

THE PRINCE OF STORY-TELLERS
**E·PHILLIPS
OPPENHEIM**



ADVICE·LIMITED

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ADVICE LIMITED

A SERIES OF STORIES

EDWARD PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM

First Published 1935

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THIRTY-NINE WOODEN BOXES

The long boat-train which had only a few minutes before started from Dover Pier Station on its way to Victoria came to an unexpected halt alongside the almost deserted platform of the Town Station. Habitual travellers, who knew the irregularity of such a proceeding, let down the windows and leaned out from their places. There was little to be seen, however, and nothing to be learnt from the various attendants. About a dozen station officials and a few other men who looked like officials in mufti were forming a sort of a ring around one of the vans in the rear of the train from which a number of heavy, iron-clamped cases were being unloaded. The proceedings were entirely unusual. Curious questions and comments flashed backwards and forwards amongst the passengers. The train attendants, however, knew nothing of what was transpiring.

John Woolston, for fifteen years superintendent of Pullman cars upon the boat-trains, badgered from all directions by questions as to what was going on, confided to his underling that he had no intention of answering another enquiry of any sort. He changed his mind, however, when the most beautiful woman from amongst his regular patrons leaned out of the coupé which, according to custom, he had reserved specially for her use.

“What is this delay, Woolston?” she asked pathetically. “And what are those funny-looking boxes there thrown out on to the platform?”

The man stepped inside the coupé and removed his cap. Except for one mad English duke, who sometimes had lapses of memory and therefore was not altogether to be relied upon, this was the most profitable of all his regular passengers.

“To tell your ladyship the truth,” he confided, “I’ll guarantee there’s not one of us on the train—unless maybe the guard—who knows what is going on. I can tell you what the boxes are, though. They’re made specially down in Tooley Street and they’re used for transporting gold.”

The lady pushed back the veil she was wearing and looked at him through wide-opened eyes.

“But my good man,” she protested, speaking very musically but with a slight foreign accent, “who on earth in their senses would unload bar gold on the platform of Dover Town Station?”

The man’s wrinkled face betrayed his own bewilderment.

“All I can say, your ladyship,” he pointed out, “is that they’re doing it. The

cases came off the boat, the French guard left us and the Bank of England men took over the job. They were placed in the usual van, and here we are, barely started on the journey, and half an hour late already, when on go the brakes and out come them boxes. If I hear anything later, your ladyship, I will let you know.”

“Do,” she begged. “It seems such an odd thing to happen.”

“Your ladyship’s car will be at Victoria as usual?” he asked.

She nodded.

“And my maid will see the things through the Customs,” she said. “I shall hurry away. You might see that I have an intelligent porter. I shall only take my dressing-case with me.”

The man, resuming his cap, passed on his way. Clara, Baroness Linz, shook out from the long holder the remains of the cigarette which she had been smoking and looked curiously out of the window. Her eyes were fixed upon the silent group of men standing almost in a circle around the pile of boxes. Every few seconds a porter with one on his shoulder hurried off, escorted as far as the subway by a custodian who was evidently some sort of an official. She yawned and rang the bell.

“Some tea,” she ordered of the attendant.

Long before it was brought, the train, with its snakelike bend, had glided away from the station. The baroness rose to her feet and, leaning over one of the inlaid panels of the car, studied with some interest a map of the south-eastern corner of Kent.

Through the grim, falling darkness the boat-train, flaring with lights, spitting flame and vomiting smoke from the funnels of both its engines, tore through the countryside on its rush to London. Almost parallel with it but continually veering eastwards a motor van, built after the style of the modern armoured car, travelling also at great speed, was cleaving the same blackness of the winter night increased by the grey mists rolling inland from the river. The latter came at last to a stretch where the shroud of vapour was less dense and the chauffeur gave vent to a grunt of relief. With his left hand firmly upon the wheel of the formidable vehicle he was driving he fumbled in his right-hand pocket for pipe and tobacco. Larson, the trusted official of the Bank of England, who was seated by his side with a revolver bulging in his overcoat pocket, frowned disapprovingly.

“This is the rottenest bit of road we’ve got to tackle, Jim,” he reminded his companion. “Not a house for four miles and that filthy canal within a few yards all the way. I’d wait to smoke till we get this beastly job over. I never did care for it and I’m liking it less every moment.”

The driver, holding his pipe between two fingers, opened his pouch

dexterously with his thumb and another finger.

“All very well for you, Mr. Larson, sir,” he mumbled. “You don’t care about tobacco. I do. Gawd!”

The sandy-haired little man gave a start which would have been comical but for the fact that it was the start of death. The pipe fell on to the dashboard and out into the road. He himself lay crumpled over the wheel. His companion, though his movements seemed swift enough, never reached the revolver towards which his fingers were groping. The observation window behind had been broken with a crash and he felt the cold, menacing pressure of metal into his side, almost at the same time as two deafening reports reached him from the interior of the vehicle.

“Take hold of that wheel and stop the car,” a harsh voice ordered. “Put your foot on the clutch. Lean over for the footbrake. Keep the car on the road, I tell you, or you’ll get what he got.”

Larson had plenty of courage of the ordinary sort, but there was another gun pressing into the small of his back by this time, and it was obvious that he was in a hopeless position. He leaned over the limp body of the driver and brought the car almost to a standstill, a great fear all the time chilling his blood and setting his hand shaking. This was no ordinary hold-up.

“You fellows,” he faltered. “You’ve got us cold. What’s it—mean?”

He fell over—dead—with a roar like the roar of a cannon in his ears and the smell of gunpowder in his nostrils. A man who had apparently been lurking in the shadows of the hedge boarded the car, took the wheel and drew in to the side of the road. The door of the van slammed. From invisible places three or four other figures stole into sight.

“Not a light for over a mile either way,” one of them declared.

“Get at these two,” was the savage order from the man who still stood with his revolver in his hand. “Strip them both and fling them into the canal. We want their clothes—Buddy and I. The rest of you can tramp it to where the car is waiting. We meet at the Orchard Inn by Pender’s Creek. Get me?”

There was a muttered assent. The speaker, who appeared to be in charge of these amiable proceedings, was all the time throwing off his coat and waistcoat. In a darkness which was almost complete, with rapid breathing and clumsy fingers, the little group of men went on with their grisly task. Ten minutes had barely passed before the car was once more on its way. Even the stains of blood, which were scanty, were wiped from the seat. The man who had boarded the car drove with one hand and held the flask, which he had found in the leather pocket of the door, to his lips.

“Not too much of that,” a voice from behind snarled. “You can swim in it when we’re through with this job.”

An arm stretched through the aperture leading to the back of the car. The

flask went spinning over the hedge into the darkness and fell in the muddy waters of the canal. After that, except for the roar of the engine as it picked up speed, there was silence.

Except that the company was more brilliant than usual the Porchester House charity dinner, for which Clara Linz had hurried home, differed very little from most functions of its sort. The young baroness had the air, however, of enjoying herself extremely. She had chosen to wear a gown of dark violet colour which seemed to bring out marvellous lights from her uncannily beautiful eyes, and she was easily the most admired woman in the room. The Duchess of Porchester, who was senior hostess, looked more than once across the floor with a sigh of regret.

"I cannot imagine," she complained, "why Clara should have chosen a place at Felix Blondel's table. Sir Felix is all very well in his way, of course, but he always seems to me so hopelessly mute."

"A man cannot very well be a successful banker and remain a human being," her neighbour observed.

"Clara always has a purpose in everything she does," the man on her other side remarked. "Felix Blondel may have some secret attraction that none of us others have ever been able to discover. In any case bankers are rather the fashion this season. Everyone loves to talk about money—especially those of us who haven't any."

"Blondel is not exactly a banker, is he?" another of the guests pointed out. "He buys and sells specie. Deals in the real stuff, you know, not in notes and oblong strips of paper. Sits in his office with a million pounds' worth of gold ingots in the cellar underneath him."

"Anyhow," the duchess observed, "Clara seems to have succeeded in making him talk. Perhaps he will bring out his cheque-book before the evening's over. . . ."

Clara had certainly succeeded in making Felix Blondel talk. He was a small pink-and-white man, the quintessence of neatness in his attire, speech and general deportment. To-night, however, he seemed to be letting himself go. With the air of a man upon whom the gods have showered their gifts he leaned towards his neighbour with unmistakable empressement.

"I suppose you are right, baroness," he admitted. "There is a great deal of romance attached to a business such as ours. We are merchants, it is true, but we are operating behind the barterer in mere commodities. We are dealing in the sinews of the world—with what makes commerce possible, in fact."

"You express so well what I was trying to say myself," Clara murmured. "By the by," she added, after a moment's pause, "is it true that there has been a great robbery of gold this afternoon? I heard the boys calling out but I never

read the evening paper.”

Blondel’s expression changed. There was a more serious light in his eyes although his tone was casual enough.

“There is a report of something of the sort,” he acknowledged thoughtfully. “Personally I am inclined to think that the whole thing must be greatly exaggerated. There has not been a successful theft of gold in transit during my recollection.”

A man from opposite leaned across the table.

“I believe there has been a robbery,” he intervened, “and quite a serious one. A shipment from France to England which seems to have been stolen from under the very noses of the custodians. You are not interested, I hope, Blondel?”

The banker shook his head in a superior fashion.

“We are not direct buyers of gold at present,” he confided. “We would rather sell if there was anything doing. And I would fill your house with silver, Lord Ragley, if you would give me my price! No. The gold was consigned to the Bank of England.”

“Do tell us some more about it,” Clara begged. “I thought gold bars were such heavy, clumsy things.”

She shut up her vanity-case with a click and smiled invitingly at her neighbour. The little pink-and-white man shivered with delight.

“I wish I knew more, baroness,” he regretted. “It seems the gold was landed and handed over to messengers from the Bank of England. That lets the senders out, of course. The boxes were packed in the special van of the boat-train and then, to everyone’s surprise, the train stopped at Dover Town Station and the boxes were all unloaded. What became of them from that moment no one can even guess. Presumably they were handed over to someone else, but to whom and in what manner not a soul seems to know.”

“I was on the train,” Clara sighed. “I wish I had known about it. I am so good at spotting thieves and there were a strange-looking lot of men on the platform.”

“Bank of England guards, I suppose, and probably the men who took over,” Blondel remarked.

“I expect you know all about such things, Sir Felix. Tell me, why do you think the boxes were taken out of the train at Dover Town Station?”

Sir Felix shook his head.

“Baroness,” he assured her, “there is a limit to the scraps of information which have come my way. I cannot imagine any possible reason why the gold should have been changed. To-morrow I expect the whole story will be told. The evening papers are not much to go by.”

Lord Ragley, who was the duchess’s second son, rose from the table as the

newly arrived orchestra started its dance music. He bowed across to Clara.

“Will you honour me, baroness?” he begged.

She assented with a smile, but quitted her seat with reluctance.

For several days after her journey from Dover and the dinner-party at Porchester House, Clara Linz occupied herself in making various excursions in the neighbourhood of London of an apparently indeterminate nature. Afterwards she established herself in the small salon of her queerly situated London house and, refusing all invitations, sat down to wait. Her window commanded a view of Adelphi Terrace and the river. The house itself, though dingy, was neat, with a green front door and the smallest brass plate in London upon which was inscribed:

“ADVICE LIMITED”

It was here that Clara, Baroness Linz, received her callers and occupied herself with the commissions with which she was frequently entrusted. It was here that she received, in due course, the visitor whose arrival she had been expecting for the last two days. He was shown in by the dark, melancholy-looking butler whom she had brought with her from abroad.

“Colonel Grainger, madam,” he announced.

Clara held out her hand and waved her visitor to a seat. Taken as a whole he was fairly true to type. His appearance was a trifle too military for the profession into which he had recently drifted, but he had the keen blue eyes and firm lips of a man of insight and determination. He was perhaps a little ruffled this morning, for although Scotland Yard had had earlier relations with the mysterious firm whom he had come to visit they had not been of his choosing.

“I have come to consult you, baroness,” he began with soldierlike directness, “at the urgent request of the directorate of the Bank of England concerning the theft of those gold bars you may have read about. I have acted as liaison officer before on several occasions between the bank and Scotland Yard.”

“I shall be very happy to assist you in every possible way,” Clara replied. “Will you tell me how far your investigations have gone?”

“I will give you a brief résumé of the case,” was the somewhat grudging reply. “You can ask any questions you like. We received due notice from the Bank of England that the gold was coming over on the usual boat, the *Maid of Kent*, and was to be transferred to the boat-train in the customary fashion. We sent down an adequate number of men to cover the landing and stow the boxes in the special van. The stowing away was on the point of being completed when the Bank of England representative, who I understand was a man above

suspicion, received a message written on Bank of England notepaper, brought by an official messenger and written partly in the code used when any matter of the transport of gold is concerned.”

“You kept the order, of course?”

“We have never seen it,” was the slightly contemptuous reply. “This poor fellow—Larson his name was—read it, showed it to the station-master at Dover and never for a moment doubted its genuineness. He was informed that the gold had been resold to a firm in Amsterdam, and his instructions were to have the boxes unloaded at Dover Town Station and repacked in a Scotland Yard armoured car, which was duly waiting in the station yard, and which it transpired later had been obtained from the Yard with its chauffeur on a forged order signed by a person in authority. The chauffeur was one of our regular and most reliable servants. With him, of course, was Larson, two armed policemen in plain clothes and two men who were supposed to have been sent from the country to which the gold was to be reshipped.”

“Larson started off with the gold?” Clara enquired.

“It was Larson’s duty not to leave the boxes, after he had signed for them, until they were in the vaults of the bank to which they were consigned or handed over to some recognised authority.”

“That means six men in the car?”

“Precisely,” Colonel Grainger agreed.

“And what were Larson’s new instructions respecting the delivery of the gold?”

“He was to proceed in the car with his companions direct to a port on the river where a vessel was waiting to transport the boxes across the North Sea. You probably do not know Kent intimately but the bodies of Larson and the chauffeur, stripped of a portion of their outside clothing, were found in a canal along one of the loneliest stretches of road in the county. Both had been shot and had been dead for many hours. The armoured car was found in a deserted lane not many miles farther on. The bodies of the two policemen were only discovered yesterday.”

“And the gold?”

“The gold had disappeared.”

Clara had the air of one pleasantly but not supremely interested.

“Your story,” she remarked, “is even stranger than the newspaper versions.”

“The truth,” her visitor retorted somewhat tritely, “is usually stranger than fiction. . . . I am entirely at your disposal in case there are any further questions you would like to ask.”

“I should like to know the precise spot where the police car was discovered,” she said.

The colonel drew a road map from his pocket and handed it across.

"I have prepared this for you," he confided. "You will find the place marked here where the bodies of Larson and the chauffeur were found, farther on the lane where the car was discovered abandoned and a little to the right is the lime quarry where the bodies of the two policemen were found. Anything else?"

"I should like to know the name of the agent in London who purchased the gold from the bank for delivery in Amsterdam?"

The colonel stroked his stubbly moustache.

"These are delicate matters," he said, "but I suppose it is information to which you have a right. The agents for the firm are Max Shuster, Raymond and Blondel, metal brokers."

"Are they in any way responsible for the loss of the gold?" Clara enquired.

"As it happens they are not," Colonel Grainger replied. "The robbery of the gold took place during transit and the representative of the Bank of England having signed at Dover, the bank themselves are responsible until delivery is effected."

"Quite an interesting case," Clara reflected, lighting a cigarette and offering one to her companion.

"I am glad you consider it as such," was the somewhat stiff rejoinder. "I hope that you will be able to help us elucidate it."

"We have never yet had a downright failure," she remarked, leaning farther back in her chair, "and I can see several avenues in connection with the present case along which profitable enquiries might be made."

"You seriously think that you will be able to help us recover the gold?" her client asked bluntly.

"I feel sure of it," was the confident reply.

Colonel Grainger looked about him in amazement. The little salon was very comfortable, very homely and essentially a woman's apartment.

"But where is your establishment?" he asked. "Your bureaux—your staff?"

"Not where the public can get at them," she assured him, smiling. "Nevertheless, let me warn you that we are not a cheap firm to do business with. Our fee for a week's investigations will be a thousand guineas and if we return you the gold or give you information as to where it is we shall require a fee of twenty thousand. As the value of the gold is well over a million you will not, I hope, think this excessive."

"The bank will pay the sum you suggest, of course, provided you are successful," Colonel Grainger assured her. "I must confess, however, that personally I should feel a little more confidence in the success of your activities if you could give me some idea of the lines upon which you propose to proceed and what measure of professional help you could rely on."

Clara shook her head.

“My dear colonel,” she told him, “the secret of our success, and we have met with a certain amount of success in various directions, has been the secrecy of our operations. If the Prime Minister himself were to consult us about a stolen treaty or a murdered ambassador he would learn no more of our methods than we have confided to you.”

The door was noiselessly opened and the saturnine-looking butler remained respectfully upon the threshold. Colonel Grainger’s sense of humour prevailed. He bowed over the fingers of this strange young lady and took his leave.

Clara, contrary to her custom, was lunching alone a few days later with the little pink-and-white man. They were seated at a retired table in a corner of the Ritz Grill, and a very beautiful bunch of orchids reposed by her plate.

“I suppose you know,” she said to her companion, “that you are spoiling me shamefully. You are quite one of the most generous of my admirers in London.”

He was so much in earnest that his words were almost pathetic.

“I wish,” he declared, “that you liked London well enough to——”

“To what?”

“To live here altogether.”

“But, my dear man,” she protested, “you yourself must care for other places too. You have travelled, you are not hopelessly British. In fact, you are not British at all, are you?”

“By naturalisation—yes.”

“At any rate you have not the prejudices. I wander through Florence, where I have a little flat which I call home. It is a city of beauty. All the time there are things which pull at my heartstrings to be seen and loved. All the time there are things which keep your head in the air and you forget to look down. And I walk, or I drive, or I fly over London and what on earth do I see? A few huge buildings wrapped in mist—cold grey mist, unsympathetic, colourless, depressing—nothing beautiful. And I say to myself: ‘It is time I left this place.’ The rivers of the world! Think of some of the beautiful ones, Sir Felix! Look at the Thames. Yesterday afternoon, to please a friend, I flew up the Thames. I ask you to remember it for the last five miles, say, before you come to London Bridge. Those hideous factories belching out smoke and smells. Why, there were some works on what seemed to be a flat mud island with curls of black smoke crawling up to the sky and disfiguring the landscape as far as you could see.”

“Whereabouts was that?” he enquired curiously.

“How should I know?” she answered. “Or stop! I think they actually call it Mud Pie Island. There seemed no one at work in the factory and yet we felt the

heat from the furnaces hundreds of feet up. Oh, it is all so ugly.”

The little pink-and-white man was suddenly serious. His eyes seemed to be boring into his companion's. He had the air of one assailed by disturbing thoughts.

“Why do you mention that place particularly?” he asked with an unaccustomed harshness in his tone.

She shrugged her shoulders. Her attention had wandered to the next dish which she was discussing with the maître d'hôtel. She turned back to her host a few moments later.

“Forgive me,” she begged. “This sole colbert looked so marvellous. You are asking why I mentioned that place particularly. I think it was because of the hugeness of the factory chimney, the emptiness of the whole place, the stark ugliness of it and also because my pilot told me that it must have been somewhere within about a mile of there that the gang who stole the gold bars from the Bank of England reached the river.”

Sir Felix frowned.

“How could he or anyone else know that they really did reach the river?” he queried dolefully. “Scotland Yard cannot tell me. No one can tell me. I was keeping the secret to myself, but I was the agent for the sale of that gold and I have had to see a good commission disappear.”

“It may be recovered.”

“Little chance.”

“Tell me, what could the thieves do with it?” she asked. “Supposing the gang who murdered the custodians and got away with it reached the river. Supposing then they had had motor boats to meet them—what could they do with the gold? There could be no market for it with the government stamp there. To have even offered it would have given the whole show away.”

“I have not followed the case,” he admitted. “I am very ignorant indeed about it. Why are you so interested?”

“I don't know that I am particularly interested,” Clara assured him. “One must talk about something.”

“Then let us talk about ourselves,” he begged gallantly.

“Very well,” she agreed. “You shall commence by telling me why you part with the loss of a commission upon your gold bars so easily.”

He looked at her intently and if ever she had been inclined to think him the slightest degree of a fool she changed her mind. She had been getting too lax, she decided. This man had cunning even if he lacked brain.

“So far as I am concerned,” he said quietly, “the loss of ten thousand pounds is no great matter. Tell me, though, why you are so interested in this extraordinary robbery?”

“I really do not know myself,” she confessed. “Perhaps because I never

heard of gold bars before and I had no idea that all the governments kept them locked up in their strong rooms. Secondly, because I cannot imagine what use they are unless to make coins out of them. Could I, for instance, go into Cartier's with a gold bar under my arm and buy a diamond bracelet?"

"The necessity for buying a diamond bracelet for yourself should never arise," he said, with a faint meaning underneath his words, "but if it did—supposing you took a gold bar under your arm and Cartier's weighed and tested it—without a doubt they would accept it as payment for your diamond bracelet."

"Supposing you had bought those from the Government," she persisted, "what should you have done with them?"

"I should have passed them on at a very considerable profit to the firm upon the Continent with whom I was already in negotiation," he answered. "The business was already arranged. What does it matter? There are other days and larger profits. Large enough," he went on with another of those sidelong glances which set a chill aversion shivering even in a person of Clara's nerve, "to pay for that bracelet at Cartier's!"

They had arrived at the stage of coffee. He offered her cigarettes from a wonderful case. Clara took one and turned it over curiously. She smelt the deep orange-coloured paper and looked at the mouthpiece.

"Genuine Russian," she observed. "I thought there was no longer such a thing in the world."

"There is only one place in Moscow where they can be found," he replied. "My correspondent there sends me a few now and then whenever it is possible."

She turned the cigarette over in her fingers and finally lit it.

"So you do business in Moscow?"

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Everyone does more or less secretly. No one can afford to run the risk of offending what may some day become a very great nation."

"At present," she remarked, as she sniffed appreciatively at the blue smoke curling upwards, "their methods strike one as a little crude."

He smiled.

"You would think so if you had to do with them. Luftstein, their agent, who is over here now—— All the time," he broke off impatiently, "we talk of such unpleasant subjects! Baroness, I have been wondering whether I dared ask you to honour me by strolling a little way up Bond Street when we leave here."

"We might look in at the windows of Cartier's!" she suggested, her elbows upon the table supporting her smiling face whilst she looked across at him.

"It would give me great pleasure," he agreed.

She smoked in silence for a minute or two. Then she asked him an abrupt question.

“Have you ever been in Russia?”

“Many times,” he answered. “I myself am half Russian.”

She looked at him long and curiously and the longer she looked the more poignant grew a queer sensation of uneasiness in the pink-and-white man. Women as a rule, even the most beautiful women, even women of Clara’s position, had been so quick to respond to the little hints he had thrown out. Suddenly he had the idea that she had been playing with him. Why? He wondered. She was the famous Baroness Linz, the great aristocrat, with the entrée to many courts through her own family and the exalted personages who were her friends. Yet in these days nobody was safe.

“Well, I must be going,” she said suddenly.

He signed his bill and walked with her towards the door.

“I have enjoyed my luncheon, and more than anything your divine cigarettes,” she assured him.

“I have still a box for my friends in Curzon Street,” he told her.

“Don’t smoke them all, then,” she begged. “You may see me at any moment.”

“But this afternoon—this evening?” he whispered softly as they stood on the pavement.

“These tiresome dressmakers,” she murmured, stepping into the taxi which the commissioner had called.

Sir Felix Blondel was bowed obsequiously into his own waiting automobile but for several moments he lingered on the kerbstone. His eyes were following that disappearing taxi. A beautiful woman. A fascinating woman. And yet he had always felt something which amounted almost to fear of any personal element in life which he failed to understand. He leaned back in the corner of his very luxurious car, muttered the address to his chauffeur through the tube and became once more, as he drove through the crowded streets, the little pink-and-white millionaire of Mayfair, a man without a care, the head of an old-established and famous City firm. His thoughts travelled back through the last few years. They travelled forward through the years to come. The present he left alone, for it was the present he feared. He had never meant these wild connections of his to take such risks. He had never meant to have become so closely involved with them. A hundred thousand pounds was a very nice sum to handle, it had been even necessary money, but he hated risks. He liked to do his business and multiply his capital across his rosewood desk, smiling but with the cunning of a fox all the time, confident that before the end his cunning would have triumphed and that the deal he sought to close would be made. He understood bargaining, he understood the clever by-ways of his

own business. He had never been in such deep waters before. . . . His passage through the stately thoroughfares of the City into the slums, to the grey-hung, half-empty streets of dockland seemed to him almost allegorical. He reached at last his destination. A great gate was rolled open, the car moved slowly on to a heavy ferry. There was a moment's delay. He let down the window and looked ahead at the huge silent factory upon that stretch of land which at high tide was little more than a swamp. From a hundred windows there came scarcely a light, but from that annex, from the great round furnace and the high chimney close at hand, it was possible to catch a glimpse of flames leaping through the darkness, great billowy clouds of smoke darker even than the darkness itself. They moved slowly forward through the black muddy water. Now he could hear the roar of the flames, the throb of the great generator. A stupid game this to have been mixed up in.

He stepped out on to the pier. Almost immediately he was confronted by a couple of watchers, men with dour faces and of threatening aspect. They recognised him, however, and waved him on. He hurried up the short avenue. The doorkeeper looked at him suspiciously but passed him in to a huge dirty hall. From there he was admitted into a large untidy office. There were no blinds upon the windows and only one green-shaded lamp in the way of illumination. A man swung round in his chair, a man as alien from his surroundings as Blondel himself. He was elegantly dressed, he smelt of perfume, his long pale face was lined and anxious—the face of a man who had seen much of life.

“What on earth do you want down here, Blondel?” he demanded.

The banker shrugged his shoulders. He sank into the one spare chair—a broken-down affair without springs or cushions.

“How are things going?”

“Can't you hear? Can't you see the flames? Hear the roar of the dynamos? We are ahead of time. By the day after to-morrow we shall be on our way to the Baltic.”

“I wish,” the other sighed anxiously, “that you were off to-night.”

“Is anything wrong?”

Blondel shook his head.

“Nothing definite. You have read all the papers, of course. We faded out of the news to-day. I always think it is a bad sign when the police leave off talking. Nothing happened down here?”

“Not a thing.”

“Anyone called?”

“Only oil salesmen and mechanics and people on business. No one is allowed inside the building. No one can possibly make a guess at what we are really doing.”

“You think,” Blondel asked anxiously, “that you will carry this through?”

His companion laughed harshly.

“Too late to have fears, my friend,” he said. “We shall carry it through. You shall have your hundred thousand pounds at the end of the week or we shall vanish off the face of the earth. I myself have no wish to vanish off the face of the earth, and what I wish generally happens. Don’t be a fool, Blondel. How should you like to have to sit down here morning and night, never sleeping, never eating a decent meal or seeing a pretty woman—doing nothing except listening and watching and goading on these few mechanics? Going to dine at the Embassy or somewhere, I suppose. Curse you! Well, be off. Take my advice. Don’t come near here again. I will send you a wireless in code the moment we are in the North Sea.”

Blondel felt his confidence returning. The man with whom he talked was famous and he had never known failure. It was his scheme this, and there were only forty-eight hours more of anxiety.

“Very well, Nicholas,” he agreed. “I will be off and keep away. As you say—it is best.”

“I shall be at the Ritz in Paris the first week in June,” the other promised. “See you then.”

Blondel stumbled out into the darkness. A rough shape of a man piloted him into his car at the end of the pier. The ferry creaked and wheezed and stole into the blackness of the river. Lights were not popular in that part of the world.

“Drive fast,” the banker ordered his chauffeur as soon as they reached terra firma.

The man obeyed. Soon they were in the brightly lit streets, amongst the crowds of men and women jostling one another on the pavement, all going about their business, they themselves unnoticed cogs in the wheel of everyday life. Blondel leaned forward and opened a small cupboard in the car. He drew out a bottle and a glass and half filled the latter with brandy. He drank it in one gulp—he at all times a moderate man! He scarcely felt the strength of it, but it was good. He composed himself in an easy position. That woman—God, how beautiful she was! What a fool to have given way, almost for the first time in his life, to nerves.

Colonel Grainger shook hands with the representative of ADVICE LIMITED and accepted her invitation to be seated with a slightly cynical smile.

“Well,” he remarked, “the week is up.”

“We seem to have timed it exactly,” Clara replied. “I was just going to ring you up.”

“You have news?” he asked quickly.

“Certainly. The gold is at a riverside smelting works on a strip of waste land called Mud Pie Island. I have prepared a plan showing you the locality and how to get there.”

She pushed a folded sheet of paper across the table. Her visitor picked it up and stared at it incredulously.

“You will find at least twenty or thirty men to deal with,” Clara continued, “and a fairly desperate crowd, I should imagine. The principal was on Dover Town Station platform when the gold was unshipped. He passed himself off as the representative of the foreign bank, and it was he, no doubt, who committed the murders. The rest of the gang were probably picked up along the road.”

“Look here,” Colonel Grainger said, recovering his calm with a great effort. “Are you talking seriously?”

“Why ask me such a foolish question?” she protested. “Remember that although as a matter of fact I am a very insignificant person, I am in this matter the representative of ADVICE LIMITED. We have never failed. We never shall fail. We have found your gold. In a few days we expect your payment. In ten minutes you had better be on your way to Scotland Yard making your plans. Before you go I will put you in possession of a few more facts. These works have an enormous furnace and they were hired by foreigners some months ago evidently for this exact purpose. The motor boats that were dashing up and down the river and the empty boxes that were found by your police were only meant to put you off. The gold was stored away in the works before daylight the morning after the robbery.”

“Why?” he demanded.

She looked at her visitor slowly and he fancied that he sensed a gleam of contempt in her curling lips.

“The bars have been through the furnace,” she answered, “or most of them. They could not have been taken anyway with their stamps on. I don’t suppose they are materially changed—except in shape. There is a steamer lying about a hundred yards off—looks like an old tub but in reality has very fine engines. The gang are expecting to load her up with the gold to-morrow night and she will be in the Baltic by the end of the week.”

Colonel Grainger pulled himself together. The woman spoke convincingly. After all, ADVICE LIMITED had already performed miracles. Let him assume that she was speaking the truth.

“Who was at the top end of this?” he asked rapidly. “Remember, there were the messengers from the Bank of England, there were the code instructions—everything in order.”

“A man named Blondel—Sir Felix Blondel—was responsible for that,” she confided. “He is a partner in the firm you spoke of on your first visit. The gang who have the gold are associates of his. He has often worked with the Bank of

England as their agent in arranging shipments.”

“My God!” Grainger muttered. “He was dining at the Embassy last night.”

“Our information leads us to believe,” Clara Linz concluded, “that the gold will not be given up without a fight. You ought to take plenty of men, and if you want to avoid bloodshed you should surround the place and rush it as soon as it is dark. . . . We shall expect a settlement from you during the week.”

The little pink-and-white man was in a grievous state. His tie was awry, his hair was ruffled. One side of the white slip of his waistcoat had disappeared. He was walking up and down the large, bleak office of the Mud Pie Island works with quick, uneven footsteps. Lounging against the desk the young man Nicholas—calm and sleekly debonair—was watching him with a half-amused, half-contemptuous air.

“Nerves,” Blondel repeated for the twentieth time, endeavouring to reassure himself. “Nerves. That’s what I am suffering from. You have seen nothing suspicious? You assured me of that, Nicholas, didn’t you? No spies about—nothing of that sort?”

The younger man shrugged his shoulders.

“As for that,” he remarked, striking a match and lighting a cigarette, “who can tell? In this blasted country there is never enough light to see fifty yards away.”

“Do you think you can get the gold safely on board?” Blondel asked feverishly.

“The last lot is in the cooling vat,” Nicholas replied. “They will pack it at midnight. We expect to be on board before dawn.”

“I wish to God you were there now,” Blondel groaned. “It came on me all of a sudden, this fit of nerves. I had to rush down here. I don’t know how I shall ever find my way back.”

The two men stood before the high dusty window. Fog—the great elementary terror of the riverside toilers and the captains of the ships, small and large, which pass up and down the narrow river—had blotted out the world, had deadened sound as well as sight. They gazed out upon nothing.

“It’s a loathsome hole, this,” Nicholas exclaimed with a shiver. “If you had been down here as I have been all these nights urging them on, watching the furnaces, doing sentinel at night and slave-driver by day you might talk about nerves!”

With a start so slight as to be scarcely noticeable and without a spoken word he peered suddenly forward. A row of strange orange flares had appeared on the other bank of the cut. They were moving in line now. Nicholas—stooping down—with a great effort threw open the window. Blondel went choking backwards. Nicholas ignored the fog which was drifting in. He was

listening. Suddenly the telephone sounded. He stretched out his hand and took off the receiver.

“How many?” he asked in response to some spoken words from the other end. “Are you there, Paul? Blow up the ferry. You’ve got the stuff on?”

Nicholas too, it seemed, was sometimes subject to nerves. He seized the telephone instrument and dashed it on to the ground. His thumb was pressed upon a bell in the wall.

“Curse you and your nerves, Blondel!” he exclaimed. “Anyway, you’ve got something to be nervous about now,” he added with a short fierce laugh. “Listen!”

They heard the ferry boat starting on its creaking and groaning passage. The orange lights seemed somehow or other to be on board. Down the passages of the works overhead and all around was the sound of flying footsteps.

“What is it?” Blondel shrieked. “Tell me what it is, Nicholas. What’s wrong?”

“Not much,” the young man answered coolly, picking up his cigarette from the table. “There are forty policemen on that ferry half-way across the cut by now, I should think. We had a mine laid on the boat but they evidently found it and cut the wire. Look at the lights down either side. They are trying to hem us in.”

He started tearing off his coat and waistcoat.

“What are you going to do?” Blondel cried.

“Swim across to my motor boat behind,” was the quick answer. “Are you coming?”

“I can’t swim,” Blondel sobbed. “Don’t leave me here, Nicholas.”

The young man laughed. He was in his shirt and trousers now.

“A pretty sort of a fool I should be,” he scoffed, “to stop and keep you company! Here—you can have this,” he added, throwing a revolver which he had drawn from his hip pocket on to the table. “Much good may it do you!”

He rushed from the room. Blondel would have followed him but his knees gave way. The sound of flying footsteps had ceased. The silence of emptiness was upon the place. Blondel staggered to the window. The fog was denser than ever in the room and he felt himself choking. The ferry boat was looming up, a great black shape, barely fifty yards away. Already he could hear the creaking of the chains. He took up the revolver, laid it down, picked it up again with a sob. The fog drifted in. Somehow the darkness made it easier.

The inspector-in-chief landed his men safely and sent them swarming through the place. The gold was there, lying about in all directions in the great shed near the furnace. There were coats and hats lying about too, but the only

sign of any human being was the little pink-and-white man stone dead with a revolver still grasped in his hand.

AN OLYMPIAN DEBACLE

The Right Honourable John Spencer St. Alban, Prime Minister of England, drew his chair a little farther back into the shadows of the room. His terrible visitor, who sat in the full flood of the unexpected spring sunshine, only smiled. Hulings, the perfect secretary, a dark silent figure, moved from the background to the window and adjusted the blind.

“I must take a few minutes for reflection,” St. Alban said quietly. “Your attitude, Lord Reisborough, if you will pardon my saying so, is a trifle incomprehensible.”

The visitor made no remark. St. Alban, notwithstanding his expressed desire for concrete reflection, found his thoughts wandering. He found himself visualising the drama of this unequal conflict. In his youth he had been a great reader of fiction. The idea of a mortal conflict between two men hating one another to the limit, each seeking for the other’s extinction, had always fascinated him. He imagined himself with some instrument of death in his hand facing this man whose removal from existence seemed to be the thing most to be desired upon earth. He hated the sneering face, the coarse lips, the insolent though suppressed air of triumph about his visitor. He hated his ungainly form, his ill-chosen clothes, the purple tie, the over-creased, loud-patterned trousers. He felt a little twitch in the forefinger of his right hand. Supposing the instrument of death had been there, he pondered. It would be so easy to give the world a new shock! No Prime Minister of a great country, that he could remember, had ever stood in the dock of a court of justice charged with murder.

Hulings stepped lightly across the room and whispered in the ear of his august chief. The latter shook his head slightly. Nevertheless he turned towards his visitor.

“I presume,” he said, “that there is nothing within my power to offer which would influence your attitude?”

The thick mocking lips were slowly parted.

“What have you to offer beyond what I already possess?” was the harsh response. “I am many times a millionaire. I am a peer of your country. I already wear such decorations as are within my reach. I gave you to understand upon our first interview that I was not to be bribed.”

“I find the word offensive,” the Prime Minister pronounced. “We seem to have said all that there is to be said. I see no reason for prolonging this

interview.”

The visitor rose to his feet—a puny, malicious-looking man, morally and physically unattractive.

“I shall not change my mind,” he declared, “however long I stay here, whatever stale arguments you may trot out.”

St. Alban waved him towards the door—a firm, contemptuous gesture.

“Men of your type are usually obstinate,” he observed.

“No more fireworks of eloquence for me,” the departing visitor sneered, as he waited for Hulings to open the door.

“I will spare you the full text of the ancient simile,” was the icy rejoinder.

“I will keep my pearls and the swine may go.”

Hulings was back again in a very few minutes. For a young man who had only been down from Oxford for two years he was a singularly sympathetic and human person. He crossed the room towards his chief with leaden footsteps. There was a look of almost spaniel-like devotion in his brown eyes.

“Could I have done more, Charles?” the former asked him thoughtfully. “Was there any argument I failed to use, any other possible means of dealing with that venomous person?”

“None, sir,” the young man assured him. “You and he do not speak the same language. He has always been our enemy—politically and personally.”

“Give me the reports from the Home Secretary and the Chief Commissioner,” St. Alban enjoined.

The young man withdrew some papers from a clip upon the desk and brought them over. St. Alban glanced them through carefully and passed them back. They were concise, terse and final. In other words they were useless.

“There is only one thing to be done, sir,” Hulings said slowly. “I wish to God I could have had the courage to do it as he passed out into the street!”

St. Alban smiled curiously. He smiled, though, with dead lips and there was no answering light in his eyes.

“I thought of that, Hulings,” he admitted. “Those were simple days when one killed the lepers.”

The young man summoned up all his courage.

“We have tried the Secret Service, sir,” he pointed out, “the home and the foreign branches. They can do nothing. The Chief Commissioner has to admit himself baffled. If you would not think me a howling lunatic I should like to make one more suggestion.”

“Well?”

“I should like to be allowed to ask the advice of a lady who conducts an international secret service agency here in London.”

St. Alban’s amazement was blended with incredulity. He could scarcely

believe his ears.

“Are you in earnest, Charles?” he demanded. “Employ a secret service agency upon such a matter!”

“It sounds like madness, I know, sir,” the young man confessed deprecatingly. “Still, wonderful stories have been told about the one I have in mind. They work in secret. With the exception of one woman no one knows who the principals are. They are as silent as the grave in their methods.”

“How did you get to know so much about them, Charles?”

The young man flushed.

“I would not mention it to anyone except to you, sir,” he said, “but I happen to know from my cousin Guy Leighton—he is second now at Rome—that the private letter on various Irish questions addressed to the Pope, which was lost, was recovered by them. A very fine piece of work they thought it over there.”

The Prime Minister nodded somewhat wearily. He had no wish to damp the young man’s enthusiasm, but the idea of an international enquiry agency was like a bad taste in his mouth.

“You can go and see them if you think it worth while,” he conceded. “Make sure that they are thoroughly responsible, though, and keep Downing Street out of it as much as you can.”

“I will be careful, sir,” Hulings promised. “It is better than sitting here waiting for the thunderbolts, anyhow.”

“I do not like your friend, Lord Henry,” Clara, Baroness Linz, remarked to a youthful scion of the house of Dunworthy. “He is not a nice man. Why did you present him?”

“Nasty bit of work, isn’t he?” the young man acquiesced cheerfully. “Had to introduce him, though. He came up and asked me point-blank.”

“But such an appearance!” the baroness complained. “Why should one know such a person?”

Her companion chuckled.

“I’ll tell you why everyone knows him who can, my dear Clara,” he replied. “Reisborough is a multimillionaire. He owns the *Daily Sun*, three theatres, the favourite for the Derby, and Reisborough House. My old lady mother puts the case in a nutshell. She said quite firmly the other day to my father: ‘You cannot afford to live in London and not know Reisborough.’”

The baroness shrugged her shoulders, knocked out the remains of a cigarette from her holder and with delicate and shapely fingers fitted in a fresh one.

“We Austrians,” she murmured, “were never like that.”

“Seems to me when I was in Vienna,” Lord Henry reflected, “that I

remember a few Hebrew bankers who kept open house.”

“One was not forced to go there.”

“Of course it is all a rotten shame, but since the war what can you do? We are all up a tree. The Reisboroughs of the world have got us in the palms of their hands. I admit, though, this man does give me the shivers.”

“I really do not see why I should be made to suffer,” Clara Linz sighed. “You have imposed upon me the necessity of refusing to continue an acquaintance. It is not a thing which I often do but I certainly shall not remember Lord Reisborough the next time we meet.”

“You may change your mind,” Lord Henry grinned. “A man who gives sapphire bracelets for dinner favours keeps his friends.”

It came about that Clara Linz did change her mind but it was not for the sake of a sapphire bracelet!

The young lady who controlled the destinies of *ADVICE LIMITED* was impressive enough in her personality, her pleasant but strong face, the severe elegance of her attire, the clean crispness of her sentences, but she was nevertheless a disappointment to the young man who was seated a few yards away and whose card reposed upon her table.

“It is difficult to make myself clearly understood, perhaps, baroness,” he said, “but I am representing very powerful influences.”

“Which you are not at liberty to name,” she reminded him dryly.

“Surely in your profession that is not unusual,” was the smooth reply. “You have there my name—Charles Hulings—and if you doubt my word I can easily produce proof that I am, as I say, private secretary to a Cabinet Minister. I think, under the circumstances therefore, I am entitled to certain reticences.”

“Without a doubt you are,” Clara assented. “There has never been any question about that. The fact remains, however, that I never attempt to give advice unless I know every detail of the matter under consideration. You may be sure that every word you say will be confidentially and carefully treated, and if I am not able to give you a direct reply immediately as to my views upon your case you will receive it within twenty-four hours.”

The young man continued dubious.

“It is a curious situation,” he grumbled.

“We are curious people,” she assured him.

He hesitated for a few moments and then took the plunge.

“A certain personage whom I shall not name,” he began, “but who is a member of the Government, decided some short time ago upon a particular course of policy with regard to an important foreign power. He drew up a draft treaty signed provisionally by himself and by the ambassador of the country concerned. This treaty involved the country in definite obligations under

certain conditions. Is this clear?"

"It sounds," Clara replied, "like a Chinese puzzle, but I think I know what you mean."

"Will you please take this for granted," the young man went on. "It is vital to British interests that no word of this proposed agreement should become known to the general public, both for reasons of general policy—which abhors secret treaties—and on account of the minister who is responsible for it. By some means or other, although every precaution was taken, a copy of the draft has been secured by the owner of a great newspaper. He is proposing to publish that copy in his morning issue next Friday and to give the names of the small section of the Cabinet who have sponsored it. The result of the publication would be, without a doubt, to bring the present Government to an end."

There was a brief silence. With a word of apology Clara Linz lit a cigarette and pushed the box towards her visitor. For a moment or two afterwards she seemed wrapped in meditation.

"The Press and the Government of the country," she pointed out, "are generally on excellent terms. Surely pressure can be brought to bear upon the editor of this newspaper?"

"It is not the editor but the owner—a man of considerable importance—who has the draft of the arrangement," Hulings confided. "He has already been approached. His attitude towards the Government is inimical and towards the minister chiefly responsible one of hatred. There is no possible bribe or inducement which can be offered which has not been suggested. The result is less than nil. Unless a miracle happens or you perform something more than a miracle, the bombshell will be exploded next Friday and the present Government will come automatically to an end."

"Mr. Hulings," Clara said deliberately, "you have come to us for help and it would be a triumph if we were able to give it to you. We cannot move in the matter, however, unless you treat us with more complete confidence."

He looked at her miserably.

"My dear lady," he pleaded, "how is that possible?"

"It is for you to decide," she answered.

He sat for a few moments in dreary silence.

"Very well," he yielded at last. "I ask for no promises, I make no threats, but naturally if you betray my confidence your bureau is not likely to exist very much longer. The person whose reputation as a statesman is in danger is the Prime Minister, John Spencer St. Alban. The country involved is Japan."

"And the newspaper proprietor?" she asked mercilessly.

"Lord Reisborough."

"Upon what date does he propose to draw down the thunders?"

“Friday the twentieth.”

She glanced at the almanac upon her desk.

“It is now Tuesday the seventeenth. Be here at the same time on Thursday. If it is humanly possible to help you we will. We shall require a very large fee if we succeed and I shall ask you for a hundred pounds now for preliminary expenses.”

The young man counted out some notes. Clara handed him over a receipt.

“I shall see you again,” she reminded him, “on Thursday morning.”

That evening, whilst a very depressed Hulings was dressing for dinner, the telephone rang in his little sanctum. He shook his head.

“You can see who it is, Samson,” he told his servant, “but if it is anyone who wants me to dine or go out this evening say that I am ill or engaged.”

The man came back again a few minutes later.

“The Baroness Linz wishes to speak to you, sir,” he announced.

Hulings sprang to his feet and made his way to the instrument. That same smooth, precise voice greeted him from the other end of the wire.

“I am speaking to Mr. Hulings?”

“You are.”

“This is the Baroness Linz. I am anxious to ask you a question. It is not advisable to ask it over the telephone. Please call in here within a quarter of an hour.”

“I shall be there,” he promised, “in ten minutes.”

He kept his word. It was past eight o’clock but Clara was still in her small salon seated before her desk. She offered no apologies for her summons.

“I want to ask you, Mr. Hulings,” she said, “in what manner the information which Lord Reisborough threatens to use in his newspaper came into his hands.”

Hulings hesitated.

“Is it necessary for you to know that?”

“We cannot proceed with the case until we do.”

“I am glad to be able to tell you,” Hulings confided, “that the leakage was not from anyone of our departments. A copy reached Lord Reisborough from someone in the service of the Japanese Embassy.”

“What have they to say about it there?”

“Very little. The ambassador expresses himself as humiliated and quoted poetry to explain to us that he was sitting in ashes and his soul was steeped in misery. Furthermore, his second secretary, the most popular member of the embassy, has disappeared. Also his wife.”

“Do you know what has become of them?”

“So far as he is concerned,” Hulings replied, “I have not the faintest doubt

but that he has committed suicide.”

“Have you made any enquiries as to what has become of him?”

“It does not seem to matter much, does it? Nevertheless, we did enquire. The ambassador’s reply, so far as I can remember it, was that Kuniashi had returned to his ancestors.”

Clara Linz considered the young man’s reply with a deepening frown on her forehead. Finally she rose abruptly to her feet.

“I am going to ask you, Mr. Hulings,” she begged, “to wait here for a few minutes.”

“I will wait all night if it is in any way helpful,” the young man assented.

Clara Linz left the room and was absent for some twenty minutes. When she returned, to Hulings’s surprise, she was dressed for the street.

“I should like you to take me,” she requested, “to the Japanese Embassy.”

Hulings was a trifle disappointed. It had seemed to him from the first that Reisborough was their only hope. The Baron Kyashti was a man of gentle, plastic personality with nothing to offer but regrets.

“I am afraid we shan’t have much chance of being received without an appointment,” he warned her.

“You will try,” Clara insisted. “The matter, as you know yourself, is urgent. The newspaper will be in the press at midnight on Thursday. It is not a long time.”

“Don’t think I do not realise it,” the young man groaned. “Come along. I have my car outside and we will see what we can do.”

They drove through the crowded streets in silence—Hulings himself at the wheel. At the Japanese Embassy they were admitted and shown into a private waiting-room. One of the officials came quickly in answer to Hulings’s enquiry.

“Is it a matter of unusual pressure this, Mr. Hulings?” he asked, speaking very precisely but in a high-pitched, monotonous voice. “His Excellency does not receive at these hours. He is engaged in studying the day’s despatches from Tokio.”

“It is a matter of vital importance,” Hulings assured him. “A matter, too, in which His Excellency is also deeply concerned.”

There was another brief delay after which they were ushered into a spacious but barely furnished apartment. Baron Kyashti was seated upon a hard chair in front of a plain but handsome desk. He was surrounded by a sea of papers. Two young men who were sorting them were waved away. The ambassador rose to his feet and shook hands with Hulings.

“You will permit me to present the Baroness Linz, Your Excellency,” her escort begged. “You will understand, I am sure, that we would not intrude if the matter were not one of urgency.”

The baron was statuesquely polite and frigid.

"I will hear what you wish to say to me," he said. "It is not my hour to receive. What is this lady's business?"

"I am the representative, Your Excellency, of an institution which probably does not exist in your country," Clara explained. "We call ourselves *ADVICE LIMITED* and our business is to help people who find themselves in a serious position in life but are unable to resort to the police."

"Criminals?" the baron ventured.

"As a rule," she told him, "we work only for honest people. There is a great deal of trouble into which an honest person can get nowadays in which police intervention is impossible."

The ambassador showed that he was not disposed to waste words.

"It is still this terrible matter of Lord Reisborough's threat, I presume?" he said.

"It is," she assented. "We have been engaged by Mr. Hulings to seek for some method of preventing Lord Reisborough carrying out his threat and publishing a copy of the proposed Manchurian Treaty which has been provisionally signed by the Prime Minister."

"If you can do that," the baron said gravely, "you will perform a good office. It is not easy."

"It is not easy," Clara admitted. "You should be willing to help, though, Your Excellency, if it is possible," she went on. "The trouble started here, although it is Lord St. Alban who will suffer."

"The lady's words have passed outside my comprehension," the ambassador confessed, turning to Hulings.

"What she means," the young man explained, "is that the treacherous sale of the copy of the treaty to Reisborough was effected from here."

The baron winced perceptibly. If it were possible for him to have gone paler he had done so. The light in his eyes was colder. His tone was icy.

"It is a great humiliation but it is the truth."

"Where is Kuniashi?" Hulings asked bluntly.

The baron considered for a moment.

"Kuniashi is dead," he said with cold finality.

Hulings started. The woman gave vent to a smothered exclamation.

"How does this concern you?" the ambassador demanded. "How are you concerned in his life or death? Here you are in Japan. Here things may happen which could not happen in the streets without or the adjoining buildings. Here the laws of Japan are administered. Kuniashi is dead."

"That seems rather a pity," Clara reflected. "His death was well deserved, without a doubt, but there was just a chance that certain information——"

"He has no longer any information concerning events in this world,"

Kyashiti interrupted. "He was subjected to great temptation and he fell. In the hours that followed came light. The only thing that could happen to him has happened."

"But it is impossible that he should be dead," Clara reflected in her matter-of-fact way. "There has been no word in the papers—no announcement. People cannot disappear like that in England."

"This is not England, madam," was the measured reply. "I would not have you doubt the word of a Japanese nobleman, but with your own eyes you shall see."

The baron crossed the room with swift, even footsteps. He touched a bell and spoke to the servant who answered it a few words in Japanese. Then he turned and beckoned his two visitors to follow him. They passed across the great hall into one of the smaller rooms at the back of the house. Every curtain was tightly drawn. The room itself was in darkness until the Japanese servant who had preceded them had touched the switch of the electric light. They looked around curiously to find that they were in an apartment almost devoid of furniture. Upon two wooden trestles at the farther end stood two coffins draped in white. In a niche of the wall above them was the image of a Buddha seated with clasped hands at the top of a gilded dais. The ambassador motioned his visitors forward and spoke a word or two to the servant, still in Japanese. The latter lifted the lids of the two coffins. In the nearer was the body of a young man wrapped in a loose robe. In the farther the body of a girl in white. Both were already embalmed. There were flowers on the bosom of the girl, and fastened to the robe of the man, just over his heart, was an oblong strip of paper. The baron pointed to it. They both leaned a little forward. It was a cheque upon a London bank for a hundred thousand pounds and it was signed Reisborough!

"The bodies leave for Japan on Monday," the ambassador announced. "If this thing had happened in my own country Kuniashi would have been less kindly treated. Here we had charity. The woman was unused to Western ways and it was her voice which prevailed."

"Kyoto—his wife," Hulings groaned.

"Certainly his wife," the ambassador assented. "A Japanese gentleman does not keep a mistress. When he commits a folly, when he sins, it is for his wife. If this atonement, my friend Mr. Hulings, can be of any satisfaction to your illustrious master, you can tell him that you have seen it. You will excuse?"

Out in the street they stumbled back into the car. Hulings was still shivering as he took the wheel. The woman was deep in thought.

"I am wondering," she confessed, "how this is going to help us."

Reisborough, glossy and perfumed, with a white carnation in his buttonhole, priceless black pearls in his shirt-front, his shrunken limbs tailored by an artist, sat at dinner that night with a sly grin of content upon his lips. It was a dinner *à deux* at the most desirable table in the most fashionable club restaurant of the moment, his companion—Clara, Baroness Linz—one of the most admired women in London. In his acquired habits Reisborough was no ordinary vulgarian. He ordered his food and wine with distinction. His manner with the waiters was excellent. Nothing that he did or said savoured of ostentation. His conversation, perhaps, was limited, but he himself was a sympathetic listener. He was content to know that his companion was exciting the admiration of all his neighbours. It was only when she led the conversation round to the power of the Press that he expressed himself with a certain amount of egotism.

“I never meant to be a newspaper man,” he confided. “I was a millionaire several times over before I sat back and asked how I could make the best use of my money to gain power. A woman,” he went on, “lives for admiration. A man lives for power.”

“There are other things in the lives of some of us,” Clara murmured, toying with her bracelets. “I agree with you so far as men are concerned. There are a few women, however, who possess brains——”

“Not many,” he interrupted bluntly. “If they do they don’t use them. Haven’t they proved it? Women are failures in every serious position in life. They have had their chances and lost them. They are objects of ridicule in Parliament or any public office. They can write inferior novels glibly, but there has never been a great woman poetess, soldier, financier or diplomatist. Women are coming back to their own in this generation. They are beginning to understand again what their grandmothers knew—that they were made for love and to be loved and for nothing else.”

She laughed softly and with genuine amusement.

“The most humorous part of it is,” she declared, “that what you are saying is very nearly the truth.”

“What I say generally has the truth in it,” he observed, so quietly that the conceit was almost non-rapparent. “I bought newspapers because through newspapers you can govern the world much better than from the senate or parliament. You can sit upon the Olympian mountain-tops above the clouds and listening nations will dance to the tune of your trumpet.”

“I suppose you are right,” she admitted. “I do not agree with you but that makes no difference. I do not think I could even explain.”

“Try,” he suggested.

“It is very difficult,” she murmured. “The power of the Press is so ruthless. It is used to sway the mob, not to appeal to the brains of the world. It can do as

much harm as it does good. The influence of a great statesman who has seen the truth and carried it always with him lives after his death. The Press is just a day-by-day power. It fashions the thoughts of one week and pulls down everything it has built up the next.”

He indulged in his hateful smile.

“You will live and learn if you get to know me better,” he said. “I know of circumstances where the Press in one issue can send the fame of a great statesman crumbling into the dust, where in one issue it can turn war into peace or peace into war.”

“But its methods,” she argued. “Have you ever stopped to analyse its methods? A foul little revolver can end the life of the noblest of men. Those creeping reptiles from West African forests can sting the life out of the great explorers of the world. Any power is great that governs life or death, but it may be foul.”

“We must be friends,” he insisted.

“You laugh at me,” she complained. “Come, we have finished dinner. It is too late for the theatres. Will you trust yourself to me for half an hour and I will give you an instance of what I mean?”

There was a sudden flash of suspicion in his face, a mean thought that travelled through his mind. She laughed scornfully, and so far as he could feel shame he felt it.

“You will run no risk,” she assured him. “I wish you no harm. You will come to none in my company.”

“I could find the one thing more to be valued than power in your company,” he whispered.

She laughed again as she gathered her trifles together and left the restaurant.

“Tell your man,” she enjoined, as they stepped into the car, “to drive to the side door of number 18A Grosvenor Gate. The side door is in Ladbroke Street.”

“Grosvenor Gate, 18A. Grosvenor Gate,” he repeated, as they rolled off. “Surely that is the Japanese Embassy or next to it?”

“Never mind where it is,” she said. “I shall show you something. I shall try to prove my point. Then, if you feel like it, we can go on somewhere. We both have cards, I suppose, for Berkeley House. One had better make one’s bow there.”

They pulled up in a dark narrow street. She stepped lightly on to the pavement and rang the bell by the side of a solid door of imposing appearance. The door was opened at once by a manservant in sombre livery. Without any exchange of words he led them into a vast, gloomy hall at the end of a long passage.

“Why, this is the Japanese Embassy!” Reisborough exclaimed.

She held up her finger.

“Hush!”

The man who was their guide led them, according to his previously received instructions, into the chamber of death, turned on a light which showed them the two draped boxes and flashed softly upon the set placidity of the ever-watching Buddha. In silence the man removed the two coverings. Clara pointed downwards.

“Kuniashi and his bride Kyoto,” she announced. “Do you see what is pinned to his robe? It is what the Japanese call ‘the price of dishonour.’ ”

“They are dead!” her companion gasped, as soon as the power of speech came to him.

“They are dead,” she assented. “It is the juggernaut of the Press which has killed them. On Friday morning a famous statesman may be crucified and a great newspaper treble its circulation. Only listen to me, Lord Reisborough. If that happens there will be another story the next day in the papers across the street. There will be the true story of that cheque lying on a dead man’s chest and the history of the little Japanese girl, his wife, lying by his side. Cannot you hear the wind of horror which will sweep across the world when people realise the price that was paid for their news?”

Reisborough said not a word. The lids were replaced. The light extinguished. Together they crossed the floor, made their way down the passage and re-entered the waiting car.

“What do you want me to do in this matter?” he demanded, his thin voice more metallic and unpleasant than ever.

“Return the copy of the Manchurian agreement to the Japanese ambassador, find some other melodrama for the black headlines of your newspaper on Friday morning and forget, above all forget, upon your word of honour, the whole events of this evening and every little thing which has connected me with it.”

“A bargain,” he agreed sourly. . . .

The car rolled on through the thronged streets, Reisborough leaning back in his corner, his arms folded, his forehead furrowed, a shrunken figure of mingled malice and humiliation. Suddenly his lips parted in a malevolent smile. His dominant cynicism came to his rescue.

“The damn’ thing looked safe enough where it was,” he muttered, “but I shall stop payment of that cheque the first thing in the morning.”

BROKEN ENGAGEMENTS

The engagement is announced between Phillip Stewart Perceval, Royal Dragoon Guards, eldest son of Colonel and Mrs. Perceval of Leigh Castle, Devonshire, and Mary, younger daughter of General Sir Richard Brattison and Lady Brattison.

Flora, Dowager Countess of Witherley, read out the announcement from that morning's *Times* to the little gathering of friends who had dropped in at her hospitable Mayfair maisonnette for a pre-luncheon cocktail. She glanced around with a smile of approval.

"Well, here's one engagement at least," she remarked, "which we may be sure won't be broken off. Those two young people are obviously crazy about one another."

Freddy Witherley, her twenty-year-old son, who had the reputation of being one of the best-looking, best turned out and most immoral young men in London, paused in his manipulation of the gleaming silver shaker and looked around.

"They were getting positively maudlin," he said. "They have even sunk so low as to be holding one another's hands under the tablecloth at the Embassy the other night."

Clara, Baroness Linz, the beautiful Austrian who had taken all London by storm, smiled quietly.

"Is there anything very maudlin about that?" she asked.

"It is a matter of sentiment. I must confess that I like to have my hand held."

"If you would only make a confession like that at the right moment," Freddy sighed, resuming his manipulations of the shaker.

General Nightingale, the young man's uncle and Flora's brother, raised his glass.

"We will drink their healths," he suggested. "I am dining with the Brattisons to-night and I will give them all your messages."

There were seven or eight young people in the room, all rather typical of their age and circumstances. Doris Taylor, a very bright young person indeed, who called herself the last of the platinum blondes, set down her glass with a sigh of relief.

"I agree with Flora," she declared. "It is really a comfort to read of an engagement between two young people who know their own minds and are

likely to go through with it.”

“The season,” Lady Osborne, the wife of a well-known portrait painter, remarked, “was becoming positively spoilt with all these broken engagements. So awkward, too, to remember who was going to be married and who wasn’t.”

Maurice Dimsdale, a wealthy but as yet unattached member of the aristocracy, who preferred writing film plays and wearing quaint garments to the ordinary routine life of his fellows, nodded gravely.

“One felt,” he observed, “that there was something sinister about it.”

The hostess of the light-hearted gathering shivered slightly.

“Don’t say that, Maurice,” she begged. “Broken engagements must be quite common in the world at large.”

“Perhaps so, dear lady,” Maurice assented, reaching out for a cigarette, “but on the other hand think of the aftermath in most of the cases we know about this season. Little Betty Crawshay——” He glanced around the room. “Well, we all know that she committed suicide. Then there was Helen Boyes. They gave out that she had gone for a cruise round the world, but I happen to know for a fact that at the present moment she is in a sanatorium in Switzerland. Then on my side of the fence there is Frank Draycott. He resigned his commission, chucked soldiering altogether and has gone out exploring in the South Seas. Of course, he was desperately in love with Maggie, but what I could not understand was that she seemed to be just as desperately in love with him.”

There was a cloud on Lady Witherley’s sensitive face. She seemed genuinely distressed.

“Do not let us drag up all those unhappy affairs,” she implored. “Mary is a dear, we all love her and, although she is just a tiny bit of a flirt and rather too fond of dangerous enterprises, she is also the type of girl who settles down promptly when she has once made up her mind. As for Phillip, if I were a girl instead of an elderly professional chaperon, he is just the man I should have set my heart upon.”

There was a little chorus of protest. Flora—although it was perfectly well known that owing to her straightened means she was always ready to chaperon young women for a consideration—was a very popular person, especially amongst her younger friends.

“My darling,” Doris Taylor, who was one of her present charges, exclaimed, “even to-day there is not one of us has your attraction and you know it! Every time you take us out I feel that you could collect all the young men for yourself if you wanted to and we should have to be content with the crumbs.”

“Even I,” Maurice Dimsdale intervened, “who could be considered nothing but a crumb in this gathering, would rather take you out, dear hostess, than any

of these unfledged charges of yours, if only you would forget sometimes that you are a chaperon and give them all a lesson or two in the gentle art of flirtation.”

Flora laughed happily.

“I must do my duty to my *débutantes* when I am lucky enough to have any,” she declared. “When everyone is married who I think ought to be married——”

“I am first on the list,” Maurice insisted. . . .

It looked all right, but exactly three weeks afterwards the following notice appeared in the *Times*:

The marriage arranged between Phillip Stewart Perceval, Royal Dragoon Guards, and Mary, younger daughter of General Sir Richard and Lady Brattison, will not take place.

General Nightingale and Colonel Sir Francis Dobson, Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard, were old friends. The former, therefore, had no difficulty in securing an appointment at police headquarters and on his arrival was ushered promptly and with much courtesy into the Chief’s presence. The two men shook hands warmly. Cigarettes were favourably considered. The visitor was established in an easy chair.

“Last man I should have expected to have seen here,” Sir Francis remarked, with a twinkle in his eyes. “What can I do for you, General?”

“Try and not laugh at me in the first place.”

“I think I can promise that. Go ahead.”

The General settled down.

“I know,” he began, “that you are too busy a man to go into what we call society very much, and its gossip naturally does not interest you. I shall ask you, therefore, to take my word for granted as regards the details of what I am going to tell you.”

“That’s all right,” Sir Francis agreed. “Saves time, too.”

“Since the first of February,” his caller continued, “there have been seventeen engagements between well-known young people in society announced and broken off. Three or four of them have patched things up, but there are twelve I know of where the thing has ended practically in tragedy.”

“An inconstant age,” the Chief Commissioner remarked.

The General frowned.

“I want you to look at this matter a little more seriously,” he begged. “Of course it may seem ridiculous to you to connect these episodes with your work here at Scotland Yard, but I can assure you that to us who have known many of the young people, there is something—to use the word a young friend of mine,

Maurice Dimsdale, used at my sister's the other morning—*sinister* about these happenings.”

Sir Francis was puzzled at his friend's earnestness.

“Tell me what you mean.”

“I mean this. Just as many years ago there was a horrible sort of crusade going on amongst the lower orders in which Jack the Ripper went about mutilating bodies, so I am convinced that there is amongst us in society to-day some moral leper who is going about working for evil amongst the souls of our young people.”

The Chief Commissioner stared blankly across the desk at his visitor. Nightingale, as he remembered him, had always been a stolid but successful soldier, the last man in the world likely to embrace a fantastic theory on any subject. Yet he was obviously in earnest. He had something of the grim look in his face which the Chief Commissioner, who in those days had been a soldier, had seen one night when the field telephones near Mons broke down and his brigade was in danger.

“Have you any facts to go on, General?” he asked. “Anyone you suspect of slander-mongering or blackmail or anything of that sort?”

“I have no facts,” the other admitted, “and I have no definite suspicions. The more I consider the matter the more bewildered I become. I simply have the conviction that there is something wrong.”

There was a brief silence. The Chief Commissioner fingered his closely-cropped grey moustache and became official. He chose his words carefully.

“If that's all you can tell me, General,” he said, “I am afraid that at its present stage this matter is not one with which Scotland Yard can concern itself.”

General Nightingale nodded.

“I was afraid that you would say something like that,” he confessed. “On the other hand how can we advance it a stage? How can we move in the matter at all except with the help of the machinery which you possess—detectives and all that sort of thing?”

Sir Francis ignored his friend's lack of logic.

“You must remember,” he pointed out patiently, “that these broken engagements of which you speak consist, I presume, of young people drawn from different families and different parts of England.”

“That is so.”

“Then what common object could there be to induce any one person or group of persons to interfere malevolently in their affairs?”

“Hanged if I know,” the General admitted bluntly.

“If there is any definite agency at work,” the Chief Commissioner continued, “it must be the work of a madman. There is no possible motive

which would apply to all of them. My own opinion is that what you have told me is just an indication of the disquiet which reigns everywhere just now. We are still suffering from the aftermath of the war and our young people—well, they may be smarter and cleverer than we used to be, but they certainly are not so well balanced.”

“You don’t think you can help me at all then?”

“I shouldn’t know where to start,” Sir Francis confessed. “I could not possibly put any of my men on to an affair of this sort, especially just now. We are having a perfectly rotten time. Motor bandits using firearms and shooting our insufficiently protected policemen. Three murderers at large. A fresh burglary nearly every night. Those are definite crimes, you see, and the sort of crimes we are here to fight against. We could not possibly go off on such a fantastic quest as you suggest.”

The General sighed.

“Can’t say I am surprised at your decision,” he acknowledged. “I expected something of the sort. Still, just put yourself in my place for a moment. Imagine that you shared my conviction. What should you do?”

The Chief Commissioner’s face cleared. He had an idea.

“I’ll tell you what I should do,” he replied. “I shouldn’t bother about Scotland Yard at all. The affair has not reached a point at which we could intervene usefully. I should go and see this new firm of enquiry agents, or whatever they call themselves, *ADVICE LIMITED*, 12A Adam Street, Strand.”

“Never heard of them,” the General declared gruffly.

“Well, I have, and I can assure you of one thing—they have done some very clever work. I cannot give our secrets away and I won’t say more than that we came in touch with them over the Dover gold robbery and I was considerably impressed.”

“But who are they? Where is their office?”

“I tell you frankly,” Sir Francis confessed, “I have not the slightest idea myself as to who the principal is. They do most of their work quite secretly, but they are just the people to deal with an affair like yours. Here’s their address, anyhow.”

He tore off a sheet of paper from his memorandum block, scribbled upon it and handed it across the counter.

ADVICE LIMITED, 12A Adam Street.

“It is just at the corner of Adelphi Terrace,” he explained. “You will find it quite easily.”

The General accepted the paper and thrust it into his waistcoat pocket a little doubtfully.

“Can I say that you sent me to them?”

Allegorically speaking the Commissioner's hair stood on end.

"For God's sake—no! Don't mention my name whatever you do. This advice of mine is absolutely unofficial. Just ask to see their principal and state your case as you have stated it to me. If they take it up I must warn you of one thing—you will have to pay through the nose. . . . What about lunching at the club together? It's nearly one."

The General shook his head.

"Can't to-day," he regretted, preparing to take his leave. "I have a couple of ladies lunching at the Embassy. See you later in the week. . . ."

General Nightingale was an ardent pedestrian and he walked across the Park and up St. James's Street towards his destination. As he waited to cross Piccadilly a girl, driving a two-seater car, passed him. She waved her hand gaily and threw him a kiss. The General sighed as he returned the salute.

"Bluff," he murmured to himself. "Needn't have tried it with me. I am too old a hand to be taken in by forced gaiety. Damn that fellow Perceval!"

He was still fuming when he greeted his two guests—the Baroness Linz and his sister, Lady Witherley.

"You come to our little party, General, like a man to his own execution," Clara complained. "Is it that you do not like us this morning? My new costume does not please you?"

"My dears, I love you both, and your costumes are charming," the General declared. "To tell you the truth Mary Brattison passed me driving her car in Piccadilly. At one moment she was looking like a ghost and then comes a beaming smile and all that sort of thing. What it must cost a proud young woman like that to face all her friends as though nothing had happened!"

"You are a dear sympathetic man, General," the baroness sighed. "Myself, I wonder that someone does not do something about all these broken engagements."

Her host set down his cocktail glass and looked at his *vis-à-vis* with interest.

"My dear baroness," he observed, "I am just beginning to think the same thing myself."

Flora closed her vanity-case with a snap.

"But what can one do?" she asked. "I hate to see young people unhappy. The trouble with this last young couple is that they won't allow anyone to speak to them. Phillip dined with us quietly last night. You know what a dear sympathetic girl Maisie is, and Doris as a rule can make any man forget anything except herself! Neither of them could get him to say a word about Mary!"

"Dined with you?" the General repeated, a little surprised. "I fancied him half-way across Europe."

His sister shrugged her shoulders.

"I always think it is a stupid thing to do to run away from trouble," she said. "Maisie is so sympathetic and she seemed to quite cheer him up before he left. Temporary, of course, quite temporary, but if one can forget one's troubles in this world for a few minutes it is something. I fancy they are lurching here to-day."

The General looked speculatively at his empty glass.

"Well," he remarked, "I should have thought one of them might have cleared out. It can't be pleasant for either if they happen to meet."

Flora sighed plaintively.

"Young people get over those sort of things much quicker nowadays," she murmured.

"All the same," Clara Linz said with her delightful little foreign lisp, "I think that something ought to be done to see if there is anything behind this awful epidemic of broken engagements."

Their host ordered another round of cocktails. He determined to make confidantes of these two sympathetic women. He drew his chair a trifle nearer.

"I don't mind telling you both," he confided, "that I am entirely of your opinion. I think that something ought to be done. In fact, I made a blundering sort of effort this morning. I went down to Scotland Yard and had a talk with my friend Dobson, the Chief Commissioner."

They both looked at him in surprise.

"Scotland Yard!" Flora exclaimed. "Where on earth could they come in?"

"I cannot tell you," the General replied doggedly. "I only know that a remark of Maurice Dimsdale's the other day put it into my head. You remember, Flora? He remarked that there seemed to be something sinister about this long trail of broken engagements. Sinister is the word that struck me."

"It is terribly interesting," Flora meditated. "A most intriguing idea. But, Henry—none of these young people, so far as I can remember, were connected in any way. Some of them were not in the same set. How could there be any one influence at work that could affect them all?"

"That is what puzzled me," he admitted. "That is why my friend Dobson gave me the cold shoulder, I expect."

"Dear me, I don't know about this second cocktail," Flora declared, holding the glass firmly in her fingers and raising it to her lips. "Remember, Henry, I positively refuse to drink any wine for luncheon. That is my régime. Two cocktails—no wine. One cocktail—just half a glass, perhaps. One has to be so careful these days, especially with girls to look after who are watching you all the time!"

"I always think, my dear," the baroness observed, "that it is because you

are so human and yet so careful that you are so successful with all the young women you take under your wing. But, General,” she went on, “tell us about this police friend of yours. Did he refuse to help in any way?”

General Nightingale nodded.

“He just told me that it was not an affair for the law.”

“Did he offer no suggestions at all?” Flora asked.

“He advised me to go to a firm of private agents,” her brother confided. “I suppose that means detectives.”

“Any particular one?” Clara enquired.

The General produced a scrap of paper from his pocket-book and adjusted his eyeglass.

“Name of *ADVICE LIMITED*,” he announced. “Francis says that they have done some very good outside work and that someone connected with the firm is a very brilliant person. I thought of looking them up this afternoon.”

“*ADVICE LIMITED*,” Clara repeated. “I have heard them spoken of. They did something for one of the European governments. They are very clever, I believe, but they charge a great deal of money.”

“When I think of poor Mary’s face this morning,” the General sighed, “I feel that I would give all my small fortune willingly if that could help.”

Flora patted him on the shoulder.

“You are a dear, Henry,” she said affectionately. “You are always thinking about other people. I am afraid this is a rather Don Quixote enterprise, but if these people could really hold out any hope I think we all ought to club together and give something.”

“I would be glad to come in,” the baroness offered.

Their host rose to his feet.

“You are two sweet women,” he declared, “but the only thing we need to think about for the next hour is luncheon. Andrew has just signalled that our table is ready and I have a soldier’s appetite.”

Flora laid her fingers upon his arm with a gay little laugh as they climbed the stairs.

“This dear brother of mine is almost the shyest man I know,” she exclaimed. “I can feel him shivering at the idea of taking money from women, even though they are relatives. All the same I feel that we ought to help in an affair of this sort if there is anything to be done.”

Clara Linz said nothing, but her reflective smile was in its way acquiescent. As they took their places at the very desirable table reserved for them, one of General Nightingale’s young friends in a distant corner smiled enviously.

“Just like the old boy,” he confided to his companion. “An out-and-out old bachelor. Declares that he avoids the sex whenever he can and has the two best-looking women in London lunching with him!”

At four o'clock that afternoon, which he judged to be an auspicious hour for such a visit, General Nightingale was ushered into a small, charmingly furnished salon on the second floor of a house in Adam Street, at the corner of Adelphi Terrace. To his utter amazement he was greeted by Clara Linz.

"What on earth are you doing here?" he asked in astonishment.

"And you?" she enquired with a smile.

"No good beating about the bush so far as I am concerned," he replied. "I have come to consult this mysterious firm who call themselves ADVICE LIMITED."

"And I am here," she told him, "because I am ADVICE LIMITED."

The General flopped into a chair. He looked, as he felt, completely dazed.

"So this is your mysterious occupation," he muttered. "I have been told that you were everything from a Soviet spy to the secret head of M.I.7A at the Foreign Office!"

"And now you know the truth," she told him calmly. "I am the owner of a private enquiry office which, with the help of a few employees who never appear, I manage to run very successfully."

"God bless my soul!" the General exclaimed.

"Having got over the preliminaries," she suggested, "supposing we come to business."

"I—well, you know the business as well as I do."

"Perhaps I do," she admitted. "That may prove helpful. In any case you do not need to make a long statement. You know who I am now. If you still decide to trust me perhaps I might be of assistance."

"Of course I trust you," he declared. "But you don't mind my confessing that this has been a bit of a shock?"

"Not an unpleasant one, I hope," she observed. "The only difference, it seems to me, is that, knowing all I do, when I have asked you a few questions I ought to be able to get to work at once."

The General pulled down his waistcoat, straightened his tie and prepared to meet the situation.

"Go ahead with the questions, then," he begged.

"You say that a young friend of yours gave you this uneasy sense of there being something sinister at work to account for this large number of broken engagements," she reminded him. "What do you mean by 'something sinister'?"

"I have no idea," the General confessed. "I thought of blackmail, but I do not see the application. I thought of some super scandal-monger, but I cannot find a motive. I simply *feel* that there must be something at work underneath."

"You say that there have been seventeen broken engagements since

January,” Clara observed. “I suppose I must have heard about them, but I was not taking a professional interest in the matter then. Can you give me the names of the young people?”

The General rose to his feet and produced a sheet of paper.

“I thought you might ask that and I made out a list before I came,” he announced. “You will see that there are people in every walk of life—soldiers, sailors, politicians, landowners, members of the nobility—American girls, English girls, Scotch girls.”

“I want, if I may, to speak of Flora for a minute, General. You don’t mind?”

“Of course not.”

“She is in the habit, I believe,” his questioner went on, “of taking charge occasionally of young *débutantes* for the season—taking them to Court and placing them in society?”

“Quite true,” he admitted a little stiffly. “My sister is not very well off, and she finds it a pleasant way of adding to her income.”

“Quite a common one nowadays, I understand. Can you tell me whether any of the young girls whom she has looked after have suffered in this way?”

“Not to my knowledge,” the General answered. “In fact, I can assure you that they have not. On the contrary several, I think, have been very successfully married.”

“I must ask you this, General,” she continued, turning towards him again. “Was there any particular reason for your coming to consult me just now?”

“In a way there was,” he admitted. “The trouble between the last two young people on my list disturbed me personally more than any other. I am very fond of the young lady, Mary Brattison, and I like the young man.”

“Have you made any attempt to find out from them the cause of their broken engagement?” she asked. “You would be, I am sure, such a sympathetic sort of person to confide in,” she went on with a smile.

“I have,” he acknowledged. “I have been to Mary Brattison, but although I have known her since she was a baby she absolutely refused to exchange a single word with me on the subject. Her father, who is one of my oldest friends, declares that she is adamant on the subject, even with him. I then went to the young man, whom I have always considered one of the best-mannered young fellows I have ever known, and he practically told me to mind my own business!”

“That seems curious. As a rule in an affair of this sort one of the two think they have a grievance and they are only too glad to find a confidant.”

“It certainly was not so in this case,” he sighed. “Neither of them would have anything to do with me.”

Clara reflected for a few moments.

“What you want to find out,” she said, “is—to put it in a nutshell—whether there is any person or company of persons who are interested in breaking off marriages between thirty or forty people, none of whom were connected with one another, and, if there is, how they went about it.”

“Quite right,” the General admitted.

“Very well. I shall accept the case,” she announced. “If I succeed entirely you will have to pay the firm of ADVICE LIMITED five hundred guineas. If I fail it will only cost the fifty guineas which I shall have to ask you for to cover our preliminary enquiries.”

The General produced a cheque and also a fountain-pen from his pocket.

“Shall I make it payable to ADVICE LIMITED or to you?” he asked.

“To ADVICE LIMITED, if you please.”

The General sat down and wrote. When he had finished he glanced curiously around at the beautifully panelled walls, hung with a few choice etchings, and the bowl of red roses upon the table.

“I have never been in a private enquiry office or detective agency before,” he observed. “Are they all like this?”

“Not one of them,” the representative of ADVICE LIMITED assured him, as she blotted the cheque, handed over a receipt and rang the bell.

Clara, Baroness Linz, leaned back in the corner of her divan seat and laughed. She was dining that evening at a small but very select restaurant with the “show boy” of London, as he was nicknamed, and she was very much amused.

“My dear Freddy,” she said, “you are a very entertaining—what is the word, I wonder?—scapegrace, and I always find you a pleasant companion, but as to marrying you—why, it is too ridiculous!”

There was a sullen look upon the young man’s handsome face.

“Why?” he demanded. “We have always been good pals. We have been out together quite a great deal, especially lately, and I am sure we get on wonderfully.”

She shook her head.

“That may be true,” she admitted. “I find you a pleasant companion—yes. But—as a husband——”

“Well? Go on!”

“For one thing you are eight years younger than I am.”

“That’s of no consequence nowadays. You will admit, I hope, that I am very advanced for my years.”

“Far too much so,” she acknowledged dryly. “But there is another thing—forgive me—of even greater importance. You have no profession nor, so far as I know, any settled income. I am a very extravagant person. I owe bills now in

Paris, Vienna and Rome. I shall pay them, of course, but it would be more agreeable to me were my husband to do so."

"I am not a pauper," the young man assured her. "My mother makes me a very decent allowance and I have another bachelor uncle besides the General. They are both going to leave me their money."

"I do not think," Clara said coldly, "that I should care about waiting for that. I do not think either that I should care about living with a man who did nothing in life; and you must forgive me again if I sound rude, but I did not think that your mother's means would permit of her making you a sufficient allowance."

"How do you know what my mother's means are?" he asked.

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I do not know," she admitted. "I only understand, like other people, that your mother is compelled to add to her income by presenting *débutantes* at Court and looking after them generally."

"Well," he confided, "that's not such a bad egg. I have nearly a thousand a year of my own, anyhow, and my mother allows me four. Then, if we really need the money, they all tell me that I could make a fortune on the films."

Clara raised her eyebrows. There was a look of incredulity in her soft eyes.

"Four thousand a year," she repeated. "My dear Freddy, we will leave films alone, but I really do not see how your mother can afford to allow you a sum like that."

"It's quite true," he assured her. "Remember this, my mother is no fool and she only takes the girls of rich families. She gets a commission upon every one of them if they marry satisfactorily, as well as the usual fees for presenting and taking them around. She has had awful luck, of course, with the girls. In the last four seasons she married off ten of them. I won't tell you what she made out of the Moxendale young woman!"

"I had no idea," Clara meditated, "that your mother was such a clever woman."

"You won't give it away, will you?" he begged in sudden disquietude.

"Of course I will not," she promised. "Five thousand a year is quite a good income."

"We could manage upon it," he insisted eagerly, "even if you had very little."

"We will not discuss my means just yet. This divine waltz! Just one turn."

They danced for some time. Clara was inclined to be distraite. When they sat down again she leaned a little closer towards him. He responded almost fatuously. It was plain that she was impressed!

"Freddy," she said, "do you really think that there is any chance of Phillip Perceval taking a fancy to that little *débutante* of your mother's? Not Doris, of

course. The South African one, I mean. Maisie Soher her name is, I believe.”

“Shouldn’t be surprised,” the young man replied. “If it comes off we shall touch a cool ten thousand.”

Clara looked down in case he might see the gleam in her eyes.

“You are so clever, Freddy,” she murmured. “You get to know all about these things. What was the quarrel between Phillip and Mary?”

“I don’t know that there ever was one,” he confided. “It was just something he found out. A week-end visit of Mary Brattison’s, I think, that was on the fishy side. Somewhere down the river, I believe, but I never heard the details. Mary is a good-looking girl and I used to go about with her quite a good deal, but somehow or other she never attracted me. My uncle is crazy about her.”

“I always thought that she was quite a nice girl,” Clara remarked. “How delicious these quails are! You do know how to order a dinner, Freddy. I am afraid that appeals to a Viennese woman. We are always greedy.”

“I took special pains about this one, anyway,” was the gratified reply.

“When was this romance of Mary’s supposed to have taken place?” she asked.

“Oh, I don’t remember,” the young man confessed. “Why are you so curious?”

She caught the light of suspicion in his eyes and she patted the back of his hand.

“I am not really,” she assured him. “Perhaps I have been jealous of Mary! I rather wonder your mother has not married you off, Freddy, to one of these wonderful young heiresses.”

“She knows it is not any use trying,” he declared. “I hate *ingénues* anyway. I have not looked at any woman, Clara, since I danced with you at the Embassy that night three or four months ago.”

“I remember quite well,” she said coolly. “I had to turn you out of the house when I allowed you to come in for a drink.”

He flushed angrily.

“Never mind about that,” he begged. “Any fellow would have lost his head about you that night. Couldn’t you please make up your mind?”

She lit a cigarette and laughed at him.

“I shall have to be an awful long time thinking it over,” she warned him. “A flirtation is very pleasant but marriage is serious.”

“How long?”

She gathered up her belongings, waited until her companion had paid the bill and rose to her feet. There was an unanalysable smile about her lips.

“You can ask me again next month,” she said, “if you still feel like it.”

At four o’clock on the date arranged General Nightingale presented himself

at the house in Adam Street and found Clara prepared to receive him.

“Any news for me, baroness?” he asked.

“Yes,” she admitted. “I have a certain amount of information for you.”

The General was taken aback. He had thought over his visit once or twice during the week and had come to the conclusion that it was absurd to expect any corroboration of Maurice Dimsdale’s vague remark. He leaned forward in his chair.

“Do you mean that you have discovered some link between all these untoward happenings?” he demanded. “Do you mean that there has been some mischief-maker at work?”

“There has certainly been some very serious mischief-making,” she assented. “I have only gone into one of the cases—the most recent one—but from the nature of its solution I have no doubt that all the others, or the greater part of them at any rate, are to be accounted for in a similar manner.”

The General was not diplomat enough to conceal his surprise.

“Do you mean that we are going to get to the bottom of this?” he exclaimed in some excitement. “Do you really mean that you have definite information to offer me?”

“I have, indeed,” she confessed. “I am afraid you will not appreciate it very much, but, of course, you took that risk when you came here. We generally succeed. I should not have taken your case if I had not thought that we should.”

“You said just now that you only investigated one of the most recent cases. Do you mean the affair of Mary Brattison and Perceval?”

“That is the one which ADVICE LIMITED has investigated.”

“And you can explain it?”

“Perfectly well.”

“God bless my soul!” he muttered.

“I presume that you want to know the truth,” she proceeded. “You will have to pay for the investigations, anyhow, so you may as well know the result.”

Then for a moment General Nightingale hesitated. He had a curious indefinite premonition of tragedy. The woman’s tone was level, her manner was composed, yet to him she had the air of one who might be capable at any moment of wielding thunderbolts. He felt an ignoble temptation to pick up his hat, to hand over the cheque which she might ask for and hurry out with his hands over his ears. Even then he had no definite prescience of what was to come.

“Do you suppose that I came here for nothing, baroness?” he asked, and as the words left his lips he was surprised at the sound of his own voice, which seemed to have developed a new harshness. “I shall pay what you demand for

your investigations. I expect to hear everything.”

Clara had the air of a woman about to embark upon an unpleasant task. Her voice was softer. She avoided looking at her client.

“The rupture of the engagement between Captain Perceval and the young lady,” she went on, “was due to the fact that someone brought to Captain Perceval a sheet cut out from the hotel visitors’ book of a smart but somewhat notorious little hotel in the Thames district. The entry on that sheet indicated that Miss Brattison had stayed at the hotel in question one night early in the year and had occupied communicating rooms with a rather well-known young man-about-town. The numbers of the rooms were given and the fact that there was a single bathroom between the two made apparent.”

The General was a clean-minded man and he shivered.

“Mary Brattison!” he exclaimed. “My God, it’s impossible!”

“That was the cause of the rupture of the engagement, General,” she assured him.

“And Perceval was fool enough to believe it?”

“The evidence was somewhat conclusive and the handwriting of the two young people indisputable,” was the grave reply. “This younger world nowadays have got into the habit of going great lengths. . . . Now shall I tell you what really happened?”

There was a gleam of hope in the General’s eager monosyllable:

“Yes!”

“Miss Brattison was there with a somewhat gay party on the date indicated. The head waiter, an Italian, who, by the by, has been in prison in his own country, brought them a visitors’ book when they were all feeling very pleased with themselves after dinner, and begged them to sign it. They signed, thinking that the book was simply what it appeared to be—a register of people who had visited the place. Afterwards the sheet was tampered with. The numbers of the bedrooms and other incriminating particulars were added. The sheet was cut out by this waiter and later it came into the possession of Captain Perceval.”

“A foul blackmailing trick!” the General cried. “Thank God we have a chance to clear the thing up!”

“It will cost you a great deal to clear it up, General,” she warned him.

“Money be damned,” was the indignant rejoinder. “If it costs me my whole fortune—”

“It will cost you more than your fortune.”

The old apprehensions were back again. He stared at her. It seemed to him that everything else in the room faded away, that he could see only that queer, sympathetic lightening of her grave face. Pity! How in life he had always scorned pity!

“It was a plot, General,” she disclosed reluctantly, “and a disgraceful one. I

am rather sorry that you came to us, but since you came you must know the truth. The plot was conceived and carried out by your sister, the Countess of Witherley, and her son, your nephew.”

The General gripped the arms of his high-backed chair. He was almost speechless, but it seemed to him somehow or other now that the blow had fallen that he had already been dimly groping amongst the mists of suspicion.

“Go on,” he groaned.

“Lady Witherley has done something of the same sort to others. She and her son have been very clever schemers. I dare say you know that in addition to her usual fees she gets a very large commission upon any *débutante* she marries suitably. Four of her *débutantes* at different times have been married to men whose love affairs she has interfered with in some subtle fashion or other and who have become easy victims afterwards. Here and there men have escaped, of course—gone abroad, turned against all women, however subtle their wiles. In other cases she has succeeded. She was apparently on the point of success with Captain Perceval. Our reports go on to prove that since the breaking off of his engagement he has been a frequent visitor at your sister’s house and that he has been seen often in company with one of her principal *débutantes* whom she is presenting next month.”

The General covered his face with his hands. It never occurred to him to doubt one word of what this woman had said. Her voice was like the voice of Fate itself. Besides, he knew his nephew and he was not nearly so sure as he would like to have been about Flora!

“You must allow me—you must excuse me for one moment,” he begged.

She affected to be busy with some papers. When she looked up the General was standing by her side, his cheque-book in his hand.

“Baroness,” he said, “I thank you and your firm for their good offices. Be so kind as to hand me such proofs as you possess of this shameful story and if you will permit me the use of that pen your cheque is here.”

She produced a small packet of which he took careful possession. He wrote the cheque and passed it to her. For the first time to any client she extended her hand. There was sympathy shining out of her eyes.

“I am sorry, General,” she assured him as she touched the bell, “but you yourself drew down the thunders.”

On the fringe of Flora Witherley’s informal before-dinner gathering the General stood waiting. He spoke to no one, he refused the cocktails which were being freely handed round. There was the usual quantity of chaff and badinage to which he appeared to be deaf. In the midst of all the gaiety Flora happened to catch a glimpse of her brother’s face and she felt a cold shiver of apprehension. She remembered suddenly that on his arrival he had begged her

to cut short the party as soon as possible. She summoned Freddy to her side.

"The old man wants to talk to us," she whispered. "I am afraid you will have to hurry them off a bit."

Freddy made a grimace.

"What does he want?" he demanded sulkily. "Clara promised to come in later on."

He glanced across towards his uncle and suddenly he too felt something of his mother's apprehension. The latter raised her voice a little.

"All you darling people," she said. "I am so sorry but we are going to the theatre to-night. I shall have to clear you out. To-morrow evening at the same time."

They drifted away pleasantly and easily, with leave-takings curtailed after the modern fashion—a chattering, slangy, good-hearted little company. The time came when the General was alone with his sister and nephew. He drew them into the inner apartment where the cocktails were mixed and closed the door behind him. Then apprehension turned into chill fear, for he stood facing them both, and before he opened his lips there were terrible things to be read in his eyes.

In less than half an hour the General had returned to his own bachelor abode. Almost before Groves, his attentive butler, touched his overcoat he asked a feverish question.

"Anyone called, Groves?"

"Miss Mary Brattison is in your study, sir. She said that she had come in response to a note of yours."

The door bell rang almost as he finished speaking.

"If that is Captain Perceval," the General ordered, "show him into the study at once."

"Certainly, sir," the man assented. "I rather fancy that it may be the captain, sir. I saw his car turn out of Queen Street as you came in."

The General made his way to the study. He was very fond of Mary Brattison and his heart ached, not so much at the change in her appearance as for the brave effort at gaiety with which she greeted his entrance.

"You dear man!" she exclaimed. "But how dare you compromise me in this fashion—asking me to come and visit a dangerous bachelor like you, for instance, just as I am supposed to be nursing a broken heart!"

He took her hands and held them tightly.

"Mary," he said, "I want you to promise me that you will stay just where you are—never mind who might happen to come."

The colour slowly left her cheeks.

"What do you mean?" she demanded with a catch in her throat.

There was a knock at the door. The butler stood just inside the room announcing a visitor.

“Captain Perceval, sir.”

The man and the girl stood facing one another. For a single moment something of eager suppressed joy seemed to flash backwards and forwards between them. Then a steely light gleamed in the girl’s eyes. The man drew himself up but the General manœuvred his way between them and the door.

“You two young people,” he said, “need not speak to one another for the moment. They call me a silent man but I am going to do the talking here. You trust me—both of you?”

Even the two affirmatives seemed reluctantly spoken. They were honest, though. There was not a person in the world who did not trust Henry Nightingale.

“I want you both to remember,” he continued, “that the few words I am going to say to you are the most painful to me personally that I have ever spoken. I am a humiliated and ashamed old man—I who have always tried to hold my head high amongst my fellows. Think of that and be kind.”

All the smaller angers and jealousies and suspicions of the moment seemed to fade away. There must be something behind this—something vital. They both turned eagerly towards him. Then he told his story. With shaking fingers he unrolled the sheet which had been cut from the hotel book. He pointed to the numbers of the rooms.

“Forgeries,” he announced quietly, but in a tone which carried irresistible conviction. “There are no rooms of these numbers in the hotel. Forgeries committed by my nephew, my sister’s son. They are worse than forgeries. They are the keynote of a diabolical plot. Listen. Listen.”

The General was known as a bad after-dinner speaker. He had once been asked to stand for Parliament but after his first effort at oratory the matter had been dropped. Yet at this moment he seemed gifted with a strange power of lucidity. Not one word too much. Not one word of exaggeration. No help from adjectives. The plain truth. Before he had finished, the two were in one another’s arms, each trying to sob out the pain of their hearts. The General stood very upright. His face seemed thinner. He had very much the air of a lay bishop.

“Please listen—please be guided by me. I am an old man and this has been a shock.”

They were by his side in a moment. He kissed Mary on the cheek. He shook hands with Perceval. He rang the bell.

“Will you two please do all that I ask?” he pleaded. “I can see that you will. Take her away, Phillip, and stay with her. Never mind if either of you have engagements. Take her out and dine somewhere and dance afterwards

and forget it all. I should look for a registry office if I were you within the next day or two, but take her away now.”

For the first time his voice trembled and they hesitated.

“I am afraid you are not well, sir,” Perceval said.

“Couldn’t you come with us?” Mary whispered. “We could show you how happy two stupid young people can be. It would take a lifetime to say how grateful we are, but one might try.”

He wrung their hands. Groves appeared on the threshold. The General waved his feverish farewell.

“The door, Groves,” he ordered. “Drive carefully, young fellow,” he enjoined. “I saw you going down to Ranelagh yesterday afternoon and two police officers looking after you!”

“No fear now, sir,” Perceval assured him joyously. “With Mary to look after I doubt whether I shall ever appear in the police courts again!”

They were gone. The glorious selfishness of youth and love had engulfed them and they forgot everything but their two selves. In the study the General sank back into his favourite chair. He heard their car start off, then the outside sounds seemed to die away. When Groves returned half an hour later the room was in darkness. He turned on the light. As he told Harrison, the General’s valet, in the course of the night’s gossip, he had the start of his life, for it seemed to him that it was the General’s ghost that sat in the chair, the ghost of a man who had already passed through the agonies of death.

“Harrison has prepared your bath, sir,” he announced respectfully. “It is a little after your usual time.”

The General rose to his feet. He had faced trouble in his life. He knew too how to walk proudly through the valley of humiliation.

“I’m coming at once, Groves,” he said. “I had other ideas but I have changed my mind. I shall be dining at the club.”

TOO MANY DUKES

It was the spring sunshine and the tang of a southwesterly breeze through the open port window which induced Clara, Baroness Linz, to leave the privacy of *cabine de luxe* No. 14 and mount to the deck. It was perhaps chance which induced the officious seaman who brought her a chair to place it next to a solitary young man who was seated gazing gloomily over the rails towards the receding coastline. It was, without a doubt, sheer curiosity which induced Clara to remove for a moment the coloured glasses which she always wore in the sunshine to glance at the coronet upon the worn brown leather dressing-case which reposed upon the deck by the side of her neighbour. She looked away again almost at once and there was no sign of interest in her face. Nevertheless, what she had seen provided her with matter for speculation at various periods during the remainder of the voyage.

“Madame desires a light, perhaps?” the young man asked a few minutes later, realising that she was in trouble with her cigarette.

Madame accepted the courtesy and leaned a trifle forward. One felt that nothing but his innate good breeding kept the admiration from the young man’s eyes when he realised that he was seated next to a very beautiful woman.

“We shall have a pleasant crossing, I imagine,” she remarked as she thanked him.

“If the fog which threatens does not approach,” he agreed. “The sea is too calm for this time of the year. It is sometimes deceptive.”

The conversation, never thoroughly launched, languished. The young man, however, appeared also to have developed some instinct of curiosity. Through his immovable eyeglass he stared at the label neatly attached to his companion’s small jewel-case. The printed letters were clearly visible.

“You will pardon me,” he ventured, “but in glancing at your satchel I discover an address in Adam Street, London.”

“That is where I live,” Clara acknowledged.

“You will forgive my interest,” he continued, “but I am not well acquainted with your city. To tell you the truth I have been advised to call upon someone in Adam Street in connection with the purpose of my visit to London. Perhaps you would be kind enough to indicate in what direction this Adam Street is situated.”

“You will find it without difficulty,” she assured him. “It is a turning off

the street which runs down to the Adelphi Terrace. Every taxicab driver knows it.”

“I am exceedingly obliged,” he acknowledged. “I am also,” he added, “somewhat surprised to find that it is also a domiciliary neighbourhood. The address which I was given in Adam Street was the address of an enquiry office which I imagined might lie more in the direction of the city.”

She smiled with sufficient indifference.

“The enquiry office you have in mind is doubtless the one conducted under the name of *ADVICE LIMITED*,” she observed.

“It is a famous firm, madame?” he queried.

“They have an excellent reputation,” she replied.

Her lack of curiosity seemed for the moment to intrigue him. He looked at her thoughtfully.

“One imagines, madame,” he remarked, with a slight hesitation, “that you yourself are not English?”

She shook her head.

“I am English by birth, Austrian by marriage, a cosmopolitan from habit,” she told him. “As a place of residence, however, I prefer London to any other city. But for its climate I should probably be a permanent resident there.”

He shivered as though the idea repelled him. Although the day was mild he was wearing a heavy, fashionably cut travelling-coat with a band of crape upon the arm. The rest of his attire was also black—the meticulous mourning of the bereaved Frenchman. His cheeks were sallow and inclined to be puffy. There were lines under his eyes which were not altogether natural. He had, without doubt, a certain air of distinction but his appearance was not wholly agreeable.

“You surprise me very much, madame,” he said. “I should have imagined that Paris——”

“There is no Paris,” she interrupted. “The circle has shrunken and shrunken until it has become too small. One cannot breathe in the atmosphere of the few French people who are left. It is a beautiful city but it is no part of France.”

“There is, alas, truth in what madame says,” the young man lamented.

“We have, without a doubt, mutual acquaintances in the faubourg,” she remarked.

The young man took up a novel which had been lying by his side and settled himself farther back in his chair.

“Without a doubt, madame,” he assented courteously, but with his eyes already seeking the printed page.

Clara stared at him for a moment, permitted herself a faint unheard gasp and took up her own paper. She had been treated like an inquisitive and intruding tourist. She had been “put in her place” by a young man whom she suspected to be one of the scapegraces of Europe. The humour of the situation,

however, prevailed over its irritation. Presently she rose and strolled off. The young man read on undisturbed.

A stout, dark woman with almost painfully brilliant eyes and the smudge of a moustache upon her upper lip leaned forward to her companion as Clara disappeared from sight. She was seated upon a bench a few yards away.

“Monseigneur does not trouble himself about the woman,” she remarked. “That one, too, she was beautiful.”

“She had also distinction,” her companion, a man of the same type, agreed.

“She possesses an air of familiarity,” the formidable-looking lady ruminated. “Somewhere she has been pointed out to me. She brings into my mind a sense of danger.”

The man scrutinised his neighbour calmly. His face was almost as hard as hers, his deep-set eyes as bright. At first sight they seemed to be an ordinary bourgeois couple—probably tradespeople engaged in a voyage of commerce. Afterwards one might have been inclined to change one’s impressions.

“It is not like you, Hortense,” he observed, “to have ideas.”

“If I had no ideas,” she scoffed, “we might be living in another world by now! Henri, my lamb, we move slowly. It is not that I am nervous but we are surrounded by matters which need consideration. Walk slowly around the deck, come back to me and report. Amongst other things I would like to know whether the beautiful lady has descended.”

He grumbled a little but he did her bidding. With his hands thrust deep down in his overcoat pockets, so deep that he could feel something hard in the inner recesses of one of them, he made a complete revolution of the deck. His walk was inclined to be a strut. His expression was amiable but self-important. More than ever he looked the prosperous shopkeeper. One could picture him bowing to a patron from behind the counter of a jeweller’s shop, or standing in welcoming fashion upon the threshold of a tailoring establishment. One could imagine him seated behind a desk in an office of prosperous appearance writing cheques—good fat cheques—or with the menu in his hand at a popular restaurant ordering with care the repast of a connoisseur with healthy appetite. He had nothing of the air of a cocktail bar lounge. One could figure him peering at the rich dishes presented by a respectful maître d’hôtel and criticising the flavour of a stout bottle of wine.

“Madame,” he reported to his companion, “remains at the farther end of the deck. Monseigneur is apparently engrossed in his book. Nothing changes.”

“And the others—little Armand and the woman?”

“One believes that they have not mounted.”

From far away ahead, where the shores of England lay under a glimmering haze, there came the faint shriek of a siren. The woman puckered her brows

and turned around. The man walked to the rail and came back.

"It is a trifle of mist," he announced. "Fortunately it has not a serious appearance. We shall have landed before it spreads."

The woman, notwithstanding her fur coat, shivered.

"*Grand Dieu!*" she exclaimed. "We spend all our time travelling northwards. If we could but seek the sun!"

"*C'est les affaires,*" the man muttered.

Clara, Baroness Linz, saw ahead in the distance the grey mists thickening upon the water and heard behind them the sirens calling. The bells from the engine-room rang and the race of the Channel steamer through the water was finished. Already they were going at half-speed. With a little grimace she turned round, passed through the open door and descended the companionway. As she approached the door of her cabin a stout, powerful-looking man, his hands thrust into his overcoat pockets, the remains of a cigar in his mouth, stepped aside to allow her to pass. Something about his appearance struck her as being familiar and she looked at him with some curiosity. His restless eyes appraised and admired her. He ogled her shamelessly. There were glimmerings of a smile upon her lips as she passed into the seclusion of *cabine de luxe* No. 14. She rang the bell for the steward.

"Would a champagne cocktail be drinkable, Francis?" she asked him.

He smiled confidently. The baroness was a well-known and valued client.

"I will see to it myself, your ladyship," he promised her. "The last time I left it to the barman. A dry biscuit too?"

She nodded and the man hurried away. She glanced out of the large square porthole at the thin vaporous fog, examined her face in the glass and found nothing to correct.

"A dull voyage," she remarked to the man when he returned with her cocktail.

"Might have been worse, your ladyship," he told her cheerfully. "We have only just missed the fog. It is coming along now, but a bit too late to do us any harm. I have arranged with your maid about the baggage."

She nodded, paid her bill and tipped him, as usual, munificently. Faint little wisps of mist were stealing now and then through the window. She leaned over to close it but suddenly paused. She was always a curious woman and she listened. Someone was speaking in the next cabin.

"Port harbour light on the last train signal. Starboard on the castle. *Le bon Dieu*, what an agony!"

The occupants of that next cabin, *cabine de luxe* No. 16, appeared to have discovered a new form of amusement. All the time the woman, bareheaded but

with her fur coat fastened tightly around her, stood at the porthole window muttering to herself.

“Port harbour light on the last train signal. Starboard on the castle. If only Bouvard would hurry!”

The young man, her companion, who had risen from his chair and was looking over her shoulder, suddenly called out. His delicate white forefinger with its glittering ring—platinum with a green stone—flashed upwards.

“Bouvard must have failed!” he cried. “Something has happened! We do not move.”

The woman, too, strained forward. It was true. The engines had either ceased or they had become inaudible. The sea was rippling gently by the side of the ship below but the curling wisps of mist had become stationary. The woman leaned farther forward, beautiful after a certain fashion with her red hair, her delicately preserved cream-coloured skin, but with the lines of middle age already asserting themselves. Away in the distance, it was true, the faint outline of the shore was dimly visible, but straight ahead the curtain had fallen. Barely a hundred yards distant was a dense wall of fog and behind it nothing but the screaming of sirens. The young man wiped his forehead. He was slim, typically Parisian with his elegantly controlled waist, his carefully draped tie, his closely cropped moustache, his modish linen and jewellery. He was not of the type, however, which had fought at Verdun. Even the sight of that bank of fog seemed to have reduced him to a state of terror.

“It is the evil one himself who mocks us,” he babbled incoherently. “How shall we be able to see the land? And Bouvard—he must have failed us.”

The woman threw a scornful glance at him.

“Bouvard does not fail,” she said. “He told us to remember that it would be towards the end when people were gathering together their belongings. It is just as well that he has not hastened. They might have searched the cabins.”

The young man was in bad shape. He wiped the glistening beads of perspiration from his forehead with a scented handkerchief.

“If one could only feel oneself safe on land,” he muttered. “Safe anywhere in London.”

“You forget,” she reminded him. “We are not going to London.”

He groaned.

“What misery!” he exclaimed. “A grim English hotel—the waiting around—the risk. The game is not worth the candle. Let us throw this thing overboard,” he added, touching a large but flimsy paper parcel with his foot and upsetting ruthlessly what seemed to be a plant with stiff green leaves enclosed in a wicker-work cage. “Let us change cabins.”

“And betray Bouvard!” the woman cried contemptuously. “Armand, you are not a man.”

"It is my nerves," he moaned.

"I thought that they might fail you in a crisis," she said, and there was a hard light now in her brown eyes. "But listen. They shall not fail you now or if they do it will be the end. Drink some more of the brandy. Gain courage somehow. This is an affair already commenced. There is no drawing back. The fog will make not so much difference. Sooner or later we must move, and when we do, enough will be visible."

The young man drank from the tumbler which stood upon the table. It contained neat brandy but he drank it greedily.

"You should have been a man, Lucie," he muttered.

"I should have made a better one than you," was the bitter retort.

He drew himself up, but words died upon his lips. There was a knock at the door, a harsh, peremptory summons. The woman crossed the room, her movements disclosing a curious feline grace. One might have divined that she was of that breed who love danger for its own sake.

"Who is there?" she enquired in a tone of unexpected sweetness. "I have already told the steward that monsieur is suffering and we do not wish to be disturbed."

"It is Bouvard. Open!" was the sharply spoken rejoinder.

She drew the bolt and opened the door without hesitation. The stout man who had been strutting about the upper deck stepped in. He was smoking a freshly lit cigar. His eyes seemed more brilliant than ever. He had the air of a man engaged in an enterprise every moment of which brought happiness. The young man—there was a duke's coronet upon his dressing-case but the name on his passport was Armand de Boncourt—sank trembling into a chair. His presence to the other two became for the moment negligible.

"Success?" the woman asked swiftly.

"It is not Henri Bouvard who fails," he boasted. "Tell that little rabbit to close the window. It will be time enough to open it when we are going again. He can busy himself also with the parcel. The branch of the plant there must be attached in an upright position to the cork."

The young man was incapable of movement. The woman leaned over and closed the window.

"I changed my plans," the newcomer continued. "As usual, luck favoured me. The fog threatened and he and I were left alone. After that, it was easy. I confess, however, that I did not reckon upon complete stoppage. My fear is that Challes will find time now for action. If so, and he has word with the captain, there may be a search before we proceed. I ask myself what is best."

The man's words were alarming enough in their suggestion. The woman, however, merely reflected.

"What have you done with—with it?" she asked.

“The dressing-case I disposed of through the porthole in the lavatory,” he replied. “It will not be easily found. The box is here.”

It appeared that Monsieur Bouvard’s corpulence was not altogether a substantial thing for from underneath his two coats he produced a very sizeable-looking, though flat, tin box. It was no sooner in the woman’s hands than she commenced to wrap it up in a piece of matting which had lain upon the table.

“The immediate trouble might be,” she said, listening to footsteps outside, “if anyone insists upon entering. What would two wealthy passengers in a *cabine de luxe* want with a thing like that?”

She pointed contemptuously to the untidy looking bundle. The man stroked his chin thoughtfully. For a single moment his confidence seemed to waver.

“It was such a wonderful scheme too,” he reflected.

“Imbécile!” she exclaimed furiously. “You men grow more *lâche* every day. I am sorry that I spoke. There is poor little Armand shivering with what he calls nerves. What is that indeed but rank cowardice? Here are you, even you, deliberating—Zut! *Je me fiche de vous deux!* We take our risks. We stay as we are, Henri, until the engines beat again and we carry out our plans exactly as they were made. See here.”

She picked up a tumbler and half filled it with brandy from the bottle which stood upon the table. Bouvard accepted it with a chuckle.

“I drink to you, my beautiful,” he said. “It is not courage I need. I pause only to reflect upon what is best. Some day, mark you, I shall take you away from this little rabbit. You please me. Madame and I have squabbled for long enough.”

He leaned towards her and put his arm around her shoulders. She gave him her lips without hesitation.

“So,” he said with a deep sigh. “I shall take you like this when the time comes and the little rabbit there can do what he pleases. Once more—success!”

He drank from the tumbler. She followed his example with a laugh. This, after all, was the sort of man she understood.

The young man, ushered in by the saturnine-looking butler, entered Clara’s charming little sitting-room with a bow and stood with his hat in his hand. He was obviously very much shaken, but a young man with precise manners.

“I wish,” he confided, “an immediate interview with the principal of your firm. You have my card. I am the Duc de Challes.”

Clara, who was wearing heavy spectacles and had established herself with her back to the light, waved him to a chair.

“To all effects and purposes, duke,” she told him, “you can look upon me as the head of the firm.”

The young man frowned slightly.

“Mine is not a trivial affair,” he warned her. “It is an affair which demands the immediate attention of the best brains in your organisation. It is of great importance and it would surely save time if I were allowed to state my own case.”

“We have our methods,” Clara rejoined smiling, “and please forgive my assuring you that they cannot be changed. You must explain the business to me.”

The young man recognised finality and took a chair.

“I was robbed yesterday afternoon,” he announced, “of half a million pounds’ worth of jewels on the steamboat between Calais and Dover.”

Clara inclined her head sympathetically.

“There were rumours of a great theft in the papers this morning,” she murmured. “I have heard no particulars.”

“The particulars are simple,” the duke explained. “I inherited these jewels from my aunt, the late head of our house. They were handed over to me as my inheritance by the lawyers on Monday. I was to bring them to London at once to have them displayed at your great sales-rooms—Messrs. Christie’s. During the crossing from Calais to Dover they were stolen.”

“In what fashion?”

“I was seated on deck,” the duke continued, “with my small articles of luggage—including a bag which contained the jewels—by my side. We ran into a mist and nearly all the other passengers descended to the saloon. I was suddenly attacked from behind and received a severe blow on the head. I try to put this in as few words as possible. The end was this. I did not see my assailant to recognise him. When I recovered my breath and my head ceased to swim, the bag containing the jewels had gone and I was alone.”

“Very simple so far,” Clara observed. “Exactly what did you do when you discovered your loss?”

“We were in the middle of a bank of mist and they refused to permit me to speak to the captain. The purser, however, promised that no one should be allowed to leave the boat at Dover until they had passed through the Customs and that a rigorous search should be made through everyone’s hand baggage. I was obliged to be content with this. The search was made without result. There was no trace of the jewels.”

“Did you enter into communication in any way with the Dover police?” she enquired. “They have the reputation of being a very clever force.”

“Five minutes after the purser had told me that the search had been in vain and that he could detain the passengers no longer, I left my own luggage in the care of my servant and went to the police station,” the duke recounted. “I found the chief of the police most intelligent. He told me that there had been

one or two cases in his time of thefts on board steamers and the—how is it you call it?—the booty thrown overboard in something which would float and returned for afterwards. Accordingly, I hired a motor boat and went out, as near as I could possibly guess, to the spot where I was attacked. It was still misty but after about an hour's search we found my dressing-case empty and the box which had contained the jewels attached to the wicker cage of a lobster pot—also empty.”

“Indicating,” Clara reflected, “the fact that the jewels had probably been thrown overboard attached in some fashion to this wicker basket and the thieves, or their accomplices, had been lying in wait in a motor boat.”

“It is possible,” the duke admitted. “Through the mist we could hear at times the hooting of a siren. The police are keeping a strict watch along the coast for any motor boat that might have been concerned.”

Clara, who was deeply interested, leaned across towards her visitor.

“Was there anyone on board who to your knowledge was aware of the fact that you were taking the jewels across?”

The duke hesitated.

“There was a relative of mine,” he acknowledged, “a young man, very feeble in his head and anæmic, who probably knew. We do not converse. There was, however, some question of his having a claim to the succession. French law is, as you may be aware, peculiar and one of the reasons why my aunt transferred her property into jewels and insisted upon them being hastened into my possession on the day of her death was her fear that my cousin Armand might successfully contest my claim. She was a woman of spirit and she had a great contempt for Armand.”

“He was on the boat, was he?” Clara meditated.

“He was on the boat, but it would be the height of absurdity to suggest that he could have come up and given me a blow on the head sufficient to make me half unconscious. He would never have had the courage or the strength for such an exploit.”

“He may have had an accomplice,” she suggested.

The duke shrugged his shoulders.

“Whoever it may have been who was responsible for the conspiracy my cousin would have been quite capable of it if someone else did the work and ran the risk. How did they dispose of the jewels? That is what I want to know.”

“I will study the facts,” Clara promised, “and report to you to-morrow. You are staying in London?”

“At Claridge’s Hotel,” was the somewhat gloomy reply. “I hope you will bear in mind the fact that with every minute which passes the chances of escape on the part of the criminals become more favourable.”

“I shall not waste time,” she assured him.

“In this case,” Clara reflected, as she mounted the gangway of the Channel steamer upon its return journey, “Scotland Yard has the facts, I have the ideas! I wonder!”

The first half-hour upon the boat was one of disappointment to Clara, Baroness Linz. There was no one amongst the passengers who resembled anyone she had ever seen before. She had better fortune, however, when she descended to the cabins. Walking up and down the corridor the picture of misery and despair was the elegant but dissipated young man who had occupied *cabine de luxe* No. 16 with the flamboyant-looking lady of the previous crossing! He appeared to be in the depths of depression and also in the throes of a nervous attack. His china-blue eyes were bloodshot, the cigarette he was attempting to smoke hung limply from his twitching lips. Nevertheless, from sheer habitude, he watched with obvious admiration the approach of a very beautiful woman. Clara, as she entered her cabin, looked over her shoulder and smiled. . . .

The voyage had commenced. Already they were passing out of the harbour. Clara threw off her furs and made herself comfortable upon the lounge. She had left the door ajar and she noticed with satisfaction that the footsteps outside had ceased. Presently there was a timid tapping. The door was pushed an inch or two wider open. The young man—a very timid boulevardier—peered in.

“Come in,” she invited pleasantly. “You were in the next cabin yesterday, were you not? You have had as short a stay in England as I have.”

She swung round and made room for him by her side. He bowed and accepted her invitation. Clara became aware of an overwhelming waft of perfume irresistibly reminiscent of the Rue de la Paix. The young man with delicate white fingers toyed with the pearl which held in its place a mauve tie of rich silk.

“I remember madame, of course,” he acknowledged. “No one who had seen her could fail to do so.”

“Are you going to pay me compliments?” she laughed. “The voyage then will be so much the shorter.”

“Alas,” he sighed, “my heart is full of much that I would say but I am in terrible despair.”

She looked at him with exquisitely simulated interest.

“You distress me,” she said. “Despair? It is not possible,” she added, as though the idea had suddenly occurred to her, “that you are connected in any way with the jewel robbery which took place yesterday?”

Once more he sighed deeply.

“Alas, madame,” he admitted, “I am the victim.”

“You?” she exclaimed. “I thought that the jewels belonged to the Duc de Challes.”

He coughed. He had perhaps been indiscreet.

“I am the Duc de Challes,” he announced boldly.

“You surprise me,” Clara confessed. “The Duc de Challes was pointed out to me upon the boat. He had not the appearance or presence of monsieur, although he was taller. He was, too, of a different complexion.”

“That was my cousin,” the young man confided bitterly. “He calls himself the Duc de Challes although the title is by right mine. He helped himself to the jewels which were also mine. Through his carelessness they are lost. I am ruined. Madame, there has been treachery somewhere!”

“What you are telling me,” she reflected, “seems very strange. Do I understand that you both call yourselves the Duc de Challes?”

He shook his head.

“During my aunt’s lifetime,” he said, “I humoured her whims. I called myself the Marquis de Boncourt, which is one of our minor titles.”

“One understands, however,” Clara continued, with an air of sympathetic interest, “that it was from your cousin that the jewels were stolen.”

The young man coughed. It was perhaps borne upon him faintly that he was talking too much. The eyes of madame, however, were so delightfully sympathetic!

“It is a complicated story,” he explained. “I followed my cousin on to the boat. It was my intention to have taken him by the throat and to have demanded the return of my property. Before I could find an opportunity of doing so, however, the theft took place. The jewels have gone! Worse than that, I—the Marquis de Boncourt, to whom they justly belong—am a pauper!”

“It is all very confusing,” Clara acknowledged.

The young man sighed. He was gazing out of the porthole. Once more he was fingering his beautiful mauve tie.

“If one had the courage,” he murmured. “If I dared, madame, what happiness it would give me to tell you the story.”

“I would love to hear it,” she admitted.

“The details—no,” he began after a moment’s reflection. “Madame can imagine them for herself. I came on board yesterday with a friend—no, not a friend—a tradesman of the bourgeois class who has acted as my banker for years. We were firmly determined to possess ourselves of my property. I have been a soldier, madame, and I know how to deal with a crisis. We confronted my cousin with his treachery and we took from him the box containing the jewels.”

“That was heroic!” Clara exclaimed.

“Then came the question,” the marquis went on, encouraged by the

admiration in those beautiful hazel eyes, “how to conceal the property until we could prove our rights in the courts. My companion had arranged for that. It was a triumph of ingenuity. At a certain spot the case containing the jewels was thrown overboard in a wicker basket. We had men in a motor boat lying in wait. The thing was done—a magnificent exploit. We congratulated ourselves. Alas, we were too previous. My cousin had been too cunning. The case was discovered. The box opened. It contained a little sand and a few pebbles! My cousin was on his way to London with the jewels. He was safe from the law and from our pursuit.”

“But, my dear marquis,” Clara argued, “there was a robbery. The Duc de Challes has sworn that the jewels were in the case which was taken from him.”

The young man’s lower jaw dropped, his face was almost pitiable in its vanity. He shook his head.

“That is my cousin’s bluff,” he declared. “He had the jewels with him when he left the château. The case was empty when we took it from him. He disposed of them elsewhere.”

“You poor man,” Clara sighed. “Tell me—where is your friend now?”

The marquis indulged in a silent but expressive gesture.

“That I must not say. He is afraid of the police. Our attempt was an illegal one. It was my own property we tried to regain but I too am in some danger.”

“Nevertheless, where is he?” Clara persisted. “Somehow I have an idea he is not far away. Is he?”

The marquis’s expression was like that of a distressed and tortured child.

“I must not tell you about him. I have sworn that I will not open my lips. He was seen by more than one person with the case. They would never believe that he had not the jewels.”

“I suppose,” Clara reflected, “you have every confidence in your banker friend?”

“Why should I not have confidence? It is to his interest as well as mine to recover the jewels. With them in my possession my debts to him will be paid. Without them I am penniless.”

She sighed once more.

“If only I could help you,” she lamented. “And listen—come a little nearer to me—I *believe that I could.*”

He was under the spell of the light in her beautiful eyes, the slight quiver in her tone. Never in all his career of gallantry had such a thing happened to him with a woman so marvellous, so responsive.

“There is a way to help you,” she confided. “You have courage, I know.”

“Tell me,” he begged.

“Tell me where your friend is,” she whispered.

“He is in the next cabin,” the marquis replied. “Locked in. He would not

even have me there with him. Furthermore—he is disguised.”

She patted his hand.

“You will trust me?”

He drew a little nearer. She avoided what was after all only a timorous attempt at an embrace.

“Always, beloved,” he murmured. “But first——”

Again she eluded him with a little laugh.

“They have told me that you are a dangerous person, marquis,” she said. “Even with a fortune at stake you show yourself a man of gallantry. But wait. The jewels first.”

“The jewels first,” he repeated in a mesmerised tone.

She rang the bell. Her friend the steward presently appeared. She drew him on one side. With a little nod and a gesture to the marquis she stepped out into the corridor.

“Steward,” she demanded, “who is in the next cabin?”

The man’s face fell. He was evidently perturbed.

“Madame,” he replied, “his name is Fontany but I know no more about him.”

She shook her head gently but reproachfully.

“You are an honest man, Grayson,” she said. “You do not wish to get into trouble? You do not wish to shield a thief?”

“Not for one moment, madame,” was the indignant answer.

“Then trust me,” she insisted. “Fetch me the purser as quickly as you can and tell him to bring two of the officers who have some courage. Tell him if he does this there may be a very pleasant surprise for him.”

The steward’s face was a study in expressions.

“I will tell you the truth, your ladyship,” he confessed. “The man who is alone in the next state-room has given me five pounds to see that he is not disturbed before we reach Calais. He has promised me another ten pounds when we arrive there.”

She shook her head again then leaned across to him and whispered in his ear. He sped away with a little gasp. Clara Linz returned to her seat upon the lounge. The young man welcomed her petulantly.

“You leave me alone,” he complained, “and we have arranged nothing. You will travel to Paris with me—yes? I will arrange for a coupé.”

“What about your friend in the next cabin?” she asked.

“He does not wish to be seen with me,” the marquis assured her. “He is afraid that we might be recognised. Although there was nothing in it, we took the dressing-case away from my cousin. There might be trouble.”

“And the lady with the beautiful hair who was your companion?” Clara asked with a very creditable simulation of jealousy.

“She went to Folkestone to return by the other route to Boulogne,” he explained. “Bouvard thought that it was better. For myself I am not afraid,” the marquis went on with a show of courage. “I try to recover from a relative my own property. It is a man’s natural impulse. With Bouvard it is different.”

“What do you suppose,” she asked, “he is doing in there alone and with the door locked?”

“He is a very excitable person,” the marquis confided. “The anxiety has brought on an attack of seasickness.”

There were steps in the corridor. The farce was coming to an end.

“Do you believe that?” she asked.

“Why not?” the marquis demanded. “He is my good friend. It is he who has financed me since the banks have been difficult.”

There was a knock at the door. In response to Clara’s invitation to enter, the purser and two of the ship’s officers were disclosed upon the threshold. She rose to her feet.

“Mr. Brown,” she said, addressing the purser, “there is a man locked up in the next cabin who I believe stole the jewels belonging to the Duc de Challes. Furthermore, I believe that he has the jewels with him.”

The purser’s eyes glittered.

“Baroness!” he exclaimed.

They all swung out on to the corridor. The marquis had an attack of nerves. He was calling out feebly and trying to attach himself to Clara. The purser knocked at the door of state-room No. 16. There was at first no reply. Then a very weak voice was heard.

“Who is that? Go away. I am ill. I have the *mal de mer*.”

The purser wasted no more time. He drew from his pocket a pass-key and fitted it into the lock. He threw open the door. A man, who was lying upon the couch, sprang to his feet.

“What is the meaning of this intrusion?” he demanded, and his voice was suddenly strong.

The purser looked round the room hurriedly.

“I see no trace of seasickness,” he remarked.

“This is my reserved cabin for which I have paid,” Bouvard exclaimed angrily. “I demand to be left alone.”

“I should like to point out to you, Mr. Brown,” Clara said with a sudden inspiration, “that this man crossed yesterday on the boat from which the jewels were stolen under the name of Bouvard. He has engaged this cabin under the name of Fontany! He was a stout man then with a black moustache. Look at him now! He has shaved off the moustache and got rid of his false front.”

“But this is ridiculous!” Bouvard shouted.

“Take my advice,” Clara begged. “Search the cabin.”

The purser, one of the officers and the steward set about their task. The other officer stood over the man upon the lounge. The latter, with a shrug of the shoulders, appeared to have resigned himself.

“For what you search I do not know,” he said. “I have shaved my moustache because it pleased me. I do not break the law when I do that. You may look through my belongings. If you will you may search me. I do not know what it is you are looking for but I am not a thief. . . .”

At the expiration of a quarter of an hour things began to look a little awkward. The carpet had been torn up and the boards tested. The lounge had been thoroughly examined and the two chairs dismantled. The purser was distinctly uneasy. Clara herself was puzzled. Suddenly inspiration again befriended her. She pointed towards the lavatory basin.

“What is that lying by the side of the nailbrush?” she asked.

The purser picked it up.

“It appears to be a screw-driver,” he remarked. “Belong to you, Adams?” he asked the steward.

“Never saw it before, sir,” the man replied. “I don’t know how it got there.”

“See if it fits the screws which hold the bowl in place,” Clara suggested.

The steward went on his knees and made an effort. Clara smiled. She was spared the catastrophe of failure! They all stooped down. One by one the screws were withdrawn. The purser pulled forward the lead pipe and bent it over. A little shower of jewels fell on to the floor!

“Don’t you see what he has done?” he pointed out. “He has opened the pipe at the other end, put in some sort of an obstacle, rescrewed the pipe at the top and there he has the most complete hiding-place anyone could imagine.”

“Purser, I suggest that you have the pipe carefully removed,” Clara directed. “As for the jewels—I claim them on behalf of the Duc de Challes for whom I am acting.”

Henri Bouvard’s shouts filled the cabin. He tried to fight his way out, but he was easily overpowered. He might, perhaps, have slipped away, but he shrunk back trembling before the revolver which the marquis was pointing at him in unsteady fashion.

“The jewels were there after all, Bouvard!” the latter called out. “You have deceived me! It was you who secured the jewels!”

“For your sake, you puppy!” the other bellowed.

“*Je m’en doute*,” the marquis sneered.

“The whole affair,” Clara pointed out, “is quite clear. This man Bouvard double-crossed his companion, who, I dare say, may be a cousin of the Duc de Challes, and who may think that the jewels are his. He reported failure, having achieved success. You will take care of the jewels, Mr. Brown. So far as I am

concerned the affair is over.”

The Duc de Challes, who had already received the welcome news, presented himself at midday on the following morning in Adam Street. He was received as before by Clara, Baroness Linz.

“Madame,” he said gratefully, “I extend to the firm of ADVICE LIMITED my sincere thanks and my hearty congratulations. I have here your fee of a thousand guineas.”

He laid a cheque upon the table and looked more curiously than ever at his companion.

“I can scarcely be blamed now,” he continued, “if I insist upon an introduction to your principal.”

Clara pulled up the blind and removed her spectacles. That intriguing smile which had captivated him for a moment upon the boat had returned. He stared and took up his hat. Then he laughed. He was a man of the world and he understood very well how to mind his own business.

“I shall drink a toast to-night,” he promised, “to the continued success of ADVICE LIMITED.”

THE RITZ HOTEL CONFERENCE

Four of the guests remained in their places around the table upon which the interrupted feast had been spread. Two others, a man and a woman, were leaning over the couch at the farther end of the room on which a sixth man was lying—slim and unusually tall he seemed stretched out at full length—with closed eyes and ghastly of complexion. The woman straightened herself and looked across the table.

“It works!” she exclaimed breathlessly. “Malcolm’s wonderful drug has done everything he promised.”

One of the four silent figures pushed back his chair and rose to his feet. He was short and rather stout and the illustrated newspapers of the world had taken care that his were familiar features.

“Even Malcolm,” he said gruffly, “could not tell us how long the effect would last. Let us get the thing over.”

He crossed the room towards a large writing-table, picked up a weighty-looking document and made his way to the sofa. The woman, in obedience to his gesture, held the document, the man who had brought it produced a fountain-pen and, lifting the limp hand of the unconscious man, wrapped his fingers around it. The action brought its own gruesome suggestions and the woman closed her eyes for a moment. Her companion addressed her almost roughly.

“Hold the agreement firmly with both hands,” he enjoined. “Mind it doesn’t slip. Surely you are not frightened of an unconscious man?”

She recovered herself and did as she was told. Her fellow-conspirator, still gripping in his large hand the nerveless fingers, brought the nib of the fountain-pen on to a certain pencilled space upon the document and traced in a certain famous signature. Then he drew back with a little chuckle of content.

“Europe is saved,” he declared triumphantly. “Nelson has signed!”

He carried the document across to the table and poured himself out a glass of wine.

“I shall drink to the great chemist who is Lady Hannah’s friend,” he declared. “I shall drink also to the brain that conceived the idea—yours, Lady Hannah. It sounded like moonshine melodrama but it has worked. Everyone of us can swear that we saw Nelson sign.”

“He might tell the truth and repudiate his signature,” one of the others at the table suggested.

The man who had guided the pen smiled scornfully.

"We must take that risk," he admitted, "but is he likely to do anything of the sort? Everyone knows that Nelson is fond of his glass of wine. Who would believe a cock-and-bull story of his having been drugged? If he signed it without knowing what he was doing, then everyone will believe that he was drunk. He will not ask for that."

Lady Hannah's first companion, who had been kneeling all the time by the other side of the unconscious figure upon the couch, rose suddenly to his feet. There was a wild gleam in his eyes, a note of horror in his tone.

"I shouldn't be in a hurry to drink that toast," he warned them all. "Do you know what has happened?"

"The agreement is signed," the man who had just filled his glass replied triumphantly.

"And Nelson is dead!" the other groaned.

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!

A ring at the front door bell awakening strange echoes in the empty building!

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! Tramp!

Another ring at the bell!

Clara, Baroness Linz, threw off the coverlet, sat up for a moment or two to listen, swung out of bed and wrapped herself in a peignoir. She opened the window and, leaning out, looked down into Adam Street.

"What on earth do you want?" she demanded of the young man who, for the third time, was pressing the bell.

He stepped a little farther back to get a better view of his questioner, removed his silk hat with a sweep and bowed. There was something in the grace of his gesture and still more in his tone when he spoke which convinced Clara that her would-be visitor was a foreigner.

"I address myself, perhaps," he said, "to the Baroness Linz."

"You do," she admitted severely. "But why you are walking up and down outside there and ringing my bell at this hour of the night I cannot imagine."

"I regret," he answered, with a fervent note of apology in his tone. "If your telephone had been in working order you would have been warned of my visit."

"My telephone is all right."

"But I can assure you that it is not," was the courteously-spoken rejoinder. "If you doubt my word try it for yourself. Acquaintances of yours have rung up this evening in vain. At last it was decided that I must come and fetch you."

"What absolute nonsense you are talking," she exclaimed. "Fetch me where?"

“It is difficult to explain,” the young man pointed out, “when I am standing upon the pavement and you are two stories above me. I take the liberty of suggesting that either you come down or you permit me to mount.”

“I shall do nothing of the sort,” was the angry reply. “Who are you and what do you mean by disturbing people at this hour of the night?”

“It is only eleven o’clock,” the young man below remonstrated.

Clara reflected for a moment. Her visitor was probably right. She had gone to bed, being all alone, at something after half-past nine, and the extension between the telephone instrument which stood by her bedside and the instrument in the back office was, she knew, out of order. She looked at him with growing curiosity. He was young, dressed in the precise evening clothes of the period, he wore his silk hat at the correct angle, but from his dusky complexion and slight accent she was convinced that he was a foreigner. By the side of the kerbstone was drawn up a very beautiful two-seater car.

“It is quite impossible,” she pointed out, “for me to continue a discussion with you like this. I have gone to bed and there is no one else in the building. I could not, therefore, let you in nor could I think of coming downstairs. Go away, please, and come back at some civilised hour if you want to see me or if you have any message to give me.”

“Alas, baroness,” he replied, “all that you say demands an apology, which I offer freely, but the fact remains that the matter is urgent. It would be better if you would resume your ordinary attire”—he paused for a moment as though to study her very attractive blue peignoir with a touch of white fur round the neck—“and come down to me. I can then take you to the place where your presence is desired.”

“But who is it that wants me?” she demanded. “How dare you expect that I should come out with you to some unknown people on some unknown errand at this time of night?”

He set his foot on the palisading which supported the railings and, leaning forward, lowered his voice.

“You are the Baroness Clara Linz,” he said. “You call yourself on the door-plate and elsewhere *ADVICE LIMITED*. Is that not so?”

“Well?”

“You give counsel to men and women who are in trouble or perplexity. That situation has arisen in a private salon of the Ritz Hotel. We have arrived there at an impasse. We telephoned for you in vain. It was then suggested that I should fetch you.”

“But who are you?” Clara insisted, sinking into a chair which she had drawn up to the window. “What is your name?”

“Is it important?” he asked. “You may know me by my first name. I am generally called Roderigo.”

“Rubbish!” she scoffed. “In any case, respectable young men don’t go wandering about at this hour of the night with incomprehensible messages to ladies with whom they have no acquaintance.”

The young man in question sighed.

“It is my hard fortune to be in that position,” he confided mournfully.

“No more nonsense, please,” she begged. “We shall have the police from the Terrace round here directly. What is your full name?”

“If you insist you shall hear the worst,” was the gentle reply. “I am le Duc Roderigo de Partagena de Cervera y Topete.”

The Baroness leaned a little farther out of the window.

“It sounds intriguing,” she confessed. “I must see more of you.”

“That is my own wish,” he assured her. “I only beg that you will descend. It is an undignified position for me this. Notwithstanding my formal costume I might be mistaken by an unintelligent police officer for a troubadour or a would-be burglar at any moment.”

“You are very fond of talking,” she observed.

“You are a charming and appreciative listener,” he rejoined.

There was a moment’s pause. Clara found herself laughing softly. The young man, without a doubt, had charm.

“Who is it that has sent for me?” she asked. “And what do they want?”

“Our little party at the Ritz,” he told her eagerly, “consists of five people—two of whom are known to you. I was told to mention no names but, as I am finding my mission so difficult, I will go so far as to tell you that Lady Hannah Phillipson is one of them. You are acquainted with her, I believe.”

“Do you mean to say that Lady Hannah has sent you here for me at this hour of the night?”

“My dear young lady,” her visitor pleaded, “‘this hour of the night’ conveys altogether a false impression. It may be perhaps a quarter past eleven. We only sat down to our conference an hour ago. Who in the world would have expected to have found a very modern human being asleep in an empty building with a broken telephone at such an hour?”

“Upon my word,” Clara decided after a moment’s reflection, “perhaps you are right. By the by, tell me this—what coloured gown is Lady Hannah wearing?”

“Of what significance it may be I do not know,” was the puzzled reply, “but I happen to remember that she is wearing a gown of a shade which I would describe as between yellow and orange colour.”

His listener nodded.

“You are quite right,” she admitted. “I had a cocktail with her and a friend at the Embassy at half-past eight. Now I come to think of it she did tell me that she was going to a queer sort of party at the Ritz.”

The duke below bowed.

"Including your prospective cavalier," he murmured.

"I suppose, under the circumstances, I had better come," Clara decided. "It will take me ten minutes to get ready."

"I will smoke a cigarette and attend you with impatience," the young man announced, removing his foot once more on to the pavement.

Tramp! Tramp! Tramp! Slither! Slither! Slither!

Outside in the street the man who waited for her was obviously unable to conceal his impatience. He walked up and down unceasingly until the young lady who called herself *ADVICE LIMITED* began to hate the sound of his smooth-soled patent shoes as they fell upon the pavement. She herself, with no clothes laid out, dressed swiftly but with many minor difficulties. Her hair, always a baffling proposition, troubled her. Finally, however, she was ready. She wrapped an evening cloak around herself, descended to the street, opened and locked the door behind her. Her escort handed her into the car with a little murmur of welcome which sounded suspiciously like a groan.

"Have I been long?" she asked.

"There are times," he answered, "when even the seconds crawl."

At close quarters she looked at him critically. The white-gloved fingers grasping the polished wheel struck her as being somewhat effeminate. The set of his tie, the perfection of the small details of his clothes were almost meticulous in their correctness. Yet there was something, too, of the man about him. His dusky complexion, she saw now, was chiefly the tan of an open-air life. His eyes were blue, he was lean about the cheeks and the lines of his mouth were unwavering.

"We are going to the Ritz?" she enquired.

"Or Eternity," he replied, as he flashed past an omnibus. "I hoped we should get back before the theatres were over."

"I did my best," she murmured. "As a matter of fact very few of them are out yet."

They circled Leicester Square and, ignoring the side streets, shot across into Piccadilly.

"When we reach the Ritz," she ventured, "precisely what are you going to do with me?"

"You will make one of an informal dinner-party," the duke confided. "There has been some little trouble which has left us all confused. We need the advice of someone who was not present when a certain incident occurred. It was Lady Hannah who thought of sending for you."

"And you were the unwilling messenger?"

"Ah, baroness," he replied, with a sigh of relief as he saw the empty road

ahead and the bending line of lights, "how could I tell what was in store for me? I have never before met an intelligent woman who was also beautiful."

"You chose your nationality ill," she remarked dryly. "Of what race are you?"

He raised his dark eyebrows slightly. She admired him for the fact that his eyes had never for a second left the strip of road along which he was making his illegally rapid progress. He had not once looked at her.

"Such is fame!" he murmured, evading her question.

They turned into Arlington Street. With a twist of the wrist he brought the car to a standstill a little below the main entrance. A chauffeur in plain black livery hurried forward and opened a door a few yards down the street. Clara's companion led her across an obscure yard into the hotel by a side entrance and, handing her into an automatic lift, ascended to the second floor. A few yards of passage and they were in the main corridor.

"My task is over," he whispered, as he pressed the bell of one of the suites. "It is to be hoped that we are in time."

At a round table in the very beautiful salon of the Royal Suite were seated four men, all of whom were complete strangers, and Clara's friend, Lady Hannah Phillipson, who was the daughter and also the private secretary of a Cabinet Minister. There were besides three unoccupied places—one apparently belonging to Clara's escort, for he made his way deliberately towards it, another Clara herself was invited to occupy, and the third had the appearance of having been occupied and abandoned in haste. Lady Hannah, who had directed her to her chair—a brilliant young woman as a rule—was looking like a ghost, her face white and drawn.

"Glad you could come, dear," she said in an odd, jerky tone. "We are having an irregular sort of feast instead of dinner, as the men have been discussing affairs of some importance. You will have to excuse introductions. This is not exactly a social gathering. Roderigo, you have been looking after the baroness for so long, go and fetch her something from the sideboard and give her some champagne and a sandwich. I am afraid we cannot allow her time for more."

The four men—three of them obvious foreigners—had risen to their feet and each in turn bowed solemnly towards the newcomer, who returned their greeting in a silence which matched their own. It was a curious thing but, strangers though they were, there was something familiar about the face of every one of them. It was certainly, she reflected, as she ate her sandwich and sipped her wine, no ordinary party which she had been invited to join. . . . The conversation, which had been interrupted at her entrance, began to flow around her again. They were discussing Epstein in an indifferent and almost

perfunctory fashion and as it was a subject upon which Clara herself had decided but unpopular views she devoted herself entirely to her late escort.

“What an extraordinary thing appetite is,” she remarked. “I went to bed at half-past nine to-night deciding that I didn’t want any dinner because it was too much trouble to do anything about it, and here I am eating a large sandwich and looking greedily every now and then at the sideboard!”

The young man took the hint, rose to his feet and brought her a further supply. Clara, with a sigh of content, ignored Epstein and continued to talk to her companion. Suddenly she lowered her voice.

“Is there any harm in my asking who all these strange people are?” she enquired. “Except that their faces seem familiar I am sure I have never spoken to one of them before in my life.”

“Those illustrated papers!” her neighbour sighed. “You certainly have the right to know, baroness, or we could scarcely hope to benefit by this wonderful insight you are reputed to possess. The elderly man with the grey moustache and the eyeglass next to Lady Hannah is Baron Strengler, the German Minister of Finance.”

“One of the conference now sitting in London,” she murmured.

The young man nodded.

“The obvious Frenchman on the other side of the table,” he indicated, “is Francois Latourne. He is the French Minister of Finance as, of course, you know. Some day he will be Premier.”

“Another member of the conference,” Clara exclaimed in growing excitement. . . . “Now tell me what your place is amongst this remarkable crowd?”

“I am private secretary to Baron Strengler,” he confided, “and confidential interpreter. You may pass me over as being of little account. The disordered place on your right was occupied by a guest who left us hurriedly. On the other side of Lady Hannah you surely recognise Mr. James Mortimer. He is the American banker who buys and sells kingdoms. The other man to your right is Lord Bradley. He is the man whom they all say would like to become dictator of Great Britain. One thing is very certain—if this present conference is successful he will be our next Chancellor of the Exchequer.”

“Will it be successful?” she asked eagerly. “The late editions to-night spoke of great difficulties—the Bank of England——”

“One cannot tell,” the duke interrupted nervously. “It depends on how a certain little matter is arranged.”

“You are a very impressive gathering,” Clara observed, as she leaned back and sipped her wine. “What puzzles me is what on earth I am doing here? You bewildered and almost terrified me when you walked the pavement outside my rather lonely dwelling and insisted on bringing me here. Now that I have

arrived, if I am not exactly so terrified, I am even more bewildered.”

“Soon,” he assured her, “you will know everything. In the meantime there are ices and cakes of every description, as you may perceive from the plate of my chief opposite. His head for figures and his appetite for sweets are the most amazing things I have ever come across in my life.”

“One peach, please, which you will prepare for me,” she decided. “I am too curious to eat more. . . .”

It seemed to Clara that conversation had become more and more staccato. Epstein was forgotten, finance again ruled, yet no one seemed to be really and genuinely in earnest. There was an atmosphere of tragedy looming somewhere in the background. Something had happened. She looked around the room. At the farther end was a large writing-table covered with papers and surrounded by several chairs. She had the idea that documents might have been signed there. On the left there was a closed door.

Gabble! Gabble! Gabble!

Everyone was talking now in rapid German, excepting Mr. James Mortimer, who probably did not understand and was leaning back in his chair, a cigar in the corner of his mouth, smoking furiously. The talented administrator of *ADVICE LIMITED* lost her taste for eating and drinking. It was time the farce was over. She wanted to be told the truth, to know what service was expected of her. Suddenly Lady Hannah leaned across the table. Since that light-hearted cocktail at the Embassy a few hours ago she seemed to have aged a dozen years. Her tone too was thick and husky.

“You are becoming impatient, Clara,” she said. “Very well, come with me and I will show you the problem we have to face. It is ugly enough. I can promise you that.”

Clara rose readily to her feet and followed her friend to the door on the opposite side of the room. It opened into a bedroom as large and beautifully furnished as the salon which they had just left. On a handsome bedstead of empire design a man, fully dressed, was lying, whom Clara at first thought must be asleep. She drew nearer and a little cry broke from her lips.

“He is dead!” she exclaimed.

Lady Hannah gripped at the bedpost. She was shivering.

“Yes, he is dead,” she assented. “It happened half an hour ago.”

The Baroness Linz gazed with a sort of morbid fascination at the face of the man who lay stretched upon the coverlet. There were no signs of his end having been anything but a peaceful one. His pale features were set and composed. His clothes showed no sign of any struggle. Even the black, flowing tie which had always been the joy of the caricaturists was undisturbed.

“Is this the missing guest?” she asked.

“Yes,” Lady Hannah replied. “He was taken ill at the table. He came in

here. This is Baron Strengler's room. When he did not return we—we came to look for him and found that he was dead.”

Clara looked across the bed towards her friend.

“For days,” she said, half to herself, “the newspapers have been at loggerheads. They said that he would never sign this marvellous new treaty.”

“He has signed,” Lady Hannah muttered. “And he is dead.”

Lady Hannah had abandoned her grasp of the bedpost. She seemed to have recovered herself. Her voice was firm but hard.

“You and I do not need to talk politics,” she continued. “The question before us is this. We want practical advice from someone who knows something about this sort of thing. What do you do with a dead body?”

“Send for the doctor and the police as a rule,” was the brief reply.

“Don't talk like a fool, girl,” Lady Hannah exclaimed passionately. “Everyone knows that he was bent upon smashing the conference. Everyone in that room, including myself, believes honestly and sincerely that his attitude would bring all Europe to ruin. We should all be submerged by a great wave of destruction. The scheme the conference has drawn up will save us. He was the only obstacle. The Prime Minister had sworn never to sign without his consent. Everyone else was willing. You see, therefore, that what has happened is not so great a catastrophe.”

Clara looked down at the almost waxen white features. She touched the cold fingers for a minute. She looked across at her friend in horror.

“You don't mean to tell me that someone has had the audacity—someone of you people here to-night—to commit a *murder*?”

“Don't be an idiot,” was the harsh reply. “These are all famous diplomats here to-night. Who amongst them would be fool enough to attempt such a thing?”

“Then how did he die?” the baroness demanded.

“We procured a powerful, newly discovered drug from a great chemist which was guaranteed to produce suspended animation in a man for at least an hour and without any dangerous consequences. When he refused to sign we slipped it into his wine. He drank it—and afterwards—well, with assistance he did sign. Rather a liberty, perhaps, but what are you to do with a man who is threatening to pull down the pillars of the world? I don't know whether we gave him too much. He has always been known as a delicate man. Anyhow, you see what has happened.”

Clara felt the limp wrist for a moment. Her expression was very grave.

“It seems to me that you have all been mad,” she declared. “For two years Nelson has been quoted as the greatest authority on British finance and British banking in the world.”

“Leave off that senseless talk,” Lady Hannah begged. “Whatever he may

have been I tell you that he had lost his inspiration. No more arguments. We are in the Ritz. We are in a private room. We have a special exit reserved exclusively for us. The reporters—everyone—are being kept in another part of the hotel. We want that,” pointing to the bed, “taken away so that no one will have any need to suspect our word when we say that he left the hotel as usual at the conclusion of the conference.”

“And to-morrow?”

“We want it to be a matter of loss of memory. That part of it is not difficult. Everyone knows that he is in shocking health. Twice before he has gone off alone without a word to anyone. Once he was found in Canada—another time in Scotland. No one would be surprised at his disappearance. In a few months it won’t matter. We already have his signature beautifully forged on the agreement. We want your advice only on the material things.”

“There is one thing more I must ask,” Clara persisted. “Could you not at least have persuaded him to remain neutral?”

“Absolutely impossible,” Lady Hannah declared. “He was at his worst to-night. Soon after we sat down he absolutely and positively announced that he had spent the previous part of the day considering the matter and that he was determined not to sign the new agreement and to advise the Cabinet, even at the risk of war and the deflation of every currency in the world, to have nothing to do with any part of the scheme. . . . His next glass of wine—well, it had something to do with it. We were positively assured that it would do him no permanent harm and that the effect would last only for about an hour. Instead of that, soon after he collapsed we found that he was dead. So that’s that. The thing is—can you help us?”

The baroness bent once more over the prostrate body. Something seemed to catch her attention and to hold her interest. She hesitated as though debating with herself.

“Yes, I can help you,” she promised gravely. “If I have ordinary good fortune I can do what you want.”

Lady Hannah showed signs of hysteria. Clara pushed her towards the door.

“Leave me here alone for a quarter of an hour,” the latter enjoined. “If I want any help I will send for the young man who brought me here.”

Lady Hannah stumbled out of the room and the door was closed firmly behind her.

In the salon there was a certain difference of opinion chiefly because one or two of the little company knew a great deal more than the others.

“I cannot for the life of me see any sense,” Mr. James Mortimer declared doggedly, “in bringing that very charming young woman into the affair at all. Everyone knows that the poor fellow was in bad health. If he’s had a stroke, or something of that sort, why not send for the hotel doctor and bluff it out?”

We've got his signature to the agreement. I'm not altogether easy in my mind about that——”

“What does it matter?” Baron Strengler interrupted fiercely, “whether he was ill or well, dying or dead when his fingers held the pen? We can all swear that we saw it in his hand, and there is his signature. The world is now saved from the greatest catastrophe in history.”

“Then there is another point of view,” Lady Hannah argued. “Supposing we send for the doctor and the reporters, what do you suppose would be the effect when to-morrow morning's papers announce the sudden death of the chief prop of British finance? Everyone would go crazy. If he just walks out of the limelight for a time the Press will be on our side. They will all argue that he broke down in health after signing this agreement and that he has gone away for a sea voyage or something of that sort. Remember, he has done it before. The papers never gave it away, but he went into hiding for nearly two months and no one had his address.”

The American pinched a fresh cigar and lit it. He looked across the table.

“What is your idea of this, Lord Bradley?” he asked.

“It is not absolutely straightforward, of course,” Bradley admitted, “but I am inclined to agree with Lady Hannah. There have been times before in the history of the world when men like ourselves have had to step off the beaten track. I think the news in to-morrow morning's papers of the sudden death of our friend in there would bring about a collapse on the Stock Exchange here, as undoubtedly it would in all the small countries which we have been bolstering up. With the scheme we have elaborated in the new treaty I believe we can save the world. It is not worth while risking everything for the sake of a few scruples.”

“I am of the same opinion,” Francois Latourne pronounced.

Mr. Mortimer knocked the ash from the end of his cigar.

“I don't want to play a lone hand,” he declared. “If you others think this disappearance stunt can be brought off I am not going to stand in the way.”

The young duke, Roderigo de Partagena de Cervera y Topete, was pacing the room restlessly.

“The Baroness Linz, from our brief conversation,” he observed, “appeared to me to be of quite surprising intelligence. No doubt she has a staff of friends of whom she makes use at times, but how, in this brief period, she is going to summon people to her aid and whisk a dead man out of the hotel without comment from the officials is incomprehensible to me. I think she takes too much on herself. I feel inclined to offer my help.”

“You will do nothing of the sort,” Lady Hannah insisted. “You are associated with us all and you must not appear in the matter.”

“But how——”

“I have confidence in my friend,” Lady Hannah broke in. “I have known her accomplish more difficult tasks. Remember this suite is detached from the hotel proper and the staff have been ordered not to interfere with or look at anyone who may pass from it into the courtyard—or enter it. We are completely cut off from ordinary observation.”

“Well, I suppose everything is possible nowadays,” James Mortimer admitted. “To read some of these detective stories a little affair like this would seem only child’s play.”

“Fortunately for us,” Lady Hannah observed, as she motioned the duke to fill her glass, “even the papers have been remarking upon his appearance lately and when he arrived to-night he was looking ghastly ill.”

She finished her wine and rose to her feet.

“The quarter of an hour is up,” she announced. “I am going in to see if she has a scheme. Will you come, Roderigo?”

The duke rose to his feet. Together they crossed the room and passed into the adjoining apartment. Even as she reached the threshold a sharp cry of astonishment broke from Lady Hannah’s lips. She swayed upon her feet. The body of the man had disappeared from the bed! There was no sign of the Baroness Linz. The room was empty.

In a little more than twenty-four hours the great journalistic salvos were fired. These were the days when the newspaper lion was eating from the same platter as his cousin the lamb. For once in the world’s history there was national unity. The success of the Ritz Hotel Conference, as it was called, was hailed as a diplomatic and financial triumph which would turn out to be the salvation of Europe. During the next few days Latourne, the great French statesman, was cheered whenever he showed himself. James Mortimer, the American emperor of finance, was hailed as one of the deliverers of the world. Baron Strengler received an ovation every time he presented himself at the door or the window of his hotel. Lord Bradley’s car was followed by an applauding mob whenever it was seen. A crowd gathered round the modest town house of the official representative of British finance, cheering and shouting, but representatives of the Press, retiring baffled from the premises, disclosed the fact that the man whose obstinacy was said to have caused the crisis but who had finally suffered himself to be persuaded to sign the famous agreement had left town for a rest cure. He had done his part, however. The Prime Minister had given his solemn word that if he set his name to the agreement the country would adopt it. The thing had been accomplished. Without a doubt Europe was saved. With true British optimism everyone declared that a new era of prosperity was now assured.

Le Duc Roderigo de Partagena de Cervera y Topete drove his beautiful two-seater down to Adam Street a few days later and was ushered by Clara's saturnine butler into her presence. She welcomed him cordially.

"Now that I know that you really are a duke and a responsible person," she said as she pointed to a chair, "I may say that I am delighted to see you. You should not have confused me, though, with that terrible name of yours."

"Baroness," he declared, with a twinkle in his eyes, "although as yet I have persuaded no one to share it, it is a name of which I am proud."

"You have every reason to be, I am sure," she acknowledged. "It is a very famous name in Spanish history but what, I ask myself, were you doing in that *galère*? Lady Hannah's presence I could understand. She has been her father's private secretary ever since he took office and we all know how ill he is. But you—a Spaniard!"

"Since the downfall of our monarchy," he confided, "I have accepted the post of secretary and interpreter to Baron Strengler. He married into my family. I was general interpreter at the conference. I speak all the languages well."

"And your mission to me this morning?" Clara asked sweetly.

"First of all," the Duke explained, opening his pocket-book, "you can surely understand our anxiety to know how you—er—disposed of that very obstinate gentleman with whom we left you."

"And secondly?" she murmured.

"The second reason for my errand," he continued, opening his pocket-book a little further, "is to offer you these two bank notes for five hundred pounds each, which we hope you will consider a suitable fee for your marvellous services."

Clara accepted the notes without hesitation and pushed them into a drawer which she carefully locked.

"Perhaps on the whole," she observed, "history would declare that I had earned them. Thank you."

"With regard to my first query?" the young man ventured.

The baroness became more serious.

"You want to know what I did with the gentleman whom the newspapers call 'the mystery man of finance'?"

"It would gratify an almost overwhelming curiosity. Furthermore, it would set at ease any slight scruples we might feel as to his dignified termination."

"Your English is not so good just now," she commented, "but I think I see your point. Perhaps you would like to read this."

She handed him a letter addressed to the Baroness Linz, in large sprawling handwriting. At the top of the folded notepaper which he drew from the envelope was printed the name of a well-known steamer of the Canadian

Pacific Line. He read aloud word by word:

“MY DEAR BARONESS,

“Here I am as Peter Halkin with a perfectly good passport, a pound of my favourite tobacco, two of my chosen pipes and a single change of clothes. I am on my way—never mind where—but when I arrive at my destination I am going to sleep for a year. No one need worry about me. I harbour no ill feeling towards anyone. My health is improving with every day at sea and I doubt whether I shall ever come back. I am only too happy to have been able to escape.

“You are a clever young woman but don’t overdo your activities. The most hackneyed of adages have their fallacy and dead men sometimes can spread consternation. However, this particular one is very much alive and bears no one any grudge. Thank God I am out of it all. For weeks I have felt my brain giving way.

“If ever I feel like writing anyone again it will probably be to you, but I don’t think I shall.

“Ever yours,

“PETER HALKIN.

“PS. I have clipped off my beard and trimmed my hair. I am sporting, instead of my spectacles, the monocle of my college days and I swear that my own mother, if she were alive, would not know me.”

The duke, for a moment, lost his aplomb. His open mouth gave him an almost fatuous expression. He was for several seconds without the power of speech.

“Do you mean that he was not dead?” he faltered.

“Of course he was not,” Clara replied. “I admit that you might easily be deceived. His was no ordinary fainting fit or anything of that sort. The drug which he was given must have been even more powerful than was anticipated, and it did produce a genuine state of suspended animation. I happen to have seen a case before, though, when I was taking my course at the hospital and I knew what to do.”

“This is very wonderful,” Roderigo declared. “How did you get him downstairs?”

“He managed quite well after a little treatment.”

“And his signature—did he know?”

“He guessed all right. You see, he had sworn not to sign and he didn’t—consciously. There won’t be any trouble, if that’s what you are thinking about. I myself think he was rather glad of a dignified way out.”

“This is all very strange,” Roderigo murmured.

“Not if you think about it,” she pointed out. “Nelson was a terribly obstinate man but he realised at the end that everyone was against him. If this last desperate effort to put things right had failed through his refusal to sign, he would have had to bear the whole brunt of the thing. You people were really very kind to him. You put him in the right and the wrong at the same time. He signed and he did not sign.”

The duke handed back the letter.

“Are you looking for a partner, baroness?” he enquired.

She laughed into his serene but understanding eyes.

“Not just yet,” she replied.

BETWEEN THE EIGHTH GREEN AND THE NINTH TEE

The telephone message was brought out to the administrator of ADVICE LIMITED just as she had parked her car in the open space behind the golf club shed at Ranelagh. She glanced at the written lines apprehensively.

“Lady Hannah Phillipson regrets that she will not be able to play golf with the Baroness Linz this morning as she is suffering from a bad headache.”

Clara, with a gesture of disappointment, dismissed the boy and considered the situation. There was no one waiting upon the tee, no sign of anyone who might possibly want a game. It was a morning in early spring, the turf looked soft and inviting, the air was sharp but not too cold. Perhaps, after all, it would be as well to use her voucher and play a few holes alone.

A familiar voice attracted her attention. A slim young man wearing a soiled duster over his riding clothes had hurried across the open space in front of the stables.

“Good morning, baroness,” he said. “May I carry your clubs to the tee for you?”

“Good morning, Roderigo,” she answered. “You are very kind. What are you doing in that wonderful kit?”

He smiled blandly.

“A few of my ponies are still here,” he explained. “I may be able to play now and then this season. I have sold most of them but there are five that remain. I keep only one groom so I help to look after them myself in the mornings. I did not stop to take off my coat because I was afraid that I might miss you. Excuse.”

He removed his duster solemnly. In his tweed coat and well-worn riding breeches his costume conformed to type.

“There is also,” he confided, dropping his tone a little, “another reason for my being here this morning. I was given to understand there is just a chance that a personage in whom I am greatly interested might be here. So far he has not arrived. I think now that he will not come. It is difficult to tell nowadays since he has taken a queer fancy for going about alone. And you?”

“To tell you the truth,” his companion confessed as they strolled towards the tee, “I was just wondering whether to play golf alone or not. My partner has failed me.”

"It is a beautiful morning," he said wistfully. "I would offer myself as a partner but I play so bad."

"Rubbish," she laughed. "Get your clubs and come along."

"If the mysterious stranger in front would only let us through," Clara Linz remarked as they neared the sixth hole, "we should be having a wonderful game. I hate watching a man play golf who doesn't seem to care whether he hits the ball or not."

"Soon we catch him," Roderigo prophesied hopefully, "then we go through."

"I doubt it," his partner grumbled. "He seems to be one of those objectionable people who pick up their ball at the last moment and hurry on."

At the eighth hole they came for the first time within hailing distance of the lone player. They watched him tee his ball—he had no caddie—and drive off. He carried the stream, and without a glance behind hurried across the plank bridge. Roderigo looked after him with a puzzled light in his eyes.

"It is a curious thing," he confided. "I don't think that my friend would be playing golf alone, notwithstanding his queer penchant for solitude these days. It would scarcely be he—and yet there's a likeness."

"Whoever he is," Clara declared a little crossly, "he seems to have something on his mind. He hits the ball without looking at it and he plays nearly every ball with his brassie. . . . After this hole I am going to call 'fore' and drive. You must back me up and we will go through. I hate a single player in front."

Presently they caught sight of the offender leaving the green. Clara played a good tee shot and her companion followed suit. They crossed the bridge and were on their way to their balls when Roderigo stopped short.

"Why, our enemy has disappeared!" he exclaimed. "What can have become of him?"

For a moment they looked around in bewildered fashion. Then, with a gasp of dismay, Clara pointed to a dark heap upon the ground.

"He seems to have fallen down," she cried. "I'm afraid he must have hurt himself."

They diverged to the right and hurried towards the prostrate figure. Presently they began to run. An exclamation of horror broke from Roderigo's lips as he reached the scene of the tragedy and fell on his knees. The man was lying perfectly still, his eyes stark open, his face drawn up as though in pain or terror. In the middle of his forehead was a small hole. He was quite dead.

It was about a fortnight later when Clara received an unexpected visit from Roderigo, Duc de Partagena de Cervera y Topete. She waved him to a chair

but her welcome was clearly a qualified one. She had strictly laid down a law that visits during office hours were not allowed.

“My dear Roderigo,” she remonstrated, “you know how pleased I always am to see you for a cocktail in the morning at the Embassy or in the evening at the Wanderers, but during office hours I must be left alone. I have no time whatever to receive chance visitors.”

“But I am not a chance visitor,” Roderigo pronounced eagerly. “I am here officially on behalf of a great friend. It is an affair of business entirely. He prefers not to interfere himself, so I come as his representative.”

“What? Another case?” the baroness laughed. “Are you aiming at being my only client?”

“You have many others, I am sure,” he answered politely, “but when you have solved one problem for my friends so wonderfully, is it strange that, face to face once more with a difficult crisis, I should be here again? My friend and I—he is a very important person—we talk and talk and talk and we get no further. Then I speak of you—of your intelligence—of your success—of your wonderful organisation,” he went on with a little wave of the hand, “and my friend says: ‘Visit that young lady. Confide in her. Tell her the whole truth if it is necessary. Let us see what she can do.’ ”

“Very flattering,” Clara murmured. “Of course, if it is really an affair in which my help would be possible I shall be delighted to hear about it. Yes, you can smoke if you like,” she added, watching her visitor’s well-shaped fingers playing about his waistcoat pocket. “Two cigarettes. No more. I myself love the smell of your tobacco but my next client might be an old lady——”

“I understand,” the young man assured her gravely as he shut his lighter with a click. “It shall be one—no more. It is the beginning which is difficult.”

The picturesque genius of *ADVICE LIMITED* settled herself down to listen. She was facing her visitor but not in a direct line, and the half lights were upon her beautiful hair and sensitive, thoughtful face.

“Tell me what it’s all about,” she invited.

“I am afraid that you will be disappointed at first,” he began, “but I must tell you that it concerns our little adventure upon the golf links. What with the inquest and all those visits from the police I expect you are quite fed up with it.”

“Great heavens!” she exclaimed, honestly surprised. “Surely that is all wiped off the map?”

“It would seem so,” he confessed. “It is my friend who thinks not.”

Clara puckered her brows for a moment.

“But, my dear Roderigo,” she pointed out, “was there ever a simpler affair? A man was found dead upon the links. We, as a matter of fact, found him. He was behaving in a queer way to start with. Fancy a man going out to practise

golf with a brassie and a niblick! He had a hole in his forehead when we found him, and the weapon from which the bullet which killed him had been fired was within a yard or so of where he was lying. There was not another soul in sight, a blank impenetrable fence on two sides of him and the stream on the other.”

“Quite true,” her visitor murmured dolefully. “Quite true.”

“The usual inquest was held,” Clara continued, “during the course of which it transpired that he was a stockbroker who lost a fortune during the war and was still in financial difficulties. He lived alone and was subject to fits of melancholy. Letters from creditors were found in his rooms and even in his pocket-book. The jury, without leaving the box, brought in the merciful verdict of suicide, without any evidence as to his state of mind, and the coroner acquiesced as a matter of course. That is surely the end of Mr.— Let me see, what was his name?—Michael Berens.”

“So it seems to you,” Roderigo admitted. “So it seems to his relatives, who never for a moment disputed the verdict, so it seems to everyone else—except my friend.”

“Is he a friend of the family?” Clara asked, puzzled.

“No, he is not even that,” Roderigo confessed. “I know what I am here to propose must appear to you foolish but let me disclose my friend’s wishes.”

“As quickly as you can, please.”

“My friend, what he wishes is this,” the young man confided. “He wishes that you go back in your thoughts to when we found the man lying dead. He wishes you to neglect all the evidence, and with the idea of suicide wiped out from your brain to see if you can find out any way in which he could have been killed, to advise us as to the method and in which direction to look for the possible murderer.”

“Your friend,” the baroness declared bluntly, “is crazy. The man shot himself almost within sight of us. We were certainly in sight a few seconds afterwards and there wasn’t another human being on that part of the course. The evidence supplied the motive and the weapon itself was lying within a few feet of him.”

“My friend is rich,” Roderigo continued unmoved, “and he is a person of curious obstinacy. He offers you two hundred guineas to place the matter in the hands of your investigators and another three hundred guineas for your advice if by chance you should discover any fresh solution to the mystery.”

“My advice to him would be not to waste his money,” was the blunt reply. “However, it seems that that would be useless. Is there any new evidence?”

“None whatever.”

“Did he know this man Michael Berens?”

“He never heard of him.”

“Is he by chance a little touched in the head?”

“He is a man of brilliant intellect.”

“Your friend realises that he is throwing away his money?”

“Perhaps so, perhaps not. He asks that I beg you to start from the moment we found the body and work backwards.”

Clara shrugged her shoulders. She drew a diary towards her and made a few notes.

“You accept the case?” Roderigo asked joyfully.

“I accept, but I give no hope.”

The young man rose to his feet and looked at his watch.

“This morning,” he confided, “I have exercised my ponies, and for a fee—you see, I too earn money, baroness—I have ridden two very wild animals for a young Armenian. The fashion of lurching early in London has grown.”

“At one o’clock in the Embassy bar,” Clara agreed. “Run along now, there’s a dear. I can hear my next client on the stairs.”

The Baroness Linz, although she felt her task quite hopeless, was conscientious. She sent for Ernest Nicholson, whose investigation bureau was under her control, and drove him down to Ranelagh. Nicholson, who was a remarkably shrewd man of youthful middle age, with several years’ experience at Scotland Yard, was inclined towards his patron’s own point of view, but found certain features of interest in this curious commission.

“One thing, baroness, we can take for granted,” he pointed out, as they walked across the golf course to the corner where the eighth hole was situated. “This nameless client of yours knows something we don’t know. It would have made it much simpler if he’d told us everything, but he may have very excellent reasons for holding back and for keeping his information from the police. That, I suppose, is where we come in. There are two points about the case, of course, which have always struck me as being rather quaint.”

“What are they?” his companion asked.

“In the first place why did Berens bother to lug round a heavy air rifle like that? Of course, he was able to conceal it in his golf bag and that may have been why he took most of the rest of his clubs out, but surely a revolver would have been easier.”

“And the other thing?”

“Oh, the evidence at the inquest. There was really not much in it. The slant of the wound was downwards, so that the bullet was found at the back of the man’s throat. You’d have thought he’d have pressed the barrel flush against his forehead.”

“Do either of those facts suggest anything to you?” Clara enquired as they crossed the bridge.

“Only this,” Nicholson admitted, “and it sounds a little far-fetched. That weapon would kill at a hundred yards. If a third person had shot Berens it could have been done from some distance away with that weapon, but not with an ordinary revolver.”

“Then how did the weapon come to be found by the side of the body,” Clara asked, “and where was that third person when we appeared only a few seconds afterwards?”

“A poser,” her companion confessed. . . .

They had arrived at the spot where the body had been found. There were very few who passed, even now, without a shiver, and it still possessed a sinister fascination for the caddies. There was no one playing in the vicinity so the two investigators were able to loiter about. Even Clara herself felt a queer little sensation of uneasiness as she pointed out the place. She crushed down the weakness, however, and looked around her.

“Assuming for the first time that this was a murder,” she demanded, “what spots of vantage, if any, are within range of the weapon?”

“Neatly put,” her companion approved. “It could have been fired from the other side of that fence in front of us or it might have been fired from that tree on the right, although, owing to the slant of the wound, that is almost impossible. Or, of course, it could have been fired from the top of an omnibus or tramcar passing along the road. All these would be within range. It could not have been fired by anyone upon the course itself since, as you say, you crossed the bridge directly the man left the green.”

The baroness nodded.

“Very well,” she said. “I think you can rule out the shot coming from behind the fence opposite because that is simply waste ground belonging to the club and not in use. The fence is ten feet high, there is no way of climbing it and the slope on the other side is downwards. As for the tree—well, here comes Jenks, one of the gardeners. We’ll ask him.”

The man approached in answer to her gesture. He took off his hat politely, recognising her as a friend of the presiding genius of the place.

“Jenks,” Clara asked him, “do you think it is possible for anyone to climb that tree?”

“A monkey, your ladyship, no one else,” the man replied. “There’s thirty feet there without a twig or an odd bit of bark to hold on to. If you’re thinking of what happened the other day,” he went on, “the police were round there before it came out that the poor gentleman was likely to have committed suicide. There wasn’t even a scratch upon the bark anywhere. . . . Thank you, madam. Good afternoon.”

“That rules out the tree, then,” Clara observed. “The tramcar, of course, is an absurdity. What about the top windows of the houses opposite?”

Nicholson measured the distance with his eye.

"It's a possibility," he admitted with a sudden increase of interest in his tone. "I wish I had examined the rifle more carefully."

"Let's see how far it is to the fence," Clara suggested.

They did so and found it less than fifty yards. The thing was possible! They stood gazing over at the rows of windows.

"There are only two houses," she pointed out, "from which the shot could have been fired, because it must have passed between those two trees. And look—there's someone standing at the window of the one right in the line."

A man, large and powerfully built, smoking a long cigar, was standing there staring at them. He wore his hat, a broad-brimmed Homburg, a little on one side, and even at that distance Clara fancied that there was a half-insolent, buccaneering look in his dark eyes. She drew her companion away, laying her hand upon his arm and sauntering as though they were ordinary loiterers.

"If that poor stockbroker did not kill himself," she declared in a voice which shook with excitement, "there is the man who shot him!"

"But, for heaven's sake why?" Nicholson demanded.

"Come and have some tea in the Winter Garden while we seek for an inspiration," she invited.

About an hour later the inhabitants of No. 72 Langdale Terrace, a row of red-brick villas overlooking one side of Ranelagh, were somewhat flustered by the sight of a handsome two-seater car drawn up outside their gate and the ringing of the visitors' bell. The solitary domestic being otherwise engaged, the lady of the house left the tea table and answered it herself.

"Sorry to trouble you," Clara apologised pleasantly, "but we were told you might have rooms to let. My husband and I," indicating her companion, "belong to Ranelagh and we thought it would be so nice to be close at hand and have a view of the course."

"I don't know who told you a story like that, miss, I'm sure," the woman replied, "but let rooms is a thing I never have done, though what we're all coming to with these new taxes and what not, heaven only knows. I have eight children, a husband and my own mother living here now, and four bedrooms is all we have. It ain't likely we should be letting rooms."

"Sorry, I must have come to the wrong house," was the regretful reply. "Do you know of anyone else in the neighbourhood who takes lodgers?"

"There's Mrs. Garcia next door," the woman confided dubiously, "but if you go there don't you mention my name, for we're not, as you might say, on terms. Lodgers she does take, but whether she's any rooms a lady and gentleman like you would care for I can't say. An untidy-looking lot of foreigners they always seem to me."

With renewed apologies the two callers took their leave and Nicholson rang the bell of the next house, which was really the one in which they were interested. Nothing happened for a considerable interval. He ventured to ring again. This time the door was opened almost at once. A stout, pale-faced woman with black eyes, swarthy of complexion and unfriendly of aspect, looked out.

“What is it that you want?” she demanded.

“Sorry if we have disturbed you,” Clara replied pleasantly. “We heard that you might let rooms.”

The woman looked them up and down suspiciously. Clara’s clothes, though unobtrusive, always possessed distinction, and Ernest Nicholson, who was rather particular about his appearance, patronised a West End tailor.

“What sort of rooms?”

“Two bedrooms and a front sitting-room. My wife and I are very fond of Ranelagh and we want to be near,” the latter explained.

“What is that—Ranelagh?”

“It is the name of the golf club opposite.”

The woman reflected for a moment.

“I have rooms,” she admitted, “but they are all taken. Three of my lodgers are leaving the day after to-morrow.”

“Perhaps we could have a look at them,” Clara begged. “It would save us coming back. If they suited we could take them from—say, next Monday.”

Mrs. Garcia shook her head, scowling.

“To show rooms whilst they are still occupied,” she said, “is not a nice thing to do. My lodgers would object. Come when they have gone. Come next Friday when I have cleaned up after them.”

Clara’s hand stole down into her pocket. She held a pound note thoughtfully between her fingers. She would have made it five had she dared.

“We are so busy,” she pleaded. “Just one peep in would do.”

The woman looked covetously at the pound note. It was evident that she wanted it very much but felt herself in something of a quandary.

“There is no need for us to see all the rooms,” Clara continued with the air of one anxious to save trouble. “If we could just glance into the front upstairs room which overlooks the links we might take the others for granted.”

“My three lodgers are there now,” the woman said doubtfully. “They use it as a sitting-room. I dare not let you go up without their permission. Wait and I will see whether they will permit you to enter. They are important people. They do not like to be intruded upon.”

She mounted the stairs, breathing heavily. They heard her knock at the door, they heard the rumble of voices in some foreign tongue and finally what sounded to be like a fierce torrent of abuse. There was the opening and

slamming of the door. The landlady appeared once more, scarlet in the face and muttering to herself.

“Go away, please,” she called out to her visitors. “Take your money with you if you want it. The gentlemen are angry because I even let you into the house.”

“But, Mrs. Garcia,” Clara pleaded.

“Do not ‘Mrs. Garcia’ me but clear out,” the woman enjoined.

Once more there was the sound of the door above opening. A man leaned over the banisters—the man whom they had seen standing at the window—burly, defiant looking, yet with a touch of the rollicker in his smile as he lifted the hat he was still wearing.

“I see the lady below in the green field, is it not so?” he asked, with a look of undisguised admiration in his black eyes.

Clara nodded.

“My husband and I are members of the club there,” she explained. “That is why we wanted to get rooms near.”

“Quite good rooms these,” the man assured her. “You can come up. You can see for yourself. We go away the day after to-morrow.”

“Very kind of you,” Clara murmured, mounting the stairs swiftly.

He threw open the door, scowling at Nicholson who had followed. Clara, with a word of apology upon her lips, stepped forward. The air of the room was heavy with cigar smoke. A pale young man with a black moustache and pince-nez was banging away at a typewriter. Another slightly older one was making notes from a map he had spread out in front of him. Both regarded the newcomers with obvious disapprobation. Clara, however, continued to beam upon everyone.

“It would seem that you are great travellers,” she remarked, looking round at the maps, the piled-up suit-cases and other impedimenta of travel.

“All over Europe,” the big man boasted, “we have important affairs. From north to south we are always travelling. We see the world, but seldom, young lady,” he added, with a sweeping bow and a glitter in his dark eyes, “do we behold a young lady so charming. If it will give you pleasure, señorita, I will show you the other two rooms.”

Clara shook her head, laughing.

“This is enough,” she assured him, with a glance out of the window. “I would not trouble you so much. *Bon voyage!* . . .”

The woman waddled after them down the creaking stairs. Clara produced two more pound notes.

“My husband and I must have a few days in which to make up our minds,” she explained. “We give you this to hold the rooms for us until Thursday.”

The woman smiled. Her face suddenly caught a reflection of gracious

youth. The money was good.

“It shall be as madam suggests,” she agreed. . . .

“Smelly lot of dagos,” Nicholson observed as he scrambled into his seat. “What is our next move, chief?”

“We make a report,” she answered. “For one day we have gone a long distance. Berens could have been shot from that window, and the man who talked to me—did you see his muscles?—with a little run from behind, for which there was plenty of room, could have thrown that air rifle afterwards to where it was found.”

“But why?”

Clara shrugged her shoulders. It was the only possible answer.

“I take great pleasure, baroness,” Roderigo said two mornings later, “in presenting to you my relative, General Cuidrad de Vial, who until a few months ago was chief of the police at Madrid—the Baroness Linz.”

“My unknown client?” the latter remarked, smiling, as she held out her hand.

The General bowed. Notwithstanding the fact that he was no longer slim, with his white moustache and gallant bearing he was a fine figure of a man.

“Your very grateful client, baroness,” the General acknowledged. “I am here to express my appreciation of your services verbally and I hope in other ways to your satisfaction.”

“That sounds very pleasant,” the lady of ADVICE LIMITED declared, endeavouring to conceal her surprise. “To tell you the truth I felt that I had fallen a great deal short of what you hoped for. It was difficult, however. All we could do was to point out that what appeared to be a suicide might have been murder if there had been the slightest motive for it, and to show in what manner the murder might have been committed. The duke’s instructions were obdurate or I should have passed the matter on to the police where we left it.”

“It was unnecessary, baroness,” the General replied. “Justice has been done.”

He showed signs of reaching for his pocket-book. Clara held out her hand.

“Do you know,” she confided, “I believe I would rather you explained to me the meaning of this mysterious business and what you meant by that last sentence, than paid me my fee because, after all, I did not carry the affair to any termination.”

The General smiled.

“You are, I am convinced, a young lady of discretion,” he ventured.

“I myself will answer for it,” Roderigo murmured.

“This money has been well earned,” the General declared, placing some notes upon the table. “The explanation shall be gratis. You must know,

baroness, that up till now the Republican Party in Spain has been unable to form a stable government, consequently they are haunted by a growing fear that Alphonso will suddenly return and take back his kingdom. To prevent that a small army of miscreants from Barcelona, which is the headquarters of communism in Spain, have been following Alphonso about for the last two months. On the other hand there are some of us others who stand for his protection.”

“But here—at Ranelagh!” Clara exclaimed. “Berens, the stockbroker! What’s that got to do with it all?”

“Three of these rascals from Barcelona, chief of whom was Dominique Bastidio,” the General continued, “settled in London. They had information that Alphonso was to take golf lessons and play polo at Ranelagh. They hired rooms and they waited. Upon a morning there came this unfortunate man, Berens, who bears a most remarkable resemblance to Alphonso. His Majesty was expected upon the links that day. Instead came Berens, and from the window of the room into which you penetrated, baroness, that unfortunate man was shot. His only crime was that he resembled a king.”

“But surely,” Clara protested, “those men—they were Spaniards themselves—they didn’t expect to find Alphonso playing alone and unattended?”

The General twisted his moustache.

“The baroness must remember,” he pointed out, “that these were ignorant scoundrels. They looked for Alphonso and when that other poor man came along on the very day they were warned to keep watch for their victim, they did not hesitate for a moment. There was certainly a strong resemblance and they did not stop to think of the improbability of my late master being absolutely alone. They were there to kill and they killed. There was another reason, too, for their mistake. It is well known that for weeks my master has been in a highly nervous and morbid state. He has recently, on many occasions, sent away his companions and indulged in deliberate solitude. The papers even have commented upon this.”

“And this man—Dominique Somebody—the murderer?” Clara asked. “What has become of him?”

The General smiled with the air of one who has committed a good action. With a gesture of apology he lit a cigarette.

“The remains of Dominique Bastidio,” he confided, “were hauled out of the Thames this morning. He will make no more attempts at regicide. In this case, baroness, we perhaps owe you our apologies for having anticipated your advice, but to set your mind at rest let me tell you that the man had seventeen murders to his credit.”

“But,” Clara protested, “couldn’t you have left him to the police?”

The General curled his moustache.

“No one could have proved the crime,” he pointed out. “He would have been extradited, sentenced to seven years’ imprisonment and pardoned. Ours was the simpler way.”

HELP FOR MR. GOLDMAN

Clara, Baroness Linz, leaned across the table and lifted the telephone receiver to her ear.

“Hello!” she said.

A shrill, eager voice with a distinctly Jewish intonation replied.

“Goldman and Company of Penton Street, Finsbury, speaking. Who vas you?”

“I vas and I am ADVICE LIMITED,” Clara answered.

“Don’t be fresh, young voman,” was the curt retort. “I vant to speak to your principal, the Baroness Linz.”

“Speak on then. I am the Baroness Linz.”

The voice at the other end changed its tone. There was a certain amount of respect in the next query.

“You vas the young lady who found out who stole those six bales of silk from my nephew, Sam Fink’s warehouse?”

“Quite right,” Clara assented. “That was not very difficult.”

“You take a taxi, young lady—I vill pay—and come to 56 Penton Street, Finsbury, right along. Come straight to my office. Don’t speak vith no one.”

Clara considered for a moment. Her recent activities had been of a far more exciting character, but she had nothing in view for the moment. An affair of an altogether different type might be interesting as a matter of experience.

“Is the matter urgent?” she enquired “I am rather busy this morning.”

“Urgent!” the voice at the other end exclaimed, quivering with excitement. “I tell you it is tragedy vich has happened here! You leave your other business. You come right away. I pay for the taxi.”

“Very well. I’ll come,” she promised.

Clara, Baroness Linz, sole instigator and owner of the newly launched business of ADVICE LIMITED, was without a doubt handicapped by her looks. She had at different times been likened to Mona Lisa for her smile, to Fra Filippo Lippi’s Madonna for the exquisite clearness of her eyes and the transparency of her complexion, to Viola Tree for the delightfully humorous curve of her lips when she was moved to inward mirth. Notwithstanding the fact that every article of her attire was chosen to conceal rather than exploit her personal charms, and that she wore a closely fitting hat simply to hide the colour of her beautiful hair, little Mr. Goldman, seated before his large, untidy-

looking desk, Rebecca, his daughter, and Geoffrey Montessor, salesman of the firm, a blond young man of gentlemanly appearance, were all struck dumb by her entrance. Sam Goldman, who was diminutive in stature, afflicted by a slight cast in one eye and whose whole poise towards life seemed to be apologetic, gazed at her helplessly. The young traveller, whose manners were always above reproach, rose automatically to his feet but was similarly impressed by her presence. Rebecca, with the eternal egoism of her sex, after a single glance at the newcomer looked only at the young man opposite to see in what manner he was affected. Clara announced herself.

“I am the Baroness Linz of ADVICE LIMITED. I understand you wish to consult me. Please let me know what the trouble is.”

She selected the least dusty of the empty chairs and seated herself calmly a few feet away from the desk. The young man was the first to recover himself.

“You must forgive Mr. Goldman,” he begged in a pleasant tone. “He has had rather a shock this morning and, if you will pardon my saying so, he was expecting to see an older—a different sort of lady.”

“I am afraid I cannot change my appearance,” was the cold reply. “I may not be very old but I have had some experience in helping people out of trouble. For instance, Mr. Goldman,” she added, turning to him, “it is quite true that I found the thief of your nephew’s bales of silk. Now, what can I do for you?”

Sam Goldman groaned. The recollection of his trouble dispelled the momentary paralysis of his senses.

“I scarcely know vere to begin,” he wailed in a thin, nervous voice. “The shock has been too much. My poor head!” he exclaimed, clasping it between his hands. “Our season’s trade ruined! Oh dear, oh dear!”

“If you don’t mind, sir,” the tall young man intervened, “perhaps I had better explain the situation to the—er—the baroness.”

His employer waved his none too clean hand in assent. Geoffrey Montessor, who in the local circles of the suburb in which he lived was considered the complete ladies’ man, turned towards this amazing visitor.

“I know that your time is valuable, madam,” he began. “I will try to be concise. We are manufacturers of ladies’ clothing here—perhaps I should say girls’ and women’s clothing, for we cater for the lower middle classes—for the great shops who show their wares in the windows. Lately our success has been entirely due to the fact that we have an arrangement with one of the most important French firms to send us over four times during the year copies of their forthcoming designs. It costs us a great deal of money——”

“A fortune,” Sam Goldman groaned. “Hunderets and hunderets——”

“—but it has always been worth it,” Montessor continued. “A few days ago we received in a sealed packet the spring designs as usual. We rushed

them up into the cutting-room, had a few samples made, and I started off—I am traveller for the firm—to see our biggest customer. To-day is Friday. On Tuesday I showed the costumes to one of the most important wholesale men in England. He just looked at me, smiled and shook his head. When I asked him what was the matter he whistled down a tube and in a few moments his foreman brought up precisely the same goods as I was offering, cut in exactly the same way to the same design. I had to stand still like a fool whilst he told me that he had placed his season's order a day before with a rival firm."

"Explain the significance of this a little more clearly, please," Clara begged.

"This is the problem," the young man pointed out. "These costumes were cut from the design which came to us in a sealed packet from Paris and which was supposed to have been shown to no one else in England. The designs, from the moment they arrived, were locked in our safe here and taken up by Mr. Goldman himself to the cutting-room, yet somehow or other they must have been got at and their secret disclosed to another firm of manufacturers. They rushed through samples twenty-four hours ahead of us and cut the ground from under our feet. I might as well be out of business, for it is the same wherever I go—everyone has placed their orders."

Clara reflected for a moment.

"Could this not possibly be an accident—an intense similarity of design?" she suggested.

"If you were in the trade," Montessor assured her, "you would realise the impossibility of such a thing. There are small details in connection with the fall and sweep of the skirt and the loops and hang of the cape which are entirely original. Our designs have been stolen and copied. We have lost our season's trade. That is our position."

Sam Goldman looked up. His eyes were red, his out-turned red lips were quivering.

"Vee vas ruined, young lady," he groaned. "Our trade vas cut away from under our feet. We have ten thousand pounds' worth of materials to pay for within the next three months and not an order on the books."

Clara made no comment. She was beginning to develop a faint interest in the situation.

"Are you sure that the firm which supplied you with the coming designs has treated you fairly?" she asked. "Sure, for instance, that they have not themselves supplied the same thing to your competitors?"

"That is impossible," the young man declared with confidence. "The designs come over in a sealed packet by air, they are met by Mr. Ducane, the firm's agent, who brings them direct to us. The seal is broken here before us all and the designs unrolled."

“Where do you keep the designs until you can get to work upon them?” Clara asked a little wearily. These preliminaries always bored her. It was only when the stage was set and the psychology of the thing appeared that she was able to find a real interest in her profession. Montessoro pointed to the safe which stood against the wall. She rose to her feet and, crossing the room, examined it.

“A Bartholomew number five,” she murmured in some surprise. “Surely that is one of the best safes in the world.”

“Vat it costet!” Sam Goldman groaned. “I bought it second-hand but it cost a fortune.”

“Who sets the combination and keeps the keys?” she enquired.

“Mr. Goldman himself,” the young man replied.

“Do you mind opening it?” she begged.

There was a moment’s hesitation. Mr. Goldman stroked his chin. Clara smiled as she turned her back and walked to the far end of the room.

“I will talk to the young lady,” she proposed. “I promise that I will not look round.”

“Vee trust you all right,” Mr. Goldman said, rising to his feet and jingling a bunch of keys, “but maybe this is best. The world is full of queer people. Ven it is open, young lady, you shall examine it.”

Clara glanced with some faint interest at the girl who had risen to her feet and who was now standing by her side at a remote window. She was pale and anæmic looking, with jet black hair and thin angular figure. Her eyes were the one beautiful feature of her face. They were deep-set, almost black, but clear and brilliant.

“Have you any theory about this, Miss Goldman?” she asked.

The girl, who was looking out of the window fixedly, shook her head.

“How can one have a theory? My father and I alone, and perhaps occasionally Geoffrey, know the combination.”

“Is the young man whom you call Geoffrey a relative?”

A very faint streak of colour appeared in the girl’s cheeks.

“He is my fiancé,” she confided. “We are engaged to be married. Father is very fond of him. He is quite one of the family.”

“Your fiancé,” Clara repeated thoughtfully.

The girl’s eyes seemed to be pleading with her. She was trembling slightly and her voice was not quite steady.

“You think it strange that I should want to marry someone who is not of the same faith?” she queried. “My father is not strict and Geoffrey has been very useful to us in the business. You see, it is difficult for us sometimes. People like my father succeed because they are hard-working and saving but so many people think that when they do business with Jews they are being taken

advantage of. With Geoffrey it is different. All the customers like him. They believe him when he talks about prices. They feel that he is doing his best for them. When he marries me he will be a partner.”

“Very nice for him, I should think,” Clara commented, with a smile which she tried to make reassuring.

There was a summons from the other end of the room. Obeying it, Clara examined the safe with the air of an expert. It really was a very solid and fine piece of work.

“I understand that there are no spare keys?” she persisted.

“Not with us. Only one with the maker and that has never been used,” Mr. Goldman confided. “Sometimes on Thursdays there is quite a great deal of money for the wages. One key is enough. I like to know that my money, when it is out of the bank, is safe.”

The genius of ADVICE LIMITED returned thoughtfully to her chair. Goldman resumed his seat. He watched her anxiously.

“Vell?”

She smiled.

“You don’t expect me to produce a divining rod and grope my way to the thief, do you?” she asked. “Tell me the name of the firm who seem to have profited by the theft—the firm who supplied your customer.”

“Epstein and Jacobs,” the young man announced.

“They was a good firm, but tricky,” Sam Goldman put in. “Maybe I trust Epstein, but Jacobs—he would rob his own father!”

“Have you any theory as to how they got hold of the design?” Clara asked bluntly.

“They stole it,” was the angry reply. “They was rascals! They have taken all my trade. Mr. Montessor here—this time last year he sold eighteen thousand pounds’ worth of spring costumes. This year nothing!”

“How do you suppose your designs came into the hands of Epstein and Jacobs? No one could break into that safe. It has obviously never been tampered with since it was made, and you say that you always keep the key in the family.”

“How did them designs get stolen?” Sam Goldman demanded, raising his voice despairingly. “How should vee know? Vee send for you to find that out! Vat you think, young lady baroness? Vat you think now? Tell us.”

Clara smiled.

“I am not a magician,” she reminded him. “I will work on your case if you like for three days. I shall require ten guineas a day and fifty guineas if I am successful.”

Sam Goldman groaned. It was a great deal of money.

“Ten guineas a day!” he expostulated. “My dear young lady, how was it

possible for you to spend ten guineas a day?"

"Those are my terms. The ten guineas a day will go to the private enquiry office I have to make use of, so you see if I don't succeed I get nothing. If you think I am asking too much——"

She rose to her feet. Mr. Goldman rose too. He beat the table with the palm of his hands.

"You vas too impatient, young lady," he cried. "It vas a great deal of money you ask, but we pay. You listen to me—we pay. Maybe you do for me what you did for my nephew."

"I shall do my best," Clara promised. "If I don't succeed it will only cost you thirty guineas."

"You vant we should explain to you anything more?" Sam Goldman asked. "Here we are—my daughter, Mr. Montessor and me—we tell you anything you ask."

"I only want to know one thing at present," Clara replied. "Tell me the address of Messrs. Epstein and Jacobs."

"Thirteen Stockton Row," Rebecca announced, looking up from her work.

"They won't tell you anything," Geoffrey Montessor prophesied. "They never give any of their business away."

"Very difficult people," Sam Goldman sighed. "You think you earn that fifty guineas, miss. Yes?"

Clara nodded to them all but refused to commit herself.

"I shall do my best," she promised.

Being a young woman of quick apprehensions Clara was not in the least surprised to find that she was followed out of the premises of Messrs. Goldman & Company, or to hear a not unpleasant but deprecating voice in her ear.

"Forgive me, baroness, may I walk to the corner of the street with you?"

"Certainly, Mr. Montessor," she replied without enthusiasm. "You may even fetch me a taxicab if you will."

"I would do anything you asked me to," he assured her earnestly. "You won't mind, will you, if I say that I think you are wonderful?"

The old trouble! But what an exceedingly foolish young man!

"Don't talk to me like that, if you please," she begged.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Because I hate silly compliments—especially from strangers."

"How long will it take me to know you well enough to tell you exactly what I think of you?" he asked.

She looked at him critically. Nothing in her expression displayed her growing dislike.

"Please don't be personal," she begged lightly. "Can't you give me a hint as to how those designs were got at?"

"I wish I could," he answered. "I'm afraid you won't do any good by going to see Epstein."

"Why not?"

"They were not the actual thieves."

"They were the receivers of the stolen design. According to you they could not have made the costumes without it."

"They won't tell you anything," he replied gloomily. "I have been at their buyer already. We have always been pals. He would tell me if he would tell anybody but he swears he doesn't even know himself how the firm became possessed of the designs."

"What is his name?" she asked.

"Sidney Jacobs," he told her after a moment's hesitation. "He is the son of the Jacobs who is in the firm."

She hailed a passing taxicab. The young man opened the door and stood with his hat in his hand in the most approved fashion.

"I could not come a little way with you?" he begged wistfully.

"Certainly not."

"When shall we hear from you again?"

She shrugged her shoulders indifferently.

"Whenever there is anything to report."

On the third morning after the visit of the head of *ADVICE LIMITED* to Finsbury a note, which arrived by special messenger, was brought in to Mr. Goldman. He read it and frowned.

"It is from *ADVICE LIMITED*, I'm sure," Rebecca declared. "Has she found out anything?"

Her father reached for his hat. He had tucked the note away in his pocket and he had an uncommunicative air.

"She vas not vell," he confided. "She thought maybe I would call and see her."

"Better let me go, sir," the blond young Adonis, who was kneeling on the carpet filling a sample case, suggested. "I can handle her all right."

Sam Goldman shook his head.

"I go myself," he announced. "I shall take the bus to Moorgate Street and then the Underground. It will take me an hour and a half. I shall be back at twelve o'clock."

"Much better let Geoffrey go, father," Rebecca persisted, noticing the shadow on her fiancé's face. "He is more used to those sort of people."

"I go myself," Mr. Goldman repeated obstinately. "If the young voman has anything to tell she vill tell it to me. No need to waste time with fine talk. The

young woman knows what business is. She don't want no nonsense."

The head of the firm took his leave omitting to mention the fact that the note which he had received stipulated that he should come himself to see *ADVICE LIMITED* and not send any representative. He caught his bus, resisted the temptation to expend a penny on a morning paper, and in due course reached the Strand and, mounting two flights of stairs, presented himself at Clara's tiny domicile in Adam Street. He looked around him in wonder as he was shown into the small, elegantly furnished room by the dark-visaged butler. There was nothing except the telephone and a large, severe-looking desk to indicate that business was transacted in this very feminine apartment. Mr. Goldman felt his pulses tingle nervously as he sat on the edge of his chair swinging his hat in his hand.

"Vell?" he exclaimed eagerly. "You find out something—yes?"

"Nothing whatever," Clara confessed.

Sam Goldman was thunderstruck.

"Vat you say?" he demanded in a changed tone. "You find out nothing at all? You take ten guineas a day—thirty guineas—and find out nothing! Vat you bring me all this way for just to tell me that?"

"I am not quite so unreasonable as you seem to think," Clara reassured him, smiling. "In the first place I am not going to charge you one penny for the present. That's good news, isn't it?"

Goldman was vastly relieved. His one sound eye twinkled.

"Dat vas good news," he admitted cautiously. "How could you charge, though, ven you find out nothing?"

"You say you get these sets of designs four times a year," she remarked. "When is the next lot due?"

"The last week in April," Goldman replied. "They will be for the summer styles. But vat is the good? If no one find out anything maybe they get stolen again."

She nodded.

"They probably will, but this time I shall be able to produce the thief."

"How do you know that?" he demanded, eyeing her shrewdly.

She smiled.

"Perhaps I have not been altogether so unsuccessful as I appear to have been," she confessed. "I have had a talk with Mr. Ducane, the agent of your French firm, and I have made friends with Mr. Jacobs, the buyer at Epstein's. My information department, too, has been at work and I know something about these people. At the present moment I could guess how your designs came into the hands of Epstein and Jacobs and I should probably be right."

"But why not tell me—tell me quick?" Goldman exclaimed, mopping his forehead.

She shook her head.

"I have no proof," she told him, "and I do not work without proof. I think I can produce the thief during the first week of May and before he has done you any further harm."

Sam Goldman sighed deeply. He could not conceal his disappointment.

"Dat vas very clever of you," he said sarcastically. "Vat about all the cloth I bought for the spring styles? Vat am I going to do vith my work-people and my machinery? Vat about paying my bills when they come due with no sales in the book? Do you think I am made of money?"

"You want my advice?" Clara asked.

"Vat else do I pay for?" Goldman demanded, apparently forgetful of the fact that so far he had paid nothing.

"Well, here it is," she continued. "I can quite understand that your ordinary spring trade is ruined. You are second in the market instead of being first. Still, you must do something with the material. You have the machinery and you have the work-people. You have the designs, too, even though they have been copied. Make up the costumes and sell them, if you must, without a profit."

"Without a profit," Goldman groaned, wincing as though in agony. "Vat nonsense you talk, young lady. You suggest to a business man that he sells without a profit! Is dat your fine advice? Do people pay you for telling them things like that?"

"Only for three months," she reminded him gently. "In that way you pay your bills, you keep your work-people employed and I expect there is always a little departmental profit to be made. Anyhow, you keep the factory going and after next quarter I don't think anyone will steal your designs again."

"You give good advice, you do," Mr. Goldman lamented. "You call it advice to sell my goods, my beautiful goods, without a profit!"

"Only for three months," she reiterated. "Surely that would be better than doing no business at all. At the end of three months, if anyone tries to steal your next season's designs, I shall find out who it is and the trouble will probably never occur again."

"You tell me who it is now," he begged, with a sudden change of front. "After all, you vas working for me. You tell me what you think."

She shook her head very firmly indeed.

"I should never do that," she told him. "I take no account of suspicions. If I accuse anyone I produce the proof."

Sam Goldman groaned. Three months' work and no profit! Yet it was good advice—he knew that. Not advice to be paid for, but good of its sort. He rose reluctantly to his feet.

"You tell them in the office and let your friends believe that I have failed completely," she advised him.

“So you have,” he snapped.
Clara, Baroness Linz, only smiled.

Sam Goldman, when he had once made up his mind to the ghastly exploit of selling without a profit, rather enjoyed those next three months. His competitors, even his old friend, Aaron Sachs, were furious with him.

“Ruin,” the latter declared angrily one evening when the two met in a tea shop, “is what you are asking for. You cut the market so no one can live. You sell that costume for forty-two shillings what costs forty shillings before it leaves the bench. It was not honest trading, Sam. The bankruptcy court is where you will end.”

Sam sucked up his tea noisily.

“You want too much profit, Aaron,” he said with a soothing note in his tone. “Wait till the next models are here. Maybe I put up my prices then.”

“Listen, Samuel,” his old friend implored him. “Let me look at your costings. I can show you where you are wrong. It is that smart young salesman of yours who is doing the mischief. I tell you no one can sell at your prices. You will fail, Samuel.”

Goldman smiled cryptically. He laid his hand upon the arm of the man whom he had known since boyhood.

“Aaron,” he reminded him. “There was a manufacturer not so far from us two now, a manufacturer whose name was not so unlike Aaron Sachs, who never had any money until after he had failed.”

Aaron Sachs, who was a fat man, wiped his forehead vigorously.

“If my own brother had said that to me, Samuel,” he declared, “I should have called him a liar. . . .”

Even Geoffrey Montessor, although his work was made easy for him, grumbled.

“I shall never be able to get prices up again, Mr. Goldman,” he told his prospective father-in-law gloomily. “Everyone says we have gone mad. We sell our spring models too cheap.”

“If you can make better prices, make dem,” was the prompt reply. “What would you have? You like me to keep all that cloth, turn away half my hands, do no business and ask to have my bills renewed just because Epstein and Jacobs got my designs and steal my customers? I will show them people something!”

“You have shown them something already,” the young man remarked disconsolately. “Sidney Jacobs won’t speak to me now. He thinks we are doing this out of spite.”

“Maybe we are, my son,” Goldman sighed. “Maybe we are crazy.”

“That’s what people are beginning to say.”

Samuel Goldman chuckled. His unpopularity afforded him a sort of savage satisfaction.

About a week before the time appointed for the delivery of the summer designs by Mr. Ducane, Miss Rebecca Goldman rang the bell of the small flat in which the business of ADVICE LIMITED was conducted and was promptly admitted. Clara received her kindly, ordered tea and did her best to make her visitor feel at ease. It was obvious, however, that the latter was anxious and upset.

"I got your note, Baroness Linz," she said after a nervous pause, "and, as you see, I have come along. I cannot think even now, though, what you want with me."

"You have done what I asked?"

"Yes. I came and I told no one. But what do you want?"

Clara took note of the girl's hollow cheeks, her over-brilliant eyes and her general restlessness of mien.

"I am afraid you are not very well, Miss Goldman," she said sympathetically.

"There's nothing the matter with me," was the hasty reply.

"You are not overworked?"

The girl shook her head.

"We have finished the spring business," she explained. "Just now there is very little work to do."

"You are waiting for Mr. Ducane to bring you the summer designs, I suppose?"

"Yes," Rebecca assented a little faintly.

"Did your father ever tell you what I promised him?"

"No."

"I promised him that when Mr. Ducane arrived this time I would tell him who had taken his spring designs from the safe, had them copied and replaced."

"Why do you tell me this, Baroness Linz? What do you mean?"

Clara moved her chair and laid her hand on her visitor's shoulder.

"Miss Rebecca," she confided. "You see, I have found out who removed the designs and who copied them. I want to talk to you about it."

In Rebecca's deep eyes there was the terrified look of a hunted animal. She was incapable of speech.

"I almost made up my mind," Clara went on kindly, "not to interfere at all. I am only doing so for one reason. I am afraid Mr. Montessor has not been treating you very well."

"How did you know that?" the girl faltered.

"I have an enquiry office connected with my business, and I have learnt a few things about Mr. Montessor. I can tell you the whole story if you like."

"Geoffrey never stole the designs," the girl exclaimed breathlessly.

"No, but you did," Clara told her. "Four or five times, I think, within the last few years, but never so flagrantly as on this last occasion. You took the designs from the safe on Saturday when, as you know, your father would never cross the threshold of his factory. The young man had them copied and they were back again before sunset. He sold the copies to Epstein and Jacobs and swore to you that he was putting the money aside to buy furniture for your house. He says the same thing to Miss Jacobs whose people believe that he is engaged to her."

"It's not true," Rebecca cried, a throb of despair in her voice. "It's not true. He is engaged to me."

"He is behaving shockingly to both of you, of course. I expect that somewhere or other there is a third girl or even a fourth or a fifth."

"I don't care how many girls there are," Rebecca sobbed, twisting up her handkerchief in her fingers. "What you say is true. I stole the designs this last time and I have copied an odd one or two before when it was not so important, but Geoffrey and I are to be married and father has been mean about the money. Geoffrey may seem to have been friendly with the others but he doesn't mean it. I don't care so long as I get him. Don't you interfere, Baroness Linz. It's not your business."

"Isn't it?" Clara remarked, smiling. "I rather think that it is. However, listen to me. I don't want to do you any harm. If you have really made up your mind that you still want to marry him—although you must know yourself that he is not faithful—I would rather help you than stand in the way."

"You mean it?" the girl asked feverishly.

"I do," Clara assured her. "I think you are foolish, but then all girls are foolish once in their lives."

"Are you going to tell father?"

"In my own way, in my own time I may let him guess," Clara admitted. "Do you believe in me, Miss Goldman?"

"Yes," the girl faltered.

"If you want to get out of this trouble, if you want to keep the young man—if you think he is worth it—will you do exactly what I say?"

"Yes."

"Very well then. Mr. Ducane will pay his usual visit to your office next Friday. Have you promised this young man to copy the patterns for him?"

"I think—he expects me to. But, of course——"

"Listen to me," Clara insisted. "Mr. Ducane will present the designs. Your father will study them. They will be sealed up as usual presumably until

Monday morning. You will go down to the office—as you have done before—on Saturday. You will make copies of the designs and you will pass them on to Mr. Montessoro.”

“Do you mean that I am to go on doing this?” the girl cried, bewildered.

“Just once more. Then if this young man marries you I presume there will be no further occasion for it. We must try to persuade him that Mr. Goldman is likely to be a better father-in-law than Mr. Jacobs.”

“If you can do that,” Rebecca pleaded passionately. “If only you can do that. Sarah Jacobs is extravagant, she can’t cook, she can’t keep house. She cares for nothing but fine clothes and going out with young men. There is nothing in the world I care for but just Geoffrey.”

“What you have to do,” her mentor reminded her with an encouraging smile, “is not very difficult, and if you do it I think I can promise you that you will keep the young man.”

A few days later a somewhat angry manufacturer of ladies’ clothing climbed the same stairs and was admitted into the feminine sanctum of ADVICE LIMITED. Its presiding genius, who seldom shook hands with anybody, motioned him at once to a chair. He sat on its edge twiddling his hat in his hands and retained his overcoat.

“You may be a very clever young woman, baroness,” Sam Goldman began impetuously, “but you try to treat me as though I were one big fool. I am a good business man. I find my way through the world quite all right. Why should you be the one to decide how much you shall tell me of my own affairs and how much you shall keep to yourself?”

“Mr. Goldman,” she begged, “put your hat down on the floor, please. Thank you. Now listen. It is a very difficult thing to give advice and to help other people, and you can only do it if they are able and willing to help themselves. I always have to explain that to my clients. You must have confidence in me.

“Dat vas all very vell——”

“Wait,” Clara interrupted. “I told you only three months ago that I thought if you were patient until this week I could stop your new designs getting into the wrong hands and if you insisted upon knowing I could explain to you how it has happened that your secrets have leaked out. Very well, I know now that I can keep my word but I must do it my own way.”

“Vat you call your own way?” Sam Goldman asked suspiciously.

“You will receive Mr. Ducane on Friday afternoon as usual, but he will arrive an hour late. It will be half-past six when he comes. You will accept his packet and you will lock it in your safe after a brief examination. You will call and see me on Sunday—at this time—and from then on, with the exception of

one or two small details, everything will explain itself.”

“And how do I know that my designs will not be stolen again?” Sam Goldman demanded.

“You must take my word for it.”

“And ven shall I know who stole them last time?”

Clara considered.

“How long does it take you to make the two or three sample costumes which Mr. Montessor takes out to get his big orders from?”

“Forty-eight hours,” the clothing manufacturer replied.

“On Wednesday or Thursday then of the following week.”

Sam Goldman deliberated for several moments. His lips were pursed, his fingers—an old trick—seemed to have the inclination to stroke his nose. He was in a state of uncertainty.

“I have told you all that it is necessary for you to know at this moment, Mr. Goldman,” his adviser assured him. “Believe me, the rest of the affair is very much better arranged by someone outside.”

“But how vas you able to get to know about my affairs?” Mr. Goldman enquired. “You sit here in your little parlour all the time. Vat do you do? Make guesses?”

Clara smiled.

“If I do they are generally good ones,” she conceded, “but of course I have to have help. If you like to know I will tell you that I have connections with a very excellent enquiry office, and through them I have been in touch with Mr. Ducane and two other firms in your particular line of business. I can tell you one or two things about people whom you know which may surprise you presently. I shall earn my money all right, Mr. Goldman.”

He picked up his hat and nodded.

“I trust you,” he announced. “I think you are one smart girl.”

Somewhat later than his accustomed time on the following Friday afternoon Mr. Ducane, dapper and smart as usual, was ushered into the office where Samuel Goldman, Rebecca and Mr. Geoffrey Montessor were eagerly awaiting him. There was a little chorus of greetings and they all gathered round the table whilst Mr. Ducane broke the seals of the parcel he was carrying.

“This time,” he confided, “I met the aeroplane at Croydon. I have come straight from there.”

“Any particular change in the styles?” Geoffrey Montessor asked.

“More changes than I expected,” the agent replied. “You will find several small surprises.”

“We vill have just one look—one quick look,” Mr. Goldman declared excitedly. “It is a bad day you come late, Ducane, on a Friday. I finish work

when the sun sets. Never mind, just a glance at the number one costume, then we lock everything away until Monday morning.”

The agent undid the parcel and drew off the tissue paper. Mr. Goldman held up the design and unfolded a pattern. The young man’s lips pursed in a whistle.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “Shorter! And everybody said the skirts were to be longer. Look at the new bodice too. High neck, after all, and if there’s not a belt!”

“Marvellously chic,” Ducane commented reverently.

“Takes your breath away at first,” Sam Goldman admitted, covering over the pattern, “but it’s what they asked for. It’s something new. No one shan’t cut in this time on us! We start work at six o’clock Monday morning. Your appointment was for Wednesday, Geoffrey, eh?”

“Nine-thirty at Lessingham’s—with the boss himself,” the young man announced. “Very few travellers get anywhere near him nowadays.”

“I go with you myself,” Sam Goldman decided. “Very polite Mr. Lessingham will think it after our little dispute a few months ago. Now—if you please——”

He pushed them out of the way, deposited the packet in the safe, locked it with great care and rattled the keys into his pocket. Then he picked up his hat.

“Close up, Rebecca,” he directed. “Come along, Mr. Ducane and Geoffrey. I don’t like that any light shall burn in here on Friday night. Are you coming home to supper with us, young man?”

Geoffrey Montessor hesitated. The words of an excuse were already framed upon his lips, but his prospective father-in-law would have none of it.

“You come right along,” the latter insisted. “We may talk a little business and you and Rebecca can have your walk.”

“Very good, sir,” the young man replied meekly.

That Wednesday morning’s appointment was Sam Goldman’s hour of triumph. He elected to carry the sample case in which reposed the three costumes under his own arm. For the first time when on an errand which was purely a business one he engaged a taxicab. From the moment of their arrival things seemed favourable. Mr. Randolph Lessingham, the head of the great firm, received them with exceptional consideration.

“I trust that we are going to be more fortunate than last time, Mr. Goldman,” he said. “I have only seen one design for the summer season and I don’t mind telling you that I am not touching it. Now let’s have a look at yours.”

Geoffrey Montessor had already started to unfasten the strap of the box. He was looking puzzled and his fingers were shaking. His employer watched

him keenly.

“My young man,” he apologised, “is not quite himself this morning. Too excited you get, Geoffrey. You see a big sale coming. You should take it coolly as I do. Remember that big sales ain’t everything in the world. When we sell to a house like Lessingham’s there is very little profit to be made. . . . There you are, Mr. Lessingham. Was there ever an artist turned out a finer design than that or a manufacturer better quality goods?”

Mr. Sam Goldman was in his element. He held up the model, he smoothed the skirt with knowing fingers, he shook out the newly shaped coatee. Geoffrey, who was watching, seemed thunderstruck.

“My God!” he exclaimed. “The skirt is longer! That coatee—it didn’t seem cut like that to me on Friday.”

“The goods are better than the design,” Sam Goldman declared cheerfully.

Mr. Lessingham called in his partner. They whispered together for several moments, shook out the costumes and held them at every possible angle. Finally the head of the firm turned to his visitor.

“Mr. Goldman,” he said, “I congratulate you. This time you are on top. I am going to do big business with you.”

Sam Goldman chuckled. He moistened his red lips, his sound eye beamed.

“I knew it, Mr. Lessingham,” he exclaimed. “There ain’t no one gets what we gets. Just now and then we may miss it, but not often.”

“How many costumes can you turn out per week?”

“A thousand in assorted colours and materials.”

“Very good,” Mr. Lessingham decided. “I take you on for three months.”

Sam Goldman’s fingers trembled so that he could scarcely hold the pencil and order book which he had produced. He gave a little gasp.

“Fourteen thousand costumes we may as well call it in round numbers. My buyer shall go round and select the various materials. We will take the price you have marked here as the basis for the tweeds and we will adjust the other prices according to the quality of the material we choose. Is it a deal?”

It was very much a deal. Mr. Lessingham rang for his contract clerk and typist. Geoffrey Montessor was fanning himself at the window. A crisis of one sort had passed without a doubt, but he understood now that furious stream of telephone calls and the urgent desire for his presence at the premises of Messrs. Epstein & Jacobs.

It was certainly Mr. Sam Goldman’s day. He showed an unexpected firmness when his young companion tried to escape, if only for half an hour.

“A business conference,” he announced. “That’s what we are going to have directly we get back to the office. Afterwards you go where you like.”

Geoffrey Montessor, who was not looking forward with any particular

pleasure to his interview with Epstein & Jacobs, assented without demur. The conference consisted of Clara Linz, Rebecca, Sam Goldman and Geoffrey himself. From the first Sam Goldman, who seemed to have taken to himself a new dignity, dominated the gathering. He spoke more slowly than usual and there was an unfamiliar gravity in his tone.

“You two, Rebecca and Geoffrey, you have got to listen to me carefully,” he began. “All that I say has been put into my head by this young lady,” pointing to Clara, “but I think she sees the world better than we see it sometimes. Three months ago there came about a great disaster when our designs were stolen from that safe. Someone sold them to Epstein and Jacobs and I lose my trade. I send for this young lady baroness. She did not make no rash promises but she just talked good common sense. What she said was—do not sit down and fret, use up the cloth you have got to pay for and when the time comes for the next designs to arrive, maybe I do something for you. I did what she told me. Last Friday our friend Mr. Ducane he had *two* packages of designs. One he left with this young lady until Sunday, the other he brought here. The one he brought here went into my safe and maybe someone has had it out and copied from it this week-end. If they did it won’t do them any good. They was very bad designs—even Epstein and Jacobs could not make for themselves good sales with designs like that!”

No one spoke. Geoffrey Montessor, who was something of a coward, was ghastly pale. Rebecca’s great eyes reflected some of the horror which she was feeling.

“This may seem funny what I am going to say,” Sam Goldman went on. “Just at first I did not see it like I do now, but this young lady she talked to me and I think she is right. I don’t want no trouble. Rebecca she is my only daughter. You, Geoffrey—I was fond of you really like a son, although sometimes you may make a slip. I don’t want to know who took those designs. I want you two to get married next week. When that’s all agreed we will go somewhere and drink a bottle of wine to the biggest order the firm has ever had and maybe one small change in the name.”

Mr. Goldman was embarrassed by the attentions he received. Rebecca’s cheek was pressed to his, the young man was grasping his unoccupied hand in fervent and desperate gratitude. Mr. Goldman’s one sound eye was moist.

“Now, now, now,” he said. “That’s all right. That was settled. We never think of it again. All gone. Rebecca, you get my cheque-book. You write out cheque to young lady baroness—eighty guineas—thirty expenses, fifty for the job. And I tell you this, young lady baroness,” he wound up emphatically, “you tell me you have got some clever helpers behind you. Maybe you have, but you know how to give advice good.”

THE LONELY MAN

"It is a good party?" Roderigo, Duc de Partagena, Marquis de Cervera y Topete, questioned hopefully.

"It is a very good party indeed," Clara, Baroness Linz, assented.

"You enjoy yourself?"

"Immensely. There is no one else, however, who dances nearly as well as you do."

"We have this one—yes?" he invited, rising to his feet.

Clara shook her head.

"You have not quite been doing your duty," she pointed out. "I don't think you have danced once with Lady Hannah who, after all, is your joint hostess."

"If I dance with her now," he complained, "you will be left almost alone."

"No one minds that here," she assured him. "The place is too *intime*. Besides, I shan't be alone. The beautiful dark woman opposite with the sad expression—I didn't catch her name—has something to say to me, I'm sure. Twice she leaned across the table just as I was fetched away to dance."

Roderigo for a moment looked serious.

"You did not catch her name," he repeated. "That is Mrs. Roy Tremlett."

"What? The Mrs. Roy Tremlett who——"

She stopped abruptly. They were only just out of earshot of the woman who was leaning back in her chair gazing listlessly at the dancers.

"Yes," Roderigo acknowledged gravely. "That is she. You do not wish, perhaps, to speak with her. You see, she is a sort of cousin of Lady Hannah's, and of Marsham too if it comes to that. They take her side."

"Why not?" Clara demanded. "I never heard much about the case but I know that everyone sympathised with her. . . . Go along and ask Lady Hannah now. We shall have plenty of time to dance later in the evening."

The young man obeyed orders. It had been a very brilliant little dinner-supper-party given jointly by Lady Hannah, who was one of London's best-known hostesses, and Roderigo himself, a party towards the complete success of which Clara had certainly done her share. The latter was no sooner left alone than the woman opposite rose to her feet, picked up her fan and vanity-case and took the chair which Roderigo had just vacated.

"May I come and talk to you for a few moments, baroness?" she asked in a curiously low sweet voice.

"I should be delighted," was the ready assent. "What an amusing place,

isn't it?"

"I suppose so," was the listless reply. "I am afraid I have rather lost my taste for this sort of thing. You are the young lady who gives advice professionally, aren't you? Hannah Phillipson says that you are wonderful."

Clara nodded.

"It is a quaint profession, isn't it?" she remarked. "Still, most of the vocations for women are so overcrowded and I wanted something to do. On the whole, I suppose I ought to consider myself lucky. I have had some interesting clients—Lady Hannah has been one of them—and I have been able to help a few people."

Mrs. Roy Tremlett was speculative yet wistful.

"I wonder whether you could help me."

"I should be very glad to try."

The music suddenly became more insistent. Jazz tunes were out of fashion. People were flirting once more with the idea of sentiment in their dances and flounces on their skirts. The orchestra glided into the "Blue Danube" waltz and for a moment both women were silent. The rhythm and flow of the melody seemed to have become part of the atmosphere of the room. Clara's head moved slightly to the music. The woman opposite listened but gave no sign. She leaned across the table. The music was enveloping.

"Four years ago," she confided, "I committed a crime. Since then there has been fraud in everything I have done and said. The whole of my life has been a lie. Now I think the time is coming when I shall be found out."

The presiding spirit of *ADVICE LIMITED* listened intently. She attempted no comment nor any gesture of sympathy. Nevertheless, she never heard the music of the "Blue Danube" waltz again without recalling that woman's voice with its sweet but terribly sad undertone of misery.

"I suppose I knew," the latter went on, "that some day I should be faced with this. I did the only wise thing. I closed my ears and took the solace of the days as they passed. Now the time is coming when I must pay and I am afraid."

The last bars of the music throbbed and glowed. The dancers seemed to be making their supreme effort—round and round—a medley of flying feet, of beautiful women and eager men thrilled with the unusualness of the rapid movement. With a triumphant burst it was all over. Then the clapping.

"Perhaps you would like to come and talk to me about it all," Clara suggested. "*ADVICE LIMITED* is the name of the firm, you know. My address and telephone number are in the book. I have a funny little home and office combined, close to the Adelphi Terrace."

The woman's attention seemed to have wandered. She was engaged in the thankless task of acknowledging salutations from the passing crowds. She

returned smile for smile, jest for jest, when acquaintances paused to say a word. Except for the natural gravity of her features she was far from wearing her sorrows upon her sleeve. Somehow or other Clara felt that she was the only person in the world just then who could really divine the misery of her beautiful *vis-à-vis*.

“I wonder whether it would be of any use,” the latter murmured, with lips that scarcely moved.

The interruptions continued. The orchestra had started an ordinary foxtrot and the floor was more crowded. A woman who was evidently a personage of consequence paused at the table.

“Patricia, my dear,” she said. “How nice to see you about once more. You know Lord Darrenmore, I’m sure—Mrs. Roy Tremlett.”

“At any rate I know Mrs. Roy Tremlett,” the man assented with a pleasant smile. “Mrs. Tremlett has deserted us all for so long that I am afraid she has forgotten some of her friends.”

She nodded graciously. She was quite mistress of herself and the situation.

“There have been reasons,” she reminded them quietly.

“Oh, bosh!” the woman laughed. “Life is too short to bother with such stupid things as reasons. Come and lunch one day, Patricia. Any time. Half-past one-ish. Don’t go back to the country without letting us see something of you.”

The two passed on. Mrs. Roy Tremlett’s eyes followed them for a moment.

“People are becoming more charitable, I think,” she meditated. “But then, of course, they don’t know everything. They have no idea why I have been driven to live the life of a hermit.”

“One is always foolish, I think,” Clara ventured, “to imagine oneself prejudged.”

The other shook her head.

“I was never afraid of people being unkind to me for the obvious reason,” she confided. “I only did openly what most of them do in secret. Not that that makes people more charitable as a rule. A woman who is concealing her own sin is generally the hardest upon the others who have been found out. . . . Isn’t anyone coming back to our table, I wonder?”

Clara looked around the room.

“Everybody seems to have so many friends,” she pointed out. “Lady Hannah and the duke are talking to some people over in the corner. The Treshams have joined up with the Coningsbys for a time but they are coming back. The others seem to be still dancing.”

“If I don’t tell you now,” the woman said, “I think that I shall never tell you. This is such a wonderful setting for a confession. Lights and music, sinners all around us, not a single grave, disapproving face. . . . Four years ago

I sinned to save my life. I sinned because if I had not I would have died from what no one believes in—a broken heart.

“You are talking of something which I do not understand,” Clara reminded her quietly.

“You know who I am, of course?”

“Yes, I know.”

“You may have read my case. It really doesn’t matter. It was a very ordinary one—a woman’s stupid impulse and the irretrievable disaster. It was the judge’s last ruling which plunged me into hell. He gave my husband the custody of my child.”

The leader of the orchestra, who was swift always to gauge the inclination of his clients, looked around the room and saw few people dancing. The foxtrot came to an end. Even whilst people were loitering on the floor there crept out into the room the first bars of a very sad and very haunting melody which had supplied the motif for one of the most successful productions of the day. It flowed with smooth and effortless facility from the shivering strings of the famous *chef d’orchestre’s* violin and it brought men and women half unwillingly on to the feet. Mrs. Roy Tremlett, absorbed apparently in some poignant memories of her own, listened for a while in silence. Then she turned back to her companion. The other places at the table were still unoccupied.

“I was fond of my husband,” she confided. “I had, indeed, a great affection for him, but even he was always second to my child. As for the man with whom I ran away—well, I will not speak of my feelings for him. Some people in the world thought that I was treated leniently. The husband whom I had left settled a fortune upon me, although I was already a rich woman. The man with whom I played the absurd jest of eloping offered me the shelter of his name. Neither of those things mattered. I had forgotten that they could take the child.”

The music was throbbing through the tangled atmosphere of the place. One had dim visions of a broken-hearted woman bending over a murdered man, with agony in her face and pain clawing at her heartstrings. At the farther end of the room where the music was not so insistent there was still the hum of conversation punctuated with laughter, the clatter of dishes and the popping of corks. From the dance floor, close to which Clara and her companion were seated, came the fluttering of skirts, the sliding of smooth-soled shoes over the polished floor. People were dancing differently, however. There was none of the joy and abandon of the earlier waltz. The dancers seemed to be moving in a mist of sentiment. One man who missed his step hurried his partner shamefacedly from the floor as though he had made a discord for which there could be no atonement. . . . All the time Patricia Roy Tremlett talked.

“I did not get very far with my life of sin, as I suppose it would be called. It

was in Tours, forty-eight hours after I had left London, that I heard a child cry. I heard it again at the hotel in the night. It was a cry of real distress, with just that touch of surprise in it which comes from a child who is too young to understand pain but who is hurt. . . . The next morning I had the news from my lawyer about Rosalind. I found a 'plane and flew home. I made cautious enquiries. I found that Rosalind was expected at Oxenden Castle, where my husband's father and mother lived, in ten days' time upon their return from Canada. She was still at Chandeleys, our own place, with her governess."

The last chords of the music had died away. Clara found Roderigo at her elbow.

"To me it seems too sad, that 'Bitter Sweet,' " he said. "You like me to ask them to play 'Franchise' and we dance?"

She waved him away.

"Not just yet," she begged. "Dance with Marian Howells, please, and don't disturb us. I will come out some night soon and dance all the time with you."

Roderigo had the Latin quickness of apprehension and he at once effaced himself. The altered tone of the music seemed to have changed the whole atmosphere, but across those few feet of table with the bowl of sweet-smelling yellow roses between them, Clara felt as though she and her companion were enclosed in a chamber with steel walls.

"That was a terrible week," the woman who was making her confession went on. "I went to all the institutions I could hear of, those awful institutions where lost children are brought up. Nowhere could I find anyone in the least like Rosalind. One day, driving back to the rooms where I was living secretly in London, in one of the suburbs I saw a child playing outside a small villa. I stopped the car. I spoke to the child. I was wild with hope. She seemed to have even Rosalind's mannerisms and she was exactly her age—three years old. I saw the mother. She laughed at me. At first she declared that she would not part with her child for any consideration. She asked me into the house, however, and I saw that she had other children—a large family—and I could see too that she was poor. When I mentioned money there was hunger in her eyes. I pointed to those other children. I told her how well she could dress them all and feed them and bring them up by just parting with one. I gave her a great deal more money even than I had promised, and she was happy and content. I did not tell her my name. She did not ask it. I went and fetched her the money. I took away the child."

There was a brief pause whilst the music sung in their ears. Then she went on.

"The scheme worked out perfectly and the children were changed. The child who has been living at Oxenden Castle as my daughter—mine and his—came from that little villa. She has puzzled them all there more than once, but

they have been in Canada nearly all the time since Rosalind was born and no one seems to have suspected. Rosalind and I went abroad. When we came home I said that I had been to India and had brought home one of my sister's children, but I kept out of sight of everyone and I lived in strange places on the Continent where few English people go. We have been almost happy, except that I have always had one fear. I have kept it in the background. Now it has come. After four years of wandering my husband is home. He wrote to his mother to say that it was the child who had called him back."

"But after all," Clara reflected, "your sin has not been so terrible. You were guilty of contempt of court and in the eyes of the law you kidnapped another woman's child. You did so, however, with its mother's consent, and the child herself must, by the by, have had a marvellous time, brought up at Oxenden Castle with all sorts of advantages in life she never could have had otherwise. Besides, how are you any nearer being found out?"

The woman shivered slightly.

"Norman will know," she said. "He was very fond of Rosalind. The moment he hears that other child speak he will know. If they take her away from me now—well, I am not a sentimentalist. It is nothing to say that I shall die. What I am afraid of is—pain. Like we heard just now in that music. Pain tearing at the heart. That is what will live with me for ever if they take her away."

"What sort of a man is your husband?" Clara asked.

"Too good for me," the other sighed. "I admired him—I loved him when he gave me Rosalind—but he is stern. Right and wrong—he knows no middle course. He is generous in nearly all his instincts, but he never learnt to forgive. My breathless search of those institutions, my taking away a child from its mother—however willing she may have been—the whole course of deceit and falsehoods connected with the child's bringing up, will appal him. I would take Rosalind and escape if I could but it is too late. The news of his return to England was in all the papers the day before yesterday. By this time he will have been down to Gloucestershire."

The restaurant seemed stirred into fresh activity. The theatre crowd was beginning to arrive for supper and rapidly filled up the places of the retiring diners. The music became livelier in tone. Two new young men joined Lady Hannah's party, but Clara steadily refused to dance.

"Go on helping me, please," she begged Roderigo, who was once more hovering round in attendance. "You shall have all the evenings you want and all the dances you want later in the week, but leave us alone now."

He looked at her with a whimsical contortion of the face. Mrs. Roy Tremlett's attention had been momentarily claimed by a passer-by.

"Another case?" he whispered.

"I am not sure. I wish that it might be."

Roderigo became brisk and tactful. Clara and her *vis-à-vis* were again left alone at their end of the table.

"Well, now you know everything," the latter said. "You know more than I have told anyone on earth. I have carried along almost to breaking point. Now I feel that I must have counsel. I cannot tell you why, but to-night I have a presentiment. I feel as though the whole thing were coming crashing about me, as though something were going to happen—dramatic—final—at once. I never dreamed that I could have asked a stranger for help, but with you somehow it seems different. I feel that the crisis may arrive at any moment. I should not be surprised even to see policemen upon the threshold here. Tell me what I am to do. Tell me some way in which I can keep Rosalind," she wound up with a little sob in her throat.

"There are three possibilities which might affect the situation," her adviser reflected. "Your husband may not—even if he is puzzled—decide off-hand that the Rosalind at Oxenden Castle is not his child."

"Useless," the other sighed. "Norman is a strange creature. He will know."

"Another idea, of course, is that you leave England to-morrow, go to some quiet place, say, in the Black Forest, and leave someone here in whom you can trust to let you know what happens."

"Norman would follow me. He has always been a great hunter of game. He could hunt men or women just as well. I have heard him say so."

"Then you could try a complete bluff," Clara suggested. "Especially if you can get your sister in India to help. You could declare that Rosalind is indeed your niece whom you brought to England to take care of."

"Norman will know his child just as I should."

"You must remember this," Clara pointed out. "Your husband certainly will not want to see you in the dock for kidnapping or——"

"Leave off, for the love of God!" her companion faltered. "Don't speak to me for a moment. Don't leave me, though. Don't let anyone go away."

Clara filled a glass with water and passed it to her neighbour. Then she looked down the room towards the entrance. A man was approaching them who was a stranger to her. He had something of the air of a man-about-town, something of the air of a hard-riding country squire. He was well set up, florid, with large shapely features a little coarsened. He received with every step he took a salvo of greetings. Somehow or other Clara was quite sure that this was not Mrs. Roy Tremlett's husband. An instinct prompted her to look around for Roderigo. He obeyed her gesture and sank into the vacant place between her and her neighbour. They know a great deal at the Legation Club, and the maître d'hôtel who was steering his client through the room tried his hardest to direct him to a table in a distant corner. The newcomer would have none of it,

however. He paused in front of Mrs. Roy Tremlett and held out his hand.

“No ill feeling, Patricia,” he said good-humouredly. “Shake hands.”

She gave him the tips of her fingers. Lady Hannah leaned over. There was a wicked little gleam in her eyes.

“Johnnie, by all that’s wonderful!” she exclaimed. “And no frost, either! How did you tear yourself away from Leicestershire?”

“Business,” he replied. “Regimental dinner as a matter of fact. So dull I cut it short. Fancy seeing all you people again.”

There was a brief but somehow noticeable silence. Any pleasure the newcomer might have felt from this *rencontre* with old friends was obviously not shared by the others. Mrs. Roy Tremlett’s voice was cold and stony.

“You doubtless have many friends here, John,” she said. “I think you had better go and find them.”

Something that was almost a scowl disfigured his good-looking face.

“As a matter of fact,” he announced, “I wanted a few words with you.”

“You certainly will not have them here,” she assured him, “or anywhere else. You can write.”

“You know that your husband is in London?”

“Wherever he is I don’t wish to discuss him with you.”

The duke leaned forward in his place. His tone was gentle and courteous enough but there was in it an underlying note almost of menace.

“I think, if you will excuse me,” he said—“I am one of the hosts of this party—I would suggest that you leave us. Your presence, you see,” he went on with a smile, “is not agreeable to one of my guests.”

The newcomer frowned sombrely.

“And who might you be?” he demanded.

Lady Hannah intervened and there was enough of warning in her lazy tone.

“I think you had better go, John,” she advised.

“I don’t want to stay where I am not wanted,” was the surly reply. “So long as you tell me to go, that’s all right. I’m not going to be ordered off, though, by a confounded dago.”

There was a strange fluttering silence. Even the music seemed to become indistinguishable. Everyone was holding their breath.

“You are behaving like a ploughboy, John,” Lady Hannah told him severely. “You are a disgrace to any civilised society. This gentleman is the Duke Roderigo de Partagena de Cervera y Topete. I do not introduce you because I think he would scarcely care to add you to his list of acquaintances.”

“If Sir John,” Roderigo said very quietly, “cares to repeat the word he used just now at any time when there are no ladies present it would give me great pleasure—the greatest pleasure in fact—to deal with him.”

The manager, with his very tall commissionaire, was drifting up the room.

Sir John swung round on his heel and without a word of farewell to anyone took his leave. Mrs. Roy Tremlett turned to Clara.

“My trouble,” she confided bitterly, “develops of its own accord. Soon you will know all of it without a word from me. Sir John Mitchell was the man I ran away with for twenty-four hours. He has not very much money. He knows my secret. He is trying to blackmail me. He proposes to tell my husband.”

“What a beast!” Clara exclaimed.

Mrs. Roy Tremlett sighed.

“He is a beast,” she admitted. “The fact remains, though, that he is very popular with his own sex.”

“As a rule that is a good sign.”

Her companion shook her head.

“I always distrust it now. ‘The well-known sporting baronet,’ the papers call him, and you see for yourself how everyone greets him. . . . Oh, I know what you are thinking, of course. You are wondering how on earth I could have made such a fool of myself.”

“I am never surprised at anything of that sort,” Clara admitted. “A thing just happens and that is all there is about it.”

“Things are happening to-night anyhow,” Mrs. Roy Tremlett observed. “With a very little more help from events you will have my case set out and be able to give me your advice. There is one word, perhaps, I should not have used,” she went on after a moment’s pause. “The word blackmail. It is what it comes to indirectly, but what I meant, of course, was that Sir John is trying to use this secret as a means of making me go back to him.”

“So he wants you back?”

“Not from any personal feeling. I think he was fed up with me before we got to Calais. It is his vanity that has been hurt. Besides, to live with a wealthy woman, as I unfortunately am, would make life a different thing for him. He has been extravagant and he has very little beyond his pension.”

“It does not seem to me,” Clara reflected, “that he is a very important factor in the case. You say that your husband is certain to know at once that the child who has been living with his father and mother is not Rosalind. If he is going to find it out for himself Sir John does not matter, even if he has guessed the truth.”

Mrs. Roy Tremlett agreed.

“Norman will know,” she declared. “He may know now. That is why I am half beside myself. I may hear from him or the lawyer at any moment. He will have no mercy. He won’t come near me. He will apply to the courts. I shall be charged with kidnapping the other child and he will take Rosalind away from me.”

“That sounds rather inhuman,” Clara murmured.

“From his point of view it would not be inhumanity. It would be according to his sense of justice.”

It was Lady Hannah who threw the next and the final bombshell. She broke off a dance and hurried up to them.

“My dear Patricia,” she said, resting her hand upon her friend’s shoulder, “I am afraid you are having a rotten party. Too bad, too, after your making such an effort to come. I felt I must tell you, though——”

“Tell me what?”

“Pull yourself together, there’s a dear. Now look towards the entrance.”

A tall, slim man, sunburnt and of soldierly bearing, having somehow the air—notwithstanding the correctness of his attire—of one strange to such places, was almost surrounded at the farther end of the room by men who had left their places to shake hands with him. Mrs. Roy Tremlett laughed unnaturally as a *maître d’hôtel*, after a few moments’ delay, ushered him towards a small table in the corner at the extreme end of the restaurant.

“I am past sensation,” she said tonelessly. “I can feel nothing. I suppose I ought to faint. Tell the baroness who he is, Hannah.”

“That is Colonel Roy Tremlett,” Lady Hannah confided. “This must be his first appearance in London for years and what on earth he is doing here I cannot imagine, except that it used to be his favourite place when he went anywhere.”

“Do you want to get away?” Clara asked her neighbour.

The latter shook her head.

“What is the use?” she asked sadly. “Besides, there is such a crowd here to-night that very likely he will never see me.”

Clara who, although she was kind-hearted, was seldom affected in that way, felt a sudden wave of intense sympathy. She was physiognomist enough to divine how much the woman by her side was suffering. For the moment she felt moisture in her own eyes.

The lonely man at the other end of the room who had refused all his friends’ invitations to join them, rose to his feet at the approach of a young lady who was a perfect stranger to him. His attitude was courteous but reserved.

“I don’t think that I have the pleasure, have I?” he said, looking at Clara doubtfully. “I have been away from London for some years so you must forgive me if I am mistaken.”

“You don’t know me, Colonel Roy Tremlett,” Clara acknowledged, “but the Duke Roderigo de Partagena, with whom I was dancing, pointed you out to me.”

“I am not quite forgotten, I hope, colonel,” Roderigo said, advancing from

the background and holding out his hand.

"I remember you quite well," was the courteous reply. "You played for the Harlequins in my polo days. I was afraid that I should not find you in London after all this trouble in your country."

"This is the safer place," Roderigo remarked. "My partner, colonel, permits me to present you. This is Colonel Roy Tremlett—the Baroness Linz."

"May I sit down and talk to you for a minute?" Clara asked.

Colonel Roy Tremlett was taken by surprise. The duke, however, made the situation inevitable.

"We will finish the dance later," he said, with a little bow to his companion as he slipped away through the crowd. . . .

Clara took the vacant place at the table although she was fully conscious of her new companion's lack of enthusiasm.

"You are sure that you are not making some mistake?" he asked in a tone of polite restraint. "As we are complete strangers I can think of no subject _____"

"Please don't," Clara interrupted. "I am doing a very unconventional thing, I know, but I am taking a mean advantage of my sex and exerting one of my privileges. You see, I am a professional interferer in other people's business."

"A most undesirable calling, I should think," was the coldly spoken comment.

"Do you mind looking at me for a moment, please," she begged.

He turned his head unwillingly but in a very few seconds his resentment was lessened. There were many people who had called Clara a beautiful young woman but there were perhaps few who realised that apart from her beautifully curved mouth, her steady truthful eyes, the fine shape of her head and her untouched complexion, the greatest charm which she possessed was her intense humanity. She was looking at him very earnestly and with an almost beseeching light in her hazel eyes. Involuntarily the stiffness of his manner softened. This, at any rate, was a very charming young lady and apparently of a serious frame of mind.

"You have asked me to do a dangerous thing, baroness," he said in a distinctly altered tone. "I find you very pleasant to look at, I believe that you are serious and you don't look like the type of young woman who would interfere unbidden in other people's concerns. Please say what you wish and I will listen."

"That is so nice of you," she acknowledged with a sigh of relief. "I have just been talking to your wife."

"My wife," he repeated slowly, and there was already a danger signal in the flash of his eyes.

"Yes. Your wife—who spends every moment of her life regretting one

stupid impulse. It was nothing but sheer stupidity. You ought to know that. She ran away with a man whom she learnt to thoroughly dislike in less than twenty-four hours. The day she heard that she had lost her child she left him and started back for London. She has never seen the man since until to-night."

"Until to-night," Colonel Roy Tremlett repeated coldly. "That appears to be somewhat of a coincidence. What did he want?"

"What he is always wanting. To insist upon her going back to him. He is even mean enough to threaten her that unless she does so he will disclose what he calls her secret."

"Rather like the fellow," was the scornful comment. "She need not be influenced by that. She has no secret."

"You have been down to Gloucestershire?"

"I went down yesterday. I came back to-day."

"And you discovered——"

"I discovered," he interrupted, "that she had palmed off upon my father and mother a child which was neither hers nor mine."

"What did you do?"

He moved uneasily in his place.

"I have done nothing for the moment," he admitted. "There is an absurd complication. My father and mother are old people. They had seen very little of Rosalind so they accepted her substitute without hesitation and they have become devoted to the child. They thought me heartless because I came away so soon."

"And now what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," he replied bitterly. "What does a man generally do who has been doubly deceived by his wife? Shall I come to you for advice, baroness? Is your fee very prohibitive?"

She suddenly laid her hand upon his and pressed his strong muscular fingers. Being utterly unused to such gestures he felt to its utmost degree the thrill of sympathy which she intended to convey.

"I wish that you would," she said, "because I know just as surely as I know that you are here by my side that I could give you the best advice in the world for which you would be grateful all your life. Why do you suppose your wife ever became a criminal—kidnapped another child—so that she could keep Rosalind—yours and hers? Because she loved her. Why do you suppose that she left the man with whom she made that idiotic mistake after little more than twenty-four hours? Because she cared for you and loathed what she was doing. Think of what her life has been since—hiding in different parts of Europe, hiding from her friends and strangers alike, anyone who might have discovered her real identity. She has had no pleasures. Nothing else in life has counted. It was just to keep the child—your child. You know so well why she did that. If

not, she is longing to tell you.”

His fingers were twitching upon the tablecloth. He was looking across the room with unseeing eyes.

“If only one could believe,” he muttered under his breath.

She made a sign to Roderigo whom some instinct had kept hovering near all the time. He was away across the room in a moment.

“Life would be a more terrible thing than it is,” Clara continued softly, “if we had not the courage sometimes to admit our mistakes, if we let one false step poison the rest of our days and the days of those who were really dear to us because we were proud, because the little things seemed a great deal to us and the big things nothing. My advice—well, it is coming.”

As the woman whom he had been escorting paused at the table, Roderigo slipped once more into the background. Colonel Roy Tremlett rose slowly to his feet. At that moment there were many others besides Clara and himself who thought that Patricia, at that supreme moment of her life, was surely the most beautiful woman in the world. Her eyes, fixed upon her husband’s, were tender, glowing, beseeching. He bent forward and raised her trembling fingers to his lips.

“Patricia,” he said, “they tell me that Rosalind is in London.”

“She is with me,” his wife faltered, “in Curzon Street.”

“I have been looking forward to seeing her so much,” he whispered. “Would your friends excuse you if we went home early?”

Mrs. Roy Tremlett said nothing but her mouth was terribly eloquent. Words would have been a risk. She laid her fingers lightly upon his shoulder as they passed into the crush and out of the room, oblivious of the kindly curiosity, almost excitement, which they were causing amongst their friends. . . . Clara threw herself back in her seat and laughed long and hysterically.

“You amuse yourself?” Roderigo murmured.

“They have forgotten me,” she confided, wiping her eyes for other than the obvious reasons. “They have gone away without paying my fee!”

A FAMILY MISUNDERSTANDING

The Baroness Linz, sole proprietress of the institution announcing itself as *ADVICE LIMITED*, with several cases upon her hands and an increasing stream of callers, found it necessary to engage a clerk secretary. Miss Marlowe, whom from amongst many applicants she finally selected, was a colourless young woman, neat and precise in her methods and speech. She wore spectacles and looked at life seriously. She permitted herself the faintest possible frown of disapproval one sunny afternoon when her employer came back from lunch an hour later than her usual time, smoking a cigarette and carrying a large bunch of violets.

“A Mrs. Rentoul is waiting to see you, baroness,” she announced. “She was in the book for half-past three and she came punctually.”

Clara threw away her cigarette, handed the violets over to her secretary and seated herself at the table.

“I forgot all about her,” she confessed. “What does she want?”

“‘Urgent private business’ was all that she said in her letter.”

“Well, arrange those violets for me, there’s a good girl, and show her in.”

Mrs. Rentoul made due appearance. During her few words of apology Clara studied her—casually at first and afterwards with more interest. She was a pretty woman of the fluffy order, a blonde of the type that goes off early in life, a trifle sharp-featured and with a querulous look in her blue eyes. She seated herself nervously.

“It doesn’t matter about your being late in the least,” she declared. “I was really rather glad of a change of atmosphere. My husband and I don’t go out much. We live in West Kensington—I don’t suppose you know much about that part of the world.”

“I know it quite well,” Clara assured her. “I had rooms there myself once. Now please tell me what you want to see me about,” she added pleasantly.

The woman in the chair seemed perturbed. She was of the type who would have talked foolishly for half an hour or more before coming to the business on hand.

“I want to ask your advice,” she began hesitatingly. “They tell me that you are very clever.”

“Never mind about that. If I can help you of course I shall be glad. What’s it all about?”

“My husband,” Flora Rentoul confided, “is trying to poison me.”

Clara looked across the table with upraised eyebrows. The woman was obviously very much in earnest. The blue veins in her forehead and on the backs of her hands showed more clearly. Her eyes, which some time must have been beautiful, were sunken and lit with sombre fears. The fluffiness had gone. She was very much afraid.

“Lately,” she continued, “I have not felt well. I thought at first it might have been something else, but it isn’t. My husband gives me some medicine which he makes up when he’s by himself in the surgery. He watches while I take the doses and then throws the bottle away.”

“Is your husband a doctor?” Clara asked.

“Yes,” Mrs. Rentoul assented. “He has quite a good practice, but he works very hard and he will never take even a day’s holiday.”

The genius of ADVICE LIMITED studied her client briefly. She was obviously both hysterical and unreliable, but it was just possible, of course, that her present condition might be due to nervous fear.

“Let’s talk about this for a short time,” Clara suggested. “What makes you think that he is trying to poison you? Don’t you get on well together?”

“I thought so until lately,” the woman answered. “He seemed to take a dislike to me about a year ago—soon after my sister came back from Paris.”

“Is your sister younger than you, or older?”

“Fifteen years younger,” was the bitter reply. “She is very pretty—far prettier than ever I was. I used to look something like her. I never shall again. I believe that George—George is my husband—looks at her and thinks of me, how faded I am since those days.”

“And you believe that is why he is trying to poison you?”

“I can’t think of anything else.”

“Well, I will tell you what I think,” Clara said sternly but cheerfully. “I think you are a very foolish, imaginative woman, a little run down in health and very much given to fancying things. Your husband would not dare to do anything of the sort. Nowadays poisoners are always found out.”

Mrs. Rentoul shook her head sadly.

“Why am I so ill then?”

“What do you mean when you say ill? What are your symptoms?”

The visitor hesitated.

“I have lost my appetite,” she confided, “and when I do eat anything I am generally sick afterwards. I have headaches and giddy fits and every few days I have a temperature.”

“That does not sound very good,” Clara confessed. “Will you go to my doctor and ask him what’s the matter with you? You need not give your name. He probably would not recognise it even if you did, though. Say that I sent you and give him permission to answer any questions I ask him afterwards.”

“Supposing he tells me that I am being poisoned, what can I do?” she asked pitifully.

“Come back and tell me and I will give you my advice,” Clara promised her. “I only want to make sure that you are not mistaken.”

Mrs. Rentoul took her leave. She was very nervous and she left first her handbag and then her umbrella behind her. Finally she went off. Clara remained looking after her thoughtfully. Then she rang the bell for Miss Marlowe.

“Miss Marlowe,” she said, “the lady who has just gone out must have been in with you for some time. What did you think of her?”

Miss Marlowe took the question, as she did everything in life, seriously.

“At first,” she confessed, “I thought she was ordinary. Hers is such a very usual suburban type. Afterwards I became more interested in her. It seemed to me that she had either had a great shock or she was living in fear.”

Clara nodded.

“I had the same idea,” she admitted. “Let me know if she comes again. Anyone else waiting?”

“One gentleman. He said he would rather not give his name but he would not detain you for long.”

“Does he look as though he had anything to sell?” Clara asked.

“Not in the least,” was the prompt reply. “He said that he wished to consult you. He seems to be quite a gentleman.”

Clara had the same idea when her visitor was ushered in. He was rather more formally dressed than was the fashion amongst young men of his age, but he had a pleasant though hard face, and his voice was agreeable. His mouth, with its upturned lines, was its least attractive feature.

“You are the Baroness Linz who conducts this establishment?” he asked with a little bow.

She pointed to a chair.

“I am,” she confessed. “Do you mind telling me your name?”

“My name is Rentoul—Dr. Rentoul.”

It said a good deal for Clara’s power of self-control that she refrained from a start. Probably, however, her visitor would not have noticed it, for he was slowly removing his gloves and folding them together.

“I have come to you on rather a queer errand, baroness,” he said, “but I have been a great deal worried lately and I need advice. Sometimes advice comes better from a stranger who is not prejudiced by knowing the people concerned.”

“It is my business to give it when I can,” Clara remarked. “What sort of trouble are you in?”

“My wife,” Dr. Rentoul confided, “is trying to poison herself.”

“Your wife—poison herself!” Clara repeated, bewildered.

He nodded.

“After all, it is not so very extraordinary,” he said. “Women have made idiots of themselves in the same fashion before. The only thing is my wife has not a shadow of a motive and I cannot think what she is doing it for.”

“Why don’t you ask her?” Clara demanded. “If you are sure of what you say there is no use making a mystery of the matter.”

“That is common sense, of course,” he admitted. “But you don’t know my wife. She was always a nervous woman and lately she has been absolutely unbalanced. At present she is taking poison in very small quantities. I believe that if I asked her what she was doing it for she would take a treble dose and end the thing at once.”

“You can’t take her away for a time?”

“How can I?” he replied. “I have had four years’ struggle to establish a practice and I have just turned the corner. I have a dozen new patients—all very important people—and to leave just now would ruin my chances. Besides, to be frank, I could not afford it.”

“Where does your wife get her poison from?”

“God knows! Not from my surgery. That’s certain. I keep all the dangerous bottles securely locked up. They are never touched or disturbed, yet two or three times a week she takes a dose, fortunately I should judge a very small one, of something which is absolutely virulent.”

“And you don’t know where she gets it from?”

“I have not the least idea. By using my name and showing my card she might easily succeed in getting anything if she went about it the right way.”

“You have not any idea where she keeps this poison?”

“I have searched her room, I have sent her out and even gone through her wardrobe and private cabinet,” the doctor confided. “I have not succeeded in finding a trace of anything. She must keep it in the house, but where—Heaven knows!”

“Exactly what do you want me to do for you?” Clara asked.

“Well, I don’t know,” he confessed. “To tell you the truth I thought you might have something to suggest yourself.”

“Do you know of any cause for unhappiness or anxiety which might be depressing your wife?”

“Before Heaven, I don’t,” he replied earnestly. “Two years ago things were not going so well with me. Money was short and housekeeping was hard. Today everything is on the mend. We are able to keep two more servants, Flora is able to entertain her family as often as she likes and she has her own small car, besides mine when it is not in use. I cannot get away much myself, but I do make a point of taking her to the theatre sometimes and she has quite a great

many friends.”

“I am afraid,” Clara decided, after a moment’s reflection, “that you will have to risk demanding an explanation from her. Tell her that you, as a doctor, have seen signs of some particular drug in her complexion or her eyes, or something or other. Find out, too, if there is anything on her mind which she has kept secret from you.”

“It will be a terrible risk,” he sighed.

“I cannot see what else you can do. You say her people live close at hand. Couldn’t you confide in one of them and get them to watch her so that she has not an opportunity of taking this poison? You can be frank with them. You can tell them it is an ordinary drug some chemist has recommended which is bad for her system. Could you not arrange that one of them didn’t leave her side for a few days? Perhaps if she discontinued using it she would become more normal and you could talk to her yourself.”

He pondered for a few moments, looking down at the toe of his shoe.

“Well,” he said, “there’s Maisie, of course. She is in and out a good deal and she might stay in the house if she were asked. The worst of it is she’s such a child. The other sister is married and in India and her mother is an invalid.”

“How old is this sister whom you call Maisie?”

“About nineteen, I should think. If one could get her to realise how serious the thing is perhaps she might stick around, but she is such a scatter-brained young woman that I’m afraid it would be difficult to make her understand the importance of never leaving her sister.”

“Unless you take my first advice,” Clara said, “I don’t see what else you can do but trust your sister-in-law. The more I think of it the more I am convinced, however, that what you should do is to risk having an understanding yourself.”

“If I knew where she hides that damned drug,” he declared savagely, “I would do it. As it is, I daren’t. Think—there are certain patients I must see every day, especially just now. She knows when I have to go. Very well. She could do anything she wanted to in my absence. You look incredulous, baroness. You don’t believe——”

She stopped him gently.

“I believe everything you say,” she assured him with a mental reservation, “but I cannot conceive for myself a woman who is your wife——”

“Has been for ten years,” he put in.

“—for ten years who, if you went to her affectionately, praying her to tell you what was troubling her, charged her with what she was doing, told her that she was making you terribly unhappy—— No, I cannot believe that it would not have the right effect.”

“Look here,” Rentoul proposed. “You will excuse my referring to the

subject, baroness, but we doctors get a bit hardened about fees. If you will let me pay you for coming I wish you would dine with us one night—soon—at once. Let me introduce you as a new patient or a friend of my brother's, whom you have met during a visit to India and who asked you to look me up when in London. We can easily manage that. I will get some of her own people there if I can and you can watch her. You will tell me afterwards whether you think I dare tackle her, remembering, mind you, that I shall have to leave her alone either the next morning, if I do it at night, or within an hour or so if I do it in the daytime—and she knows where she keeps that filthy drug and I don't."

"Fix your night," Clara promised, "and if I am disengaged I will come."

"You fix the night," he begged. "We none of us have any engagements."

"I could come next Friday."

"At eight o'clock. Number 29 Chiltern Terrace. I will just think it out and let you know exactly what to say about my brother before then."

He took up his hat and left. Clara remained at her desk for a few minutes reflecting upon this new experience. If only she could divine the meaning of those upward lines around Dr. Rentoul's mouth and the reason why, during the whole of his visit, he had persisted in talking with his eyes fixed upon the carpet!

Clara, during those few uneasy moments before the announcement of dinner at Chiltern Terrace on the following Friday, found it hard to believe that she was at close quarters with tragedy. Flora Rentoul, with a moderate use of the standard cosmetics, seemed to have recovered her poise and her looks. She was really, if not beautiful, a very attractive and pretty woman as she stood on the hearthrug talking to Colonel Singleton, her father. Rentoul, handing round lukewarm cocktails with a faintly apologetic air and exchanging chaff with Phillip Porter, his sister-in-law's fiancé, seemed to have left all his anxieties behind him. The only emotion which Clara had perceived and which she, in fact, shared followed upon the entrance of Maisie, Mrs. Rentoul's sister. For a moment the visitor even forgot to shake hands. It was only when she realised the interrogation in the girl's eyes that she pulled herself together.

"Do forgive me," she begged. "But you know you rather took my breath away."

"Won't you tell me why?" Maisie asked.

"I am a much older woman so I can say so," was the smiling reply. "I honestly think that you are the most beautiful creature I have ever seen in my life."

Maisie laughed gaily. Something of her former frozen expression came back to Flora Rentoul's face. Her husband, with the cocktail tray still in his hand, was apparently mildly amused.

“Don’t let her turn your head, child,” he enjoined.

“Not I,” she laughed. “All the same I like people to admire me. It does me good with Phillip. It makes him appreciate me properly.”

Later on Clara found herself studying the girl curiously. Her pink-and-white complexion was absolutely perfect. There was not a line or a wrinkle anywhere in her face. Her hair was a very light, almost platinum gold. Her deep brown eyes were set far back in her head and her eyebrows were of a much darker shade. Her mouth was of the rosebud type but it also possessed the saving grace of a humorous curl when she laughed, and she laughed a great deal. There was no trace of guile at any time in her expression or her speech. In Clara’s judgment she seemed to be a perfectly natural and happy young woman enjoying every moment of life. She went in to dinner with her arm round her fiancé’s neck and, although Clara possessed to the full the knack of watching people without herself being observed, she could only come to the conclusion that nothing whatever in the shape of an understanding existed between her and her brother-in-law. The latter in his own home was a very different man to the gloomy, almost dramatic figure he had presented in the Adam Street office. He exchanged a few carefully prepared remarks with his guest concerning the life and tastes of his brother in Bombay, his attitude towards Maisie was entirely careless and fraternal and each time he addressed his wife there was a note of pleasant consideration in his tone. Flora Rentoul herself talked very little. She spoke now and then on unimportant subjects to her sister’s fiancé, who sat on one side, and occasionally to her father, who sat on the other. Watching her with almost meticulous closeness Clara was conscious of a certain lack of animation in her face and a lifelessness in her tone. Nothing that she did or said seemed altogether natural, yet to outward appearance she was the gracious and comely hostess, and her ignoring of the occasional mistakes of the one servant who waited at table might well have been put down to good breeding rather than indifference. Only once there was a gleam of real feeling in her blue eyes and that, curiously enough, was when her husband—to supplement the indifferent service—had opened a bottle of wine at the sideboard and filled her glass. She looked at it with glazed and fearful eyes. The fact that the rest of the glasses were filled from the same bottle seemed to have no effect upon her. The white fingers which played with the stem of the wineglass shook. She glanced covertly towards her guest whose unseeing eyes refused her challenge.

After dinner the two found themselves for a time alone in the drawing-room. The others had settled down to bridge in a remote corner. Flora Rentoul leaned towards her visitor.

“Of course it’s wonderful to have you here, baroness, but why didn’t you tell me that you knew my brother-in-law? When George told me to write and

ask you to dinner and gave me your address I was so astonished that I nearly gave myself away.”

Clara smiled.

“Rentoul is not such a very uncommon name,” she pointed out. “Why should I have taken it for granted that the Captain Rentoul I knew in Bombay and who asked your husband to look me up some time was even the same family? As a matter of fact it was I who promised to come and see you both, but one does not get much time for social calls in my position.”

Mrs. Rentoul nodded.

“Anyhow, it’s a wonderful chance to have you here,” she said. “I suppose you think now that I am a fool.”

“I think that you are making a great mistake,” was the kindly reply. “If I were you I would go and see the doctor at once. He will probably tell you that your symptoms come from some quite ordinary cause and not from poisoning at all.”

Mrs. Rentoul leaned back in her chair with a little fluttering sigh. She sat gazing into the fire for a few moments. Presently she looked up again and glanced at the bridge table. Her husband’s back was towards them.

“And Maisie?” she whispered. “What do you think of her?”

“I think, of her type, that she is the most beautiful creature I ever saw.”

“So George thinks,” Flora Rentoul sighed bitterly.

Clara was very nearly angry.

“If ever I saw two people who were entirely indifferent to one another, except in a friendly and pleasant way, I should say those two were your husband and your sister,” she said sternly. “You are making yourself ill about nothing. I think you must forgive my repeating that you are a very foolish woman.”

“Even you!” Flora Rentoul murmured, with a note of despair in her tone. “No wonder that I dare ask no one for help. . . .”

At the end of the first rubber Clara excused herself. Her hostess wished her good-bye listlessly. Rentoul handed her over to his prospective brother-in-law.

“Will you call a taxi and see the baroness into it, Phillip,” he begged. “I must go down and fetch the whiskies and sodas.”

“With pleasure,” the young man acquiesced. “Not too strong for me, George.”

“We must have another chat about Bombay, baroness,” Dr. Rentoul said as they parted in the little hall. “I will come and see you during the course of the next few days, if I may.”

“Do,” she invited. “I am generally at home except for the luncheon hours until about six.”

Clara passed out on to the front steps accompanied by her escort. It was

raining slightly and he held an umbrella over her whilst he whistled for a taxi. For several moments there was no response although in the main street a short distance away they could see glittering lights passing all the time. He handed her the umbrella.

“Wait here for a moment,” he enjoined. “I will bring one of those fellows up.”

She protested, but he was already off down the street. Looking about her idly Clara followed the slant of light that came from a side window in the area. She turned her head and found that she was looking into what was evidently Dr. Rentoul’s surgery. She saw him standing by the table. He poured what seemed to be whisky from a decanter into a glass, then he stood with his head turned towards the door as though listening. A moment later he moved towards a shelf which was lined with bottles, thrust his hand behind them all and brought out a small phial. He shook out two capsules, dropped them into the whisky and splashed some soda-water into the tumbler. . . . The young man returned in triumph with the taxi.

“I do hope I have not been very long,” he apologised. “They are not easy to find to-night.”

Clara glanced indecisively towards the house. Her first impulse had been to return. She realised the futility of such a proceeding, however, and stepped into the vehicle.

“You have been very kind,” she said to the young man. “I hope you are not wet.”

He reassured her good-humouredly, gave her address to the driver and re-entered the house. Clara leaned back in her place.

“So clever,” she murmured. “Such an actor. And yet to forget to draw the blinds! . . .”

Clara could scarcely wait until she reached her rooms. Arrived there she threw off her evening coat, lit a cigarette, turned up her reading-lamp and seated herself at her desk. She drew a sheet of paper towards her and, writing carefully, headed it:

“THE CASE OF DR. GEORGE RENTOUL

“April 4th. Flora Rentoul visits me for consultation. She is a nervous woman, evidently in ill-health, still fairly well balanced. She asks my advice. She is convinced that she is being secretly poisoned by her husband. The only reason she can assign is that she has a very beautiful young sister who is frequently at the house, and that she herself, as is usual with her type, has begun to lose her good looks. She describes her symptoms.

“N.B. (A little out of place.) The next day I consult Dr. Herries who tells me that the symptoms she spoke of are exactly the symptoms which would be produced by the use of a dangerous and little-known poison called phenifer, which has many of the characteristics of arsenic. I promise Mrs. Rentoul to think over her statements and see what I can do.

“The same afternoon I am consulted by Dr. Rentoul. If all reasonable evidence is to be believed he comes to me utterly independently of his wife and without knowing of her visit. He tells me that his wife is slowly poisoning herself and begs for my advice. In reply to the obvious suggestion that he should take her away somewhere, find out what her trouble is and watch her so that the poison is unprocurable, he points out that he is a struggling doctor just meeting with his first measure of success, that to leave home would mean ruin to his newly established practice and to remonstrate with his wife in her present hyper-nervous state, he feels sure, would be only to drive her to take a larger dose of poison and end the matter quickly. I agree to visit the house for dinner one night as a friend of his brother in India, make the acquaintance of the family, and tell him what I think of his wife’s condition and the possibilities of intervention.

“N.B. If Flora Rentoul’s statement is true and if her husband is slowly poisoning her, his visit to me, it is easily understandable, would be strong evidence in his favour in the case of trouble at her decease.

“April 11th. I visit the house and dine with Dr. and Mrs. Rentoul, her sister, the most exquisitely beautiful girl, the latter’s fiancé, a pleasant but ordinary young man, and her father, a colourless retired officer. There is nothing which repays the closest observation throughout the evening except Flora Rentoul’s obvious terror when her husband fills her glass with wine.

“N.B. The wine is from a freshly opened champagne bottle and drunk by everyone at the table, including myself.

“I leave early, inclined to think that the whole thing is an hallucination of Mrs. Rentoul’s, as her husband seemed a perfectly good-natured, ordinary person and there does not appear the slightest motive for wishing harm to his wife.

“N.B. After three hours of the closest watching I did not perceive the remotest sign of any secret understanding between the doctor and his beautiful sister-in-law, who appeared to be to him merely an object of friendly indifference.

“When I leave I wait on the top step while a taxi is being fetched. The side blind of the surgery has been left undrawn. I see Dr. Rentoul, who has gone down for the avowed purpose of mixing some whiskies and sodas, take one—the small—glass and drop into it two tabloids from a bottle which he fetches out from a hiding place behind his rows of drugs.

“I feel myself in a difficult position. If I place the matter in the hands of the police there will never be any proof, even if Flora Rentoul should die of poisoning, that the poisoner was her husband, as I should not be able to swear that the tumbler into which he dropped the tabloids was the one from which his wife drank, nor have I any certain information as to the nature of the tabloids. There is strong presumptive evidence of the guilt of Dr. Rentoul, but how am I to move in the matter? If I tell him what I have seen, and threaten to inform the police if anything happens to his wife, he will at once destroy the only evidence against him, and if he is determined to encompass her death he will do so in some other fashion.

“Problem: To save Flora Rentoul.”

On the following morning Clara dealt resolutely with her correspondence before she permitted herself to think of the proposition she had on hand. It was fully eleven o'clock before Miss Marlowe, her secretary, had left her with the remainder of the day comparatively at her own disposal. Five minutes later, however, Miss Marlowe was back again.

“A young lady to see you, baroness,” she confided. “She does not want to give her name but she says you know her.”

Clara nodded. She was quite used to young women who thought that it mattered whether they gave their names or not.

“Show her in,” she directed.

Maisie floated in, blithe and buoyant. She was carrying a bunch of primroses she had bought in the street and was rather the personification of spring herself. She laughed gaily at Clara's obvious astonishment.

“Have I taken you by surprise?” she asked. “What fun! I thought I might. Shall I sit down?”

“What on earth do you want, child?”

“Serious business,” Maisie assured her. “I was so interested when George told us last night about your profession. I have never met anyone like you before and I've wanted to ever so much. Do you really sit there and give people wonderful advice and get them out of all sorts of trouble?”

“Well, I do my best,” was the somewhat stupefied reply.

“Will you help me, please,” Maisie begged, trying for a moment to look serious.

“Are you in trouble?”

“Well, not exactly in it,” the girl confessed. “But I’m afraid I soon might have been, and now I have changed my mind about everything, so I just want to start again.”

“If you are in need of my advice,” Clara suggested, “try and be as simple as possible. Explain the situation as clearly as you can. That last sentence, for instance, was a trifle complicated.”

“Well, I suppose I have been rather silly,” Maisie admitted with a faint sigh and the delicate shadow of a frown. “You see,” she went on, “a few months ago I fancied myself desperately, horribly in love with George.”

“Your brother-in-law?”

“Yes. Of course, I see now how foolish it was but I was sorry for him too. He married Flora and, naturally, she is not so nice looking as she was. I used to try to get him to take a little notice of me but he never would. Then I got mad. I decided that I would poison Flora and then that George would marry me.”

“You decided what?” Clara gasped.

Maisie smiled complacently.

“I suppose it sounds quite horrid,” she continued, “but that’s just what I wanted to do, so I did it. I had heard of a wonderful poison—Phillip is in a wholesale chemist’s and knows all about those things. I made him get me some of it—it is supposed to be wonderful for the complexion—and I gave small doses to Flora whenever I had the chance. I thought I had better do it by degrees or else there might have been trouble.”

“My God!” Clara murmured under her breath.

Maisie held the primroses delicately to her nose for a moment and then laid them down by her side.

“Aren’t they lovely?” she sighed. “My favourite spring flower. Where was I? Oh, I know. I think the poison is beginning to have an effect but I suppose I have not given Flora quite enough. I hope not, because I find it would be very much better, after all, to let her live. I don’t want George any more. I have changed my mind completely. I threw all that was left of the poison into the Serpentine this morning.”

“Listen,” Clara begged. “I’m not quite sure whether I’m still dreaming. Do you mean to tell me seriously that you have done your best to poison your sister and that you have only left off because you have changed your mind?”

Maisie nodded brightly.

“How well you put things,” she acknowledged. “That’s quite true, baroness. I will tell you why. I am feeling all differently about things. Some time ago I met a Mr. Chambers, *the* Mr. Chambers, you know, the great film

man, and he wanted me to go and have a test. I suppose I ought to be on the films really, with my appearance. What do you think?"

"I should hate to tell you," was the calm reply.

"That's because you don't think it's a nice life perhaps," Maisie went on. "You would if you were in my position. Last week I went to a studio with Mr. Chambers and I had a test. You should have seen them all up there. They were simply crazy about me! I can't think why I didn't go there before. I have a contract all signed guaranteeing me a thousand a year for certain—what they call, I think, a retaining fee—and a salary commencing at fifty pounds a week as soon as I start work! I have two hundred pounds in my pocket now and I am going shopping directly I leave you. I think—yes, I feel sure—that I shall buy Flora a little present, something for her to wear if she gets well enough again. Now, give me your advice, please."

"What about?" Clara demanded.

"Well, I don't want any trouble," Maisie observed, fondling her vanity-case. "I hate scenes. They are so bad for me. And Flora is so fond of them. I am rather afraid of George, too. He ought to be flattered at what I have done but he might not be. I want you to arrange everything with them. I want you to let George know that Flora has been having phenifer for two months and she had better perhaps go to a hospital so that nothing happens to her."

Clara was silent for a few moments, which period of time Maisie employed by looking into the mirror of her vanity-case. Everything she saw, however, reflected perfection, so with a little sigh she closed it up.

"Of course, I know there will be a fee," she went on. "Please make it not too high because, although I am going to be very rich, I have not a great deal of money yet and I need so many clothes. There is a mink coat I——"

"Oh, do be quiet," Clara interrupted. "What you have been telling me, then, is that you attempted to murder your sister, having a penchant for her husband, that you have changed your mind and want me to see that your sister does not suffer and that you are not bothered about it."

"It must sound very fickle of me, I suppose," Maisie sighed, "but I really did have a tremendous pash for George. It all seemed to go in one minute when I met Morris Falcon. I am to play opposite to him. I never saw anyone so handsome in my life. If he is married I shall break my heart! Anyhow he has *got* to fall in love with me."

"Five guineas, please, Miss Singleton."

Maisie opened her purse with a sigh.

"Do you mind making it five pounds?" she begged, laying the notes upon the table. "I haven't any silver."

Clara reflected for a moment.

"I will tell you what I'll do," she suggested. "I have a friend—a great

scientist, but very fond of beautiful young women. If you will come and lunch with me to-morrow at the Berkeley Grill and let him watch you and talk to you for a time you can take the five pounds back again.”

The girl snatched up the money.

“Of course I’ll come,” she declared. “I love talking to strange men and I love the Berkeley Grill.”

“At one o’clock if you please, then. That’s settled. Now, have you any objection to being present while I put this matter straight for you?”

Maisie indulged in a little grimace.

“It won’t be very pleasant,” she complained. “All the same, I suppose they will have to know some time. I don’t mind about Flora so much but George can be so disagreeable. I don’t believe that I succeeded in making him the least bit fond of me.”

“Please be here at four o’clock on Thursday afternoon,” Clara invited. “I shall have your brother-in-law and sister here. I am not asking them earlier because I am afraid Dr. Rentoul would be too busy. The whole matter shall be cleared up for you then.”

Maisie smiled and rose to her feet. Again the little perfume of spring seemed to float about her. Her wonderful eyes shone with gratitude.

“You are kind,” she exclaimed. “I will be here, of course.”

She held out her hand but Clara happened to be busy ringing the bell.

The oracle of ADVICE LIMITED always considered that the strangest tea-party she had ever given or participated in. Somewhat to her surprise, Dr. Rentoul, his wife and Maisie, all three, arrived together. Dr. Rentoul was evidently ill at ease. His wife was nervous. Maisie was the only one who seemed unperturbed. She was wearing an obviously new and most expensive costume of Chanel grey trimmed with light fur. She took the most comfortable chair and munched greedily at her buttered toast.

“This is going to be rather a surprise party for all of you,” her hostess announced after a few minutes of general conversation. “To begin with, I hope you won’t mind, Dr. Rentoul, answering me a question.”

“Go ahead,” he assented shortly.

“The other night while I was waiting for a taxicab I saw you drop two tabloids from a little phial into one of the whiskies and sodas.”

“My wife’s,” he remarked.

“Why did you do that?”

“As I told you before,” he confided, “I believe my wife is trying to poison herself. I have not dared to tell her so but I am putting my trust in you. I know the nature of the poison she was taking from the effects. The tabloids I gave her were the best known and only effectual antidote. I have been doing that for

weeks.”

“Trying to save her life?” Clara observed.

“Precisely.”

Flora leaned forward in her chair. Her eyes were set, her hands were shaking.

“Do you mean that you were not giving me poison, George?” she faltered.

“Don’t be such an ass,” he answered. “Forgive me, but you are too silly, Flora. Why on earth should I want to give you poison? My wife! You’re too ridiculous!”

“Then why is it,” she demanded, “that every now and then some of the things I eat or drink taste so queerly and I have this pain and this sickness?”

“Someone else,” Clara told her, “has been giving you poison. If you want to know who it is, she has confessed and asked me to tell you the truth. It is your sister Maisie. It seems that she had what she calls a ‘pash’ for your husband. It has worn off now and as she is starting a new life on the films she wants you to know that she has been giving you phenifer so that you can be treated properly.”

Rentoul was the first to break the strange and terrible silence. He rose to his feet. His face was dark with passion.

“You little devil!” he cried.

Maisie smiled across at him deprecatingly.

“You ought to be flattered, George,” she remonstrated. “I was terribly fond of you or I should not have done it. I hope you won’t be any the worse, Flora.”

“Do you know that if I had not given those antidotes to your sister,” Rentoul said, his voice terrible in its intensity, “that she would have been dead before now, that you would have been a murderess and, I hope to God, hung for it?”

For the first time Maisie seemed disturbed. She set down her teacup and ceased to swing her pearl-coloured, silk-clad leg.

“What a brute you are, George,” she complained with a shiver. “I can’t think how I ever liked you.”

A rejuvenated Flora looked across at her sister. There was a certain horror in her eyes but her whole face seemed to have grown softer and younger.

“Maisie,” she cried. “Whatever have I done to you? Why should you have done this terrible thing?”

Maisie was getting sulky. It scarcely seemed to her that she was being fairly treated.

“I wanted George just then,” she declared. “If I could have had him without hurting you I should not have done what I did. I don’t want him any more and I never want to see either of you again. I have a wonderful career

_____”

There was a knock at the door. Miss Marlowe presented herself.

“Mr. Chambers has called for Miss Singleton,” she announced.

Maisie sprang eagerly to her feet.

“That’s my manager,” she confided with a smile. “At least he’s going to be. I am due at a cocktail party with him and Morris Falcon, the great cinema star. You don’t want me any more, baroness?”

“I think not,” was the contemptuous reply.

Maisie kissed her hand to her sister and brother-in-law and nodded to her hostess.

“Thank you so much for arranging everything,” she said sweetly. “It has been rather disagreeable but I am glad it is over. You will excuse me, won’t you?”

No one seemed to think of any suitable reply, and Maisie disappeared. Dr. Rentoul rose to his feet. Side by side with a great relief there was something of horror in his eyes as he stared at the door.

“But my God!” he exclaimed. “She must be mad! No sane girl could talk like that. She is obsessed.”

“I wondered whether you would realise that,” Clara said earnestly. “You see, she came to me and confessed. I felt that it was impossible she could be in her right mind and I promised to help her if she would meet Dr. Strangeways, the great mental specialist, at lunch with me. Of course, she hadn’t any idea that he was anything but an ordinary guest. Directly she had gone he told me that she was suffering from some obscure mental malady—I forget the name, but he will tell you everything, Dr. Rentoul. She will have to be looked after for a few months. She doesn’t know it but that message she received was a bogus one. Dr. Strangeways is going to take care of her for a time and keep her under observation.”

Flora Rentoul was crying softly upon the sofa. Rentoul shook hands with Clara.

“You are a very wonderful woman, baroness,” he said. “You have realised what we none of us dreamt of. I will see Strangeways to-night. Meanwhile _____”

He turned to his wife and Clara tactfully went back to the tea tray. What she saw when she looked up a moment or two later sent her on tiptoe from the room.

THE LISTENING LADY

Detective-Inspector Wayes was a burly and broad-shouldered man with a voice which belied his appearance. It—the voice—was low, distinct and penetrating. It inspired discomfort in the criminal placed upon the carpet and it carried conviction to the sympathetic listener. Nevertheless, Clara, Baroness Linz, proprietor and sole executive officer of ADVICE LIMITED, regarded her visitor doubtfully across those few feet of her neatly arranged desk.

“You must forgive me if I seem surprised, inspector,” she said. “This isn’t a usual move on the part of the charitable institution you represent, is it?”

“It isn’t a move at all,” he answered irritably. “My visit to you is not official.”

“I see,” she murmured.

“You don’t see and I’m beginning to wonder whether your friends who speak of you as a young woman of exceptional intelligence are not mistaken,” was the terse reply. “Kindly listen to me without interruption for a few moments. There is a certain old lady—the Countess of Martinhoe—who is, in the eyes of the Chief, a very important person. Yesterday she telephoned to the Yard for a detective, and I was sent. When I arrived I found her a partial invalid and in a state of dangerous excitement. After listening to what she had to say I realised at once that it was not a police job. In her condition it seemed better not to tell her so in plain words, but I recommended that she employed someone outside the service in the first instance, and mentioned your name. She wishes to see you at four o’clock this afternoon.”

“What made you recommend me?” Clara asked curiously.

The inspector’s fingers played with his slight stubbly moustache. He smiled across at the very composed and exceedingly good-looking young woman on whom he was calling.

“I have come into touch with some of your work during the last few months,” he confided, as he rose to his feet. “The appointment is for four o’clock at number 17A Belgrave Square, if you care to keep it. The Earl of Martinhoe is in residence there, but it is his aunt, the dowager countess, whom you have to see. She is virtually the head of the family as she has sole control of the money bags. Good morning. . . .”

Clara checked up the name and address in a town directory and kept the appointment. Her enterprise opened badly. She was kept waiting for nearly a quarter of an hour in a small draughty apartment which she took to be a

waiting-room for the reception of tradespeople, and then ushered into a palatial library to find herself confronted by a handsome young man of dissolute appearance whose lips were pursed into a whistle at the sight of her, and in whose eyes there flashed the usual light. He had been lounging somewhat insolently upon a couch at her entrance, but a moment later he was upon his feet, his outstretched hand indicating a chair.

“This is quite unexpected,” he observed, glancing at her card and reading the name inscribed upon it. “What can I have the pleasure of doing for you?”

“Nothing at all,” was the brief reply. “I am here to keep an appointment with the Countess of Martinhoe.”

“Ah, yes, I see,” the young man murmured with some vagueness. “The fact of it is that my aunt—I am Robert Brandon, you know—sees no one. She is not in a fit condition to receive visitors. Her business and charitable affairs are in my hands.”

“I am sorry to hear that her ladyship’s health is in such a poor condition,” Clara sympathised. “At the same time I am here by her special request so I naturally hope that she will be well enough to see me.”

Robert Brandon’s face darkened.

“Have you any objection to telling me the nature of your business?” he asked.

“I certainly have,” was the cool rejoinder.

The young man was taken aback. This caller was so composed and confident, her personality, whilst alluring, so utterly remote that for the moment he felt the situation beyond him. He rang the bell and gave a brief message to the footman who answered.

“Lady Martinhoe cannot possibly see you,” he announced, turning back to this embarrassing visitor. “She does not see anyone. If you know anything about her at all you must be aware of the fact that she is an invalid.”

“All that I know is that I have come at her particular request,” Clara told him, “and at the suggestion of Inspector Wayes of Scotland Yard.”

The door was quietly opened. A young man and woman entered together, obviously brother and sister. The former was of fair complexion, precise in clothes, general appearance and demeanour. His pale blue eyes had rather a vacant look but his *tout ensemble* was redeemed by an indefinable kindness of expression. The girl, who appeared to be the best looking of the family, was in riding habit and smoking a cigarette. She looked across at Clara a trifle insolently.

“This is my brother, the Earl of Martinhoe,” Robert Brandon announced, “and my sister Lady Mary Brandon. This young lady says that she has an appointment with Aunt Julia at four o’clock.”

“Some mistake,” Lady Mary declared. “Aunt Julia does not see anyone.”

“The appointment was made by Lady Martinhoe herself and emanated in the first place from an official of Scotland Yard,” Clara confided.

They all three exchanged glances. Lord Martinhoe coughed nervously.

“I am afraid that what my sister says is quite correct,” he explained apologetically.

“The appointment has obviously been made under some misapprehension,” Robert Brandon intervened. “My aunt’s state of health does not permit her to receive visitors.”

Some heavy curtains at the farther end of the room were suddenly pushed aside. A wizened old lady, bent nearly double and leaning upon an ebony stick, extravagantly dressed and decked with an amazing amount of jewellery, had made her appearance. She pointed her stick at her younger nephew.

“Liar!” she exclaimed bitterly. “My health is as good as yours and I receive just what visitors I choose. Now, be off—all three of you. I want to talk to this young lady.”

“If you are Lady Martinhoe——” Clara said, moving a step forward.

“Of course I’m Lady Martinhoe,” the newcomer interrupted irritably. “Be off at once, you others. I want to talk to this young woman.”

“The young lady appears to be connected indirectly with the police,” Robert Brandon pointed out. “Mayn’t we others of the family know what it is you have to say to her?”

“You certainly may not,” was the sharp reply. “I am quite capable of looking after my own affairs. And next time I have visitors,” the old lady added, sinking into an easy chair and waving her stick once more at her nephew, “don’t talk about my being an invalid, and don’t try to worm out from them what their business with me may be. There’s too much of that sort of thing going on here. Do you understand, all of you? I’m perfectly well able to take care of myself.”

“In family matters——” Robert began.

“Family matters be damned,” his aunt cried furiously. “I am the head of this family and don’t you forget it. Out you go, all of you.”

They departed with more or less dignity and the door closed behind them. The bent old lady with the parchment face and the queer pale blue eyes chuckled. She pointed with her stick to a chair.

“Come and sit close to me,” she invited, “and I’ll tell you the same story I told the policeman. He went away quite sure that I was mad. You won’t think anything of the sort, my dear. There’s too much sound common sense in your face. Those policemen are always making mistakes simply because they think they’re cleverer than other people. Now make yourself comfortable and listen.”

Detective-Inspector Wayes seated in his own chair, at his own desk in his

private room at Scotland Yard, was somehow or other a more weighty and dignified figure. Clara scarcely recognised him at her first entrance into his sanctum on the following morning. His opening words, however, reassured her as to his identity.

“Sit down, baroness,” he invited. “I rather fancied that I should have a call from you during the day.”

“What made you send me to Belgrave Square?” she asked him bluntly.

“I didn’t send you there,” he objected.

“You suggested to Lady Martinhoe that she should write me. It was through you I went.”

“Perhaps so,” he admitted.

“Why?”

“Frankly because I wanted a woman’s view of the situation. We don’t employ ladies here, you know, so I had to look outside.”

“Very kind of you, I’m sure,” Clara observed with a note of anger in her tone. “I suppose you know that everyone else except Lady Martinhoe and her elder nephew was disgustingly rude to me.”

“That isn’t very important, is it?” the inspector urged soothingly. “One has to put up with that in our profession. I simply sent you there to see if you could find out more than I could. I was handicapped all the time by my official position.”

“You didn’t even give me an idea about what that old woman had in her head.”

“Naturally not. Your receptive faculties would all have been biased if I had given you my view of the situation before you went. Now tell me what happened.”

The inspector’s shrewd, dark eyes were fixed steadily upon her. His yellow-stained fingers waved away a little cloud of cigarette smoke from in front of his face. Clara noted the creases upon his worn forehead and around his mouth, and her sense of irritation decreased.

“I saw the young man first—the Honourable Robert Brandon,” she began. “He was very anxious for me to tell him exactly what I had come about.”

“He would be,” the inspector assented dryly.

“When I refused he sent for his brother, Lord Martinhoe, and his sister, Lady Mary Brandon. Lord Martinhoe was courteous enough, but the girl was just as rude as she knew how to be.”

“All in the day’s work.”

“Then the dowager came along. She sent them all away and told me her grievances.”

“After which she asked for your advice.”

“Yes.”

“Did you give it to her?”

“Naturally. Wasn’t that what I was there for?”

His forefinger tapped the table impatiently.

“Well, what was it?”

Clara opened her cigarette-case. Her eyes wandered towards the door. The inspector nodded acquiescence.

“That’s quite all right,” he assured her. “We don’t encourage women to smoke on the premises as a rule but ours is what is called a 1A interview. There’s a man on duty outside the door and I can only be addressed through the telephone. Smoke away if you want to.”

Clara lit a cigarette and watched a couple of blue rings curl upwards to the ceiling. They seemed like the frames of the tragedy which was still in her mind. The inspector waited more or less patiently.

“You must understand,” she went on, “that when I am called upon to give advice I simply put myself in the place of, say, the woman who is my client, and no outside considerations have any weight with me. I embrace her wish as my guiding motto and I advise her how to attain that wish in the safest possible manner. The Countess of Martinhoe,” Clara proceeded, “although she is very far indeed from being a lunatic, has, without a doubt, a grotesquely ill-balanced and malicious brain. Within the last year she assured me that she has been selling out her securities steadily and investing the whole of the proceeds—nearly a million pounds—in jewellery. She has been doing this secretly and on a smaller scale for years and now the whim seems to have seized her to confide in her relatives, her friends and even the Press. When I was on my way there this afternoon I could not remember why the name of Lady Martinhoe was so familiar to me. Directly she told me her story I knew. Her name is in the paper all the time as a buyer at Christie’s and elsewhere of any rare or precious stones.”

The telephone bell at the inspector’s elbow tinkled. He took off the receiver, listened for a moment and turned towards his visitor, holding his hand over the transmitter.

“That’s quaint. Lady Martinhoe is downstairs,” he announced.

“You can put me in another room if you don’t want to keep her waiting,” Clara suggested. “We can finish our conversation when she has gone.”

The inspector reflected.

“Have you any objection to remaining here?” he asked.

“None whatever,” she assured him. “It would rather interest me.”

The inspector turned back to the telephone.

“Show her ladyship up,” he directed.

Lady Martinhoe was announced and ushered in. In her outdoor habiliments and without her circuslike display of jewellery she presented a less grotesque

appearance, but her stoop was, if anything, more pronounced and the angle at which it placed her head made her seem more than ever like a person suffering from some terrible deformity. She entered the room leaning on her maid's arm, but as soon as she was safely ensconced in a chair she at once dismissed her.

"Wait for me outside, Anna," she enjoined. "That nice young policeman will find you a seat, perhaps, if you ask him. Dear me, if it isn't the baroness again—with the inspector too. Is Scotland Yard taking advice, Inspector Wayes?"

"We often need it, your ladyship," was the courteous reply.

She leaned forward, her hands clasped on the top of her stick and her chin, witchlike, only an inch or two above them.

"Discussing my affairs, I wonder?" she asked shrewdly.

"Exactly what we were doing," the inspector assented. "The baroness was on the point of telling me what her advice to you was."

"I'll save her the trouble," the little old lady declared, her voice seeming to become shriller and harsher with excitement. "I'll tell you what I asked her and what her reply was. First of all I let her into a secret. You'd like to hear it too, eh, inspector? Very well, you shall."

"Unless it is something which would interest me professionally——" the inspector began.

"Oh, cut out the starch," Lady Martinhoe interrupted scornfully. "I told her that I slept with a million pounds' worth of jewels in a black safe by the side of my bed and with the key of the safe under my pillow. I told her why too. I have in the house two nephews, a niece and a companion, besides my maid and twenty or thirty other servants. Most of them are mentioned in my will. Sometimes I am anxious about them," she went on, dropping her voice. "Most of them at different times and in their own way have tried to rob me. That makes me very anxious. I wonder how dishonest they really are. That is where my scheme comes in. I am finding out."

"You will remember what I told you," Inspector Wayes said severely. "I think your scheme, besides being dangerous, is a wicked one."

His visitor chuckled. There was a gleam of humour in her eyes but it was humour of a virulent type.

"I do nothing against the law," she croaked, "and oh, what a joke it has been! Benskin, my butler, the man whom I trusted more than anyone else in the world, he came in like a ghost the first night. I pretended not to see him, but I had one eye open and a pistol under the bedclothes in my left hand! His fingers were shaking so that he could scarcely draw the key from underneath my pillow. He managed it somehow or other. Then I gave a little moan as though I were waking up. He stuffed a few rubbishy things into his pocket, locked up the safe, replaced the key and went puffing out of the room like a

scared rabbit. He was funny, inspector,” she went on, wiping her eyes between little jerky spasms of laughter. “I was longing to shoot at his legs. That would have been funnier than anything. . . . How I enjoyed myself! That night I think I laughed myself to sleep. . . . Then there came Miss Camps. I told you about Miss Camps, didn’t I? She’s my companion. She’s outside in the car now.”

“You told me about Miss Camps,” the inspector assented.

“And me,” Clara echoed.

“I hope I made it perfectly plain to you,” the former said, “that I consider your escapades unfair and malicious.”

“But not illegal,” the old lady chuckled. “I can do as I like if I choose to risk my own jewellery. Miss Camps was much less nervous than Benskin. I am afraid that she must be an older hand. She got off with one or two very nice diamonds before I turned over with a yawn and nearly scared her out of her skin. I shouldn’t be surprised if Miss Camps didn’t make a couple of thousand pounds on those diamonds.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” the inspector remarked coldly.

“Poor young woman,” the countess continued with a grin which disclosed two rows of yellow teeth. “I had left her five thousand and it might amuse me at any moment to give information to the police. You’d like the case, wouldn’t you, inspector? Criminal business is quiet just now. I know, because I always read the murder trials. I take the *Police Gazette*, too.”

Clara’s eyes were cold and unsympathetic. There was a shade of disgust mingled with her curiosity. Nevertheless, she was listening to every word intently. Inspector Wayes’s face was set in hard lines and his expression changeless.

“I trapped Benskin and Ada Camps all right,” Lady Martinhoe continued complacently. “They’re small game, though. I don’t count them seriously. One of my own people has been robbing me for a long time. I’ve never been able to make up my mind which it was. My time’s coming now, though. Thanks to this nice young woman—the Baroness Linz, isn’t it?—I shall soon know. Here’s a clever girl for you, inspector. She’d had a glimpse of Robert and she couldn’t have thought much of him. I managed too so that she saw Stephen and Mary before I marched in. She summed them up all right. Would you like to know what she said to me, inspector?”

“I certainly should,” he admitted.

Lady Martinhoe was afflicted with a short spell of coughing. They waited patiently until she had recovered.

“‘When I give advice,’ the Baroness said to me, ‘I put myself entirely in the position of my client. You are convinced,’ she persisted, ‘that these young relatives of yours would rob you if they dared?’ I told her at once that one of them I knew would, that it was being done all the time. ‘Very well, then,’ she

said, 'you must make it worth their while. You bought the Kura-Kut diamond last Tuesday. It was in all the papers. Have it delivered in Belgrave Square and tell all three of your young people in the strictest confidence that it is coming. Let them see it, if you like, before it is put away in the safe. Then complain that you haven't slept well and order a sleeping draught. If there is a thief amongst the three you should know of it before morning. You can make just enough noise to prevent anyone getting away with the jewel and you can discover who deserves to be cut out of your will.' Good advice, eh, inspector? Bait your trap temptingly enough if you want to bring the wolves out into the open."

"Good advice in its way," the inspector agreed. "Thoroughly bad morally and, from my point of view, highly dangerous. How old are you, Lady Martinhoe?"

Her ladyship grinned.

"What a question for a gallant man!" she exclaimed. "I am eighty-one."

"You are of an age when any violent shock might kill you," he reminded her bluntly.

"Oh, my eye," she mocked him. "My heart's as sound as a bell."

"Then there's another point to be remembered," he went on. "With the Kura-Kut diamond in their hands anyone might become desperate. Even if they were your own kinsfolk, if you sat up in bed and jeered at them—they might retaliate."

The countess smiled complacently.

"There would be no fun in the affair except for a certain amount of risk. I should have been amused anyhow. Life is very dull for old women, inspector, and when they are malicious old women like me it is very hard to find amusement."

There was a brief silence. The inspector coughed, then turned over some papers.

"Precisely what, Lady Martinhoe," he asked politely, "was the purpose of your visit here this morning?"

"Dear me, I'd nearly forgotten that," she confessed. "It was just this, inspector. I wanted to ask you a question—the police are sometimes so very clever, especially when we don't want them to be! You might come across some of these little articles of jewellery of mine which Benskin and Ada Camps made away with, find out where they have been sold, or something of that sort. If I denied that they belonged to me, though, if I told you that I had lost nothing, you couldn't do anything about it, could you?"

"Unless you made a charge," the inspector admitted, "we should be helpless."

"That's just what I wanted to know," his visitor observed, her beadlike

eyes aglow with pleasure. "Wait until the grand coup comes off, inspector, as I hope it may to-night or to-morrow, then I will give you a list of what Miss Camps has stolen and what Benskin got away with. They will just be beginning to feel safe when the little tap on their shoulder comes. You must let me know which day you make the arrest. I should like to be at home. And the big coup! That," she meditated with an ugly smile, "will be a wonderful affair. I do not like my nephew Stephen or my niece. Stephen is kindly enough but he is a prig. Robert is not so bad but he is a rascal. I wonder which one it will be. Robert, I fancy. Perhaps Mary. Perhaps both of them!"

Inspector Wayes rose to his feet.

"Your ladyship," he cautioned her, "you will forgive my pointing out that Scotland Yard cannot countenance in any way your present course of action and may, in fact, intervene at any time whether we receive instructions from you or not. If you will excuse me now——"

"Surely I can catch my own thieves," Lady Martinhoe snapped as she raised herself to her feet. "Why should you people have all the fun?"

The inspector shrugged his shoulders as he opened the door.

"Thief-baiting is nevertheless a dangerous hobby," he warned his departing guest.

A silence, uncannily intense, brooded, through the watches of the night, over the vast gloomy bedchamber on the ground floor of the house in Belgrave Square. Not only was every light in the apartment extinguished but every curtain was tightly drawn, every window hermetically sealed. Lady Martinhoe believed in neither light nor fresh air. In a silence unpenetrated by the sounds of traffic, the hooting of motor horns or the dull tread of passing footsteps she could lie awake and listen. Her eighty-one-year-old lungs seemed to work as well in this tomblike apartment as though she had been sitting in the famous grounds of her castle in Cornwall where the spring airs carried perfumes of exotic flowers and the ozone of the sea drifted upwards from the tumbling waters. Neither of those æsthetic ecstasies would have given any pleasure to the listening woman. It was the joy of her present life to lie with her chin upon the bedclothes, her eyes closed, her breathing apparently normal, with every nerve of her withered old system concentrated and responsive to the faintest sound which might disturb the sepulchral stillness of that unwholesome chamber. The chimes of the beautiful clock below were inaudible. A violent altercation between two chauffeurs immediately under the window failed to reach her. Yet she would have heard the passage of a mouse, the falling of a pin upon the thick velvety carpet. The turning of the invisible door handle, well oiled and beautifully fitted though it was, would have brought her the thrill of excitement for which she craved. The breathing of an infant, the

passage of a cat or the cautious gliding of naked feet across the rugs would have awakened in a single second her shivering energies. . . .

Clara's advice had been taken. The great trap had been baited. The Kura-Kut, the most famous diamond of its type and class in the world, encompassed by its steel walls, lay within a few feet of her head. Her bony fingers were pulling the sheet up to her chin. Malicious hopes kept her eyes bright. Her tongue moved in a silent chuckle. Benskin! She had found Benskin out! Solemn-faced old humbug strutting about the place with all the dignity of an archbishop. The meek and humble Miss Camps! Lying there in the inky darkness she pictured to herself with a ghastly smile the floods of tears, the pitiful protestations of her frowsy, genteel old companion suddenly face to face with disgrace and the bitter amenities of prison life. . . . Her thoughts passed on to richer anticipations. There was Robert. Supposing it would be Robert who came stealthy-footed into her room! A little shiver passed through her withered frame at the thought. Robert, although she had sometimes felt faint sensations of affection for him, was soft as a woman and a coward at heart. She could still revel over the misery in his anguished face as, faced with ruin and exposure, he pleaded for mercy. The suffering of any human being, even Robert, lured into a position of shame and disgrace, appealed to her, but as a matter of fact it was not Robert for whose furtive entrance she waited with so many tremulous hopes. Nor was it Mary, her niece. Mary was just a fool. Curiously enough she had never awakened the dislike in her aunt that some of the others had done. Stephen was the one she wanted. Stephen, the young man of correct judgment, the young man who bore her dead husband's title, who ruled the destinies of the family, the prig at Eton, the poseur at Oxford, the only one amongst the little crowd of sycophants—not excluding even the old family solicitor—who had spoken to her boldly about the wickedness and folly of gathering to herself this great store of jewels in her declining days when the estates and great houses of the family were going to rack and ruin because the injustice of a dead man's will had given her the right to play with the family money. Stephen was the man she wanted. Let her catch him red-handed and Inspector Wayes could come as fast as he liked. She pictured him being led away from the house with handcuffs, she hoped, on his wrists. For the first time the sepulchral silence with which she was surrounded was broken. That wicked little chuckle escaped from her lips. . . .

Perhaps, after all, no one would come to-night. What were they afraid of? she wondered with an unseen sneer. They all of them knew of the sleeping draught which she was supposed to have taken but they none of them knew of the deadly little pistol clasped in the fingers of her left hand. To every one of them it must seem as though a fortune were there waiting for them. They needed it too. They were all in debt. Mary for her frocks and her new motor

car, Stephen to his various banks with whose help he was endeavouring to manage the estates, Robert for his mistress and his bookmakers. So easy. Nobody but the old woman lying there asleep. Surely one of them would have the courage to afford her these few minutes of evil joy! . . .

At last the time came when her heart gave a shivering jump. With the slightest of efforts the masklike impassivity of her face was reassumed. Her eyes were tightly closed, her breathing became a little louder. Even she could have heard nothing, but a faint ripple of air had crept into the room. A pencil of light had shown for a single instant. She lay still and waited. This was the supreme moment. One of the three—Mary, Stephen or Robert—was in the room, was passing the foot of her canopied bedstead. Now the intruder had reached the front of the safe. There was the faint scratching of a finger-nail as though searching for the keyhole. In a moment, she knew, would come the hour of her test. A hand would be thrust under her pillow, the key would be drawn away. The newcomer might even turn on a light. Certainly he would use his shaded electric torch. . . .

She had spilt some of the sleeping draught upon the sheet and its sickly odour was strong in the unventilated apartment. A man, she felt sure. It was either Robert or Stephen then. She prayed that it might be Stephen. The supreme moment was coming. The intruder was leaning over the bedside, his hand was travelling over the silken counterpane, had plunged in under her pillow. The key! Yes, he had the key. She could feel it withdrawn. Some undisciplined sense told her that with it in his hand he had turned away. Yet Lady Martinhoe was not enjoying herself as she had expected. A spasm of strange emotions had frozen her mirth. Cautiously she opened her eyes. There was little but a blur in the darkness to be seen before she closed them again but by that time a new sensation was draining the warmth from her body, laying a chilled weight of fear upon her heart. It was neither Robert nor Stephen who had walked into the trap. It was a stranger who had drawn the key from under her pillow, who was busy now in the recesses of the safe only a few feet away!

Julia, Countess of Martinhoe, had been a wicked woman all her life and a wickeder still in these her closing days. Curiously enough, although she had spoken often and boldly of her eighty-one years, she had never thought of death. Now she knew that it might be close at hand it filled her with a sort of grisly terror. A sneeze, a moan, a shiver—anything that betrayed her waking state—would be enough. A robber from the real world of robbers! She had never dreamed of this. She had baited the trap with care for one of the household whom she hated. She could have flashed on the lamp and laughed at Robert's scared face, Stephen's panicky agitation or Mary's Victorian hysterics. They were to have been the prelude to her own little drama of enjoyment. But this. . . . Fear was a horrible thing! She tried to grip the butt-

end of the pistol clasped only a few minutes before so tightly in her fingers. The use had gone from her joints. Her fingers refused to close. Nerves, the meaning of which she had altogether forgotten, began to afflict her. She felt a twitching of the eyeballs, a wild desire to see what she could of this figure of fate. His hard breathing was now in her ears. She heard him shaking out the jewels from their cases. Her throat was dry and her tongue as though it had been smitten with a palsy. Yet she had a horrible feeling that it still possessed the power of speech although her own control over it was lost. In a moment she would be calling out, calling for death. She knew perfectly well that this unseen presence bending over his task was the presence of a prospective murderer. He was engaged in the business of collecting a million pounds' worth of jewels. It wasn't likely that he would leave an old woman behind to send him to the gallows. And try how she would she felt that in a moment the end would come. She would call out or try to call out. She would struggle to move her stiff limbs to throw herself upon the bell. Horror was moistening the pores of her skin. She prayed that she might faint. Unconsciousness might save her. At least death would come easily. . . .

It was all over—this mad struggle with herself. The disaster had happened. A hoarse gurgling cry had broken from her lips! Without the power to raise herself in bed she was still able to turn her head. The man, who was filling a dress suit-case from the safe by the light of a shaded electric torch pushed right back into its recesses, answered in kind. With a brief but profane exclamation he swung round and, although Lady Martinhoe was a wicked old lady herself, she had never seen anything more wicked than the light which was glittering in those narrowed eyes, or the ugly curl of his cruel lips. He bent over her. A stocky man on whom dress clothes sat like a travesty.

“What a b——y old fool you were to wake up!”

He uttered no threats. In stark but silent horror she saw the approach of a perfectly black hand, thick and ill-shapen. The smell of rubber was in her nostrils. She felt the fingers searching for the vulnerable part of her throat. Now she was trying to call out, trying in vain agony at her impotence. The bed heaved. . . .

It was as though the universe had wheeled. There was no more silence. The door had been flung noisily open. Every light in the room was blazing out from the various brackets. Stephen, in a blue silk dressing-gown, with dishevelled hair and a man's light blazing in his eyes came swiftly across the room.

“Leave her alone, you brute!” he shouted. “What are you doing here?”

The man in the black gloves straightened himself. Probably he regarded the question as futile for he made no attempt to answer it. There was his dressing-case, now fully exposed, upon the floor, filled with a glittering medley of jewels, the safe, with its door open, partially denuded of its contents. Lastly

there was the man himself, the typical criminal, whose fingers were stealthily straying towards his hip pocket.

“Put ’em up!” he snarled.

Stephen’s reply—an ill-considered one from a man to whom life was dear—was a leap forward and a crashing blow on the side of the face which the intruder, from sheer surprise, only half avoided. In a moment the two were locked in one another’s arms, swaying backwards and forwards around the room. Probably all would have been over in a matter of seconds but the man with the black gloves wasted time trying to draw his revolver from an unaccustomed pocket, before it dawned upon his slowly moving mind that he had only a weakling to contend with. He abandoned the idea of the gun and gripped Stephen with both arms. He lifted him up and shook him. This was almost the softest thing that had ever come his way! Then he remembered that after all time was valuable, for the alarm had been given. He flung the young man over on his back, held his wrists with one hand and caught him by the throat with the other. . . .

Julia, Lady Martinhoe, had never experienced a greater joy in life than that reactionary flow of blood back into her veins. Her wicked old face was aglow with a new zest for life. She rose on her knees in bed and, resting most of her weight upon the palm of her right hand, she leaned cautiously forward. The words of the little gunsmith from whom she had learnt her marksmanship flashed into her mind.

“As soon as you have taken aim at close quarters drop the barrel of your gun an inch.”

Lady Martinhoe obeyed the instructions and the bullet entered the cheek of her marauding visitor exactly where his very truculent jawbone began to assert itself. His fingers loosened their grip and he stared wildly round. Through the valley of the shadow of death and later on in the wards of the hospital, he carried with him the amazing memory of a hook-nosed old lady in pink pyjamas leaning over the end of the bed, the pistol still steady in her hand, a beatific smile of supreme content parting her thin cracked lips.

The complete reconciliation of the Countess of Martinhoe with her two nephews and her niece was a source of congratulation amongst all their friends and of much pecuniary benefit to the younger members of the family. At one of those cheerful little dinner-parties which became her greatest pleasure towards the end of the season, Stephen glanced in a puzzled manner at one of the name cards.

“Why the Baroness Linz, aunt?” he enquired.

Lady Martinhoe smiled.

“The baroness,” she told him, “is a young woman who earns her living by

giving good advice. When I was a different sort of person and believed that everyone, even my own family, were trying to rob me, it was she who advised me to try you out. I baited the trap, the unexpected burglar walked in, you saved my life, I recovered my faith in all you nice young people and I had the supreme moment's excitement of my life. I feel that I owe that young lady a great deal more than the hundred guineas I paid her and this dinner."

Stephen, Earl of Martinhoe, who had just had a very satisfactory interview with his agent, awoke to a rare enthusiasm.

"We must all do our best," he declared firmly, "to see that the baroness has a pleasant time."

A GIFT FROM THE GODS

The greeting of Clara, Baroness Linz, president and everything also to do with the organisation entitled *ADVICE LIMITED*, was inclined to be frosty. She regarded her early morning caller with disapproval.

“Not even Roderigo, Duc de Partagena, Marquis de Cervera y Topete, is a welcome visitor at a business office before eleven o’clock in the morning,” she remonstrated.

The young man of pleasant appearance, dressed in Savile Row tweeds, with a bunch of violets in his buttonhole, touched the tips of her fingers with his lips and sank into the visitors’ chair. He seemed a little depressed by the coldness of his reception.

“But behold,” he pleaded, “mine is not a social call. I arrive on a matter of business.”

“Have you an appointment?” Clara asked severely.

“The affair which brought me here developed too quickly. I arrived in the time it would have taken me to make an appointment by telephone. If you had been engaged I should have waited quite patiently.”

Clara permitted herself a mollified smile.

“Very well,” she said. “What is it?”

“I must ask you first,” the young duke continued eagerly, “what is your lowest fee for advice to a friend? The rendezvous will probably take an hour of your time and there will be a luncheon.”

Clara tapped her teeth with the end of a lead pencil.

“A luncheon?” she murmured interrogatively.

“At the Savoy Grill room,” he announced. “There must be rich food because I entertain people of my own nationality. For you I will order separately.”

“The smoked salmon at the Savoy Grill last week was divine,” she meditated.

“You shall commence with that,” he promised her. “Afterwards for you there shall be a grilled Dover sole with roe if possible, followed by two fat quails with grape salad.”

“I shall reduce my fee to its minimum,” she declared. “My advice shall cost you only five guineas.”

Roderigo produced a worn pocket-book and counted out the money. He laid it on the edge of the desk.

“You permit?” he begged. “Now I make sure of your services. We meet at one o’clock in the Grill.”

“But listen,” she remonstrated as he reached for his hat. “You haven’t stated your case yet. You have paid your money and had no advice.”

“I shall ask you for it when the time comes,” he told her. “I wish you to hear the story from others, not from me. Afterwards you will put this and that together. You will question me as to what you do not understand and you will give me your advice.”

“It seems to me,” she remarked with a smile, “that you are going to make large demands upon my intelligence for five guineas!”

“There will be the luncheon,” he reminded her.

“I wish I were not so greedy,” she sighed. “I shall be there at one o’clock.”

Clara found three people comfortably established in easy chairs waiting for her in the new lounge of the Savoy Grill room when she arrived on the following morning. Roderigo sprang at once to his feet and advanced to meet her.

“You will permit,” he begged, “that I present to you Señor Sovrado and Señorita Isabella Sovrado—the Baroness Linz.”

A stout, heavily built man with black bristly hair, a black moustache and carefully clipped imperial, rose to his feet and bowed. He was correctly dressed in dark clothes but his linen and vivid purple tie were obviously not the efforts of an English haberdasher. His complexion was pale, almost as sallow as his tobacco-stained finger-tips, his eyes were dark and restless and he possessed an uneasy and unattractive mouth. Whatever he lacked, however, in personal charm was atoned for by the beauty of his daughter. She missed perhaps the exquisite slimness of the modern young woman, but her figure was nevertheless beyond criticism and the ivory pallor of her cheeks seemed the natural setting for her beautiful dark eyes. She greeted Clara with a faint air of surprise, her eyebrows a little uplifted, and she turned towards Roderigo as though for an explanation. He gave an order for apéritifs and placed a chair for the newcomer.

“I have perhaps,” he admitted, “confused to some extent my friends and compatriots, Señor Sovrado, the agent for my estates, and Señorita Isabella, his daughter. A little matter of business exists between us. I begged that I might be allowed to introduce my adviser. They expected, without doubt, the usual notary.”

“I expected certainly to meet someone with whom I could discuss a certain proposition which I have to place before my patron,” Señor Sovrado admitted in perfect English. “Nevertheless, if the duke is satisfied it is not for me to complain. The young lady will permit me to say that she possesses an air of

great intelligence.”

The young lady accepted the compliment with a smile. There was a sombre and suspicious light in Señorita Isabella’s eyes. For some reason or other the newcomer’s appearance seemed to disconcert her.

“It is incredible,” she murmured, “to find that there are women notaries in England who are qualified to give advice upon serious matters.”

“It is nevertheless true,” Clara assured her pleasantly as she accepted her cocktail, “that intelligence in this country is not a matter of sex.”

“The baroness,” Roderigo explained, “is not, of course, a notary. She does not claim to have any legal status. She has an acute mind, however, and she has solved many problems for people who have found themselves in difficulties. It is good advice which she gives and it is generally worth following.”

“But how can she know anything about this matter which father has been trying to arrange for you?” the girl asked.

“It is a discussion which we might waive for the moment,” Roderigo suggested.

“In fact,” Señor Sovrado observed with a sigh, “it might be well if we decided to forget business affairs altogether for a time or I fear that our meal might be a sad one. The news this morning is not good, your grace,” he added solemnly.

“In that case let us fortify ourselves with another cocktail,” Roderigo suggested. “No? It is against the Spanish custom, I fear. But, baroness, will you not support me?”

Clara shook her head.

“From what I gather about it,” she observed, “I shall need to be clear-headed to deal with this problem of yours. I have not a great deal of time to spare.”

Her host took the hint and led the way towards the restaurant. He had turned towards Clara, but Señorita Isabella had laid her compelling fingers upon his arm. She whispered something in his ear as they passed up the steps and although his response was vague she entered the restaurant with a smile upon her perfect lips.

“My daughter,” Señor Sovrado explained to Clara as they followed behind, “has known his grace since she was a baby. As I am sure you are aware, the house of Partagena stands first amongst the nobility of Spain. I have had the honour of managing their affairs all my life. It has been a family inheritance.”

“Rather a troublesome one just now, I should think,” Clara commented.

Sovrado nodded gravely.

“The present situation,” he admitted, “is little short of disastrous. I am in fear and trembling when I think of the news which I have to convey to his

grace.”

As usual when the duke was in charge of the proceedings the table was carefully chosen, the luncheon excellent and well served. Clara, who had expected to be bored, found herself somewhat intrigued. The dignified, silent man of affairs was a new type to her as was also the Spanish girl with her flamboyant but seductive appropriation of her host. It seemed to Clara that it was to save himself the embarrassment of her attentions that Roderigo insisted upon leading the conversation into business channels almost as soon as the meal had started.

“You must know, baroness,” he confided, “that for generations the family of Sovrado have been the notaries to my house. The post has passed from father to son without a break for hundreds of years.”

“So Señor Sovrado was telling me,” she remarked. “I have been wondering how the revolution has affected the situation?”

Sovrado contented himself with a groan. Roderigo smiled at her whimsically.

“It is a cataclysm which has arrived,” he pointed out, “or why should I be living here, doing the work of secretary to my uncle, without a home and with an uncertain future?”

“The property of most of the monarchists,” the Spanish lawyer explained, “has been confiscated by the new government. The situation is indeed deplorable. Many of our nobility who had not had the foresight to make some investments abroad, are now penniless. There is a court sitting at the present time which decides whether sequestration is justifiable or not. So far not one of the monarchists has escaped. The verdict has been unanimous. In the case of my illustrious patron here, however, we have put up a great fight. When I left Madrid, indeed, the issue was still doubtful.”

“Why is the duke’s case different to the others?” Clara asked.

“For this reason,” the notary expounded. “His grace’s father was a far-seeing man, a man of vision and sagacity. He foresaw what was coming, he sympathised with the peasants and he did everything he could to improve the conditions upon his estates. He owned enormous tracts of timber which for generations had been allowed to increase untouched and uncared for, cumbering the land and bringing in no profit to anybody. The late duke turned the whole of his peasants who found it hard to obtain a good living from the soil, into woodmen. He established a school of forestry, he brought expert advisers from Norway, Sweden and Canada. He built wonderful sawmills on the banks of the Guadalquivir, and even though he paid high wages the profits from his enterprise were great. If he had invested the money in the different capitals of Europe my illustrious patron here, the present duke, would have been a millionaire in English pounds many times over. His father, however,

was too fine a patriot to do anything of the sort. He invested his profits in developing further parts of the estates, digging up his old vines and planting fresh ones and introducing modern types of agricultural machinery until he had established a great corn-growing country where before there was only a wilderness. Upon his death his grace here, the duke's only son, followed enthusiastically in his father's footsteps."

"You never told me anything of this," Clara said, turning reproachfully to her host.

"My dear baroness," he protested, "there was so little to tell. My enthusiasm, I am afraid, was mostly negative. A great machine had been started. I simply let it continue to do its work. I was never a home bird. I travelled. I entered the diplomatic service."

"You didn't wear yourself out with work exactly, to judge from the number of your appointments," Clara remarked.

"You are quite right, I did not," he acknowledged. "I played the games. I gambled. I had a villa on the French Riviera, an apartment in Paris. Yes—a hunting box in Leicestershire. Polo stables at Ranelagh, at Rugby and at Cannes. I raced a little too. But listen, baroness, I never withdrew one peseta from the industrial concerns which my father had started, I never spent a quarter of my income. I left it to accumulate in my own country."

"That is why it seems so brutal," Señorita Isabella exclaimed, "that this new government should dare to think of seizing your estates."

"Is their effort likely to be successful?" Clara enquired.

Sovrado groaned.

"At first we believed that they would surely fail," he said. "One did not see what possible excuse they could have for such an outrage. Their proceedings, however, so far have shocked the whole of civilised Spain. They have appointed what they call a Sequestration Court which deals with these matters, presided over by three judges. They commenced by forbidding the export of a single peseta of revenue. Since then, notwithstanding all that I have been able to accomplish, it is hard for me to conceive how my illustrious patron has contrived to exist. The whole business is atrocious. The government even have dared to borrow his capital balances, giving undertakings to the court that they will repay if the lands be not sequestrated."

"When is the final decision to be given?" Clara asked.

"Within a few days—almost a few hours. One might even say that it has already been given but not pronounced."

"I do not see that we need conceal the truth," Roderigo intervened. "According to the information which my old friend Sovrado here has brought me, the verdict of the judges has already been arrived at. They have decided by two to one upon sequestration."

“But this is terrible,” Clara exclaimed. “Do you mean that you will lose everything?”

Señor Sovrado, with a lavishly perfumed handkerchief, dabbed at the beads of sweat which had broken out upon his forehead. He pushed his plate away from him. He had the air of a man about to burst into tears.

“Every acre is to be confiscated,” he groaned. “Every peseta of money which they have ‘borrowed’ from the duke is to go permanently into the government’s coffers. His woods, his mines, his great farms, his palace in Madrid, his château at San Sebastian are confiscated. Heirlooms which have belonged to his family for a thousand years are to be sold by auction for the benefit of the State. It is the most disgraceful robbery of which a noble country like Spain has ever been guilty.”

Señorita Isabella’s eyes were swimming with tears. Her long exquisitely cared for fingers twined themselves in her neighbour’s.

“I could kill those men,” she murmured passionately. “I will never go back to Spain. I disown it. It is my country no longer.”

Roderigo summoned the wine waiter and saw to it that the glasses were replenished. Glancing curiously at her host Clara had never admired him more. There was not the faintest change in his expression, not a quiver of the lips, not a sign to show he was in any way affected by the drama of Sovrado’s recital. His voice indeed sounded gentler than usual as he gave an order to the attentive maître d’hôtel, and his greeting of some passing acquaintances was light-hearted and even gay.

“But tell me,” Clara asked. “Has the—what do you call it?—the verdict, the decision of the court, already been finally pronounced?”

“Not officially,” Roderigo replied. “Señor Sovrado here, however, had a long cable this morning which seems to place the matter beyond doubt.”

“One of the copying clerks to the court is my nephew,” Sovrado confided. “He has warned us to be prepared for the worst. The chief of the three judges has always been an enemy of the house of Partagena. He even went so far last night as to hand a copy of the decision to the editor of a Madrid newspaper.”

“It is enough for the present,” Roderigo declared in a suddenly changed tone. “Why should we all be made miserable talking over my misfortunes? I have good health and I am young. I shall not starve. London is a wonderful place. If one may not lunch at the Ritz one finds excellent food in other places. It was one of our own philosophers, Sovrado, who said somewhat more elaborately that the best of God’s gifts to the world are free. I had very little hope of that court. To-day’s news does not disappoint me.”

Clara touched him on the hand. She was looking earnestly into his eyes.

“Tell me,” she begged. “Why was I bidden here to-day? What possible advice could I have given you upon a matter which seems to have passed

already outside of our control?"

For a single moment it seemed to her that Roderigo was showing signs of embarrassment. He glanced across at Sovrado and palpably hesitated.

"Perhaps it was selfish of me to invite you," he admitted. "Next time I promise that I will bid you to a more cheerful feast. . . ."

Very soon afterwards Clara took her leave. Sovrado bowed over her fingers with much courtesy and murmured a politely indifferent speech. Señorita Isabella made no pretence, however. Her farewell was chilly in the extreme and she bit her lip with anger when Roderigo, after a murmured word of excuse, walked with his departing guest to the door.

"I am terribly sorry," he apologised humbly. "You must not be angry with me. I honestly did believe that a matter might arise upon which your advice would have been very valuable."

"What prevented its arising?" she demanded.

Roderigo was ill at ease. His eyes met hers frankly enough but he seemed distressed.

"It is very difficult," he murmured. "The matter is largely a personal one concerned with Sovrado, my agent. He has laid a proposition before me upon which I have to decide to-day. I looked upon it as ordinary business arising out of his management of my estates. Now I find that it is not so. He has committed himself to a pledge of secrecy with the third person concerned. It seems to me that I am bound to respect his position and decide for myself yes or no."

She bade him farewell a little abruptly.

"Don't forget," she said, "that there are five guineas of yours lying upon my table."

"But—but, Miss Clara," he pleaded.

"I do not accept a fee for advice I do not give," was her valedictory remark.

Roderigo, at ten minutes to eight that evening, was glancing through the evening paper in the tiny sitting-room of his apartments at the back of Shepherds Market. His servant with coat, hat and white muffler upon his arm, was standing attentively by.

"If anyone rings up during my absence——" the duke began.

The telephone bell rang. The elderly manservant answered it.

"It is the Baroness Linz who wishes to speak to your grace," he announced.

Roderigo threw aside his paper and took up the receiver.

"It is actually you, baroness!" he exclaimed in delight as he recognised her voice. "I was so much afraid that you were angry with me."

"I am not yet," she replied. "I may be soon. Tell me, are you seeing your two friends again this evening?"

"You mean my agent and his daughter?"

"Of course I do. Are you seeing them again this evening?"

"I am dining with them at the Ritz," Roderigo confided. "I was just starting off when the telephone bell rang. It is a great piece of good fortune that I am still here."

"You may realise that some day," was the dry response. "It is to-night, I suppose, that Señor Sovrado is to put forward that proposition to you?"

"That is what I imagine," Roderigo admitted. "I do not know what it is but it is something for which he has been working very hard. Perhaps he has managed to smuggle a few deposits through to an English bank."

"Listen," she begged. "You have paid me five guineas for my advice. Will you take it?"

"Try me, if you please."

"You say that Señor Sovrado has some sort of proposition to make to you. My advice is that whatever that proposition may be you do not accept it."

"I say, baroness," Roderigo protested blankly. "Do you mean that?"

"I certainly mean it."

Roderigo was the picture of despair.

"But Sovrado is my agent. He knows every detail of the estates. He may have some sort of scheme for saving something from the wreck. However little it may be it will be welcome."

"My advice to you," she repeated firmly, "is that you do not accept any proposition from Sovrado or his beautiful daughter until you have seen me again at twelve o'clock to-morrow morning."

Roderigo was more than ever bewildered.

"But it may be very awkward," he pleaded. "If by signing a transfer, for instance, I could get some bonds over to London it would be very foolish of me, would it not, to miss the opportunity? There is so little time. You heard what he said. The judgment is already decided upon. It will be pronounced to-morrow or the next day."

"Roderigo," Clara pleaded. "You have faith in me, have you not?"

"From the bottom of my heart."

"You know that at times I have given people advice which has been very much to their benefit."

"Indeed you have," he agreed with enthusiasm.

"Very well, then, accept the advice which I am offering you now. Do as I ask. I have nothing against your agent. I have nothing against his seductive daughter. I only beg of you not to agree to any proposition or sign any papers until after you have seen me at twelve o'clock to-morrow."

Roderigo hesitated no longer.

"I consent," he decided. "It is a promise. Even if I am to lose a great

benefit I shall keep my word. Shall I come to you to-morrow?"

"Make it half-past twelve if you don't mind," she replied, "and meet me at the Embassy bar."

The connection ceased. Roderigo accepted his coat and muffler thoughtfully. Instinctively he adjusted his silk hat at that slightest possible oblique angle which was permitted.

"I will take the latch-key, Pedro," he said, as the man whistled for a taxi, "but I am not at all sure that I shall not be home early. My evening does not promise well."

Arrived at the Ritz, a maître d'hôtel obsequiously conducted Roderigo to the suite upon the first floor in the salon of which Isabella alone was awaiting him. She held out her hands for his salute, and the light in her glowing eyes was as warm a welcome as any man might hope for.

"Serve sherry now and dinner in quarter of an hour," she told the maître d'hôtel. "Father has only just returned from the city," she confided, leading her guest towards the divan on which she had been seated. "I have scarcely yet had time to speak to him but I believe that he has succeeded in what he was trying to arrange."

"There has been no further news from Madrid?"

She shook her head sadly.

"I fear that there is nothing more to be hoped for."

Roderigo shrugged his shoulders and lit a cigarette.

"Nevertheless," he confessed, "it will be difficult for me ever to repay your father's efforts on my behalf."

She drew him into the place by her side.

"He will not need repayment," she assured him. "Cannot you believe that what he has done he has done from devotion to your family—devotion which we all share?"

Her fingers impulsively sought his, beautiful fingers as pale as lilies with faintly rose-coloured tips. The cadence of her tone was in itself alluring. A sense of uneasiness crept over him. Neither nature nor nationality had cast him for the part of a St. Anthony and he had a devastating conviction that in another moment those arms, as softly white as her fingers, would be around his neck. He gave a little shiver of relief as the door opened to admit the waiter with a decanter of sherry. He embraced the opportunity to rise to his feet. There was further respite in the evening papers which also lay upon the tray. He picked one up and shook it open.

"You excuse?" he begged. "There is sometimes news in these late telegrams."

She tried to snatch the sheet from him. There was an angry glint now in

those dusky eyes.

“The world has always said,” she exclaimed, “that our men were men of gallantry. Yet you would read a newspaper in my presence!”

“It was only whilst the man was in the room,” he pleaded humbly. “There was Spanish news in the paper last night—of no account, but still it was a telegram from Madrid. To-night I see that there is nothing.”

He laid down the sheet with a sensation of relief for the door leading into the further apartments of the suite had opened and Señor Sovrado, attired for the evening, with a white gardenia in his buttonhole, made his appearance. He welcomed his guest obsequiously.

“You do us a great honour, duke,” he said. “Maître d’hôtel, be so kind as to give me a glass of sherry at once and let dinner be served. I confess to fatigue. The air of London is exhausting.”

“Is all well?” Isabella asked quickly.

There was something almost beatific in her father’s responsive smile.

“The transaction has gone through,” he announced. “It was difficult but it is done. Let that be enough for the present. After dinner there will be a word of good news for our noble guest.”

She took Roderigo’s arm and led him to the table.

“This makes me very happy,” she whispered. . . .

Dinner was an elaborate meal, too much so, in fact, for Roderigo’s recently anglicised taste. Señor Sovrado devoted his whole attention to it, declining to discuss business or give any account of his afternoon’s activities. He waved aside his daughter’s questions with a self-satisfied gesture.

“All is well, Isabella,” he declared. “With the coffee I shall explain. Prepare for a *bonne-bouche*, your grace. My family has served yours faithfully for many years, but to-night—well, you shall hear.”

Roderigo ate and drank moderately, smoking according to the custom of the moment, however, endless cigarettes between the courses. All the time he was uneasy. Clara’s mysterious message oppressed him. At any moment he felt he might be confronted with a crisis. If only he had left his rooms a few minutes earlier! . . . Interminable though it seemed, the meal at last came to an end. The table was wheeled away. Another with fruit, coffee cups and liqueur glasses promptly took its place. Sovrado lit a large cigar and leaned back in his chair. He had the air of a man who embarks upon an enterprise the success of which is already assured, yet he had also the air of a man who is not wholly at his ease. His eyes were never entirely at rest. His fingers kept playing with his short imperial.

“Now, my father,” Isabella begged when the last waiter had left the room. “You must not keep us any longer in suspense. Tell his grace everything.”

“It seems to me,” Roderigo remarked gloomily as he lit a fresh cigarette,

“that I know already the worst.”

“It is time, perhaps, for the tide to turn,” Sovrado pronounced. “It is not a great thing that I have been able to do but it is something that should make a difference. It is something which I have had in my mind from the moment these disturbances began, but I needed an English agent to help me to carry out my scheme. I needed, too, a definite assurance of the Spanish law. Both these I have found.”

He knocked the ash from his cigar a little prematurely, drew a roll of papers from his pocket and placed them by his side. Then he continued:

“The judgment of the court, your grace, has been pronounced and by this time is probably sealed. It has been given against you. At midday to-morrow the sequestration order will be signed. This, however, comes as no shock. We have had ample warning as to what the decision would be.”

“Nevertheless,” Roderigo reflected drearily, “to exchange fears for a certainty is always a sad business. To-morrow I shall be a pauper.”

Sovrado leaned across the table towards his guest. He was showing all his white teeth. His eyes reflected fire and steadfastness. He gesticulated with his cigar.

“To-morrow at the last stroke of noon you, Roderigo, Duc de Partagena, Marquis de Cervera y Topete, will be without doubt stripped of every acre you own and every peseta of money. But to-night, at this moment, you are very nearly the richest man in Spain.”

“Of what use is that?” Roderigo asked sadly.

“It is of this use,” his agent pointed out. “Until twelve o’clock to-morrow the Guadalquivir forests are yours. You have no knowledge of any adverse verdict on the part of the court and in any case the papers of dispossession are not yet signed. The forests are yours. It is an even chance whether, if you could dispose of them to-night, the sale would not be legal.”

There was a moment’s silence. Roderigo was acutely and morbidly conscious of the harshly aromatic odour of a handful of scarlet geraniums which Isabella was crushing together between her fingers.

“Who in this world would buy them?” he demanded. “Estates that are going to be confiscated in an hour or two?”

Sovrado waved his cigar wildly.

“Confiscated from you, but if at midday to-morrow they do not belong to you it is level betting that the Court of Sequestration has no jurisdiction over them. I have found a man who is willing to take the risk, who will buy and pay for them to-night. All the deeds must be signed, however, at once. That, too, I have arranged. I have done more. You are to be paid for them in Bank of England notes, paid for them before the judgment taking them out of your hands can be passed into the book of statutes.”

Roderigo was speechless. Sovrado, with an air of triumph, threw himself back in his chair, laid down his extinct cigar and mopped his forehead. Isabella, with a dawning smile upon her lips, was leaning forward, her eyes questioning her guest.

“It is a wonderful scheme of my father’s, is it not?” she asked.

“It seems to me marvellous,” Roderigo muttered. “The forests are mine, you say, until midday to-morrow?”

“Technically they are absolutely yours,” Sovrado declared. “You can deal with them as you will. Here on the table by my side is the deed of sale. You sign that with two witnesses before a London notary who will be in this room within an hour and you can sleep to-night with bank-notes for fifteen thousand pounds under your pillow.”

“Fifteen thousand pounds,” Roderigo repeated.

Sovrado shrugged his shoulders and held up his chubby hands.

“Perhaps a twentieth part of their value,” he admitted. “Perhaps a fortieth. Who can tell? I worked my hardest for the largest sum possible. That you, my patron, who know the history of our age-long relations, can, I think, believe. Do not forget the buyer has to take a very certain and a very definite risk with the whole influence of this new government in Spain against him. The courts will probably try to upset the sale. Anything may happen. One fact remains. There are fifteen thousand pounds in cash for you. It is a gift from the gods.”

“It is incredible,” Roderigo murmured.

Isabella rose silently from her place. She bent over her father’s shoulder, took the sheet of paper from its place by his plate and brought it to Roderigo. Then she crossed the room and fetched the pen and ink.

“Not yet,” her father said, shaking his head. “The deed of sale must be signed in front of a notary. He will be here in half an hour.”

Roderigo leaned back in his chair and dug his heels into the carpet. His moment had arrived.

“I am sorry,” he said. “There are reasons which I am not able to explain. I cannot sign that paper.”

The storm of a quarter of an hour ended in the tornado-like disappearance of Sovrado. Roderigo rose to his feet. He glanced across the table to where Isabella was seated, her face buried in her hands. For the last few minutes she had taken no part in the furious discussion.

“Believe me,” he said gently. “I am sorry to seem so ungrateful. I must appear to you both to be behaving like a lunatic. The fact remains, however, that I cannot sign that deed of sale.”

She removed her hands from before her face and he saw the traces of tears there. She rose to her feet and came round the table towards him. Before he

could stop her she was on her knees and her arms had drawn him back into his place.

“Tell me why,” she implored. “You are a great nobleman. You would not stoop to bargain. It is not that the money is not enough?”

“No, it is not that,” he assured her. “Still, I cannot sign.”

Her arms were like a yoke. Her face strained with passion was uplifted to his. Her eyes prayed to him.

“Roderigo,” she whispered. “Shall I tell you why my father has done this? Do you know why I have helped him, why I have prayed that he might succeed? It has been done for my sake, for my happiness.”

“I do not understand,” he said, and he kept his tone steady, almost cold.

“But you should understand,” she went on piteously. “Years ago when I was a child I worshipped you hopelessly. Our country is not like others. If I brought you millions in those days nothing would have been possible. Now there is a change. I have money. Not millions, but something. With the money father could get for this sale one could live. There is South America. Take me there. We could change the name. I would go anywhere you wished. Understand me, please, Roderigo! I would be your servant if you wished. But take me and all that I have to offer.”

He kissed her fingers gravely and relieved himself of her arms.

“Such things are not possible, dear Isabella,” he said. “Believe me, I am not lacking in gratitude to you or your father. I shall probably remain a pauper all my life because of my obstinacy. That is of no consequence. I may be robbed of my inheritance but I will not sell the Guadalquivir forests, I will not sign any such deed as your father has presented to me.”

She leaped suddenly to her feet. Her passion seemed to have changed. There was hate rather than love in her eyes as she faced him with swelling bosoms and choked breath.

“Is it that you do not trust us?” she cried. “My father, who has served you like a slave! I, who have bitten the dust at your feet!”

He had his moment, and he escaped whilst the white flame of her anger still scorched.

“This is the trick of peasants, this pertinacity,” he declared. “You must forgive me if I find myself with no more to say than this—the lands of my ancestors can be stolen from me by my misguided country people but they cannot be bought.”

The Embassy bar as usual was packed on the following morning when Clara passed through a little flutter of friendly greetings to the table in the corner which Roderigo had managed to reserve. He bowed woefully over her fingers and gave an order to the waiter.

“You are depressed?” she asked him.

“Who would not be?” he answered, with the faintest note of petulance in his tone. “Yesterday and the yesterdays before I was poor indeed inasmuch as my pockets were empty, but to-day I am a pauper for all eternity.”

“Whence comes this sudden stroke of ill-fortune?” she asked.

He glanced at the clock.

“At midday,” he confided, “judgment in the Spanish Court of Sequestration was pronounced against me. I should not grumble. I follow in the wake of my sire and many other famous people. I am dispossessed.”

“Dispossessed?”

“The new government has taken over my estates. The judgment of the court was decided upon yesterday. The order was signed at midday.”

“Dear me,” she exclaimed, smiling at him with a light of banter in her eyes. “I am afraid that you have been listening to gossip.”

“To gossip? What do you mean?”

“To reports from ill-informed people.”

He shook his head sadly.

“I heard the truth from Sovrado, my own agent,” he told her. “The decision in my case was arrived at yesterday and pronounced to-day at twelve o’clock. I simply take my place amongst the others. The government has confiscated my lands, my quarries, my forests and my bank balances.”

Clara remained silent for a moment whilst the waiter deposited the two cocktails which he had ordered upon the table. As soon as he had gone she leaned towards her companion.

“Drink the whole of your martini,” she invited.

He obeyed promptly.

“I was feeling very much like that,” he admitted. “But why?”

“You needed that one to help you bear a shock,” she explained. “You will need the next one for us to drink to your good fortune. Judgment was pronounced by the Spanish courts yesterday and the result will certainly be in to-morrow morning’s *Times*. You are the first member of the Spanish aristocracy whose lands have not been confiscated. Thanks to your father, Roderigo, who must have been a very wonderful man, judgment was given in your favour.”

“You mean——” He gasped and broke down through sheer inability to control his words.

“I mean that nothing you possess has been confiscated,” she assured him. “The demand of the Republic has been refused. The only stipulation attached to the judgment, so far as I remember, was that you present yourself in Spain within thirty days and undertake either to continue the work upon your estates or form a company that will do so.”

“But last night,” Roderigo protested, pale as death but with his self-control re-established, “last night Sovrado, my agent, whom I have known since I was a child, assured me that all was lost. He brought me a small offer for the Guadalquivir forest lands, something which was to secure me against penury, to be signed while the lands were still mine.”

She shook her head slowly.

“I mistrusted that gentleman with the beautiful daughter from the moment I saw him,” she confided. “That is why I made you give me that promise to sign nothing. If you had not kept your word it is he who would have been the owner of the Guadalquivir forest lands at about a fiftieth of their value.”

“Sovrado! Do you mean to tell me that Sovrado is not honest? Isabella!”

“Honest enough I dare say both of them in normal times,” Clara replied coolly. “Rascal and adventuress in this great crisis.”

For a moment he held his head.

“Forgive me, baroness,” he pleaded, “but do you know what you’re talking about?”

She smiled reassuringly.

“Have you ever known me when I didn’t?” she demanded. “I will admit that I’ve been in great luck this time. I do not know a soul at the Spanish Embassy but it just happens that the Spanish consul, Señor Parascato, is a great friend of mine. He was consul in New York years ago. I went straight down to see him yesterday after leaving you—all the way to Queen Victoria Street if you please—and what I didn’t learn from him he found out for me from others. You won’t see anything more of your late agent, Roderigo. The reason that I was a few minutes late here was that I waited for the report of my messenger who saw them off from Croydon. They hired a special plane to Le Bourget to catch the Madrid train. . . . Now you can drink that second cocktail. You are still the Duc Roderigo de Partagena. You are still the Marquis de Cervera y Topete. You are still the owner of a few hundred thousand acres of Spanish soil. And, from what my friend the consul told me, very much a millionaire! But you do need someone to look after you.”

His eyes flamed into hers.

“Will you be that someone?” he begged.

“I will not be proposed to in a bar,” she objected.

“What about the stairs?” he asked breathlessly, as they rose to their feet.

“This place is very crowded to-day,” she meditated, faintly returning the pressure of his fingers. “I have always thought that it would be very romantic to be proposed to in a taxi. You see, the sun has arrived at last. Let us drive down to Ranelagh and lunch there.”

They passed up the stairs and down the arcade. On the pavement Roderigo summoned the commissionaire.

“Taxi, please,” he ordered.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.

[The end of *Advice Limited: A Series of Stories* by E. Phillips (Edward Phillips) Oppenheim]