THOMPSON'S PROGRESS

C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE

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BY

C. J. CUTCLIFFE HYNE

AUTHOR OF "THE ADVENTURES OF CAPTAIN KETTLE"
"THE ESCAPE AGENTS" "KATE MEREDITH"
"THE REV. CAPTAIN KETTLE" ETC.

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CHAPTER I
THE SCHOOLMASTER'S FEE

Clara, the dog of doubtful ancestry, lifted a mottled nose in the air and gave utterance to the faintest possible whimper, and Tom's Son lifted his head above the bramble clump, and looked sharply round him through the aisles of the tree-stems. There was no one in view, but he was quite aware that the unhandsome Clara possessed several senses which were denied to even his acuteness, and, moreover, that she never departed from her poacher's taciturnity without adequate cause. So he clapped an extra knee on the rabbit-net, and stooped his ear to the pine-needles on the turf.

Beneath him he could hear the scared rabbits kicking danger-signals with their hind-legs against the walls of the burrow, and the scratchings of his brown hob ferret as it harried them. But telephoned in and amongst these sounds there were others which he presently recognized as distant footfalls —*thum-thums* when they fell on the turf, *thush-thush* on the moist autumn soil, and *sash-crackle* when they pushed through gorse and bramble, or trod on the dead sticks of the undergrowth.

Tom's Son made a quick diagnosis of the position. "Yon's t'keeper," he decided, "wi' a mate," and promptly wished he had been working the hob ferret on a line instead of free.

Prudence suggested desertion of the ferret and an immediate retreat. Professional pride declaimed that honour would be lost if the hob were left behind.

So far no sound of the advancing enemy came to him through the air, but he kept his sharp ears strained to their fullest pitch to catch the first warning. He took in three of his outlying nets. As he was in the very act and article of unpegging a fourth, a scared rabbit bolted into it and butted spasmodically amongst the meshes. Again prudence urged that, in view of possible complications, it was advisable not to be carrying a recently killed rabbit upon the person. But Tom's Son had that within him which made it almost impossible to jettison property once acquired; and, moreover, now as in after life, the riskiness of a speculation never scared him if he saw an opportunity of good profit and the means of bringing off the venture successfully. So he gave the rabbit a skilful *coup de grâce*, staled it, and slipped the limp, warm remains into a skirt-pocket.

Already he had the contours of the hummocky ground, the plan of the coverts, and the line of his own retreat marked out in his mind with entire

accuracy. He had decided to a hand's-breadth the direction in which the keeper and his companion were coming, and had mapped out to a yard the point which they would have to pass before there was any necessity for his retirement. He was a lad, as may be seen, who left nothing to chance if calculation could make it certainty.

The one thing he could not decide was whether the keeper had brought his dog, and even Clara's wonderful talents stopped short at giving information on a nice point like this. If the dog was present he must make a long retreat, as the dog's nose would be a danger if he and Clara remained in the neighbourhood, and he took no avoidable risks. If, on the other hand, there was no dog, he knew of a snug place of hiding close at hand which was quite man-proof. It was part of his capital, the knowledge of these places. Then he could return to business as soon as the keeper had gone his ways. If only that miserable hob ferret would bolt those two rabbits which were left, and come out . . .

The keeper's brown cloth cap showed at the appointed place, and Tom's Son doubled up under the lee of the bushes and glided away. The hob must be deserted after all. Annoying, but there was no help for it. Moreover, he was learning young that fine art of cutting a loss which would serve him so well in later years. So he ran on by the ways he had marked out for himself, and Clara slunk silently along at his heels.

A quick reconnaissance told him that Hustler, the gamekeeper, had (like a fool) come without his dog, and so the retreat took its shorter alternative. They came to a portly old oak that had been pollarded by lightning. Many a time had Tom's Son gathered acorns from beneath its branches to fatten the rabbits in the burrows before he poached them. Moreover, he had learned that the tree, though to all appearance sound, was a mere funnel inside, and indeed it had more than once served him as a place of temporary residence.

He picked up Clara and clapped her round his neck, lamb-fashion, and that intelligent mongrel clung on there skilfully. Then, with boot-toes and knees and fingers, he climbed the rough bark till he got to a branch, swung himself up till he reached the crown, and thereupon disappeared, and Clara with him.

Meanwhile Hustler and his companion were coming at a steady plod, and presently the gamekeeper's instinct became aware of a recent disturbance of the ground. He should have seen rabbits round this warren; a pheasant or two should have been feeding on those acorns; but the wood was desert and quiet except for the twittering of small birds. His trained eye began to rove about more curiously, and once he found a place on a shale bank where Tom's Son, in spite of all his thoughtful cunning, had been compelled to leave a boot-print.

He stooped a moment and examined the tiny fountains of muddied water which had welled into the nail-pocks. "That's fresh wi'in this last hour, Hophni," said he.

“It’ll be Tom’s Son, yon lad I telled tha’ about.”

“ ’Appen so, ’appen no,” said the keeper. “Let’s be moving and see if we can leet on him. Cower quiet.”

They walked on stealthily, and the keeper’s woodcraft was severely tested in following the tracks, because Tom’s Son, as became an intelligent poacher, made a study of walking invisibly. But in another score of yards the rape of the burrow lay patent to any professional eye.

Hophni Asquith, the keeper’s companion, could not, it is true, read the marks till they were pointed to him; but when Hustler displayed the impress of the poacher’s knee and toe, the newly riven earth where pegs had held down the rabbit-nets, and the dozen other matters which told an expert the exact history of what had been done, the younger man read these things eagerly enough for himself, and repeated with a fresh snap of delight that this was surely the work of Tom’s Son. “He’s a jill ferret that they tell me’s a marvel,” said Asquith.

The keeper of a sudden stiffened into immobility and motioned for silence. A scared rabbit bolted, and presently a lithe brown animal came capering out of the burrow. It stopped for a moment, framed in the archway, and then ran out into the open. The keeper stretched out a large, gentle hand and secured it.

“Well, Hophni lad, this ’ere ferret’s a ’ob, and so tha’rt wrong. Appears to me there’s a good deal of dislike atwixt this Tom’s Son, if that’s his name, and thee. What’s it about?”

“There’s a lass that I like that likes ’im better. Not that he walks her out. But she’ll noan walk wi’ me, an’ if I’d ’im gaoled, I’m thinking she’d forget t’beggar.”

“I care nowt for thee nor tha’ lass,” said the keeper, with cheerful candour; “but if this chap comes here after my rabbits, I’m wi’ tha’ i’ wanting ’im stowed away i’ t’jug. We’ll just go ower yonder out o’ sight and wait a while. ’Appen he’ll come back. It’s us that’s scared him, you can see that, but I must say he’s picked up his feet and run away remarkable cautious. There’s not a bootmark to show onywheres. But he’ll noan be so pleased at losing yon ferret, and ’appen he’ll come back to fotch it. We’ll go an’ set wersens down agen yon gurt oak.”

Some impish fate decided that the tree in question should be that lightning-pollarded patriarch which has already sprouted into this history, and when Tom’s Son heard the thump of their shoulders, not three inches from his own ear, he could have laughed aloud in his amusement. It is terribly hard at times to keep such excellent jests as these to oneself.

The mirth, however, died out of him to some extent as he listened. Asquith, with frankly unconcealed spite, was giving the history of this poacher to the keeper. He was telling how, almost as soon as the lad was breeched, he

descended with his father to work as a ‘hurrier,’ or propeller of corves (which are miniature coal-trucks), in one of the collieries. This event first took place in the year 1842, before the Education Department was born and when labour laws were mostly conspicuous by their absence. In the winter months he was lowered down the pit-shaft before daybreak, and so did not see the sun, except on Sundays, for six months together. The buckle-end of a belt gave him encouragement when he was tired, and as he did not die under the treatment he grew uncommonly strong and hardy. “He could throw thee an’ me together,” said Asquith, and spat disgustedly at the thought.

The keeper smiled contemplatively and felt his forearm. “Tha’st been brought up i’ t’miln,” he said, “but I can wrastle aboon a bit mysen. I’d like to have a thraw wi’ him. Why, he’s nobbut a lad. He’s nobbut sixteen or seventeen. And what’s his name, dost ta say?”

“Tom’s Son they call him i’ Bierley. His mother died when he wor a bairn. They called his father Tom.”

“Tom who?”

“T never heard t’owd chap given any other name than Tom, and as he’s been dead these two year now, killed by a fall o’ muck i’ t’pit, I don’t suppose that there’s any that remembers.”

The talk dropped between them then, but at intervals, to beguile the tedium of waiting, the history was continued in scraps. It appeared that the original Tom had done a trifle of poaching at intervals, according to the usual collier custom which then held in the Low Moor and Bradford districts, and (also according to custom) blooded his son to the sport as soon as that urchin was old enough. The original Tom was a poor poacher, and took to the woods only in a *dilletante* way. But Tom’s Son proved a genius and an enthusiast at the business, and had frequently to be checked by applications of the paternal belt, lest he should lose the entire taste for the beauties and necessities of coal-mining.

After the fall of earth made him an orphan, as all the household property was swallowed up in providing sufficient pomp for the funeral, Tom’s Son became for a while a lodger in various cottages, but attended less and less at the pit as the months went on, and finally ceased even to have an official residence amongst the haunts of men during those seasons when game was sufficiently edible to find a market. At intervals, it seemed, he appeared in Bierley and Wibsey, and other villages, to sell his wares, and more than one tired mill-lass—for that was the era before the ten-hour day—gave him free leave to pay her court. But not even a love-affair could anchor him, and where he bestowed himself no man knew.

“I’d have liked thee to cop him if it could have been managed,” said Hophni; “but if he’s too artful for that, there’s another way. Sithee, here’s the

law o' t'land on poaching. I weared two shilling on it. Here's the point we can touch him on. Now read that."

Apparently the keeper read, for there was silence for a minute or so, broken only by the faint rustle of a blunt finger tracing the words laboriously along the paper, and then a grunt or two of satisfaction. "By Go'!" he said, "I didn't know the law ran as simple as that. Why, if he goes on at his present gait—and there's no reason why he should change—we can just pick him up and run him in when we choose."

Inside the tree-trunk, Tom's Son, the listener, was wrung with a sudden clap of fear. Of what nature was this danger they spoke about so confidently? He did not know. It was beyond his art to guess. He saw no means of finding out. It came to him as a horrid shock that he could not read.

His cool nerve, of which he had been so proud, seemed to slip entirely away from the confines of his system. He had a strong imagination, and it depicted to him in that moment visions of gaols and diagrams of treadmills in the most lurid of colouring. He had, up to now, thought himself armed at every point by his courage, his ability, and his cunning; as he was a poacher, it was his ambition and vanity to be the most perfect and skilful kind of poacher; and lo! here he was told of a gap in his defences, whose position it was beyond all his art to discover. So profound, indeed, was his agitation, that Clara, by intuition, shared in it, and began to move uneasily in her form, and even forgot her poacher's manners so much as to utter the ghost of a whimper.

It was Clara's agitation which cooled his wits again. Panic is the most catchy thing on earth, but one finds here and there rare fellows on whom the sight of panic in others has the most amazingly bracing effect; and it is these who in war, and in trade, and in everything else, become leaders. Tom's Son slid out a strong, steady hand and laid it on Clara's mottled nose, and Clara looked up and saw from her master's eye that, outwardly at any rate, he was calm again, and that was enough for her. She was quite willing to accept the opinion of anyone else upon the situation, so long as it was coolly and steadily given. She was eminently one of the ruck. She had no ambition to think and lead for herself.

Tom's Son, once more his own lad again, decided that the situation needed a remedy, and, churning it over in his nimble brain, plotted out with very little waste of time what that remedy must be. He must learn to read. It was typical of him that he tried to find other alternatives. It was typical of him also that in less than a minute he had reviewed every other possible course, and proved to himself that each of them held its own insuperable flaw. But once he had made up his mind upon the point, he dismissed the entire subject from his thought, and employed his imagination upon quite alien matters, till the keeper and Hophni Asquith chose to go, and left him free to follow their example.

He climbed out of his shelter then, dusted himself free from dead leaves and punk—for he always had a niceness about his clothes—and started off watchfully to get free from the woods, with Clara treading delicately at his heels.

Now Tom's Son, though fully determined to acquire the art of reading, was by no means minded to expend unnecessary capital over the matter if it could be avoided. In the first place, he destined what money he had for other purposes; and, in the second, the love for a deal lay deep within his blood, and it dearly tickled him to get the upper hand in one, through sheer lust for conquest.

However, Mr Squire Tordoff, the teacher, whom Tom's Son went then to interview, was as close-fisted an elderly man as, in the years 1840-50, could be found in that part of Yorkshire. He had begun life as a hand-loom weaver, but on accession to the ancestral property—which consisted of three low-rented cottages—he had left his family to propel the clacking looms in the upper chamber, and himself set up a night-school for the instruction of grown-ups. In earlier days he had been a devout Chartist, had drilled with a pike in '38, and twice in the autumn of that year had dodged the sabres of indignant dragoons in Bradford streets. He still held to some very weird and revolutionary political opinions, and education for the masses was his constant outcry. Hence the night-school. But he tempered fanaticism with commerce, and scoffers held that once he had raised enthusiasm amongst the unlettered, and lured them into his night-school, they found the fees there exorbitantly heavy.

Squire Tordoff and Tom's Son were old antagonists. Many a time had Squire pointed out to the lad the tremendous advantage of education, and Tom's Son (without prejudice) had admitted the point, but held that so strenuous an apostle ought to supply his wares gratis. They were quite friendly over the matter. Once Squire had tried to break Tom's Son's head for his impudence, and found out that he had tackled a professional boxer, who was built apparently of chilled steel, with copper fastenings, and got soundly trounced for his pains. But, of course, he did not bear any enmity for that. He merely boasted of the circumstances in Bradford afterwards, as showing what thews Bierley could produce amongst its young.

When Tom's Son called at the Tordoff residence the family there were partaking of their evening meal of oatmeal porridge delicately flavoured with bacon grease. He produced a fine plump rabbit from a skirt-pocket—a rabbit from a burrow which he had carefully fed with acorns before poaching it—and threw it into a corner of the room. It always pleased him to make unexpected gifts.

He waited till the meal was at an end, and the porridge bowls were gathered on the sink, and the clogs of the household had clattered off, and

overhead the hand-looms had once more begun their clacking, and then he tackled his subject without any unnecessary preface.

"Squire," he said, "I want that schooling. But I'll noan pay tha'."

"Then, my young friend," said Squire Tordoff, lighting a long pipe and preparing for argument, "you may just stay where you are in outer darkness. If a man of the present day appreciates that the blessings of education will put him on the level of the so-called aristocracy of this country, and yet will not pay a small fee to the professor who drags him there, he may just stay where his fathers were, amongst the beasts that perish."

"I'll pay tha' one rabbith a week for three nights' teaching. And ye know well, Squire, that my rabbiths is allus fine fat 'uns."

"Your rabbits are plump, Tom, and I'm free to own that they're the best sold in this district, though how you manage to find them in such fine condition I do not know. But your proposal that I should accept your fee in kind is not accepted. I might mention that when rabbits are needed in this household, I have some skill in culling them from their native hedgerows myself. Put your wares on the market, Tom, and bring your school-fees in current coin of the realm, like a gentleman."

"I'm noan a gentleman, though I will be one of these days, and talking 'fine,' like thee and t'parson. Better tak' t'rabbiths, Squire, or I'll be forcing tha' to snap at a worse offer afore I've done with tha'."

"As you would say in the vernacular, Mr Thompson, t'brass or nowt are my terms; and if you don't like them, clear out of this dwelling and let me read the paper. I only have my turn with it for another hour, and then I have to give it up. As it is, you've been wasting me a good half-inch of tallow candle with your idle talk, and I think the least you can do as a recompense is to tell me where you get those fine fat rabbits of yours. All those that I can find are as lean as greyhounds."

Squire Tordoff quite expected a refusal of this request, but made it on the principle that little is lost by asking. Somewhat to his surprise, he was promptly told of a burrow where the rabbits had achieved a portliness past belief, but was bidden to raid them the following afternoon, or they would be collected by another hand. After which Tom's Son departed from the house feeling very pleased with himself.

Squire dipped into the sevenpenny newspaper, which he and others subscribed for amongst them, with a feeling of conquest and complacency, though if he could have known the thoughts which had been passing in the brain of the nimble-minded diplomatist who had just left him, he might not have felt so secure of his future happiness and ease. But then, of course, it was too early in life for Tom's Son to have earned the reputation of being "a queer fellow to cross," which was sometimes so humorously applied to him in later

years.

Tom's Son, on his part, laid his plans with care. He artfully let it come to the ears of Phineas Asquith (brother to Hophni of that ilk) that he intended raiding a certain warren in the Low Moor woods on the succeeding afternoon, to supply a large order which he had received for rabbits, and then, to clinch matters still further, went and did a few minutes' flirtation (*coram publico*) with the girl of Hophni's fancy. It was a case somewhat of wheels within wheels, but Tom's Son had a clear head and saw his way through. The trifle of courtship would come promptly to Hophni's ears and keep his jealous wrath warm and active; Phineas, knowing the feud, would certainly make it his business to tell Hophni of the poaching plans out of sheer clannishness; Hophni would lay information with Hustler, the keeper; and for the rest of the campaign also Tom's Son had his careful arrangements.

In due time, then, he betook himself across country to Low Moor woods, with the usual Clara at his heels, and, after depositing that intelligent mongrel in a place of security, went on alone under the trees, and presently obliterated himself from sight and scent amongst some convenient undergrowth. It was just possible that the keeper might have the gumption to bring a dog with him, and, as Tom's Son knew that fact quite well, he remembered there is nothing like loam, new-rootled, to neutralize the human taint so far as a dog's or a rabbit's nose is concerned, and used his knowledge.

The tedium of waiting was in no wise heavy to him. He had his keen commercial instincts even at that early stage, but upon occasion he could eliminate these entirely from his mind, and leave free for work that artistic half of his soul, which showed him more than is granted to most men the beauty of the woods even in their winter dress, and helped him to appreciate with almost an animal's ardency the music which the wind and the wet and the things of life make amongst their branches. I think he had a more receptive eye than most people, and certainly an ear capable of taking up a larger gamut of melody.

But with all this he was no dreamer, to get lost beyond hope of rescue in his dreams. He could awake with a dog's quickness to the stress of everyday life; and when from far off the rustle of a blundering footstep on a broken branch fell upon his ear, he sloughed off in that moment his poetic mood, and became once more the poacher and schemer.

He chuckled presently to find that the newcomer was his particular enemy, Hophni Asquith, and watched him get to cover; and when, in the course of another half-hour, Squire Tordoff resolved himself out of the mist of distant trees, and came up with clumsy caution, Tom's Son shook with noiseless laughter.

Squire, though at home he preached loudly the common inheritance of

ground game, the inalienable rights of man, and his own contempt for unjust game laws, was openly nervous. His process of culling the rabbits was to net all convenient holes of a burrow except one, and then to introduce down this a spluttering reeky firework of damp gunpowder, which, in theory, should cause all residents to bolt without standing upon the order of their exit. His fingers trembled as he pegged down the nets, and when it came to striking a light for his engine, the wood rang with the *tack-tack-tack* of his steel upon the flint, and he barked his fingers four times over through sheer scare before he got a spark upon the tinder. To watch him casting back frightened squints, first over this shoulder and then over that, was, thought Tom's Son, one of the most exquisitely humorous scenes he had ever peeped upon.

But it hung in Tom's mind that he did not make up all of the audience. He knew the position of Hophni. It struck him also that the warren was in the flat floor of a gully, and that Hophni Asquith blocked one of the only two available exits. Presently he concluded that Hustler, the keeper, would come up from the other direction, and so they would net the excellent Squire between them.

These deductions did not surprise him in the least; in fact, it was all worked in with his plan of campaign that Squire Tordoff should be in this way surrounded and pinned. But it was by no means part of the game that the man should be actually captured; and so, having made sure in his own mind that the trap was acting perfectly, he slipped from his cover into the narrow gutter cut by a tiny beck, and in his noiseless way made for the burrow where Squire was working.

He knew he was well out of sight of Hophni. He knew also that Hustler, if he was watching in the neighbourhood (which was probable), could not see him. But, for all that, he moved rapidly, because, like quick decision, quick movement was part of his nature. Life seemed to him so full and so busy that it was sheer gratuitous sin to waste time over any of its details.

His great trouble was how to make Squire Tordoff aware of his presence without causing that doughty person (who was as nervous as a hare) to start violently, and probably advertise the cause of his emotion to the watchful Hophni. He managed, however, to let his presence be known just as Squire extracted a bolting rabbit from one of the nets, and though start the old man did, to any watcher his sudden movement and uplifted hand might have been one of the ordinary actions of the chase. Indeed, the upraised hand descended next instant on the rabbit's neck to give it a *coup de grâce*, for Squire Tordoff had his pride like other people, and did not wish to leave on record even with Tom's Son his exhibition of fear. Moreover, he had his lips ready to utter an ordinary greeting, but there was a look on Tom's Son's face that froze the speech behind his teeth, and though he was a dogged, obstinate man himself, he fell to wondering for an instant as to what there could be in the lad's looks

which sent out such an unrefusable command.

However, it was presently shown to him in very unmistakable signs that there was danger abroad, but that he personally was to show no consciousness of it. Obedient to the stronger mind, he dropped down again on to his knees and busied himself at his employment, and though his face beaded, and his fingers twitched as though St Vitus had visited him, he continued to exhibit a very tolerable presentment of the undisturbed amateur poacher.

Tom's Son, with a gurgle of intense laughter, stalked nearer along the ditch, and in a delicately modulated whisper spoke with splendid descriptiveness of the dangers that encompassed them: how there was Hophni on this side, the keeper on that, and the shale walls of the ravine on either flank, too steep for a man of Squire's figure to scale. "But 'appen they'll let tha' off wi' a fine when tha'st up before t'magistrates," Tom's Son concluded, with wicked consolation, "as it will be a first offence."

" 'Twill not be a first offence," groaned Squire. "I've been there twice before, and got warned. It will be gaol for me this time, and no option."

"Well," said Tom's Son, shaking in his ditch, " 'appen gaol is noan as bad as they say. And tha' can tell afterwards, when tha'rt making speeches Saturday neet at t'public, that tha' went theer for conscience sake."

It was a neat application from Squire's former lectures, but it did not soothe the victim. On the contrary, it moved him to muffled and somewhat irrational profanity, though at the same time he studiously went on manipulating the rabbit-nets and the burrows, for the benefit of possible onlookers. Finally, "It isn't as if I was younger," he said. "I'm too old to offer myself as a martyr now, for the people's good; and besides, the case is not clear here, and the motive might be misunderstood. Tom lad, I'm going to make a run for it, and do you come with me. Then, if the keeper tries to stop us, you can give him a rap over the head."

"Not me. I'm noan poaching, and I've nowt to run for. Run ye and get copped—unless, that is, a fine would suit tha' better."

The old man caught somewhat pitifully at the alternative. "A fine, Tom. How do you mean?"

"Give me that schooling for nowt, and I'll get tha' off, and neither Hophni nor t'keeper shall know where tha'st gone to."

"Certainly, Tom. I'll teach you with pleasure, and do it free, as you say; I'll teach you all I know. You're a bright, smart lad, and I always intended to do something for you."

"Ye sung a different tune t'other neet."

"I was hurried. I wanted to read the paper. But I thought after you when you'd gone, and intended to see you about it again some other day. Quick now, Tom. How am I to get away? I've just seen Hustler down yonder through the

trees, and if I've caught sight of him it's likely he's noticed me. Can you catch Hophni and give him 'what for' if I run that way?"

"Cower down i' t'dyke here aside o' me."

"But, my good lad, they're certain to ferret us out of there."

"Tha'st no 'casion to pay t'fine," said Tom's Son drily, "if t'gaol suits tha' better."

Squire Tordoff wiped the sweat from a very white face, and got down into the little watercourse.

"If tha' splashes and slips like that," said Tom's Son sharply, "I shall leave tha', and tha'lt go to Wakefield after all. Try and handle your feet cleverer. Look at me."

They worked across the floor of the little ravine, and part of the way up one of its sides. Twice Tom's Son raised his head above the lip of the watercourse and took an observation from behind the cover of brambles. Hophni Asquith had left his hiding-place, and had gone to the ravished burrow, and was foolishly fingering the abandoned nets. Presently he shouted, and the keeper's reply came from quite close at hand. But Tom's Son did not unduly hurry the retreat, and Squire Tordoff sweated with fear as he crouched along at his heels, following the windings of the channel.

But presently the ditch widened, and its walls grew more tall, and then in front of them there opened out what seemed to be an abandoned quarry, with its sides covered with fern and bush and grasses, and its floor filled with a tiny pond. There was no possible scaling of its walls. It seemed to the old man a *cul de sac*, and he almost whimpered as he said so.

"Watch where I put my feet," said Tom's Son, "and come on; or, if you don't like that, stay behind and get copped."

Squire did as he was instructed, and found that there were stepping-stones not more than an inch below the surface of the pond. So he got across to a clump of elders at the farther side of the quarry, and discovered there a black tunnel disappearing into the hill and floored with black, forbidding water.

"For the Lord's sake, lad, not in there! It's an old day-hole, and it will be full of foul air; and the roof may fall on us. Nay, lad, better gaol than that."

"Tha'st comed this far," said Tom's Son, catching the old man's hand into his own strong grip, "and I'm noan bahn to leave tha' behind for evidence. This is my own residence, Squire, and I wish to keep it particular private from Hustler and that Hophni Asquith. Now, sithee here," he added, when he saw that his visitor's terror was going to get the better of him, "call out one word aloud and I'll stun tha! Tha'st n'casion to be 'flaid. They've noan gotten coal from this day-'oil these forty year, but t'roof's as sound as ever it was, and t'air's as sweet as blackberries."

He ducked his head and slopped off into the darkness, with Squire

plunging along at his heels, and that eminent man tried to tell himself that if there was a pit in the unseen contours of the floor, Tom's Son's plunge would demonstrate the fact, and his companion would not necessarily be involved in the fall. Although he had lived in a colliery district all his days, this was his first journey underground; he was a hand-loom weaver by caste and trade, and these always held themselves socially above the colliers; and so the dark, dank, echoing tunnel daunted him past belief.

Of a sudden Tom's Son, by a quick twist, wrenched free his hand, and Squire whimpered with a new terror at finding himself orphaned in this abominable blackness. "Lad, lad," he cried, "give me back your hand! You're a collier, and can see in the dark, but I can't, Tom, and I'm afraid! Tom lad, come back to me! Tom, I'm afraid!"

"Cower quiet where you are, you owd foil! Nowt'll bite tha'. I'm seeking t'plank. There was a fault here i' t'coal, an' they sunk a shaft to find t'new seam. Shaft's full o' watter, and I've a plank weighted and sunk in it, if I could nobbut find t'string to fotch it up. Ah, here 'tis!"

There was a sound of heavy breathing, a splash or two, and then the clatter of the plank being thrown across the gap.

"Now grip my hand again and come on, and see tha' doesn't tread over into t'watter. T'plank's nobbut a ten-inch 'un."

Again the powerful unseen hand drew Squire along, and his fumbling feet shuffled sideways across that invisible plank in terrified three-inch strides. The blackness that crowded in around gave him physical pain. At the thought of the horrid abyss beneath the plank his stomach rose till it almost choked him.

Tom's Son left him again for a moment and drew across the plank, hiding it in some fold of the coal-seam. "It'll noan be Hophni and Hustler that follow us in here, even if they do think of trying the entrance, which I doubt. But if they did, there's a swim for them."

"My God!" gasped Squire, "do you think that any man would walk into hell like this unless he were dragged?"

They were in a crossroad just then, and Tom's Son's laugh rumbled down three galleries. "Hell's a place with a fire in it, don't they say? Well, if I show tha' a few lit coals, Squire, do not be 'flaid and think it hell."

But Squire Tordoff's mind was numb to any further accumulation of terrors. They turned and twisted on through more invisible galleries, now climbing steep banks, and now slithering down muddy hills and splashing through unseen ponds at their foot, and he blundered on with his hand in Tom's Son's lusty grip, walking like a man in a trance.

At length they halted in a place that was warm to the face, and dry and hard to the foot, and filled with a feeble glow of light; and though in his raised state this confirmed Squire's worst belief, his mind had got its full load already and

was incapable of further emotion. Here was hell, apparently warm and comfortable, and presently would arrive the devil. After coming to which conclusion he shut his eyes, and either slept or fainted.

When next he blinked into wakefulness again, he found himself resting very cosily on a bed of crisp, dry bracken, and was conscious of an appetizing smell of cooking meats. He looked round and saw a small, low room, some nine feet cube, lit by a most ordinary rushlight dip, and furnished chiefly by the well-built, well-groomed person of Thomas Tom's Son, and a mongrel she-dog with a mottled nose. A vision of hell still hung mistily in his mind, and with it a picture of gridirons. Well, there was the gridiron truly enough, and a fire; but instead of an attendant with horns and hoofs, and the wicked man suffering penance, Tom's Son was the operator, and a simple rabbit was his barbecue. He was tending it with salt, with butter, and with pinches of pepper, and the scent which arose from the performance was appetizing beyond words. Indeed, it was that scent more than anything else which brought Mr Squire Tordoff back again to his level senses.

Tom's Son noted his guest's recovery and winked approval. "There's nowt like victuals ready and waiting to wake 'em up with their teeth sharpened." He broke the rabbit across its back and handed half across to his guest. Clara uncoiled, stretched luxuriously, and stood by for scraps; and the meal progressed pleasantly. Knives and forks were little used in 1850 in the West Riding of Yorkshire by people of the station of Tordoff and Tom's Son, and, for that matter, are by no means deemed necessities to-day. As a further luxury, there was a stone bottle of beer which each consulted in turn; and when in the end the rabbit's meat had disappeared, and Clara had enveloped the head and frame-work, Squire Tordoff, who lived on porridge most of his days, felt that he had seldom dined so satisfactorily.

He knew that he must be in some old coal-workings, but there was no awful darkness now. The candle and the fire dispelled his superstitions, and his curiosity began to work at pressure. "Where does the smoke from your fire go to, Tom?" he asked as a preliminary.

It appeared that the ventilating shaft of one of the better-bed mines came up from below just alongside the little room, and ended in a fat, round stack of brick on the hilltop above, and Tom had tapped this and used it as his private chimney. For fuel he had a collier's pick, and could dig coal himself from its native seam not a dozen fathoms away. Rabbits, for food, were easy to come by. Only beer and an occasional tallow candle did he have to import. But for the most part rabbits and his fiddle sufficed him. He could play best in the dark or by the dancing firelight.

All this did not come out at once—first, because, although Tom's Son could feel, he was no hand at some kinds of description; and secondly, because

he had a curious coyness about letting anyone into the secret of his love for delicious sounds. There seemed to him something positively unchaste about Squire Tordoff's hands when they stretched out to take hold of his fiddle.

But when Tom's Son did not like a conversation, he could be brusque enough at those days in changing it. He brought out a lump of chalk, and with a sweep of his hand indicated one of the smooth black walls of the room. "The candle's wasting," he said. "Learn me to read."

Squire Tordoff preferred himself to do what ordering was done, as a general thing. But he made no objection to this proposal. Without exactly owning it even to himself, he was more than a little afraid of Tom's Son. So he wrote out the letters of the alphabet, great and small, and discovered that after three repetitions the pupil knew them as well as he did. Here was no dullard, such as he was used to. Here was a fellow with brain and with prodigious memory, and Squire got inflamed with the ardour of teaching him.

The store of rushlights, which numbered three, ran out, and they stoked up the fire to light them at their labours, till the little cube of a room carried an atmosphere like that of an oven. To this flickering illumination Tom's Son learned how A CAT ATE A RAT, and other great truths usually acquired by infants, and, boldly discarding the initial stage of pot-hooks and hangers, advanced straight into letters, and with another piece of chalk wrote duplicates of the texts in a dashing hand.

The sun made no division of day and night in that troglodytic residence, and long after the teacher had dropped back into sleep on the dried bracken, the pupil was working on at his lesson with tireless energy. Here was the beginning, a ridiculously easy thing: presently the whole art of reading would leap within his grasp. He was thrilled with a sense of the power which would then be his.

It was one of the peculiar attributes of Tom's Son that he seldom took more than four hours' sleep in the twenty-four, and never more than five. It gives a man a great pull if he can refresh himself in half the time that his neighbours take over that operation; but at the same time, when he is young, it is rather apt to make him impatient of those who employ the slower methods.

Squire Tordoff was addicted to a nine hours' sleep, and when at the end of three hours he was rootled up, he was touchy in temper. He complained that his mouth tasted as if he had been sucking a brass tap, which, in view of the stuffy heat of the room, was not to be wondered at, and when asked at once there and then to continue his course of lessons, flatly and rudely refused.

Tom's Son's big lower jaw began to protrude itself unpleasantly.

"Squire," he said, "could ye find a way back to out-o'-doors?"

Squire blustered. "You must guide me, my good lad. Come, don't answer back, but do as you're bid. You've done me certain services, and I've repaid

them handsomely. You've had your lesson, and I must say took good advantage of it. At intervals, if you come to my house, I shall be pleased to give you other lessons both in reading and writing, and I may throw in ciphering and other things. But first, my good lad, I must get back. My absence will be causing anxiety."

That grim jaw of Tom's Son softened by not one hair's-breadth, and he in turn put forth his proposition. Having annexed a teacher, he saw no good cause in letting him go again. A month at the outside he reckoned as being necessary for the transference of all the learning that teacher possessed, and during that said month he might stay in the room in the disused mine, and Tom's Son would feed him sumptuously on barbecued rabbits, with occasional tastes of beer.

The old man's fury at these cool suggestions was worthy of his Chartist traditions. He was an Englishman, and demanded his freedom. He would be no man's captive; he refused to work as a slave; he would die sooner than submit to such impertinent tyranny.

"Very well," said Tom's Son—"no teaching, no victual," and proceeded to eat himself, but to offer no share of the repast to his guest. Squire pelted the meal, the place, and Tom himself with revilings—he was a man with an astonishing fluency of tongue—but got no answer for his pains. Tom's Son was in thought going over again his lessons, till he assured himself all was locked in his memory and would not be forgotten.

Then, without an effort, he emptied his mind of all commercial things—ambition, poaching, Squire Tordoff, and suchlike—and got out his fiddle-case from the niche that was cut for it in the coal-seam. He tuned the strings, and then cuddled the delicate wood with his great square chin and began to play. The music sang out with delicious sweetness—airs from oratorio, *lieder*, even hymn-tunes, and there was weirder melody too, that the lad had heard from the woods and the brooks.

He did not play to his audience. He had gone away into a music dream and had forgotten he was not alone. In fact, he was as different from the hard schemer and bargainer of an hour ago as could well be imagined.

Squire Tordoff, on his part, listened not without appreciation. All Yorkshire men are born with an ear for music. But Mr Tordoff was not unnaturally sore in mind, and was almost equally anxious for escape and revenge. He had said all the nasty things which occurred to him already, and Tom's Son had received them all on a hide of brass. But Squire was a man of large and varied experience, and he thought he knew something of the vanity which belongs to the artist. So presently he cried out again, "For God's sake, my lad, stop that scraping! I might put up with being a prisoner, I might put up with teaching you, but that music you make hurts my stomach."

When he had spat out his venom he was almost frightened. Tom's Son's face, as seen in the flickering firelight, lost on that instant its healthy colour, and was stricken with a sudden pallor. The music snapped off in the middle of a bar, the fiddle was put into its case, and the lid snapped down. It was the first criticism the lad had ever received upon his art, and he took it in its literal words. Squire was frightened at the bare look of him, but if only he had known how his host's strong hands itched for murder, he would have been even more uncomfortable.

"Get up," said Tom's Son.

"I might give you another lesson now, I think."

"Get up."

"Come now, lad, you'd like to learn the multiplication table?"

"If tha' doesn't get up, I'll use my clog-toe to tha'."

Clara also stood erect, with stiff legs and bristling hackles, and showed a full set of unpleasantly powerful teeth. It was a matter of professional pride on Clara's part to see that her moods coincided with those of her master.

"I've half a mind to leave thee to Clara," said Tom's Son thoughtfully.

Squire had the sense not to cower. "You'd lose your free schooling if you did, Tom."

Tom's Son thrust back his passion with a strong hand. "By Go', Squire, but tha'rt right there! I've gone to some trouble to make a good bargain out o' tha', and it mustn't be lost. By Go', man, but I was very nearly wasting tha'!"

Squire Tordoff shivered.

"Well, man, tha' can get thee gone from here, and when tha' gets home, see that tha' forgets this place and all about it. I'm noan wishing for visitors."

"I'm not likely to talk, Tom. There's very little I could tell to my own credit."

By the devious galleries of that old-time mine they made their way to daylight again, and when Tom parted with his instructor he had quite regained his usual pleasant spirits. Music and prosperity were things apart, and he must not let them clash. Squire made for prosperity, and he had driven a sound bargain with him.

"Well," he said, "I'll come to tha' two nights a week, Mondays and Thursdays, an' tha' mun learn me reading, writing, and sums, and owt else tha' knows. And 'appen I'll bring tha' a rabbith every now and again as a bit o' discount. By Go', Squire, but I came very near to wasting tha' just now, when ye gave me that sauce about t'fiddle! Look at Clara—she's fit to rive tha' i' bits even now if I nobbut gave t'word."

Squire Tordoff took himself off then, treading cautiously through the woods. During his walk home he wondered to himself how he could so often have preached from that lying text that "all men are born equal."

CHAPTER II
THE PROFITABLE STRIKE

Out of sheer joy and exhilaration, Thomas Thompson was indulging in a clog-dance to the accompaniment of his own clear whistle; and the *rat-tattle-rattle* of the clog-irons on stone pavement drew many eyes to his performance. A stream of white-skirted mill-girls poured out of the door of the weaving-shed beside him. They flung him a good deal of pleasant chaff whilst they pinned the shawls over their heads, and it was very plain to see that he was more than an ordinary favourite amongst them. Tom had not the vaguest intention at that period of cramping his movements or his efforts by matrimony, and said so freely; but he liked popularity and the admiration of women's eyes, and made it his business to obtain abundance of both.

But presently, when the stream of hands had ebbed away down the narrow, twisted street to make the most of their sixty minutes of dinner-space, there arrived, in the doorway above, the tenant of the mill. He was a man of six-and-twenty, and so some six years Tom's senior. He was thin and white-faced, and he wore a heavy red whisker cut square from the lobe of the ear to the corner of the mouth; and just at that moment he appeared to be holding back with some difficulty an explosion of bad temper.

Tom winked at him cheerfully, and ended his dance with a final flirt of the clog-iron upon the stone. "Don't you wish you could step like that, Hophni?"

"I'm Mr Asquith to my hands."

"Then I think I'll call you Hophni, like we always did up at Bierley, and you can consider me sacked." A stray cat came and rubbed at his leg. Tom pulled its tail dexterously, and the cat writhed and gurgled in an ecstasy of enjoyment. "I reckon there's no more to be learned in your mill now. It seems to me I've sucked you dry."

"You can come in and get your time now, and thankful I'll be to see the last of you and your sauce. You don't come back again, either, though you'll be begging for employment in a week's time. Half the mills in Bradford are standing to-day, and the other half are only running on short time. Weaving overlookers as good as you, my man, are growing thick on every bush round here, with trade as bad as it is just now."

Tom whistled a bar or two of a sprightly air. "I can see you've got that matter of the dobby-box still in your head, Hophni."

"It was my patent all along. You were in my employ, and as my paid hand any improvement in the looms which you may hit upon belongs to me."

"Oh yes, I've heard that tale before."

"And let me tell you that your original hint didn't amount to much. I have had to develop it. The thing has cost me scores of pounds in experimenting. It's been so altered that none of the original idea is left in it. You wouldn't recognize that dobby-box as it stands to-day. And it isn't finished yet. I shall have to spend more on it before it's ready for manufacture as a perfect machine."

"They teach you the intention of lying pretty well at thy chapel, Hophni," said Tom thoughtfully, "but ye make a poor show at following out the practice. I should change chapels if I were thee, Hophni."

"You let chapel alone," said Asquith furiously.

"I'm likely to," said Tom. "Seen too much of chapel ways since I've been with you. But what's this tale about you ordering ten of the new looms, with my—that is, your dobby-boxes, from Keighley? They said you were trying to keep it quiet, but the tale's slipped out."

Mr Asquith's thin white cheeks flushed. It is not pleasant to be caught out in a lie, even by a discharged *employé*. "Well," he said, "I don't see why I need justify myself to you. It's no concern of yours. I'm paying for them, anyway."

"Ho, yes," said Tom delightedly, "you'll be paying the cost, and a nice fat royalty too, if you don't want the looms broken up as soon as they are delivered. Ho, yes, Hophni, you're paying!" And once more Tom's clogs clattered on the pavement with a joyous *rattle-tat-rattle*.

"Stop that immoral dancing. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, doing such a thing."

"Not I. David danced. But I'm just wondering how much royalty you can afford to pay without getting banked."

"Royalty, you poaching scoundrel! I tell you there is no royalty. The patent's taken out in my own name."

Tom froze into a sudden sobriety, and the big chin began to project itself with unpleasant firmness. "Yes," he said, "you took out the patent, but you waited a few hours too long in doing it. I made you a fair offer to begin with. I took my drawings to you and showed you the invention, on the offer of equal partnership if you would put the money in. You agreed to that. But I've known your shifty ways this long enough, Hophni, and I made so bold as to keep an eye on you. There's a lass you want to marry——"

Hophni Asquith's pale face grew ghastly. "Leave her out, please."

"Very well," said Tom, who was by no means merciless. "But you shouldn't promise anybody more than you've got. I picked up the hint, you see, from your own lips; and as I saw you'd every idea of throwing me over I just got in at the back of you, and took out a provisional protection myself. Yours went off to London Thursday?"

"Yes."

"Mine was in the Patent Office by then, and filed. It was posted Monday. So you see I'm well covered."

"Your patent will never hold," said Hophni violently. "And, at any rate, ye've not enough brass to fight me for it."

"Eh?" said Tom, with one of his dogged looks, "and how much do you put me down for?"

"Your half-week's wage, which you have yet to draw."

Tom dived a hand into his pocket and produced a bank passbook. "I thought there'd be some question like this betwixt me and thee, Hophni, and so I brought t'book along. There's two hundred and thirty-two pound ten shilling there, as you'll notice, and though it's a deposit account, repayable at two months, I reckon I can get it out in time to fight thee, my man, if tha' shows awkward."

Hophni gasped in amazement. Money was his chief god; it was for him even above the God of the chapel; and he always bowed before it. "Wherever did ye get all that brass from, Tom? Never honest, I know. Why did ye not tell of it before, and I could have used it for you in the business?"

"If it was locked up in a business," said Tom drily, " 'appen it mightn't be easy to come by at a pinch when it was wanted, like—well, say, like now."

Hophni Asquith gritted his teeth and tugged at his square-cut red whisker. He intended to use the new loom, because vast profit was latent in its improvements; he intended to pay no royalty or fee to Tom if fighting or dodginess could avoid it, because he preferred to have all that profit in his own pocket; and he was setting his nimble brain just then a-rummaging for some scheme by which Tom could be left out in the cold, or be conveniently packed out of the way. He was not scrupulous—they were neither of them very scrupulous, for that matter—and some of the schemes that flashed past him were not over-creditable. By then Tom quite appreciated that in the immediate future he would have to keep his weather eye lifting for squalls. It was all part of the game, and he was perfectly ready to take his risks. In fact, he had a very appreciative taste for a scrimmage, and did not much care whether it was physical or whether it was mental. He had tried his thews many a time, and tried also his powers of strategy, and was chinful with confidence in both of them.

They parted at this point, and it was characteristic of the pair of them that Hophni Asquith should retire forthwith to his narrow little office to grapple there and then with the problem, and permit it to worry him incessantly from then onwards, and that Tom should dismiss the matter entirely from his thoughts. In 1856 there was no Yorkshireman in all the West Riding keener for commercial success than Mr Thomas Thompson, but at the same time he had

other objects in life to which he gave portions of his attention. He was a fellow of infinitely quick decisions; once he had made up his mind upon a matter, he could tilt it completely out of his thoughts till the moment came to take it up again, and in the meanwhile find refreshment in some entirely different mental exercise.

Accordingly he took his leave of Asquith, whistled up Clara, and marched off in this company at a smart pace.

He stopped once at the door of a cellar-dwelling, and hailed down, "Maister still playing?"

"Ay, lad. He's had no wark these three week."

"Sithee, here's a couple of rabbits. 'Appen they'll do for t'bairns." After which he went on again, whistling cheerfully, with the stolid Clara keeping close to heel, as befitted an elderly dog. These small, unobtrusive benefactions had come to be part of his nature, and he derived a curious inward warmth from them.

They went briskly up through the twisted, hilly streets of Bradford, and, seeing that the town was only some one-sixth of its present size in those days, quickly reached its outskirts. Tom viewed the valley slopes beyond with an appreciative eye. What splendid sites were here for mills and dwelling-houses! It is a matter of history that largely owing to his energy during the next half-century, masonry covered the whole of this district; and Tom was shrewd enough to buy up land, and resell at thumping profits.

But as he walked then, his position was lowly, his capital small, and his schemes correspondingly humble. He had given up successively the trades of collier and vagrant poacher, had entered the manufacturing life of the town in its lowest grades, and had learned very thoroughly all that was then to be taught of spinning, weaving, combing, and had obtained a shrewd insight into wool-sorting, dyeing, and machine-making. He had come equipped to his task with magnificent health, a body that required only four hours' sleep out of the twenty-four, an abnormally useful memory, and an ambition without any limits to it whatever. And so at an age when other young men are just idling through their first year at Cambridge, this Thompson had got the trade of the worsted district at his fingers' ends. He had a great idea of making money, and making lots of it; but at the same time he kept very closely in touch with those two other great interests—the capture of game and the cultivation of music.

Tom walked on, enjoying the air, enjoying his thoughts. Clara for the most part puttered steadily along at his heels, to all appearance with no further thought than to follow abjectly. But it is probable that her mind also had its activity, for twice (when they had left the region of houses) she made sudden excursions away from the path, and each time returned unostentatiously with a rabbit. Tom received these gifts with scanty thanks, because the animals did

not happen to be plump. He had a great taste for having the finest of everything. But Clara, in spite of her years and experience, could not be taught to differentiate between a fat rabbit and a lean one.

So in time they came out on to the moorland, and once amongst the heather this scheming, dreaming Thompson became the many-eyed and alert poacher. Grouse on their native heath are the most invisible of birds, as many a shooting man will proclaim; but there are here and there rare fellows who by custom and talent can pick out the comely brown creatures with surprising nimbleness, and can, moreover, approach them so delicately that they will not fly, but merely run cowering a few yards away amongst the heather-stems, crouch in the new cover, and presently return to the old one. A dozen times Tom drove single birds or a brood in this fashion, and to his pride never flushed them once. He took his observations of the places from which they had moved, and in ten of them decided that the birds would return, and so set snares of brass wire for their reception. Clara showed her well-preserved teeth in a smile as she watched.

He was poaching for no profit then, and so had no need of nets. He wanted a few brace only, and so he chose this more difficult way from the sheer delight at pitting his own skill and wit against the knowledge of the grouse.

Tom set no more snares after the ten had been twisted on to the heather-stems, but made his way over one of the knolls of the moor to a shallow dingle which was heaped with great grey boulders of sandstone. He trod always with a view of leaving behind him no readable tracks, but this caused him no conscious thought. He had reduced the art of stepping invisibly to an instinct, and so did it automatically.

At a place where three great slabs of sandstone lay heaped together he stopped, and laid hands upon a small boulder which was apparently bedded in black peat. It swung out easily to his pull, as a door swings, and behind it was a tunnel. Clara slipped in first, to make sure the place was clear, and then Tom squeezed through and lugged the stone into place. He had been at much pains to arrange the easy poise of that entrance-stone. He crouched along for half a dozen yards, and then stood up, took flint, steel, and tinder from his pocket, and presently had his residence lit by a rushlight.

The sloping grey stone slabs formed the sides and roof, and for bed and carpet there was bracken and springy heather. To a jutting stick hung three brace of grouse in various stages of maturity; against one wall was stocked a crisp brown heap of peats. But day still rode in the sky outside, and though in those times the moors were not watched with that attention they receive now, Tom did not brazenly light his fire and send forth smoke as advertisement of his trespass. He waited for nightfall for that, and in the meanwhile got out his fiddle, put on the mute, and set to work to enjoy himself.

He had got written music to play from now. There were dealers in Bradford in those days who bought copies and duplicated them (in defiance of copyright laws) with their own pens at a halfpenny a sheet. There was a large sale for these, for all the townspeople, even down to the humblest of the working classes, were musical, and they were passed on as a sort of depreciating currency. If griminess was no object, you could get them as low as seven sheets for a penny at third or fourth hand. But Tom always got his music new, and paid the full halfpenny. Music and gifts were two great joys of his life, and his two extravagances.

At the same time he had an appetite for living well. In Bradford at that period—which was before the era of herrings and tea—the working man lived chiefly on oatmeal porridge, and if you had told him at the end of the century his descendants would be grumbling over daily meals of meat, he would have called you a liar. But Mr Thomas Thompson never fancied himself on this exclusively vegetarian diet. He worked better, he thought better, and more relishing music came to him on higher fare; and as a consequence he saw that he got it.

In this residence, which his troglodytic tastes had made him construct on the moor, he lit a generous fire of peat as soon as night fell, and proceeded to prepare a meal. The primitive cookery of working-class Bradford contained nothing in its principles to meet a case like this, and, as in other things, he used a plan which experience and his own invention had taught him. He plucked and drew three plump young grouse. From one he cut the meat, mincing it fine, and associating with it an equal bulk of bacon. With this mixture he stuffed the other two birds, closing the gaps with wooden pins. Then he took clay, kneaded it soft with bilberry juice, and with this paste luted the birds all over with fastidious care. And finally he dug away the glowing peats from the hearth, clapped in the clay-covered corpses, heaped high the embers over them, and applied himself once more to his fiddle till they should be cooked.

In due season the roast was complete. He raked away the glowing peats and pulled the birds towards him. The baked clay came from them as cleanly as the shell leaves a hard-boiled egg. They were brown, hot, and deliciously juicy. They were tender to a fault. They had been hung the exact number of days to bring out their most exquisite flavour, and Tom said his grace before eating, and meant every word of it. It is worth while at times to whet your appetite with hard work and long hours and plain living, if you have a feast like this to save up for. He was always grateful afterwards that the interruption did not come till he had finished his meal.

It was Clara who gave the first alarm of danger. Clara, who had been lying as near the fire as any dog could lie without getting actually singed, got up, and stood on stiff legs, and bristled. She did not growl; she was a dog who had

always been associated with the poaching business, and knew how golden was silence; but she looked round to make sure Tom had noticed her, and then worked with her mottled nose in the air to make further investigation.

Tom jumped to his feet and took out the turf plug from a reconnoitring place. He had three of these posts of observation, and he plugged each carefully after use. It was the third look which showed him Hophni Asquith with two policemen and a keeper searching about for a way into his stronghold.

Now Tom, like a rabbit, had more than one bolting-hole, and at first he was minded to make a run for it. But on second thoughts he refrained from this. Even if his face were not viewed, he was quite certain that Hophni would swear to him. And besides, the keeper carried a gun. He was prepared to risk a charge of shot himself, but he knew that the first barrel would be given to Clara, and if Clara were killed, he was quite certain that he would turn and tear the throat out of somebody.

Still, he was by no means contemplating surrender; he had yet another alternative. At one point in the floor, under the carpet of heather, was a large flat slab of stone. He got his fingers under this and lifted. It came up easily enough; like the entrance blocks, it had been carefully poised. Underneath was a hollow about the size and shape of a grave for two. Into this Tom descended, with the fiddle-case and Clara, and the slab of sandstone clapped down into place above them.

Almost simultaneously the raiders found an entrance, and at first seemed unwilling to trust themselves in the uncanny gloom inside. They shouted for Tom to deliver himself up to justice, telling him that all was now discovered, and it would be much best to come peaceably.

As they got no reply to this courteous invitation they became more peremptory, and snarled threats; and presently the keeper, with the remark that there was “no dang use talking,” shoved his gun-muzzle in through the opening, and followed it with a rush. His comments on finding the nest warm and empty were forcible.

To him came Hophni Asquith and a policeman, peering about them curiously.

“I knew I was right,” said the manufacturer. “I felt sure that this was the place where I marked him down.”

“That’s no evidence of poaching,” said the policeman.

“T’beggar’s got two brace of my birds here, and Lord only knows how many more he’s etten.”

“There’s no evidence who took ’em,” said Robert.

“I nobbut wish we could ha’ copped t’beggar. The way my grouse has been going this last year has been simply Hades. The fashion he can set snares beats

anything you ever saw. I should walk into them mysen if I was a bird. He must ha' been living on grouse, and no trouble either, except just gathering them. Ye must work very short time at yar miln, mister, for him to get up here so often."

"Thompson's never done a short day since he's been with me. But then that wouldn't interfere with his getting out on to the moor here. I don't believe he ever sleeps. He's the most restless man in Bradford. Too restless for my taste."

"So it seems," sneered the keeper, with all the clean-handed man's contempt for the informer. "Well, mister, I don't know what for ye wanted him locked up out of the way, but I wish you success wi' your dirty job. I've got to stop him poaching, choose 'ow; and if I cannot get him gaoled and out of the way, I must ax t'maister if he willn't let me tak' him on as underkeeper."

"I thought you said you didn't know the chap," said the policeman.

"Neither I do. I've never so much as clapped eyes on his coit-tails, far less his face. But I've seen his work, and I've seen my birds go, and that's enough for me. Here, come out of this, and let's be getting home to we'r suppers."

They left then, and promptly Tom disentangled himself. He was angry, of course, at having to abandon his country house, but not especially angry with Hophni. It was all in the game. Only he rather blamed himself for underrating Hophni's cleverness. He had judged the man to have no eye for anything but business—to be wholly wrapped up in money-getting. From the puny mill-hand of a few years back Hophni Asquith had already raised himself to be a manufacturer; and though Tom admired the feat, until now he had always rather distrusted the cleverness that brought it about, as being too much on a single string. The additional power shown in tracking him to his lair on the moor exhibited Hophni in a new light; here was a fellow of resource; and Tom quickly decided that the fortunes of Hophni Asquith should, to a certain extent, henceforward be advanced with his own. "I'll go into partnership with him," said Tom. "I didn't know he was worth it before. There's more behind that square red whisker than many folk would guess."

He knew of a concert-club meeting that night in Bradford where his fiddle would be welcomed, and when the coast was clear he set off for the town at a good sharp trot, with the fiddle-case under his arm and the ungainly Clara loping at his heels. Ahead of him the sky held the glow of blast-furnaces, so that a stranger might well have thought the town ablaze. But to Tom the spectacle was a normal one, and he gave it no consideration. Hophni Asquith, a patented loom, and a girl filled his thoughts to the brim and helped along his pace. He was always in hard training, and at go-as-you-please gaits could cover his easy six miles to the hour. Life for him was too short to allow leisure to move across any considerable distance at walking speed. And just now he was covering the ground even faster than usual.

He had an especial reason for wishing to visit the concert-club that evening. The girl of Hophni's fancy possessed a rather sweet soprano voice, and she would be there "singing the top line." Hophni would not be present. Hophni Asquith liked music well enough, but openly stated that he had no leisure to chuck away over its cultivation—business took up all his waking hours.

Tom came into the room when the concert was in full blast, tuned his fiddle, and singled out with his eye that Louisa, who was just then hesitating as to whether or not she should adopt the surname of Asquith. Their eyes kept in touch, and Louisa, presently understood that Tom had something to say to her alone, afterwards, and she signalled back that he might see her home. Tom had a very expressive eye when he chose, and, moreover, was very useful at picking up meanings from other people's eyes.

"It's mother that wants me to marry him," Louisa explained, when they were alone outside together, "and I'm beginning to think she's about right. I'm stalled o' being poor. Besides, I like him well enough."

"There's nothing comfortable about poverty," said Tom, "especially for a lass. Then you'd not marry Hophni at all if it wasn't for his brass?"

"I'd wait and think it over a bit longer," said Louisa drily.

Tom laughed.

"Oh, you needn't be so scornful, Tom. He knows quite well how I think about it. He dangled out his brass himself as a bait for me."

"Well, be sure it's there, dear, before you're wed."

"Is there owt wrong?"

"I can't say yet, but you'll see for yourself presently."

"How do you mean?"

"If you see the firm of Thompson and Asquith joined in partnership presently, that would be a sort of guarantee that I thought well of his chances."

"That would be good enough for me. But are you going to join him, Tom? Besides, will he have you? He's a master already: you are only a man."

"When I make up my mind to a thing, don't I generally do it?"

Louisa laughed. "They say so. I heard there was a lass said she was going to wed you the other day, and you said no, and I haven't heard yet that there's been a wedding."

Tom twisted his face. "You'll let that alone, my dear. You and I are very good friends, and I'm sure will always stay good friends if only we're conveniently forgetful of just a few things that are best forgotten. Now, here we are at the door. I'll not come in. And I should say you'll forget to tell your mother who's walked you home. Good night, dear."

"Good night, Tom."

Tom's evening peregrinations were still unfinished. He went into

unsavoury Silsbridge Lane, and walked briskly into the Bird o' Freedom public-house. The reeking bar-room was filled with Irish, two of them fighting. There were women in that gruesome company as well as men, many of them young women. But Tom had no truck with any of these. He asked one of the attendants, "Meeting still on?" and, being answered in the affirmative, made his way to a door which stood (as it were) half-way up the wall, at the head of a couple of steps.

A drunken Irish bricklayer put out a hand and collared him. "Here, my beauty, yez do not go up there till yez paid your footing."

Tom's sharp, quick blow, with eleven stone six at the end of it, was aimed at the angle of the petitioner's jaw, and that person was *hors de combat* for the rest of the evening. Tom always considered himself first, and just then he was in a hurry. Besides, he never had any sympathy with drunks. A gangway was made for him to the door; but before he reached it, a girl clasped her arms round his neck and kissed him hotly on the mouth. "Ye're a brute, lad, but I love tha' for it," she said; and Tom laughed and kissed her back, because she happened to be pretty. Then he opened the door and stepped up the stair.

It was before the legal days of trades unions then, and the men who were congregated in that upper chamber conducted themselves after the manner of a secret society. There was a guard at the door, armed with a flimsy sword to keep off intruders; there was a password and sign; and the room within aped to some degree the ritual of a Masonic lodge.

Tom's reception was not entirely cordial. There was a current of socialism in this assembly—though they didn't call it socialism then—and Tom was no socialist. He had not the slightest intention of slackening his own pace down to the level of that of the slowest and idlest, and said so openly. He intended to climb to the top, and to get there very soon, and everybody was free to know it; but at the same time, if his principles in this respect were repugnant, they fully appreciated his shrewdness and insight, and the balance there lay well in his favour.

When he entered the subject of a strike at Asquith's was being discussed with blunt freedom. It was the old tale, which has existed ever since labour first commenced. Expense of living was growing heavier, wages were getting less, and hours showed no tendency to decrease. Moreover, machines were improving, and to the uneducated alarmist it was plain that there would be less demand for labour presently, and the state of the working man and woman would grow steadily worse. A word-bubbling agitator pumped out his twisted arguments through the tobacco smoke, and the meeting rumbled comments of "Let's strike" at intervals.

Then an elderly hand-loom weaver uprose, and pressed for the old remedy of machine-breaking. He spoke with the dull violence of a ruined man who

sticks to an obsolete trade, and his wrongs had endowed him with a certain sledge-hammer eloquence. It was plain at once that he had a large following. Destruction and a riot were always popular cries at these assemblies, and thus are revolutions made. Those who did not assent were for the most part the cowards, and for their conversion cries of cowardice were freely levelled at them, as being the most likely taunt to stir their pluck.

The meeting, then, was in an unpromising temper when presently Tom was called upon for his views, and saw fit to give a flat defiance to everything which had been previously stated. He was no orator at that time, or at any other; he was not much more than a boy then, be it remembered; but he knew his own mind and he knew his own policy, and he stated both in lucid sentences. Others had cursed machinery, but he gave it his uncompromising blessing; others advocated restricted output, he was in favour of turning out every stitch that could be made—and finding good markets for it. "Hard work and good machinery," he said, "meant high wages." Hand-looms, he pointed out, were as dead as bows and arrows, and both nowadays were only fit for kindling-wood. But at that point the meeting refused to hear him further, and from the other side of the room an irritated hand-comber flung across at him a heavy pewter pot.

Now, one man with his bare arms cannot in an open room fight five-and-twenty, and Mr Thomas Thompson afterwards appreciated this and stored it amongst his axioms. But youth is warm-blooded, and Tom rather liked a turn-up. He returned the pewter to its owner with the full strength of his arm, and presently was the centrepiece of a very tolerable *mêlée*. It is a wonder that he did not get the life kicked out of him by angry clogs, for he was in an assembly where a vote of censure was frequently fatal; but activity and luck saved him from any extravagant injury, and though he did leave the room by the window instead of the door he reached the dirty street outside all in one piece, and presently was his own man again. An agitated Clara came up from somewhere to lick his hand.

Most men, after a hint like that, would have adjudged the neighbourhood unhealthy, and have retired from it with speed. But Tom was doggedly determined to get the information he came for. So at the risk of his life he crept back again, and found against the wall a fall-pipe by which he could climb up to the level of the meeting-room. He did not go up at once. As a preliminary, he picked up a stone and sent it neatly through one of the window-panes. Angry men came out to catch the aggressor, and Tom retired for a space whilst they blew off their temper. But when the coast was clear back he came again, and, leaving Clara as a sentry at the foot of the fall-pipe, shinned up, took a lodging on the window-sill, and listened to the balance of the proceedings through the gap. By the time he came down again, and departed towards the

house where he had a lodging, he had got the information he needed.

There was battle, riot, and revolution mapped out for the future, but Tom did not lose any sleep that night through thinking of them. He had made his plans, and the matter was dismissed from his mind till the time came for them to mature. In the meanwhile there was leisure. So next morning he engaged himself as a striker at a millwright's, with the idea of getting some practical knowledge of forging and fitting, and in the evenings he learned the mother tongue of a German clerk who shared his lodging. The German was very content to take his fee in kind, and Tom fed him royally on rabbits and game, which he and Clara went out two evenings a week to collect by way of exercise and diversion.

It was two months after that meeting of the conspirators at the Bird o' Freedom that the climax was reached. The machine-makers at Keighley had finished the new looms, and they were duly set up in Hophni Asquith's weaving-shed. The ingenuity of them was plain for anyone to see. As compared with the old looms, with the same amount of over-looking, they would add thirty per cent. to the output, and would probably double it. Mr Asquith announced a diminution in piecework wages, and invited his hands to attend to their duties as formerly. He pointed out very sensibly that he was not proposing to pay them less on the week; he was only readjusting the scale to changed circumstances.

Promptly the political economists of the Bird o' Freedom uttered their howl against over-production. For Hophni's hands the case needed little argument after that. If gentlemen who could earn beer merely from their knowledge of finance and economics recommended a strike, it stood to reason that their advice was good. The *Spectator*, a local paper which was always against any form of government whatever, hounded them on. And so out on strike they came, breaking the mill windows behind them as an announcement of the fact.

Hophni Asquith lived in the mill those days, armed somewhat tremulously with a horse-pistol, which he pointed at visitors. The flesh had sunk underneath the clean line of his red whiskers, outlining the jaw in hard, white relief. He victualled himself on biscuits and tea. When he slept, it was in a hard Windsor chair in the office. His bravery in doing this approached the heroic. He knew that the strikers would stick at little, and that any night a force of them might turn up to wreck the mill or set it alight, and leave him to fry on a grill of smashed machinery. Constitutionally he was a timid man, born of an ill-nourished stock and physically feeble. Every clog that clattered down the paved street without sent him into a sweat of fear. But—he stuck to his mill. He had built up the business in an incredibly short time by sheer industry and cleverness. He knew full well the devils of poverty from which he had arisen.

He had tasted the keen delights of handling money, and the power that money gives, and he lusted with all the force of his nature for more. There was another impulse which drove him, but he did not know it then. If he had been forced to make confession at that date, he would have said that it was money and his mill that alone he would fight for.

To this unpromising person then came Thomas Thompson, with a mongrel she-dog at his heels, and bluntly proposed partnership. “And for Heaven’s sake put down that pistol, man!” said Tom, squinting down at a bell-muzzle that wavered against his chest. “Fit a new flint to it if you want the thing to go off. Or, better still, chuck that on the scrap-heap, and buy a new one with percussion lock. I should have thought you’d learned by this, Hophni, that old machinery is not profitable—not even gun machinery.”

Hophni ordered him off the place promptly enough, but the burly Tom pushed inside and sat himself in an office chair. “They’ll be here to wreck the mill for you to-night and smash every loom in the shed. How does that new loom of mine frame, Hophni? I haven’t commenced an action against you for infringement yet. It didn’t seem worth while. It looks as if you’ll either have to give me a partnership, or see those new looms smashed i’ bits.”

“So you’ve set them on to wreck the place.”

“Nay, lad, but I’ve not. I tried to put in my bit of advice at the Bird o’ Freedom, and they threw me out—threw me through the window, for the matter of that. But I’ve made it my business to find out what goes on at the meeting, and here’s the news.”

“I shall go to the police for protection. I shall demand to have the soldiers out.”

“Yes, you’re likely to get that. With the *Spectator* squawking for liberty of speech and freedom for the individual, you’re likely to get a Bradford magistrate to order guns and cutlasses to be used upon the sovereign people in their legitimate agitation against a merciless employer!”

Hophni recognized the quotation, and cursed the *Bradford Spectator*.

Tom laughed. “So much for your loyalty, lad. You swear by that paper most times. It’s your own way of thinking in everything that does not touch your own individual pocket.”

“If there’s no way of saving the mill, I shall have to file my petition, that’s all. But I shall start again. Every one will know why I failed, and it’ll do little harm to my credit. Besides——”

“You’ve got some brass put away in a stocking, that the creditors will not lay hands on? Well, maybe. But from all accounts you’re not overly liked, Hophni, and I should say they’ll squeeze you pretty tight once you’re down, and see that you don’t get your discharge in a hurry. Much better not to go into bankruptcy at all.”

“You seem to think you could keep me out?”

“Oh, I don’t think; I know.”

“Come now, I don’t mind admitting that I’m pushed pretty hard just now, Tom. If you’ve got a way of getting over this trouble with the hands, and setting the mill agate running once more, I’ll do the handsome thing by you. Come, lad, you like brass: you’ve said so. I’ll give you twenty pound.”

“Now, once for all, Hophni, what I’ll take for the job is a half-partnership, and no less. It isn’t much to ask: the mill you rent, the machinery you paid for in bills at six months, and most of your other assets are liabilities; but I offer you that bargain because I think you really mean getting ahead, lad, choose ’ow.”

“Oh, you’ve discovered that, have you?”

“If you want to know when, it was that day you sent keeper and Robert on me and Clara on t’moor. It was you that followed us there. I hadn’t given you credit for so much cleverness outside your own narrow little line, Hophni. Look here. I know Bradford manufacturing trade as well as you do yourself, and all the other trades of this district a sight better. You’d better have me with you now than against you afterwards.”

“You don’t get a share of a business like this that way, my lad.”

“A business like this? Poof! I shall have a concern as big as this running just for the export trade to Germany a year after I’ve begun.”

“Germany! What do you know about Germany? Cats and dogs and poaching I believe you understand, but dress goods for Germany!”

“I’ve been lodging with a German for three months and better. I’ve a memory, like you know, and he’s been learning me the language. I can talk German to that chap now as easy as I can talk good plain Yorkshire to you.”

Hophni was obviously struck with this, but he pulled back his interest with an effort of temper. “Be done with your talk and get outside this mill. A workman you are, and a workman you’ll remain, unless you make your way up by degrees from the bottom, like your betters did before you. Away with you now, and let’s hear no more of this.”

Tom got up, stretched good-humouredly, and scratched Clara’s head with an affectionate forefinger. “All right, Hophni, but don’t forget I’ve given you the offer. I said I would, and now I may as well tell her you prefer to be banked to having anything to do with me.”

“Tell her? Tell who?”

“Louisa. Why, who did you think?”

Hophni Asquith’s white face got if anything still whiter. “What have you been doing with her?”

“Oh, I’ve known the lass ever since she was as high as a bobbin skep.”

“Is there—is there anything between you, then?”

"We're very good friends, that's all, and I'd like to see her well wed."

Hophni moistened his lips. "You know I've asked her, then?"

"Who doesn't?"

"I'd be a good husband to her. I'd let her spend t'brass. I care for her more than you'd think, Tom. And I know how she is to me. But I don't mind about that. It would all come right once we were wed."

"Don't see how you could well marry just after you'd filed your petition."

"No."

"And you know best whether she'd wait for you."

Hophni dropped his ghastly face into his hands. He did not say anything. He did not even groan. But Tom saw that he appreciated the full hardness of the difficulty.

Tom let fall a hand lightly on to his shoulder. "Why fail at all, lad?"

"I mustn't; I daren't. I'd lose her if I did, and I can't do that. Tom lad, but you don't know what that lass is to me. You're all smiles and jokes and laughs with all the women, but you don't care a rap for one of them yet. One day you will, and then you'll understand. Ay, whether t'lass cares for you or not, you'll know how it fair tears t'heart out of you to think of losing her."

He turned to the desk, picked up pen and paper, and wrote furiously. "Here's the partnership for you. You'll want it in writing, I suppose; and if you get me through this trouble we can have it set out all legal and fair later on. And if we do not it will be so much waste paper, for the business will be gone, and Louisa will be gone—and I don't blame her—and I shall try the Colonies. Now let's hear your plan."

"Well, we'd better doff our coats and be up and moving. There's too much time slipped by with talking already."

They toiled then with skilled fingers and frenzied energy. Night had fallen, black and moonless, and they carried lanterns to light them at their work. In the mill-yard a glow of lit fires came from the boiler-house, and from the top of the lofty stack smoke rolled forth in lavish billows.

The rioters did not come to their work cold-blooded. They had warmed themselves first with the beverages sold at the Bird o' Freedom, and also with the fervid eloquence of an article in that morning's *Spectator*; and when at last, to the music of the Marseillaise as delivered from a battery of concertinas, they formed up into a solid regiment in the street, they were ripe for any mischief, and had the pleasant comfort of numbers.

The mill, after the architecture of those days, which paid little heed to light and ventilation, was already something of a fortress. On three sides it was built in with houses: only the fourth side, which flanked the street, remained to be defended. Here the point of attack was really confined to a massive gateway, wide enough for a pair of wheels. Windows there were, to be sure, on the

ground floor, but the glass in these had been smashed at the first outbreak of the strike, and staunch iron bars kept out the human invader. They builded strongly in such matters in the fifties.

The attacking force knew all this quite well, but they had confidence in their weight and numbers. The big gates were comparatively flimsy, and once these were down, they surely could rush through in the face of any opposition, and do their work with thoroughness. So they marched on vaingloriously, singing their anthem with fine musical effect.

As they drew nearer, the faint, laundry-like smell of wet steam met them, and some began to sniff curiously. It could only come from Asquith's mill, and the boiler fires there had been drawn ever since the beginning of the strike. When the next angle of the street showed them that the gates were open, and in place of darkness there was a good healthy glow of a bonfire, they began to suspect that there was some trap laid here. But though the song stopped, the rioters did not. The front ranks certainly did see the prudence of halting for a reconnaissance, but those behind pressed on without consulting their convenience. A *Spectator* reporter in front loudly complained of the lawlessness of mobs.

They surged round the front of the gateway, and there in the light of the fire another surprise was dished up for them. Instead of the slender, white-faced Asquith, whom they detested, there was that burly young Thompson, whom most of them knew and many of them liked. Beside him was an ugly, powerful-looking mongrel dog. The apparatus in front of him, gently leaking grey pencils of steam from many ill-made joints, needed no explanation to them. They worked for their living in the near neighbourhood of steam every day, and they fell instinctively to criticizing the hasty workmanship of the men who had uncoupled the main steam-pipe from the engines of Hophni's mill, and led it direct from the boilers to this horrible sprinkler contrivance which threatened the doorway.

Nothing was said. They stood there in the glare of the bonfire, swaying, muttering, and beginning to fear, and then from somewhere amongst their feet a little black kitten ran out, mewing with fright, right into the open before the steam-pipe.

Tom saw it too, and snapped his fingers alluringly. The black kitten, with a kitten's instinct, recognized a friend and capered lumberingly up. Tom stretched out a dirty, gentle hand and gathered it in. For a moment or two he stroked the kitten into confidence again, then, turning, pitched it deftly out of harm's way through the open doorway of the mill behind him. After which he turned again, and put hands on the throttle-valve of the murderous steam-pipe in front of him.

Then he laughed and said, "Now, what do you chaps think you're going to

do with my mill?"

A hundred angry voices, glad at having the chance of speech, howled back the answer, "Asquith's mill."

Tom waited for silence again, and when they had bawled themselves out, "Partly Asquith's, of course," said he, "because Asquith still retains an interest, but partly mine. In fact, you might say it belongs to each of us, because I've bargained for a half-partnership. Now, what you intended to do with Mr Asquith's mill property does not concern me. But it seems to me that some of you there look as if you want to spoil property that's mine. Well, lads, when I get my fingers into a pie it's going to be my pie, and if anybody tries to take it away from me they'll get hurt. See that?"

He delivered this speech in the full breadth of the vernacular and with a smiling face. But the big, dogged jaw of him, and the knowledge that those scalding steam jets would instantly play on them if the throttle were opened, stopped any attempt at a rush by those in front. There were other orators, though, in the snug security of rear ranks, who were by no means satisfied by this brusque change of front. "What abaht t'new looms?" they shouted. "Will ye promise to brak t'new looms?"

"Certainly I will not," said Tom. "I'll even promise you to double the number of them within six months' time. And because why? Because those new looms have come to stay. If they were not used here, they would be used at Halifax and the other towns, and the trade would follow them and leave Bradford. I don't choose that that should be so. I'm going to run them here, and if I can't get hands from Bradford, I'm going to bring them in from Halifax—yes, or from France; and if necessary I will lodge them in the mill and give them guns to keep out interferers. And do you know what else I'm going to have with my workpeople here? I'm going to have none but first-class weavers, and I'm going to have none that don't want to earn high wages. Bradford weavers have been content to earn from eight to ten shillings a week up to now. I've been a workman all my life, at one trade or another, and I know."

"Yes, that's true enough."

"Well, a weaver that can't earn eighteen to twenty shillings in Thompson and Asquith's shed won't be asked to stay."

"Tha'rt bahn to revise t'wages?"

"Certainly we are. The new loom will turn out double quantity if it's properly worked, and there'll be just one weaver in the gait between each pair of looms. If that does not mean four times the old output, I'm no scholar. You needn't let those Bird o' Freedom chaps squawk to you about 'over-production.' Knock off their beer, and let them produce a bit of something more solid than talk themselves for a change. I'll sell the stuff. Half the

markets haven't been touched by Bradford goods so far, and the other half haven't been given what they want."

There is nothing so hysterical as a crowd. A girl plucked the shawl from over her head and waved it in the air. "By goy, Tom," she shrilled, "I'll work for tha', lad," and promptly a score of others joined in the cry. The mob-leaders in front were quick to catch the changed humour of their following. They began to edge away out of the firelight, lest they should be recognized and remembered to their future detriment. Presently, "It's late; let's be getting home," was the suggestion that was being passed about; and from out of the flickering light of the bonfire they dissolved away, till the last *rat-tattle* of the clogs faded in the distance. Clara, the unbeautiful, lifted up her mouth and yawned elaborately, and the black kitten came out from the mill door and rubbed her head against Tom's boot.

Tom caught the infection from Clara and yawned also. "Hophni," he said, "you may leave tending that fire and shut the gates. The strike's dead. It'll take t'engineer all to-morrow to get the boiler coupled on again. There are few men in Bradford that can work on steam-pipes as you and I have done this last few hours. I'll sleep with you in t'office after I've washed me. You haven't a spare pair of trousers you could lend me? These are fair ruined with that white lead, and I hate being filthy."

"No, I haven't," said Hophni wearily, "and if the only cash outlay you make for your partnership is a pair of trousers you're getting it cheap."

Tom laughed. "I like a bargain, lad. But as the bargain's driven now, I don't mind giving you a bit back. I'll come in handsome for a wedding present for Louisa when you marry her."

CHAPTER III
THE PHILANTHROPIST

Now in all Bradford there was no keener man of business than the young Mr Thomas Thompson, of the growing firm of Thompson and Asquith, manufacturers, and though he was very generous also with his money, that side of his character was often overlooked, because it was his habit to do all his benefactions on the quiet. He was popular in the town, undeniably popular, even with those who got the worst half of a deal with him. He was well set up and good-looking, and this goes a long way; he was sprucely dressed—and clothes have more to answer for than many people think; and he exuded good humour, which is always a pleasant atmosphere to share, whether you are paying for its presence or not. But in a town and at a time where hard bargain-driving was the rule, Tom established at a very early age the reputation of being one of the shrewdest of the community. There was a saying in currency that if T. Thompson sold you anything for a shilling, he had always fobbed sixpence profit over the transaction.

Still, being an eminently successful man, he was, of course, not without his enemies; and, although he was not a fellow easily ruffled, it is placed on record that in one or two places he was a pretty sturdy hater himself. The strongest of all his antipathies was against Mr Fletcher Bentley. I think it was the result of two very dissimilar natures grinding together. They saw much of one another. They did business together four times a week, and on each occasion warmed up their mutual dislike. Bentley was a merchant, and bought the class of goods which Thompson and Asquith manufactured, and none of the three of them were men to let a private enmity stand in the way of commerce. As Tom said, he would sell pieces to the devil himself if that wicked gentleman happened to be a stuff merchant, and he would guarantee to produce fancy worsteds suitable for the most tropical of climates. He would mention this as a parallel when people wondered at his booking orders from Bentley.

Fletcher Bentley always finished up a conversation with Tom by inquiring, “How’s coals?” He was a man of fifty, and his father had been a yeoman farmer, and so he could trace back his pedigree, and felt himself to be a person of family. It always pleased him to gibe at Tom’s early career of collier on Dudley Hill.

Tom would take this pleasantly and make a suitable reply. It never occurred to him to be ashamed of his origin, any more than it occurred to him to doubt his final ascension to the House of Lords. And presently, “Oh, by the

way, Mr Bentley," he would say, "they tell me you have really made up your mind this year to subscribe a guinea to the infirmary." Upon which Bentley would pull at his pointed ears and retire in a snarling fury. He was a man who had worked hard to earn money and comforts for himself, and he had a theory that those who did not work equally hard, and who did not earn money, should suffer for their own neglect. He held that to give anything in charity was to pauperize the masses, than which no greater sin could be committed. Still, he objected to being sneered at and called a mean skinflint. He was not a man who courted popularity; indeed, he took rather a melancholy pride in being solitary and isolated; but he had his vanity for all that, and a cry of niggardliness always caught him on a raw nerve.

Fletcher Bentley was unmarried, and had no relatives with whom he was on speaking terms. His one human hobby was the collection of books. He was no reader, but he was a connoisseur of editions and bindings, and built wing after wing on to his library, and derived dusty ecstasies from seeing the new shelves stretch out and fill. But this was only for evening's relaxation. On six days of the week he toiled in his office in Bradford. On the seventh, after chapel, he drove out to the farm beyond Bingley that had been his father's, and walked round it with the foreman. He gave no orders then, being a great stickler for the sanctity of the Sabbath; but when he got back to his office on Monday it was his custom to dictate a long letter of instructions to the foreman. He farmed, as he did everything, successfully. He put no sentiment into it; he simply ran the land, as he did his warehouse, to make money; and he did not care a rap from whose pocket it came, so long as the coins finally arrived in his own palm.

It occurred to him one day that the shooting rights of this farm had a value, and that afternoon, after making a purchase of fancy worsted coatings from Tom, he asked him if he knew of a customer for the hares.

"I'd take the place myself if it was worth anything," said Tom, "but I don't think there'll be much game there. It's never been preserved, and those Bingley chaps are rare poachers."

"I can tell you, Thompson, that no poacher ever sets foot on my land. The game's my property, just as much as the cattle and the other stock, and my foreman out there watches cleverly that it's not meddled with."

"He must be a remarkably capable man, then, that foreman."

"He is. Well, just think over the offer, and if you like go and see the ground for yourself. There's no hurry about deciding at once. I'll keep the offer open for a month."

Tom could afford to take shootings of his own by this time, and had a moor and some low ground, but the sport was tame compared with what he had been accustomed to. On his own territory he had only to pit his wit against that of

the game. As a poacher, the sport had been sharpened by its loneliness, and by the constant need of circumventing the keeper. It was poaching that first taught him his splendid self-reliance, and to poaching he periodically returned to keep this self-reliance acute and in practice.

As it happened, when he got back to the mill, his partner, Hophni Asquith, once more brought the subject of Mr Fletcher Bentley into the foreground. He pointed out that that eminent merchant had again claimed two and a half per cent. for shortages on the last lot of pieces they had delivered to him.

Hophni had developed into a mere creature of routine, and Tom found him a very convenient partner. He, Tom, was quite able and willing to introduce all the dash and push and invention that the firm had any use for, and, moreover, he was an excellent salesman, neither wasting his own time nor that of the purchaser, and possessing that knack for extracting high prices from a customer which is born in a man and cannot be obtained by mere greed and education. He was a fellow of infinite endurance, and could, when necessary, work for forty-eight hours on end. But he had a hankering for the open air. He could always drive a better bargain in the street than he could in the stuffy atmosphere of an office. His best ideas for new patterns of cloth and new arrangements of machinery always came to him when he was tickling for trout under the bank of some lonely stream, or when he was setting snares for grouse amongst the heather of some wind-swept moor. He was very much primitive man, and he worked best and most brilliantly without too many trammels of civilization.

The pale, slight Hophni, with his square-cut red whisker, on the other hand, seemed made for indoor employment. He loved the smell of ink, and the rattle of looms was music to him. Both whispered to him of money. Money and his wife were the only things he really cared about, for although he made a great show of attachment for the chapel, he really looked upon that institution only as an aid to business. He had only one extravagance: every hundred pounds he could spare was sunk in diamonds for Madam Louisa, his wife. Prosperous Bradford ran rather violently to diamonds in those days, and it was Hophni's ambition that one day, at some civic function, he should see Louisa standing amongst her peers, and carrying upon her person in open view a good half-pint more gems than any of them.

"It's very annoying," said Hophni, "these continual reductions that Bentley makes. They cut into profits more than I like. But I suppose we shall have to put up with them. He's too good a customer to offend."

"We'll not lose him," said Tom, marching up and down the narrow private office floor. "I'd not lose Old Nick as a customer, once I'd got him on the books. But if Mr Fletch has been robbing us I'm going to let him see that we know it, and take the change out of him somehow."

"You'd better be careful. It won't do to offend him."

"Offend your grandmother! He can't hate me personally any more than he does at present. Has the taker-in measured off those pieces we send out to Bentley's to-day?"

Hophni handed over the figures on a sheet of paper.

"Right. Now just put that in the safe and make out another, giving three yards more measure to each piece."

"But he'll fly up terribly, lad, if we invoice——"

"Just think a minute. Do you imagine I don't see my way pretty clear to something?"

Hophni Asquith left off pulling at his square red whisker, and wrote the paper out afresh, stating the length of each piece as three yards more than it really measured. He still did not see how the manœuvre would profit them; but Tom evidently did, and he had a profound confidence in Tom's ingenuity and invention from previous sampling. The which mood was what the sturdy Mr Thompson liked. He disapproved of too many inquiries. In fact, he was a trifle too masterful in this respect to quite suit everybody's taste.

However, by degrees Hophni appreciated the details of the plot. Mr Fletcher Bentley, as usual when the time came for payment, knocked off some two and a half per cent. for shortages, and Tom's dogged jaw began to show itself with rather unpleasant prominence. He put on a hat and buttoned his coat. "Trapped the old fox fairly this time," he said, with grim approval. "I'll go round and talk to him about his morals."

Tom walked abruptly into Mr Bentley's office and nodded a dry greeting. "I've come," he said, "about those shortages you complain of. We don't agree with you in the amount of these shortages."

Mr Fletcher Bentley began to pull at his pointed, satyr-like ears. "Then I can leave off buying from you if you don't like my terms."

"Nothing of the kind. You are useful to us. But I want you to keep your bare word and be decently honest, that's all."

For a mere manufacturer to speak to a merchant in this style was nothing short of rank blasphemy, and Tom knew it.

Bentley waved his hand. "There's the door, Mr Thompson."

Tom's big jaw stuck out till it became an absolute deformity. "If I go out of here now I walk straight on 'Change and lay the grounds for a libel action which you'll have to bring against me, whether you like it or not. You'd better own up at once."

"I've nothing further to say to you. The shortages claimed were exactly as they existed. I can't show you the pieces, because, of course, they have gone on to customers."

"Naturally, they would do. Who measured the pieces?"

"The taker-in."

"Will you let me see his book?"

"I don't see why I should, but I am willing to satisfy you in everything reasonable. Afterwards, I shall make your bit of a firm smart for this impertinence. I've a considerable amount of influence amongst Bradford merchants."

"Oh, we won't discuss pains and penalties for just another minute."

A man came through the door, dressed in a long chequered brat. He was the taker-in.

"Was it you measured these pieces?"

The man looked at his employer, got a nod, and said "Ay."

"And you measured them accurately? You measured this piece, for instance, number thirteen-ought-forty-three, accurately?"

"Ay."

"And found it to contain fourteen yards and nine inches?"

"If that's what I wrote, that's what it wor."

"Then, my man, you're just as big a liar as your master. The invoice we sent with those goods says thirteen-ought-forty-three was fifteen yards and thirty inches. But look here!" He pulled another sheet of paper from his pocket and slapped it on the desk. "That was the original invoice. We've long thought you were a pack of thieves here, and so we set a gin for you this time, and, by goy, you're well trapped. So that there shall be no mistake, we got in two independent witnesses, who measured the goods for themselves and signed this statement, as you see. Then we made out another statement, clapping three yards on to each piece. You didn't measure one of them. You simply made your own deduction, and Mr Fletcher sent a cheque, thinking he'd stolen two and a half per cent., as usual. Well, that cheque's cashed, and as we've been paid on two and a half yards per piece in excess of what was delivered, we'll call that quits on what we've been swindled out of in the past. But see that you don't do it again."

Mr Fletcher Bentley had sat through this harangue like a person on the verge of an epilepsy. That he, a man of birth, should be treated thus by a collier's whelp, was intolerable; that he, a highly respected merchant, should be brow-beaten by a mere manufacturer, was indecent. All his instincts were violently outraged—and yet—and yet, where lay his remedy? For the life of him he did not see one. He blustered and he fumed, but Tom had said his say and kept irritatingly cool. He appealed by look and word to the taker-in, but that co-culprit remained woodenly silent. He pulled at the tips of his ears till their high points grew purple, but even they gave him no inspiration. And so at length he fumed himself to a standstill.

"Now," said Tom, "as you've nothing more to say, I'll go. I suppose most

men who had caught you out like this would refuse to sell you another yard of stuff. We shall merchant all our own stuff presently. We've got a Chinese chop that in a year or two will be one of the biggest things in the Eastern trade. But for the present you are useful to us, and we shall go on selling to you. Indeed, I'm open to making a concession. I'll repeat your last order, if you like, at twopence a yard less."

"Very well," said Bentley, pulling himself up with an effort. "You can have it at that." He felt he must pocket his pride, and keep peace with this dangerous young man at any price. "But how can you do it at the lower figure?"

"Because I always charged you threepence a yard more than I took from others, to cover the loss caused by your little ways. But I think we understand one another better now. Bid ye good morning, Mr Bentley."

For Mr Bentley, so far as business was concerned, the rest of that day was ruined. He could not get his commercial balance again, and distrusted himself too much to give another order. He finally broke through his rigid rule and went home at four o'clock instead of six. A new parcel of books had arrived that morning, and he promised himself that in gloating over these, and fitting them to their shelves, he would forget Thompson's injurious treatment. But neither rare editions of uncut poems, nor the feel and the glitter of exquisite bindings gave him ease. Always before him floated a vision of a sturdy, handsome young man with a big, dogged jaw and a contemptuous voice. He had forebodings for the future. He felt convinced that he would try other falls with this Thompson and again get tripped. He saw no way of avoiding them. He had gone on too long with his peculiar methods to be able to alter them. He was fifty, and there are few men of fifty who can change from a groove, whether that groove be straight or crooked.

As for Tom, he tilted Mr Fletcher Bentley out of his thoughts the moment he left his office, and took up again the threads of his many other interests. He remembered him again for a moment when he reported his downfall to Hophni Asquith, and then removed his mind entirely from business of all description. He had a dinner-party afterwards, and he liked good dining and pretty women; a concert to follow that, and music was one of his great indulgences; then a couple of hours with a Belgian clerk whilst he hammered at colloquial French; and at half an hour after midnight he was free for the rest of the evening. He was never a man who took more than four hours of sleep, and the night outside invited him pleasantly. The smoke of the busy town had sunk, and a purple heaven overhead was picked out delicately with diamond star-points. He was always impatient of conventional walls at the tamest of times, and just then the house cramped him horribly.

The two dogs on the hearthrug seemed by their animal instinct to guess at

his longing and to share it. The younger one, Clara's Clara (who might by a stretch of courtesy have been called a lurcher), jumped about the room and whined and licked his hand. Clara the elder, a mottle-nosed mongrel of uncanny intelligence, laid herself against the door, and breathed luxuriously at the draught which came from beneath it. Tom laughed, and swung on his hat. Then, as the thought of the open warmed him, he went and changed his clothes. One cannot poach very decorously in the black of evening wear. "We'll make a night of it," he said to Clara, and tweaked one of her tattered ears. "You disreputable old person! you'll take good care I don't get too respectable whilst you are above the sod." The other dog rammed a strong, cold nose into his spare hand—"And your daughter's just as bad. I've got evil companions, and that's a fact—and I love 'em."

The streets outside were empty, the night air was cool and sweet, and the dogs made most efficient company. They passed to the outskirts of Bradford at a smart walk, and then Tom broke into a trot. "I don't wonder," he said to himself, "that men commit suicide if they live all their lives in towns and stew up in offices. Why do they do it? Just to make money? If they only knew the trick they'd make twice as much if they cleared their heads from all thoughts of it just now and again."

The dogs, with the poaching instinct strong in them, were for making excursions to this side of the road or to that whenever a rabbit tempted them. But Tom had a bit of coursing in view, and kept them strictly to heel. "We'll just see if Mr Fletcher Bentley's farm carries as many hares as he said it did, and we'll just taste the capabilities of that foreman he bragged about."

The night was bright overhead with moon and stars, and though thin blue mists hung in the valleys, and thickened some of the plantations, there was plenty of light for coursing. In the very first field the dogs got on to a hare, and away they went silently and swiftly. Clara's Clara had the speed. Clara's joints were stiffer with age, but her judgment was wonderful. Tom was in an ecstasy as he watched her. She hung well behind, seeming to make little exertion, but when the hare doubled, and Clara's Clara was thrown out, the artful Clara would always be in the act of cutting off the corner.

Finally, in one of these manœuvres the hare came straight into her jaws, and was duly accounted for by the time the younger dog arrived, and stood with heaving flanks and lolling tongue, looking both angry and foolish. Tom talked to them both, and the elderly Clara lifted an upper lip and showed a twinkle of well-kept teeth. She had an excellent sense of humour.

There was plenty of game, and course succeeded course. The moon died, and the stars closed out, and still the dogs found hare after hare, and coursed on, Tom aiding and abetting them. The sweet, clean morning smell of the meadows intoxicated him; the spice of lawlessness and danger thrilled him

through. Here was a life that was worth the living indeed!

But, keen though he made his look-out, Tom got tripped that morning from a quarter he little expected. He was watching for watchers from the farm; the most improbable coincidence of another practitioner also poaching the hares had not entered his calculations. Still, such was the person who accosted him, a big, straggling, red-haired man, who extracted himself from a convenient ditch, and brought with him a brindle greyhound on a slip.

"Mornin'," said this personage. "When I see thy dogs first of all I thought 'appen it was ode Fletcher himself or some of his friends he had sold a leave to, so I got me to cover. But when I see it was nobbut ye, Tom, I made out ye were having a bit of cheap sport, like mysel'."

Now, Tom was not uppish since he had made his way to prosperity; he was just as familiar as ever with his old friends, even though some of them worked for him, and, according to the habit of the country, he was much more frequently spoken of as Tom than as Mr Thompson. Moreover, he was generous, as a rule, and liked to share his pleasures and his successes with others. In one thing only was he selfish, and that was over his sport. On his own hired moor he asked other guns, but never went out with them. Sitting in a butt to shoot driven grouse did not attract him in the very least. He always shot over dogs himself, and invariably went alone. And, similarly, through all his poaching career he had always made his raids lone-handed. The absence of the rest of his species was the essence of his enjoyment.

"I'll run tha' a course or two, Tom—my dog agin orther o' thine, just for an odd pint."

"They'd be no use. They've only learnt to work alone. 'Twouldn't be fair on them to try. Besides, they've both about run their fill. I've gathered seven couple, and there's a tidy handful of hares they've missed, for all their cleverness."

"Always plenty hares on this ground if you don't work it too hard. I always think when I take one how Fletcher Bentley must have grudged that old hare her feed. I've worked for him as a warehouseman for seventeen year, and never heard that he'd so much as ever given away the value of a fill of 'bacca. Terrible keen chap, old Fletcher. He nearly copped me last Sunday afternoon, though. I was walking along t'road wi' t'dog here, when we saw an old hare setting just inside t'hedge, and ye know how it is, Tom, we was over and coursing her before you could think twice. We——"

" 'Sst!" said Tom, and effaced himself into the ditch. His two dogs came quickly afterwards, and the red-haired man with the brindled greyhound made no delay in following.

"Fletcher's foreman," whispered the red-haired man, with a grin. "He's bid him watch this ground carefully, because he wants to let t'shooting to thee.

The foreman told me hissen that Fletch had written that to him in a letter. Where did you hide yon sack of hares? Will he leet on it?"

"That's stowed away safe enough under a culvert. Come, we'd better move along, or we shall have that foreman stepping down on top of us." They made their way quickly and silently down the ditch with the ease of men well used to stalking. The two younger dogs, under the wise Clara's example, entered entirely into the spirit of the retreat, and slunk along with perfect noiselessness. At the end of this first ditch another opened out at right angles, and from this they reached a thick quickset hedge which ran down into a plantation. The grass here was gleaming with the morning dewdrops, and by no poachers' ingenuity could they avoid leaving tracks. However, there was no particular danger; the foreman had not got on to their trail so far, and, indeed, had shown no consciousness of their trespass; and, moreover, a road lay at the farther side of the plantation.

"I'm thinking a bit of a snack would not come amiss," said the red-haired man, when at last they stepped out of the trees. "It'll be getting on for five o'clock, and this keen air just after sun-up always gives me a bit of a twist. There's an old delf-'oil just down the ghyll yonder that's very quiet and comfortable; I shouldn't wonder but what we might find a sup o' ale under one of the stones."

"I've rare hunger on me too. Come along."

The red-haired man cached his hares, with the exception of one, in a rabbit-hole by the wayside, which was discreetly shaded by a clump of gorse, and then the pair of them got off the road into the stream-bed and made their way to the quarry.

At first there was no appearance of tenancy. The great pit was overgrown with bush and grass, and from the tints of its strata it was plain that stone had not been delved from there during a generation. But the red-haired man set his hands to the edge of a great flag and heaved it up, and displayed to view the wood ashes of many a fire. He rather stammered over admitting his tastes. "There's times comes to me," he said wistfully, "when I can't fancy my victuals under a roof. Sometimes it's i' rain, sometimes it's i' shine, but I always have to come here for my cure. I suppose there's nothing bonny about the place, but there's a rare nice smell comes from them pines round here, and for the rest, the tinkle of the ghyll makes plenty of company. I suppose I must be a bit soft i' my head to like things like these."

"I hope not," said Tom, "because I am very much that way myself."

"Well, I make you very welcome, then." He pulled from his pocket the carcass of the leveret, warm and limp, and threw it on the ground. "They tell me tha' can cook: here's meat. I'll gather wood and kindle t'fire."

Tom cleaned the leveret and spread it open. He crimped it delicately with

his knife, larding it with strips of liver. In the meanwhile the fire, under the red-haired man's tutelage, crackled merrily on the ash-heap, and burned off its smoke, and presently, on a greenwood grill, the barbecue was giving up a savoury incense such as Tom's soul loved.

"A fine fat 'un she was," said the red-haired man, watching the grill admiringly. "Hadn't time to get cold and tough, either, before we cooked her, so she'll be tender as though she'd been hanging a fortnight. I wish old Fletch could see us eating one of his hares that's lived on his land, and just feel that he's as good as giving it to us. It hurts Fletcher Bentley as much as having a tooth pulled to think of anybody getting something of his without paying brass for it." He went to another part of the quarry and upheaved another flag, beneath which a flat brown stone bottle lay neatly hidden. "Here's ale, lad. There's some that takes milk to their breakfasts, and some watter, and some tea, but give me some good, solid ale wi' some guts to it. There's my missis, now, she can't wash, so they say, and I know she can't weave, but she can bake and she can brew, and I wouldn't swap her for any other man's missis i' Bradford—no, not with a pound thrown in. And I've had offers too!"

They discussed these and similar domestic matters whilst the grill was preparing; ate, when it reached perfection, with gusto and appetite; drank up the home-brewed beer; and then sat back for a smoke.

"It's a queer thing about Fletcher Bentley," said the red-haired man, squinting at a glowing stick which he had clapped against the bowl of his pipe.

"Oh, let's drop him for a bit," said Tom, stretching luxuriously.

"That's more than he seems to do by you."

"Why, how do you mean?"

"I'm for ever hearing at the warehouse little games he's on against Thompson and Asquith."

"Well, Thompson and Asquith seem able to take care of themselves, and maybe can make him sit up a bit in return."

"I've heard tell ye never wanted for confidence in yourself, Tom, whether it was a dog fight ye were backing or a wool deal ye were thronged wi'. But ye'll get copped one of these days. Old Fletch is giving ye a heap more thought and attention than you think about. It's perhaps news to you that he's studying over you, Sundays?"

"Ah, is he?"

The red-haired man chuckled. "Perhaps you'll not know, but it's his habit to walk over his farm here, Sundays. Well, last Sunday as ever was, I found myself trying a course here as I been telling you. Dog had just run into t'hare, and I was taking her from him, when up comes Fletch on t'other side o' t'hedge, humming the Old Hundredth as melancholy as you please. I couldn't run, 'acause there was nowhere to run to. But there was a gate in the hedge just

beyond, and a bit of a brig in front of it, to carry a cart across t'dyke. Well, I claps mysen and t'dog under yon brig as quick as you could think, and I mind that there was a good sup o' watter there to keep us from getting warm and flustered.

"Well, thinks I, it's not for long. But wait a bit. Fletch comes nearer, and I heard him start the Old Hundredth a second time—'A-ll peo-ple that on ear-th do-oo dwe-ll'—and then there was a squeak of the gate as he leaned his arms on top rail. But he didn't come through. Be hanged if he didn't get out a pen and begin writing. I could hear the scratch of it, and you know he always carries an inkpot in his waistcoat pocket. Well, thinks I, if he's making poetry the Lord grant him quick inspiration, or I shall catch cramp and rheumatiz, cowered here in three feet of cold watter.

"But there was no hurry about Fletcher last Sunday afternoon. There was a fine sunshine, and he stayed to enjoy it. *Scratch-scratch* went his pen. *Drone-drone* went the Old Hundredth. And thinks I, he knows I'm below in t'watter here, and he's keeping me there out of sheer wickedness. That's where his humour comes in. Many a time I was for crawling out and taking what he chose to give me. But t'dog stood it without a whimper, and if a delicate dog like a greyhound could stay there, I wasn't going to be less of a man than dog was.

"However, at last the old man stalled of his job and went off, still *drone-droning* at his tune, and I crawled out, pretty near frozen stiff. I was fit to swear with aching, but I couldn't but laugh to think how he'd made me pay for that hare. On the grass of the brig below the gate were some crumpled-up bits of paper, and, thinks I (with the poetry still strong in my head), these'll be verses he's spoilt; and so I straightened them out to have a look at his style. But there was no poetry there. It seems he'd been only idling, and, so to speak, practising with his pen. He'd just been writing your name, Tom, and your firm's name, 'Thompson and Asquith,' over and over again. Not a bit like his usual writing, either—looked as if he'd been practising a new style of hand."

"Queer sort of amusement," said Tom. "What did you do with the specimens? Throw them away?"

"Nay, lad," said the red-haired man, diving a hand into his pocket; "I've most of them here wi' me. A piece of paper's always useful for pipe-lights."

Tom took the papers and looked at them with an unmoved face. "Silly old fool he must be, to waste his time like this! But I suppose he felt dull that Sunday afternoon, with nothing but the farm and the Old Hundredth to amuse him. D'ye want these?"

"I'll swap them for a couple of hares," said the red-haired man, who had an eye to a bargain.

"All right," said Tom cheerfully. "There's a bag of hares under a

culvert”—and he described the place—“you can keep the change. Now I’ll be getting back to Bradford. It’s half-past five, and I must look sharp if I’m not going to be late for business.” Upon which he got up and went off whistling, with the two dogs trotting dutifully at his heels.

The machine-like Hophni was at the mill when he got there, wrapped in routine. Hophni seldom made suggestions nowadays, but he carried them out finely. Tom proceeded to prove that his night in the open air had not been wasted commercially. He took up a drawing-board and started to work out some diagrams.

“Now,” he said to Hophni, “what do you make of that?”

That thin, sallow person saw the idea at once and appreciated its value. “That’s a splendid notion, and there’s a lot of money in it. Looms making that would earn us as much as a hundred per cent. But they’d have to be specially built. And then, lad, we’ve got no room to put them.”

“Haven’t we looms in that far shed that are not earning more than twenty per cent.? What about breaking them up?”

“We have; but they are not more than a year old, and there’s ten years’ wear in them yet. Twenty per cent.’s not bad profit.”

“Nowhere near good enough for me. When we’ve got looms not earning more than fifty, Hophni, you break them up, and I’ll design you something new that will bring us in a profit worth calling a profit. Fifty per cent.’s all right for some people, but, for me, I much prefer a hundred; and some of these fine days, when the race tails out a bit, you’ll see who’s left in front. It doesn’t do to stick to one line of goods, Hophni, however high-class they may be. Get a line, skim the cream off it, chuck it, and find another. We’ll let the sleepy ones lap up the skim milk we leave.”

“They won’t thank you for that.”

“No, they’ll take it and grumble. If they’d sense they’d find out what the public will want a year hence, and then make it ready for the time when the public finds out its wish. That’s good business, and that’s what you get high prices for, and that’s our business. It’s the only difference there is in this manufacturing trade between making a fortune and making a living. And a fortune’s about good enough for us, Hophni, eh? Only it’s got to come quick and big, so as to leave time in life for other things. Well, good-bye, lad. Keep the desk pushed into your stomach, and don’t spare the ink. It’s lucky for the pair of us that an office is your idea of bliss.”

Tom went out to a machine shop then, where they were making an experimental model for him, and spent some time sketching, explaining, joking, and blarneying, and finally took off his coat at a fitter’s bench, and made one of the parts himself, as a simple way of avoiding further verbal demonstration. And it was not till after that, and eleven o’clock had boomed

out from the parish church clock, that he found leisure to remember certain papers in his pocket, and took up Mr Fletcher Bentley into his mind again.

He washed his hands, dusted his coat and trousers—he was always very natty about his personal appearance—and set off through the streets to that merchant's office; and when he arrived there was presently asked by a clerk if he could manage to wait for half an hour.

"Far too busy," said Tom. "Shan't keep Mr Bentley long. Tell him I've merely come about a signature. Say it's a matter connected with a gate on his farm. Now, get a hurry on you, boy, or you'll never be more than a drudge all your days."

Tom was shown into the private office with promptitude after that, and found Fletcher Bentley with a ghastly face, pulling at the tops of his satyr-like ears as though he would pluck them out.

"H'm," said Tom, looking at him. "No reason to go into too many explanations with you. I see you understand my business already. But there's one thing I'm surprised at, and that's that a man of your tastes should be so unutterably careless with valuable documents. But then, I suppose, it is the great trait of criminals always to make some fatal blunder in their plans."

"Criminal, Mr Thompson! You must not use a word like that. I've done nothing criminal."

"H'm. It's a nice point. Your plea is, I suppose, that you haven't forged. You were merely practising forgery?"

Mr Bentley took a brace on his nerves. It might be possible to bluster out of the mess yet, except that Tom was an awkward young man to bluster with. However, he tried it. "Where are your proofs? What have you got to show?"

Tom slapped down the papers of sample signatures on to a table. "These are all that are left. The rest were used up as pipe-lights. But I think you'll agree that quite enough remain over for all practical purposes. They're good enough to deceive the bank. They're good enough to deceive Mr Asquith or me. They're just on the high-water mark of forgery."

"But why do you saddle them on me? What proofs have you? Pooh! none."

"Don't you remember Sunday, down at the farm, when you hummed away at the Old Hundredth, and leaned on a gate of the thirty-acre seed-field, and wrote with a scratchy pen, and dipped for ink in a bottle you carry in your waistcoat pocket? You've got the ink-bottle there now, I see. Well, there was a wooden bridge over the dyke in front of your gate, and under the bridge was a poacher and his dog, waiting till the coast was clear. They were squatting there in the water, and the man said you kept them a plaguy long time. It was he that picked up the papers. He thought you were composing hymns or something. When he found it was merely my name and the name of my firm he sold the papers to me for a trifle."

“So he knows too?”

“He knows exactly that you wrote out the signatures, recognized that the handwriting was not your usual one, but drew no deduction. He’ll not accuse you of forgery; and, indeed, he’ll not talk about the matter unless I make him, as he has reasons of his own for keeping quiet; but if there’s any question of a forgery case you can see he would be a very important witness.”

“There is no question of forgery. I’ve forged nothing. I may have had something in my mind, but that cannot be proved. I was simply amusing myself, idling away an afternoon. There is no crime in that.”

Tom dropped a heavy fist on to the table. “Now, look here, if I go on ’Change now and show that paper round, and then write an explanation underneath and frame it and hang it in our office, where would your business be after this dinner-time? Where’d you be? Who’d speak to you in the street? Who’d sit next to you in your chapel? They tell me you’ve a fine book collection. Well, you ought to be proud of it, because I believe books would be the only thing in the world which wouldn’t turn on you, once you were shown up.”

Mr Fletcher Bentley stared at the empty fireplace with a face grey as that of a corpse. All the life had gone out of his voice. “This spells ruin for me, if you persist in making the worst of my little—exercise.”

Tom was almost ashamed of himself for his hardness. But he was not a man who neglected his own interests for a mere sentiment. His main motto was, “T. Thompson has got to get on”; and if anyone put hindrances in the way of this, after being warned a decent number of times, that person must submit to being scotched. So he said grimly enough, “I intend to stop your little games now and for always. I shall keep this paper in my safe, and there it will be snug as long as you behave yourself. But the next time I have trouble with you I’ll show it up. That’s point the first.”

“And now for money? You’ll want money? You’re going to blackmail me?”

Tom’s jaw looked very ugly. “Now, there you’re wrong. Money I want, and mean to get, but not your money—not dirty money. I’ve a nicety about the kind of money I condescend to touch that would perhaps surprise you. But as I know nothing will prick you nearly enough unless there’s a good thumping fine to ram it home, I’m going to bleed you in another way. You’ve never given away a penny in your life, and it’s time you began. So you’ll just hand out ten thousand pounds a year for the next three years, for matters that Bradford and the people here stand in need of.”

“Ten thousand pounds a year!”

“Oh, it won’t ruin you, by any means. But I hope it will make you remember.”

“But what am I to give it for? What’s wanted?”

“Well, you’re not likely to know at present. You’ve been too much out of touch with the town charities all your life. But, as a beginning, we’ll say you shall build a church. You can put up a very nice one with your first ten thousand pounds. And after that you won’t find any trouble. Once you get the reputation of being a giving man, you will have plenty of applications. You have been let alone for far too long.”

“But a church! I couldn’t! Man—Mr Thompson, I belong to the Methodist body.”

“And little credit you’ve done them. There’s a chance for you to ’vert and start afresh. But I don’t insist on that. It’s only the church that I’ll trouble you for, and if you don’t make arrangements for getting that started within the next month I’ll call on you again and make it two churches. The town’s growing fast, and can do with them. Now, that’s all I’ve got to say at present. I’m busy, and have a lot of other things to see to, and I dare say you’ll be pleased enough to see the back of me. Only take my tip, and don’t force me to come schoolmastering over you again, or you’ll find it more expensive next time.”

It is almost ludicrous to look back on the subsequent career of Mr Fletcher Bentley. The church was built, and, to a certain extent, it was endowed. Other magnificent presents followed. The man who had lived for fifty years without ever doing a kindly action to any living creature suddenly became a famous philanthropist. His colossal monument of meanness, the building of a lifetime, was overturned, destroyed, forgotten. Every charity looked to him for help, and got it, in lavish abundance. If ever a man was bitten with the mania for charity, that man was Mr Fletcher Bentley. His means were large, but he went far beyond them. The original yearly dole of £10,000 for three years was far outstripped. Tom once ventured on a friendly hint that the matter of the signatures might now be looked upon as forgotten, but he was waved impatiently aside. The man toiled mercilessly at his business as a merchant to make more money—to give away in charity. His books, that marvellous collection of fine editions and sumptuous bindings, that had been the love of a lifetime, were sold—to make money for the charities. The house that had held them was sold also, and Mr Bentley went elsewhere to live in humbler style.

Even London heard of his princely generosity, and Government, after its fashion, offered a knighthood. But there was no Sir Fletcher Bentley. There has to be a search into a man’s bank account before these honours are given, and the philanthropist was found to be too poor. He had given away so much that he could not come up to the low pecuniary standard necessary for even that dignity. And in the end, when he died, he had very little but a reputation for tremendous generosity to leave behind him.

Bradford looked upon him as one of her principal benefactors. Bradford

also to-day honours Mr T. Thompson for many vast acts of philanthropy, but it has never guessed that it has to thank him also for the distributions of the late Mr Fletcher Bentley. And as for the red-haired man, who was also a *deus ex machina*, he has dropped entirely out of the record.

One other point deserves mention. Bradford, as a lasting receipt for benefits received, determined after its usual custom to adorn one of its squares with the presentment of Mr Fletcher Bentley in stone. A sculptor of repute came and saw the philanthropist, and presently submitted a bust in clay. A committee inspected it with visible shrinkings. It seemed correct in every detail, accurate in every feature—the pointed ears, the retreating forehead, the curious nose, the loose-lipped mouth were all there; but (perhaps by some impish cleverness on the part of the sculptor) the bust might just as well have stood for the likeness of some ancient satyr. The committee shuddered as they scanned it.

The clay was beaten out of shape, and the matter hushed up. It is said the sculptor received a heavy cheque. Certainly Bradford never got a statue of its famous philanthropist, Mr Fletcher Bentley.

CHAPTER IV
THE MIGHT-HAVE-BEEN MRS THOMPSON

The British Islands are pre-eminently the country of the sportsman and the animal-lover, and amongst country gentlemen there are those who can afford to give all their waking hours to the contemplation of these pursuits. Mr T. Thompson was a man of many interests—the making of money and the gathering together of the reins of power into his hands took up much of his time; but he contrived to apportion a part of each week to sport, and it was hard to find anyone, even amongst those who dedicated a life-span to it, who could follow more accurately the habits of game animals and birds. A poacher he had been in his pre-opulent days, and a poacher he remained even after he had arrived at considerable fortune, through sheer inability to tear himself away from the illegitimate joys of a lonely raid.

It was a poaching exploit which brought him first into touch with the lady who afterwards became his wife, and though he appeared before her then in the poorest of lights, and inspired her merely with disgust and contempt, it is typical of him that even whilst he was conscious that her eye fell upon him with undiluted scorn he determined that somehow or other she should go through the marriage service in his company. Moreover, at the time, he was engaged to another woman, and had parted with her not half a day before.

At that date it was the solid custom of Bradford business men to apply themselves steadily to their affairs without intermission. They took holiday on Sundays and Christmas Days—that is, they only thought and planned on these days, and put no pen to paper; and when they went to chapel they made it quite clear that, besides their cash contributions, the time which they were giving to the Almighty had also its high pecuniary value.

Tom, with no respect for tradition to start upon, never allowed himself to get entangled too much by local custom. He found that he could work best, and that the brightest ideas came to him, when he was moving about and in the open air, and so round he moved, building up business connections in France, Germany, and the Continent generally, in North America, and even in China, where the Thompson and Asquith “chop” was a trademark which found very high Celestial favour. Hophni Asquith made him a perfect partner. Hophni was a sedentary creature, with no originality and a wonderful genius for carrying out to the letter Tom’s instructions, and a whole-hearted love for routine. Hophni’s one miserable weekday of the year was Christmas Day, when custom forced him to take a vacation, and he looked forward with pleasure to those

rare years when Christmas sensibly fell on a Sunday, and there was no useless frittering away of good working time.

Hophni during all his life had paid attention to one woman only, loving her from the first, and always, and had married early. Tom had announced himself as “not a marrying man,” had taken a keen delight in women’s society, and remained a bachelor at twenty-nine. By that time he was a man of considerable wealth, was asked out to everything that was going in which marriageable young women were concerned, and one day it struck him that he was wasting more time over this kind of intercourse than he could strictly afford. This frivoling about with the other sex and enjoying their society was interfering with that rapid advancement of the fortunes of T. Thompson which was the principal occupation of his life. So with characteristic decision he made up his mind to marry, as the simplest means of choking off some of his invitations, and with characteristic quickness he there and then ran through the list of his acquaintances, made a choice, laid especial siege to the lady, and was engaged to her by that day week. He had spent four whole evenings over the job, and considered that the expenditure of time was lavish.

The young woman of his conquest was the only daughter of another Bradford manufacturer. Her father, being a self-made man, recognized the value of education, and had given her the best procurable. As a consequence, she could sing, drive a horse, speak her three languages, play the piano, dress well and dance, and manage a house. She used the local accent for her English, but only in its more modified form. She had passable good looks, and knew how to carry her hands. She would have a *dot* of £18,000 on her wedding-day, and a prospect of inheriting some £150,000 from her father on some later occasion. Her name as a spinster was Emily Outhwaite, and she was quite convinced that, as a signature, “Emily Thompson” made a better combination.

On the principle that Miss Outhwaite was the best matrimonial prize of the day in Bradford Tom selected her for himself, and, as has been stated, got her necessary consent to the arrangement. He was not in love with her, or she with him; but he liked her well enough, and he had observed her for sufficiently long to be sure that she would look well after his house, and any other houses or estates which hereafter he might see good to buy. He was quite right in this. He was a remarkably quick and accurate judge both of character and capacity. Indeed, it was in a large measure owing to the high development in him of this talent that he had been able to pick out the smart, keen men who served the firm of Thompson and Asquith, and who were piling up for them such colossal profits.

Once engaged, Tom did the thing properly. He bought a new house, and set about furnishing it in the best style which occurred to him; he was agreeably lavish with presents; and he gave Miss Outhwaite a good deal more of his own

personal society than he had ever before bestowed on one single individual outside business.

But even for the most cautious and calculating of the human species Chance is a large integral in the prescription of Fortune. If Tom had not gone with the Outhwaites to the Moors Hydropathic Establishment—then a great emporium of middle-class fashion—it is highly probable that Emily would have been his wife, and he would have had to work far harder for his admission to the House of Lords. But as it was, he felt that it was part of the game of courtship to attend her on this outing; and, as one consequence, Miss Emily Outhwaite never signed herself "Thompson."

When Tom went to the place nothing was farther from his mind than getting into a poaching embroilment, but the hours and rules of the establishment undid him. They treated him to a bad high tea instead of dinner; they filled the evening with amateur singing and some piano torture which jarred upon his musical tastes; and at 10.15 lights went out as a gentle hint that the hour had arrived for bed. The people who went to hydropathic establishments took themselves seriously in those days, and submitted to a tyranny which in more liberal times would have been looked upon as fanatical.

Tom went to bed at 10.15. He impressed firmly upon himself that as he was about to marry he ought to settle down. Moreover, being a man of tremendous will, he went to sleep at once—also on the settling-down principle. But there Nature stepped in. Nature had endowed him with the faculty of getting all the rest his mind and body needed in four out of the twenty-four hours, and so at about 2.30 a.m. Tom's eyes snapped open, and, according to his quick habit, there he was, broad awake.

Again the restlessness of the man was his bane. His brain would not submit to lie empty. He picked up some business matters into his thoughts, hammered them through, and presently had need to get up and apply himself to pencil and paper. He had an idea for an improvement in the jacquard, and sketched it out in form ready for the draughtsman. A pattern in worsted coatings revealed itself to him after much disentanglement from other patterns, and he got it keyed down on paper in those tiny chessboard squares of black and white, which mean so little to the uninitiated layman, and yet explain every stitch of the finished fabric. He reckoned the first invention was worth £10,000, and that the other would bring in Thompson and Asquith a clear £5000; and, conceiving that he had done enough towards commerce to satisfy the moment, went to the window and threw high the sash.

The pre-dawn mists came in to him cool and sweet, the cackle of frogs sounded dry and insistent from a pond up under the moor, and over the dew-spangled grass the feeding rabbits frolicked in the thin moonlight, spreading the freshness of the coming morn, and leaving behind them dark trails amongst

the herbage.

Tom stood there at the open window, torn by two proprietors. Mr T. Thompson, the affianced husband of Miss Outhwaite, said, “Go back to bed, you fool, and drop those old blackguardly habits of yours. Cultivate respectability, my good sir.” But, on the other hand, Tom Tom’s Son, the poacher, kept urging, “Come on, lad, and let’s have another taste of the old trade.” Tom grinned and reached for his clothes.

He went downstairs and wound his way through the corridors without creak or rustle, with his boots in his hand and a heart beating with pleasant stimulus. He found a door and unlocked it. The keen, moist air outside thrilled him to the bone. “How could men endure to live in houses?” he thought. And then, when his boots were laced, away he dived into cover, once more primitive man, happy and forgetful that such things as trade and marriages of convenience ever formed part of his ambitions.

Although a twelve-stone man, he had acquired the knack from long poaching habit of moving without noise, and to a large extent invisibly. Four times, out of the sheer delight of testing his skill, he laid quick hands on sitting rabbits and lifted them aloft. But he did not want to burden himself with a bag of game just then, and, merely taking one along with him as a stand-by against emergencies, he put the other three captives back again on to the wet grass, with a tweak of the ears by way of farewell, and whispered instructions to keep a sharper look-out for the future.

Everything in the wood gave up interest to him. He eyed over the disused birds’ nests on the ground and in the trees, and named their former tenants; he noted the earthworms scurrying home before the near approach of day; he feasted his gaze on three lemon-coloured newts in a shallow pool; and, from the scantiness of two broods of young pheasants which he saw, he deduced that the wood had been badly tended by the keeper, and that either the foxes or the vermin or the hooded crows needed a chastening hand.

And then, when the dawn came, and with it the cry of the corn-crake and the blundering flight of the early bumble-bee, he worked his way down to the riverside and watched the trout begin to move under the young sunlight. What a pity, he thought, that Emily neither could nor would appreciate any of this! He had sounded her on the matter many times, but she professed a distaste for game otherwise than cooked, and did not care to trace the history of trout farther back than the fishmonger’s slab. With a bit of a sigh Tom got his eye on a fine fat two-pounder drowsing in a pool under the bank, and presently his fingers—without asking his further opinion on the matter—began to take off his coat.

Then up went the shirt-sleeve, baring a brawny arm, and Tom lay, chin down, amongst the dewy grasses on the bank and took a final observation of

that trout. Well, it might be tickled with the naked arm, or it might not—the chances lay on 'not'; and all Tom's instincts, both business and sporting, always forced him to go hard for complete success in everything he put his mind to.

The water was very bright, and his arm would stand out very white against the yellow clay bottom. He had all of a clean man's dislike for daubing himself unnecessarily, but there was no help for it here if he meant having that trout. So he went farther downstream, found a lump of wet clay, and with it covered his arm and fingers a ground yellow, leaving no spot unsmeared. Then he returned to his place above the contemplative trout. Delicately the yellow fingers dipped into the water without splash or ripple. Delicately the long arm descended, the sharp eyes above directing it and allowing for the water's refraction. The fingers curved up under the fat trout's belly, just avoiding the tail flukes. Then with the flimsiest, lightest kind of tickling they began to work their way forward.

From an unpractised hand the trout would have shot away with two tail-flicks and one quick flash of silver. But to Tom's poacher's caress it surrendered itself in a sort of ecstasy, merely propelling itself languidly against the stream. With exquisite skill the scamp's fingers edged forward till his thumb hung over the fluttering gills, and then there was a sudden clutch, a fountain of water-drops under the early morning sunlight, and the trout flew upwards and fell, a picture of floundering fishy beauty, amongst the dew-flecked grass blades. Then a crisp, delicate voice from behind said, "I suppose you know you are poaching?"

To say that Tom felt foolish is putting the case mildly. Half the charm of these predatory excursions was the risk of getting caught, and he always prided himself on avoiding it. But here he had allowed himself to become too much wrapped up in his sport, and had not kept one ear sufficiently at the service of intruders; or the lady had stalked him with consummate quietness and art; or both. Anyway, there she was, standing two yards away, and regarding him with a fine contempt.

"A rabbit also, I see, in the pocket of your coat. But I suppose you will say it is not your coat?"

A readier man with his tongue than Mr Thomas Thompson it would have been hard to find in all the West Riding of Yorkshire—which is saying something, for the district is somewhat noted for its glib repartee—but just then speech left him. What a woman was here! He was filled with amazement at the mere sight of her. What a woman for a wife!

"You have no excuse. You must know perfectly well that the river here and the woods are most strictly preserved."

What a voice she had, and what a carriage! She was cheaply, yes, shabbily

dressed, but how splendidly she carried her clothes. Emily, even in her most domestic moments, would never have worn a skirt, for instance, of frieze as rough and as faded as that, and Emily in the privacy of her domestic circle could be homely and even slatternly in her attire. But Emily at her smartest never carried clothes like that. Now, this was the way that the future Mrs T. Thompson must carry her clothes.

"You had better come with me to the keeper's lodge, and he will deal with you. Of course, I can't trust you to give me your proper name and address."

And the pluck of her! He was a big, burly man, just then very unbrushed and wet and clay-smeared, and probably to the female gaze very ruffianly-looking. She must have known that with one hand he could have pitched her into the river with about the same ease with which he had thrown out the trout. Fancy Emily turning on a poaching stranger in this way—Emily, who would no more dream of going out into the early morning woods than she would think of climbing a chimney—Emily, who studied early Victorian female helplessness as a fine art!

"Please don't keep me waiting. Take up your coat—no, don't leave the rabbit or that trout—and go along in front of me to the keeper's. Walk along the riverbank there."

Decidedly this woman was the most desirable he had ever seen. Middle height she was, with dark brown eyes, brown hair, and the most exquisite mouth and teeth imaginable. With a flash he pictured to himself how magnificent she would look in the evening, and how regally she would wear diamonds. His tastes ran rather violently to diamonds in those days—they were gems which Bradford had a great affection for. He wished he could give her a great handful of diamonds there and then, just for the momentary pleasure of seeing her in a different setting. But it came to him at that moment that, although he had been devouring her with his eyes, so far he had not opened his lips in speech; and so, with an effort, he pulled himself together and made a blurt for it.

"I haven't an atom of excuse to offer you. Of course I was poaching, and for that matter you saw me at it with your own eyes. The net bag is one rabbit and one trout, which are very much at your service, if you will let me send them up to your house. I could have taken about sixteen times as much if I had happened to be on the kill. You were talking of your keeper. You ought to make that man attend more to his work. The pheasants up yonder are bringing off disgracefully small broods."

The lady's tone grew more icy. "Ah," she said, putting her head back and looking him up and down, "I took you for a tramp. Am I wrong? Are you one of the people from that hydropathic place on the hill?"

Tom knelt down again at the water's edge and began washing the clay

from his arm. “Yes, I’m staying at the hydro, and if you want to send a summons you can address it there to T. Thompson. But, on the whole, would it not be simplest if you were to let me rent the sporting rights of the estate on a lease? I heard they were to let. You must be a Miss Norreys, I suppose.”

“I know nothing about whether the shootings are to let or not. You had better see my father’s agents if the matter interests you. But for the present I know they remain in our hands, and I must ask you to take yourself back to the public roads or to your hydro.”

The amount of delicate contempt Miss Norreys put into that popular abbreviation ‘hydro’ filled Tom’s soul to the brim with delight. Indeed, her whole uncompromising attitude seemed to him exquisite. She had nothing for him but contempt, and he loved her for it. No first impressions or first meeting could possibly have been more out of his favour, but the circumstance did not ruffle him in the slightest. He intended to make this young woman his wife, and that the operation would be attended with infinite difficulty would only add to its interest. There were obstacles in the way: he was himself engaged to some one else, and, for anything he knew, she might be also; but these impediments must be honourably removed. She carried no wedding-ring on her marriage finger, and, as he finished washing the clay from his own, and rolled down his shirt-sleeve, he took a very pious vow to himself to put one there, and as he pulled on his coat he sketched out in plan the first trenches of his campaign.

“I’ll send the trout up for your breakfast.”

“Please throw it into the river.”

Tom laughed delightedly. “Not I. If you won’t have it, I’ll take it myself, and it shall be stuffed. One of these days later you shall see it for yourself.”

With which, and not giving the lady time for a further reply, he swung off his cap to her and strode away.

He did not go straight back to the Moors Hydropathic Establishment. After his custom, when a peculiarly knotty point presented itself, he went up on to the heather, and lay there in a quiet nook thinking it through, till at last he saw his plan clearly. Then he went down again, met Miss Outhwaite, and noticed with singular distaste that she was wearing diamonds for breakfast. As an engaged young woman she assumed a proprietary air with him, and for the first time in his life he began to question as to whether her public endearments were exactly in good taste. He was somehow convinced that Miss Norreys would not say, “Yes, love,” and “No, love,” and “Pass the buttered bread, love,” at the public table of a hydropathic establishment, even if she were engaged to a man; and he was morally certain that she would never under any circumstances throw a wet sponge down from a stairhead on to the hair of a comparative stranger in the hall beneath, as he had seen his Emily do the night

before. These little problems of taste had never worried him before, but since that morning's adventure he was beginning to define to himself what was a lady and what was not. Miss Outhwaite was clever, undeniably clever in her way, but it appeared that there were items omitted in her education, and she showed no signs of attempting to supply what was missing. She was very well contented with herself as she was, and contented with Tom. Tom himself was satisfied with neither.

After breakfast they walked together in the grounds, carefully keeping to the paths for fear of wet feet.

"You know what I told you about my poaching tastes, Emily?"

"Yes, love. But why go into that again? We're going to forget all that when you marry and settle down."

"I've got to tell you it will never be forgotten. It's just part of me, like working and making money. If you want a confession, here's one. I was at it again this morning."

"Oh, how silly of you!"

"And if I stay in this stifling hydro, and go to bed early, I shall probably do the same thing again to-morrow."

"Didums," said Miss Outhwaite, and laid her head upon his shoulder. "It shall go poaching every morning if that pleases it."

"I got caught, too, and there's a summons hanging over me this minute."

"Then I'll go without part of my next present, love, and you can bribe them to let you off."

What can one do with an accommodating young woman like this? Tom finished out his walk—on the dry paths—and then pleaded business. He suggested that Emily should play croquet. She retorted coquettishly enough that a Mr Hardcastle, who was also staying in the house, had already invited her to be his companion in that exhilarating game. Tom did not recommend Hardcastle; he was too knowing for that; but he went away with a most heartfelt prayer that Hardcastle would prove an enterprising young man of eloping tendencies.

Thereafter Tom got his horse, and that intelligent animal, knowing his master's weakness for speed, and having soft turf-edges to move upon, sent the miles flying behind him. A train whirled Tom into Bradford, and his legs carried him sharply across to his bank. Another half-minute saw him in the manager's room, with the door shut. It took him sixty seconds to outline his scheme and explain the amount of financial backing he required.

The bank manager pursed his lips in a noiseless whistle. "I knew you weren't exactly scared of size in your speculations, Tom, but you aren't exactly all Bradford, you know."

"I'm not asking you to hold the dog. You'll have the wool as your security,

and for cover against a drop in prices you've Thompson and Asquith. I won't insult your intelligence by telling you what that firm would squeeze out to at a pinch."

"No, Tom, I know what your firm's worth about as well as you do yourself. It's my business to know. But it's a mountain of brass you're asking for. We're fairly big, and we can lay hold of cash easily, but we are not exactly the Bank of England for size, you know."

"You can split your holding. And if you don't care for the offer——" Tom gently indicated with his thumb that there was another bank open for business not very far away. "Besides, as I told you, I'm willing to pay through the nose for the accommodation. It will make you the biggest year your bank has ever had."

"Or the worst,"

"I always thought you'd an idea T. Thompson was a pretty level-headed sort of business man? I started with practically nothing when I joined Hophni Asquith, not very long ago, and you know what I have put together. Now, does it strike you that I'd deliberately speculate with all I've got, credit and cash, on one throw of the game, unless I'd a pretty good certainty of getting it all back again—with feathers on it?"

"Never knew a man yet who went into a speculation without assuring me he was dead sure to come out a winner. Wouldn't something smaller satisfy you?"

"No. Nibbling at it would be simply chucking the money away. It's a corner or nothing."

The bank manager stabbed patterns in his blotting paper.

Tom looked at his watch. "Well?"

"I back T. Thompson—subject, of course, to my other two partners' approval. I've got to consult them on a big affair like this."

"They'll agree. I know what you say goes. You won't regret it. Good-bye. See you again when it's over."

Curiously enough Hophni Asquith fell in love with the scheme at once. Few financial speculations were too wild for Hophni's taste, though if anyone had hinted that he was a gambler, he would have bristled out as a picture of outraged propriety. Yet gambler he was, and gambler Tom was not. Tom's speculations to the uninitiated might many of them look perilously risky, but Tom never touched anything that he did not see through to the farther side of, and he tended the intermediate steps with a care which would have surprised many people who only saw the apparent ease with which his *coups* came off.

"Now, lad," said Tom, "you're a bit of a fool to go in on what I've told you so far. I haven't yet shown you the thing that'll clinch it." He clapped down a rough sketch on the desk. "How's that? I've had those improvements in mind

for long enough, but this morning, about three o'clock, I woke and lit a candle, and got them down on paper. Is the sketch good enough to draw from?"

"Splendid. I'll get out the working drawings myself. We must keep it between our own four eyes. It won't do to risk letting this slip out."

"Not much. And then get the parts made quietly at different shops. It will take no time to assemble them when they are all ready. And we won't take out a provisional specification till the very last moment."

Hophni pulled delightedly at his square red whisker. "There'll be a perfect rage over this when we get it out. It will double the consumption of Botany yarns."

"No, it won't, lad. There's only a certain amount of Botany wool here in England, and you can't expand it. But if it doesn't send prices flying up I'm a German. Only prices are down just now, and down they must stay till we are through with our buying. The fools still shy at this fine Botany wool. By goy! if they could only see a little farther than their noses, we'd be rushed by half the big capitalists in Europe. But as it is, we shall get in cheap, and we'll make our pile, and in another year or two's time we'll be as big capitalists as any of them."

"Wool sales begin to-morrow. We've a buyer of our own now. Are you going to give him orders?"

"I doubt his nerve. I shall go up to town to-night myself. Besides," here Tom grinned, "somebody will have to satisfy the brokers that Thompson and Asquith have enough backing to see it through. I think the Lord built my tongue specially for a job like that."

Tom went out then and called at his solicitor's. "Do you know Mr Norreys?" he asked.

"Know of him. Proud old fellow! Nothing in your line, Mr Thompson. He's got a soul above manufacturers, even if they are merchants as well. His people have owned the place out there four hundred years."

"And I cropped up yesterday. Yes, I see the point of view. Lot of sons, hasn't he?"

"One. Five daughters. I know them all by sight rather well. We meet occasionally."

"There's one of the daughters with dark brown eyes. Stands five feet three and a half. Brown hair——" Tom went through with an accurate description.

"Oh yes; that will be Mary. She's rather different from the rest. You seem to have got her pretty well off by heart."

"I've just seen her once; but she struck me. Much obliged for the information. I may want something more from you later, but that's all just now. Good-bye."

Tom's quick walk took him next to an upstairs room where a shabby man

was painting.

"Hullo, Tom! It's a wonder to see you in business hours." Tom was looking sharply round the walls. "Surely you are too much of a Philistine to think of buying one of my pictures. Oh, I forgot, though. You're going to be married, aren't you, you lucky dog? You want something to hang on the walls of your dining-room? Now, this——"

"Look here, Mr Robins, can you do me a commission?"

"Certainly."

"A portrait?"

"As good as one of the R.A.'s, though I say it, who am a luckless scarecrow. Twenty guineas is my usual fee, but to an old friend like you——"

"I'd like to make the fee two hundred, if you'll swallow one single condition."

The poor man's eyes twinkled. "Don't humbug me now, Tom."

"I only want your word of honour as a gentleman to keep the thing quiet. You're to ask no questions, and hold my name out of the matter altogether to all inquirers."

"That all seems easy. Then who is the subject? I suppose your young——"

"H'm! I want you to do me a picture of Miss Mary Norreys. And I don't want an acre of it; the smaller the better. Not more than eight inches long, anyway. Rather have a miniature, if that is in your line."

"But Miss Mary Norreys is not your——"

"Look here, Mr Robins, let us stick to the bargain. You must not ask questions."

"Well," said the artist, scratching his chin, "I suppose I may laugh?"

"You may laugh," grinned Tom, "till you crackle if it pleases you; but you mustn't talk, that's all. How you'll get your view of the lady I don't know. You must arrange that somehow or other by your own wit. But if nothing else occurs you might go painting bits in the woods out there, you know, and see her by accident. You're likely to catch her, I should say, in the early morning by the riverside. She's great on early morning. Only get the picture for me, and get a good one."

"And keep my head shut. I quite understand, Tom; you're an excellent patron of art. I hope you will find a new one every week."

"New what? Oh, I see. Confound your guessing!" And off Tom took himself, back to the bustle of business, and that night took train up to London.

Now, in those days Australia was young, and her export of the fine merino wool was correspondingly small; but still the value of the total clip ran into very large figures. In the London salerooms, where now broker after broker comes on to the rostrum, and the buyers yell themselves hoarse from the semicircle of benches above, there is ten times the competition to-day that

there was then. Now there are buyers from America and from the Continent. Then England manufactured for the world, and used up all the material. And, as a consequence, if the English demand for Botany wool happened to be small, there were no other buyers to put strength into the market.

Thompson and Asquith, through their buyer, started bidding for the very first lots, and got them at such low prices that the auctioneer watered the purchase with Hebraic tears. But as they went on, other buyers who had to have some wool pressed them harder, and prices rose; but still they bought. Prices came up to the normal, and passed it. The excitement increased. Thompson and Asquith's buyer, with a white, strained face, still bought, and as the auctioneer accepted his bids, it was presumed that Thompson and Asquith had given sufficient guarantee of their ability to pay.

Still the prices grew higher. Here and there some outsider, who frantically skied a lot, had it knocked down to him, often to his considerable discomfort; but between whiles Thompson and Asquith bought steadily. They were paying now exactly double what they had given for the first lots, although the wool was all more or less of the same quality.

Then they practically stopped. They had got two-thirds of the entire clip, and the remaining buyers with yarn to deliver, and looms to feed, and contracts to fulfil, snatched up the rest at prices that grew hysterical. There was many a sunbaked squatter out in Australia who blessed the name of T. Thompson for his deeds at that sale, and—waited anxiously for the next mail to see how much he had gone bankrupt for.

Now, as I have said before, Tom was a keen speculator, and he was no fool. He intended to make a heap of money over this wool deal, but he intended to get something else from it besides, and that was freedom from his engagement. Mr Outhwaite senior, his prospective father-in-law, was a man of the steady, cautious type, who had made his own fortune by solid grind and no risk-taking, and the idea of speculation was an abomination to him. If it came off he might forgive it; but if it did not succeed Tom quite knew that words would fail him to express his disapprobation. He would go on to deeds as well.

When Tom returned from London he found that the fine-spinners and the others of Bradford business men who used Botany wools were by no means pleased with him. They had had to pay through the nose for the small amount of wool they had got, and they were all short, and would have to get more somehow, whatever the price might be. They regarded him as an upstart who had deliberately upset all their regular arrangements for his own private ends, and, if management could do such a thing, they intended to give him a cold season of it, and at the same time get the wool they were short of at what they considered reasonable rates.

Accordingly they put their heads together, and presently were buying and

selling wool on ’Change amongst themselves, and every day the *Bradford Spectator* in its Wool Report continued to mark a fall in prices. Hophni Asquith looked leaner and more cadaverous than ever, and was all for selling before the figure got worse. But Tom saw through the manœuvre, and insisted on holding on tightly; and, what was more to the point, persuaded the bank to see the matter in his view, and to continue their backing. And in the meanwhile, in eight different machine shops, parts of a certain piece of mechanism were being made from Hophni’s working drawings.

Down dropped prices, and farther down. The firm of Thompson and Asquith began to be ‘talked about.’ The official quotation of Botany wools dropped between eightpence and tenpence in a week, and no one, except the insiders, seemed to grasp the fact that there were practically no sales. Finally, a couple of small firms who had been speculating round the fringe of the market, without understanding in the least what was going on, called meetings of their creditors, and then there was a regular flare-up of panic.

Again, to the real insiders, there was no difference in the situation. Very little wool had changed hands since the sales. Wool was wanted on all sides, and Thompson and Asquith were sitting tight on the supplies. But a few of the smaller men who had little ballast lost their heads, and this constituted the panic; and it was used for all it was worth. At such a time rumours fly on easy wing, and the market reporter would be less than human if he did not pick them up. The next morning’s contents bill of the *Spectator* reflected the spirit of the moment. Thus it ran:

RUMOURED HEAVY FAILURE
ENORMOUS LIABILITY
WILD SPECULATION

Tom proposed to himself a visit to Emily that evening to see how she took it all; but Mr Outhwaite fore-stalled him. He called at the Thompson and Asquith office and exhibited a good deal of violence. A ten-minute stream of words ended up with a refusal “to let my daughter wed wi’ any chap that gives himself up to this ’ere immoral speculation.”

“We’re not bankrupt, if that’s what you mean,” said Tom, thinking he must put in some defence.

“It’s t’principle I’m against, not t’result.”

Tom choked down an “Oh, is it?” He said instead that he should only take his dismissal from Emily herself.

“I thought there’d be some sort of foolery like that. You young folks nowadays think you are to have everything your own way, and your elders need be consulted about nowt. But my Emily does as her father bids, and if you want her view on t’matter, it’s here, packed close i’ this letter which she

wrote herself. We won't trouble you to call."

As Mr Outhwaite went out of one door the pallid Hophni came in at the other, rubbing his hands. "All those parts are ready now, Tom. I've ordered them to be sent round here. We can assemble them in our own engineer's shop. The whole thing can be set up by the day after to-morrow. What about that provisional specification? I was round at the patent agent's yesterday. It's all drawn out."

"Then send it up by to-night's mail to be filed. We'll stop this panic quick now; it's gone on long enough. It's cost me my girl, anyway."

"Why, what do you mean? Engagement broken off?"

"Yes. Old Outhwaite's just been in. Didn't you hear him shouting?"

"Well, Tom, I'm not going to condole with you. Louisa says you never did care twopence for her, and so you're well out of it. I shouldn't be surprised if you never did marry, Tom. Nor'd Louisa. We don't think you could ever care enough for any woman."

"Man's an uncertain animal, Hophni. You shouldn't bet on him. You go round to the patent agent's, and I'll go and rouse them up on 'Change a bit. I'm sure they will all be pleased to know that we have seen through the whole game, and we're ready for it all before it begins. And I'm sure it will cheer them, too, to know that with the new machinery that will presently be put on the market there'll be even more demand for Botanies than they guessed at."

Now, the inside men above mentioned had kept cool during the panic, thinking that they knew all about it; but when they saw that Thompson and Asquith emulated their coolness it began to occur to some that there must be more behind than met the eye. Of course there was the bank in the background, but banks do not finance enormous operations without pretty good security, and the inside men began more and more to respect that said security the longer its powers of holding out were exhibited. Finally, when one day the cheerful Tom walked sharply in amongst them, and after a little talk produced a stub of pencil and an envelope, and sketched out the points of the new invention, they began to see how nicely they were nipped, and only a few of them availed themselves of the invitation to go round to the mill and see the machine in work for themselves.

They hadn't time to get away just then. They wanted to buy wool, and the *Bradford Spectator* recorded in its report of that day that certain classes of Botany made the unprecedented jump of one-and-threepence a pound in the hour. It was not till the end of that hour that Tom commenced selling. He had brought off his *coup* to perfection, but he did not push success too remorselessly. Let alone the cruelty of the proceeding, it would not have suited either his own firm or Bradford trade to deliberately make firms fail, and so he did not carry his squeeze too deep. But he and Hophni had something on the

windy side of £200,000 to divide between them over the affair, and he, Tom, was honourably free to carry on another project which lay very near to his heart.

When he was alone he pulled from his pocket a miniature, and every time he looked at it he realized more and more how really near his heart the matter lay.

"You beauty!" he thought, as he feasted his eyes upon the painting, "I wonder how I am to win you. But I'll do it somehow."

And in the dining-room of his new house was a glass case, in which was a plump two-pound trout, delicately poised amongst grasses.

"I wonder," chuckled Tom, as he looked at it, "when Mary'll come and laugh over that for herself."

CHAPTER V
BLACK THURSDAY

The British business barometer had been steadily falling for some time, but when it reached Stormy it went down with stumbles and bounds. In Bradford, where men work largely on overdraft, there were signals on every hill which pointed to a general collapse. Prices of wool and yarn and stock generally shrank like ice in sunshine. Men who on their balance-sheets of a month before counted themselves as moderately affluent now saw ruin gibbering at them. A pestilence of bankruptcy swept the town. Hardly any of the small men escaped. Even the biggest were badly shaken. It was grimly said on 'Change that the Bankruptcy Office was the only concern in the town running full time.

Hophni Asquith, of the dashing, pushing, thriving firm of Thompson and Asquith, found himself left alone in sole charge, and very soon lost his head. He saw things go from bad to worse, and watched firm after firm in which they were heavily implicated come toppling down like autumn leaves in a breeze; and in the stress of arranging for salvage of the wreck he lost his health. An epidemic of measles had been running through the mill-hands; then the Asquith children got it; and finally Hophni himself, who was a man of no stamina, and who was just then more run down than usual, got bowled over with the ridiculous childish complaint.

In less of a commercial crisis, or with his partner at home, Hophni Asquith would have taken the wise course and submitted to the stereotyped treatment. But he was a man who knew only how to win; he could not take losses without dropping his nerve; and he felt also that he had been left in charge of affairs by his partner, and had no one in the office who could in the least take his place. As a consequence he tried to put the measles on one side, and, as a natural result of this cavalier treatment, the measles in their revenge very nearly killed him.

T. Thompson, the brain of the firm, was in America, and so, with Hophni incapacitated, Fortune, who happened to be in one of her most impish moods just then, simply played ducks and drakes with credits and assets.

In blissful unconsciousness of all this domestic turmoil Mr Thomas Thompson toured the United States, arranging agencies and making local merchants acquainted with the New York house which Messrs Thompson and Asquith, merchants, had established to sell the goods of Messrs Thompson and Asquith, manufacturers. The war between North and South was just over; the country was licking its wounds and getting into its stride again; and the Merrill

tariff, which had practically prohibited all textile trade with Great Britain, was struck off the statute list. The Democratic party was, for the time being, coquetting with free trade. America just then was not far-seeing enough to grasp what high protection could do for her manufactories.

Tom did not compete with the other Yorkshire firms who already imported fine stuffs and catered for the clothing of the few. He decided that the many—who still remained unprovided for—were quite good enough for him. They wanted cheaper material, but the percentage of profit which it would stand was quite as great, and the demand was about one thousand times as big. There were fewer rich people in the States then than in this era of the Trusts, and Thompson and Asquith were quite open to making their quiet seventy-five per cent. on showy cheap fabrics, which anyone with the least amount of good taste would turn up the nose at. Allowance had to be made, of course, for bad debts, as American commercial morality in those days was at a low ebb; but the seventy-five per cent. was especially devised to counteract these reductions, and so the honest paid for their more knavish neighbours.

Be it said, however, that Tom had not crossed the Western Ocean entirely in pursuit of the nimble dollar. The acquisition of money and power were certainly great objects in his life, but just at that period the winning of the hand of Miss Mary Norreys in marriage appeared to him an even greater necessity. He had first come across Miss Norreys by accident; he intended that her further cultivation should be a matter of design. But here caste stepped in and set up an enormous barrier. The girl was the descendant of a long line of country gentlefolk; Tom was a mere collier's whelp. In Mr Norreys' eyes he was certainly *nouveau*, and only problematically rich. Mr Norreys saw no dignity whatever in labour, and considered that Consols and Land were the only securities worth recognizing. None of his people had ever been mixed up with trade, and he would be not exactly blessed if he let any of them begin in his time. Tom might take himself and his aspirations to the devil; and as for Miss Mary Norreys, she preserved a face of unruffled composure, as though the subject were entirely beneath her concern; and Tom loved her for it.

This was no sentence delivered in so many words. Tom had far too much tact to let matters come to an open *fracas*. The Norreys' shootings and fishing had been let, and Tom had rented them; he had taken a house in the neighbourhood and furnished it lavishly; he had set up horses, carriages, kennels, cooks, a refrigerating plant, and a highly experienced butler. He asked Norreys father and Norreys son to shoot with him and dine, and they did both. He repeated the dose three times before the invitation was returned. And in this proportion they entertained one another during the shooting season.

All Tom's instincts went towards a quick settlement. He wanted Mary Norreys badly; he wished her to want him as soon as possible; so that then they

might get married and push on with the business of advancing the power and fortunes of Mr and Mrs T. Thompson. But he recognized that here was no bargain to be pushed through by sheer power of will; his tongue was quick, and that of Mr Norreys was slow; but Mr Norreys' drawl somehow carried a power with it that Tom could not fail to recognize, though it was beyond his art to reproduce it.

It annoyed him to wait; it annoyed him when he was given very plainly to understand that the lady's hand was probably for another, and certainly not for him; but these things did not in the least disturb his desire to marry her, or upset his cool faith that one day or another he would bring this thing to pass. He had never been thwarted yet in any really important matter, financial or otherwise, that he had firmly set his mind on; it had grown to be a creed with him that anything within sight could be got, if only you tried hard enough for it; and he did not intend that his theories should be upset by a matter which lay so entirely near to his heart as this marrying of Miss Mary Norreys.

It is probable that in the end Mr Norreys got a trifle frightened at the continued sight of Tom's big, dogged jaw, and the prevalent rumours of his hard persistency and his unbroken success. He was a man who took a heavy pride in keeping his family within its caste, even in the female branches, and, moreover, he was a man who took no superfluous risks. So one day, in reply to an invitation to dine and shoot, Tom was informed that Mr Norreys and his second daughter, Mary, had gone abroad for an indefinite period.

Inquiry showed that the destination was America, but nothing further disclosed itself. Mr Norreys had taken particular care that his route should not be advertised, by the simple expedient of not deciding upon one before he sailed.

However, America in those days was a far smaller place than it is now, and Tom wired Liverpool for a berth in the next boat and sailed for New York next day. It occurred to him that now was the exact moment to push the American branch of his firm's business into active life. Hophni Asquith quite saw the point of this, and as he had to be left in charge in the meanwhile Tom sat with him in the office during the remaining twenty hours he had in England, and together they talked through and decided on the policy of Thompson and Asquith for the next six weeks, with what seemed to them a microscopic thoroughness.

Through New York, if they had reached that port, the Norreys had passed without trace; but Tom put on a couple of reliable men to find out for him their movements, and in the meanwhile took up the affairs of his business with the result above recorded.

In due time a report of their progress reached him. They had landed in Philadelphia, and after a week in Pennsylvania, had gone straight down South

to visit friends who had a plantation in North Carolina. Tom got the news in Baltimore, and took the cars that night for Ashville.

As he sat a day later on the piazza of the Battery Hotel smoking an after-dinner cigar, and looking thoughtfully at the blinking fireflies, a man swung round the corner with a "Fancy seeing you here!"

"Why, Emmott!"

"Oh, it's all right about me. I live out Arden way when I'm at home, though that's been seldom this last fifteen years."

"Are your people the Emmotts of Bowden's Bluff, by any chance?"

"Certainly."

"Never talk to me of coincidence again. Who'd have thought of connecting John Emmott, yarn merchant, of Berlin, with these people here! Why, man, I didn't even know you were a Yank."

"I'm not, thank God! I'm a Southerner."

"Beg your pardon. Being a mere Englishman, I don't quite understand your distinctions in this country yet. But you didn't take much interest in the war, did you?"

John Emmott flushed. "You've got on to a rather delicate subject, but as you're down here, perhaps I'd better explain. I didn't agree with local theories on slave-holding when I was a youngster, and so they took me down from Harvard, and, in fact, I more or less got the dirty kick-out. That's the way I drifted to Germany. When the war came I just wanted to get back to my country more bad than you can think. But I couldn't fight for the South, as I still didn't like what was the essence of their theories, and I wasn't going to be a renegade and fight against them. So I stayed on in Berlin and bought Bradford yarns. But," he added with a sigh, "the mischief isn't over yet, and I've come to see if I can't help straighten things out a bit. The old people have seen a heap of trouble, and, well, they're old, and I'm the only son they've left. They haven't invited me, mind you. I guess if they've lost everything else, they've their pride left still. But I've a notion if I came back as the prodigal son they'd be pleased enough to provide the veal."

"Pretty those fireflies are, snapping away under the trees. I'd like to meet your people. May I drive over when you're settled in?"

"Now, why the deuce do you say that? You take no sentimental interest in the South. Your sympathies are with the Northerners, if you take any interest in the country at all. And besides, from what I know of you myself, and from what I've heard of you in Bradford, it's a sure thing you don't do anything unless T. Thompson is to make some dollars over it. Now, what do you want out of my poor old people in their trouble? What's your little game?"

"Don't get angry, and I'll make a small confession It is not your people I want to meet at all. But they have some guests just now who interest me very

much indeed."

John Emmott leaned forward in his rocker and tapped Tom on the knee. " 'Say, I don't know whether you are talking quite innocently, or whether you are tackling a very dangerous job. But if you'll take the cinch from me, you'll go back North and get on with your ordinary business. You won't find it healthy out at Arden if you're going there for empty amusement; and if you've taken on some job for your friends the Yankees you'll find this neighbourhood very sickly indeed. Just remember that the white men round here are all ruined, and they're feeling pretty desperate just now; and I—well, I'm not John Emmott of Berlin just now. I'm a Southerner."

Tom listened unmoved. "It's Mr and Miss Norreys I want to see."

"How did you know they were staying at Bowden's Bluff? It's news to me. You seem to know a good deal."

"Well," said Tom, with a grim smile, "as you appear to think I'm trying to force my way into your house for some suspicious motive which I haven't arrived at yet, perhaps it's only due for me to tell you that my one object is to marry Miss Norreys. I can't afford to let any time slip by. I hear she is practically engaged to another man whom her father arranged for her to meet on the steamer coming out, and I'm going to knock him out of the running, if I have to upset half America to do it."

John Emmott shrugged his shoulders. "If you will go, you will, and there's an end of it. I know you're a lot too pig-headed to change your mind through any argument of mine, if you have made up your mind on the matter. But if trouble comes, and you find yourself in the middle of it, don't say I haven't warned you. And," he added, in a harder voice, "if the trouble does come, and we find ourselves on opposite sides, don't think that because I have known you in Europe I shall refrain from shooting you here."

"I can tell you in a moment which side I shall be on, and that is the side favoured by Miss Norreys. I don't know which that is, and I do not remarkably care. As for your suggestion of shooting, I'll take the hint and provide myself with a weapon to-morrow. And now, suppose we change the subject. Tell me, will you, what sport there is in the neighbourhood? You've wild turkeys here, haven't you? I'd like much to bag a couple or so, if it could be managed."

On the afternoon of next day Mr T. Thompson, spruce in person and neatly booted, rode out on a hired horse with a hard mouth and a bullet-clipped ear. He had a shotgun on a sling over his shoulder, and two hundred 12-bore cartridges in a neat roll over the pommel of his saddle. When he was alone, and riding down a track between high woods, he pulled a miniature from his pocket and nodded to it cheerily. "I'm going to have you, you know," he said, "so you might as well give in without further trouble. Eh, lassie, but you are a beauty! You are worth the fighting for. And yet, so far, the only things tangible

I've got to remind me of you are a picture and a stuffed trout. Well, I guess they're enough, and I could do without even those at a pinch. I'm not likely to forget you this side of eternity."

When he came out into Arden village beside the railroad track he met a party of negro militia shuffling along through the dust, and they, after the custom of that unhappy period, pelted him with impertinences. Tom had never troubled himself about colour questions before, but somehow, at the sight of some of their brute-like faces, his gorge rose within him. The atmosphere of the South was beginning to sink in. But one thing puzzled him. Why should they hail him as "mo' Ku Klux trash"? What was this Ku Klux? He had heard of it several times within the last day or two, but whenever he asked for explanation he could only get a stare and an evasion. From John Emmott in particular his question drew forth something very like rudeness. "If you don't know what the Ku Klux is you'll do quite well without being told. If you do know you've come to the wrong man here if you're trying to pump me for further pointers."

It was seldom he could let his hard-mouthed old troop-horse go beyond a walk. The roads over which he travelled had been cut up with the passage of guns and the heavy transport of an army, and no one thought of repairing them. This annoyed him, because, in the first instance, he was always a man who liked quick movement; and, in the second, he was vaguely conscious of some disturbing influence in the air. He was nervous about the safety of Miss Norreys. He wanted to be at hand ready to look after her. He had never known what it was to be nervous about anybody before.

The attitude, too, of the various people he asked his way from was not reassuring. When he inquired for Arden they just pointed listlessly enough; when he mentioned Bowden's Bluff they stared at him inquiringly; when he added the name of Colonel Emmott the blacks cursed him and the whites usually threw in a word of warning. "I suppose you know what you're about?" was their usual question. But one lean tar-heeler was more open. " 'Say, you're liable to'n attack of chills-an'-fever daown at the Kernel's to-day. You pull raound, sonny, and get away back." Tom stuck out his jaw and rode on.

When he came to it the once prosperous plantation was a sufficiently dismal sight. Here and there sorghum, corn, or tobacco grew with uncultivated rankness; but the zigzag snake-fences were derailed or spread level with the ground, and in many places secondary-growth forest sprouted shoulder high. The house itself—a fine building of stone raised a man's height above the ground on stone piers—had escaped fire and shot; but neglect and the climate had marked it with terrible fingers. Its piazzas were mere jungles of trumpet- and catorba-vines; the shutters of the windows limped on single hinges; the gaps in the cockled grey shingles were an invitation to the jays and the

squirrels.

There was the faint smell of wood-smoke somewhere in the air, but no reek came from the chimneys, and from the front of the house no trace of recent human occupation betrayed itself. Tom moved up to the entrance steps on his uneasy-gaited horse, and looked sharply about him. Hornets were building their clay-pencil nests in the angles of the front door's panels. A lithe black snake flickered away under the foundation-pillars of the house, like the lash of a vanishing whip.

Tom made no attempt at this unpromising door. He wheeled his horse with intention to circle the house and try if the back offered more hospitality. But round the first angle he stopped, chuckled, and swung off his hat. Miss Mary Norreys was displayed in a string hammock between two of the posts of the piazza.

She coloured a little and nodded to him.

"You expected me, of course?" he asked.

She answered this rather Jesuitically—"Papa didn't."

"Emmott did say I was coming, then?"

"He brought the news this morning. Papa went away yesterday, over to Tennessee. If he had known of your arrival I'm sure he would have stayed to receive you."

Tom chuckled. "I suppose I should take his sudden exit from England as some kind of compliment?"

"What is the connection? He came out to see Colonel Emmott, who is an old friend of his. I didn't know you even knew the Emmotts." Miss Norreys had a twinkle in her eye.

"Oh, John Emmott is an old acquaintance of mine. Didn't he tell you? Perhaps not, though; he seems in a queer mood just now. By the way—sudden thought—did John Emmott come out in the same boat with you?"

"No; why?"

"Because," said Tom coolly, "I'm told there was a man in that boat who seems to be in my way, and if there is anyone I have got to put my heel on—or, if necessary, shoot—I should prefer that it was not an old friend."

Mary Norreys pulled herself out of the hammock and stood facing him, with the piazza rail and its straggle of trumpet-vine between them. "Mr Thompson, I don't pretend to misunderstand you, but please remember that I resent this. I do not know what rumours you may have heard, but I may tell you that the person you talk about is no more to me than—than you are."

"That's all right, then," said Tom bluntly. "But they told me you were engaged."

She bit her lip and flushed. "Your information seems surprisingly accurate. We were engaged. We are not now. When Mr—when he heard we were

coming to Colonel Emmott's he objected. There was something in Colonel Emmott's political opinions he did not like. So my father broke it off. The engagement was my father's wish from the beginning."

Tom rubbed a fly from his horse's bullet-clipped ear with a switch. "Now, I find Colonel Emmott's political opinions charming. I don't in the least know what they are, but they seem to have your approval, and I for one will defend them utterly. It appears to me that Mr—that the other fellow was small-hearted."

"He was a gentleman."

"And I was born a collier's son, and am a *parvenu*. Do you still prefer gentility?"

Mary Norreys laughed and plucked a red blossom from the trumpet-vine. "That's a very bold question, and a very broad one."

"But still you could answer it."

"I could, I suppose. If you want an answer now, I don't think you would like it."

"But later? I can wait. I could wait eternally almost. In a week's time, say ____"

John Emmott came sharply round the corner of the piazza. "Miss Norreys, you must go away from Bowden's Bluff at once, please. I've made arrangements. There are troops coming, and there will be wild work here presently. Morning, Thompson. You'd better put heels into that old crock of yours and clear out as fast as you can go. They've spotted you down in the village, I'm told, and you'll get shot on sight if you're found here. I warned you," he snapped out irritably, "not to come, you fool!"

"What has happened?" asked the girl. "Why are the troops coming? Why should we go? Surely United States troops would do nothing to us."

"They're nigger militia," said Emmott; "and if you've not been long enough in the South to appreciate the coloured man under these circumstances, you must take my word for him. I'm sure Thompson will back me."

"All the way. Miss Norreys, you must go."

"But," she persisted, "what is the trouble? The war's over and forgotten. Why should troops trouble you?"

"Ku Klux," said Emmott shortly. "There's no time to explain. We've only just got the news, and every second wasted now means more danger. Colonel Emmott and my mother will be your escort. You will cross the French Broad River, cut the ferry adrift, and get on to a friend's house on the other side. They will give you horses, and you will have to go into the mountains and hide till things have blown over a bit. I am sorry, but you should never have come here. Your father was warned that the colonel was mixed up with this miserable Ku Klux Klan, and if he'd been anything short of a fool he would

have stayed away."

"Then you are not implicated with it? You will ride away back to Ashville with Mr Thompson?"

"I," said John Emmott, with a grim laugh, "shall stay on here in the house, and keep those martial coloured men amused till you are safely out of the way."

"I'm reckoned rather good myself at entertaining people," said Tom. "I'll stay with you."

"More d——d fool you. Now, Miss Norreys, you must go. Please remember it isn't only yourself that you are risking. Colonel Emmott and my mother have their fine old Southern pride, bless 'em! and they won't take care of their own skins till they've seen to the comfort of their guests."

The girl moved reluctantly. "But I don't like leaving you—and Mr Thompson. Why can't you come too, and leave the house?"

"Because when they found the place clear they'd run on and nip us before we got to the creek, or shoot us down on the ferry. As it is, they'll stay here till you're over, and once the boat's adrift then you're all right. The French Broad's in flood, and it's no nigger's job to swim it."

"Then you'll be in no danger? You'll come on afterwards?" She looked at Tom. "Both of you?"

"Yes, yes, yes," said Emmott. "Take Thompson with you if you want him. I can do alone."

Mary Norreys crimsoned and went, which was what John Emmott wanted, and when he and Tom had seen the three of them well off down the river track they turned again to the house.

"Now look here," said Emmott, "there's your horse tied to that tree-branch. Just you mount and quit. There's nothing commercial about this job. There's nothing to be made out of it."

"It will be quite a pleasant change."

"I tell you plainly we haven't a cat-in-oven chance."

"As I have seen the troops for myself, and counted coconuts, I guessed it would be a tight job keeping them off. What's the plan? We can't hold the whole of the house against them. It's too big. Besides, it's all windows and doorways."

"There's a storeroom inside, with stone walls and one door. We can finish up there. Listen!"

A chorus of voices, not unmusical, singing *John Brown's Body*, made itself heard in gradual crescendo.

"By the Lord, the brutes are here already! Well, we'll go to the front door to receive them."

"Wait a minute," said Tom, "I've a few necessaries on my saddle." He

went round the piazza, unstrapped the roll of cartridges from his saddle, and turned the old troop-horse loose with a thump on the quarters to make the best of his chances. Then he loaded his gun and snapped up the breech. “Now,” he said, “I’m quite ready to help you with your entertainment.”

John Brown’s Body came nearer, to the accompaniment of a good flat-footed tramp, and Tom, who had a fine ear for a tune, perched himself on a piazza rail and joined in.

John Emmott opened the front door and stepped inside. “Better come in here under cover,” he advised. “They’ll shoot you like a partridge when they come round the corner of the trees there.”

“I don’t think it,” said Tom, and stuck to his seat.

The black soldiers swung out into sight, saw him, and bubbled into quick excitement. Their song snapped off in the middle of a bar; Tom’s kept on bravely. He knew that time was of value if the retreating party were to get across the French Broad undisturbed, and took his chances accordingly. The soldiers halted thirty yards away from him, and an officer harangued him. The officer said that if he would throw down his gun, and come out and surrender, he should be taken away and given fair trial; otherwise he would be shot. The same offer applied to Colonel Emmott and all the other people in the house.

“But, great Brown!” said Tom, “what on earth do you want to arrest me for? I’m a blameless Englishman, and I haven’t been in North Carolina a couple of days.”

“You know, sar. You know what you’ve done.”

“I’m bothered if I do.”

“You’re one of the Ku Klux trash.”

“Never heard of the gentlemen till a couple of days ago. I remember you mentioned their names when I had the pleasure of meeting you just now in Arden village. Will you kindly define?”

The negro officer would not. But he talked enormously, and repeated his threats and invitation to surrender.

“Nothing of the kind,” said Tom. “I’m a blooming Englishman; and if you shoot me there’ll be old mischief to pay.”

They occupied twenty minute over this edifying wrangle before the officer finally lost his temper and gave an order. Four bullets flew. Tom sent them in return two charges of number six shot, which, at thirty yards, spread finely, and were acknowledged by an uproar of squeals and yells. Then he retired through the front door and slammed it behind him.

“Well, you’re a cool hand,” said Emmott, “seeing it’s the first time you’ve been shot at!”

“Oh, it isn’t that. I received my baptism of fire years ago.”

“Where, you curious person? I thought you were a worsted manufacturer.”

“Also poacher. It was a keeper who couldn’t run as fast as he would have liked, and loosed off out of disappointment. Now, where’s your fortress? Those jokers will have the door down in a minute, and be through half a dozen windows, and I’ve no especial fancy for being shot down like a rat in this passage.”

“Along here,” said Emmott, and led the way. “Whilst you were speechifying, I’ve been collecting bedding and stuff for a breastwork. You kept them off and made time splendidly. By Jove, though, you must be awfully fond of that girl to stay here with me! You know, it means being wiped out.”

“I’m going to marry her when she sees the necessity of it as much as I do; and therefore we must use our wits so as not to be killed just now. You’ve picked a grand place to hold here. We shall be quite in the dark, and so they can’t see where to shoot; whereas out in the hall there they’ll be in the light, and we can pick them off like pheasants. They’re firmly persuaded that they’ve got your father and a whole crew of folks boxed up here.”

“They don’t seem in any hurry to get at us.”

“So much the better. They are letting off temper a bit by smashing and bashing furniture and window-shutters, by the sound of them. By the way, what is the trouble all about? Not that it matters, of course; but I should like to know what I’m fighting for, just out of curiosity.”

“Oh, Ku Klux.”

“That’s just unmeaning gibberish to me. Can’t you explain further?”

“It is a sort of secret society which the broken Southern gentlemen are using now to get back a reasonable amount of the power of the State into their hands. I agree with that object well enough. The present corrupt nigger government forced upon us by the Northerners is intolerable. But the Ku Klux methods I detest.”

“What are they?”

“Oh, murder, murder, murder—that’s what it amounts to. And the grimmest part of it is that my father is the president of the Klan. But he is my father, and so I’m here covering the retreat.”

Tom laughed. “We seem a queer pair of champions for the cause. There’s humour in it, if only you look at it the right way.”

“You’ve an odd notion of what’s funny. Do you notice that smell? We’re not going to have our shooting over this barricade, after all.”

“Fire!” said Tom. “They’ve set the house ablaze. Sensible of them, but ugly for us. How far is it to the French Broad River?”

“Our people ought to have it in sight by now. Another ten minutes, and I should say they’ll be safe. We can then take our choice of staying here to suffocate or fry, or else making a dash for the outside and getting a bullet. You bet they’ll have all the guns well placed.”

“Wait a bit,” said Tom thoughtfully. “I haven’t time for a funeral just now. I want that girl, and I want a lot of other things first. How many doors are there to this house?”

“Three.”

“And how many windows?”

“Oh, any number.”

“That’s awkward. I was hoping there might be one side where they wouldn’t have any guns posted.”

“There are no windows or doors on the side that backs on to the woods, of course.”

“Good. Then that’s the side on which we leave.”

“But how, man, how? We can’t pick a hole in that solid masonry in the time that’s left us.”

“Through the floor. Here, give me that big ugly knife of yours. I’m the stronger, and I’m the better carpenter of the two, and we must hurry. This smoke’s getting bad. The house is built on stone piles, isn’t it? And underneath there it will be full of smoke by this. We must cut a hole down to it. Once we’re through this floor, we shall have a clear run of it to cover. It’s all America to a tintack they haven’t wasted men by putting anybody to guard the solid side of the house.”

Tom, with the knife in a lusty fist, hacked and sliced and splintered at the boarding of the floor, coughing the smoke from his lungs, and bedewing his work with perspiration. Over and above them the dry woodwork of the house crackled and roared. Outside were the negro militiamen with itching trigger-fingers. Round all was the ruined plantation and primeval North Carolina woods.

Slowly the tough boarding gave under the knife-slashes, nearer and noisier grew the fire. The stone walls of the storeroom splintered under the heat. The doorway was like the throat of a chimney. Only near the floor could they breathe at all, and even there the stinging smoke was like to have choked them. But at last a small hole was cut through, and Tom got his powerful hands into the gap and wrenched away a board. He tried the boards on either side; they hove at them together; but none would budge. They had to be painfully cut through with the knife before they would yield.

Flames began to dart in at them through the doorway in hungry yellow tongues. Tom hacked and slashed and wrenched and strove; two boards gone now, and a third yielding. The heat was intolerable, and the clothes on their backs were singeing in spite of the drench of perspiration. For a moment Tom thought he was going to lose Mary Norreys after all.

One more gigantic effort, and another board yielded, and the gap was made sufficiently large. There was no standing on precedence now. Tom crammed

Emmott through into the unseen below, and followed, with a yellow sheet of flame flickering over his head. He beat and kicked Emmott into consciousness, and together they tottered through the reek, with the walls and floors of the house thundering to blazing ruin above them. The smoke drove in a solid wall down to the edge of the trees and gave them cover, and presently they found themselves lying, breathless and scorched, in a cool green fern-patch, beyond probable reach of harm.

It was five days later than this, and after considerable wandering and adventure, that the pair of them came up to Colonel Emmott's retreat in the mountains. The Ku Klux organization had proved useful, in so far that it had picked up its chief and his wife and guest after their passage of the French Broad, and had handed them along from house to cabin, and from cabin to camp, along the rough mountain trails of the western North Carolina woods. They brought up finally in the domicile of one Colonel Swanlee, a mutinous Southern gentleman, who, for the maintenance of his revenue, ran a moonlight whisky-still, and it was here that the rearguard joined them.

They had recaptured the hard-mouthed horse with the bullet-clipped ear, and had ridden this veteran turn and tie on the trail of their friends, and it happened that John Emmott was the first to come up with their hiding-place, and so got in the first word. He was not sparing with the colour. It had occurred to him many times within that last five days that but for Tom's strategy, and Tom's pluck, and Tom's strength, he, John Emmott, at any rate, would not have been able to enjoy the hospitality of Colonel Swanlee's whisky-still, and he was not ashamed of being openly grateful. Being, moreover, a man without the smallest jealousy, he was not in the least ashamed of lauding Tom up to the skies for the benefit of all and sundry who listened, and for the special behoof of Miss Mary Norreys. So that when that hero himself arrived, very hot and very dusty and very tired, he found the lady looking upon him with a certain something in her eyes which sent him very nearly light-headed with happiness.

They sat down to a supper of bacon and heavy corn bread and imitation coffee, which seemed to Tom just then an epicurean feast. And afterwards, when Colonel Swanlee brought out a demijohn of corn whisky, potent enough to bite the bark off a tree, and with the guarantee that it had never paid the North a nickel, poor Tom had to forgo the luxury of a tot, as he felt quite drunk on Mary's looks already.

But he made then what the girl described afterwards as the one most miserable mistake of his life. There was an interval after the meal, in which the men adjourned to smoke their cob pipes on the stumps of the tiny clearing, and the womenfolk stayed behind (after the mountain custom) to give attention to the domestic offices. Afterwards, if eyes as true as hers could be read, Tom felt

that Mary would come alone with him down one of the trails, and give the answer he so longed for to the question he so dearly wished to put.

In the meanwhile, however, the courtly Colonel Swanlee, like some evil old sprite, must needs show the perfection of the abominable Ku Klux organization. “My friends, sir, in Ashville, knowing that you were in some trouble with the dirty Northerners, took the liberty of applying for your mail. We have our interests in the Post Office, as elsewhere. I trust, sir, you will find your correspondence all intact, and its contents to your taste.”

Tom was in no mood for letter-reading just then, and glanced them over with but slender interest. But, seeing one address in Hophni Asquith’s handwriting, shaky in outline, and marked “Immediate,” he tore the envelope, and presently was conscious of a feeling of deathly sickness.

“Firms going down right and left . . . tried all I knew . . . then health went . . . still struggled on from sickbed . . . unconscious or delirious for whole week . . . Louisa pulled me through; God bless her! . . . doctors say very near thing . . . shattered now . . . we went down on that Black Thursday; but could have done nothing even if I had been there. Too ill to make even a guess at our assets . . . of course, everything will have to be sold up, yours and mine. Terrible for Louisa and the children. Oh, thank God, Tom, thank God, old lad, you never married!”

The words danced and swam in a sickly scum before poor Tom’s eyes, and his head rang with the shock of it. So near to what his heart wanted, and then that this unthought-of blow should come! It was the most fiendish of cruelty. The money? Bah! that was nothing. He could soon make some more. The position and the credit? A few years would soon restore those. But he had nothing to offer now—and he was an honourable man. He could ask no woman for her hand till the stigma of this bankruptcy was taken away.

He got up from the stump and wearily staggered away down one of the trails through the woods. A few minutes ago he was treading on air, his soul was bursting his ribs with its bigness. Now he blundered along, weary-footed and with shoulders bent. Night had fallen, full of mystery and odour, and the moon rode high. The crickets and the tree frogs and the katydids clattered amongst the branches. The dew stood in diamonds on the ferns, and the purple shadows danced languorously. But he neither saw nor heard any of it. Where he was going he did not know, neither did he care. All the brightness was gone out of his world, and the primitive man in him came out, and he instinctively drifted towards the deep woods to find a hiding-place.

Footsteps came after him, light footsteps which crunched the dead leaves daintily, as though anxious to draw attention to themselves. He heard nothing. Presently Mary Norreys came up from behind and laid gentle fingers upon his arm.

He looked down at her heavily. “Ah!” he said; “you?”

“You did not wait for me?”

“No.”

“They told me you had a letter which seemed to carry bad news?”

“Yes.”

“I had a letter from Bradford. I can guess what has happened.”

“Yes.”

“It seems to have been very bad for every one in Bradford. They call it Black Thursday.”

“Yes,” he said dully. “Black Thursday; good name, isn’t it? It’s Thursday to-day too. I should like to call this Black Thursday also. It’s late, isn’t it? I think you had better go back. Good-bye.”

She moistened her lips. “Have you nothing more to say to me?”

“No, nothing that I know of.”

“I thought you had—earlier—just when you came back—before you read that letter.”

“No,” he said painfully; “it was a mistake. I was pleased to see you again, that’s all.”

“I’m not greedy after money, if that’s what you think.”

“No. I know you wouldn’t be. But I can’t say anything more, that’s all. I must go now, please. I must go back to business. I must go and begin again, I mean.”

“I understand. I wish you would have said more, but you won’t. I know why, and I honour you for it, Tom. You must let me know how you succeed, and I hope you will find success quite soon again.”

“Yes—I will let you know—when I have made success again—if you are still——”

“I shall be still Mary Norreys, if that will help you.”

“Dear,” said Tom, “I will take no promise from you, not even that.”

He knelt for a moment and put his lips to her dress, and a drowsing squirrel in a live oak above opened her eyes and watched him. Then he rose to his feet and ran violently away down the trail, as though some heavy temptation hung behind his heels.

As for Mary Norreys, she threw herself down amongst the ferns and wept as though her world had ended.

CHAPTER VI
THE SPANISH ARMY CLOTHING CONTRACT

"I've done the best I could for both of us," sighed Hophni Asquith from the bed, "but in effect it was very little, and there was no chance of saving the firm. The creditors have got everything, both of yours and mine, Tom. Both houses were sold up, and the figures things went for were just cruel when one remembered what they cost. You see, Louisa and I have come down to living in this little chamber-'eight house, and we don't even keep a girl. Louisa feels it very much having to do without a girl."

"Rot!" said Tom. "Louisa never so much as dreamed of ever having a servant of her own till she married you, six years ago."

"Ah, Tom, you're single, and you may thank God for it just now. When the crash came, and there was I ill, the suffering was horrible. Whenever I shut my eyes I dreamed that I was dead and that Louisa had to go back again to the mill to keep herself and the bairns from starving. But it wasn't so bad as that. Some of my health's come back. I've found work as a book-keeper, and I can just manage it by staying in bed Saturday afternoons and Sundays."

"You poor old sick man. If I'd got a five-pound note in the world, Hophni, you should have it; but I haven't. To tell you the truth, I got down to Charleston without a nickel in my pocket, and no clothes worth mentioning. There was a strike on the quays, and a cotton steamer that was very anxious to get away. I signed on in her stokehold for two pounds for the run. Well, two pounds won't buy a rig-out of clothes."

"They would me."

"Yes, lad. You believe in ready-made 'uns. I don't. I dress well. I like it, and it pays. But about that two pounds. It was all the capital I had in the world, and I wanted to hang on to it for emergencies. So I just walked from Liverpool to Bradford, and took three days over it."

"And people gave you enough to eat?"

Tom grinned. "I don't know about the giving; but there were woods that held some fine pheasants, and I found acres of rabbit-warrens. There is some grand game country, Hophni, amongst all those chimneys and mills between here and Liverpool. I helped myself to what I wanted, and cooked it delicately. I'd nearly starved on their infernal, half-rotten messes on that cotton boat. It was just heavenly being amongst the game again, and having decent victual. Some day when we've made another pile I'll tramp through that country again and poach it once more for sheer old acquaintance sake."

The pallid, red-whiskered Hophni Asquith sighed. “I wish I’d your hard, strong health, Tom, and your faith for the future.”

“Never does to lose your pluck.”

“You’re ahead of me, you see. You’ve no one depending on you. And besides,” he added, with feeble pleasantry, “you’ve a capital of two pounds already.”

Tom rubbed his square, big jaw and looked a trifle confused. “I tramped into Bradford yesterday, and went to my old tailor, and he stood me tick for some clothes. He was a bit awkward at first. He said I owed him a stiffish bill. I pointed out to him that if I went on in rags he’d never get paid at all, but that if I was rigged out once more as well as his art could contrive he’d probably find everything settled up in full before the end of the year. He saw it in that light, and I got one suit this morning. Then I went round to a broker in Leeds Road, who had bought a stuffed trout in a glass case from my house when it was sold up. I cabled you from America about that stuffed trout, Hophni.”

“I know you did. But I hadn’t the heart to go to the sale myself, Tom, and Louisa wouldn’t, and there was no one else I could send. Besides, don’t you think it was for the best? I know that stuffed fish carried associations with it. But a lady like Miss Norreys is not for you now, lad. The Norreys are county people, and there are no edges to their pride. Even when we were most successful, I don’t think you would have got her; and after compounding with the creditors in the way we have done, I’m sure she’ll never look at you again.”

Tom’s heavy jaw hardened. “If ever you have a chance of betting on it, I advise you not to bet that way, or you’ll lose your money. We’ve had a bad facer just now, and you’ve lost your health, and your nerve seems a bit shaken. Now, I’m quite healthy, and I don’t know that my determination is any weaker than it was six months ago. I’m one of those chaps with the knack of making money, and I’m going to collar hold of it again—lots of it, and soon. That’s item the first for you to remember. Item the second is that I’m going to marry Mary Norreys; and if anyone gets between me and her I shall push him out of my way somehow. I’ll keep that coast clear by gentle means, if possible; and if not, by other means. But don’t you make any error about my doing it. She’s as good as offered me a promise, and I refused to take it. I prefer to guard her in my own way.”

“You’re a bit of a savage, Tom.”

“I’ll be a good savage, then. At present, beyond the clothes I’m wearing, and a miniature, the only other possession I’ve got is that stuffed trout. I went to see the broker who’d had it. He’d picked the thing up for a shilling at the sale. Ye know I’m a pretty good buyer as a general thing, Hophni?”

“There’s none smarter in Bradford.”

“I never drove a weaker bargain than that in my life. I let the rascal see how keen I was on having that stuffed fish, and he naturally clapped on the price. He asked me ten pounds for it. I told him I’d only two, and he bid me go and raise the balance. Then I got angry and lost my temper a bit, and he suddenly found himself a very frightened man. He took the two sovereigns and I took the case, and when I went out of the shop he was muttering a good many threats of setting the police on me. I’ve left the case with Louisa in your room downstairs. I want you to warehouse it for me till I get a roof of my own again.”

Now there was no better known man in Bradford just then than Mr Thomas Thompson; but having once got rid of him as their most formidable local competitor, nobody was very anxious to set him up again as a probable—indeed, a certain—rival. Besides, men who had any money left, over and above what was absolutely necessary for their own concerns, were nervously careful at that period of how they employed it. The town had just passed through a bitter financial crisis; every business man within its boundaries had been badly hit, and the survivors were still savage with their wounds.

But where more Christian firms feared to tread, Messrs Hochstein, Isaacs and Company stepped in with the courage of their race. Tom had a fluent knowledge of French and German, and a tolerable acquaintance with Spanish, and these acquirements were rare amongst Englishmen just then, if they had also any acquaintance with the Bradford business. Moreover, Tom had a reputation as a salesman which Hochstein and Isaacs had learned to their own cost. He had squeezed prices out of them for the firm of Thompson and Asquith that made them groan to think about, and the performance appealed to their tenderest sense. And lo! here was this hard bargainer himself on the market!

Messrs Hochstein, Isaacs knew a sound, reliable article when they saw it, and their instinct for getting such things at the precise moment when they were at their cheapest had made them rich and powerful. They engaged Tom as one of their continental travellers, and Tom chuckled at their astuteness in screwing him down to the smallest possible commission and salary. It was seldom that he had been so thoroughly the under dog in a bargain.

The commission and salary had been so arranged that by hard work and luck an ordinary man could have made a trifle under £300 per annum for himself. Tom was no ordinary man. He had one of the keenest noses for business then carried by any Englishman, and he was a born salesman. He started earnings at the rate of £700 per year for himself, and sent Messrs Hochstein, Isaacs into ecstasies over their increased turnover; but neither of these things satisfied him. He was a man with big ideas and big ambitions, and (with view to Miss Norreys) he was in a great hurry to be rich again.

Furthermore, he was by no means enamoured of his un-Christian employers. When he was utilizing his brain for the making of money he much preferred that it should come to the coffers of Mr T. Thompson or to those of his immediate partner.

He travelled France and Germany then for six months, finding brilliant success, and sending from each stopping-place some small present to the address of Miss Mary Norreys in Yorkshire. He forwarded these anonymously, as a salve to his honour; but he was not above hoping that the lady would guess at the sender and remember him favourably. But at the end of that six months he felt he must be up and doing. He wrote to the firm that he saw a prospect of business in Spain. The firm replied that they had no connections in that country, that it was in a disturbed condition just then, and that if Tom went there it would be at his own risk—they would not guarantee any outlay.

"Quite so," said Tom as he read the letter. "You know that if I said I'm going, I shall go, and you think you will save expenses. You've been envious of that seven hundred pounds a year I'm making for some little time, and I knew you'd be wanting to cut it down. You're a bit too keen, and when the time comes I shan't be delicate about handling you. So look out. Now let's see when there's a train through Tarascon for Port Bou and Cérebère."

Tom broke his journey at Cette, put in half a day there, and picked up four small orders. He caught the 5.37 next morning, wasted the usual two hours and a half at the frontier stations, had his baggage very minutely inspected by an official in sea-green cotton gloves, and finally slid off into the Peninsula at the usual dizzy rate of Spanish travel, which, on the Barcelona line, then frequently averaged twelve miles to the hour, including stops. He had his second-class compartment to himself to begin with, but at San Miguel, the second station out, he was joined by the Customs inspector who had so carefully examined his possessions at Port Bou. Tom's predatory instincts came to the fore at once. He always liked to make something out of everybody, and where most people would have ignored the green-gloved official as uninteresting Mr Thompson saw in him a polishing-block whereon to burnish his deficient Spanish. The newcomer on his part was willing and even anxious for talk, but it appeared that he was from the north-east and spoke only Catalan Spanish, which is a very different tongue from the Castilian that Tom had picked up from a derelict exile in Bradford. However, all was grist to Tom's linguistic mill, and so away they worried at a conversation.

The man with the green gloves had a talent for curiosity, to say the least of him. He wanted to know the Englishman's personal history by the yard, and Tom blundered away at it, working out Catalan phrases, and picking up Catalan words, which he stored away in that splendid memory of his to make money with later.

The train crept along under a blaze of Peninsula sunlight, and at every station the two cloaked and cock-hatted *carabineros* who travelled with it got out on to the platform and conferred with the two other local *carabineros* who came to meet them. The man with the green gloves also got out at each of these opportunities, and employed himself in sending telegrams.

It was not till the train had crawled into the open country, past San Celoni, that these telegrams bore fruit; but after that it was not long before Tom connected the man of the green gloves with what took place.

The dull rumble of the train slackened, and then with a jar of brakes she stopped. "O Lord!" said Tom, "what a line! what engines! Water gone off the boil again, I suppose."

"I do not understand."

"I don't suppose you would. The joke's a bit too technical for me to put into good Catalan at the first try. I'll have another shot at it—— Hullo, *amigo*, why get out of the carriage? This isn't a station—it's only a stop."

"I go to see what's wrong."

"Phew!" said Tom, fanning himself, "this is a slow country. And yet it seems some of them are trying to raise a revolution. I wonder they have energy enough for it."

As though to answer him, the door swung open and three rifle-barrels pointed through it at various portions of Mr Thompson's person. There were dirty men in some vague kind of uniform at the back of the rifles, and directing these was the official with the green cotton gloves who had so recently left the carriage. It was he who acted as spokesman.

"The señor will descend."

Tom stretched himself lazily against the cushions of the carriage. "Why?"

"Because there is an order. The order is to take the señor, alive or otherwise." The man spread his green palms. "The choice about that is left entirely with the señor."

"That won't take me long to decide. But you will perhaps let me suggest that there are certain pains and penalties attached to this kind of amusement. I'm a business man, and my time has value. Moreover, I'm a British subject with a passport especially viséd for Spain, and if you aren't made to pay up I'll eat my hat. Better think twice about it, my man. Time's cheap here in Spain, judging by the way you waste it; but when you begin to value up the time, and the kind of Englishman I am, you'll find it mighty expensive."

"Come out," said the man with the green gloves impassively.

Tom stepped down to the ground. The heads of many passengers watched him from the train.

"Go over on to the road."

Tom stepped down the side of the embankment, climbed a wire fence, and

stood on the road. The rifle-muzzles followed him faithfully. There was a cork wood at the other side of the road from which projected more rifles, and the shadows of the wood suggested even further reinforcements. The passengers in the train watched curiously, but without demonstration. The two *carabineros* who were travelling on the train, presumably to defend it, made no appearance whatever, and one gathered that they were investigating the dust and the orange peel under the seats of their carriage.

Up to this, Tom had imagined that the dirty men in the un-uniform uniform were the regular troops of Spain. But the eclipse of the *carabinero* escort, and, indeed, the holding-up of the train itself between the stations, hinted to him that something was irregular, and then it flashed upon him that one of the usual revolutionary parties was disturbing Spain just then, and that these assuredly were some of the revolutionists. The man in the green gloves, who now seemed to be leader, had certainly overhauled his baggage at Port Bou as a Customs official of the regular Government, but this was easily explained as a *ruse de guerre*. The revolutionists evidently wanted somebody—presumably English—pretty badly, to judge by the pains they had taken to order their capture, and Tom wondered who on earth they were mistaking him for.

The man in the green gloves led the way, Tom followed, and a long tail of the scrappy uniforms brought up the rear. Patches of sunlight stole through the branches of the cork-trees overhead and mottled the ferns through which they marched. The engine of the train blew off steam behind them with a certain air of languid impatience, but whilst they remained within earshot there were no sounds which so much as hinted that the engine-driver had dared to move it. It looked as if a rearguard still remained in the edge of the cover to hold him with their rifles.

"I say," said Tom to the leader, at the end of half an hour's march, "is there any order against my being told what all this little affair's about?"

"Yes."

"Don't let me try to persuade you to break orders, then. I suppose that the business will come to a head some time, and it will get along quite comfortably by itself till then. But don't let's waste time. I'm here to learn. What game is there in these covers?"

"Men."

"Oh, do leave shop alone for a minute. Are there rabbits, now? No pheasants have shown up so far, so I suppose the woods aren't preserved much."

No answer.

"They tell me there's good quail ground outside Barcelona."

The man with the green gloves misunderstood the drift of these questions. He turned on his prisoner with sudden spite. "I will not be ridiculed. If you do

not keep silence, you hired butcher, I will have you gagged."

"Now, why in the name of all that's ridiculous am I a hired butcher?" wondered Tom. But he made no further remarks aloud. He recognized that he was in the hands of some very angry and very determined men, and had no wish to travel with his jaws tied up. And presently, deciding that he could do no more with this present affair till further developments arrived of themselves, he dismissed Spain and Spanish revolutionists entirely from his mind, and turned his wits to an improvement in combing machinery for the worsted trade, the solution of which had long been simmering in his thoughts. He was tackling the much-tried problem of burr extraction.

They stayed in the cork wood till dark had fallen, and during the period of waiting Tom was relieved of all his money and papers, and very systematically searched. Thereafter they found a road, and a house, and vehicles, and drove away through the night at a rapid pace, gradually ascending into mountains. Tom kept his bearings from the stars, and, being a poacher by extraction and used to the dark, found very little trouble in keeping an exact map of the journey in his mind during intervals of steady work on the combing puzzle.

By daybreak they arrived at the rebel headquarters, a village picturesque enough when they first sighted it at a distance and lit by the sunrise, but very squalid and odorous when their tired horses drew them down its cobbled street. There were uniforms here in plenty, and most of them were suggestive of having been bought originally for service in the regular army of Spain. A tall, lean, yellow-faced man seemed to be in command, and Tom presently gathered that he was Colonel Toroja.

The prisoner dismissed combing machinery from his mind when he came in sight of Toroja. He quite understood that he had been in danger before, but it occurred to him that his danger had suddenly become acute. There was a certain vicious cruelty about Toroja's face that there was no mistaking.

Colonel Toroja sat himself before a table which was brought out into the village street, took a cigarette from his pocket, unrolled it, and then rerolled it with care. He smoked half of it through, and stared at his prisoner with his twitching yellow face without saying a word.

Tom stood before him, with a guard with a rifle and fixed bayonet on either side, and another in his immediate rear. He on his part also preserved silence. He was naturally galled by Toroja's silent insolence, and he had it in him to have resented it sharply. But he told himself he was a business man, and his private resentments in this as in other matters must give way to his personal advancement. His one object must be to get back to business again as soon as possible.

"We have caught you, you see," said Toroja at last, "in spite of all your precautions."

"I wonder who you think you have got?"

"If you tell me where the arms and ammunition you are supplying to the Government are to be landed, I will let you go again in a week's time. If you refuse, you shall be shot at sunset."

"Then it doesn't seem to me that I shall be of much use to you. About your guns, or whatever they may be, I know no more than the man in the moon. And if you shoot me, you waste a cartridge, and will get into trouble. I don't know how your Spanish game laws run as a whole, but I can guarantee for you that there's a close time for Englishmen just now, and anybody who shoots one out of season will catch it uncommon hot."

Colonel Toroja took another deep inhalation from his cigarette. "If you take that attitude I don't see that anything further need be said. The firing party shall be ready for you punctually at sunset. Remove the prisoner."

"This," thought Tom, "is a very ugly corner. I don't know who that yellow-faced brute thinks I am, but he means murdering me as sure as the sun's shining now." "Wait a minute," he said. "Now look here, colonel, that fellow with the green gloves there went through my traps as thoroughly as he knew how in Port Bou, and your other pickpockets searched me down to the bone afterwards. I'm T. Thompson of Bradford, and the firm I represent is Hochstein, Isaacs and Company, who never bought or sold a gun in their life. May I ask who you mistake me for?"

"I mistake you for no one. You are—Mr J. G. Croft of Birmingham, England, and it's not the least use trying to fall back on your disguise. As a disguise I will admit it is good; your sample-cases are a clever idea; your papers as T. Thompson are perfectly correct. The only thing is, we've had you followed all the way from England, and if you are a wise man you will recognize the fact and give in. We can't afford to let the Government have the arms they have bought from you. And, besides, we want them ourselves."

"It's a pity you haven't got a photograph of this Mr Croft of Birmingham. If you look you'll find T. Thompson marked on my handkerchief, and on the tail of my shirt."

"We have a photograph of Mr Croft of Birmingham," said Toroja drily. He pulled a card from his pocket and threw it down on to the table. "And if it pleases you to see how sure we are that there is no mistake, look at it for yourself."

"By Go'!" snapped Tom, "you don't make out I'm as ugly-looking a brute as that?"

"Yours would probably be called a strong face, but I shouldn't describe it as handsome myself." He tapped the card. "I'll admit, if you like, that this photographer did not flatter you, but I don't think you will deny now that you sat to him for a portrait."

"I deny it entirely. That's no more my photograph than it is yours."

Toroja twitched his yellow face and threw away the cigarette. "Then, if that's your attitude, I do not see how you will avoid my firing party at sunset. Remove the prisoner."

Dirty hands descended on to his arms, and Tom was turned to the right-about and led across the street to the edge of a wood which rimmed the village. Already the morning sun was beginning to make itself warm, and the shade was comfortable. Only one of the soldiers, and the man with the green gloves, stayed as his escort; but as these possessed severally rifle and revolver, with a bayonet apiece, and Tom was unarmed, and there were a hundred more men within thirty yards, they seemed to be ample for their purpose.

Presently bread was brought by a peasant girl, with a demijohn of blue-black wine, which the two shared with their prisoner, and then all three threw themselves on the turf and sought comfort in rerolled cigarettes.

Tom was outwardly calm and stolid, but he owned to himself with much plainness that he was in an extremely dangerous position. "Toroja has got it into his head that I'm J. G. Croft of Birmingham," he announced to himself, "and I must say the pair of us, as far as a photograph can show, are remarkably alike. I can't tell tales about J. G. Croft's rifles, or else I would, and it's a sure thing that the colonel intends to have those guns, or shoot. There's no humbug about Colonel Toroja; he's got a nasty, yellow, vicious face on him, and he'd think no more of shooting me than he would of smashing a fly that got in his way. It strikes me very forcibly that I've got my wits to depend on to get me out of this, and if they fail I don't see how Mary Norreys is going to get the husband I've intended for her."

A man thinks his hardest in cases like these, and Tom was no dullard, but for long enough not so much as a feather of a plan came to him. The sun burned hot in a cobalt sky above, and the tree shadows shortened and then grew long again; the village bustled with the affairs of an army; and the man with the green gloves and the other guard kept watch with malevolent vigilance. Now and then knots of children came and stared at the man who was to be shot at sunset.

Tom lay on the turf, digging at the grass with his fingers, and maturing a plan. He thought he saw how to get a start, but the wood against which they lay was small, and he would soon be hunted from that if he tried to find cover there. The green-gloved man smiled acidly as he watched the prisoner stabbing his fingers into the turf. "Here," he thought, "was all the bitterness of death before death had come."

But at length Tom's plans matured, and he ripped away the wad of turf and held it in his left hand. Then before either of them in the least anticipated such a move, he clapped the wet sod on to the mouth of the green-gloved man with

his left hand, whilst he gave a terrific undercut on the jaw with his right to the other man. That revolutionist went down without a sound, as if he had been poleaxed, and before the green-gloved man could recover from his surprise and get the sod away from his mouth, Tom's heavy fist had whacked him also, and he too underwent eclipse. Then Tom nipped up and took to the timber.

Now the wood was, as has been said, small, and, though it carried plenty of undergrowth, it would not conceal a man for long, if many were hunting him. It was this fact which had kept Tom from making his bolt earlier. But when he did start, it was with a very clear destination in view. His poacher's training served him finely then. Hue and cry sprang up almost immediately, but he went away through the cover, noiselessly, invisibly, crouching almost to the ground, but hardly disturbing so much as a leaf in his passage. Neither did he leave any tracks. Pursuing gamekeepers had long ago taught him the necessity of acquiring the art of going over ground without leaving visible tracks.

His aim was to cut a circuit through the wood, and make back almost to the point from which he had started—or, to be more exact, to get back to the house from which Colonel Toroja had come out to examine him. He had chosen this house, first because it was the unlikeliest for him to choose, and secondly, because its lower story was a half-empty stable, and had an unglazed window port opening on to the wood.

He climbed in through this three minutes after he had laid out his two guardians; crept to the top of the haystack which filled one of the stalls, and reached within eighteen inches of the floor above; and lay there as still as he knew how. Overhead, Colonel Toroja stumped about, dictating letters and instructions to his Chief of Staff, and between whiles cursing the fools who had let the prisoner slip through their fingers; whilst outside the wood rustled and echoed with the shouts and cries of men who were man-hunting.

The troops would have wearied of their employ after the first time they drew the wood blank, but Colonel Toroja spurred them on with vicious energy. He stood just above Tom's head and shouted down his orders through the window. Dark was falling, and it was time the prisoner was shot. He must be in the wood somewhere. If he had gone through to the bare country beyond they would have seen him at once. They must search and search till they found him. It was only a question of looking closely enough.

With the help of his Chief of Staff Colonel Toroja was maturing the revolutionary plan of campaign, and under the flimsy floor boarding Tom listened with appreciative interest. He had intended leaving the place that night, but a move just then was out of the question. The village and the wood were alive with soldiery, and the whole place was lit with a score of lavish bonfires. There was a store of horse-carrots in the stable, and Tom dined off these, and fingered the outside of a miniature of Miss Norreys. He was very

proud of the way he had contrived to hide this miniature when the green-gloved man searched him and annexed all he could find.

For two more days Tom was forced to lie hidden on this haystack, and subsist on that lean diet of raw carrots, but on the succeeding night there was a lull in the activity of the place, and he managed to slip away. He gained the open country beyond the timber, and held on his way for the railway line. The stars were out, and he had no trouble about direction, and, besides, he had been over the ground once, and was far too good a poacher to forget any country that he had ever seen.

He had no money to buy a ticket, and, moreover, he had a delicacy in letting his whereabouts be known. The revolutionary feeling was abroad; he might quite likely appeal to a rebel sympathizer; and he had no wish to get sent back for a further interview with Colonel Toroja. So he boarded a slow-moving luggage train in the dark, carrying with him, by way of provision, a couple of pullets he had collected and roasted *en route*, and, under the tarpaulin of a grain truck, made a safe entry into Barcelona.

He went first to the British Consul, and gave that slow-moving official a warm half-hour before in exasperation he finally left him. “I don’t want a war,” Tom said, “neither do I want the leisurely consideration of the Foreign Office. I’m a business man, and I want cash damages for loss of time and ruffled feelings, if you like to put it that way.”

“I’m afraid we don’t work on those lines—Mr—er—Mr Thompson.”

“I don’t think you know what work is,” snapped Tom, and left the office. He dropped the Consul from his mind then, but it is characteristic of him that in after years, when he had come to power again, he did much to stop the practice of using British Consulates abroad as dumping-places for gentlemen who were too incompetent for any other employ.

Tom’s mind always travelled quickly, and he decided on his next move as he was shutting the Consul’s door. He went out of the street, walked with his quick stride down the crowded Rhambla, and within the next two hours he had driven a bargain, with the officer commanding the troops in the Barcelona district, that was very much to his liking.

“General,” he said, “if you want to squash your rebels at one pinch, I can tell you how to do it. I can give you the exact number of men they have got, the exact number of guns, and everything about all their supplies, and an accurate sketch of their next movements. I’ve got these things at the risk of my skin, and if I were a Spaniard I’ve no doubt I should be patriotic and let you have them for nothing.

“Being a foreigner—one of the shopkeepers, as you call us, from an Island in the North—I naturally intend to sell out my goods at full value.”

“I like you none the worse for that, Señor Thompson. There are only two

things I should wish to point out. One is, that you must not ask too high a price. We are poor here in Spain, and I have very little ready money at my disposal. The other point is this: I like your face. Your manner, señor, carries truth with it. But it is a lamentable fact that till a few minutes ago I never had the honour of your acquaintance. You see, there is a risk that you have—shall we say?—overestimated the accuracy of your information."

"I don't ask you to buy a pig in a poke. I am not going to suggest that you should pay till you have proved that my report is accurate. I know when I'm dealing with an honourable man."

The old general bowed. "You do me an honour. But still there is that other thing. May I hear your price? Please make it low. We want what you have to sell, but there is a great scarcity of ready money here just now."

"Your Excellency, I don't want a single peseta."

"Then, señor, I hope it is not something you are going to ask for that I cannot give."

"On the contrary, you will serve Spain as well as serve me by giving me what I want. You are on the Army Clothing Board?"

"I am; but how did you know?"

Tom laughed. "Oh, it's my business to know these things. And you are not satisfied with your present contractors?"

"Now, that you cannot know. It has never been mentioned outside the Board."

Tom laughed again. "Deduction, then, if you like. I know the price you pay, I know the firm that's got the contract, and I've seen the shoddy rubbish they supply. They've been swindling you right and left. Give me the contract, and I'll supply you with the same cloths (if you like rubbish) at twenty per cent. reduction, or I'll give you real good materials at the same figure. I've got the samples here in Barcelona. Colonel Toroja's men didn't loot my sample-cases when they pulled me out of the train, and they came along all safely. You can see the stuffs for yourself, or submit them to your tailors."

"But why did you bring samples of army clothing materials into Spain?" asked the old general, with a shrewd suspicion.

"Oh, I hadn't arranged with Toroja to raid me, if that's what you mean. But I smelt out, as I've told you, that this contract would presently be on the market again, and I intended to capture it by hook or by crook. I wasn't grateful to Colonel Toroja when first he interfered, but I am now, because I think he's made the business easy for me."

"You English are a curious race. You seem to do anything for money."

"Making money's my trade. I want to make a lot, and I want to make it soon, because I'm just hungry to be able to marry some one. Come now, general, I think you can let me have this contract, can't you—subject, of

course, to my information about these revolutionists proving accurate?"

The soldier stroked his white hair. "I wish we'd a little more of your keen Northern energy in this country, señor. You shall have the contract. I suppose, as you are a business man, you would like a word to that effect in writing. Excuse me a minute or so whilst I get our agreement down on paper, and then you shall give me the information you have gathered."

Tom left Barcelona by that night's express, and raced home to Bradford without a stop. Spain, her army clothing, and her revolutionists were all out of his mind for the time being, and he sought with every diligence to ravel out the secret of that improvement in combing machinery which had so long eluded his grasp. If only he could catch the idea for extracting those burrs from the wool, what a splendid fortune it would make! But in spite of his efforts the puzzle would not reveal itself then.

He worked at this problem till the train set him down in Bradford, and then dropped it, as his habit was, and took up again the matter of the Spanish army clothing contract, and presently was in the private office of Messrs Hochstein, Isaacs and Company. He reported the result of his interview with them before tea at Hophni Asquith's later in the evening.

" 'You have been to Spain,' old Hoch said to me, 'and you know that was against our wishes, Mr Thompson. We warned you that the country was in a dangerous state, and you have only yourself to thank for getting into a mess. We have heard all about your trouble with Colonel Toroja.' Well, Hophni, I tried them hard to see if they wouldn't give me my expenses. But not a penny. 'Then practically I was not in the employ of your firm when I was in Spain?' said I. 'You vas nod,' said old Hoch. 'Cerdainly nod,' said Isaacs."

"Splendid!" said Hophni.

"Well, it was their own fault. They shouldn't have screwed me down so hard, and then I wouldn't have been so sharp with them. As it was, the contract was mine to do as I liked with, and they bought it from me. They just had to. They knew that I could take it to ten other firms here or in Huddersfield who would just snap at such a chance."

"What did you get, lad?"

"Fifteen thousand pounds. Look, there's a cheque for five thousand pounds. I've got the rest in bills at two and three months. I could have got more if I'd have waited longer for it. But now's the time. We're getting older every day, Hophni, and so's the world, and I want to have my spoon in it again and be helping myself. We've got fifteen thousand pounds as good as cash to start on again to-morrow, and that's better than twenty thousand pounds you have to wait a year for. We'll make that amount of profit in the twelve months."

Hophni coughed. "Then you'll give me a job, Tom, when you set up again?

I’m not quite better yet, but my health’s much improved. A week-end at Morecambe will set me all right again.”

“Job be hanged! I foisted myself on you as partner once before, lad, and you’ll have to take me as the same again. Now shut your silly mouth, and don’t thank me. It’s sheer hard business. I know how you work, and I’m not going to lose you. And now let’s chuck this talk and get on to something else. I want to hear English news and Bradford news. Louisa, where’s my stuffed trout in that glass-fronted case that I gave you to take care of?”

“Upstairs i’ t’chamber, Tom.”

“Is it, lass? Thank you for keeping it. I’ll just go upstairs and wash my hands if I may, whilst you get tea ready.”

Louisa laughed at him when he came down again. “Tom, I believe you say your prayers to that silly old fish. I wonder what Miss Norreys would say if she knew?”

Tom scratched his square chin. “Well, lass, perhaps I may tell you some day. Or perhaps she will.”

CHAPTER VII
THAT CRAZE FOR MOHAIR

"To tell you the truth, Tom," said Hophni Asquith, "if there had been only myself to consider, I should have cut the chapel altogether, and gone regularly to church. I don't mean to say that I have your ambition, but I do want to rise. I think every man ought to do his best to rise. But Louisa won't have us trying to take our place with the church people yet. She says we should only be cold-shouldered if we did try."

"Then," snapped Tom, "she should see to it you didn't get cold-shouldered. Louisa would do with a lot of pulling together."

Hophni's square red whisker bristled. "I don't think that's deserved, Tom. After we compounded with the creditors, of course Louisa and I had to slip back again socially a bit. But since we've started making big money once more, I'm sure you'll seldom see Louisa without a thousand pounds' worth of diamonds on her, and in the street she always wears the most expensive clothes that are to be got in Bradford."

"She looks it. Now don't get angry with me, lad. I'm an outside critic, and so I see things that you miss. Besides, Louisa and I were mates when she was a mill-girl and wore clogs on her feet and a shawl over her head, and I was just Tom's Son and hadn't a surname. You can't get over historical facts, Hophni. Because my father was a forgetful creature who chose to go through life under the name of Tom, I found when he died that no one remembered what else he was besides Tom. Tom the Collier was the nearest I could get. Well, Collier is a very good surname, but for Bradford use just then I did not think it would do. It seemed to smack too much of the soil—or, to be more accurate, the subsoil. So by natural evolution we got Thompson, which was simple and definite, and to which one seemed to have a certain amount of title."

"I don't see what you are driving at."

"Why, this. If you aren't born with what you want the only alternative is to get it by other means. Now, Louisa hasn't a bit of notion of dressing herself."

"Hang it, man, but she has! I tell you she gets the most expensive clothes that are to be bought in Bradford."

"But that's not dressing well."

"If you think," said Hophni, rather viciously, "that Miss Mary Norreys dresses well, I flatly disagree with you. Louisa has said time after time she wouldn't be seen out of doors in the shabby old things that girl wears."

Tom laughed. "I know when you mean. Louisa saw her, did she, on the

Thursday morning in last week? That's the only day she has been in Bradford for the last month and a half. The weather was wet, and she had on a short walking skirt of Harris tweed and a boxcloth coat. They were both well cut, and she carried them well. By goy! Hophni, have you no eyes? Can't you see how splendidly that girl carries her clothes?"

"You seem to be pretty accurately posted in her movements."

"I am," said Tom simply, "and you know why."

"Still, you don't make me believe that she dresses well."

"I'll prove it to you one of these days most convincingly. Will you give me credit for having a keen nose for money-making?"

"Ay, lad. We can agree there. I'll back you against all the world for that."

"Very well, then. You'll perhaps think better of my judgment when I tell you that the firm of Thompson and Asquith is going to back Miss Norreys' taste for all it is worth."

"How do you mean?"

"She goes up to London for the season; perhaps you know?"

Hophni Asquith showed interest. "I didn't know. So those are London clothes she wears, are they? I see what you are getting at, Tom. I suppose we could weave Harris tweed as well as anyone else if there's going to be a run on it."

"There isn't. Now, lad, you see where your limitations come in. You can imitate; and, once give you a hint, you're as sharp as any man living to take it up if there's money in it. But you're like Louisa; you won't look far enough beyond Bradford. And also you're like Louisa in having rank bad taste in dress. Now, I've beaten you there. I was born with no taste; but I've seen that taste was a valuable asset if it is your business to manufacture the wherewithal to gratify it; and so I have made it my occupation to acquire taste. Don't you suppose I'm wasting my time when I'm walking about the streets of London and Paris and Vienna and Brussels, between appointments. I'm not. I'm looking at the women's clothes."

"And seeing which is the prettiest dressed?"

"Nothing of the kind. Fashion isn't prettiness. I mark the ones who are rigged out in the height of the fashion, and I've been training myself to deduce from them what the next fashion will be which catches on."

"First you've ever told me about it."

"I haven't talked about it before, because I was only an amateur at the game. I observed and observed, and puzzled and deduced. I stared into dressmakers' windows and chummed with a good many of the dressmakers themselves. I stood them dinners and talked clothes with 'em. Y'know, cookery and wines are two things I'm rather an expert on. Wonderful what a lot of information a judicious dinner sometimes gets you, Hophni. And then

when I'm in cities where the women go in for dress I look in at four or five theatres a night to see what they have got on. I'm a great patron of the drama, and I never sat through so much as half a play in my life."

"You shame me with the amount of work you put in, Tom."

"Nothing of the kind. If a man is so constituted by Nature that he only needs four hours' sleep in the twenty-four he must fill in time somehow."

"Well, I'd rather you worked that way than poached."

Mr Thompson grinned. "Can't poach in London, lad, or in Brussels. So I use my eyes there for money-grubbing. When I started trying to predict coming fashions I was usually wrong. By degrees I got more into the hang of the thing. And now, by goy! I'm going to put my last sixpence and my last inch of credit on it that I've got my finger exactly on next season's fabrics."

"It's a risk."

"It isn't. It looks risky, I'll grant you; but I've taken full care to get at the back of my facts, till I've brought the thing to a mathematical certainty. If you want a final clincher, here it is. Miss Norreys is notoriously one of the best-dressed women in London, and she agrees with my prediction, and, what's more, she's influence enough to see that it comes off to a nicety."

"What! She lets you make use of her, and the pair of you are not even engaged?"

"We are not engaged; but we have an understanding, and when the time comes we shall marry. Things aren't quite ripe yet. The Norreys are county people, and they don't understand trade. The only securities Mr Norreys recognizes are Land, and perhaps Consols. I don't agree with him, but I understand his standpoint and his limitations, and I'm open to fall in with them to a certain extent. I'm not going to marry Miss Norreys in spite of his teeth, though I believe she would come to me. I'm going to see Mr Norreys give me his daughter with a willing hand, and for that purpose I'm going to buy a big estate in the country and settle it on her. Thank Heaven, I can pay for other people's fancies as well as my own!"

Hophni pulled doubtfully at his square red whisker. "It would cramp us a good deal if you took much money out of the business. But perhaps you mean buying the place and getting a big mortgage on it?"

"Neither the one nor the other. In fact, I shall put more money into the business, and so will you. I buy no land to hang a mortgage on it, either. That wouldn't be playing the game. You and I will have a quarter of a million at the lowest estimate to divide by this time next year, and I can quite draw what I want out of that."

"You're getting into big figures."

"I prefer them. I can't niggle, Hophni; haven't time. Bradford will call it gambling, because they haven't seen how it's been worked up to, and can't see

how it's done. They'll copy us when the boom comes, and then it will be too late. They'll probably drop money in trying to follow. Some of them may pick up a little, and I'm sure they will be welcome to it. We shall have the cream, and by the time they start imitating it will be time for us to drop that line and be manufacturing for the fashion that will be next to follow. Grasp?"

"Quite. What's this fashion going to be? Merinos, I suppose."

"Merinos be hanged! They're just beginning to wear merinos again now, and all Bradford will be making merino pieces as fast as they can turn them out. We're making merinos ourselves, and we're going to stop."

"But what about all those new looms? They haven't paid for themselves yet."

"Break them up. We can afford to take scrap value for them. We shall want every inch of room that can be got in the shed to weave alpacas and mohairs."

"Mohair! Why, man, mohair is about dead! There's hardly a price quoted for it. The mohair manufacturers are nearly all burst or cutting their losses and going out of that business. The mohair spinners make dolls' hair, but precious little else just now. If your theory was in any way correct, surely some one would have an idea of it besides yourself? Come, Tom, we all know you are a right clever chap, but you mustn't set up for having more brain than all the rest of Bradford put together."

Tom's great square jaw began to protrude.

"Why not in this instance? There's no mystery about how it was done. I've worked the thing out from the very foundation, and nobody else has, that's all. Somebody's got to be first in everything, and that's the place I've marked out for myself all along. There's no use being modest over the matter. If you aim low you'll never get high. If you aim high, and mean to get there, you'll probably do it. The thing isn't half so difficult as it looks."

"I wish," said Hophni Asquith, with a sigh, "I'd your confidence; and then ____"

"Don't you worry, lad. You've a mind for detail that's a mind in a million. I couldn't stay in the mill day after day for the year on end, as you do. I've just got to be out in the open air, or I'd burst. I've a lot of primitive man in me somewhere, and it will come out. So you see what one lacks the other has, and that means we're exactly fitted as partners. What we've got to do now is to get hold of all the mohair we can for cash as far as it will go, and credit after that, and at the same time keep the market low and unsuspicious. We shall want every penny we can raise and borrow for that. I'd like to have our own top-making concern, and our own spinning-frames, and a dyehouse, besides the manufacturing and merchanting businesses. But we can't afford that yet, though I guarantee we have all the lot within three years from now. It's going to be such a fat time for us, Hophni, as was never dreamed of. But for the

present we must get our combing done on commission, and the yarn spun on commission too, and must put out the dyeing as we want it. It's a dead pity about the dyeing. I know a black dyer we could get cheap just now who's the best man in England. You could give that chap fifty shades of black, and he'd dye them all absolutely accurate."

"I think we could manage a small dyehouse at a squeeze; or, at any rate, I know of two or three we could get interests in. Dyeing's been bad lately, like everything else. We could do it just now pretty cheap."

"No. Can't afford it. We shall have to waste that black dyer for the present. Every penny must go for mohair and the new looms. Now then, that's settled. What are you going to do for the week-end?"

"Stay here in Bradford. You know I never miss chapel on Sundays, Tom, now we have got on our feet again, and can afford it."

"You're a mirthless creature. I know your style. You'll think over this new scheme and worry it out till the mill starts again on Monday morning. It's no use telling you to empty your head of business occasionally, and give your mind a holiday on that line, because you don't know how, and you won't try to learn. Well, good-bye, lad, for the present, and don't go straight home and tell Louisa that presently she'll have to give up black satin for morning wear and take to black alpaca. Remember, we've got to keep this scheme absolutely dark, or we'll have the mohair market flying up before we've begun to touch it.—Come along, Clara.—But all the same, you must tone down Louisa's taste in dress. She's a drag on us as she is."

Tom went out then, and a scarred she-dog of doubtful breed emerged from an unobtrusive corner of the office and followed him through the door. This particular Clara—whose official name was Clara's Clara's Clara—had a fine genius for self-effacement. When Tom was in Bradford she followed him about in his quick walks from place to place, keeping to the middle of the roadways for the most part, waiting for him against opposite kerbstones when he went into offices, but pestering him never. Every now and again Tom would snap his fingers, and Clara would come up, accept a quick pat on the side of the jaw, and then drop back to her station ten yards away. When Tom was away from Bradford, and she was off duty, she amused herself by fighting. But it was when the primitive man in her master came uppermost, and he left business behind him and took to the woods and the moors, that Clara's enjoyment of life reached its zenith.

Mongrel Clara's Clara's Clara was according to kennel-book niceties, but her breeding was the result of thought and much careful selection. The original Clara, now deceased, had been a genius in her way; the daughter, Clara's Clara, had a talent for poaching operations that has seldom been surpassed; but this granddaughter, Clara's Clara's Clara, had reached a pitch of perfection in

the illicit pursuit of game that was far more than human. Even Mr Thompson himself was almost satisfied with her, and he was a man never contented with anything short of the very best.

They went out that Saturday, Clara and Tom, the first stage of their journey in a first-class carriage of a railway train, and thereafter took to the road, putting behind them a steady five miles to the hour. Clara trotted along, with nose to ground and tail adroop, the picture of homely incapacity.

A twelve-mile stretch brought them to some corners which had a reputation for being more keenly preserved than any other shooting country in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Their attitude of simple wayfarers dropped from them with the quickness of a conjuring trick. Here was enjoyment of the most exquisite, and they prepared to get their fill of it.

The woods were hung with the last rags of their autumn draperies, and the cover was scanty, but poaching man and poaching dog dissolved into them invisibly before they were a dozen yards from the road. They trod with all delicacy, so as to leave no tracks; they trod, too, with such exquisite niceness as never to send abroad the crackle of a breaking twig or the rustle of crunching leaves.

Deer can move noiselessly like this in a cover when they choose, and, on occasion, so can the pheasant and the rabbit, but for man and dog the art must be laboriously learnt, and even then it is only some rare fellow and here and there some favoured cur that can acquire it in anything like perfection. But a poacher Tom had been born, a poacher (on off-days from more dry affairs) he remained through sheer love of the trade, and it was his pride to work himself up to the top of the poaching class. He was well equipped for the climb. He had a nimble brain and an appreciative eye, a tireless body and a prodigious memory. He had learned the knack of observing the ways of the woods and the moors and the ways of the things that peopled them. Perhaps, too, his ancestry helped him, and his instincts for falling into touch with these wild things were more keen than those of men descended from more highly civilized stock.

The wood was, as has been said, most strictly preserved, and formed, in point of fact, part of the estate of Mr Norreys, though leased by that gentleman to another to supply the chronic deficit of his purse. Norreys and Tom were very good friends, though they disagreed about the destiny of Miss Mary Norreys. They were both keen sportsmen, and though their methods were essentially different, each had a toleration for the other's tastes; and if Tom was clever enough to pick up pheasants under the keepers' noses without getting caught or earning a charge of shot in the legs, Mr Norreys was pleased enough that he should do it. At any rate, the game was calculated to brighten up the keepers.

Twice that afternoon Tom and Clara dissolved into the landscape on the

near approach of one of the patrolling watchers, and everywhere they went the clumsy trails of the game guardians were fresh and easily readable. It was a most appetizing cover to poach.

At last, however, they came to a spot which Tom thought would nicely fill his purpose. It was a piece of ground between two rides, which had been cleared by a windfall. The heavier timber of the uprooted trees had been carted away, but the branches remained, stacked into heaps to make shelter for the pheasants, and a yard from one of these Tom set up a snickle of thin and carefully rusted piano-wire. The brackens of the wood had drooped and flattened with the autumn frosts till they lay for the most part on the ground as a rich brown carpet; and against the background of these, the brown wire snare was wholly invisible.

Next came the ground-baiting. In one pocket Tom had some Indian corn, in another some Valencia raisins, which are the two greatest delicacies known to the pheasant palate. Now, Tom was a bit of a gourmand himself, and more than a bit of a cook. He was an adept at the invention of dainty dishes for men —and also, it appeared, for pheasants. There is an art in these things. He split each raisin carefully down half of one of its edges and inserted a yellow grain of corn into its interior—surely the most luscious beakful ever offered to a pheasant's gobble.

Then he laid them in place. Three of the stuffed raisins, built into a little pile, stood on the faggot side of the snare; a train of six led across the open to the edge of the cover.

Clara watched these preparations with intelligence, and when they were ended she went off by herself deeper into the wood. Tom dived out of sight amongst some brambles to see her work. But, keen though his eyes were, of Clara herself he caught no further view. Still, presently there was evidence that she was attending strictly to business. Lying with face close to the ground, Tom could see down the fringed aisles of the undergrowth the pheasants beginning to move, jerkily, foolishly, with outstretched heads and beady eyes. Clara was driving them most scientifically. A pheasant in cover will never rise on to the wing so long as it is not hustled from behind too rapidly. The excellent pheasant has learnt that it is never shot at on the ground, and so it very naturally far prefers to run.

Clara kept the birds on the move, slowly, persistently, never making the mistake of over-eagerness and frightening them into the air. It was clever beating for any dog unaccompanied. But now came genius. Some eight or ten birds were moving before her, and if these were driven into the clearing one might get caught, but the rest would be badly scared. That would be untidy work, of which Tom, as a neat-minded poacher, would not approve. So Clara deliberately set about cutting one bird after another away from the mob, till at

length, when the opening was reached, one gorgeous-plumaged cock alone remained.

The bird trotted out into the open, very beautiful and somewhat troubled. It was vaguely alarmed by some slight disturbance which had been moving in the wood behind. Then its quick, bright eye fell on one of the stuffed raisins, and there was a gulp and a gobble and a chattering crow of astonished delight. Caution flew. Nothing so entirely delightful had ever passed that pheasant's palate before. Gobble! down went number two. Gobble! number three. And then! Ah! never mind these scattered ones. They will do for afterwards. There is a whole heap of raisins on ahead!

There was a quick, straggling run, head down, tail extended. Then there was a fine cock pheasant with two fat raisins in its beak and a wire snickle tightly round its neck beating at the landscape with vain spurs, and fanning up the brown fern spores with ineffective wings.

Clara came and grinned through the edge of the cover whilst Tom slew his game and spread more of the irresistible stuffed raisins, and then back she went deep into the wood again to drive up another victim. Three more birds they got in this way, and were disturbed only once. A patrolling underkeeper came perilously near the line of drive. But Tom imitated the bleat and stampede of a frightened sheep, and the yap of a pursuing dog, and this most uncommon occurrence was quite enough to draw away that simple underkeeper on a non-existent scent.

Finally, with two brace of fine pheasants in the inside skirt pockets of his coat, and a very wet and complacent Clara at his heels, Tom worked his silent way to the upper edge of the wood, and climbed over the boundary wire. The rough bent-grass of the lower moorland lay beyond, and he walked up over it, keeping to the gullies so as not to show upon a skyline. Finally, with infinite caution, to make sure he was not watched or followed, he came to a tunnel-mouth of some old lead-workings, and after Clara had sniffed carefully and declared them unoccupied he left the open air and stepped off briskly into the darkness.

The way was wet, black, and narrow, fanned by a damp air, suspicious with the sounds of water dropping into pools. But Tom held along his path with the confidence of an accustomed tenant, and presently turned, climbed a dozen rough steps, and halted.

He fumbled for a minute and found a bottle, and from that extracted matches and a candle. When the wick yellowed out into flame, there was displayed a cubical, irregular cave of some three yards each way, and the entrances to two tunnels which led off into blackness. A light air passed through it and fanned the candle flame.

Here had once been a 'pocket' of lead ore in those distant days when the

mine had supported workers. Mr Thompson, with his troglodytic tastes, derived from those collier ancestors, had found the place and furnished it with dried bracken laid over heather, and here, when so inclined, he could retire in primitive seclusion. He was no regular visitor; months would sometimes pass without his coming to this earth; but latterly he had been pretty constant in his appearances, and it was curious that this assiduity should be coincidental with the residence of Miss Mary Norreys at her father's house in the neighbourhood.

On this particular autumn afternoon Tom hung up the two brace of fresh birds on the pegs in the wall of one of the galleries which formed his larder, and examined with care the other brace which was there maturing. He chose with satisfaction a fine plump hen-bird that had hung exactly the right length of time to reach its gastronomic perfection. Then, after he had lit a fire of wood and peat at the entrance to the gallery which took the outdraft, he plucked and prepared the pheasant for cooking. When it was ready he took from his pocket a handful of chestnuts, which he peeled and cut small, and a couple of bunches of red ripe rowans, which he bruised amongst the chestnuts, and with this mixture he stuffed the pheasant. Then he pinned up the flap of skin with a splinter of wood, fitted the bird with a liberal breast-plate of bacon from his stores, and hung it up in front of the fire.

Tom's roasting-jack was primitive but effective. He had found a heavy iron corvewheel amongst the other unconsidered *débris* of the disused mine, and had suspended it from one axis by a string from the roof of his cave. Another string, with a noose at the end, depended from its lower axis, and on this hung the roast. With a good smart turn, this wheel acquired momentum, which it stored up in the form of torsion in the string, till momentum was lost. Then the string would start it back in the other direction.

For a dripping-pan a shallow biscuit-tin stood against the ashes, and with a crude tin spoon twisted out of the lid Tom basted his roast with affectionate care.

But if, on occasions like these, he was very much primitive man, still there were points where civilization had begun to bite more deeply into him. He possessed a plate now, and set it to warm in front of the fire. A knife and fork too—silver fork—were turned up from under the fern. And instead of the stone jar of beer, which used to form his usual adjunct to these feasts, he produced a bottle of burgundy of curious vintage from some nook in one of the galleries, and set it to air at a nicely judged distance from the blaze.

In the middle of this cookery, Clara, the uncomely, had jumped up to her feet, had gone to the intake gallery entrance, and had stood there bristling and working her nose and ears. She uttered no trace of whimper or growl, as that was not Clara's way, but she took care that Tom should see her, and Tom drew

his own deductions.

"Shepherd on the moor, old girl. But he won't come in here. Too much afraid of ghosts. You can go out and prospect if you like. I know you won't let yourself be seen."

Clara dissolved off silently into the darkness, being there one instant and gone the next, according to her habit, and Tom attended strictly to his bird. When Mr Thompson cooked he put his whole mind to it, with the result that his dishes always attained a surprising perfection.

But his culinary operations were broken off now with something of suddenness. A murmur made itself heard down the tunnel through which Clara had vanished, which presently resolved itself into footsteps. Tom jumped up from his knees with a remark that was not altogether a prayer for the welfare of the invader, and prepared to jump over his fire and make an exit down the gallery which carried the smoke.

A voice stopped him—a voice which came from far away between rocky walls, "Tom! oh, Tom!" And then, as he gave no answer, through sheer desire to hear the voice again, the voice went on, "Mr Thompson, may I come in?"

Tom picked up the candle in its clay socket and held it high in the gallery's mouth for a beacon. "Mary!" he cried, "Mary, why do you come here?"

"I'll let you know when I am there," said Miss Norreys threateningly.

"But how did you find your way?"

"Clara brought me. Clara has some notions of civility, if other people have not."

"Clara's a treacherous young person. First time she ever gave me away."

At this point Clara came out of the gallery into the firelight, and tied herself into knots, and showed two sets of well-groomed teeth. "There, you see," said Tom to Miss Norreys, who followed, "you've seduced away my dog from me, and she's extremely doubtful as to what's going to happen next. Clara's a very clever animal, and generally knows to an inch what's in the wind. But at the present moment—look at her, Mary, writhing and grinning there—she thinks she's in for a first-class licking, and, 'pon my word, I think she deserves it."

"Make me somewhere nice to sit down on," said Miss Norreys, and Tom pulled together some bracken into a heap. "I'll stay and dine with you, Tom, thanks. What have you been doing to that pheasant, you gourmand, to make it smell so good? And burgundy put down to warm! Tom, never prate to me about your savage tastes again. I can foresee a French *cordon bleu* in the establishment that is to be, if your wife is going to have anything like a comfortable time of it with you."

"I say," replied Tom stolidly, "you know you ought not to be here."

"But I am here, and that's the main thing. Put another plate down to warm,

Tom. I see you have only one there. Aren't you going to give me chipped potatoes as well? And bread sauce?"

"There's only biscuit to eat with it. You ought not to be here, you know, Mary. And besides, there is only one plate and one knife and fork."

"Then I shall take them, and, as a punishment for your inhospitality, you must eat with your fingers. Tom, I'm not a person that goes in for crying, but if you don't amend your manners, there will be tears or something in about another minute. I can tell you it took a big wrench to one's pride to come here at all."

"You know quite well why I keep away from you."

"I never see you at all except across a street, and even then you won't cross over to speak to me. It isn't exactly proper treatment from the man one's engaged to."

"I'm not engaged," said Tom grimly. "I told you straight out I was not going to be engaged till I was in a proper position to marry."

"And yet you threatened all sorts of horrible things to anyone else who chose to take a fancy to me."

"Oh, yes, and I quite meant all I said."

"Then it seems I'm to remain a miserable spinster during my lord's pleasure."

"About that—I hope it won't be much longer now."

"I see. Well, if this is your idea of courtship I must say it is more original than amusing. Is the pheasant nearly done, Tom? What's that that makes it smell so good?"

"Never mind the pheasant. You mustn't stay here. I'll see you home, or, at any rate, well along your way."

"You greedy boy! I believe you want it all for yourself. Well, you're not going to have your own way just for once. Here I am, and here I dine. Do you still keep that ridiculous stuffed trout that we first made acquaintance over? I think you ought to hand that trout and its glass case along to me."

"I offered it to you once, and you wouldn't have it. Now you'll have to wait till 'with all my worldly goods I thee endow.' "

"You talk so glibly of marriage, and you haven't even proposed to me yet."

"I'll propose to you, Mary dear, in due form, when the time comes, if you want it. I'm not ready yet. I think I shall be soon. But I'm not going to marry till I can settle on you an estate as big as your father's on your wedding-clay. That's where my pride comes in."

She turned and faced him with eyes that shone suspiciously, and a little spurt of passion. "And do you think you have a monopoly in pride? Do you think I would marry you at all if I didn't care for you? Do you think you could buy me just as you buy one of your abominable bales of wool, if only you offer

a full market value?”

Tom stooped on one knee and kissed her hand. “I know you care for me, dear, and I know, too, you understand how dearly I love you. But it’s the difference of the positions we are in that makes the trouble. You come of an old county family, and it is your duty not to marry beneath you. I am nobody, except what I make myself. It’s the future I look to. If we married now all your own class would look down on you. No, don’t deny it, dear; you know they would. But presently I shall have made what every one will call success. I shall have money; I shall have land, with every prospect of more to follow. People forgive much to success. I don’t think they would dare to be cool with you then.”

“No. They would say I married you for your money.”

“If you will continue to look at me when we are married, my sweetheart, as you are looking at me now, I don’t think people will have any doubt about our real reasons, unless they are stone blind. Oh, Mary darling, don’t make it harder than it is to keep away from you! I think of you a hundred times a day, and just long to hold you in my arms and watch you let out that secret through your eyes. Do you think I’m ice? I’m only doing what is right. Don’t make it harder for me, darling, than it is already!”

“I suppose I am selfish, Tom.”

“You’re not. You’re perfection. I won’t have my future wife abused.”

“It seems,” she said, with a little rueful laugh, “that my will has got to give way to yours, Tom, and so I must bide my lord’s good time. But there’s one thing,” she flashed, “that I will not be cheated out of, and that’s my dinner. When Clara led me in here she fairly wriggled with hospitality.”

“You shall eat part of a pheasant,” said Tom heartily, “such as seldom comes to the tooth.” He took the bird away from the fire, unpinned its bacon armour, and carved away one breast and the oyster pieces from the back. The fragrant steam of the meat and the chestnuts and berries filled the place deliciously. He set a tumbler of burgundy beside her, and stood back to watch her eat, feasting himself on her eyes.

“When I go out to dinner, Mr Thompson, my host eats too.”

“I’m getting all I want, thanks.”

“And doesn’t make—or look—ridiculous compliments, unless I happen to be engaged to him.”

“Oh, have you been engaged to many people, then?”

“That’s my secret. But you said just now very plainly that I wasn’t engaged to you, so unless I’m to understand that you’ve changed your mind——”

“Not at all,” laughed Tom hastily, and helped himself from the bird, and ate with a pocket-knife, and used the lid of the biscuit-box as a plate.

“I’m glad you’ve only got one tumbler,” said Mary Norreys, with a shy

laugh, and drank a toast. “Here’s to that coming fashion in mohair, Tom. I only took a partial interest in it before. But as you’ve got so very high and mighty I’m going to make you remember that if you do pull a fortune out of the new fashion, you’ll owe some of it to me. If I don’t pin the women’s tastes in London on to mohair, I’ll—well, I’ll not marry you. And that would be dreadful. Oh, but I shall do it, Tom. Here’s to mohair, Tom.” Then she passed him the tumbler.

It was little more than a year after this that a dogcart brought Tom up over the frozen drive that led from the main road to Norreys House, and presently Tom found himself being rather coldly regarded by Mr Norreys in an unused library.

“I’ve just called,” said Tom pleasantly, “to say I’m going to marry Mary, and we’d like to have your consent.”

“The deuce you would! I knew you’d got ideas of that kind in your head some time ago, but I thought they were all over and done with. By the way, does she know you are here?”

“Not yet. She will do directly. Are we going to have your consent?”

“Most certainly not. I like you well enough personally, Thompson, but you’re not the right man. Miss Norreys is going to marry some one in the county. So suppose we drop the subject.”

“Not at all. I’ve been pretty successful in business lately.”

“My dear fellow, I know nothing at all about business.”

“I knew you’d a weakness for land, and out of sheer deference to your tastes I’ve bought a tidy estate out of surplus profits; and if size and rent-roll go for anything, it’s about twice as big as this of your own. Now mind, I still hold to my own theory that for an active man, such as I am, to sink his money in land is sheer waste of useful capital. But I want very much to have your approval, and so there’s the estate. It will be settled on Mary when we’re married.”

“Where’s the place?”

“Buton Hall.”

“Phew! I say, Thompson, you seem to have been doing pretty well. But just buying the place doesn’t get you into the county, you know.”

“I’ve an intention,” said Tom drily, “of skipping the county and going into the peerage in the course of time. I said I’d only bought Buton to please you.”

“H’m! very good of you, very good of you. Well, stay to dinner. I suppose you’d like to go and see Mary now, and say it’s all right. By gad, though, to think of your buying my girl Buton for a wedding present! I’ll have a talk with you about wool afterwards. It seems rather a good thing to go in for if one’s got a bit of loose cash.”

CHAPTER VIII
THEIR MR BENT

If in these records it has been shown that Mr T. Thompson made at one time and another a great deal of money, it should also be remembered in counterpoise that his personal liberality was at all periods very handsome. He was no indiscriminate giver, and (although he was always described as a ‘pushing’ fellow) he was never a man who gave with one eye on the printed subscription lists. Fully three-quarters of his benefactions were held as a secret between himself and the recipient. Indeed, he had a very delicate sensitiveness about this matter.

He was notoriously a keen judge of men and motives, and was a difficult person to impose upon. He was dangerous too, because when he discovered that his charitable instincts had been tampered with he was touched in his sorest spot, and showed a vindictiveness which surprised many people and warned a good many more.

He was by no means straitlaced over the matter. He often gave to some idle rogue, on the elementary principle that the rogue wanted a sovereign more than he did. But it was when his feelings of pity had been worked upon, and he parted with money, and later on found that he had been swindled, that he began to get ugly. To score back on these occasions had grown to be an absolute passion with him. He was not very choice about his methods either: any stick that would beat this peculiarly dirty kind of thief was in T. Thompson’s eye a good stick.

Still, as was natural, he got imposed upon now and again, and on one particular occasion his tender feeling for poverty and sickness was made the lever against him for a very ingenious piece of deception.

He was coming out of the mill that day, dog at heel, after a terrific spell of work, and intended to walk home (or, rather, to trot as soon as he came out into the country) by way of exercise. Twenty-mile spins of this description always gave him more enjoyment for his dinner, especially if the weather were cold or rainy.

But on this occasion he was stopped at the office door by a small boy who said:

“Oh, Tom, there’s Sarah Olroyd wants to see tha’. Shoo’s enjoyin’ very bad ’ealth this three week nah.”

“Why, she only tumbled down and broke her wrist.”

“T’sheckle willn’t mend. Shoo’s been to t’bone-setter, an’ ’e cannot get it

to knit; an' shoo's got a bottle thro' t'infirmary an' all, an' that's been n' good, nawther. Ye gave her t'recommend."

"I know I did. The fool of a woman ought to have had her shackle set at the infirmary, instead of messing about with quacks. Tell her to call here for another recommend to-morrow, and go across to the infirmary again."

"Shoo cannot. Shoo's summat wrang ov 'er insides an' all, an' shoo's been liggin' i' bed ever sin' Bowlin' Tide Monday, so they tell ma. They say shoo's fair clemmed to dee-ath."

"Who says?"

"T'young feller as telled me to slip along an' tell ye."

"Why didn't he come himself? Who was he?"

"Ar dunnoa."

"Looks as if no one was taking any special care of Sarah Olroyd, anyway. I'll just go and see for myself what's wrong. Where does she live?"

"Oop t'entry, just past Delver's Arms, i' Silsbridge Loin. Third 'ouse. T'young feller telled me shoo war livin' i' t'cellar-'oil nah."

"You don't seem to know much about it, anyway. There's a penny for you to buy spice with. Come along, Clara."

Clara, that scarred and intelligent mongrel, came up from the opposite side of the street, where she had been passing compliments with a trio of fox-terriers, and she and Tom set off at their usual town pace of four and one-quarter miles to the hour. Tom hated moving slowly, even over a pavement.

"Poor old Sarah!" he mused as he walked. "Silly old fool! why on earth does she go to a quack? And why doesn't she let me know she's hard up, the improvident old idiot? Pride, I reckon. But I'd like to twist somebody's tail for not telling me earlier. Poor old Sarah!"

Mrs Olroyd had been an acquaintance of Tom's when he was a workman, and ever since he had set up as a master (excepting for that short time when the mill was out of his hands) he had always found her employment as a weaver, and taken care that she had good warps and could earn good wages. She had no earthly claim on him beyond this item of early acquaintanceship, but that did not count in Tom's mind; neither did the fact of her improvidence, nor the detail that she had a long list of not very attractive failings. In health he would have lectured her on the lot of these points; had lectured her, in fact, more than once, and in good strong Yorkshire at that; but here she was, poor and ailing, and it was these facts of her needs and misery that alone he remembered.

He stopped once on his way at a grocer's shop, and bought tea and tinned salmon—those luxuries beloved of the poor—slipped these into his pocket, and continued once more his rapid walk.

Presently he came up the hill, and found himself amongst the Silsbridge Lane slums. He looked around him with familiarity and disgust. He had once

himself found residence there, and he had seen to it that his residence had continued for a very small number of weeks. The squalor, the foulness, and the misery of it nauseated him. If this were poverty any change must be for the better. And that, as much as anything else, was the beginning of the ambition which had set him a-climbing the ladder of success with such extraordinary quickness and fortune.

That obscene public-house, the Delver's Arms, he knew from ancient experience, having frequently exchanged his coppers there (when coppers were scarce with him) for mugs of inferior beer. The "entry next beyond" it was new to him but easily found, though narrow of entrance. He stood under six feet in height, but he had to stoop his head to avoid the lintel, and, once inside, his shoulders shaved the walls.

The air in that narrow passage was sour and stale. One jumping gas-jet illuminated it. In the cinder-paved yard beyond three lean cats were indulging in personalities, but retreated hurriedly at the sight of Clara.

There were no numbers up in this squalid court, but Tom counted out the third house for himself, and noted that it had two outer doors. One entrance stood at the head of a flight of steep stone steps; the other lay six feet below yard-level, for the use of the cellar occupant.

The other houses round the yard gave no visible sign of prosperity, but this third house outdid them all. The paint hung from its rotting woodwork in strips and blisters; the glass of most of its windows was gone, and grimy rags bulged in its place; every ensign known to poverty and squalor was flaunted there brazenly. It was just a rookery common enough in that period before municipalities took the dwelling-house question in hand, and it is typical of T. Thompson that the crusade against these hovels was largely of his raising.

But at that particular moment he was concerned solely with the welfare of Mrs Olroyd. "Fool Sarah was to come down to a hole like this!" he muttered angrily, and went down the littered steps towards the cellar. "Confound her silly pride. Why didn't she send for me earlier?"

He lifted the latch of the door, opened it, knocked, and walked inside. He saw an empty, earth-smelling room, stone paved, strewn with rubbish, and lit indifferently by a tiny window glazed with four grimy panes. A half-sucked orange on the floor pointed to a recent visitor, but there was no further sign of residence.

"Looks as if I had got to the wrong shop," thought Tom. "I wonder if that boy, whoever he was, was trying to get a rise out of me? I don't think it altogether. I know a liar when I see one—it's business to be able to pick out liars—and he looked and talked like an ordinary truthful urchin. Besides, Sarah Olroyd did break her wrist, and is far too old-fashioned to go to an ordinary doctor, and therefore probably had fallen amongst quacks, and is pretty bad.

Anyway, I must find out where she lives."

He was on the point of turning to go, but out of disgusted curiosity took one more look round the cellar, and, with eyes now more used to the gloom, made out another door in the farther shadow.

"Hullo, Sarah!" he called out. "You in there?"

There was no answer, but when he strained his ears (which through poaching practice had grown very sensitive to tiny sounds) he thought he heard the rustle of breathing.

"Perhaps she's asleep," he mused. "Perhaps she's too far gone to answer. By goy! I shall never forgive myself if Sarah dies from neglect, when a little cash and a little care might have pulled her through, the poor old reprobate!"

He walked smartly across the dirty flags, pushed open the farther door, which squeaked and yielded heavily, and stepped inside. Yes, certainly, there was a bed against the wall. He let go the door, which slammed to behind him, and fumbled in his pocket for a match. He had trouble in striking it, because everything was clammy and damp. But at last it gave its tiny flare of light, and the cellar sprang up into view.

There was the bed surely enough, recently slept in, but now untenanted. A candle in a socket of French nails sprouted from the top of an empty orange-box which stood by the bedhead. Tom lit the candle and noted a couple of cigar-butts on the floor.

"Now, where the dickens have I got to?" he wondered. "Sarah is a curious old woman, and has some peculiar tastes, but she doesn't smoke cigars. Clara, dog, I think we'll just leave the matter of Mrs Olroyd alone for the time being, and trot away out home. This seems to be the wrong shop for us, anyway. Peugh! I can do with some fresh air after this hole."

He blew out the candle, crossed over to the door, and put finger and thumb on the latch.

It refused to move.

He rattled and shook it. He pressed and pressed. Tom was, as has been reported many times in this history, a young man of exceptional strength and physique, and presently under his vigorous persuasion the iron latch bent down till it met the handle.

"Well," thought Mr Thompson. "I don't know whose property I am damaging, but I've business the other side of that door, and so here goes."

He put a sturdy shoulder to the planking, and shoved. It creaked, but did not yield. He thrust again, scientifically, taking care to get the heaviest of his pressure exactly over the lock. He felt the door yield a trifle; in fact, there was a noise that told that the catch of the latch had cracked away. He threw himself against the door again, this time about half-way up, and below the latch. The door stood as firm as the solid wall.

Then, and not before, it dawned upon him that somebody had made him prisoner. He ceased from movement a minute, holding his breath and making no sound. From the other side of the door there was the distinctive sound of a screw grating against iron and driving into soft woodwork.

"Fixing up iron bars against that door, are you, whoever you are?" he called out, and promptly attacked the door with foot and shoulder with the whole of his force.

He splintered one of the middle panels, but the wood did not fall away. He struck another match, relit the candle, and did a close inspection. Through the cracks of the splintered panel he made out that a sheet of felt had been clapped against the other side of the door. The crunch of the screwdriver told that the man who was making him prisoner was working his hardest now, and without attempt at concealment.

Clara bristled with barkless fury, but the matter was beyond her scope. In Tom too the fighting blood bubbled. He looked round the squalid room for a weapon, and wrenched a leg from the wooden bedstead. But the thing was rotten and brittle, and meanwhile the door was being made fast. He flew at it with foot and shoulder, making the most of the momentum of his twelve stone five to get the highest efficiency possible into his blows. The wood of the door crunched and cracked, but nothing gave. The heavy felt and the iron battens kept all in place.

He halted presently, sweating and bruised, and began to look about the cellar for some other means of exit. But for the moment he let this wait. A voice from somewhere was addressing him.

"I say, Mr Thompson, if you're quite convinced you're caught, perhaps you'll just sit down quietly and listen to terms."

The voice was tiny, thin, and unrecognizable, and seemed to come, moreover, from an immense distance. Tom puzzled for a moment or two over a certain quality in it that was somehow or other familiar to him, and then recognized that the speaker was holding between his lips one of those ingenious contrivances of tin which a Punch and Judy showman uses to give voices for his puppets.

"If this is a practical joke," said Tom, "let me tell you it's in bad taste. Mrs Olroyd's ill, and she's a friend of mine."

"It isn't a practical joke."

"Is your game blackmail, then? Because if that's the case you're a long way off getting anything out of me. The odds are I dig my way out of this hovel before another hour is over, and if you do manage to keep me any time, please remember that I am a man who will be much hunted for."

"My dear Mr Thompson," squeaked the voice, "don't be foolish enough to despise your enemies. I don't pretend to your brains, but I'm not altogether a

fool. I've had this little *coup* in mind for three months, and I fancy I've thought out all possible objections to it, and prepared for them."

Tom's poacher's ears were strung to their highest keenness to make out where the voice came from; Clara, the artful, was busied with the same problem; but neither of them could solve it.

"For instance, wires have already gone off to Mrs Thompson at Buton Hall, and to Mr Hophni Asquith at the mill, telling them that a sudden idea has come to you, and you have run across to Vienna to carry it through. So, you see, they won't hunt for you. You know you do have those sudden ideas, and you do make sudden rushes off to London or New York, or wherever it may be, to carry them out."

As this was exactly true Tom wasted no time in reply, but went on with his inspection.

"I know you're a physically powerful man, and if you were left alone you'd burrow a hole through that door in time, or pick an opening through the wall. So, naturally, that has been arranged for. You won't be left alone. Presently I shall give you my terms, and then if you are foolish and don't agree to them at once I shall proceed to annoy you. I shall turn on the gas into that cellar where you are, until you suffocate into submission. So take the hint and blow out that candle if you have it lit, and don't precipitate matters by an explosion."

"You fool!" snapped Tom, "if you suffocate me with gas, that's murder. My carcass would be worth nothing to you, and you are bound to be hanged for your pains, bound to be."

The voice squeaked out a sort of horrible chuckle. "There'll be no murder, my good sir. I have calculated the matter out carefully, and made experiments, and know exactly when to turn off the gas tap so as to avoid actual suffocation. When you are so far gone that another ten seconds will make you turn up your toes for good I shall shut off the tap, let the gas escape away out of the room, and allow you gradually to come to. Then, if you are still stiff-necked, you will have another dose; and so on. You needn't be frightened about it; the thing can be done with mathematical accuracy. As I have said, there have been very careful preparatory experiments before you were brought in to be operated on. The only drawback (from your point of view) is that each experience is pretty exhausting, and has, I am sorry to say, a lasting bad effect on the system."

Tom thumped the partition wall which divided him off from the outer cellar, and felt discouraged. It was of stone and at least two feet thick. They builded strongly in those olden days. The voice squeaked on.

"As you must quite understand the situation by now, we might as well come to business. It will cost you exactly eight thousand two hundred and seventy-five pounds three shillings and ninepence to get out."

"What on earth's the idea of the odd coppers?"

"The week's wages at your two mills amounted to eight thousand two hundred and seventy-five pounds three shillings and ninepence last week."

"Now, I wonder who the deuce you are to know that?"

The voice chuckled. "You admire cleverness, Mr Thompson, and you ought to admire mine. I told you I'd worked out the details of this scheme with a good deal of care. Your firm's messenger draws that sum, or thereabouts, from the bank in cash every Saturday, and the bank has it all ready. The only change from the ordinary procedure will be that you will write a letter to the bank manager saying you want seven thousand pounds additional in notes, and asking him to have it ready, and also that you are sending a new messenger. To-day's Thursday. If the letter is posted to-night, it will give the bank plenty of time to have the money ready for Saturday."

"They'd smell a rat at once. No bank would swallow a demand for seven thousand pounds in cash without making further inquiries," said Tom, who wanted to gain time. "We always do our business by cheque or bills, like every one else. Why, the most elementary thief ought to know that."

"Not being an elementary thief, Mr Thompson, I go further, and know that latterly you have been lending money on mortgage. You've worked the business through your solicitor, and when solicitors handle mortgages it is always cash that is handed over, not cheques. I'm afraid the bank will give out the money in hundred-pound notes, and I shall have to get rid of those at a big discount. Gold's the only thing I could handle without risk or trouble, of course, but I didn't see how to get gold. Perhaps you could give me a hint?"

"Now, I do wonder who the deuce you are? You're rather a clever kind of brigand, I must admit. But don't imagine you've got your own way yet by a very long chalk."

"Then," squeaked the voice, "if that's your attitude, we may as well begin our coercive measures at once."

Promptly an odour of coal-gas began to grow in the cellar, and Tom blew out the candle flame. He knew the contours of the room off by heart by this time, and could think as well in the dark as in light. It began to come home to him that this invisible brigand was master of the situation. The item of the £8275 did not mean very much to him. He was making an enormous income at the time. But though he was extremely liberal with his money, like all other successful men he was vastly bitter at the idea of being made to pay out against his will without value received. Moreover, by yielding to this blackmailer he would be establishing a very dangerous precedent.

If only he could find the pipe that gave ingress to the gas, and stop it, that would at least give him a respite; but, sniff and search and listen how he would, he could not make the discovery. Even Clara's keen nose was unequal

to solving the problem. But then, genius though Clara might be, this was outside her scope. In fact, presently Clara made an exception to her fixed rule, and showed her distaste for existing conditions by a very distinct whine.

"Satisfied yet that I can make things unpleasant for you?" squeaked the voice. "I don't want to torment your dog, and I can hear she's had enough of it, anyway."

"Turn off that infernal gas, and let's talk."

"I believe you think more of the dog than you do of your wife, Mr Thompson."

"Leave my wife out of the question," said Tom sharply. "I don't choose to have her name on the lips of a dirty scoundrel of your description."

The voice chuckled. "Now, that's very much to your credit. But why get abusive? You think yourself clever: I've proved myself cleverer. Why don't you offer me employment in your business?"

"Get to the point," snapped Tom.

"Certainly. As I have said, you're going to give me a letter signed by yourself, asking the bank to have the money ready by Saturday, and incidentally introducing me. You may refer to me as 'your Mr Bent.' Presently, when the gas has escaped from the room, and you can light the candle again, you will find paper and a pen under the pillow on that bed."

Tom scraped a match on the wall.

"Be careful!" shrilled the voice. "Oh, do be careful, or you'll have an explosion!"

"No fear. Not enough gas, always presuming you have turned it off. Yes, here's the pen, and a shut-up ink-bottle, and writing paper. I say, confound your cheek! you've gone and stolen our office paper with the firm's business heading on it!"

"My dear Mr Thompson, what a curious person you are! Now, I should have thought you were just the man to appreciate thoroughness in detail. Of course, your firm's business paper is an additional guarantee for the genuineness of everything. Nothing like attending to detail. It wouldn't do for me to have the bank sending round to inquire if it was all right. Have you found the blotting-block to write on?"

"Yes, here."

Tom sat on the bed, with an uneasy Clara at his feet, and wrote slowly and carefully. The letter was formal and businesslike. It introduced "our Mr Bent," and said he would call for the money on Saturday morning, rather before the usual time at which Thompson and Asquith's messenger was accustomed to draw the week's wages for the hands.

"Here's your authorization," said Tom. "Open the door and take it."

The voice chuckled. It was a merry kind of invisible brigand. "I've too

much respect for your physical powers. Slip the letter under the door. I'll lift up the felt an eighth of an inch or so, to give it passage."

Tom grumbled and did as he was asked.

There was a couple of minutes' pause, and then the paper slid back, again. "Very natural of you to write it that way," squeaked the voice, "but you might have given me credit for having studied your signature pretty accurately. So please write it over again, this time in your usual hand. You might fill out a cheque, too, whilst you are at it. You'll find a form torn out of your office cheque-book between the leaves of the blotting-pad. Don't spoil the cheque—it is a pity to waste the stamp—and if it isn't one the bank will pass I won't pass it either."

Tom set his great square jaw, and there was a look on his face which meant damage for the owner of the voice if they two could come in contact. But he was very securely gaoled. Again and again he looked round the cellar, and found no hint at a means of escape. Window there was none, ventilator there was none. The doorway was the only aperture that met the eye in either ceiling, walls, or floor; and the door, as he had learned by unpleasant experience, was very securely fastened. The place was absolutely unbreakable, and to dally with his captor was merely to earn a dose of semi-suffocation. Tom used to himself some good hard Anglo-Saxon when he thought over these items.

"I don't want to hurry you unduly, Mr Thompson," squeaked the voice, "but——"

"Well, I suppose you're top dog here, and I must give in. But I'll offer you my opinion of yourself, packed small, first. You're a dirty skunk! Money-making's money-making, and thieving's thieving, but there are degrees in each. If you'd got me here by fair means I wouldn't have grumbled specially; but you lure me here on the pretence of seeing a poor old woman who's sick, and, as I say, you're a liar and a dirty skunk!"

"But she is ill," pleaded the voice.

"That makes it all the worse. If she's ill and wants help, I'm the man that could give it to her; and as for you, you beast! I suppose you'd see her starved to death before you'd lift a finger to help her."

"I may have taken a liberty with Mrs Olroyd's name," squeaked the voice, "but at any rate I made it up to her. I gave her a sovereign to be going on with, and I gave her next-door neighbour five shillings to drop in and look after her occasionally. Please don't think you have a monopoly in pity as well as in mohair, Mr Thompson."

"If I could think you were speaking truth I'd half forgive your blackmailing me."

"I'm afraid you must take my word for it."

"For the present, yes," said Tom grimly. "But when I get out I'll prove it

for myself, and if I find you've lied to me, I'll set a hunt on your track, my man, that'll get you by the heels—yes, if it costs fifty thousand pounds to catch you."

"And if not? I'd like to hear the other alternative. As I spoke truth to you, your threats there don't concern me."

"If you have looked after the old body, why, I suppose it would be compounding a felony, but I'm hanged if I shouldn't like to call a truce and have a look at you! It's a devilish pity you didn't run straight, my man. You've got brains, and you've got organizing power, and if you hadn't possessed this unfortunate taste for brigandage you're just the man I could have found employment for. I'd have made your fortune for you."

"This is very flattering," said the voice; "but in the meanwhile just let me have that letter and the cheque."

"Quite right," said Tom more cheerfully; "business first. Here you are. Look out, under the door again. By the way, Clara (that's my dog here) is a bit of a judge, and she's snuffling at you underneath the door, and she's graciously pleased to approve of you. She's wagging herself very pleasantly, and, let me tell you, it isn't one person in a hundred that Clara condescends to like."

"I am overwhelmed," squeaked the voice.

"Yes," thought Tom to himself, "I'll bet that rather scares you. But I wonder who the blazes you can be? You're some one that knows me, and knows the ways of Thompson and Asquith pretty intimately, and that's a fact. 'Our Mr Bent,' I've written you as I wonder if you're our Mr Anybody-else? We've got some clever fellows in the business, but I can't put my finger on anyone quite sharp enough to have brought off this *coup*." Then aloud, "Cheque to your liking, Mr Thief?"

"Written quite naturally, thank you. So is the letter."

"I suppose you'd hardly see your way to letting me go just yet?"

"Well, hardly. Have you looked under the bed? No? Well, you'll find a raised game pie there, which I think I can recommend to you, and a bottle of champagne. I know you prefer burgundy as a general thing, but burgundy would have been chilly to drink in this cellar, and there were no means of warming it; and, besides, I thought perhaps the champagne might bring back your spirits a little after my bit of unpleasantness."

"By Jove! you are a wonderful person. How the dickens do you know that burgundy's my favourite tipple? I must really compliment you on the way you've got up the details of your swindle. You present the cheque the day after to-morrow as soon as the bank opens, I suppose; and then you'll go over the hills and far away. May I come out then? I'll give you my parole to allow you twelve hours' start before I put the police on your track. You'd better be reasonable, and not keep me here too long. I don't wish to brag, but I'm a

person of some consideration, and I'm not to be kidnapped without inquiry being made."

"Do you mean that your wife will begin to have search made for you?"

"She will not. She, thank heaven! will take it for granted I am all right somewhere. I have told her to. And look here, damn you! leave my wife out of the conversation. I don't choose to have her name on the lips of people of your class."

"Sorry to have offended you. I meant no special disrespect. In fact, curious though it may seem, I am very keen to get some liking from you, Mr Thompson. You say I have got capacity, and I know that it is notorious that you are always on the look-out for assistants who are capable."

"Ye-es," said Tom dryly; "we have a good many branches to our business, but we haven't started a burglary department so far."

"I'm not exactly a hardened criminal," squeaked the voice. "In fact, I may conscientiously say it is the first time I ever tried anything in this line."

"Let me congratulate you on the exhaustiveness of your preparations."

"If you will accept another small piece of personal information, I may say that it is you, and entirely you, who led me into the scheme. You see, Mr Thompson, you are the cleverest man I know, and I thought if I could succeed in driving you into a corner, it would be some sort of certificate of my own ability."

"You flatter with delightful modesty. I should have recommended you to take up diplomacy rather than housebreaking as a profession."

"I haven't dabbled in housebreaking," said the voice, with some heat.

Tom chuckled inwardly. "I'm so little posted in these niceties. You must forgive my mixing up the various lines of your occupation. Still, one can't get over the fact that on, say, a census paper you'd come under the general heading of swindler. It's a pity. By the way, if it isn't an indiscreet question, are you a syndicate? My dog keeps snuffling at the sill of the door, and I wish to heaven she could talk and tell me her ideas. But anyway, I presume that one of you is there. At the same time your voice, which you have disguised very ingeniously, doesn't seem to come from the door side. Have I made a mistake in supposing I've to deal with one man? Are there several of you in this little game?"

The voice chuckled. "That's rather a leading question, and I suppose anyone with discretion would not answer it. But one's vanity wins on points like these. I've beaten you all alone."

"Hang it!" said Tom impatiently, "why the deuce aren't you straight? I could find fifty jobs for a fellow of your brain, if only I could have decent surety that you wouldn't kick over the traces."

"I could offer you security to the extent of some eight thousand and two

hundred pounds odd."

"Eh? What's that?"

"If I saw my way to becoming 'your Mr Bent' permanently, I shouldn't in the least mind depositing a cheque for eight thousand two hundred and seventy-five pounds three shillings and ninepence, signed by a very sound firm. You'll perhaps recognize the sum?"

"H'm!" said Tom, "there's a good deal I like about that offer, but perhaps you'll answer me two preliminary questions."

"That depends on what they are."

"Are you our Mr Somebody-else already?"

"Not I."

"And did you in truth go and see to old Sarah?"

"To the extent I told you."

"Well, if you've humbugged me again about that old woman I give you fair warning I'll smash you, if it costs me a year's income to do it. But if your conscience is clear on that point I'll put you into a billet under the firm straight away. Any clever honest man could make himself into a successful rogue if only he chose, and so I don't see why a clever rogue, if once he makes up his mind not to go crooked again, shouldn't make a very prosperous honest man."

"Quite agree with your theory," squeaked the voice, "though I object to your implication that I am a rogue. However, we will argue that out later. I will get to work again on the door."

Tom reached under the bed and brought out the champagne bottle and a glass. "And I will drink to your coming reformation. I wish to heaven I could acquire some of the senses that Clara possesses. As soon as you go to that door, Clara goes and snuffles again at the sill, and it's all Bradford to a tin-tack she knows you, or else it's going to be love at first sight with Clara. I may tell you she's wagging to an extent that's perfectly dangerous."

There was no answer to this. A screw-driver crunched diligently outside the door.

"A very excellent wine this. It seems you have a nice taste in vintages amongst other talents. Well, I'm all curiosity to see you."

The splintered door swung open, and there in the frame of it, laughing, stood—his wife!

"Mary! Well, I'm——"

" 'Sh!"

"Surprised!"

"Thought you would be, dear."

"And is this game all your own concoction?"

"All my little own, Tom."

"Of course I couldn't recognize your voice."

“I didn’t intend you should. First of all, there was the tin Punch and Judy thing. Then there was this speaking-tube here. I had the end of it branched out into twelve smaller tubes which all come out through the cornice above there. You couldn’t tell a bit which direction the voice came from, could you?”

“It was a touch of genius in its way. So are the cigar-butts on the floor, and the slept-in bed, and all the rest of it. I made sure you were a man. But what’s the whole thing about? I suppose you had some object in it all?”

“I have an object in most things I do, Tom, though you are only just beginning to appreciate that. To commence with, you’ve been annoying me very seriously of late!”

“I, Mary? I’m just as fond of you as I can stick, and I’ve done everything I could think of to give you pleasure, dear.”

She took him by the lapel of his coat and wagged a serious finger at him. “You’ve not. I want to live all of your life with you, and you’ve tried to keep me entirely to your home life. You wanted me to share none of your other worries and ambitions. Now I have earned your word that in future I am to be ‘your Mr Bent,’ and though I don’t want you to keep to the letter of that promise, I do want you to let me help where I am able.”

“Assuredly you shall, old girl.”

“Here’s your cheque, by the way. There’s one other thing I’d got my knife into you about.”

“The dickens you had! You seem a very vindictive sort of young woman.”

“When I suggested taking up politics for the pair of us, you said I hadn’t enough finesse.”

“I apologize humbly, Mary. In fact, I grovel. You’ve a most dangerous amount of finesse and strategy and invention in your possession. By Jove, dear, I never properly realized what a clever wife I’ve managed to get hold of!”

“There’s nothing like being appreciated by one’s husband, at any rate,” said Mrs Thompson, with an impudent nod. “You never knew me till we were married. You saw me from a distance——”

“I saw you close at hand.”

“Well, we met over that absurd fish you keep in that glass case, and you made up your mind in your fierce, keen way that you were going to marry me, and you did it. But at the same time, your abominable pride wouldn’t let you come near me, and pay your court in the usual way, and get to know my many excellent qualities and failings; and so now, my dear man, that I’ve hooked you fast, you’ve got to learn them, and perhaps will have some eye-openers.”

“I can quite believe that. By the way, this cheque is yours, not mine.”

“No, no, Tom; that would give an ugly edge to the joke.”

“Well, we’ll just change it into diamonds, and when I see them I shall

remember that we are partners in every way now, ambitions included."

"Tommy, you're a perfect duck!" said Mrs Thompson, "and I'm going to kiss you. Now let's go and see that slatternly old Mrs Olroyd, and pension her off. I'm sure I owe her something for so pleasantly taking her name in vain."

"Yes, come along; I've got some tinned salmon for her, and some tea."

CHAPTER IX
COCKPIT COPPER-MINE

Hophni Asquith took off his coat and cuffs, put on a long checked cotton garment which reached to his heels and was locally known as a ‘brat,’ walked up to the high desk in front of the office windows, and prepared for work. Then he changed his mind and turned round to his partner. “Well, Tom, what is it? You look ruffled. Business going wrong this morning?”

Mr T. Thompson hung up his hat and sat down frowning. “Yes.”

“How?”

“In this way. I’ve just discovered we were making money out of animal torture.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“You know that fellow Terry?”

“Eli Terry? The steadiest carter we’ve got. Never known to get drunk till after he’s loosed out his horses on Saturdays.”

“Well, I sacked Eli Terry ten minutes ago. He was driving that bright bay mare with the Roman nose we bought at Wibsey Fair two months back, and she was badly collar-galled. He was rattling along in one of the light lurries.”

“And you sacked him for that? It will probably mean trouble with the other men. It will put us in dreadful difficulties at a busy time like this if all our carters turn out, as they are likely to. And all over a bit of a chafe on a horse!”

“Chafe be hanged! It was an open sore half as big as my hand, and an old one at that. The poor brute has been suffering torments for Heaven knows how long—and we’ve been making dividends out of them.”

“We did it in ignorance, anyway.”

“That’s what makes me so savage with Terry. He was responsible, and he knew it. What’s more, he did the thing out of sheer callousness. He knew the mare was collar-galled. He knew quite well that if he had reported it the animal would have been put aside till she was well and another given him. But not he. There are only two ways to make a brute like Terry feel, and one is to pound him and the other is to starve him. If I’d caught him in our own yard here he’d have had his thrashing sure enough; but I couldn’t very well give him that sort of education in the street, and so, as I say, I’ve sacked him; and if our recommendation goes for anything I’ll take dashed good care he does not get another job in a hurry. As you say, Terry’s a talking chap, and there’ll probably be trouble with the other carters. But I can’t help that. I’m not going to shut my eyes and let horses be tortured merely for the sake of peace and

profit."

Hophni pulled irritably at his square red whisker. "I think you are over-scrupulous. And, anyway, you are not consistent. You know, it's only yesterday you were looking on at a cock-fight yourself."

"Well," said Tom, "what of that? I was looking on at a man-fight last week, if that helps your argument. My good lad, can't you see that one's sport and the other's sheer brutality?"

"I'll use your own word, torture. It seems you can see sport in the torture of poultry."

"You hopeless, mirthless, narrow creature! Gamefowl fight because 'tis their nature to. So do men. So do dogs. Look at Clara there, under my desk. She's been out on her own all this morning, and she's had a scrap with some other dog or dogs unknown, and she's supremely happy. Look at her, the disreputable person."

"Clara never likes me," said Hophni, with a sigh, "and I'm afraid there are few people who do. I suppose that's why I can attend to business so thoroughly."

"More fool you to make such a slave of yourself. Go out more, lad. Entertain more. Hophni, you ought to entertain much more and keep up a better establishment. Now that I live out of Bradford you ought to be able to ask our business friends in to your house, and give them a clinking good dinner, and keep them for the night."

"Louisa can never keep girls, somehow. We're without now, and there's so much to do with the children that I haven't been home to my tea for ten days. She's got all the work she can do without me, Tom."

"It looks to me," said Tom grimly, "that not only have I been making money out of the torture of my horse, but out of the torture of my partner as well. Terry was responsible for one, and Louisa seems responsible for the other. Now, I've handled Terry——"

"Thank you, I'll handle Louisa myself, Tom."

"Then I wish to heaven you'd do it! You look miserable and wretched. Go away somewhere and kick up your heels."

"I don't know how. I haven't had a holiday since I was a lad at night-school."

"Then I'll take you with me. By goy! I'll take you cock-fighting next time I hear of a main."

Hophni smiled painfully. "I think I prefer business."

"Never can tell where business tumbles up against you," said Tom, with a chuckle. "Now, by the side of that cockpit you heard of yesterday—it was near Keighley, if you don't happen to know—there was a man who tried to sell me a copper-mine."

“Ah! shouldn’t touch it. Once bitten, twice shy, you know.”

“The man was a Spaniard.”

Hophni turned his back to the window and the high desk and looked more interested.

“He didn’t know much about cock-fighting, and both the birds he backed got beaten, but he was very full up about copper. His name’s Eugstera, it seems, and according to the account he put into my ear this mine he’s got hold of wants a very little development, and then will yield a fortune.”

“They all will.”

“It’s near Estremella.”

“Oh!”

“And I’m afraid it occupies the exact site of the Todos Santos mine, though Eugstera offers it under an entirely different name.”

“But—but didn’t he know who you were?”

“He knew I was T. Thompson of Bradford, a man who was reputed to have a lot of money, and one who didn’t mind talking over a speculation which would make a lot more. But, if you’ll kindly recollect, we don’t hold the Todos Santos in our own names. We couldn’t afford to be associated with flutters of that description.”

Hophni Asquith winced. “I know it was all my doing that we went in for it. I acted for the best, Tom, at the time. I only believed what was told me.”

“I generally test and prove things for myself, lad, and then believe ’em, and that’s the difference between us. But I’m not blaming you. The property is ours, and it has a distinct appearance just now of value.”

“Still, I don’t quite see what the game of this man Eugstera can be. There’s nothing wrong with our title-deeds, is there?”

“Not that I know of. But I take it that from what we agreed upon a month ago, we are about tired of putting money into the concern, and that if our manager out there didn’t report that he was on to paying ore in another eight weeks’ time, we were going to tell him to shut down.”

“Yes, and I must say I quite looked forward to writing off as lost all the brass we’d sunk there.”

“Quite so. Nothing like knowing how to cut a loss in time. On general principles, if we’d had a definite bid made for the derelict, we should have snapped at it, however small it might be, on the grounds that any salvage out of the wreck is better than none. As it is, I should say you’d better run down to Spain and look into things yourself. Our mine manager at Estremella is either a fool or a swindler, and he can be dealt with best on the spot. Let’s see, Stone his name is, isn’t it?”

The pallid Hophni put out the hand of horror. “Me, Tom? I’ve never been out of England in my life, and I don’t intend trying. Besides—well, Tom, I

want to make a gentleman of my eldest lad, and I'm sending him to Harrow this next week, and I think I should be here myself to see him off. You know, Louisa—er——"

"Oh yes," said Tom, with acrid humour, "I know Louisa."

"Well, she's not got the knack of raising herself above what she was, and never will have, though I'd not own that to anyone in the world except you, Tom; and (please) you're not to repeat what I said to your wife. Louisa means well; she's the best-hearted lass in Yorkshire, and she's all the wife I ever wanted and ever shall want; and so, if you don't mind, we'll not discuss her further. But about this Spain. You must go, Tom. You know the language, you understand the people, and travelling suits you. Whilst you're away you'll probably work out some entirely new invention or idea that'll double the business here when you get home again. That's your usual habit."

"I suppose there's no tearing you away, and as I've done my best, lad, I'm not going to complain further. There's nothing like having a drudge of a partner who'll stay at home and work things out. We seem to dovetail in together pretty well, Hophni. I'll wire Eugstera to meet me in Estremella."

It was acting on this agreement, then, that Tom that night sent a telegram to his wife, ran up to London, and next morning caught the Charing Cross boat-train in company with Mrs Thompson, who left her infant with its grandmother and insisted on accompanying him.

"I'd much rather you hadn't come, dear," said Tom, as they bobbed across the Channel. "It's delicious having you with me, but there's only a long, rattling railway journey to offer you, with an ugly copper-mine at the farther end, and probably some very ugly dealings with some very ugly men. But, happy thought! you shall stay at Biarritz, and amuse yourself there till I get the business through and can join you."

"Nothing of the kind. I shall come too. Mines interest me. Do you think I could marry a man with such troglodytic tastes as yours, Tom, without getting a liking myself for caves and quarries and holes in the ground? Besides, if there are going to be ugly dealings, as you say, all the more reason I should come too, to look after you. I'm a very capable woman, Mr Thompson. You've said so yourself."

"You're a dear, Mary, and I wish there weren't so many people on this blessed boat. But, anyway, you may consider yourself kissed."

The *fonda* which gave them hospitality in the little town of Estremella was, to say the least of it, primitive, and not inviting for a prolonged stay. Tom's original plan of campaign was a simple one. Thompson and Asquith were not known as owners of the Todos Santos mine; they ran it through an agent, and even Stone, the mine manager in Estremella, did not know the names of his real employers. All that was necessary for Tom to do was to hunt up Eugstera

and see what he had to offer. Then if this Eugstera mine proved to be of value, and proved to be also the Todos Santos mine, explanations and adjustments could follow afterwards. So, on the morning after his arrival, Tom took a sturdy ash-plant and paid a call at the Casa Eugstera.

He was received with elaborate politeness, shown into a large, cool room which was furnished liberally with whitewash and straw-bottomed chairs, and presently, after the interval necessary for the assumption of hair, reception dress, and an extra coat of rice-powder, the Señora Eugstera, a tall, lean old lady of many graces, came in to ask that he would graciously be seated.

Now, Tom at times could be curt and dry, and had the reputation of being able, when that way inclined, to pack into three minutes' talk more solid business than any man alive. But though money-making was his especial industry, he often found it politic not to let this appear on the surface. Moreover, he was a man constitutionally fond of women's society, and one also whom women liked. So, in reply to the old lady's florid civility, he strained his Spanish into its most elaborate sentences, and the pair of them exchanged compliments and beautiful emptinesses to the extent of thirty-five enduring minutes, without in the least touching upon anything so material as the wealth of a copper-vein.

The señora to all appearances would have found delight in the continuance of this edifying exercise for the remainder of the day, but Tom presently discovered that it was ceasing to amuse him, and began with Northern directness to come straight to the point.

"In the lamented absence of your son, whom it was my honour to meet, as I have told you, in England, perhaps you could give me the information I've come about?"

The lady replied with a lean and powdered smile that any information in her poor possession was entirely at the disposition of the señor.

"It's copper I'm after," Mr Thompson suggested; "and if the señor your son can show a good thick vein which he has to sell, and which will assay well, I'm the man that will buy it from him for cash."

The lady was desolated, but she was so unfortunate as to have no understanding for these matters, and from this polite attitude she refused to budge. If the señor would only wait for the return of her son, then all the mineral interests of the neighbourhood would be willingly displayed for his pleasure. Her son was a great geologist, college-taught from Madrid. She herself was a poor, simple creature who did not know one rock from another, and it desolated her to be so useless to the señor.

"You're an artful old bird!" thought Tom to himself, "that's what's the matter with you. You've had a wire from your dear son to hold your tongue, and you're doing it artistically. But your face talks. You keep it as

expressionless as you're able, and you've plastered it with a good, useful layer of whitening. But it's my trade to read faces and eyes. You knew who I was and what I wanted the moment I came into the room."

They dropped once more into the florid compliments of leave-taking, and then Tom went out from the cool gloom of the house into the glare of the morning sun. He was wondering very much why his Keighley cockpit acquaintance, Eugstera, had not come down to Estremella to meet him, according to arrangement. "Looks to me," he said to his wife, as they sat in a *café* over *déjeuner*, "it looks to me, Mary, my dear, as if this excellent person had suddenly discovered that he was trying to sell the Todos Santos mine to the owners of the Todos Santos mine, and concluded that the operation was a cut above his financial ability."

"Ye—es; for a guess, that's a likely one."

"Now, I've a strong notion that Master Eugstera has hit off the ore-vein. You know, it does exist somewhere. It was there right enough when we took up the mine, and for two months we dug out copper ore that looked like giving one a fortune. Then it pinched out, and all the money's gone back into the mine, and a lot more to boot in trying to find it again." Tom broke off and laughed. "Now, you see what you have brought down on yourself, old lady, in coming out here with me on a business trip. I've been talking shop all through luncheon."

"Go on. I like it. Aren't we partners?"

"Oh, if it doesn't bore you. And I must say you are the delightfullest kind of wife, and the best-looking and the cleverest——"

"And the wisest, and all the rest of it. Tom, don't be fulsome. We've been married three years, and you ought to have got over it; and, besides, it's quite probable that that waiter with the curled whiskers knows some English, although he makes out he doesn't."

"You see, it's the fault of never being properly engaged. I have to pay my court to you now just to make up for lost opportunity. Don't think it will last for ever. In three hundred years from now there will be nothing to complain about—— Oh! all right, then, I'll drop it for the time being, and we'll get back to Eugstera. Now, whether that man's found the vein or not, he's been trying to work off a very cute swindle on a firm I much respect, and that's Thompson and Asquith. Under ordinary circumstances I might be disposed to buy out his information; but as things are, I'm not inclined to hand over a peseta if it can be avoided."

"But don't you think it would be more profitable to pay and look pleasant? Mr Eugstera is staying away from here at present, and you have a strong notion why. Presumably, his mother's in touch with him. Presumably, if she were approached, she could write to him, and it's likely he would surrender on

terms. Wouldn't it be better business to pay than to fight?"

"Possibly. But I'm not all for profit-taking, Mary. If there were two sixpences, one of which I could pick up and the other I could earn, I'd rather have the earned sixpence."

"Good boy. Now I'll tell you something. Whilst you were flirting with that old lady this morning I've been busy. I tried to get a horse to ride, but as no horse was available I got a mule, a huge sixteen-hand creature that could climb like a goat, and I rode up to the top of the headland—our headland—under which the mine should be. Well, Tom, if Mr Eugstera has found your copper outcrop—by the way, outcrop's the word, isn't it?—I know where it is."

"I always did tell myself," said Tom, with deep conviction, "from the very first moment when we met over that trout, that you would make an extremely valuable wife. Now, Mary, don't you honestly think I was quite right in having that fish stuffed and set up in a handsome glass case? I admire it afresh every time I pass through the hall at Buton. And where is this copper outcrop?"

"All in good time. I'll tell you that presently. But, as a cool afternoon's occupation, don't you think you might take me over the mine as it stands?"

"H'm! Don't you think I'd better go alone there? It's probably dirty, and certainly wet."

"I'm not sugar, and I shouldn't melt. Furthermore, I'm the proud possessor of a cake of soap, and probably with pressure we should be able to get a basin of water; though I'll admit, if you like, that it won't be come by easily."

"Well, you see, dear, there may be a bit of a row. We know nothing about this fellow Stone, or the workmen—and I'd feel freer if I was without you."

"That's one very good reason why I should come. If there's a row I'll stand behind my lord and defend his back. I'm a lusty young woman, and, having some attachment for you, I'll see you aren't hurt. You needn't be frightened about me. To begin with, no one would try to meddle with me. I'm far too nice, and they're far too polite. And if you like I'll put that pistol of yours in my pocket as an extra safeguard."

"What do you know about my pistol?"

"I found out you were bringing one, and that's why I came tearing down here to Spain with you."

"I believe I've remarked before," said Tom, "that the cleverest thing I ever did in my life was to pick out just one special young woman as the only one then living who'd make an absolutely perfect——"

"Tom, do be quiet. I'm certain that wretched waiter with the curls knows some English. Here, if you've finished lunch, let's go upstairs."

The mine, when during the course of that afternoon they came to visit it, exhibited to the outward air a somewhat squalid earthwork, and some sheds where the maximum of unsightliness had apparently been striven after, and

certainly achieved. The mine itself was a network of galleries and shafts driven into the bowels of a headland which stood boldly out from a more or less level coastline. The headland was flat or gently sloped on its crown, and grandly precipitous in its sides. The sheds round the mine's main mouth were huddled clumsily in under looming cliffs, or perched on giddy outriggers above the surf which crunched and boomed three hundred feet below. The tramway which carried the ore down to the river quay wormed round the flank of the cliffs on brackets and in galleries, and presented to the eye some dizzy engineering.

The original goat-track from the crown of the headland, which had once led to the mine, was now discarded, and callers stumbled up over the ties of the tramline. Thus the Thompsons came; and Stone, the mine manager, a small and precise Cornishman, received them in a draughty little office with visible stiffness. "Sir," he said formally, when Tom had introduced himself, "if I'd known you'd been coming, things would have been prepared for you. I wasn't even aware you were one of the owners. You'll excuse me if I say I don't think I've been treated very courteously. I suppose this is a surprise visit, and I'm sure you're welcome to see as much or as little as there is. But if it wasn't for your lady here I could offer you some language."

"Then, if that's the case," said Tom, who liked the little man's appearance, "I'm glad Mrs Thompson is with me, because if language starts I can throw out a pretty healthy mouthful myself; and then I suppose there would be makings of a difference between us. You must take my word for it, Mr Stone, that no discourtesy was intended when the actual ownership of this mine was kept hidden under an agent's name. You see, Mr Asquith and I are in the wool business, and credit is part of our livelihood; and if we were known to be plunging in a copper-mine which didn't happen to be exactly—er—a Rio Tinto, our credit, don't you see, would be damaged. If one is successful in these things it is all right; people admire one's cleverness and call it a fine speculation. But if a man in another business gets hit over an outside flutter of this kind, people point an ugly finger at him and say, 'There goes a dangerous gambler.' "

"Well, sir," said Stone stiffly, "if that's the case, I think you've been wise in preserving your anonymity. The copper's pinched out, as you know, and I can hold out no prospects of refinding it. We've worked hard this last eight months; if you look over the cliff there you'll see we've filled up no inconsiderable part of the Bay of Biscay with our dump; but we haven't struck enough copper in all that time to form the alloy of a new half-sovereign. And it's beginning to be my opinion that you might dig down to—well, saving the lady's presence—to a place where copper would melt, and still not hit the vein again."

"Mr Eugstera seemed to have another view of the matter."

Stone flushed to a fine claret colour and bristled ominously. “Well, if that skunk’s your adviser, Mr Thompson, I’ll just resign here where I am, and you can have my next month’s wages and put them in your own pocket. If it wasn’t for your lady here, I could give you my opinion of yourself and Mr Blooming Eugstera, packed small.”

Tom chuckled. “I can understand your feelings to a nicety. But still, what’s wrong with Eugstera?”

“What’s wrong? Everything. That man’s been head general nuisance to me ever since I’ve been in Estremella. He’s been everlastingly messing round. He’s tried to queer the mine from the very start. He’s tried to bribe me; and when I laid him out with a pick-shaft he tried to knife me. Then he set his friends on to do the same. And afterwards, when I got a bit sick of that, and swore an information before the *alcade* and got him so jolly well fined that he had to sell his stud of fighting cocks to keep out of gaol, his old hag of a mother started in to try her hand. From first to last that Eugstera crew’s been trying to pull out my tail feathers ever since I’ve been in the place.”

“But what on earth could the señora do?”

“Do? Why, she worked the *padre*. She got at the beggar either by piety or subscriptions, and persuaded him that I was a heretic, and it was his duty to look after the souls of my workmen. I’d been jibbing at more than five saints’ days a week, you understand, which is their lazy custom here. And so there was I, landed in for a strike, and your blessed lawyer-chap in Bradford writing vinegar regularly once a week about an unproductive mine. Well, Mr Thompson, there was nothing for it but to square the *padre*, and I don’t know whether you or your partner are that way of thinking, but you’ll probably be annoyed to learn that you’ve paid for a bran’-new set of ornaments, or whatever it was, for the local chapel here before the old blighter would take off the taboo. It was about the worst kind of gall for me, anyway, as I’m a strict Congregationalist myself, and always was.”

The workmen in their rope-soled sandals had been plodding silently out of the tunnel into the sunshine, and lit up the homely buildings with blurs of generous colour.

Stone displayed them with a contemptuous thumb. “There they are, you see, knocking off already. If they can earn enough to keep off starvation on a half-day’s work that’s conclusive argument to them why they shouldn’t do more. My land! if only I was King of Spain, wouldn’t I buck up this country. Now, sir, do you and your lady wish to go into the level and see the nothing that you own there?”

“Yes,” said Tom, “I’ll just take a turn through, for old acquaintance sake, and see the face you’re working on.”

“Old acquaintance?” puzzled Stone.

"I was a miner myself once. Coal-miner."

"You a miner!" grumbled Stone. "And now you're a millionaire, or getting on that way! Well, there might be a chance for me yet, if only I'd the sense to quit this fools' trade." After which ambiguous remark he picked up a flare-lamp and led the way into the galleries.

The mining expert has for the amateur whom he takes over his burrows two entirely different manners. He can either be contemptuously tolerant or offensively technical. But when deep meets deep the mingling of ideas becomes more simple. Stone pointed out the line of the great vault where the copper-vein was sheared off.

"Ah! a 'throw' we call it in Yorkshire," said Tom. "I see you've followed it both ways, up and down. Strata much foliated?"

"That's not the word for it. They were just tied in knots, and ground small, and put down wrong way up. You shall see for yourself. But can your lady tackle this ladder?"

Mrs Thompson said that she had not the advantage of being born into the mining profession, but that she had every intention of making up for that deficiency. She laid herself out to captivate this abrupt Mr Stone, and did it most effectively; and when afterwards they came to compare the workings with the plans in the office, she showed a practical grip of the necessities of copper-mining that astonished even her husband.

"Well," said Stone at last, "you've seen for yourself how the mine promises, and I suppose you came here thinking I was either a fool or a swindler. Perhaps I was a swindler in drawing your pay so long, but I've had hopes. We mining engineers mostly do have hopes. But the end of my stock's arrived, and my advice to you is, sack me and close down to-morrow."

"And sell the mine for what it will fetch?" asked Tom.

"If you can get any flat to give you as much as five pesetas for your rights."

"There's been a sort of offer. At least, I judged that under certain circumstances Mr Eugstera would make an offer."

"That hound? That sneaking thief? Mrs Thompson, believe me, I'm not going to swear in your presence, but I'm thinking several things very rapidly just now."

"I'd better tell you what brought us out here," said Tom. "I like to see a cock-fight occasionally."

"I'm with you there, sir. I love to look on at a good main. It's the one attraction this beastly country offers. But the exasperating part of it is they're always fought on Sundays, and of course, as a strict Congregationalist, I can't go."

"They're rather that way at Keighley, where this fight was. And, of course,

on market-days they're busy: but there's Saturday afternoon, you know. Anyhow, that's where I met Eugstera, and he wanted to sell me a copper-mine on this very headland."

"But the Todos Santos owns all the mining rights."

"Precisely, and I naturally presumed he intended to buy them out. I wasn't known as a proprietor of Todos Santos, and I didn't claim knowledge of it."

"You wouldn't."

"I wanted to hear all he'd got to say. He was quite open about his find, and talked like a man who knew. He made out that the copper-vein was four feet thick, and suggested we should send an engineer to inspect, always supposing he and I could agree to some conditions of secrecy."

Stone wrinkled his forehead. "My land! but this looks like business. The hound may be the worst judge of a gamecock in the north of Spain, but when it comes to talking about copper he's on the ground floor. You're sure he meant our headland, and not somewhere else along the coast?"

"He described this ground unmistakably. Somehow or other I've got the idea he must have been clambering round the cliffs and found another outcrop. Or perhaps he used a boat and made it out with a glass from below."

"Then, sir, without disrespect, and meaning no offence to your lady here, you're bang wrong! I've been over every square foot of these cliffs myself, from skyline to water's edge. I climbed where I could, and where the rock was sheer I was lowered in a cradle by a wire rope. There wasn't so much as the colour of copper anywhere, and though I thought one or two spots looked promising, and put on some men to make short drives, we never came on enough to make a shirt-stud head out of. It's my belief there's no copper at all on the property."

"But—how about his offer that my engineer should inspect?"

"It isn't always necessary that there should be copper for one to sell a copper-mine. For an outside guess, he intended to nobble your engineer and bribe him with a share of the plunder. He's quite equal to it. The animal tried to bribe me, as I've told you. And if you want a further clincher, here's one: he arranges to come down here, but when he finds that you are coming in person he doesn't turn up. How's that, umpire?"

"It nearly goes down, but not quite. It doesn't all fit together with quite enough exactness. And besides"—Tom laughed—"Mrs Thompson is convinced she knows where this copper outcrops."

"My land! what's this?"

"Go on, Mary, tell us your idea. Mr Stone, as you hear, says there's no copper, and though I don't quite agree with that, still, what amounts to the same thing, I don't know where it is. So you are our last remaining hope."

"Well, gentleman," she said, "you know I went out for a ride on that great

raking mule this morning to see the country. Mules are not easy-gaited, and so I did not want to ride far. But mules are supposed to climb, so I thought I'd go to the top of the headland up there, where I could see the country all laid out before me."

"But, madam, what's this got to do with copper?"

"I'll confess to you freely I'd no thought of copper when I started off up there, and even when I did get on that last ledge before you come to the top, still copper did not occur to me. I saw a stone building and a wired enclosure."

"Ah! that's Eugstera's hen-run. The idiot, as I believe I've told you, breeds game-fowl, and he's got a theory that their wind will be better for fighting if they are kept on high ground where the air is thinner. He's always arguing about it, but in practice his birds can neither spar nor last. Not that I've ever been to the cockpit, Sundays, but my men have told me about it on the week-days afterwards."

"Well, you see, Mr Stone, I had not heard Mr Eugstera's explanation, which is no doubt very ingenious, and when I sat there on the ledge, with the mule panting and blowing beneath me, I was wondering to myself what possible object a man could have in keeping game-chickens in such an inaccessible position. It was close to the edge of the cliffs, and quite unsheltered, and such a draught of wind came up from below that I had to bend down in my saddle to meet it. Now, I know a little about raising chickens. They're like babies. They don't flourish in draughts.

"The mule was very much out of breath, and so I had plenty of time to look about me, and I did it curiously. Considering the small number of game-fowl and chickens in the enclosure, the house belonging to it seemed large and solid. It must have taken enormous labour to have brought all that stone up from half-way down the headland, and that was the nearest quarry I had seen. The house was quite new too, and the door fitted like the door of a gaol.

"There was another thing also I noticed. Between the door of the hen-house and the edge of the cliff a regular path was worn; and the edge of the cliff, which overhangs the sea just there, was dented, as if people had constantly been throwing large quantities of stuff over it. The path seemed deeper than people would make with merely throwing over the litter from the hens. Now I didn't see inside the house, and of course there may be no hole in the floor leading down to Mr Eugstera's copper-find——"

"But I'll bet there is," said Tom. "Mary, you're a genius!"

"Madam," said Stone, "you've got what's wanted in mining, and that's brains. I take a back seat."

Mary blushed and bowed, and untied a knot in her handkerchief. "I think this blue stuff's copper, isn't it?"

"Copper carbonate, sure enough."

“Of course they are only very tiny pieces; but when I got the idea of the shaft being inside that hen-house, I looked very carefully on the ground outside and found these, well trodden into the turf.”

Stone jumped to his feet. “Look here, sir and madam, can you climb a goat-path up these cliffs on to the top?”

“Give us a lead at your best pace, and I guarantee Mrs Thompson will keep close at your heels. She’s a very excellent climber. In fact—in your ear—one of the reasons I married her was because I knew she would teach me to climb.”

Mr Stone took this quite seriously, saying that activity was a great blessing to anybody and saved lots of medicine; and away they went up a goat-track amongst the frowning cliffs that frequently required hands as well as feet to secure a passage. The sun beat upon them from above; the roar of the sea from below filled the ear; sea-fowl screamed at them as they made their way up the crags.

“Phew!” said Tom, “this is hot work!”

“Do you all the good in the world,” said Mary. “You’re getting fat. Come on. Shall I give you a hand?”

In half an hour they arrived over the brink, pink-cheeked and panting, and there was the solid hen-house just before them. Under the glare of sunshine Tom took the door-handle and rattled it. The door stood firm as the wall.

“Expected that,” said the little Cornishman, “so I brought along a pick. Here, mister, stand by and let me pick that lock.”

The door crashed open, and they peered in curiously. As Mary suspected, the fowls had to be contented with a very small portion of the dwelling, which was boarded off as their residence. The rest of the floor gaped into a hole which led down into blackness.

The expert made a quick diagnosis. “There’s been a fissure here, turf-covered. Eugstera, the lucky dog, stumbled on it, cleared away enough to get his shoulders through, and either laddered it or roped it, and slipped down to prospect.” He struck a match and squinted downwards with shaded eyes. “My land! yes; here are ladders and a sheaf of candles. We’ll have a look.”

He lit a dip, stuck it through the band of his hat, and nimbly climbed down out of sight. “Fissure all the way!—still fissure!—fissure!” came his reports, and the voice grew fainter with every call and at last became inaudible. Far, far below them, Tom and Mary could see the tiny crumb of light hung in the solid blackness, but all sounds had gone save for those of their own breathing and the scratching of the game-fowl beyond the partition. They waited there hand in hand.

Then the light grew again, and presently Stone was standing beside them once more and giving a pithy report. “Fissure all the way, though he’s had to cut out stone in places to make a passage. The vein’s there all right, and it’s

rich enough for a Crœsus. I believe this mine will turn out another Rio Tinto. The maddening thing is, that in one of my experimental drives we must have come within a few feet of it. I know the height we are up now above sea-level; I measured the distance down to the vein roughly by counting the steps I took coming up; and I believe that from our own workings we can tap that copper within a few days, and certainly within a week. First and last it seems to me the credit of finding it all belongs to madam, and what I'm hoping now is that she'll use her influence with you, Mr Thompson, to keep me on here as manager."

"Most certainly," said Mary. "It was only ignorance that helped me. If I'd known Estremella and Señor Eugstera as well as you do, Mr Stone, I'm quite convinced I should never have stumbled upon the idea at all. It's always far easier to see through a conjuring trick if you happen to be deaf and can't hear the patter of the conjurer. But do you know I'm a little sorry for Mr Eugstera."

"In the name of fortune, why, my dear?" asked her husband.

"Because he seems to have had all his trouble for nothing."

"But—well, supposing you kept a bank, and an enterprising burglar, after spending months over the job, nearly got in, but didn't quite, should you pity the burglar?"

"Well, if you put it like that——"

"I could put it a lot stronger," said Stone. "If you'd lived in Estremella, and had that man Eugstera and his old whitewash-post of a mother persecuting you all the time, I believe, madam, you could swear on the subject yourself."

"There's one thing I don't mind betting," said Tom, with a chuckle, "and that is, that this mine gets known as the Cockpit Copper-mine from now on, and it will amuse me to see Hophni's face when he pockets his dividends from it."

"Why, do you think he will refuse them?" asked his wife.

"Oh no! he'll not refuse the cash. But he'll sigh. When you know Hophni Asquith a little better, Mary, you'll be able to picture to yourself that sigh as well as I can."

CHAPTER X
THE TENOR AND THE MAN

The train slowed up for Skipton Station with a heavy grinding of brakes, and the younger secretary blinked wearily at his notes. “It will take me ten hours to transcribe all these, Mr Thompson. When do you want them for?”

“Nine o’clock to-morrow morning,” said Tom cheerfully. “Mr Asquith won’t be ready for them before. You can work in the train going back to Bradford, and you’ve all night before you. Let’s see, its—m’m—five-thirty-five now. That’ll leave you twenty-five minutes for dinner and breakfast, say half an hour for getting about from place to place, and four and a half hours for sleep. Ample for any man. I’ve a lot more things to think out, and shall probably have to spend to-morrow out on the hills here working at them. I’ll wire if I find I can get into Bradford. Here we are. Good night to you both.” Tom and his dog jumped out and swung away down the platform.

Seed, the other secretary, laughed as the younger man pocketed his shorthand notebook, and got disgustedly out of the carriage.

“You don’t seem to like it?”

“I don’t, and that’s solid. It’s slave-driving. I shouldn’t stand it if he didn’t happen to be paying me about twice the salary I could get anywhere else.”

“Doesn’t it occur to you that there’s a reason for the size of the screw? There’s no philanthropy about T. Thompson in business. You’re new in the firm, but you’ll soon find out that you’ll always be worked well up to the breaking strain—and paid according.”

“I like the pay.”

“Of course you do. And you won’t be afraid of grinding a bit to earn it. You’d like more—and you’ll get it. I’m in the same box. That’s why he picked us. That’s why he picks all his men. That’s half the reason why he makes such tons of money—just his knack of picking men. He’s found out that the men to make money for Thompson and Asquith are the men who intend to make money themselves, and he pays them big salaries—what other firms call absurdly big salaries—and works them for all they are worth. I suppose you came to him with a bundle of testimonials?”

“Well, yes. He saw me in a railway carriage first, and got into talk, and asked me to call. Of course I brought all the certificates and things I could lay hands on. He never looked at one. He asked me if I played billiards well, and I said, ‘Not at all.’ He asked me what kind of luck I’d got, and I said, ‘Good, so far.’ He asked me my shorthand speed, and to wind up he told me to write out

as quick as I could, and word for word, our talk in the train; and when I'd done that, he told me to learn to write at double the pace, and took me on at nearly three times my old screw. But Lord! the amount of work he gets, and the responsibility he gives one!"

Seed laughed. "Come and have a glass of beer to warm you up before your train goes. You're a bit new yet. But you'll get used to it all when you've settled down, and you'll like the pace. We all do. And you needn't think you'll crack under the strain. He's picked you, and as you haven't been fired within the first week, or shifted on to a different job, that's sound proof that you can last out all right and are worth teaching. By the way, he was dictating a letter to you in Spanish just now. It made me laugh to watch your face."

"He's such a vile accent!"

"It's his worst language. He can talk French and German as glibly as a Swiss, and they say his Italian is quite decent too. But, that Spanish! However, the main thing is, it is quite understandable, and he's up in Catalan as well as Castilian. Here we are. What'll you have? Bass, or whisky and soda?"

"Whisky for me, if I've got to sit up and scribble all night."

"Confound it, man!" said Seed sharply, "don't pity yourself so. It's a time of pressure, and we've all got to buckle to. Do you think T. T.'s sparing himself? He's staying out at a house in the country at the back here to-night, and there's a dance in the evening, and they'll probably be kicking up their heels till three a.m. Well, I've to put up at the village pub and be ready for him at six, and he and his dog will be there to an absolute certainty. It's quite on the cards he won't have been to bed at all, and will turn up with his boots muddy and four couple of rabbits in his pocket."

"The boss seems made of cast iron," said the younger secretary thoughtfully.

"Cast steel. During this heavy push of the last week he hasn't anywhere near averaged four hours' sleep to the twenty-four, and what scraps he has got have merely been on railway trains. He's lived on trains. He's been twice to Paris, and yet he's as fresh as a daisy, and fit to fight for the middle-weight championship of creation this minute. I'll tell you what T. T. is. He's a man."

"By gum he is! all of one. Here's 'Long may he wag!' It's worth while sweating for a boss like that—especially as he has sense to pay one a screw that one can save a bit on."

In the meanwhile Tom, with the mongrel Clara at his heels, had crossed the line, had gathered the afternoon news from the bookstall posters, and was going to make his quick way out of the station, when suddenly his face brightened, and he stopped and went up to a stout, pale man who was peevishly tapping the platform with his foot.

"Hullo, Bertram! What on earth brings you down here?"

The stout man pressed his hands deeper into the pockets of his elaborate fur coat, and looked round slowly and somewhat superciliously. “Ah! Why, it’s ‘our Mr Thompson.’ I’m down here for a house-party at Dacre. Beastly bore, these sort of things! but one has to be victimized. Lady Hardcastle made me promise I’d come down for it. They wrote that they’d send a carriage for me to the station, but it’s not come yet. I’ve waited half an hour in this infernally draughty place already! I shall be catching a chill in my throat next. And how is ‘our Mr Thompson’? How’s wool?”

“Oh! wool’s scratching along quite nicely, thank you. Here’s the Dacre carriage, by the way. Sorry I can’t come out with you, but I’m going to walk. One must catch a mouthful of fresh air some time, you know.”

Mr Bertram shivered. “Fresh rain. Man, don’t you see it’s raining? Surely you don’t walk for choice in the rain? But are *you* staying at Dacre?”

“To-night. I couldn’t get there before. Afraid I shall have to be off again to-morrow.”

“Got to look after your factory, or whatever it is? You make something, don’t you? Coats, isn’t it?”

“Parts of them,” said Tom cheerfully. “There you are. Like the window up? I’ll shut the door for you. Good-bye. Come along, Clara.”

Now, just then, besides running the businesses they had got, to very handsome profits, and increasing these businesses right and left, the firm of Messrs Thompson and Asquith were speculating very largely in Argentine wool, and to bring off the *coup* successfully required a very big brain and some very clear and continuous thinking. The whole of this devolved upon Tom (as Hophni Asquith was the detail man of the partnership), and, by way of doing his duty towards himself and his partner just then, Tom emptied his head of every matter concerning money, wool, markets, exchanges, and freights for the time being, and set himself to enjoy the air and the things that lived in the air and the open. He lit his pipe and carried it bowl downwards to keep out the wet, turned up his trousers, and, with the rain pricking freshly on his face, strode out through Skipton streets into the hill-country beyond.

There was no view to be had. The moorland on either flank was shut out by the rain mists, and underfoot everything squelched with wet. Nevertheless Tom was enjoying himself thoroughly—enjoying himself more, in fact, than he expected to presently at Dacre. “Fancy Emily being there!” he commented with a rueful grin. “If I had guessed it earlier, I rather think business would have been too pressing to let me turn up.”

“Emily,” it may be mentioned, was Lady Hardcastle. Formerly she had been Miss Outhwaite, and once there had been a probability of her legal signature being Emily Thompson. The engagement had been broken off by an ingenious scheme which has been detailed earlier in these chronicles.

But Tom was no man to worry himself in advance with something that could not be avoided. He was well out in the country by now, and had left the roads, and he and Clara were taking the fields and the high limestone walls at a fine pace. Twice Clara flushed a draggled rabbit, and looked rather hurt when Tom refused to let her course it. But Tom spanked her playfully on the buttock, and reminded her that poaching for quantity was not their present business. “We’ll just enjoy some of the niceties of the art,” Tom explained to her, “and as hares are pretty scarce round here, old girl, I’ll trouble you to show me just one couple, and we’ll decorate them with earrings. I’ve got just two nice brass paper-fasteners in my pocket. There’s no scent for you to pick up in this rain, so it’s a case of eyesight—your eyes against mine, Clara—and I take two to one in biscuits I beat you. There’s to be no coursing, mind that. And mind, also, you don’t flush one single hare. I want to put my hand on them.”

Now, there is no such thing for a man as stalking up to a hare in her form, unbeknown to the hare. The ground is a most delicate telephone, and the ear of a sitting hare is very close to it. But a hare will never move—or make herself conspicuous by scampering across an open field—if she thinks that she is not being looked for very closely. She is quite aware that by colour she assimilates into the landscape very accurately, and, indeed, chooses for a spot to make her form one with such colour and cover that she will so assimilate. Still, at the same time, the hare is constitutionally timid, and much hunting has made her instinct for knowing when she has been sighted almost superhuman—that is, there are few human beings who can see her and prevent her from gathering knowledge of the fact.

Now, Tom was quite aware of all these items, and so was Clara, and many and many a time they had tried to outwit hares together in this way, and many and many a time had they failed. It was not profitable poaching, and therefore Clara, who liked quantity, did not especially admire it; but it was poaching brought to a fine art, and on that account Tom, who had the casting vote, highly approved of it.

Twice during this wet afternoon they sighted farm men, and had to slink off out of their way through the mists. Once they nearly jumped over a wall on to the top of a crouching shepherd, and when that indignant man and his dog gave chase they had a good deal of trouble in dodging round walls, and slipping through sheep-gates, and splashing up a ghyll or two to shake them off. It was a most persistent shepherd, and perhaps Tom looked like a poacher who, if caught, would buy himself off handsomely. But between whiles they searched the ground ahead and on either flank as they walked, with four of the keenest and most highly trained eyes in the north of England, and when they came to walls, and had made sure that the coast was clear, they crouched on

the coping-stones and searched from an eminence.

At last Clara pointed, noiselessly, unobtrusively, and accurately, from the top of a wall. It was not a setter's point, or anything like it; it was an indication of Clara's own entirely; and Tom was just the one man on earth who could understand it. "First biscuit to you, old lady," said he, and Clara showed just the smallest tips of her teeth, and then they both dropped down into the field below.

They did not walk straight towards that crouching hare. Clara, having done her share, pottered off in quite a different direction, and Tom faced so that a straight course would take him within about five yards of the desired spot. He walked with his hands in his pockets and his big, square chin well up in the air, and his blue eyes looking anywhere but in the hare's direction; but, as everybody knows, it is the hardest thing imaginable to walk in an absolutely straight line, and with each step Tom edged imperceptibly in towards the hare's direction.

The hare, motionless as the brown grass tussock against which she crouched, watched him with a thumping heart. "Man, certainly, and therefore dangerous. But not dangerous unless roused to a knowledge of an unfortunate hare's presence. If she jumped up and ran, he'd set his beastly dog on her track. But as it was, he did not see her. He was the stupidest and the most unsuspicious kind of man. It was horribly startling, of course, to see him coming so near, but strong nerves were a thing which ought to be cultivated, and——"

Tom stooped sharply down and picked up a kicking, bucking, struggling hare by the scruff of her neck, and the uncomely Clara came racing up and grinning till her nose was wrinkled like a concertina.

Tom produced one of his brass paper-clips, pushed it through the hare's ear, and clamped out the ends. "Now, if anyone shoots you," quoth he, "and finds that there, they'll write a letter to the *Field* about it. In the meanwhile it will give you a fine subject to yarn about to your friends. Clara, my duckums! we'll just try your self-restraint now. Lie down, Clara! And keep down, Clara!"

Clara spread herself out on the wet grass and panted.

"Stop that panting!"

Clara stopped.

"Now, quite still, please," said Tom, after the manner of a photographer, and dropped the hare squarely on to Clara's back. The hare kicked and fled, and Clara was torn by many emotions. But she remembered her upbringing—and Tom's ash-plant—and shuddered and lay still—for which she was duly complimented.

Forthwith, as the afternoon was growing late, they returned once more to

the industry of the chase, and got their second hare, though not at the first attempt. That, duly decorated, was also turned down again, although there was a good thick fir wood handy, and the primitive man within Tom was struggling very hard to be indulged. At Dacre there would be merely a conventional evening, and possible awkwardness arising out of the presence of Lady Hardcastle. Out there, in that black, seductive wood, he could build a bower of branches in some dingle where a fire would be masked, and make a barbecue of the hare before it grew cold and tough, feast there to barbaric repletion, listen to the wind's music in the trees, sleep on aromatic pine-needles, and then once more be up and after the game in the fresh chill of the dawn.

Tom put down that second hare with a sigh. "You've had a much narrower escape than even you think about, miss," said he, with a sigh. And then, with Clara at his heels, he set off at a fast trot through the dusk towards Dacre.

He had nine minutes for dressing when he got to the house, and did it neatly, effectively, and without hurry. Tom was always rather a dandy about dress, but quick decision and handy manipulation served him here as they did in other things, and he was invariably one of the best turned-out men in the room, though others had likely enough taken three-quarters of an hour over the process.

His hostess laughed at him mischievously. It was a stock joke to try and shove T. Thompson off his balance. The experiment never succeeded, but it was interesting to watch his manœuvres of self-defence. Lady Hardcastle from across the room gave him a dry nod with a good deal of meaning in it. Then they went in to dinner.

At the dinner-table Tom had an easy time. Mr Bertram posed as the "celebrated tenor," and, as Lady Hardcastle showed a pretty wit in putting him through his paces, the others were for the most part content to listen and be amused.

Bertram had the gift of a deft satire which was really very funny at times, and people allowed him to go to lengths they would not dream of permitting anybody else. As some one said of him, "You couldn't kick Bertram—it would be as bad as kicking a woman."

On this particular evening he directed his lightsome impertinences at Tom—or "our Mr Thompson," as he persisted in calling him. The table laughed, and Tom (who was only too pleased at keeping the talk on such safe topics) grinned tolerantly. Those who happened to know the capabilities of T. Thompson's tongue were amused also from a different standpoint.

The text of the stout tenor's discourse was the horrors of work, the unpleasantness of people who did work, the lack of humour in Bradford manufacturers, and the ridiculousness of business generally. Tom cheerfully agreed with him on every point.

Mr Bertram next went on to show how impossible it was for a poet's nature—such as his own, for instance—to understand the ambitions of Philistinism as exemplified by "our Mr Thompson." And so he continued, till Lord Dacre, who was a slow man without a modern idea in his head, began to wonder to his next-door neighbour "What on earth the missus meant by asking these actors and acrobats and outsiders of that kind down for?" Upon which, by way of making a break, he began to talk horse of the most pungent variety.

Tom saw the move, and carefully headed him off. Lord Dacre's horse at dinner was notorious, and always led very hurriedly to a noisy general conversation. So once more they dropped back to Bertram's solo, and the master of the house gulped his wine and pondered, "Well, if Thompson likes that bounder to go on, I suppose it's primarily his concern. Sound man, Thompson, although he doesn't hunt. Never knew him do anything yet without a definite object."

So the baiting went on, and Lady Hardcastle, from close beside him, watched Tom out of the corner of her eyes.

After dinner, when people began to come in from outside for the dance, Bertram kept in close touch with Lady Hardcastle, after the most approved lapdog fashion. He considered it as part of his *rôle* of "celebrated tenor" to have an affair always on with some married woman, and if he could make it rather scandalous and could get it hinted at in the baser society papers, that made it in his view all the better advertisement. He was not a person whom any clean-minded man would conveniently kick, and so he had made himself by this means a nasty halo of notoriety. People were mildly surprised at Emily Hardcastle for allowing herself to be coupled with such an individual, but some of them supposed it was because her own husband was old, and dry, and in India, and the rest concluded it was because it amused her. But, as it happened, both of these reasons were entirely wrong.

The guests came, filling the hall with bright faces and pretty frocks, but the dancing did not begin. The hostess fidgeted and looked anxious. Lord Dacre glared out a continuous series of maledictions. He was a slow man himself, but he disliked being kept waiting, and there was no sign of the band. He differentiated very little between musicians, whether they were vocal or instrumental, and his remarks about these "thoroughly condemned acrobats and singers and fiddlers, who thought they could keep decent people waiting," were not calculated to tickle Mr Bertram's professional pride. At last Lady Hardcastle went up to him.

"Look here, let me start things. I can hammer out bad waltzes on the piano to any extent if you'll let me."

"You're awfully good, but the ballroom's a great barn. You'll break your wrists if you try to fill it. Let's see—can't somebody help you? We've got a

fiddle. I wonder if any one can scrape it." He raised his voice. "Hi! I say, all of you, can anybody play tunes on a fiddle?"

Everybody looked round and chattered, but nobody volunteered.

"Here, it's your line, Bertram, isn't it? Sorry to press you, but we're in a bit of a hole."

"Not my branch of the profession—I'm sorry."

"Tom," said Lady Hardcastle, "come and play the violin to my accompaniment."

"Now who the deuce," rapped out Dacre, "is Tom? Oh! you, Thompson! Why does she call you——"

"We used to be engaged once—weren't we, Tom?—till you—till I, that is—till, anyway, we broke it off. Come along. We mustn't keep people waiting for our waltz."

"Humph!" grunted Dacre. "Cool handful! Two cool handfuls, in fact."

"There's your pitch," Emily Hardcastle was saying at the piano up in the gallery. "Be quick and tune up. You needn't have avoided me so carefully. I haven't got smallpox, and I don't bite."

"This E string is badly frayed; I shall jar somebody's teeth. I haven't touched a bow for six years, and my fingers are like sticks. You mustn't play fast, or I can't keep up. Ready now."

They played the dance through together with vigour and rhythm, and there was a great clapping of white-gloved hands, and Bertram from below exclaimed, "Why, 'our Mr Thompson' is a musician! How well he hides his surprising qualities!"

"Why do you stand that fellow's impertinences?" asked Lady Hardcastle sharply.

"Pleases him; doesn't hurt me; and I thought they rather interested you. Who am I that I should crush worms?"

"He's a beast! I took him up because you took him up first."

"I?"

"Tom, don't be exasperating. Remember we used to know one another very intimately once for a while. We weren't in love with one another one little bit; but, as I say, we knew one another intimately, and you used to talk over your affairs. Of course, when I came back home again from India, and met Mr Bertram in London, I remembered what you had done for him."

"Then please forget it. It was a freak of the moment, and it's forgotten. He doesn't know about it, and I shouldn't at all like to embarrass him by letting it leak out."

"Embarrass that lump of conceit? Oh, Tom, you're very ignorant on some things still. Embarrass the fat Bertram? All the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't do it. And why you should have any niceties about the matter I

don't understand. You're a curious creature."

"That's probably why you threw me over. They're ready for another dance. This waltz looks swingy and pretty easy. Let me put up the music for you. You begin."

They played through another dance, were duly thanked by applause, and then: "I've adopted some of your pet theories, Tom—ambition, for instance. One must have some sort of interest in life, and one must do something with a husband. So I pushed him on, and worried him, and worked things till they gave him the K.C.S.I. I thought you were going for a title yourself?"

"So I am, later. There's plenty of time. Tell me all about India."

"There's nothing to tell. There are just the pair of us—and no one else came. He had his office, and I had weariness. As I told you, I worried him on till he got the handle, and that's the end. I couldn't screw him up to anything further. He says he's no chance of being made a Member of Council. He says he's at the top of his tree, and all he wants now is to be retired. He's just working out his time."

"You came home?"

"I had to. It was too dreary and maddening in India. He's old enough to be my father, you know, and he's got old bachelor ways. Presently he'll come home on a pension, and we shall live together in Bedford, or Bath, or Cheltenham, or somewhere. Cheerful, isn't it?"

"Oh, you'll settle down to it all right. You were always a most adaptable girl, Emily."

"I wasn't sufficiently adaptable for you, it seems. What have you been doing with your music, boy? It's run to seed terribly. I wonder you can bear to hear yourself play so amateurishly."

"I've chucked it—didn't you know? No, of course, that was after we—er—lost touch with one another. Well you see, music was taking up too much time and steam. I always was keen, and always was a pretty good performer. I 'follered it,' as we say in Bradford, rather a lot for an amateur—in fact a good deal more than some professionals. Music was beginning to be part of me, and it was getting more and more hold. Then I got into a tight place financially, and if I'd to pull round again, and get a pile, and—er—other things I wanted ——"

"Mary Norreys."

"I always did intend to marry her when it was off with you, you know. Well, I saw that to get all those items in a small space of time, I should have to have all my water on. Now, there wasn't room for music on the old scale, and I didn't see my way to halve it. Music is that way, Emily, when you're really keen on it—the whisky habit is nothing to it. It grips you body, soul, and bones. And there's no getting over the fact that it's enervating, and unfits you

for anything else. Either you must let it have its own way, or you must chuck it overboard altogether. You can't halve the dose when you've been saturating yourself with it. So I chucked it. It was a horrible wrench, but I chucked it—absolutely. It was the hardest thing which has come into my life so far."

"What a point that would have been for Bertram at dinner!"

"Oh, Bertram! he's rather a nauseous creature, isn't he? But I'm in a way responsible for his production, and he seems to think it's part of his *rôle* to pose and be silly and rude. Besides, he's a bit under my weight. The mosquito doesn't really hurt the elephant, and it pleases him to try. I can imagine most men will find him rather unendurable. But women seem to like him, so I suppose he knows what he's doing. Never does for a man in one line of business to criticize the trade methods of another man in another line. Beg pardon, though, Emily. I'd forgotten for the moment that you rather affected him yourself."

"If you'd done me the honour to listen to what I was saying some five minutes back, you'd understand why I took him up. As you've been rude enough to forget, I shall pay you out before the evening's through."

"Be merciful, Em! Remember I'm the bread-winner of a flourishing family."

"I do remember all that. I wish your wife was here to look on. By the way, how is she?"

"Going very strong indeed. But number three is a very small infant, and she couldn't very well leave him. At least she wouldn't. You see——"

"I see the band. And Lord Dacre! Listen! You can hear him giving them his views on their lateness from here. They deserve it all, don't they, for making us slave away together like this, when we might have been below enjoying ourselves? But I won't stay. If Lord Dacre saw me here, it might embarrass him and rob the band of their due. You'd better wait and listen, Tom. You may pick up a turn or two of Anglo-Saxon that will some day possibly be of use to you. You like making use of people, don't you? Good-bye for the present."

"Phew!" said Mr Thompson, after the lady had swished away from the stair, "that young woman's sharpened up a lot since I met her last. And altered. And spread out. She'll do with letting alone. I wish to heaven I'd never come near Dacre to-night!"

Tom danced then solidly on through the programme till supper-time. He danced well, and he liked dancing. When he came to a ball he danced thoroughly. And when supper-time came he picked the partner whom he thought would amuse him most, and prepared himself to sup thoroughly also.

The long table in the dining-room had vanished, and round tables for six were the order of the night. Lord Dacre met him in the doorway. "Come along,

Thompson, and we'll pig in together. That makes four of us. Who shall we get for the other two?"

"We offer ourselves," said Emily Hardcastle from behind.

"Now I shall die happy," said the little man, with coarse good humour, but scowled when he saw that the stout tenor was with her. "Worst of being in your own house is you can't pick who you'd like to take your corn with," he grumbled. "However, we'll make up our minds to enjoy ourselves, and I'll tell you all about my gee I've entered for the Grand National. Nippiest mare over the sticks and over water you ever put eyes on. Got quarters like—like—I don't know what. Of course, the date's a bit awkward. You see, with mares ——"

"Have you given up flat-racing altogether?" asked Tom hurriedly.

"Had to. Couldn't afford it. I'm only a small man. Flat-racing's all very well for a financial magnate like you."

Bertram lifted his glass. "The financial magnate!" mocked he. " 'Our Mr Thompson!' Long live clothes-making, or whatever it is!"

"Look here," said Dacre stiffly, "I am a personal friend of Mr Thompson's, and can say things to him which would be rank rudeness if they came from a stranger."

Bertram was not so easily repressed. "Ah, but I too know 'our Mr Thompson.' I once spent a week's exile in the arctic city of Bradford."

"You once spent seventeen years in the Arctic city of Leeds," said Lady Hardcastle, "and that's next door."

"I suppose I did," said Bertram rather weakly.

"And you'd have been there now if somebody who was an absolute stranger to you hadn't helped you out."

"Ah, but you see that beneficent person saw that I had a voice, and wanted to give it to the world."

"That beneficent person saw a very unprepossessing little draper's journeyman singing in a church choir. I was with him, so I know. By the way, Mr Bertram, you have given up honouring church with your presence now, haven't you?"

"One expands. But, dear Lady Hardcastle, is it worth while going into all this ancient history? So much of it is liable to be apocryphal."

"The beneficent person, as we walked away from church, said, 'That poor lout of a tenor, who sang the solo in the anthem so badly, has got a very decent voice if it could be trained. He'll never do it off his own bat. Weak chin; no determination. Rather a good idea to give him a three years' subsidy and let him have his chance.' " Lady Hardcastle looked thoughtfully at the carved ceiling. "I remember that Sunday quite well."

"I say, Emily," said Tom, "don't you think it would be a good idea to

change the subject? Don't you see you're making us all very uncomfortable with listening to these family details of yours?"

"I don't mind a bit," said Lady Hardcastle cheerfully. "I told you I'd score off you before the evening was out."

"Yes; dry up, Thompson!" said Lord Dacre. "Here—you—fill his glass and keep it full, and fill Mr Bertram's. We're all parched here. Get along now, Emily—beg your pardon, shouldn't have used the Christian name—I bet an even fiver that Thompson was the dark horse."

"Of course he was, though probably Mr Bertram never took the trouble to find that out for himself. Tom kept him at Leipzig and Florence for three years, and, of course, did it anonymously through his solicitor."

Mr Bertram's face looked pulpy and white. "I thought it indelicate to make any inquiries. We artists always shrink instinctively from money matters."

"Ungrateful lot, charity boys," said Lord Dacre, with brutal candour. "Thompson, here's your good health! You're a fine sort. D——n it, I wish you hunted. Now, I never finished telling you about my mare that I've entered for the Grand National, did I? No. Well, you see, this is the trouble about her. You know, mares——" And on he went. It was one of the few tales Lord Dacre had ever been able to get through without interruption.

But the little man was not without his faculty of shrewd observation. To his wife that night, as he turned in bed, he said, "Twig anything about that Hardcastle woman?"

"She'd a very nice frock, dear, if that is what you mean."

"Hang her clothes! But I tell you what, she's just about as gone on my pal Thompson as she can stick."

"Oh, rubbish, dear! I know they were engaged once; but that's all over and done with. Besides, there was no talk of love on either side. It was only a marriage of convenience."

"Bet you an even pony I'm right."

"Well, you can't prove it. And, anyway, a man more absurdly in love with his own wife than Mr Thompson you couldn't find anywhere.—What are you laughing at?"

"Thompson. He was badly rattled. I lifted fifty sovereigns out of him at *ecarté* just before I came up. Once he even forgot to mark the king. First time in my life I ever played cards with T. Thompson without paying for it. I say, though, they were interested in the mare at supper. I told them all about her chances for the National—— Hullo, old girl! snoring already? Well, I suppose it's about time I snoozed off too. One thing I'm glad of, though. I bet that beast Bertram keeps out of decent houses for the future. The dear Emily will keep treading on him out of memory for old Tommy. Lord, what a funny world it is!"

A little later came the dawn, and with it Mr T. Thompson arose, tubbed, dressed, and let himself very quietly out of the great sleeping house. He cleared the grounds with Clara at his heels, and, once clear of earshot, whistled jauntily to himself and to the morning birds. Six o'clock saw him down at the village inn. A minute past six he was sitting with Seed, and that ready writer was slashing down shorthand sentences in a notebook.

"The right idea's come at last," said Tom cheerfully. "I thought it all out, lock, stock, and barrel, last night, between dinner and going to bed, and now we can act finally. I've reduced the thing to an absolute certainty. Begin now with this cable to Buenos Ayres. You must put it into code yourself afterwards."

CHAPTER XI
THE NEW GROOVE

"Girls is so bad to get," sighed Mrs Asquith. "I know t'lunch isn't what you're used to, Tom."

"I know that quite well too without your telling me," said Mr Thompson drily. "But why try and make me uncomfortable by apologizing for it?"

"Oh, it's t'custom," said Mrs Asquith deprecatingly.

"Not the custom: a custom; one of many, and a rank bad one at that. You take it from me, Louisa, that you need never start in to apologize until your guest begins to grumble at the grub, and very seldom then."

"Can your wife keep girls, Tom?"

"Mary's far too sensible to worry her head about domestic arrangements. All her time's wanted for other things. We've got three houses, and there's a housekeeper in each to run the place and look after the servants. The great thing is picking your housekeeper. But once you've done that, you pay them well, give them full responsibility, don't interfere, and let them understand you want perfect results. As the alternative to perfect results, of course they'd get sacked. They know that quite well, and avoid it; good pay and the policy of non-interference isn't to be come across every day. And, as a consequence, when they are dealing with the servants under them—with whom, of course, they have an entirely free hand—they treat them like human beings, pay them well, and get them, when a pinch comes, to work themselves cheerfully to the bone."

"It's so simple to talk about."

"It's simple to do, if only you make up your mind to it. Come now, Louisa, it isn't a question of not being able to afford it. You're just as well off as we are, and neither you nor Hophni have a bit of notion of spending your money like Christians. You're only hoarding it for your children, and the odds are (from what I saw at Christmas of your two young pups from Harrow) that they'll divide it between ballet-girls and book-makers when their time comes to finger it. And then their children will start afresh on the bottom level. That's the old Bradford axiom, 'Clogs to clogs in three generations.' "

"O Tom, you brute!"

"There's nothing more thoroughly obnoxious than the candid friend. Your boys, when they were over with us at Buton, my dear lass, had the excessively bad taste to be ashamed of their home and parents, and were foolish enough to say so to Mary. She sent for me there and then, and requested me to take them

out into the stable-yard and give them a licking."

"Tom! And they've never been beaten by neither me nor Hophni i' all their lives!"

"Well," said Mr Thompson cheerfully, "I bet they know what a malacca hunting-crop feels like now. But we're getting away from the point. Here are you, a very rich woman, and you live as if—as if your husband was an overlooker in the mill. You've got a great big ugly house, and you keep three-quarters of it shut up with dust sheets over the furniture and the blinds down. You live half your time in the kitchen, and do nine-tenths of the cooking yourself, and it wouldn't surprise me to hear you took a turn at the weekly wash."

"I only get up Hophni's collars and cuffs. I haven't touched the boys' linen since they went to school: they didn't seem to like it. But Hophni never could bear to put on a pair of cuffs ironed by anyone but me. Come, Tom, that's only a little thing. And there aren't the fronts to do now. He wears them paper ones."

"Of course, too, you bake the family bread and tea-cakes and pasties and pastry, and the rest of it; I'd forgotten that. Louisa, if I came of a hair-tearing stock I should pull myself bald whenever I think of you. You're incorrigible. And Hophni on certain points is just as bad. Confound his nasty paper dickeys! And to call extra attention to them he wears a couple of single diamond studs in them that cost a thousand pounds, and look it. You and he are utterly without sense of proportion in some things."

"I suppose you are right, Tom. You always are right. It must be our misfortune."

"Then get over it, lass! get over it! If you've no ambition to pull up into a proper position for your own sake, at least find the energy to do it for your children. You've sent the boys to Harrow; you've packed off the girls to the most expensive school you could find in London; and whatever else they learn, at any rate they'll pick up ideas about decent living and well-appointed houses. I don't want to rub it in any more, Louisa, but you've seen already what the result's beginning to be. Neither of the girls come home to you at all for the holidays: they prefer to go and stay with some of their smart friends. The boys do come home, and well—when I licked them, upon my word, I felt half sorry for them."

The door opened, and the pallid Hophni Asquith came into the room.

"What are you two talking about?"

"I'm acting the perfect prig," said Tom, with a bit of a sigh, "and making myself thoroughly objectionable to Louisa. It's a sermon on the old text of 'Buck up!' I'm saying it's time you gave up wearing ready-made clothes, Hophni, and took to an occasional clean shirt instead of patches of imitation

where the white's supposed to show. I'm telling Louisa to run the house on more expansive lines, and spend five thousand pounds a year on it instead of two hundred."

Mrs Asquith bristled. "I'm sure, Tom, we never spend less than twelve hundred a year on the house."

Tom suppressed the "No one would guess it" which lay on his tongue, and added. "You ought to keep capable servants. You netted seventy-six thousand pounds as your share last year, Hophni, and you let your wife cook your meals and wash your collars and shirt-fronts. Oh, I forgot! You economize on that now, and wear paper dickeys. Hang it, man! the perspective's wrong altogether."

Hophni plucked at his square red whisker, and then bit his nails. "We've been brought up that way, and it's hard to change."

"I could never," said Mrs Asquith, "put up wi' one of them fancy cooks, who wouldn't welcome me i' my own kitchen. We tried one once as Mrs Tom recommended to us, and she was so scornful, it made me hot all down my back to give her her orders."

"Tom's right, though," said Hophni. "We ought to get out of this old groove and be moving up, if only for the children's sake." He sighed. "It won't be comfortable. We've flitted three times now since we were wed, each time to a bigger house, and each time we've liked it less than the last."

"We don't seem to get it homely, as I should like," said his wife. "Things won't chime in, somehow. Eh! but I many a time wish we was back i' that old chamber-'eight we come to when we was wed."

"I hate to be beaten," said Hophni, "but the trouble of it is, I can't see where we have gone wrong. When I bought the land here in Nob Lane, I got the best architect in Bradford, told him to find out what the next house had cost, and ordered him to build one that cost five thousand pounds more. He did it, and every one says it looks the value on the outside. I know we've no taste in these matters, Tom, and the architect had, or ought to have. It's his trade to have taste, and he's the best architect in Bradford. I didn't want to spoil anything by interfering. I told him to furnish the house as expensively as he knew how, and gave him a free hand everywhere."

"I notice I'm sitting just now in a horse-hair rocking-chair with broken springs," said Tom, with a laugh. "Did your architect countenance rocking-chairs and horse-hair coverings?"

"It's the only comfortable chair in the house, and this is the only comfortable room. We must have somewhere. How can you sit in a great barn forty-two feet square, on chairs upholstered in Genoa silk velvet at eight pounds a yard, and look at a lot of marble statues that are showing far too much leg for decency? That's our drawing-room, and it's got gold brocade

hangings and a marble mantelpiece that's like a tomb in a cemetery. I've the architect's written guarantee that it cost more than any room in Bradford, and he says we ought to have we'r teas there. Well, Tom, I can't, and that's all. If I can't get my tea set up to t'table, I'd rather go without it."

The frail little Hophni Asquith was getting irritated. Mrs Asquith was also beginning to fume. Tom tactfully smoothed matters over. "Now, look here, lad, don't worry your head about the thing, and, as likely as not, it will smooth itself out quite naturally during the next few weeks."

"How's that?"

"I mean it's not unlikely you'll have a chance to refurnish."

"I don't see."

Mr Thompson chuckled. "Well, between the three of us, I may point out that Thompson and Asquith's hands will most probably come out on strike presently. I don't want it, but the unions have forced it on us. Now, I'm not against trades unions. I was a workman myself not very long ago, and I know they have their uses. But as a master I intend to be master, and I won't be bossed by ignorant windbags who want to show their power just so that they can screw out more salary for themselves. I'm not going to have production stopped. Their idea is that every mill-hand we've got shall slow down to the pace of the slowest, and get paid one level wage. They've deliberately set up a law against earning more than a certain amount per week. What I want, and what I'm going to have, is the pace to be set by the best hands, and the others to do their hardest to follow them. I'm no believer in equality. The best worker is worth the best pay, and shall have it. As for the bad workers, I don't want them at all. They are quite at liberty to go and work for other firms."

Hophni Asquith bit at his nails. "That's all very well in theory, Tom, but you'd better not say it too loudly, or we'll be having the masters against us as well as the hands."

"Why not recognize the plain fact that they are against us? We're successful, very successful, and we're still a very young firm. It's contrary to reason to suppose that people shouldn't be envious and try to put a sprag in our wheel if the chance comes. No, lad, if we have a strike you can bet your boots on it that the strikers will have plenty of cheques from outside sympathizers."

"It's a terrible thing to think about."

"Not a bit of it. I rather like a scrap, especially if we make up our minds to win beforehand. I don't live in Bradford, so they can't get at me very conveniently; but here, in Nob Lane, you're nice and handy, and when they've been on strike a month, and the *Spectator's* fanned them into a bit of fury, they'll come and smash your windows for you, and wreck the furniture, as sure as the town rates will subsequently shell out for damages."

Hophni winced. He was not a man of war, and he was not impressed with

this threatened invasion of his castle. “But why force a strike, Tom? If we let things go on, as likely as not they’ll smooth over.”

“We’ve let them go on too long and too far already. Of course it has suited our convenience to do so. But the unions are spoiling for a strike now or later, and my idea is to give it them now when things are slack, instead of getting dropped on, and perhaps having our hand forced, when trade brisks up again. Well, good-bye, Louisa; I must go now.”

“But, Tom,” said his partner, “this isn’t a thing to be decided on hurriedly. This is a thing to be thought over.”

“I’ve thought it through during the last half-hour, lad, and made up my mind. Of course there are a lot of aspects to the affair. The women and children will suffer, and I hate to think about that. But it will be kindness to them in the long-run. They fight every new labour-saving machine we bring in, and they’d kill trade if they had their own way. As it is, we shall merely make them earn increased pay, and get better homes, better food, better education, and better conditions all the way round.”

Hophni Asquith squirmed in his chair. “It would be a change from the very root of things. I couldn’t decide all at once on such a tremendous matter as that.”

“All right. It seemed to me a very simple and obvious puzzle. But every man his own methods. You can worry and wriggle over it till to-morrow morning if you like. But for myself, I’m going to tip it out of my brain till then, and see if I can’t flog out that burr-extracting scheme. It’s odd how that avoids me.”

“Not at all odd, seeing that every comber in Bradford is trying to invent it.”

“Well, it’s all right for them, perhaps, but I don’t like being beaten. Good-bye, Louisa; don’t hate me too much. Good-bye, Hophni; see you at the office to-morrow morning at eight.”

Now Tom and his dog (who was waiting for him outside) did not forthwith take themselves out of Bradford and make their way to Buton Hall. The sight of a peculiarly ragged woman, with three peculiarly dirty children, dragging along the road outside, put another thought into his head. The woman he knew. She was the wife of a labourer in Thompson and Asquith’s dyehouse, a man of small intelligence, who was then earning nineteen shillings a week. They belonged to the lower type of unskilled workpeople which were getting more rare—the type which on wage-day redeemed the family possessions from the pawnshop, ate and drank riotously on Saturday and Sunday, repawned on Monday, and lived the rest of the week on herrings and credit. One week’s loss of employment would upset this delicate financial balance most completely, and though strike-pay would come in for a while, the strike which Tom foresaw would be a fight to a finish, and strike-pay would necessarily come to

an end before its conclusion. Tom liked money greatly; he liked power, which money helped to bring, far more; but although he was a strong man, and chose only strong men to work for him, he had an infinite pity for the weak, and a theory that hunger descends with equal grip on the just and the unjust.

"Poor little devils," he muttered, as he passed them by with his quick stride. "I can't win by torturing the likes of them. I hate being inconsistent, but there's nothing for it but being inconsistent now. It wouldn't do to get dropped on, though. Let's see, now, who's the man? By Jove, yes, Parson Cobbold. He's shrewd, he's straight, and he's capable. He's High Church and I'm Low, and the only time we met publicly I put his back up by saying I thought Rome-and-water a very poor mixture." Mr Thompson chuckled. "Foolish thing to quarrel as a general thing, Clara, my dogums, but it has its uses occasionally. No one will guess at collusion between me and Cobbold."

Mr Cobbold was in when Tom called, and accepted his invitation for a walk across the moors to Ilkley. Mr Cobbold was a big, burly bachelor of forty, who fancied himself as an athlete, and he and Tom amiably tried to walk one another off their legs. Furthermore, Cobbold was a great sportsman (during his three weeks' holiday per annum), and he and Tom exchanged views on the habits and customs of game from two entirely different standpoints, till they had left Shipley Glen well behind them, and were well up on the moor.

"Nice clear air up here, Thompson, after the town. Hope I'm not going too fast for you?"

"Not a bit. We'll stretch out here on the level, if you like."

"Wait till I light my pipe. Always like to smoke when I'm having a stroll like this. By the by, you've generally an object in things. I suppose you didn't bring me out here entirely with the purpose of making me a convert to those wicked poaching ways of yours?"

"Not altogether. I started with that by way of sapping your moral fibre to begin with. Speaking to an expert, I believe temptation's always done this way, isn't it?"

"Go on."

"Having got so far, I now want you to do an extremely underhand action: I want you to deceive a big Bradford firm, to cause them to lose a lot of money, and be pointed at by the *Bradford Spectator*, and all other right-thinking people, as utter brutes. Also everything I'm going to say is to be—er—as you'd say technically, 'under the seal of the confessional.' "

"Don't recognize confession, but go on. I suppose I shall do it, whatever it is. You are not the kind of man to ask anything which would be refused."

"I want to make use of you. We're going to have a strike in all our mills and sheds, and the dyehouse, and the machine-shop, and all the lot of it. A big,

brutal, devastating, senseless strike! I've a sort of foreboding the hands will go out exactly a fortnight from to-day, and once they are out, I'm going to lock 'em out for two solid months to pull their belts tight and meditate on the evil of their ways. That sounds pretty tolerably brutal, doesn't it?"

"M'm! It's high-handed, anyway. I suppose the idea is to starve the poor wretches into submission."

"That's the scheme in a phrase. What I want you to do is to see they don't starve—the women and kids, I mean. Tumble?"

"Ye-es. But why force on this strike at all? It will entail an awful lot of misery. You know how improvident most of the people are. It will mean loss to you, too, with stopping your mills. Give me a match, will you? I wish you'd let me try to get hold of some of the trade-union leaders, and see if I can't get them to meet you reasonably."

"Nop!" Tom's big jaw clicked up like a trap. "I know exactly what I'm doing. I've been watching them, and warning them, and trying to jam sense into them for five years, and now's the psychological moment when it's a case of beat them or bust. It will be a big fight, and we shall have to have all our water on to win, and, well——"

"Starving the women and children would be one of your strongest cards!"

"Think I can't see as far through a hedge as that? I'm going to pretend to starve 'em, and shall get the credit, or discredit, of doing it." Tom grinned. "I foresee that they'll wreck my partner's house in Nob Lane, because we're such an utter pack of brutes. You'll see that they aren't starved—much. I'll send you the needful along in five-pound notes, which can't be traced back to me, and you can shove 'em into your own account and work the thing how you like. I don't want to know any details; only do it, that's all."

"Thompson," said Cobbold, "if we belonged to a sentimental nation, I should like to say 'Shake hands.' I always thought you were a pretty decent sort, in spite of your bigoted views on church ritual."

"Nothing of the kind. I've got an artistic eye, that's all, and the sight of pinched faces annoys me. Great thing I want you to do is to hold your tongue as to where the supplies come from."

"Quite so. But your partner knows, of course?"

Tom wryed his face. "He does not, and you mustn't tell him. I'm acting dead against the interests of the firm, and I suppose I'm liable to go to gaol for deliberately tampering with my partner's interests. But—well, I like having my own way, and, you see, Asquith's a man with rather a defective sense of humour. He hates the idea of a strike at all, but once he's in, he'll fight like a gamecock. He'd only see that he was taking the bread out of his own kids' mouths if he was feeding the kids of strikers that we were trying to beat. Look here, that's settled now! Listen to that snipe drumming over there. Don't often

see snipe on this moor. Let's go off into the heather, and I'll bet you a penny Clara and I catch a brace of grouse under the half-hour."

"You wretched poacher! As a strict game preserver, I only hope I have the chance of giving evidence against you in a police court. But in the meanwhile I'll take the bet. I'd like to see how you do it."

Tom chuckled. "Pick up your feet, then, and tread like Agag."

If the committees of irritated trade-union leaders could only have seen the quiet preparations which Messrs Thompson and Asquith were making during the next fortnight, they would probably have been still more chary in tackling the firm. It was a matter of common knowledge that both partners had been workmen themselves a comparatively few years before, and although they were not loved the more on this count—for success always breeds envy and dislike—it was taken for granted that, knowing the workmen's way of looking at things, they would be all the more dangerous to tackle. Furthermore, the head of the firm, Mr T. Thompson, was a man who always contrived to get his own way.

But just then all the operatives' unions had an enormous amount of prestige behind them. On all sides economists condemned strikes, and employers had grown into the habit of making almost any concession to avoid them.

The other Bradford firms were all for compromise. If only they could keep the peace and their mills running they were willing to accept half-hearted work, and have most of their arrangements ruthlessly overruled by their own workpeople.

Tom, who liked the best of everything, had allowed himself for long enough to be swept in with this ruck, but he was sufficiently shrewd to see when the limit had been reached, and plucky enough to apply the remedy.

He made quiet arrangements for stopping some contracts, for delaying others, and for doing whatever else was necessary to hang up the various branches of Thompson and Asquith's enormous business without unduly damaging them, and then suddenly and quickly he put on the screw. He posted a notice for his spinners—that from that day week piecework would be the rule all round; and the committee of the spinners' and weavers' union held a meeting that night. Watkin, their chairman, a big ex-professional cricketer, called upon him next morning, with two colleagues as a bodyguard.

"Hullo, Watkin!" said Tom; "come to put half a crown on this afternoon's match?"

"Morning, Tom." Mr Watkin prided himself on always having a Christian name for everybody. "We just dropped in to see when you'd like that strike to begin."

"This afternoon, if you like, lad. I'm sending along to the dyehouse, and if

you'll give the word, I'll tell them to lock out."

"It's spinners I'm talking of, Tom. The dyers' union have no idea of calling out their men."

"You'd rather they stayed in and earned wages, and helped to support your union instead of coming upon their own? Nice simple game, wouldn't it be? Unfortunately, you are not dealing with the spinners in this mill only. Thompson and Asquith have a lot of businesses, but for strike purposes they are one and undivided. If you amuse yourselves by calling out one lot, we shall be humorous enough to lock out the rest, so far as it suits our purpose. So you'd better gamble on that. Have a cigar? They won't poison you; they're not wool-combers."

"If you lock out all your hands, you'll make yourself pretty unpopular with the papers."

"What," said Tom, with a laugh, "have you been to tell the editor of the *Bradford Spectator* already that we should do that?"

Mr Watkin winked a sharp eye.

"Never you mind guessing at our tactics beforehand. You'll learn them fast enough if you insist in forcing on a strike. But I suppose that, now we've had our frolic, we'd better come to terms. Good piece of tobacco this, Tom. Well, now, what have you got to offer us? We don't want to be too hard on you."

"Right, boys. Nothing I like better than a quiet, comfortable settlement. The spinners shall have the terms that we posted in the mill; and, if they work hard, they'll earn about fifty per cent more wages than they have been getting in the past. If they don't work hard they'll get fired, and we shall be quite pleased to hear they've got a job with one of our competitors. Glad you like the cigar, because I know you're a judge. You sacrificed your cricket to cigars, didn't you?"

"But, Tom, look here, be serious. This is defying us."

"That's what I meant."

"If that's all you've got to say, we shall certainly call all the hands out to-morrow."

"I knew you would. We've been getting ready for you to do it during all this last fortnight, and I won't deny that's it's been hard work. But we are ready for you, Watkin, and listen to this!" Tom slapped the desk against which he was standing, and thrust out his great heavy jaw: "Once you call out those hands, out they stay for two solid months."

The chairman of the union was obviously startled. "But, Tom lad, we may come to terms before then."

"You won't have the chance. We shall lose money by a stoppage—big money. You unions seem to think the fine should always be on our side. Well, if you fine Thompson and Asquith they're going to make you sit up as well."

"Tom, you've been a working man yourself. You know as well as I do that this spells starvation for many of the lasses and bairns."

"It seems to me that you're the man who's now deciding about their dinners."

"Well," said Watkin doubtfully, "we can't afford not to strike."

"I didn't suppose you personally could. So that's settled, and we needn't waste more time talking about it. Put half a dozen more of those cigars in your pocket before you go. I suppose you'll have to miss seeing the county match this afternoon now! Good-bye."

Next morning the spinning frames started in Thompson and Asquith's mills, but no hands turned up. In the combing and weaving sheds, at the sorting benches, in the dyehouse, and the machine-shop, things went on as usual up to dinner-time; but in the afternoon, with the exception of the machine-shop, there was a lock-out all round. In the machine-shop there were few society men, but there were distinct mutterings of trouble. Tom went and harangued them.

"Now, look here," he said. "You're all working well here, and I've nothing to grumble at. You're all earning good wages, and as we shall have a push on presently there will be plenty of overtime, and the man that hasn't his four pound ten or five pound to draw on pay-day, will only have himself to thank for it. If you strike I'll open a fresh machine-shop in Keighley, and shut this down for good. Now you know me, and you know I keep my word, and I guess you won't be fools enough to chuck up a soft job. Knock off now and talk it through, and send the foreman to me in half an hour with news of what you are going to do."

In due time the foreman brought word. There was to be no engineers' strike. "But," said the foreman, rubbing his nose with a black forefinger, "they've passed a resolution to hand over half their wages to the strike committees."

"Quite natural of them," said Tom, "and I reckoned on it. One bucketful doesn't spread very far over a big pond."

An enthusiastic mob that night filled Bradford streets, and broke a good many panes of glass which were the property of Messrs Thompson and Asquith. The *Spectator* next morning threw public odium on Tom's "brutal display of force" in issuing his two months' sentence, exhorted the downtrodden workpeople to stand firm, and implored the fierce, intolerant firm, with journalistic tears, to give way and be good. Hophni Asquith read the attack with white-faced indignation. Tom did not read it at all, as he was very busy out at Buton with drawing-board and instruments, working at the details of some new combing machinery; and the Rev. John Cobbold gave proof to a Bradford bank as to why they should honour his cheques up to an unusually

large amount.

Mr T. Thompson was very active during those next eight weeks. He was in his own machine-shop, and in the machine-shops of Keighley, arguing, explaining, and often, with coat off and hands discoloured, demonstrating at lathe, forge, or fitter's bench, or, again, working all night through with pattern-makers. Between whiles, he took over some mills in Roubaix and others in Germany, and set them going on his own vigorous lines. He excited the ire of Continental employers by raising his wages all round, and the incidental detail that he extracted double as much output from his hands quite escaped their notice. He kept two secretaries trailing about at his heels, and dictated to them mostly in trains and walking about the streets from place to place, as he was too busy at other times. He got through rather more work than any eight other men could have done, and if he could only have found time to put in a little bit of poaching as well he would have been entirely happy.

During all these weeks he had no time to look at a paper, which was a pity, because the papers were giving up much space to discussing him. The entire press of Europe, England, and America wrote violent articles about the man who had ventured to invent a new method in strikes; and Hophni Asquith subscribed to a press-cutting agency, and shivered with apprehension every time he went to chapel, lest his soul should be prayed for publicly. Hophni wondered, too, who was the anonymous philanthropist who (obviously out of sheer loathing for Thompson and Asquith's methods) had given Mr Cobbold such lavish funds to feed the hungry children, and so prevent the strike being ended at the two months' limit by an exhausted surrender. He wrote querulous letters to Tom on this subject, suggesting that firms who were opposed to them in business were handing out these supplies; and Tom left the letters unanswered, or replied curtly through a secretary that he was too busy to bother with trifles like that just then.

At the same time Tom did keep the anxious Hophni and Mrs Lousia occasionally in his thoughts, and one day, towards the end of the two months, he wrote a letter to the editor of a Bradford paper in which Hophni's welfare was cannily considered.

> SIR [it ran],
>
> As you appear to take an interest in the strike now proceeding at our mills, I shall be glad if you will make it known that if, when the strike has lasted two months, the hands choose to return to work, they may do so on our terms of employment, which we consider equitable. That matter is entirely in their own hands. If they do not return to work on that day we shall close down the dyehouse and the various mills for a further period of six months. And if, at the end of

this latter date, they still hold out, we shall withdraw our interests from Bradford entirely, and enlarge our existing establishments in France, Germany, the United States, and elsewhere.

We are, Sir,

Yours truly,

THOMPSON AND ASQUITH

The letter was printed, with lurid editorial comments, and amongst other effects it had one which Tom had calculated upon. A mob gathered, in spite of all police interference. It was not led by Watkin in person, but it was exhorted by him in language that was fluent, forcible, uncommittal, and quite unmistakable; after which (whilst Watkin, as a known figure, retired out of police range) it marched, with band playing and money-boxes rattling, for Nob Lane.

T. Thompson was out of reach, but Asquith had a big new house, most extravagantly furnished, and—they visited it. They pitched about forty tons of rockery and other *débris* through the broken window-sashes into the most expensive drawing-room in Bradford. They smashed up the greenhouses and brought out all Hophni's precious orchids to cool. They drove Mrs Louisa into such a fury that she belaboured several of them with a broom-handle; and, in fact, they all enjoyed themselves so thoroughly that on the road back to their homes they were talking quite naturally over the fact that three days hence the two months would expire, and they would be all merrily back at work again. Louisa had shown up finely whilst they wrecked her house. Louisa was one of themselves, and they loved her for her pluck.

It had been really a very pleasant strike. The pay from the unions had just lasted out; the youngsters, thanks to Parson Cobbold, were as fat as butter; and now was the time to go back to the mills. They began to speak in no uncertain voice on this last point, and if they were not to be wiped out of existence in a holocaust of resignations, the unions had to listen.

The union chairmen and committees gritted their teeth with despair and rage. It is always a hateful thing to own oneself beaten and countenance surrender, and when the rank and file have a way of treating their defeated generals something after the Carthaginian style, and taking care that they are always afterwards incapacitated for office, that does very little to tone down the bitterness of the situation. But there was no help for it. T. Thompson of Thompson and Asquith was believed and trusted. He had promised them a two months' strike, and they had done that smiling. He promised them an additional six if they refused to be good, and they quite trusted and believed that he would be a man of his word.

So Watkin and his two silent supporters wrote for an appointment, and

once more made their way to the Thompson and Asquith office.

"Morning, Watkin," said Tom. "Hands coming in to-morrow? Have a cigar? They're only wool-combers this time, but we're all a bit pinched just now, aren't we?"

"Hang your cigars!"

"That means that strike's ended, eh?"

"I don't know. It depends on the terms."

"You know perfectly well what the terms are, and you know equally well they won't shift. I've said so, and that's sufficient guarantee. It's the new groove or none. Quick now, are they coming in to-morrow, or do they want to play another six months?"

"Six months! Pah! You daren't do such a thing. It would ruin your business. That's just a bluff."

Tom's big square jaw hardened. "If you haven't learned yet that in this firm we've a way of seeing bluffs through, you know too little about Bradford ways to be fit for your job."

Watkin shook a big cricketer's fist. "Hell can't be running full time with you out of it."

"Matter of opinion, but perhaps you're an authority. However, spit your venom, boy, and don't mind me. Still, I don't see why you should make it a personal question."

"Personal! I shall be sacked from the chairmanship of the union. I lose my livelihood through you. I've got to go to work again. Personal!

"Are you serious about that? Have you no resources?"

"I'm as serious as a ruined man can be."

"Very well, then. I'll give you a job after your own heart. I'll give you two pounds a week to carry your hands in your pockets, and walk round our mills and works, and report on any abuses that catch your eye. I've put in tons of new machinery whilst the hands have been out on strike, and as everything is going to be run on piecework now, conditions and rates of wages will take a bit of adjusting. That will, perhaps, convince the other talking and writing fools that we have every intention of doing the right thing by our work-people."

"And you aren't afraid of my making mischief?"

"Not one inch. It would come to my ears if you did, and out you'd go; and you aren't fool enough to get sacked out of such a soft job."

"Well, Tom, it's very good of you. Better than I des—expected. Thank you, Mr Tom. You know I've got a missis and youngsters to think of like other people. I'm sorry things got so angry whilst the strike was on. It's a great pity about Hophni's—that is, Mr Hophni's—house."

"Why," said Tom, drily enough, "he'd got the place fitted out with some

most un-Christian furniture which made the eye ache to look on, and now he'll be able to get it furnished afresh in better taste—at the expense of the rates."

"Eh, well, Mr Tom, it's over and done with, and there's not much ill-feeling left. But there's one man I bet you don't forgive in a hurry, and that's Mr Cobbold. There's no creature did more to prevent your winning than that parson."

"Just acted according to his lights. Man must, you know, Watkin. Good morning to you all."

CHAPTER XII
TREATY-MAKERS

"No, sir; I'm very sorry, sir," said the butler, "but the master is particularly engaged just now, and won't be free till dinner-time. Would you like to go up to your room, sir?"

"Mrs Thompson in?"

"No, sir. Out driving. She left word she would not be back till late. I don't think you could have said what train you were coming down by, sir."

Mr Gahan remembered that a carriage had been sent to meet him at the station, but did not comment on this openly or facially. The industry of politics had taught him to carry an impassive face. "But I fancy," he observed inwardly to himself, "that they'd have been a trifle more keen to receive me if they'd known that I'd come down with the offer of a baronetcy in my pocket. Pity one's got to make use of *parvenus* like these I must say, though, except for that absurd stuffed trout above the fireplace, the place shows good taste."

The butler continued his respectful apologies. "I'm sorry, sir, but the young gentlemen are out too. Shall I bring you a cup of tea into the hall here, or would you prefer anything else, sir?"

"Thanks, no," said Gahan. "I'll go out and smoke in the park till dinner-time. I saw a man rabbiting there as I drove through. I'll watch him and enjoy the air. Your Yorkshire air is too good to be missed."

"Certainly, sir; I'll bring you cigars."

Mr Gahan, like other people before him, found Buton Hall and its gardens, with the carp-ponds and the park, with their backing of heather-covered hills, very pleasing to the eye; and, being a man of good family himself, he naturally resented that the owner should be a mere mushroom of yesterday. He had not seen T. Thompson or heard about him beyond the bare facts of his power and wealth, and he naturally pictured him in raw colours—a creature ignorant of everything except the devices of money-making, extravagantly boastful of his success, offensively keen, and a murderer of the Queen's English.

"It does seem a shame," said Mr Gahan to himself, as he eyed caressingly the autumn dressing of the Buton oaks and beeches, "it does seem an abominable shame that a man should get a magnificent old place like this merely by working for it. Why couldn't he build himself a shiny stone palace outside Bradford, and leave Buton to be held by somebody who could appreciate it? I give him credit, though, for keeping good cigars. It's a pity to smoke such tobacco as this in the open air. But perhaps his butler buys them

for him. Good servant that butler. He's been in a gentleman's house before he came here. Hullo, more deer! Those are Japanese this time, and that's the seventh variety I've seen already. I wonder how many species the fellow has put down here? He's got a regular zoological collection. Queer taste for a wool merchant, or clothmaker, or whatever he is, a man who rose yesterday, and who has probably never been ten miles away from his counting-house."

With musings after this pattern, Mr Gahan made his way appreciatively across the park, stepped over a line of wire rabbit-fencing, and presently came upon a man engaged beside a burrow. Three ferrets kicked in their bags by his side, nets covered all the neighbouring holes, and the man himself was occupied in driving back a couple of pale yellow ferrets which seemed to prefer the open air to their professional duties down below.

"The rabbits don't seem to be at home," said Gahan.

" 'Appen," said the rabbiter. "But t'spot fair crawled wi'm this morn."

"Perhaps they're in the next hole. They may have been driven out of this by a weasel or something."

"I've tried six and found nowt. Seems to me there's been some beggar round here poaching."

"I suppose Mr Thompson doesn't care much about game preservation?"

The rabbiter wiped the clay from his fingers on to the grass and looked up with a stolid face " 'Oo might you be, please?"

"I'm staying up at the Hall."

"Then, sir, you must have been there a very short time, and know our governor very little or not at all, or you wouldn't ask a fond question like that. Him keen on game preserving!" The rabbiter chuckled. "There's only one thing he's keener on, but that's not for me to talk about; indeed, I'm not supposed to know it."

"Is he a good shot?"

"Middlin'," said the rabbiter judicially. "But for knowing where birds is, either on the moor or in covert, and for being able to get at them, there isn't his equal. I tell you, mister, that when our governor took to making hisself a millionaire, there was the best gamekeeper in England just thrown away. I've often said it was a pity."

Gahan was genuinely pleased with the information. It went some way towards reconciling him to the present ownership of Buton. He was a keen sportsman himself. "I'm glad to hear you're down on poachers here."

"Oh, we're all that! There's a five-pound note for us keepers for every chap that's copped here taking the game, and there's ten pound if we can nobbut leet on t'worst of them."

"The ringleader, d'ye mean? The organizer?"

"No. This here chap works by hissen, and gathers more game when he's i'

t'mood than all t'rest of them put together. They say he's got a mongrel lurcher bitch that's a fair monkey for cleverness, though I've never seed orther o' them mysen. But I've a notion who t'chap is, and I s'ouldn't wonder but what I fobbed yon ten pound one o' these neets."

Gahan had been peering down at the grass. "I rather fancy you might have a try for it now."

"What's that, sir?"

"Take away those nets and give the ferrets free play. There, look. A scent's been laid down here, and that one's following it like a hound. There, the other's joined in. I thought as much. Somebody's run a drag over here. You can follow it by eye if you stoop."

"Ay," said the rabbiter, "that sounds a bit o' all right, mister. But what's the use of a drag here? Hares or pheasants you can lure away with valerian or assyfettleder; but these is rabbiths here, an' I never heard of a way to whistle them from thro' their 'oils i' t'dayleet."

"Nor I," said Gahan; "but we're neither of us poachers nor inventors, you see."

The rabbiter seemed struck with a sudden idea. "No, we're not. But t'chap I have i' minds' both. Sitha how ferret's following t'scent. I bet you never thought of being copped that way. It's a rare owd-fashioned trick hunting him down wi' a ferret, by goy! isn't it, mister? Sitha, t'ferret's dodging about like a firework to each rabbith-'oil i' turn. Yon chap's pulled drag over every one of them, an' t'rabbiths has all come out an' followed it."

"Look at this piece of bare soil; it's just smothered with their tracks. And look on ahead here through the grass. There's a regular lane. Here, pick up the ferret. There's no mistaking the way now." Mr Gahan split and twisted a good stout cudgel from a hazel. "Come along, now, quickly and quietly, and perhaps I can help you catch your man in the act."

The rabbiter murmured something indistinctly about catching a very evil gentleman asleep, but followed briskly on at Gahan's heels, and the pair of them crashed into a cover among brackens that were brown and gold with their autumn tints, and under shrubs and trees that were gorgeous with yellow foliage.

They were not good trackers, and more than once had again to bring the ferret to their aid. Moreover they made sufficient noise in their passage to advertise all the wild things of the woods about each and all their movements. But they worked on slowly and persistently, and in the end came to the farther side of the cover, and there in the open saw a sight which made Gahan whistle and the rabbiter swear out of sheer amazement.

A length of the wire rabbit-fencing had been pulled away from its former position, and the stakes reset in a curve back on to itself so as to form a pound.

At one point on the outside a small pit had been dug, and covered by the lid of a barrel ingeniously poised. The line of the drag led to this lid, which was liberally smeared with the lure. The rabbits would scamper on to it, and promptly the lid would capsize and drop them into the pit below, thereupon returning to its former appearance of security. And the pit communicated down a short passage with the interior of the pound.

As a plain testimonial to the efficiency of the plan, the floor of the pound was literally carpeted with mumbling, kicking, scuffling, furry rabbits.

"We've missed catching the man," said Gahan. "He must have heard us coming through the cover, and taken fright and bolted. But, at any rate, we've stopped him from walking off with the rabbits, and he's had all his trouble for nothing."

The rabbiter was on his knees snuffling the barrel lid. "I wish I could annylise what this 'ere drag's made of; but I cannot. It's not valerian, an it's not assyfettleder. It's some blame' chimical of his own, and he'll keep t'secret of it and just make my life a punishment if I cannot contrive to cop him i' t'act."

"You seem to know pretty well who the man is?"

The rabbiter grunted with contempt. "Of course I do, mister. It's the governor; who else?"

"What, Mr Thompson?"

"Naturally. He's the finest poacher i' Yorkshire. Everybody knows that as knows owt round here. But," added the rabbiter, with a wink, " 'e doesn't think as we know. Still, I must say we never catch him, though we're always on the try, and he'd fork out right handsome to a man who did it."

"Surprising sort of a millionaire this," thought Gahan to himself, as he walked slowly back to the Hall across the park. "Seems a bit different from my first measure of him. There's more in the man than mere wool and dollars. Well, he'll make all the better baronet. What a grand old house it is, and what splendid timber! I wonder if our *parvenu* has had the foresight to equip himself with aitches as well as a fine estate. I really must have another walk through these grounds before I go in to be bored."

It was late when Mr Gahan got in, and he went up straight to dress, and then reported himself in the drawing-room. A good deal to his surprise, he found a house-party there of quite twenty people.

A sturdy, young-looking, clean-shaven man, with a powerful jaw and a strong blue eye, singled him out and came across. "I'm awfully sorry there was no one in to meet you when you came. I'm T. Thompson, by the way. My wife will be down in a minute."

"Don't apologize. I've been gloating over the beauties of your park and amusing myself with one of your keepers. I gather you take a special interest in

rabbits?”

The blue eyes twinkled. “Yes, entertaining creatures, rabbits. Curiously simple to lead them about when you know how. But you’ve got to learn to move quietly in cover before you can do much in that line.”

Gahan laughed.

“I arranged the big shoot for the day after to-morrow,” said Tom hospitably, “but I’ll see you go out to-morrow, if you care to face an extra day.”

“Doesn’t a bit know who I am,” commented Gahan to himself.

“I’m sorry, but none of the shooting people are here yet. They’ll be all foreigners at dinner to-night. Do you talk French?”

“No,” said Gahan, with a laugh; “I’m afraid I only talk politics,” and mentioned his name.

His host laughed also. “I’m afraid you will think we are an awfully muddly crew down here. I didn’t know a bit you were coming down, and that’s the truth. But we’re business people to this extent, that my partner, Mrs Thompson, manages the political department altogether, and I don’t interfere. Here she is, by the way. Let me take you across. My dear, Mr Gahan, whom you’ve asked to come down to see you, and who doesn’t talk French. Gahan, will you take Mrs Thompson in to dinner?”

“Bless my soul!” thought Gahan, “she doesn’t know who I am either. They seem to do their entertaining here on a scale that’s wide, and, to say the least of it, cosmopolitan. I must have been corresponding with a secretary. We’d better know how we stand. It’s no use beating about the bush any more.”

So, whilst he was taking his hostess across the wide hall to the dining-room, he bluntly announced his errand into her ear.

“A baronetcy for Tom? How delightful of you—or them—or whoever it is! He won’t take it, of course. He always said from the first he was going to have a peerage; and as he said so, he’ll have it. But it’s quite delicious to hear it offered.”

“Then I am superfluous?”

“Not a bit. Not at all. It is immensely kind of you to come down and see us. We don’t want the peerage yet, not for at least half a dozen more years, or I’d ask you to help. I’m sure Tom would be delighted if you did.”

This pretty, joyous woman was outside Gahan’s calculations. He did not know what to make of her, except that she was a lady, though for that matter T. Thompson himself appeared to the eye and the ear as the ordinary civilized Christian gentleman, and not the raw, self-assertive, *patois*-speaking *parvenu* which he had pictured. Decidedly this household puzzled him. He talked on to get more knowledge of its ways.

“You seem to have your processes pretty well in hand, if you can talk so

certainly about results."

"My excellent husband," said Mary Thompson cheerfully, "always is certain of a result before he begins to move. There is no magic about. He only sleeps about four hours a day, and he's thinking things out and arranging them for the rest of the twenty-four. Only he does it in railway carriages, and on the moor, and in places like those, and people miss the mental agony, and that's why they always associate him with luck and conjuring tricks."

"I only know him," Gahan confessed, "from his contributions to party funds, and it is because of those that I am down here."

"With the baronetcy in one hand and a polite request for more in the other?"

"You've got it in a phrase. By the way, do none of these good people here understand English?"

"*Pas un mot.* That comfortable dame in the high frock and the diamond breastplate next my husband thinks she understands a little, but in effect she doesn't. It's a pity for her, because the odds are she'll be the next *Madame la Présidente*. So we can gossip as dangerously as we please. By the way, did you think all those cheques were towards purchasing that baronetcy?"

Gahan laughed. "My dear lady, you put it so bluntly that I begin to think they couldn't have been for that purpose. Not that there's anything to be ashamed of in such a course. People who want these little social additions do it every day."

"I suppose Tom and I are more ambitious, then. We are going to get our—what we want without direct purchase."

"Then," suggested Gahan rather slyly, "the cheques to the party funds were sent out of sheer admiration for the party's work?"

"Not one very little bit at all. They were either bribes or blackmail, whichever way you choose to look at it. Each has been conditional on something being done. Tom and I have our likes and dislikes, and we always see to it that we get the likes. For instance, he's travelled a good deal, and, as a consequence, he has remarkably small sympathy with those stay-at-home people who always think England in the wrong, and some other country (which they don't understand in the least) should be truckled to. We've paid a good many thousand pounds to save ourselves being nauseated by the sight of English honour dragged in the mud by Englishmen. There was Egypt, for instance——"

" 'Sh!" said Gahan, glancing up the table, "please. There are many people that don't speak English for publication who can follow a conversation—especially if it isn't intended for them. Your future Mrs President was looking down this way just then with a distinct eye of intelligence. We all understand, of course, that there are many wheels in political machinery, but it is not

always advisable to describe them too publicly."

Mary Thompson showed amusement. "I don't think you and I can teach much in this way to these good folks round the table here. They're all French political people. They're over here on a visit, nominally to enjoy themselves at Buton, and to shoot 'ze Anglish g-r-rouse-bird.' You should have been up on the moor to see them. Every butt there was half full of empty cartridge-cases, and they managed to haggle down just eight brace amongst them. I had a talk to the keeper this morning, and he cried. They say he didn't cry yesterday. Tom had told him to arrange for a good day, and Mr Keeper imagined they'd gather about two hundred and fifty brace. Tom said it was quite lucky he and the beaters talked such very broad Yorkshire, that no one could understand them. But really our dear visitors are here to see how trade is run in Bradford, and especially by Thompson and Asquith."

"That's your husband's firm."

"Yes. They've got a lot of places in Bradford, and employ about five thousand hands; and, not counting the German mills, they've got another five thousand hands in their Continental works, which are mostly in France. Now French tariffs and French legislation don't suit England's views, and Tom is English first, last, and all the way. As a consequence, things in France have got to be altered, or Tom will give them over there a very bad time indeed commercially. Of course, there are no threats. He'll be beautifully tactful and polite to them, but they'll believe he'll be as good as his word. He's had to give exhibitions of truthfulness in France, just as he once had to here in England, and people got hurt because they were sceptical."

"How do you mean? Strikes and things?"

"Yes, closing down mills and destroying machinery. He set up a machine-shop in Roubaix once, and they hampered him. He gave them fair warning to drop it, and as they wouldn't he broke up all the tools, took away the business, and incidentally smashed all the other textile machinery makers in France by underselling them. So you see they came to believe that when he said a thing was going to be they could be certain it would be done. It's a great matter to be known as a man of your word."

"Well," said Gahan, with a good deal of surprise, "this is all news to me. We knew in London that your husband was a strong man, but I'm beginning to see that his talents have a far wider scope than we'd any idea of. It's the Government," he added drily, "that usually makes the treaties for this country."

"Don't you see that makes it all the more piquant for a mere private person to take up that branch of international politics?"

"If Mr Thompson gets France to adopt Free Trade I shall call him a miracle-maker. What's more, I can guarantee that the Prime Minister would see that he had his peerage in the next list."

“Oh, Tom’s not Utopian. He’s always eminently practical, and he never cries for the moon. France would never do anything so suicidal and ridiculous as that. England stands alone as the only nation that fosters foreign competition, and none of the others will ever be insane enough to try and push her off that pedestal, at any rate. No, it’s the tariff on raw materials he’s going to get lowered, so as to reduce finished prices in France and increase the French demand. At the same time, he wants the tolls taken off the profits one makes over there, so that (don’t you see?) Englishmen, who have the skill and the capital, can make money in France by manufacturing there, and bring it home to England to spend.”

Gahan looked quizzically up at an oak beam in the ceiling.

“What are you thinking of now? Oh, I see! It strikes you that my generous husband is working with half an eye on general British interests, and a good eye and a half on his own?”

“Well, it has rather that appearance.”

“Perhaps in a way you’re right. But, believe me, he isn’t working for mere money alone now. And when you begin to think of it the reason’s perfectly plain. We’re past that stage. We couldn’t spend a third of our invested income if we tried—and the income is being added to automatically every week. Still, you know, once a man’s built up a big business, and made success with it, he carries it on for its own sake, and not entirely——” She broke off and laughed. Gahan noticed that she had a very fascinating laugh, and was, in fact, a remarkably beautiful woman. “What a nice light topic all this is for a dinner conversation! But it’s your own fault for starting it. Politics are my weak place. It’s an instance of heredity; my people have all dabbled ineffectively in politics for ten generations. You see the advantage of starting without the handicap of ancestors. That’s where my husband scored. He was able to form his own tastes as he liked, without any hindrances whatever. Oh, dear! What’s wrong now?”

A lady’s-maid had come into the room, voluble and French, and the staid butler was confronting her with disapproval. The maid with waving hands dodged past him and made for the comfortable, bejewelled lady who had been pointed out as the future *Madame la Présidente*.

It appeared that Madame had been robbed, outraged! While Madame dined thieves had broken into Madame’s bedchamber, and taken not only Madame’s emerald necklace, but also the enamel bracelet and the turquoise set, and, in fact, all Madame’s relays of jewellery! The maid explained in a shrill, tearful crescendo.

Madame did not change colour. The previous ministrations of the maid prevented that. But she showed unmistakable signs of an outbreak of hysteria. She had been struck in her tenderest spot. “I am ruined!” she panted. “All my

lovely toys! La, la! I shall have nothing now to wear. I shall be a picture of derision. And this is England! What barbarians!"

"Now, isn't that tiresome?" murmured Mrs Thompson to Gahan at the other end of the table. "Why couldn't they have helped themselves at my jewel-case if they wanted anything? Thieves seem to be people with no consideration for anything beyond loot. Now, this is just the sort of thing that breaks off half-made treaties. That woman has got more influence one way and another than all the rest of the party here put together. She's really, I believe, the most powerful person in the French Republic this minute, and certainly the vainest woman in Europe. I always think her jewellery is in abominable taste, even for Paris; but she's ridiculously proud of it, and she'll be furious enough to run France into a war with us if it's lost. Oh, there's Tom off to look. Then we may as well contain our souls in patience, because he knows the importance of it, and if anybody can get it back, he's the man."

"It's an awkward incident," said Gahan. "Even Mr Thompson," he added, with dry malice, "can't plan out everything beforehand as it ought to go."

Mary Thompson laughed happily. "Tom always allows plenty of margin. It will cost him a little more time and trouble, maybe, but you'll see it won't interfere with the result."

In the meanwhile Tom had gone up to Madame's bedroom and made a rapid survey. The door had been locked from the inside, but the raiders had overlooked the door to the dressing-room which matched the rest of the fitments, and it was through this that first the maid and afterwards Tom made entrance.

The unauthorized caller must have found his work ridiculously easy. He had found the position of a light gardener's ladder and the hour of dinner beforehand, and then, making use of both of these, had simply walked up to the window, opened it, and stepped inside. The jewel-case lay invitingly on the dressing-table, guarded only by the usual flimsy lock. The invader had wrenched it open with a pair of scissors. He had pocketed the jewels, obligingly left the cases behind him, scrawled a large "Thanks!" in rouge on the looking-glass, and taken his departure.

Tom noted these points for himself, unlocked the bedroom door, opened it, and whistled. There came silently and speedily from up some distant staircase a large mongrel she-dog, who wriggled to Tom a quick, respectful salute.

"Come in here, Clara. Just put your nose to the carpet there, dogums. That's where Mr Burglar will have stood. Now smell this jewel-case, if you can, and if it's not too much sodden with scent. He's handled that not a quarter of an hour ago. Now just take a sniff at this rouge-pot—yes, quite right, especially in the finger-marks. No, you're not to eat it. Now have another try at the floor here, in front of the dressing-table. Good old girl! now you've got it;

right across to the window, and down the ladder. No, you're not to jump. Clara, come back, Clara!"

Clara had evidently grasped the whole affair. She stood with her fore-paws on the window-sill and showed a distinct inclination there and then to follow up the chase. Tom quite appreciated her hurry. He was never fond of unnecessary delays himself.

He cuddled Clara under his arm, where she dangled passively, stepped out on to the ladder, and eight seconds later was examining footmarks in the soft mould of a flower-bed. Clara, with her nose to the ground, was taking up the scent in great gasps, and was showing distinct impatience to be off.

"All right, old girl," said Tom; "this is where you beat me. Don't run away from me, and remember I'm rather full of dinner."

Clara started off mutely along the trail, down garden paths, across lawns, through gates, over a sunk fence, and so out into the park. It was quite dark and rather foggy, and there was not enough dew down to show footmarks with any plainness. "Go on, my dogums," said Tom appreciatively. "This is just the night where you score. I wish I'd your nose."

Clara had a generous idea of pace. She knew Tom's powers and speed from long association with them, and, as the keenness of hunting entered into her, she was inclined to press them to the uttermost. Tom, bare-headed, in dress-clothes, and in thin dress shoes, was not exactly in a kit adapted for a brisk cross-country run; but he was a man always hard in wind and muscle, a man always in training; and just now he had rather a vicious interest in overtaking his chase. This thief had come between him and his business, and that was not an interference Tom easily forgave. And further, this thief had robbed one of his guests, and Tom's warm sense of hospitality was furious at the outrage. If the thief had been better advised, and merely annexed Mrs Thompson's jewel-box, it is probable that Tom would have finished his talk with his guests before he worried his head about it.

But as it was, he followed Clara at a very sharp trot across the park, and the fighting animal within him was very strongly roused. He had always carried the reputation of being a hard man with those who got in the way of any of his ambitions.

Clara swung in her course when she came to the road which led to the village, and doubled back at an angle of about forty-five degrees to her original line. Tom waited till they came to a bit of soft ground, halted a moment, and peered down through the gloom for tracks, so as to check Clara's knowledge.

He found them readily enough. "All right, old girl," said he, "two pairs of boots," and Clara lifted one side of her nose and showed a few well-kept teeth, which was her very passable imitation of a laugh. Then on they went again, rapidly and in silence, out on to the rough ground below the moor.

“A pound to a brick,” Tom betted to himself, “they’re dividing up the plunder in the lunch hut. Well, there are two of them, by their footmarks, and I suppose Clara and I should be able to handle the brace without much trouble.”

He was right in his guess of the place. Clara led to the little stone house in a bee-line, and when they came near enough they could see through the fog streaks of light from under the door and from the chinks in the window shutter.

For a heavy man Tom always trod lightly, as has before been reported in these memoirs, and just then he advanced even more quietly than usual. He was absolutely unarmed, of course, and though he did not shy at the scrimmage in the least on this account, he was no fool not to make the most of his chances and get all the advantage of a surprise.

Consequently, when he put his shoulder to the door and sent it flying open into the hut, that was the first hint the men inside had of anyone being in the neighbourhood. At the same time that was the first notion Tom had got that he had not two desperate men to fight against, but three. There were two active burglars, as Tom had rightly diagnosed from the footprints. That the promoter of the scheme, who was also the receiver of the stolen goods, should be in the hut where the others had come to meet him, was quite outside Tom’s calculations.

However, once there, he had neither opportunity nor inclination to back out, and what followed came quickly. His only chance of salvation lay in quick hitting; and, as there was no time for chivalry, he caught the man nearest him a terrific pelt on the angle of the jaw as he was in the act of rising from the table. Simultaneously the man opposite pulled a revolver, and blazed two shots within a yard of Tom’s face, missing him completely. But when man Number One toppled sideways from his stool, Tom picked up the heavy oaken table and beat it upon the face and shoulders of this marksman till he toppled on the floor, and was then just in time to save the life of Number Three, whom Clara had dragged to the ground and was doing her best to finish off. This last man had made neither sound nor complaint during the whole proceeding. The silent Clara, on her entrance, had clamped him by the throat with her powerful jaws, springing there without yelp or whimper, and wrenching at him till he tumbled to the floor. He was pretty badly torn before Tom felt himself sufficiently free to call Clara off.

In the meanwhile man Number One was pulling himself together from the floor, with the purpose of showing further fight; but by now Tom had possessed himself of the fallen revolver, and cheerfully promised to put a bullet through his shoulder if he gave further trouble.

“I’m not going to kill you,” said Mr Thompson, “so you needn’t worry about that. But I’m too busy just now to waste more time in fighting you, and so, if you show ugly, I shall just disable you by a shot through the shoulder. In

the meanwhile, I must pick up this jewellery, which is all spilt, so Clara—'st—watch him!"

"G—r—r—r!" said Clara.

"Now then. Attention! Heels together, hands behind your head, and just don't you move. You've seen Clara worry one man to-night, and she's quite ready to tackle another if I tip her a wink. Lucky thing the lamp's on the wall and wasn't upset in all this argument we've had. I shall want a light to pick up all these ornaments you've borrowed from one of my guests."

Tom had taken a mental inventory from the empty cases of what jewellery had been stolen, and it took him some time to collect all the pieces from the floor and from the persons of the thieves; but at last he got it all safely into his trousers pockets and gave the word to march.

The man who had been bowled over by the table was unconscious, and so him Tom packed on the shoulders of the more burly thief whom he had knocked down at the beginning of the skirmish, and with Clara's victim tenderly handling his throat, they set out again across the park.

Most men would have paraded such a capture, but Tom was never theatrical. He rounded up his three thieves in a warm saddle-room, under the charge of some of his own men, and gave instructions that they should be mended, fed, warmed, and handed over in due time to the police. Then he went to his own dressing-room, washed, and put on fresh clothes, and presently, smart and spruce as ever, went downstairs to the dining-room, and rejoined his guests, who had got as far as dessert.

"Well, monsieur, have the thieves got away?"

"Oh, no. They're toasting their toes in the saddle-room."

"But you have not gained back my pretty toys?"

"Oh, yes; they're all there, and none the worse. Your maid's putting them back in their cases."

"But—you are clean? You have not been fighting for them?"

"I'm clean because I've just been up to change my clothes, and that's what's kept me so long. As for fighting, does the method matter so long as the result is there?"

"It does not. You are charming. You have regained for me my delicious jewels, and I love you for it. Now I shall make the dear madame your wife jealous. I must embrace you." Which she did with effusion.

"Excitable people, the French," said Gahan, at the other end of the table. "Do you mind this sort of thing, Mrs Thompson?"

"Not to help a pious end. Besides, a good many other people have thought Tom was kissable, and I don't see why they shouldn't. I like a husband who is appreciated."

"You seem pretty well pleased with yourself," said Gahan to Tom at the

end of that evening.

"Quite nicely, thanks."

"I've been talking to Mrs Thompson a good deal."

"So I noticed."

"And she told me—in confidence, of course—of this French treaty that you were trying to work. Have you been successful?"

"Oh, yes. Madame la Going-to-be-Présidente promised it to me in return for her trumpery jewels. It's a queer world."

"It is. Your wife says you won't accept a baronetcy which I came down here empowered to offer you. I suppose you're the only man in England who would refuse such a thing."

"Then I suppose the name of T. Thompson must become a synonym for greediness."

"You mean you are going to stick out for a peerage? It's a leetle early for that yet."

"Oh, I'm in no hurry. I don't want it before I'm forty. But I shall want it then, so the Government had better keep my record under its attention."

"I'll see that they do it," said Gahan; and that this promise was kept, the recent appearance of the name and titles of Baron Buton in the official record clearly attests.

But when that time came Tom flatly refused to accept all the congratulations. "I only did the plain part and the showy part," he explained —"just made money and built up a big business and all that. Mary is the person who has really earned the title for us. But if you're congratulating me on my cleverness in bagging such a young woman for my partner, I'm quite with you there."

Then he laughed and pointed to a stuffed trout which stood above the fireplace in the hall. "That is the key to the whole business. I stole that fish from my wife's people, and she had to marry me to get it back. So you see I just look upon it as the palladium of the house. When you look at our coat of arms (if I can work the Heralds as I wish) you'll see on it 'a stuffed trout, natant, glazed.' "

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been fixed.
Inconsistency in hyphenation has been retained.
[The end of *Thompson's Progress* by C. J. Cutcliffe Hyne]