when I had a profession?"

Gossett was silent for a moment. He knew now whence had come that sense of repugnance which he had felt from the moment of his visitor's entrance. He stiffened involuntarily.

"Yes, that helps," he admitted. "You are Vivian Townsend."

"Quite right," the other assented.

Gossett was silent. His mind was travelling back to the autumn of the year before last. He knew that it was only by a miracle that the man opposite him

had not been placed upon trial for murder. He remembered the groaning and gnashing of teeth at Scotland Yard when day after day failed to produce that last thread of evidence so intensely wanted.

“What can I do for you?” he asked at length.

Townsend ignored the question altogether. He too seemed to have gone into something of a reverie, and when he spoke, he clothed his train of thought with words.

“One year I stuck it out in England,” he reflected. “I knew perfectly well that nine tenths of the people I brushed shoulders with every day believed that I had murdered that boy. I knew perfectly well that I was never outside the surveillance of the police, that they were all the time straining every nerve to bring the thing home to me. I couldn’t get a job, of course, but that didn’t worry me. I had enough to live on. I fished in the spring and I shot in the autumn. Games were impossible for me, because I had no friends. I developed a new sense. I always knew when a detective was on my track. I knew it when I came into a strange place or sometimes when I was in my cottage in Devonshire. They never left me alone. The day I left England, they followed me down to the boat, they lingered over my passport, they hated letting me leave the country. I’m surprised they didn’t frame up some sort of charge against me—one of those things—you know the ropes, don’t you?—where you’re remanded time after time and kept safely under observation.”

“They don’t do that,” Gossett said, “unless you’ve definitely been in trouble before.”

“They didn’t, anyway,” Townsend admitted. “I lived in Florence for several months. The pictures helped me to forget. Then the whispers began and I left. I went up to the Black Forest and in to Hungary. I was in Warsaw some months. I tried the other side of life and I found what a horrible city Paris can be for the tired man with some remnants of taste. I wandered about the Pyrenees for several months, nearly succeeded in losing my life there, and when I came out of hospital, I had no heart for any new place. I came home.”

“Why?” Gossett asked.

“For two reasons. The first is the unbelievable one—I did not kill Arthur Mallerton.”

Gossett remained silent. He could think of nothing to say.

“The second reason you will find in the *Times* of this morning,” his visitor continued. “You haven’t read your newspapers yet perhaps?”

“Not yet. You are an early caller.”

“Turn to page fifteen,” Townsend directed. “The third item under ‘Wills and Bequests.’”

Gossett did as he was bidden. The other quoted from memory:

“To my nephew Vivian Townsend, in the belief that a great wrong has been done to him in the thoughts of many of us, I leave the residue of my estate, which I estimate at something over five hundred thousand pounds. It is my desire that he should ignore the past and honestly do his best to reestablish himself in the good opinions of his fellowmen.”

“This is most astounding,” Gossett commented.

His client smiled bitterly.

“Really?” he remarked. “I am next in succession. The baronetcy is mine. I am Sir Vivian Townsend whether I wish to be or not. Why should my uncle not have changed his mind concerning my guilt?”

“Every one is at liberty to do that, of course,” Gossett admitted.

“But you yourself?”

“If you insist,” was the quiet reply, “I am afraid I agree with all the authorities of Scotland Yard and nine tenths of the general public.”

“You still believe that I was guilty?”

“I have always believed it.”

Townsend produced a case and, after a glance at the man at the other side of the desk, lit a cigarette. His long fingers were bony and the knuckles seemed almost as though they were bursting through his flesh. He smoked for a moment in silence.

“Even now I ask myself why you have come back. How can you be sure that the police have not stumbled across that missing link of evidence?”

“First of all, because it doesn’t exist,” Townsend replied, “and secondly, because there was never any particular significance in my absence from England. I took no pains to keep my whereabouts secret. I had letters and books sent to me all the time. If there had been any object in it, the police could have found me.”

Despite his firm convictions, Gossett’s attitude towards his visitor was changing. A certain steely note had gone from his voice.

“You were my second choice,” the latter confided. “I went first to Scotland Yard.”

“You went where?” Gossett gasped incredulously.

“I went to Scotland Yard. I was there yesterday. I asked for an interview with the Sub-Commissioner and I never saw a man more amazed in my life. All the records of the case and the detectives concerned in it were brought into the room. They thrashed the whole case out again point by point with me, the possible criminal, helping them all the time.”

“But what on earth made you do such a thing?” Gossett demanded.

“It didn’t seem to me so very unreasonable,” Townsend replied. “I pointed

out that it was an utter impossibility for me to carry out the conditions of my uncle's bequest, to take up a prominent position in the County, to go back to my clubs and challenge my old friends, whilst things were in this pitiful condition. I gave them several pieces of information which they lacked. Beyond that, I could not go. I begged them to arrest me and put me on trial for my life. If I received a verdict of 'Not Guilty,' that I thought would go as far as anything else in the world towards giving me a fresh start. If they found me guilty, well, that would be an end of it."

"You will forgive my saying that you're a most amazing person," Gossett exclaimed.

"You can say anything you like. I am telling you the truth. They were all very pleasant to me there, after they got over their stupefaction. They regretted very much that they were not in a position to accede to my wishes, but the evidence of my guilt was not yet conclusive. They wished me good-day and the Sub-Commissioner shook hands. I have been wondering ever since whether he did it because I was a baronet, or whether he had come to believe that after all there must be some slight doubt as to my guilt. However, there it is. I said good-bye to them all and I came to you."

"Well, what can I do? I can't put you in the witness box for the whole world to hear what you have to say," Gossett reminded him almost genially.

"You can't," Townsend admitted, "but you might answer me this question. Supposing I entrust you with a great confidence on the understanding that as man to man, as adviser to client, you will never betray it; supposing I tell you who really murdered that unfortunate young man—will it help you to clear my name?"

Gossett was dumb for several moments. Doubt entered into his mind. For the first time he felt confused.

"If you know who killed the lad," he asked at last, "if you didn't murder him yourself, and you know who did, why didn't you tell Scotland Yard?"

Townsend smiled grimly.

"I came here to ask questions, not to answer them," he replied. "Tell me this—are you willing to accept the confidence I offer in absolute and inviolable secrecy?"

"I should prefer to be without it," was the definite reply.

"Why?"

Gossett leaned forward and himself lit a cigarette. A very large share of his suspicious dislike of his visitor was passing.

"Remember this," he said. "Except for that fatal absence of an eyewitness, the evidence against you at the inquest was conclusive. The only way to-day to prove your innocence would be to bring home the crime to the really guilty person. If you once confide in me on the terms you have stated, I could never

prove your innocence, even if I chanced to discover the criminal for myself.”

“I am to understand then,” Townsend summed up, after a moment’s reflection, “that my innocence can never be proved except at the expense of the real criminal?”

“I think you may take that as being the truth,” Gossett assented. “You see, the ramifications of the case are too narrow.”

The visitor stooped for his hat. Gossett was suddenly unwilling to let him depart.

“I hold no official position in life,” he said, “so I am not bound to talk to you of principles, but I must remind you of this, Sir Vivian. If you know the name of the murderer, you ought to leave yourself out of the question altogether. It is your duty to society to publish it.”

Townsend laughed, not altogether pleasantly.

“I have my own code,” he confided. “As a man of common sense, I ask you—do you think after all the hell I have been through, I am likely to weaken now? The agony of the whole thing is past. I am like Prometheus—hardened even to the plucking at my vitals.”

He picked up his hat. Gossett was still loath to let him go.

“Tell me,” he asked, “what on earth induced you to attempt such a ridiculous alibi?”

Townsend shrugged his shoulders.

“Assuming that you are right,” he said, “and that it was a ridiculous alibi, I was willing to try anything to get clear.”

“Even to the extent of perjuring yourself?”

“Perjury,” the other observed, “is not a capital crime.”

Gossett was unexpectedly frank.

“I hate letting you go away,” he admitted. “I feel there ought to be some way of helping you. Will you leave me your address?”

“I have hidden myself in a cosmopolitan hotel,” Townsend replied. “Milan Court, 106. I have not had the courage yet to face a club or to give the necessary references to a house agent.”

“If anything occurs to me—” Gossett began.

“I don’t suppose it will,” the departing visitor interrupted almost roughly. “If you take my advice, you will sit back and forget my visit.”

Gossett certainly did sit back in his chair; perhaps he tried to forget his visitor, but the so often described features of a certain fateful afternoon were stealing into his mind. Gradually they took definite shape. The dreary country, the long empty stretches of rising and falling moorland, with the silvery creeks of salt water piercing the softer bogland, dank and sullen. Five geese, one a little in front, flying high overhead, their honk-honk a strange unmusical cry,

the only sound to disturb the brooding silence. Grey flickers of mist hanging phantom-like in unexpected places, appearing and disappearing, so that the boundaries of vision seemed always changing. The lake was there though, always the lake, and in the boat pulled back amongst the rushes the one watching figure. The duck were late that night. The silence after the geese had passed was a dreary, miserable thing. A jack-snipe rose from amongst the marshes with its quaint, tapping sound. A curlew rose from a bush not far away with long melancholy call, and almost immediately afterwards, with a whir and a huge rustle of wings, a black-cock forsook its shelter, flew up wind a little way and wheeled. Then from the centre of this curiously broken tranquillity came the sound of a cry—this time a human one—shrill and terrible, ringing through the twilight. There was a splash in the water. The slim figure in the boat had disappeared. Another and a taller figure was bending over the shallow water by the side of the boat. There was a gurgling murmur of agony. Then silence. The stooping figure remained immovable. Again silence. Then two figures. There must have been two figures—one stealing away through the plentiful cover of that rushy wilderness, the other hastening towards the boat. Their footsteps must have been noiseless on the black mud, their outline almost invisible, even to each other, in the deepening gloom. . . . The duck came at last, a long irregular flight. They flew low and they flew straight and they passed over the well-hidden boat. No gun was raised against them, however. The flurry of their wings passed like a sigh of the night. Again there was silence. . . .

Gossett sat up in his chair with a little exclamation of impatience. It was strange how that murder upon Tarlton Tarn had always dwelt so vividly in his memory, how he had pored over the descriptions of it and the illustrations. He had visualised it so often to himself. He had seen the lonely figure pushing his way through the reeds and wading his way through the water, to where the lad was standing with a charge of Number Four shot in his gun, heard the muffled greeting, the pitiful cry, the struggle—so soon over. He had seen the man stand up alone at the back of the boat to regain his breath, seen him look up towards the sky, in which here and there now pale stars were glimmering. But in all his mental reconstructions, there had been one figure and one figure only. From whereabouts in that glimmering landscape could have come the second? Who could have had courage to murder a weakling boy and slip away off the edge of the world?

“A lady to see you, sir.”

Gossett pulled himself together with a start. What folly to waste his thoughts upon an empty theme.

“Any name?” he asked briskly.

“She wouldn’t give it, sir,” the boy replied.

Gossett was only too glad to have his barren train of thought disturbed.

“Show her in,” he directed.

Then, as he recognised his visitor, he failed for a moment in his usual ceremonious little speech of greeting. She smiled at him very graciously, however, and addressed him in one of the pleasantest voices he had ever heard.

“You are Mr. Gossett, are you not?” she said. “You were pointed out to me once at the theatre. You and your extraordinarily pretty wife. I am Lady Mallerton.”

Gossett bowed and resumed his seat.

“The illustrated papers of to-day—” he observed.

“Oh, yes, I know what you’re going to say,” she interrupted. “You mustn’t think I like having my photograph taken, though, because I really don’t. My friends all tell me that I’m fatally good-natured and I certainly have a weakness for saying ‘yes’ to anyone who asks a favour nicely. . . . Mr. Gossett, I do hope you’re going to be able to help me.”

“It will give me great pleasure if I can,” he assured her truthfully.

“Of course you remember the Tarlton Tarn drowning case?” she asked.

“I can assure you that I do,” he told her, after a brief but understandable pause. “No case of its sort—no inconclusive case, at any rate—has interested me so much for years.”

She shivered a little and her tone became more serious.

“You probably remember,” she went on, “that my husband and I were staying at Mallerton with Arthur and Mr. Townsend, his tutor.”

“The only guests, I believe,” Gossett observed.

“We were the only guests,” she assented. “Now I consider myself in the confessional, Mr. Gossett. I was guilty of a very foolish action directly after Arthur’s body was found. I never realised it made any particular difference—at the time I didn’t dream it would make any—but I’ve been so worried about it lately I don’t know what to do.”

“Tell me about it, please,” Gossett invited.

“Well, to explain it, I must tell you this,” she went on. “My husband, Lord Mallerton, is an extraordinarily jealous man. He hasn’t the slightest cause because, although I used to flirt a little, as most girls do, before I married, I settled down afterwards as any reasonable person does. He was actually stupid enough to be jealous of Mr. Townsend.”

“Yes?”

“The afternoon when the accident happened, my husband was in a miserable temper. Of course, you know that the boy Arthur was the most terrible young person in the world. Sometimes he was scarcely human. He was an orphan from his early childhood and we used to do what we could to look after him for the sake of the family. But—it was difficult.”

"I've heard some very unpleasant stories about him," Gossett admitted.

"Well, I think that Henry—my husband—had had about all he could stand that day, and after lunch he took his gun and went off by himself. Mr. Townsend was taking Arthur out duck shooting. I walked with them some of the way, and then I persuaded Mr. Townsend to come and play nine holes of golf with me at a private course we had close to the lake. I asked Arthur too, of course, but he wouldn't come—said he much preferred to be alone, so I took Mr. Townsend off. I think I ought to tell you perhaps that Mr. Townsend was, I think, rather fond of me, and in a very simple and harmless way I was fond of him, although I very seldom dared be with him for fear of my husband. After we'd played golf for about an hour and a half, Mr. Townsend thought he'd better go back and look after Arthur. This was when I did the silly thing. I begged him, too earnestly perhaps, not to say that he had stayed the afternoon with me, and he promised me solemnly that he would not. He went off back and you know what happened. He found that Arthur had fallen overboard and, hampered by his heavy wading boots, had been practically helpless and was drowned. All this is an old story, so I won't dwell upon it, but the unfortunate part of the whole thing is that Mr. Townsend, remembering his promise to me, gave a most improbable and suspicious account of the way he had spent the afternoon. He was cross-examined very severely, and directly he left the box, people began to whisper. They have been whispering, I believe, ever since."

"There are a great many people," Gossett said gravely, "who believe that he was guilty of that young man's death."

"I know," she admitted, "and I have always felt terribly to blame. But listen, Mr. Gossett," she went on earnestly, "I can assure you I never dreamed after that terrible thing had happened that Vivian—that Mr. Townsend, I mean—would still have made up a story about how he had spent the afternoon. I was simply astonished when I heard him give that garbled account of his doings. I nearly sprang up and contradicted him. Many times since I have wished that I had done so. It would have been the simplest thing in the world for me to have declared that Mr. Townsend had been playing golf with me and that I had asked him to keep our afternoon a secret from my husband. No one would have thought much the worse of me, because they know how jealous Henry is, and he wouldn't, of course, have bothered about it seriously. But I didn't get up at the time and the mischief was done. If I had made a statement afterwards, Mr. Townsend would have been guilty of perjury, and every one would have thought that there was a great deal more in our harmless afternoon than appeared on the surface."

"It was very unfortunate," Gossett remarked thoughtfully. "Still, you must remember, Lady Mallerton, that Mr. Townsend would always have come in for a certain amount of blame. For one thing, people would have said, as they did

say, that he was paid to look after the lad and not to leave him alone for two hours in the afternoon. Then you will remember that, according to the evidence, Townsend, who seems to have been by no means an ideal tutor, had lost his temper with the boy twice the day before and threatened to leave him. These things help suspicions along, you know, besides that stupid story of having gone for a long walk and lost his way.”

Lady Mallerton reflected for a moment.

“Yes,” she admitted, “there is always that. However, what I came to ask you is this. You know that Mr. Townsend has been left a large sum of money, on condition that he comes back to England and resumes his place in society. I’m afraid it’s going to be terribly difficult for him, and I want to know whether it would help if I were to go to Scotland Yard and tell them the truth.”

Gossett made no reply for several moments. When he spoke, it was half to himself.

“Townsend was on his oath at the inquest,” he mused. “They’d have to arrest him for perjury. The case would all come up again, and I’m afraid your husband would scarcely believe the account of that afternoon now.”

She sighed.

“I may tell you in confidence, Mr. Gossett, that I have had a great deal of trouble with my husband lately. I should hate to hurt him, of course, and I have always been jealous of my own reputation, but if I thought this would do Vivian Townsend any good, I would go to Scotland Yard at once.”

“If you ask me for my advice, given, you must remember, almost on the spur of the moment,” he said, “I should recommend you to do nothing of the sort at present. Townsend has yet to make his effort to reestablish himself. If he finds it impossible, then we might consider the question again. If he succeeds without your confession, as he very likely may do, then you will be glad that you have left things as they are. They don’t let men off altogether for perjury, you must remember, even when it’s done without criminal import.”

“I suppose not,” she murmured.

“May I ask you a question?” he ventured.

“Why, of course.”

“You are quite sure in your own mind, I suppose, that Townsend was not responsible for Arthur Mallerton’s death?”

There was a look almost of horror in her kindly eyes.

“Why, of course,” she declared. “Vivian Townsend would never dream of doing such a thing. Arthur was an awkward, clumsy boy and, in those boots they wear for wading, if he once fell overboard, I’m sure he’d never have been able to save himself.”

“At the inquest,” Gossett reminded her, “both the coroner and the jury seemed to find it quite inexplicable that he should have fallen out.”

“He probably got up to fire his gun and slipped.”

“But no shots had been fired from his gun,” Gossett pointed out.

“Now that you mention it, I remember that,” she confessed. “At the same time, nothing of that sort makes any difference. I never dreamed of the possibility of Mr. Townsend having drowned that poor boy. I’m quite sure he didn’t. He is really a very kindly man, although in those days he had had bad luck, and he was certainly very impatient at times. And as for Arthur—well, my husband loathed him just as much as Mr. Townsend did, and every one of the servants. Any one, in short, who had anything to do with him.”

“It was unfortunate for Townsend too, of course,” Gossett reflected, “that he and the boy Arthur had been quarrelling so violently during the last few days.”

“No one could keep on pleasant terms with Arthur,” Lady Mallerton declared with a shiver. “He was an utterly impossible youth. If he had grown up—well, it is a terrible thing to think that he would have represented all the dignity and wealth of the house of Mallerton.”

There was a brief silence. Lady Mallerton prepared to take her leave.

“You wish for a little time before you answer my question, Mr. Gossett?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“I have made up my mind,” he said, “taking all the circumstances into account, what I should do in your place. I should make your confession to an official at Scotland Yard. If you like, I will take you there myself.”

“It would be a terrible load off my mind,” she sighed.

“But first,” he insisted, “you must tell your husband what you propose to do.”

She shrank back in her chair.

“He will have to know, of course,” she admitted. “He will probably bluster and shout and drink too much for several days, and that will be the end of it. I would rather put off telling him, though, until the thing was done.”

“You have asked for my advice,” Gossett told her quietly, “and I look upon this point as of some importance. I should recommend you to tell your husband first what you propose to do.”

She shrugged her shoulders.

“Nothing that he could say,” she argued, “would induce me to change my mind.”

“Nevertheless,” he concluded, rising to his feet, “that you should tell your husband first, before you go with me to Scotland Yard, must remain an integral part of my advice. Think it over. Townsend has not begun his battle yet. There is plenty of time.”

Lady Mallerton took her leave, unable to account even to herself for the

vague sense of trouble which had more than ever depressed her during the last few minutes of her interview.

“Sir Vivian Townsend, your ladyship,” the butler announced a few mornings later.

Lady Mallerton, an eager hostess, rose to her feet and held out both her hands.

“How nice of you, dear Vivian, to come early,” she said. “I wanted to have just a word with you before lunch.”

The butler had already left the room. They were alone in a very charmingly furnished morning room, looking out on Berkeley Square.

“I could scarcely believe it,” Townsend confided, with a grim little smile, “when I got your note inviting me to lunch and saying that your husband insisted upon my coming. He didn’t trouble about showing me many civilities in the old days.”

“Never mind about that,” she begged. “Sit down on the corner of this divan. I ordered cocktails to be brought in directly you arrived. Henry is riding in the park this morning and I know he will be a few minutes late. He hates riding in London, but he fancies it is good for his figure.”

The door was once more opened and a footman entered. He served cocktails and departed. Lady Mallerton pushed the cigarettes across the little ormolu table.

“Vivian,” she began impressively, “I went to that man yesterday, whom people talk about so much—Malcolm Gossett. He gave me some advice. He suggested that I should go to Scotland Yard with him and tell them the story of my stupid request to you.”

“He had no right to do anything of the sort,” Townsend declared, with a note of rising anger in his tone.

“My dear,” Lady Mallerton objected, “he had a perfect right to give any advice which he thought was good. I must tell you this, though—he made a proviso; that proviso was that I should first tell my husband what I was about to do.”

“Have you told him?”

“I told him last night.”

“And I am invited to luncheon to-day?” Townsend asked, a little bewildered.

“He insisted upon it. To tell you the truth, Vivian, I was never so astonished in my life. You know how he loses his temper—what a passion he used to fly into about trifles sometimes at Mallerton. He listened to everything I had to say perfectly calmly—he even made me repeat it twice. When I began to excuse myself, he simply waved his hand.”

“‘You were quite right,’ he said. ‘I should certainly have gone off the deep end if I had known you had spent the afternoon with Townsend. I am like that. I always have been—a foul, jealous temperament.’”

There was a moment’s pause. Lady Mallerton was nervously twisting and untwisting her fingers.

“I thought at first,” she went on, “that he was going to be more than usually brutal, that he was commencing quietly, just out of devilment, but he wasn’t. He was in such a mood as I have never known him in before. He was even—affectionate. I went to Scotland Yard this morning and they are considering what to do. You may be arrested for perjury at any moment. If you are, the truth will be told about how you spent your time that afternoon, and the whole world will know for certain that Arthur’s death was accidental.”

Townsend was seated dumb and motionless in his chair. His eyes seemed to be looking through the woman at his side, his fingers strayed across the table, gripped the stem of his wineglass. He finished what remained of the cocktail. He seemed absolutely unconscious of her action when she leaned over and refilled his glass.

“I cannot tell,” she went on, “what has come over Henry. I heard him come to bed at four o’clock this morning, but he had not been out. He must have been sitting in his study all the time. I called out to him, but I was too late—he had just closed his door. You need not be in the least nervous, Vivian; I am sure he has made up his mind to be absolutely civil to you. May I tell you something?”

“Of course.”

“I believe,” she went on confidentially, “that he really thought you had murdered Arthur. You see, your explanation of why you left the boy for all that time was terribly unconvincing. Perhaps that is because you are used to speaking the truth and you turned out rather a bad liar. Anyway, his whole attitude has changed now. I believe that if he can, he wants to be helpful to you in life. If he does, you must let him, please, for my sake. Remember it is, after all, a sporting gesture on his part. He believes that he has done you a wrong in his mind and he wants to make up for it.”

“I see,” Townsend murmured absently. “Yes, of course I shall accept anything he wants to do for me in the right spirit.”

“There is something about the club—” she began.

He nodded. His thoughts still seemed immeasurably far away.

“Yes, they rather put it across me on Wednesday,” he confessed. “I shall stick it out as long as I can, for the old man’s sake, but I had a bad time.”

She patted his hand.

“Never mind, my dear,” she said. “If Henry wants to be your friend, let him be. He is a strange man, as you know, but he is very popular in London

and he has heaps of friends. He was Arthur's nearest relative. If he takes up your cause, that ought to end all the gossip."

"Yes," Townsend murmured. "Certainly, so it should."

"I just wanted to prepare you," she continued. "Henry will be down in a moment now. I am so glad you are going to be reasonable about it. There were days, you know, Vivian, when you and I were inclined to be a little sentimental. It will be easier to forget those if we are really friends with Henry's knowledge and sanction, if I can see you often here, as I hope we shall, without always being in dread of a jealous husband. He was speaking yesterday of a big dinner to be given specially for you and a big one also at his club. Here he is."

Lord Mallerton, burly, high-coloured, a fine figure of a man of the coarser aristocratic type, entered the room. He had changed since riding and his town clothes seemed somehow or other unsuitable attire for his great limbs and swelling shoulders. He greeted Townsend with an affable smile.

"I am glad you came, Townsend," he said. "You and I have got to have a few words together after lunch. My wife's told me about that little matter of your game of golf with her and I see the point. She is quite right. I should have been in a hell of a temper. Jolly sporting of you to have run the risk you did. We are going to try and put it right for you. Have another cocktail?"

Townsend lifted his glass to his lips.

"This is my second," he confessed. "You are very kind, Lord Mallerton."

Lady Mallerton looked from one to the other. She was perhaps a trifle disappointed. Nevertheless, she led her guest into lunch a few minutes later, and during the meal it was she who sustained most of the conversation. Afterwards she left them for a time. Mallerton lit a huge cigar and helped himself to a double brandy. Townsend followed suit in a milder fashion.

"Take the men out, Parkins," his master ordered the butler. "We sha'n't require anything else. I want a few words with Sir Vivian."

The murmured response was scarcely audible but the door was closed a few seconds later. Lord Mallerton turned towards his guest.

"I hear that you commenced the battle at the Potentates Club on Wednesday, Townsend," he said.

"And I got it in the neck," was the somewhat dry reply.

"I am going to deal with that. You stirred them up more than even you know. There is a committee meeting at three o'clock this afternoon, to discuss whether in the rules there is any way of getting rid of a man liable to be arrested for murder at any moment."

"They need not trouble," Townsend said wearily. "I sha'n't resign. It is against the spirit of my old uncle's wishes, but I sha'n't enter the club again."

"You will enter it this afternoon and in less than half an hour," Mallerton

declared. "I am chairman of the committee and I shall ask you to take my word for it that I have a satisfactory way of dealing with the affair which entails your presence."

"I would very much rather—" Townsend began.

"I know you would," Mallerton interrupted. "I sha'n't ask many favours of you, Townsend, but I ask you this one. Put yourself in my hands so far as regards this matter. If you want to carry out your uncle's behests, I am out to help you. The car's at the door now. You are coming with me to the Potentates Club, and for the next hour you are going to do exactly as I ask you. After that, you can go your own way. I am no liar, as you know, with all my faults, and I promise you that you will become a popular member of the club in no time."

"I have no alternative, Lord Mallerton," his guest said. "Since you put it like that, I am in your hands."

Mallerton glanced at his watch.

"Sound fellow," he observed. "Time we were off."

An event which had never happened before took place that afternoon in the sacred Committee Room of the Potentates Club. An emergency committee meeting was held to consider a certain matter with regard to one of their members, and at the urgent request, almost insistence, of the chairman, the member in question was permitted to be present without power of speech and established comfortably in an easy-chair at the fire. There were eleven members of the committee. They were all shocked men but they all loved Henry Mallerton. Not one of them doubted but that he had some curious reason for this outrageous request. He certainly did not keep them long in suspense.

"Gentlemen of the Committee," he said, tapping the table with the little ivory hammer which was always placed by his side, in right of his office, "this is an emergency meeting to discover how you can get rid of a member of the club who is liable to be arrested for the crime of murder at any moment. I am here to tell you how you can do it. You can do it by exacting a promise on his word of honour from that member never after to-day to enter the premises. Will that be sufficient?"

There was a little uncertain murmur of voices. Townsend sat up in his place and his eyes flashed. He remembered, however, the embargo of silence.

"Will he give that promise?" one of the senior members of the committee ventured to ask.

"He will give it," Lord Mallerton replied.

Another member coughed.

"Are you in a position, Mr. Chairman," he asked, "to pledge your word on behalf of another man?"

“I do not do anything of the sort,” Mallerton announced. “I give the pledge on my own behalf. I am the man who is liable to be arrested for murder—if I am found alive anywhere after to-day. It is I who murdered my nephew Arthur. Although I feel at this moment life ebbing away from me, although hell is there for me just beyond the walls of this room, I am glad and proud to think I had the courage to do it. My time was pretty well up, anyhow, and the Mallertons who’ll come after—the old General and his brood—they’re all right. As for the lad, you can take my word for it, he was not only a degenerate—he was a criminal degenerate. Yet, according to our beastly laws, he could have married. That would have meant the end—of the house of Mallerton.”

If such a thing is conceivable, there was a pandemonium of exclamations. Lord Mallerton’s head had fallen back upon the chair in which he seemed to be already crumpling up. One of the members of the committee swore to the rest of his days that he felt death stealing into the room. Townsend alone, who had guessed what was coming a few seconds before, kept his pledge of silence.

X

UNCLE HIRAM SAVES THE SITUATION

His Serene Highness, Prince Charles of Damaria, to give him his abbreviated title used on non-ceremonial occasions, after studying his morning letters, fell into a somewhat thoughtful frame of mind. He summoned the young man who acted for him in all matters which required brain effort and who was sometimes alluded to as the Prince's secretary and sometimes as his chamberlain.

"Edward," he confided, "there is a tone manifest in some of my letters this morning which I fail to understand."

"If Your Highness will indicate the nature of them," the young man ventured, "I will deal with the matter."

"Bills," Prince Charles murmured. "That is how I believe you allude to these formal communications addressed to one from a class which seems to be always in pecuniary trouble. I have been advised of every sort of reason, from the stringency of the money market to grave family misfortunes, which should induce one to depart from one's usual habit and pay them. It seems to me, however, that a still more unpleasant note is creeping into the sheaf which arrived this morning. I am perhaps oversensitive. I was late last night and my Faivre *cachet* so far has failed to afford me relief. Take them away with you, Edward, and tell me whether I am imagining things. . . . Also be so good as to send a message informing Her Highness that if agreeable I should be glad to see her in her room within half an hour."

Edward, known in the household and to society in general as Count Maugny, gathered up the papers.

"I will glance these through and report, Your Highness," he promised.

Aided by the ministrations of his sombre and speechless valet, Prince Charles performed a leisurely foundation to his morning toilet. That is to say, he spent a quarter of an hour doing various exercises with a view probably to developing muscles which were apparently in a quite healthy condition, after which he spent a further period of time in an austere decorated but in reality very luxurious bathroom, from which he emerged with a much refreshed and awakened air. The season being autumn, bordering upon winter, he was then attired in thick white silk shorts and vest and, in obedience to the first spoken word between himself and his attendant, wrapped in a dark green silk dressing gown, his feet encased in slippers of corresponding hue. Afterwards, with a cigarette in his mouth and a cup of fresh coffee by his side, he awaited a reply

to his message. He had sent it as a matter of course and he received the reply as a matter of course. Throwing away his cigarette, he followed a sedate-looking maid through the boudoir which separated his apartments from those of his wife.

Her Highness Princess Sara of Damaria (she was born in Kansas City) was frankly and unconcealedly still in bed. She was amply supported, however, by an armful of beautiful pillows, and in a night-dress of lemon-coloured silk and modern negligibility, she welcomed her lord and master cordially.

“You’re about good and early, Charles,” she remarked. “Couldn’t stay away from me any longer, I suppose!”

She extended her hand and he drew a chair to the bedside.

“If I had known how exquisite you looked this morning, my visit might have been a trifle earlier still,” he assured her. “Although it seems to me,” he went on, with a ruminating smile, “that it is not—”

Her small, very beautiful hand was pressed gently against his lips.

“Dreams,” she whispered, “not to be spoken of in this crude morning light. Be practical, dear Charles. Is anything wrong?”

“Bills,” he confided. “An unusual number and a curious unanimity of poverty amongst the senders.”

The Princess indulged in a slight grimace.

“They’re almost as bad here as in the States,” she sighed. “They want pay for things before you have got used to having them.”

“It’s worse in Paris,” he reminded her.

“Have you any idea of the amount?” she enquired.

The Prince shook his head.

“You’re trying me a little high, my dear,” he said, in a tone of gentle reproof. “I have passed them on to Edward. He will probably send me in a résumé. The important question is—are the dollars still rolling in?”

She embraced one long and delicate leg with her clasped fingers, which would have been a very improper thing to do if any one else besides her husband had been in the room.

“I will send to Hollins,” she suggested. “If necessary, he can despatch a cable.”

“You are very considerate,” he murmured. “Are you by any chance lunching at home to-day?”

“I have just had my book up,” she told him. “We are both of us lunching at Alcester House and don’t you forget it. Afterwards I am having a lesson at squash for an hour, and at six o’clock we are going to various cocktail parties—most of them amusing.”

“I see before me,” he observed, rising, “every prospect of a well-spent day. Here is your maid.”

The woman approached with an envelope upon a salver, which she tendered to the Prince. He broke the seal and glanced it through.

“It is Edward’s summary of the various amounts involved in those documents we were speaking about. I am thankful to see it is not a large total—four thousand seven hundred pounds. He adds an unintelligible note to the effect that he may be able to get a little discount off—whatever that means—if the money is forthcoming at once.”

She stretched out her hand for the sheet of paper.

“I will pass it on to Mr. Hollins,” she promised. “He’ll arrange the matter. We leave here for lunch, remember, at one o’clock, Charles. Come into my little room downstairs and I will mix you a stinger first. Everything at Alcester House is so old-fashioned. They give you sherry instead of cocktails.”

He raised her fingers to his lips, gave her hand a little squeeze and released it.

“Dear Sara,” he whispered fervently, “I shall drink that stinger with you before we start, with great pleasure. Fortunately Heaven and a youth of upright living have given me an inside which can assimilate any ordinary form of alcohol, but for your own sake, Sara, let me tell you that the Alcester House sherry is better stuff than the finest cocktail the greatest artist ever mixed. Au revoir, my dear.”

His Highness Prince Charles of Damaria returned to his rooms to complete a satisfactory and highly effective toilet. Her Highness threw off the bedclothes and called for her bath.

Mr. Samuel G. Hollins, to judge by his appearance, might have been a bank president, an ambassador, or the chairman of the world’s most important stock exchange. He was, as a matter of fact, the private financial adviser to Her Highness the Princess of Damaria, born in Kansas City, and niece of the well-known multimillionaire, Hiram Clodd. No one knew what sum of money had been settled by her uncle on this fortunate young woman who had secured the affections of one of the few genuine semi-royal princes left in a shattered world; and as Hiram Clodd himself never came to Europe, for fear, it was rumoured, that he might be called upon to discharge the national debts of a few bankrupt countries, the matter remained something of a mystery. He still figured on the lists, however, as the second richest man in the world, so it was doubtful whether he had impoverished himself beyond the extent of a trifling fifty million dollars or so. Whatever the sum was, the appearance of Mr. Hollins should have been sufficient security for its sagacious dispensation. He had the clean-shaven, rather heavy face, strong features and the thoughtful expression of a man who dealt with large affairs. He was dressed always with meticulous care, and the very lack of variety in his habiliments was impressive.

He wore beautifully cut trousers of dark grey with a faint stripe and a coat of fine black serge, double-breasted and well designed to show off his powerful shoulders. He permitted himself a little exaggeration in the shape of a large collar and he wore always a purple tie in which reposed a single pearl. He was a man of regular habits and the twelve o'clock cocktail with his patroness was a sacrament which he never failed to enjoy.

"Hitting it up a bit, the lad, isn't he?" he observed an hour or so later, when he was comfortably installed in Her Highness' exceedingly luxurious private boudoir.

The faintest shadow of anxiety shone for a moment out of her beautiful eyes.

"Charles must spend," she remarked indulgently. "That's all right. He married me to spend and he's going to do it."

Mr. Hollins was a man of few words. He looked at the end of his cigarette for a moment, as though to be sure that it was burning, and then replaced it in his mouth.

"I was not well versed in the ways of princes before I came over to this country," he confided, "but there is one thing about them I may say that I have tumbled to—they are the cat's whiskers in the way of spenders."

"The more Charles wants," she reminded him, "the better for you."

"Quite so," he agreed. "What, by-the-by, is the present amount?"

"Four thousand seven hundred pounds. Better call it five thousand."

"It is a thought too much," Mr. Hollins sighed.

She looked at him with wide-open eyes. She had really the air of a fairy princess to whom money should fall from the skies upon request.

"What do you mean?" she demanded.

"Your account," he pointed out, "suffered a severe shock when we paid for that last aeroplane of the Prince's and the Hispano-Suiza car on the same day. I fear that it is still limping."

"After those figures you showed me last month!" she gasped.

"Even after those. There are also household expenses, you know. Very heavy expenses."

"Those things do not concern me," she objected scornfully. "I have done exactly what you asked me now for some months. I was told that if I did so, there was no limit to the results I might attain. Now you are hesitating about a paltry four thousand seven hundred. I shall cable—"

"Wait," Mr. Hollins begged. "I was perhaps a little abrupt. At four o'clock this afternoon, I will be here with five thousand pounds in notes. After that, I beg for a respite until after Tuesday week."

The clouds all passed from her face. She flashed a brilliant smile upon her man of affairs. With her own fingers she insisted upon lighting the match for

his valedictory cigar.

“You are really quite an old dear, Sam,” she murmured, “but you should not give me these shocks.”

“I pray to God,” he murmured to himself, as he drank the cocktail and took his ceremonious leave, “that I may never have to give you a worse one.”

There are certain departments whose destinies are presided over in Whitehall, the scheme of whose activities pertains partly to the Home Office, partly to the Foreign Office, partly to Scotland Yard, and more than a little to that whispered-about Secret Service, which has nowadays lost its glamour. Into the presence of Sir Reginald Middleton, Chief of one of these, Malcolm Gossett was, after a great deal of formality, ushered. He found himself confronted by a small nervous-looking man who was continually fidgeting with his watch chain and who had a disconcerting habit of flashing keen glances at visitors just when they were imagining themselves unobserved.

“Mr. Malcolm Gossett, I believe,” he said, indicating a chair. “An excellent recommendation about you from Scotland Yard—other reports too quite satisfactory. Before we say a word, please understand that this is strictly confidential business.”

“I have been given to understand that already,” Gossett assured him.

“There is nothing in the shape of reputation and very little in the way of material kudos to be gained even by success,” Sir Reginald continued frankly. “If you belonged to a Government department, you would be working, of course, for your salary. We have called you in to help us and if you require excessive remuneration, we should scarcely know how to secure it.”

Gossett smiled.

“I am not a covetous man,” he said, “nor a particularly poor one. If the work is interesting, I am satisfied.”

“On the face of it,” Sir Reginald went on, “the whole affair is commonplace enough. Scotland Yard could deal with it without difficulty, but there are outside circumstances which render their intervention inadvisable. It is a matter of a weekly, almost a daily theft of valuable jewels, from the most exclusive houses frequented by the most exclusive people in London.”

“That sounds serious,” Gossett murmured.

“It is serious,” Sir Reginald agreed. “Scotland Yard were first called in, of course, but I have had to use powerful influence to restrain their activities. There is just a chance that the truth might put us in a most embarrassing position and—well, you know the bluntness of our present Home Secretary. There would not be a thing doing except a flamboyant arrest and the police court, which would not suit us for many reasons. Therefore I am compelled to attempt to deal with this matter through unofficial channels, where the law

cannot be used like a battle-ax.”

“Jewel robberies, under certain conditions, are the easiest things in the world,” Gossett declared. “The disposal of the proceeds is where the trouble begins. Have you any ideas upon this point?”

“Not up to the present,” Sir Reginald admitted. “All I can tell you is that the thief himself must be an amateur, because the most valuable of the booty has been taken from rooms in which there are only a few people present and all of them guests. On the other hand, the disposal of it must be in the hands of professionals, because news has come to us from half a dozen different places in the world of some of the jewels broken up and practically impossible of identification.”

“Am I to understand that these robberies take place mostly at social functions?” Gossett enquired.

“All of them,” was the emphatic reply. “There is not a single case of what we should call burglary.”

“Can it be arranged that I am present amongst the guests next time anything of this sort is likely to happen?”

Sir Reginald glanced at his visitor and nodded with satisfaction.

“Fortunately you are the type,” he said. “You shall have your card of invitation in due course, but there are certain conditions. Even if you see a theft, there must not be one word. You will find out the name of the person and report it to us. Let the jewel go, however priceless it may be. We will deal with that later. All we ask of you is the evidence of your eyes and the name of the person.”

“I shall do my best,” Gossett promised.

“If you need any further information or instruction,” Sir Reginald concluded, “make an appointment here—C2H8—and you shall have it. The cards of invitation will reach you at your office.”

“I may be wrong,” Gossett said, as he rose to his feet, “but I am under the impression that you already have a suspect. May I know who it is?”

“You may not, Mr. Gossett. I would not dare to allow the name to pass my lips. Let me add one last word. A great deal, a very great deal, may depend upon your discretion in this matter. Good morning.”

A cheerful little conclave of sinners. Mr. Samuel G. Hollins, with the starchiness of Berkeley Square gone, was lounging in an exceedingly comfortable easy-chair; Fred Fuller, commonly supposed to be a free-lance journalist with headquarters in the Ritz Hotel bar at Paris, Mr. Edmund Spens, who had retired early in life from a very respectable firm of jewel merchants in Hatton Gardens to follow an even more profitable avocation, and Lord Felixstowe, world-known adventurer, who had triumphed over the governing fates of law and order by keeping out of prison until this well-nigh his fortieth

birthday. They were all in the conventional dinner garb of the man of fashion unaccompanied by his feminine world, and their gathering was, so far as one could perceive, an entirely friendly affair. Their conversation had proceeded smoothly without any sign of strain. All that was changed by the sound of the rattling lift outside, followed by flying footsteps.

“Who the hell’s that?” Samuel G. Hollins demanded in alarm.

He might well ask, for this was an isolated and strictly run group of flats, and it was three o’clock in the morning. Fuller indulged in his national gesture. His hand flashed like lightning to his hip pocket. The others made no movement. The hasty advent of a woman could mean no more than the portent of trouble to come.

It said much for the way in which the Princess Sara of Damarria had impressed her personality upon these men that they sprang at once to their feet upon her entrance. She opened and closed the door with the swift touch of one used to such escapades, and she stood facing them breathlessly, swinging her small black cap in her hand, her lace cloak floating like a wave of jet-black foam around her.

“In God’s name!” Mr. Spens muttered.

“There is trouble, Your Highness?” Mr. Samuel G. Hollins demanded.

She threw herself into a chair.

“There was always bound to be trouble some day or other,” she said coolly. “Bad luck that it should come to-night, though.”

She listened for a moment, dived with her hand into some mysterious place and threw a little shower of glittering gems upon the table.

“There it is,” she exclaimed. “The Rosenberg necklace. They said that she would have given it willingly to any one who could have procured her the invitation for to-night. I guess that won’t stop her making the usual fuss, though.”

The sleekly brushed heads of the four men were almost touching round the table. It was Spens through whose fingers the stones trickled smoothly. He handled them like the great connoisseur he was. He could have told you the value of every one as they slipped past him.

“It’s the real thing,” he said hoarsely. “Rosenberg gave a hundred and twenty thousand pounds for them and Rosenberg buys cheap.”

It was Hollins who broke away first from those moments of enchantment. He turned to where Sara still lay stretched in the easy-chair.

“Is there trouble?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I guess I’ve grown careless, with all this easy stuff floating around,” she confessed. “I ought to have waited. I just didn’t. That’s all there is about it. I whisked the stones off her fat old carcase in less than a second and she never

left off talking. She'll never be able to tell the moment when she parted company with them. But there was a stranger there. He knows. I caught his eye directly afterwards."

The question flashed across the room at her—from Hollins this time.

"Who was he?"

"I didn't stop to ask," she answered. "I spilt a glass of wine over my gown and faked a bet with Sybil Casserley who should get home and change completely into another costume the quicker. I meant to get rid of the stones that way. I brought them to you instead. Don't worry about me. I've five minutes to spare and I can still win my bet."

There was consternation in the room. "Lily the Lifter" she had been called in New York, free in the pigeonhouse of the bejewelled aristocracy of London and Paris, in the person of a veritable but semi-royal princess, to have played out her game in less than three months! It should have lasted for a lifetime. It should have made rich men of them all. Spens groaned. Fred Fuller blasphemed under his breath. Lord Felixstowe had the air of one about to burst into tears. Hollins alone preserved his composure.

"You don't think you were trailed down here, do you?" he asked.

"Am I that sort of mutt?" she asked scornfully. "I had planned the game for a get-away, although I never thought it would be wanted as badly as this. I changed taxis three times."

"Is it the same party you're going back to?" Hollins asked.

"It's the same party and the same house," she confided. "The only thing is that there will be a lot more of us."

"That rather makes one wonder," Mr. Hollins said mildly, "why you didn't postpone that prank of yours until the crowd were there."

"You always were rather an obvious sort of idiot," the Princess observed scornfully. "That's the time every one will be watching. There's always a Scotland Yard man down for a real crush. Until twelve o'clock, it should have been perfectly safe."

"Have you any line upon the man who saw you, I wonder," Hollins enquired.

"I can only tell you," the Princess replied, "that his name is Malcolm Gossett and he's supposed to have something to do with the Foreign Office."

Mr. Spens groaned.

"I don't like the sound of it," he admitted.

The Princess had recovered her breath.

"Now, boys," she challenged them, "it's up to you. I guess my little bluff's played out, but I shall fight to the last ditch. If you treat me right over this necklace—why, where is that necklace, by the by?"

They all laughed in their own fashion. Fred Fuller's grin was replete with

silent enjoyment. There was certainly no sign of the necklace upon the table.

"We're not saps, you know, Lily," Fred Fuller observed. "I don't suppose we would get flustered if the Big Seven, as they call 'em, strolled in upon us. They could search till daylight. They'd never find that necklace."

"You certainly are some boys," Sara admitted admiringly. "You're worth working for. I'm sorry I'm through."

"Don't say that, Princess," Hollins begged, with a sudden return to his more formal manner. "I never had a job I fancied so much as this chamberlain business—sort of financial secretary to Your Serene Highness! There'll be some more chestnuts to be pulled out of the fire."

"How do you know I'm not in trouble already?" the Princess asked. "That man was not there watching for nothing."

Mr. Hollins shook his head confidently. He was a man of experience.

"If they didn't dare tackle you with the stuff aboard," he said, "you're all right. I won't say that it mightn't limit future operations, but short of that, I'll say you're still on velvet. Over on the other side, the one thing we love is scandal. Right here, they'll play monkey tricks with their last sou to avoid it. You may take my word for it that Your Serene Highness, Princess Sara of Damaria, isn't going to be threatened with the police courts yet awhile."

She rose to her feet. Hollins followed suit but she waved him back.

"I go as I came, alone," she insisted. "I'll be back now in time to win my bet. Don't any of you move. I have a taxi waiting outside the vet's in the next block. I left a dog there a quarter of an hour ago. What about that for a bright alibi?"

She flitted away. Mr. Spens watched her with admiring eyes.

"Some girl, that," he murmured.

"Slick as they make 'em," Fred Fuller echoed.

"The cops have been on half time over there since 'Lily the Lifter' quit work," Mr. Hollins wound up.

His Serene Highness, Charles, Prince of Damaria, met his wife in the great hall of Wiltshire House. Even his magnificent imperturbability was scarcely proof against the vision of dazzling perfection which made its way joyously through the crowd towards him.

"My dear," he declared, "you are a miracle. It seems only a few minutes since you and Sybil left us. I beg that you will present my compliments to the artist who designed your present creation."

"Is that all?" she laughed.

"And this expression of my utter and complete devotion," he added, an unaccustomed tenderness in his tone. "I will not only say that I have never seen you look more beautiful, but I have never seen any one else in the world

who approached you.”

She dropped him a little mock curtsy.

“If my lord is pleased,” she murmured. “And tell me, have I won my bet?”

“No signs of Sybil yet,” he assured her. “As privileged guests, we do not need to present ourselves again. We might find our way into the ballrooms by the side entrance after the crowd have arrived.”

“That’s fine for me,” she declared. “I shall be able to keep my gown from being crushed until after my dance with Royalty.”

They gained a comparatively secluded corner, then the Prince, whose gorgeous uniform forbade any idea of comfort, let himself down with much care into a low chair by the side of his wife.

“There are rumours,” he confided, “of another robbery.”

“How exciting!” she exclaimed.

“I am not myself well versed in the value of gems,” he continued, “but it occurs to me that your pearls, for their size, are a little insecure on that thin platinum chain.”

She fingered them softly.

“One has to take one’s risks,” she murmured. “I expect if I lost them, I could get them replaced.”

The Prince nodded amiably. It was something, he reflected, to be the husband of a woman whose uncle was the second richest man in the world. He had spoken the truth when he declared that he knew little about the value of jewellery, and it would certainly have amazed him, as it would have done many others, to know that the value of those very impressive pearls was something less than the cost of the uniform he was wearing! The Princess leaned towards him.

“Charles,” she confided, “there is a young man over there who crossed on the steamer with me. He was something to do with the British Foreign Office. His name, I think, was Gossett. He was very attentive, and I should like to show that I have not forgotten his kindness.”

The Prince, with a mild grumble, rose to his feet.

“I will fetch him,” he assented. “Afterwards I will give myself the opportunity of smoking a cigarette in the lounge. My nether apparel has scarcely the elasticity which goes with comfort.”

The commission was executed and Gossett was conducted with due ceremony to the Princess.

“Her Highness,” the Prince explained, “wishes to remind you, Mr. Gossett, that she has not forgotten your courtesies to her on a recent crossing of the Atlantic. I shall spare you five minutes. Afterwards my wife will be expected to take up her duties. Her hostess’ circle is growing, I see.”

They both waited until His Serene Highness was out of earshot. Then she

motioned him to take his vacant chair.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“You have my name correctly,” he answered. “Malcolm Gossett. As for the rest, I have no official position. I am here representing an almost unknown department.”

“And you think that you have solved the mystery of these extraordinary jewel thefts?”

“I certainly saw you relieve Mrs. Rosenberg of her diamonds,” he replied.

“You must be a professional,” she said. “No one else could have noticed it. I have never been quicker in my life.”

“You are correct in so far as that I am an ex-professional,” Gossett admitted. “I was at Scotland Yard for some years.”

She looked at him critically.

“We don’t get your type in the States,” she remarked. “Just as well for us we don’t, perhaps. Aren’t you working a little overtime this evening, though? You can scarcely expect that after having got away with a hundred-thousand-pound necklace I am after another scoop.”

“You are perhaps right,” he answered. “I consider my task for the evening finished. I am really staying on for reasons of purely psychological interest.”

“Could you put that into words which a simple American girl would understand?” she asked.

He smiled.

“I am always interested,” he explained, “in considering the motive for everything which happens in life. I ask myself why a beautiful young woman like yourself, married to a semi-royal Prince, and yourself the niece of one of the richest men in the world, should run these awful risks. You can’t need the money. You must have had training. Are you an impostor, by any chance?”

“I wouldn’t call it that,” she reflected. “I am Hiram Clodd’s niece, all right, and he’s the second richest man in the world, but I ran into a spot of difficulty when I married Charles. You seem quite a human person, Mr. Gossett.”

“Thanks to having married a wife almost as nice and as beautiful as you, I think I am.”

“That sounds like the right stuff,” she declared, smiling. “I’ll make a bargain with you. Tell me your plans for to-night after this little discovery you have made, and I’ll explain why I seem to be acting like a cuckoo.”

Gossett reflected for a moment. In imagination, he had already strayed so far from his standards of moral rectitude that he was actually beginning to wonder whether it would be possible to believe himself for those few seconds the victim of a temporary lapse of sanity.

“I think I’ll go so far as to say that’s a bargain,” he assented. “I imagine that it has already dawned upon the authorities that these thefts have been

committed by some one—not outside the law; that would be impossible—but by some one whom it would be embarrassing and very distressing to accuse publicly. Hence my presence to-night, because I am not bound by any official restrictions. My report is to be made to some one not concerned with the administration of justice.”

“I understand,” she acknowledged. “Now I’ll tell you about my little fix. Uncle Hiram Clodd is just the world’s last word in downright outrageous meanness. He was my only relative and I don’t think he has another. He has simply looked upon me as a new pawn in the game of saving money. He sent me to Paris to school, but he took care that I never had a cent of pocket money. When I came back with barely enough dollars to tip the stewards on the boat, and sharing a cabin with another girl, I lived in one of his outrageous palaces and he gave me a dress allowance of about half the salary of a parlourmaid. One of the servants in the household introduced me to a man named Hollins, a charming old dear but a crook. I became a crook. I earned enough to dress properly and even to take flying excursions to Europe. Upon one of these I met Prince Charles. I had never been in love before or even thought of a man, and I got it bad. So did he—honestly, I think he got it almost as bad as I did. We were married at the British Embassy and I sent Uncle Hiram a cable. I ought to have told you beforehand that he loathes foreigners of every sort. I think he must have given a whoop of delight when he got the news. He wrote me a dignified and severe letter, sent me twenty thousand dollars and told me that that was all I was ever to hope for from him.”

“Brute,” Gossett murmured.

“Well, then I found out that Charles hadn’t got any money either,” she went on. “We spent the twenty thousand dollars on our honeymoon. Then we came to England and I was just wondering whether I should have to own up, when along came Mr. Hollins. He showed me how easy it would be to carry on the old game and, incidentally, to support my Charles in the style to which he had been accustomed. I agreed right away. Mr. Hollins became my private secretary and chamberlain, and Charles hasn’t the faintest idea at this moment but that the money rolls in from America.”

“I suppose you realised,” Gossett said gravely, “that it was bound to come to an end some day.”

She sighed. For the first time there was a shadow of gravity in her face, and that lasted only for a moment.

“I suppose I did,” she admitted, rising to her feet. “Au revoir, Mr. Gossett. My husband is coming to fetch me and I am about to dance with a very famous personage. You are a very nice man, but I wish you hadn’t quite such highly trained eyesight.”

“I am beginning to wish that myself,” he confessed.

It was six o'clock in the morning after crowded hours of rapturous enjoyment when Sara, Princess of Damaria, sank into her luxurious bed. The solitude which she had dreaded had come at last. Her eyes were hot and still tired when, after a few hours of nightmares, she was conscious of her maid standing by her bedside.

"Your Highness," the latter announced, in a tone of deep apology, "a gentleman has called with this note for you. I told him that it was impossible to think of seeing you until after midday, but he refused to leave. He said that the matter was of the gravest importance. If I have done wrong, I am sorry, but I have brought Your Highness the note."

Sara sat wearily up in bed. What did anything matter, after all, now that she was awake and back again in this world—soon to come crashing about her? There was a dull pain over her heart. She had carried herself bravely last night. It had all seemed so much easier with the music in the background, honeyed voices whispering in her ear, Charles as handsome as a god, smiling proudly by her side.

"What time is it, Céleste?" she asked, as she broke the seal of the envelope.

"Ten o'clock, Your Highness."

She glanced through the few lines. They were written on a sheet of her own notepaper.

I beg of you, Princess, however tired you may be, to see me for a few minutes as soon as possible and privately.

Malcolm Gossett.

She tore the note into small pieces. Perhaps because she was so very young and was wearing still the rose-coloured spectacles of her age, she fancied that somewhere amongst those few plain words there lurked a gleam of hope.

"Céleste," she directed, "show the gentleman into my boudoir. His Highness left word that he was not to be disturbed until one o'clock. See that no one forgets that. Come back at once. I want a quick bath and a dressing gown."

"Very good, Your Highness."

In twenty minutes' time Gossett, waiting in the little Paradise of her boudoir, was surprised at the swift and silent entrance of the girl whom he had come to see. There was a flame of anxious questioning in her eyes which brought speech instantly to his lips.

"Princess," he confided, "at eleven o'clock I have to see the head of the department who engaged me for that lamentable duty of last night. I have to tell him that I know who is responsible for these recent troubles."

“Well?” she asked feverishly.

“In connection with them,” he went on, “I have been in telephonic communication with New York. There were questions I had to ask which only concern you indirectly. In connection with them, however, I heard a strange piece of news. I heard that Hiram Clodd, your uncle, died last night.”

“My God!” she murmured. “Uncle Hiram!”

“Listen,” he went on. “Partly, I suppose, because the financial effect of his death is of great import to the money markets of the world, the report goes out of its way to state that he died intestate.”

“How does that concern me?” she asked breathlessly.

“It means, if it is true,” he told her, “that you are his sole heiress . . . Your Highness—Princess—please have courage. It is so important.”

She had sunk into a chair and the colour had drained away from her cheeks. He looked at her with all a man’s helplessness.

“I want, if I can, to help you—to save you—to keep you from telling your husband just yet. Remember, this is good news. Keep on telling yourself that it is good news. Hold on to your consciousness.”

He rang the bell, watching her struggle anxiously.

“Your mistress has had rather a shock,” he told the maid who answered it. “Bring some hot coffee at once. Don’t disturb any one.”

The hot coffee appeared as though by magic, and very slowly she recovered herself.

“All this,” she murmured, “one day too late.”

“Not at all,” he declared cheerily. “Don’t you believe it. Do as I am about to ask you to do, and I shall go straight from here to my appointment to confess myself a failure.”

“You aren’t going to tell?” she faltered.

“My dear,” he expostulated kindly, “do I look the sort of man who would tell, under the circumstances? You’re so damnably like my wife too,” he added, smiling.

She drank more of the coffee.

“Go on, please,” she begged.

“You must get back the Rosenberg necklace,” he insisted. “You can do that by promising those friends of yours its value. Then you must give me a list of the things you have taken, and we must collect what we can of them or establish a fund to pay for them. That’s all. As for your late friends, you needn’t be afraid of blackmail. I’ll attend to that for you.”

“Do you believe it is possible?” she gasped.

“If my news is true,” he said, “and I am convinced that it is, it is possible and shall be done.”

There was a knock at the door. Céleste again made timid and apologetic

entrance.

“Your Highness,” she explained, “there is a cable marked ‘Urgent.’ ”

The Princess almost snatched it from the tray. She passed it to Gossett.

“Read it for me,” she begged.

He waved the maid from the room, tore open the flap of the envelope and read:

Am despatching this from my apartment, 181 Park Avenue. Regret to announce death of your uncle Hiram Clodd from heart failure last night. As his lawyer, I am able to inform you that he died intestate and that you are sole legatee. You can draw upon me for anything up to twenty millions. Reply in any way I can serve you. Sending partner England to-morrow’s boat.

Howard Davis, Attorney.

The next few moments were the most compromising of all Malcolm Gossett’s married life.

“I’m sorry,” Sara gasped, as she wiped her eyes, “but I had to kiss some one and you said I was like your wife.”

About a month later came the great surprise. Malcolm Gossett had just glanced at a certain column of the *Times* and laid the paper down again. For some reason or other, he felt absurdly self-conscious. Opposite to him Cynthia, looking more attractive than usual, in a rose-coloured negligée, was yawning over the *Daily Mail*.

“Any news?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Nothing but a stupid list of people who’ve got titles for heaven knows what,” she replied. “I can’t—”

That was as far as Cynthia got with coherent speech for some time to come. She suddenly gripped the paper till half of it tore in her hands. There it was before her, in black and white, under the list of knightships—

Malcolm Gossett, for political services rendered.

“Malcolm,” she gasped, as she staggered to her feet.

“Sir Malcolm, if you please,” he corrected her, as she threw herself into his arms. “And don’t ruffle my hair too much, Lady Gossett.”

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *The Ex-Detective* by E. Phillips (Edward Phillips) Oppenheim]