THE POSTMASTER-GENERAL

HILAIRE BELLOC

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BIOGRAPHIES BY HILAIRE BELLOC

CRANMER

WOLSEY

RICHELIEU

JAMES THE SECOND

The Right Hon. Wilfrid Delescue Halterton, M.P., born 14th January, 1905. Father, John Halterton of Reldwell Hall, Essex. Mother, the Hon. Sarah Woolley. Educated Eton and Merrion College, Cambridge: 3rd Class Honours, Botany, 1936. Postmaster-General in Mrs. Boulger's second administration (1960). Recreation, golf. Unmarried. No s., no d.

The POSTMASTER-GENERAL

by

HILAIRE BELLOC
WITH THIRTY DRAWINGS
BY G. K. CHESTERTON

J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
PHILADELPHIA
1932

Manufactured in the
United States of America

TO

ORIANA HAYNES

THE POSTMASTER-GENERAL

I

WILFRID HALTERTON, POSTMASTER-GENERAL in Mrs. Boulger's second administration—that of 1960—sat before the wireless electric heater in the study of his new flat, at the top of the new Clarence block overlooking Hyde Park from the north. He was waiting for a visitor. He was waiting for McAuley, the younger McAuley, James (not his elder brother Andrew, the Attorney-General). The appointment had been made for five o'clock on that Tuesday afternoon, to give plenty of time for the Minister to come up after questions from the House of Commons to this flat north of the Park. There was nothing on but that eternal dull recurrent business of the Succession, and he could be free in the later afternoon.

He was a tall, patient-looking man in his fifty-fifth year, with a rather troubled face, long grey lax moustaches that drooped, and somewhat anxious about the mouth and eyes. He was looking rather more anxious than usual as he sat there. He half dreaded the interview which faced him—but it had to be gone through, and it was worth while doing. It was, of course, but one issue in the greater public affairs which a Postmaster-General controls. It was about a contract, and his own connection therewith was satisfactory enough.

Yet nervous he was. James McAuley—"J.," as they called him in the City—was of a sort which Wilfrid Halterton had come to know well enough during his now long acquaintance with public life, yet his uneasiness in the presence of which he could never quite master: the decisive men, the men who knew beforehand what they were going to say, who have all their forces marshalled and their reserves well in hand. Yes, he was nervous, though he had grown intimate with James McAuley during the last few months, since the Socialist Party had come in due rotation to its regular term of office again under Mrs. Boulger, who had led it so long. The Anarchist Party were of course again in opposition, having for their most forcible personality, though not their leader, Lady Caroline Balcombe, the wife of "Posh" Balcombe the banker, the big noise in the Anglo-American.

James McAuley, "J.," having a brother as Attorney-General in Mrs. Boulger's Government was a familiar with both front benches, and a man of consequence; a financier who was the prime mover in a number of great commercial interests.

Nothing but good should come of close friendship with such a man, and Wilfrid Halterton had no reason to worry about the coming interview, so far as its fixed results for himself were concerned. He had already arranged them with "J.," and there was nothing left to do but read over and sign the letter they had agreed upon.

Television, which had for long been an expectation, then an experiment, then a toy, had approached more and more during the past ten years to a commercial proposition. Television was already working at short ranges. It seemed just at the stage of being practicable over very long distances and having high commercial value.

Just before the Anarchists had gone out, some six months before the election designed to that effect, things were already ripe for the chartering of a television monopoly, and there had been talk of setting one up; but it was thought better to leave things over to the coming Socialist administration, which would have a clear run before it and plenty of time to organize the new public service.

Of course, the Television Service when it should be in working order would have to be under the control of the Government. It would, equally of course, have to be worked in connection with the Post Office. With the Post Office the decision would lie as to which of the two chief competing companies should be granted the monopoly.

Neither group had the least objection to Public Control. It was recognized as a necessity—and, what counts much more with public men—a *duty*. Each group therefore had negotiated with the permanent officials of the Post Office—pending the final decision of its political chief—on the basis of an arrangement with the authorities whereby whichever company worked the new system of Television as a monopoly should be granted a subsidy, the right to enforce rates fixed by themselves, to let out private machines at their own price, and to make whatever charges they thought fit for installation; with a guarantee from the Treasury against loss.

Whichever of the rival groups should obtain the management of this public service would also, of course, have the right to nominate its own directorship and management and to fill all posts. Finally, there was to be special legislation by schedule attached to the bill, providing that in case of dispute recourse could not be had to the ordinary Courts of Justice, but that the decision of an official of the Company called "the Arbitrator" should be final. To those few cranks who may quarrel with this system and complain that Public Control was imperilled by it, we have a self-evident reply, which is that we are not a logical people; we have a genius for compromise. The test of any system with us is not its theoretical perfection, but whether it *works*. This system of what may be called "modified Public Control" would certainly work by the only available test, which is the production of a profit for the monopoly which held the Charter.

Durrant's and Reynier's were the popular names of the two competing groups. The so-called "Reynier crowd" had their names from the screen they used, which was the invention of the late Hector Reynier, an admitted genius who had died in great poverty. The other (which was more talked about) was the Durrant Imperial Television Company. It was so called after Durrant, the name of the original inventor, who had lately died in embarrassed circumstances; an admitted genius. Its finance was in the hands of James McAuley—James Haggismuir McAuley to give him his full name, which bore record of family distinction on his mother's side.

Both Reynier's lot and Durrant's had manufactured short range private instruments for domestic use since 1953, each Company was well established and the shares of each stood at a premium; but when long-range Television was a fact—already arrived at experimentally over nearly a hundred miles and with prospects of indefinite extension—much larger developments were in prospect. The political—and City—interest of the movement centred upon which of the two rivals should obtain the contract and Charter.

Durrant's Television shares were known as "Billies." They had first been called "Tells," then "William Tells," then "Williams"; then Capel Court had settled down into this form of "Billies," and "Billies" they now were and would remain. They stood on this

Tuesday, March the 3rd, 1960, the £1 shares, at 23s. 6d.—24s.

A final decision upon the matter was still awaited—and one great difficulty stood in the way of such a decision. There was not much to choose between the Reynier system and Durrant's so far as sending or receiving were concerned. The difficulty in deciding lay in who should ultimately prove possessor of a gadget called "Dow's Intensifier."

Dow's Patent was the only Intensifier which had been found to work satisfactorily. With it you got tolerably clear reproductions. None of the other very numerous competing types had successfully solved what is, as everybody knows, the chief difficulty in the practical use of Television at long range; for with the experimental and unsatisfactory Intensifiers that were in use, though the picture was then all right, it was all but invisible.

Durrant's used, and talked a lot about, a certain Murray's Intensifier; but that was bluff (said the people in the know). It didn't work and it couldn't ever: it was on a false principle.

Dow's was—to those who could judge—indispensable. Reynier had hitherto used the old Keeling Intensifier, which could not of its nature suit long ranges. But it was rumoured on all sides, it was even affirmed by a good many responsible people, that Reynier's had a secret agreement which secured them Dow's Patent for the future—or at any rate could take it for granted that they would get it once they had the charter. But the Dow's Company (Dow, an admitted genius, had died two years before—financial embarrassment had hastened his end) always asserted their complete independence, and denied everything that was going about to the contrary.

None the less, the committee of experts which had been appointed by the Post Office to report on the two systems had reported in favour of Reynier's. They had done so mainly because they were convinced that Reynier's would mean Dow's Patent. They were satisfied that Murray's totally different system which Durrant's talked of would never do. Dow's alone could make the long-range Television practicable.

I have said that James McAuley was behind Durrant's—one might put it more strongly and say that he *was* Durrant's. He was the complete master of that group. And it was largely because of the trust men had in him that Billies stood thus at 23s. 6d.—24s. and were being talked higher, in spite of the Committee's report in favour of their rivals. For, after all, the report of the Committee was as yet private, and, what was much more important, it could be overruled by the Secretary of State at the head of the department. One thing was certain, whichever got the charter—that is the monopoly—would have Dow's at their service. For Dow's could have no other market, and the new market would be immense. Even if Reynier's did have already some pull or claim, they would have to sell it to Durrant's if Durrant's had the P.M.G. in its favour.

And there was Wilfrid Halterton sitting and waiting for James McAuley.

The Postmaster-General knew that this close but direct fellow McAuley was coming to complete a sound proposition; on that sound proposition Halterton had already been approached in a series of interviews from the first days of the session, of which conversations this coming one was to be the last and decisive. He had said as much to Halterton when they had met only twenty-four hours before in the Postmaster-General's room at the House of Commons and arranged the last details by word of mouth—yet did that statesman hesitate and still dread what was coming. He was still in that mood when he

heard the rumble of the lift, a discreet voice at the door asking if Halterton were in, and the light but determined step of his visitor in the passage.

He got up to receive the familiar figure as it entered: the short contained figure of a man much the same as himself in years—but how different in aspect: hands ready to grip, lips under firm control, eyes searching but fixed, and all this modified by a voice that was at once courteous and suave.

"You don't find it cold, J., do you?" said the host. "If you do I'll turn on the other one."

"Nay! Not cold!" said McAuley. "I've been walking. A man ought to walk this weather. I'm thinking I'm a touch late," he added. He pulled out his watch. "I'd hate to be late."

Then he sat down, and with a lack of preliminaries that was native to him sharply pulled out a bunch of papers from his pocket, looked at one of the sheets, and spread it out before him on the table. It was a large quarto sheet of the best thick paper, with the Royal Arms on it and the heading of the Postmaster-General's Office. It had on it perhaps twenty lines of clear typescript.

The Postmaster-General had always heard that in critical moments of negotiation it was important to stand up and make the other man sit down. He had always heard that it gave one a dominating position. It was part (he had been told) of the A B C of success. But all this knowledge, though sound enough, availed him nothing; for McAuley said, gently enough, "Sit ye down, Wilfrid. Ye can read it the better so. We can run through it together in a trice."

So Halterton sat down, drew up his chair, and joined his visitor in studying that typewritten sheet. It was addressed to the Directors of the Durrant Imperial; it began, "Gentlemen," and it ended, "Your obedient servant."

When Halterton had read the letter he sighed, and McAuley, by way of contrast, gave a sharp little cough—a cough of half-insinuating command.

"All the main points are there, ye'll be noting," he said. "All the main points. 'Tis quite simple. Just a word o' memorandum. Now ye're agreeing to give us the contract—oh! quite general. And it's sufficient—oh! we shall be quite content with that to go on with."

"Yes," answered Halterton. "Yes. . . . Yes. . . . I think I shall see better with my glasses."

He pulled out his spectacle case, rubbed the lenses carefully with his handkerchief, put them on, took them off again, rubbed them over a second time, once more put them on very carefully, got the right hook wrong and spent quite a second or two curling it round his ear, while his visitor chafed restrainedly. Then Wilfrid Halterton settled down, not too certainly, to business.

"Yes, it's quite clear," he said. "All that you were saying yesterday; it'll be quite enough for you to act on . . . when I've signed it." And he sighed again. Then he got up slowly and began pacing the room, keeping his eyes vaguely as he did so on the sheet which McAuley still held down before him with a careful but firm hand and with watchful eyes fixed on the other's face.

"You see, J.," said the Postmaster-General, "the Committee have decided against you

. . .”

“We’ve had that out before,” took up McAuley quietly and not unkindly. “We’ve had that out several times already.”

“Of course, the Committee’s report in favour of Reynier’s isn’t public yet . . . not public. . . .”

“Well, well, it was public enough to make t’other lot jump a shilling the day.” And Mr. McAuley laughed a subdued laugh.

“Well, what I mean. . . . The way I want to put it,” said Halterton, “is that . . . of course you’ve pretty well convinced me, but what I mean is, if I decide to go against the Committee. . . . No, what I mean is, if we, the Department, should finally decide to go against our own Committee . . . why. . . .”

J. McAuley pulled out his watch again.

“It’s a pity to waste time over these things, Wilfrid,” he said shaking his head, but without emphasis. “Ye’ll not hear anything more, I think, for there’s even nothing more to add. I take it, ’tis settled. Have you got it on the Order Paper yet?”

“It goes in to-night,” said Halterton.

“Well! There ye are! Didn’t I tell ye it was settled?”

“Yes, but one could always hold it up . . . delay debate, I mean.”

“Oh! Come man!” said McAuley, still gently, “all this is great waste o’ time, surely. ’Twas all fixed yesterday.”

“McAuley,” said the Postmaster-General, sitting down again and putting his spectacles away, and looking towards the door a moment, “have you brought anything in writing? I mean . . . something for *me*? We’ve had nothing in set terms as yet, you know. Not on *that* point. *My* point.”

“No . . . no,” said J., more slowly than he had yet spoken. He sifted his papers a moment, and then turned again to the sheet of paper on which stood those twenty lines of typescript with the Post Office heading at the top. “This note from you to us is what comes first, naturally,” he continued.

“I say, J. . . .”—the Postmaster-General gave a little nervous laugh—“you ought not to have written it on the official paper, you know. You should have left me to do that.”

“Eh, man, but ye do beat about the bush!”—there was a faint hint of irritation in McAuley’s even voice—“what would ye have me write it on? ’Twas no good making another draft for a simple thing like that, and it saved time to put it on your paper, from the office there. I took some with me last time I saw ye.”

“Oh, did you?” said the statesman. “All right.”

Then he put his spectacles on again with deliberation and slowly read the matter before him. He looked up.

“Oh, I say, this isn’t quite what I meant. This to be *from* me—of course?”

“Aye, of course,” said McAuley, “what else should it be? And if ye’ll just sign ’twill all be right and ready and we can all go ahead.”

“Well, no doubt sooner or later there will have to be some memorandum of this kind . . . but after all, it was for me to write it, wasn’t it?”

McAuley was so provoked that he went too far; clicked his tongue impatiently.

"Ye're difficult, man!" he said, "very difficult!" He half frowned as he said it. "Come now," more cheerfully, "I canna get to work till ye've signed; we settled that yesterday, didn't we?"

"All right," said Halterton, "all right. . . . But I want to put it this way. I think we ought to *exchange* memoranda, eh? Simultaneously, eh? Don't you?"

"What d'ye mean—exactly?" said McAuley doubtfully.

"Why," answered Halterton, "when I give you this acceptance of the proposal . . . if I sign . . . why that's giving you the contract, isn't it? . . . Virtually? You've put it clear enough."

"Of course it's enough for us to start work on the strength of it. That's why I brought it."

"Yes, but. . . . But there's the other side to it, you know."

"Oh," said J. genially, leaning back for the first time in the conversation, "ye mean that ye'd have me to put down in writing here and now what I've been saying to you lately about y'r *own* position in the Company—if so happen ye should resign and go into the City, for instance?"

"Well . . . yes . . . Something of that kind, you know . . . something of that kind."

"Hey! 'Tis not the time for that yet! Ye're still in office, ye know. See now that it's all right, before you sign, I've to-day's date on it."

"Yes, I know, I know. Quite. But still, I should feel . . . what shall I say. . . ? I should feel a little more . . . regular." He stood up with this and watched the talker.

"Oh, regular!" admitted the persuasive J., still seated, and he gave a very slight half-smile. He sat silent for a moment, still keeping that half-smile and rapidly considering the full consequences. It would tie him. It would leave a record to have the Postmaster-General's share in the arrangement written and undersigned by J. himself. It would give Halterton a hold on him. But then, Halterton seemed to insist, and it was necessary to have Halterton's signature now, at once.

"Very well," he said at last. "It might have been better to leave that part of it as a gentleman's agreement, and verbal, but perhaps you're right."

He drew out from among the papers a blank sheet, headed it with no date or address of any kind, and with the fine, hard nib of his neat fountain pen—symbolic of the man—he wrote rapidly for several minutes, covering the large sheet of paper with his stiff handwriting. Then he pushed the note over to the Minister. Halterton took it up and read it slowly, half aloud:

Mr. James McAuley, financier, makes everything regular for Mr. Wilfrid Halterton, Statesman and Postmaster-General.

"My dear Halterton. . . ."

"I put it like that, Wilfrid," interrupted J., "it's not likely that they'll give ye more than a Baronetcy and of course I couldn't call ye Wilfrid. And whether you choose to be Sir Wilfrid or whether you don't, 't'll work either way."

"All right," sighed Halterton, and he began reading again:

MY DEAR HALTERTON,

I am going to approach you with a proposition which I do sincerely hope you will smile on. I know what a modest view you take of your own talents, especially in the business line; but you are the only man in England who does; and what is more, your administration while you were at the Post Office not only gave you just the kind of experience we want, but earned you the respect and admiration of everybody. So what I want to ask you is simply this: "Would you, now that you are out of public life, and I suppose enjoying plenty of leisure, consent to take up the Managership of our Corporation?" Since my appointment as Chief Permanent Commissioner was settled there has been a great deal of discussion on the board as to who should be called in; but I don't like these long discussions, and I don't like a vacant place. Still less do I like having to do two jobs at once. I need hardly tell you that when your name was mentioned we were

unanimous about it. The only trouble was whether you would consent. For we know how you value your leisure. But do say yes! It would be a personal favour to me; and, what I am afraid I value even more, you would make all the difference to what is now a great public service. I am putting my whole heart into this, and I do beg you not to refuse.

Yrs. ever,

JAS. HAGGISMUIR MCAULEY

It was a fine clear signature, worthy of the man whose mother had been born a Haggismuir of Haggismuir.

Mr. Wilfrid Halterton finished his reading of it, and looked up. There was, what is odd in a man well over fifty, and especially in a man over fifty whose genius had raised him to one of the greatest public positions in the world, a faint tinge of colour upon either cheek.

"I think, J.," he said, "I think it would be more . . . er, regular, wouldn't it, if you were just to write a . . . a postscript with a word or two about . . . well, about the salary?"

"Regular again, Wilfrid!" said J., with that same faint momentary half-smile of a few minutes before. "All right. What was it I said the other day?"

There was a long pause. At last, almost in a whisper, came the words:

"You said ten thousand, J." Then, in a still lower tone, "Free of tax."

"All right, Wilfrid," replied J., in a cheerier tone than he had yet used. He scribbled off the postscript, and after that the figures, then the phrase, "Free of tax," he added, "and official residence, of course, if you care to use it." And the neat initials followed: "J.H.M."

The Postmaster-General was not quite sure; he had always understood that an initialled addendum to a memorandum or *habendum ridendum*, or any other official binding thing, "went," as the saying goes. At any rate, he felt he could not ask for anything more.

"Now," said J., in a more business-like tone than he had yet used, "ye'll keep that—and date it when the time comes."

"I suppose it will need some address, won't it?" asked Halterton.

"Hey? What does that matter? Ye can add it. Ye can write in whatever you like. That's not what counts. 'Tis my name at the end that counts. Ye can write in wherever I happen to be at the time."

"Very well, very well," said Halterton.

James Haggismuir McAuley got up and stretched himself. He also yawned, which, with him, was a gesture of satisfaction and completeness: but he was careful to put his hand in front of his mouth.

"Now," said he, "we must get them in their envelopes, and we'll each take his own. . . . I've brought the envelopes to fit—not that it matters much. Do you sign yours—your typewritten one."

Wilfrid Halterton brought out his little fountain pen mounted in gold and slowly inscribed his name. McAuley blotted the same: folded the fateful document which gave the contract, stuck it in the open envelope; gummed it carefully down and put it in the inner pocket of his coat.

Halterton, always influenced by example, more slowly pocketed James McAuley's generous and as yet undated offer. But he added something of his own, under a vague

feeling that it rendered him more secure. He took up a pencil and wrote, in his rather straggling hand, across the top of the paper which James McAuley had given him:—

"James McAuley's letter. Handed to me March 3, 1960. W.H."

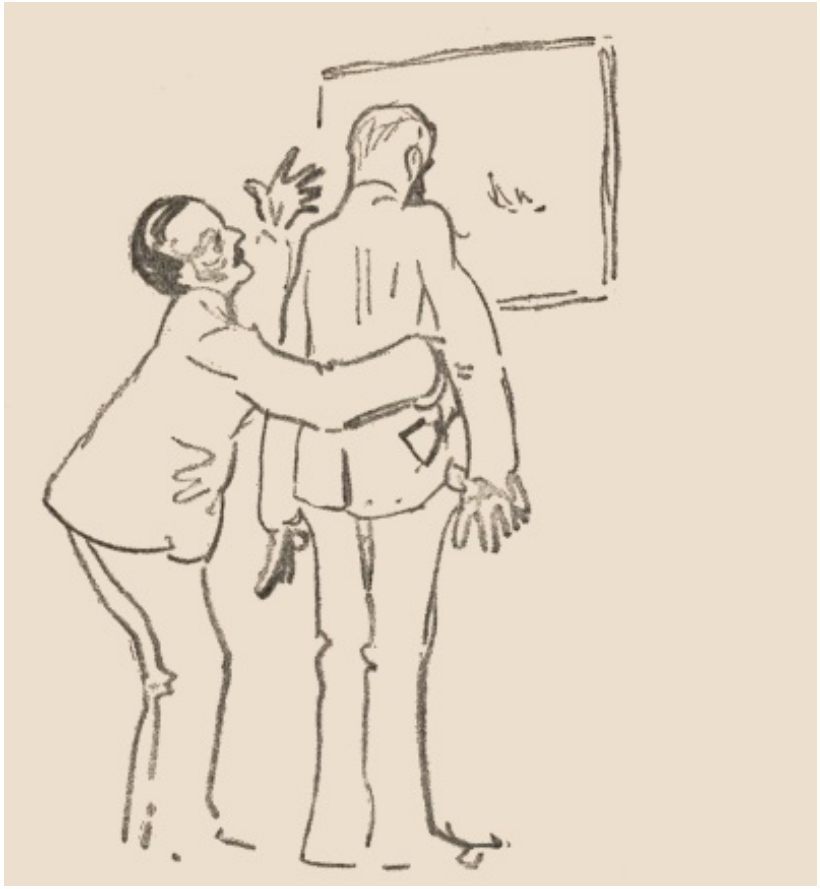
He could always rub it out when the time came to use it, and meanwhile there it was as a sort of record. McAuley watched him as he wrote and folded it with too much deliberation, and put it into its corresponding envelope, making only one boss shot. Then, licking the flap and pressing it down, to keep state secrets hidden from all profane eyes, Wilfrid Halterton, Postmaster-General, put the envelope into the pocket of the morning coat he was wearing—the side-pocket away from Mr. McAuley.

"Now," said that great captain of industry—or, at least, of applied science—or anyhow, of finance; "I must be off." He looked at his watch for about the fourth time. "Aye, man! I must be off. I'm in a hurry—I shall be late."

He shook hands warmly with his host as the Postmaster-General showed him to the door, walking at his side. James Haggismuir McAuley stopped a moment in the passage, looked up at the wall, and said:

"That's a fine etching, Wilfrid!"

Wilfrid turned his long thin neck round to follow the connoisseur's gaze. As he did so, in the tenth of a second James Haggismuir McAuley had removed the envelope from the side-pocket, passed it in a flash round his back into his other hand, and got it into that breast-pocket of his where its little brother already lay.



Mr. James McAuley, financier, effecting a conveyance of property from Mr. Wilfrid Halterton, Statesman and Postmaster-General.

That business transaction did not take five seconds all told. It had taken Wilfrid Halterton ten to move his neck.

He began the story of the etching, of its value, of its acquirement by him, when he felt his hand warmly grasped again by his friend from the outer, non-political world; he heard the door slam; he sighed, stooped his head somewhat forward, and shuffled back into his study.

II

As Wilfrid Halterton once more sat by himself in front of his wireless heater, he was filled with that powerful impression men receive but once or twice in the course of a lifetime; the impression that a whole tide about them has changed; that they have passed out of one long phase, during which the current has carried them in one direction, and that now they have come to a second phase, in which the current is to carry them the opposite way. He felt that he had achieved—or, as the phrase goes among statesmen, "made good."

His own position in the negotiation just concluded was but one out of many such. The deal about his future salary was of a commonplace sort, something we have all come to expect in political arrangements. But it was the first one he had made in all his years of Parliament, and it impressed him accordingly. He had always been far too timid a man, in a profession where timidity is sometimes fatal, and always a handicap. Some women (and men) had blamed Mrs. Boulger for giving him Cabinet rank at all. But we know that if a man attains such a position it cannot be without high talent, which his eminent colleagues have recognized. Such talents he had abundantly shown during his tenure of office. He himself had now been for more than six months at the head of a vast machine; he had delivered daily 264,748,942 letters; 968,477,321 postcards; 7,263,402 telegrams; stamps of all denominations to the value of £6,923,410 6s. 3d.—more than the entire yearly revenue of Guatemala—and at the same time carried parcels and issued licenses for armorial bearings, dogs, and male servants.

Wilfrid Halterton had managed all this for now over half a year, and there had been no hitch. It should have given him a better opinion of himself. Besides which, he should have remembered that a man is not given powers of this exalted kind unless he be also competent to deal with many other activities. Having shown his capacity for handling this huge, intricate business of the Post Office, he would be naturally chosen to direct in turn the finances of the nation, its Foreign Affairs, its Navy, its immense Police machine, public and secret, and perhaps its Museums, or even the London Parks. For it is a presumption in our constitution, and a wise one, that the talents sufficing for a Cabinet Minister in one Department will suffice for him in any other and a statesman must shift around.

Wilfrid Halterton should, I say, therefore have been less modest in the first months of high office. None the less, his original mood remained with him, and he was glad to think that his first considerable political success, this negotiation of his with James McAuley, would enable him to re-enter private life. He was content to leave to others the glory of public fame, and to take in its place a largely increased income.

He would make the delay as short as possible. There would have to be an interval, of course, between the establishment of the new Television Corporation and his taking over the prepared place and the salary agreed upon: convention demanded that, and convention must always be observed. No man in the House of Commons was more sensitive upon

such points. No man knew better the decencies of public life; no man shrank more sensitively from censure in these matters. Such delicacy went naturally with his character; it was the more laudable side of that in him which also produced his hesitations. When these things are done too quickly there is—illogically enough—a savour of something indecent about them.

He pondered for a moment as he leant back in his low chair and gazed fixedly down his long legs at the glowing grid of the heater; he was estimating what exactly the interval ought to be between this moment and his taking his salary at the head of the new Television Corporation.

Better too long than too short. J. would set to work without delay. The vote establishing the Television Corporation would come on almost immediately. It would be in public use not long after the Easter recess, and earning by the end of the summer at latest. There had been some talk of nominating young Collum to the first Chief Commissionership for a year or more, to give him time and an income for marrying Joan Bailey—who had nothing—for buying his furniture and all that—before taking up the new post at the League of Nations. Then J. would naturally succeed, and the Managing Directorship would be open—say an interval of little more than twelve months all told.

His own resignation ought to take place, then, in about six months, so that when he accepted the management it should be with an air of leisure quite unconnected with the Post Office. This delay of six months is generally understood to be the least required between a man's ceasing to take an official salary and beginning to receive the larger private City emolument which is the natural reward of political services. Well, if the Charter came into effect in the late summer, that would mean his own resignation, say, about next Easter, in rather more than a year. He could make use of J.'s letter then, date it six months after that, say in the autumn of next year, eighteen months all told.

He made all these calculations for his own satisfaction, and through them all ran the substantial prospect of which he was now assured.

Wilfrid Halterton had been born to considerable wealth; the only son of old John Halterton of Reldwell Hall in Essex. The Halterton Library, at his old college at Cambridge—Merrion—was witness to the family fortune and generosity.

But things had not gone well since his father died, now twenty-five years ago. He had managed ill; he had suffered badly from one big crash in investment; he had grown embarrassed. He had mortgaged. He had got into arrears. Some years of increasing difficulty had preyed upon him. The more relieved was he at the new prospect: that document with J.'s firm signature to it, the certitude of ample security, the old income of his early manhood and more.

He meditated on that document. He recalled J.'s face and gesture while it was being drafted, and the light on the paper. He would not, of course, fill in the date as yet; there was plenty of time for that. Then, not for any useful purpose, but from that sort of itch we all have to read again a letter which has filled our thoughts, he felt in his coat-pocket for the envelope. He would pull out McAuley's offer and go through its terms again exactly—though the only thing of moment was clear enough in his brain—the salary; free of tax.

For a second or two he wondered why his hand did not meet any envelope in that pocket, and he still groped. Then he woke up, with a start, leant forward and thrust into the

pocket three or four times, as if he were looking for some small object like a coin. No. There was nothing there.

Memory of a recent instinctive movement is nearly always accurate; but one never knows. He plunged his other hand into the pocket on the other side. Ah, there it was! No . . . *that* envelope was one which had been there all day. It was the note from his tailor. It was of a different size, too.

He grew half curious and half alarmed. He got up out of his chair. He actually took off his coat. He took everything out of his pockets and turned the linings inside out. There was not a sign of the thing.

Then he went down on his knees and lit a match to explore the darkness under the table. He drew blank. He went out of the room and searched all the short way to the front door, along the passage. There was nothing. He stood in a quandary, his eyes fixed again upon that etching which McAuley had praised. It brought the movements of that quarter of an hour back to him as vividly as though he were still living in those moments. How could the thing have gone? He spent another futile five minutes back in the room, crawling about the carpet on all fours; lifting the corners in the vain idea that it might be lurking there.

Then he stood up again and pondered fruitlessly. He had heard no servant in the hall outside; no one had come in by the front door. If anyone in the house should find that envelope it would be awkward . . . but that was impossible . . . there had been no time for such a thing; no one could have known what he had had upon him.

Further search seemed useless. Things do disappear in this extraordinary way. The bother about this particular thing was the unpleasantness of knowing that such a letter might be lying about loose. He said to himself that there was no time to be lost: the essential thing was to communicate with J. at once.

He had had time to get home to his flat by this time, surely? He must telephone. He went to the little room at the back where his private telephone stood, and when he had got on to McAuley's flat in Marble Arch House at the top of Park Lane, not half a mile off, he heard, even as the servant answered, another voice speaking which he could have sworn was that of McAuley himself.

It was not a voice near the instrument—it could not quite certainly be made out—but he *thought* he caught certain words.

The voice that presently did answer him clearly and directly was that of McAuley's secretary: he knew her well—an efficient gentlewoman, of like nationality with her employer, Rose Fairweather by name. That voice said, in singularly distinct tones, that J. had been in for a moment, and had gone out again.

Halterton was almost positive he had heard J.'s voice, and that, in spite of its faintness and his inability to catch all the words, one patch of those words had been: "If it's him," and another, "You don't know when."

In answer to a second more nervous questioning there had come the still more distinct reply, that not only had J. just gone out but that he would not be back for dinner, and that Miss Fairweather did not know where he had gone or when he would return. . . . No, he might not be back till long after midnight. . . . No, he had not dressed, and he hadn't taken a bag. . . . Oh yes, he would be back some time next morning at latest . . . yes, he would

get his post. . . . And with that Wilfrid Halterton had to be content. But it left him in an agony.

As he walked slowly back to his study from the private instrument in the little room he asked himself what a man ought to do in such circumstances.

A Statesman and Postmaster-General looking under a carpet.

Here he was, with a document which no one else must see, lying about lost and to be found by heaven knows who. It was a document vital to him, and he himself was deprived of its use and without guarantee. J. would certainly act very soon; hardly, perhaps, next day, but certainly within a few days; and then all the world would know that the Charter was as good as granted. And he, Wilfrid Halterton, would be there without his side of the affair secure under his own keeping. Obviously there was only one thing to be done. He couldn't make out why he hadn't thought of it at once. Since J. was not on the telephone, he must write to him. He could not help thinking that J., for some reason or other, had wanted not to be bothered. He was almost certain he had heard that voice, and nearly as certain that he had heard those two fragmentary phrases. He quite understood that McAuley should want not to be bothered, but still he ought, after such an important transaction, to have come to the instrument. Anyhow, it was too late now. He must write, and he must send it round at once, or even take it himself, to make certain.

He did it in only a few lines.

MY DEAR J.,

An extraordinary thing has happened. That letter of yours has disappeared. No doubt

it will be found, but as it may not be for some time or even perhaps never at all, of course the only thing is for you to write me another. You remember the terms, I am sure. I do not know when you will get this, but your secretary tells me you will be back some time to-night, and I am sure you will send me a message first thing to-morrow morning—by hand if possible. I shall be at home till ten.

Wilfrid Halterton re-read these simple words, was satisfied with them, and then spent another ten minutes of indecision, as to how they should be delivered. It was really imperative that J. should get them certainly, and get them as soon as possible. He was in such an anxiety that he was half inclined to take them himself, had he not feared almost any movement of which record could remain. Besides which, if he stayed at home he could spend some more time looking after that strangely truant bit of paper. He would trust to the post.

So he went down to the street and posted off his note to McAuley with his own hand at once. Then he passed something like two hours searching over and over again, with what, in a less eminent man, might have been called fatuity, making certain and re-certain and counter-certain that the envelope was nowhere to be found.

There was nothing on for him at the House. He had paired in anticipation of that important interview. He dined at home, and went to bed early. He read for half an hour before sleeping, but he could not remember what he read. He felt as though he had been reading the missing letter. And twice in the night when he woke he could see its contents before him with extraordinary clearness—he could have recited it by heart.

Oddly enough, when Wilfrid Halterton sat down to his breakfast the next morning—Wednesday the 4th of March—and took up his newspaper, he made no search for an item which was to prove of more interest to him than any other. It did not occur to him that such an item would be there. He solemnly read his first leader, then his second and his third, after barely glancing at the big head-lines, which told him nothing more than he had seen in the evening papers of the night before. He went through the rest of the paper in no hurry; until he came to the financial page, and there it was that he saw what suddenly checked the wandering of his mind.

There was a paragraph about the position of Billies. It was rumoured that the report of the Committee appointed by the Postmaster-General had been unfavourable to Billies and favourable to Reynier's; of course, nothing certain was known, but the report would doubtless be published shortly. That was all. The rest of the paragraph was only a few lines of the usual anodyne sort, mentioning vaguely the rival companies and their claims.

Halterton frowned. His dignity was offended. This kind of leakage could not be allowed. It was also exceedingly awkward now that J. held that signature of his. It was torturing. He wondered who had talked.

I could have told him. It was the sharp little page boy who goes in and out during the Committee meetings announcing people and taking messages. *He* had talked. He had got half-a-crown from the porter, and the porter had got a sovereign from Mr. Gamble, who had received fifty pounds in five ten-pound notes in an envelope from Miss Rose Fairweather's own dainty hands when he had called there the day before at Mr. McAuley's flat. Mr. Gamble had gone on gaily to his newspaper, and received another twenty pounds from the Financial Editor, to whom Miss Fairweather had specially

recommended him. The Financial Editor had got no money indeed, but hearty thanks when next he met his proprietor—I use that word in its fullest sense. Also the Financial Editor had promptly sold his Billies before writing a line.

Anyhow, there the paragraph was, and after all, it could not be contradicted because it was true. There was nothing to be done now, the thing was printed, and it would be known, anyhow, when Parliament met that afternoon: so there was nothing to be done. And Wilfrid Halterton was far too much a gentleman to have words with his permanent officials, anyhow.

He looked at his watch. It was just on ten o'clock. J. would probably be ringing him up any moment now. He waited, and waited, his nervousness increasing; no ring came. It was fully a quarter-past when he could bear the suspense no longer, and himself rang up the flat near the Marble Arch.

Once more the clear accents of Miss Rose Fairweather, delicately balanced between the soft Glasgow and the more lapidary Edinburgh—reflecting therefore, perhaps, an origin in Whitburn—replied like chiselled silver.

Yes, Mr. McAuley had been in for a time that morning, and had worked with her for an hour; but he had gone out again, saying that he would walk to his office, in the City, because he wanted the exercise. He would hardly be there till well after eleven, he had one or two things to do on the way.

At eleven-thirty Wilfrid Halterton, now slightly feverish, took the risk of ringing up the Imperial Durrant's crowd by the number of their palatial building. It was not very regular, the Postmaster-General was not supposed to do that sort of thing—but after all, it was most unlikely anyone would know his voice, and if by a miracle they did, why—everybody knew that he was a friend of McAuley's, and that McAuley was a brother of his colleague the Attorney-General. He might be ringing up about anything.

Anyhow, he need not have been in such a stew, for the answer was simple enough.

Yes. . . . Mr. McAuley had been in, and had attended to a little business. . . . No, he had gone out again. . . . He wouldn't be back till after lunch. They did not know where he had gone to. They couldn't say when.

Once more did the sorely harassed Wilfrid Halterton challenge the gods—once more, before he went down to his own office at noon. And this time it was again the flat near the Marble Arch which he attacked. And once more did the pellucid, sweetly-divided syllables of Rose Fairweather inform him that Mr. McAuley had indeed rung up his flat, from the Carlton Hotel, where he had happened to be for a moment in the course of the morning, but that it was only about some papers he wanted sent on to him there by messenger, and that he would have left the hotel long ago.

The Postmaster-General had no desire to increase this stream of records, or to emphasize his tracks. He must possess his soul in patience until McAuley should come to him in his rooms at the House, or until in some other way they should meet again. It could not be long. And if he did not see McAuley after a sufficient delay he would write him another letter. But all that day there was no sign of McAuley.

* * *

What did happen that day, and what the Postmaster-General himself discovered from

the evening papers, and from the tape, and also, to his no small annoyance, from a certain amount of conversation around him, was a smart little fall in Billies. They had opened well below yesterday's level, at 21s.—22s. They had sunk to 20s.—21s., rallied again at 22s. and closed at 22½s. The rally, it may interest my readers to know, was due to the purchase of a fairly large block in the interest of a Mr. Charles Marry—a relative of Miss Rose Fairweather's, whom she had herself introduced to James McAuley, and who was now devoted to the interests of that great man.

A whole day having thus passed without news having reached the Postmaster-General from his good and intimate friend James McAuley, it was necessary to take action.

There are situations which act marvellously as a spur to the intelligence, and Wilfrid Halterton that very evening acted as he had never acted before in his life. He did what is called, "taking steps"; he "cast about," in half-a-dozen quite indirect, discreet, indifferent remarks dropped here and there, in the dining-room of the House and in the lobbies, and succeeded by half-past eight in getting hold of J.'s momentary whereabouts.

"Who's dining at Mary's to-night?"

"Do you know whether Johnny's at Angela's to-night?"

"Hullo, I thought you were dining with McAuley?"

And so on; with such phrases he traced McAuley to his lair. He heard at last that the financier was dining with the Balcombes. At that time of night which Victor Hugo so finely calls the desert hour when lions gather to drink, that is, at a quarter to nine, when the lions lift the first cup of champagne to their lips in the houses of our great democracy, Wilfrid Halterton caused J. to be summoned to the telephone: he used a ruse: he summoned J. in the name of his secretary—"Say Miss Fairweather wants him—urgently." James McAuley, who had but just sat down and exchanged his first words with his hostess, Lady Caroline, in the very ugly grand new house of the Balcombes in Hill Street, cursed under his breath, left the dinner, went out and sat down to the telephone in Balcombe's private room; with the thick door carefully shut. He lifted the receiver and said, rather testily:

"Well, Miss Fairweather?"

But it was not Miss Rose Fairweather's voice that he heard in reply. It was the voice of Wilfrid Halterton.

"I'm sorry to trouble you, J. . . ."

"What d'ye mean? They told me 'twas my secretary."

"The servant must have made a mistake—it's me."

"Yes, I can hear that. What about it? What do ye want?"

"You got my letter?"

"Yes, I got your letter. But I didn't understand it. I think ye'd better explain when I see ye."

"How do you mean, you didn't understand it? I told you I'd lost the letter you gave me last night, and asked you whether you could send me another."

There was a pause, and Wilfrid Halterton at the other end of the wire wondered why there should be a pause. He was not left long in doubt. There came at the end of that pause, in strong virile accents, Scots in timbre, the following words:

“I can’t understand what ye mean! I never gave ye a letter. *You* gave *me* a letter. I’m sorry. I can’t wait now. I’ve had to come away from the dinner table. I must get me back. Try and see ye to-morrow.”

And the wire went dead.

III

THERE is a row of semi-detached villas in the suburb of Streatham known (I know not why) as Eliza Grove. Of these semi-detached villas, one (known officially and to the gods as Number 5, but to mortals and on the front gate in white letters on a green ground, as Myrtle View) is the dear home of a small building contractor, by name Nicholas Clarke. As he has nothing whatever to do with this story and, for all his efforts, will not be allowed to appear upon these pages again, we may leave it at that. But the other villa of this Siamese twin, tied on to it, rib to rib, Number 7, also with a green door, has no particular name; for its owner has discovered in his social advance that the giving of names to small suburban houses is not done. It is plain Number 7, to gods and men alike.

Here resides that strong, humorous, kindly, thoroughly efficient, healthy man, just on sixty years of age, known to the world as Jack Williams, for the moment Home Secretary —but there, he might be anything he pleased. The ball is at his feet. He had been offered the Presidency of the Council and had refused it; partly because the opportunities were insufficient—no contracts—partly because it was not a leg up. As like as not he would have the Dominions before the end of the year, for the present Secretary of State for the Dominions, like others before him, found his job a very thankless one.

Anyhow, Jack Williams is for the moment Home Secretary, pleased with his work, as he has been pleased with everything he ever had to do, and doing it well, as he has done well everything he ever had to do.

You would notice him anywhere, for though he was but a rather short man, with heavy, undistinguished features, and those rendered common by an undignified small moustache, his carriage and still more his expression would have struck you. His twinkling steel grey eyes, intermittently narrowed as he gazed sharply at you in conversation, had a sort of fire in them: they saw everything that was going on about him. His big shoulders had strength and endurance, his deep chest vitality, and his step was solid. Also there was this about him, that when he spoke he spoke with zest, entertainingly, full of life, and yet said nothing which could betray what was in his mind. The very man for politics!

He was an early riser, and this Thursday, March 5th, at 8 o'clock, he was sitting at his breakfast table, with his admirable wife opposite him, in the little front room of Number 7.

It was the morning after that strange, abrupt conversation which had passed on the telephone during the dinner between James Haggismuir McAuley and the distracted Halterton. Jack Williams was reading his newspaper, propped up against the coffee pot, and anyone who had seen him would have said: "Here is a man who has risen from very small beginnings to a modest, but, for his station, prosperous middle age. This little semi-detached villa with its spare bedroom, its parlour and its dining-room, and its one neat servant—this humble suburban home—is for him comfort and even luxury. He contrasts it in his own mind with his origins in that miserable muddy slum up North where he passed

his starved childhood under a mother broken with childbearing and a father alternately drunk and sober, and bringing in, as luck served him, about a pound a week, in the old days before the Great War when the poor were really poor."

Anyone who had passed such a judgement would have been right. Jack Williams did feel exactly like that. He had risen, he had prospered. Indeed, he had prospered more than the observer would have imagined. He was worth about a quarter of a million pounds.

He had risen simply and naturally, as such men do, something of a hero among his fellow-boys in his teens in the mill, finding he had facility with his tongue, joining in debates, as a young man, when he was shop steward: then advancing in his Union, then secretary to it: then elected to Parliament, when he was thirty years of age, not long after the Great War. All the regular routine, the *cursus honorum* which is happily still the public life of England in 1960, and which blends so well with the remains of our old aristocratic policy.

He had been cordially received as he rose. He had made his mark in the House of Commons. He had first had office of a minor sort before he was fifty. He had entered the Ministry in Mrs. Boulger's first administration. He had used his opportunities well, investing shrewdly, getting to know all he could about men, and using all that he knew, to their praise or shame, making the right friendships with rich men—real friendships upon all sides. It was a point with the young bloods to boast that they knew him. There was competition among the great hostesses to get him into their houses—and he went.

The Right Hon. John Williams, Esq. ("Honest Jack Williams"), M.P., Secretary of State for Home Affairs in Mrs. Boulger's second administration (1960).

Among his many talents were two which just fitted such a position: he played billiards admirably—he had discovered his ability therein before he was twenty years of age in the dingy billiard-room of the "Percy Arms," whilst he was yet a lad in the mills, but already earning good money. And he had a quick, racy sort of repartee. He never tried to lose the accent of his native town and province. If anything he exaggerated it, though whether consciously or not I cannot say.

There he sat, reading his newspaper. But he was not one of those men who read their newspapers to the discomfort of their wives. If she had helped to make him, as she had, it was not only because she was a woman of such capacity (he had married her when he was still a very young man—they both worked in the same mill and earned between them less than four pounds a week), but because he had always respected her, always cherished her, and always depended upon her judgement in a way which she could feel and be proud of. She was a woman much after his own mould in features as in bearing, equally resolute though more demure: not provided of course with the small moustache: and I am afraid, not humorous about the eyes, but steady in her gaze. Upon business affairs she had never advised him. She never interfered with any decision of his to do this or that, as he went up

in his career, save now and then quietly and at critical moments, but she gave judgements usually negative, against what might have been a false move. He was careful of her, and he was right. Their one child had died while they were still poor in the North, in the old days. That grave had strengthened the bond between them, and no man and woman in England were to-day less lonely.

So he was reading his paper this morning, not selfishly to himself, but with a running commentary to her as he read, telling her the news.

"Sammy's been at it again. He talks too much. . . . Hullo! Jack's got a letter. . . . All about the currency, and saying nothing."

"That Lord John never does say anything worth hearing," commented Mrs. Williams.

"Oh, but he thinks a lot," answered her husband; and he added, "That's how he's got where he is."

"And where is he?" said Mrs. Williams superciliously. "In the soup!"

"He may be now," answered the master of the house, nodding sagaciously, "but he's one as crawls out of the tureen. Don't you forget *that,* Martha. Now, you be kind to him!"

"Oh, I'll be kind to him, Mr. Williams; I'll be kind to him," said Martha, a little ruffled.

"Yes, my dear, you always were. You always know what to do."

There was a pause. And during that pause the husband turned over the paper and looked towards the back pages. His wife knew what that meant. He was glancing at certain high matters in stocks and shares, with which she was far too wise to interfere.

Mrs. Honest Jack Williams, one of our leading political ladies, giving her judgement that Lord John is in the soup.

He had done admirably at that game, and she knew her limitations. Always in her

heart when she heard (for he sometimes blundered) of such and such a big thing brought off, or when he told her in a general way (for he did that also) how they stood before the world, how he would cut up, she remembered that there might have been a son to which all this should have gone. But she never spoke of that. She knew well enough what would happen if she survived him. It would all be at her disposal. And if he survived her, why, she knew well enough that what time might be left to him would not then matter to him much. She had a vague feeling, which people often have when they have had so close a companionship for so many years, that somehow neither would survive the other. It does not exactly happen like that; but it often happens nearly like that. . . .

And even as Honest Jack Williams (Secretary of State for Home Affairs) looked at those stocks and shares, and even as the eyes which she could just see above the propped-up paper got a look of concentration in them, while he fastened on the figures he was following, she admired him more for his excellent judgement of the market, which she well knew to be the chief glory of a public man.

There had been ups and downs, though he had told her frankly of certain misjudgements or bits of bad luck; but on balance he had always been going upwards—and to what a height! For of all that large solid income nine-tenths was saved and went to swell the pile. There was the salary as well, so long as he was in office. And as for Number 7, Eliza Grove, slavey and all, and the taxis they were always taking, and the visits and the rest, the whole thing didn't come to fifteen hundred a year. She had good reason to be proud of him.

In these few moments of concentration during which he interrupted that conversation with his wife, which he was very careful to maintain, Jack Williams had captured with his bright sharp eyes one point after another in the financial news before him. He had seen that the Indian Loan was steady, he had been a little annoyed at the head-lines on the Third Central Bank; there had been a half-smile on his face for half a second at an absurd puff of the New Guaranty Loan, which he had heavily sold forward upon good official knowledge, shared by not more than half-a-dozen other men. Then his expression changed again and became arrested and almost excited. His wife noticed the expression, but she could not tell what caused it.

What had caused it had been something very small but very significant. It was a line in the middle of the industrial shares, the line concerning Billies on the New York Exchange after London had closed the evening before. That line said simply:

"Durr. Imp. Tel. Ord. 29s. 6d.—31s. 6d."

The Home Secretary gave a very low whistle, for which he politely begged his wife's pardon. He put the paper down, and asked Mrs. Williams what she thought on a vexed question which had been a good deal debated between them: whether they should make a bid for the cottage in Surrey on the fringe of the park palings which they had hitherto leased from their very good friends and constant hosts in the big house at Henbury.

Mrs. Williams was always voluble on that subject; she knew that her husband was against buying, while she was in favour. Mr. Williams therefore expected—and got—a good long re-statement as usual of all her reasons. As she made it he nodded, taking in every point, though he had heard it twenty times before—and it gave him leisure to think without her knowing how his mind was working.

He was not bothering about the cottage. He was wondering about Billies. It would perhaps be too strong to say that he was cursing himself inwardly for not having watched the tape; he had been glued all night to the Treasury Bench, right up to the cry of "Who goes home?" ringing through the vaults of the House of Commons, he had come home too tired to think of anything, he had gone to bed at once, and meanwhile he had missed his opportunity. Lord! How Billies had jumped in New York! Nearly eight bob! Twenty-nine bob, thirty-one, from twenty-two. . . . What on earth had made them jump like. . . .

The voice of his wife came to him across the table (for men like this can attend to two things at once).

"You're always saying as you don't want the place—saying it's always better to look tenants of theirs anyhow—more friendly-like, and doesn't make people call us forward. But that's all nonsense, Mr. Williams. You never know what's going to happen in this world, and we've been there now all those weeks every summer for these five years, and I couldn't abear to part with it."

"If they was to take it away we could buy them out big house and all," said Mr. Williams proudly.

"Not open, we couldn't," answered his wife.

"My dear, there's a great deal in what you say, but they won't turn us out."

Mr. Williams spoke gently and kindly—but the words that were passing through his mind were quite different: he was saying to himself:

"It's still early, I can arrange for Gunter to get my packet before that broker leaves his house for the City: but it's nearly ten bob a share lost already anyhow, dammit!"

Then he continued aloud, to Mrs. Williams: "I shall always do what you want in the matter, my dear—you know that: I shall always do what you want."

And the sentence running in his mind was more like this: "They're blazing! I've missed the first eight shillings, but I'll bet they'll go to forty and over!"

"Thank you, Jack," said Mrs. Williams. She called him Jack every time she got her way. She rose, with a little difficulty, waddled round the table, and kissed him on the forehead. He fondled her hand, murmuring: "Anything you want, dear, I allus do say, anything you want."

But in his mind there was running something like this:

"I'm that sure, I think I'll cover fifty thousand."

He pulled out his watch and sprang from his seat.

"Hullo, it's later than I thought," he said. "I must telephone."

He went off to the telephone in the narrow hall. He heard his wife's slow and heavy step proceeding to the kitchen to give her orders for the day to the unique servant, the symbol of their humility. And then, taking off the receiver, he talked to one of the gentlemen with whom he dealt—indirectly—for some at least of his business affairs.

"Is that you, Gunter? . . . yes, Jack speaking. Fifty thousand. . . . No, I know what I'm saying. . . . Yes, I know all about that. . . . Never mind what I missed. Perhaps I didn't miss it. Anyhow, that's what I say. . . . No, it's not too much. . . . Yes, I do know best. Yes, fifty thousand. The second name, the one we agreed on last week. . . . No, no top figure. There'll be time enough for selling. I'll tell you when."

He hung up the receiver again.

The Rt. Honourable Jack Williams, M.P., one of H.M. Ministers, Secretary of State for Home Affairs, loved exercise, as any healthy, successful Englishman will. And though it threatened rain upon this early March day, he would walk, as was his custom, from Victoria to Whitehall. He would be at the office by ten.

As the train took him up to Town his mind was full of that which so often mixes with public affairs in the minds of great statesmen. He was wondering why Billies had kangarooed.

Obviously they had jumped because someone had wind, or believed he had wind, of the contract's going to Durrant's. But what was the nature of the information? What was its value? By the time he got to Victoria he had it well sorted out in his mind.

There were four possibilities:—

First, McAuley and his crowd, the Durrant crowd, might have had an assurance; they might have that assurance in their pockets now, and however much they wanted to conceal the fact in order to give them time to buy before the rise, it might have leaked out through a servant or a spy, or someone through whose hands the document had passed: in the typewriting as like as not—if anyone had been fool enough to have it typewritten.

That was one possibility. The second possibility was that James Haggismuir McAuley, having got his assurance solidly in writing, had deliberately released the knowledge of it indirectly, having already bought at the lowest during the little slump of yesterday, Wednesday morning, and desiring to catch a profit in passing before the big business began.

The third possibility was that there was no assurance at all, and that James, in a laudable effort to catch the same quick profit, had let it be thought that he had an assurance, though he had it not. In that case the shares would slump badly sooner or later, and must be watched. For the moment they were bound to be blazing, because all London would be reading the quotation from New York in the paper this morning.

The fourth possibility was that someone in New York had lied brazenly for his own purposes, and that there was as yet no assurance given to Durrant's at all, or, if there was, no leakage of the assurance voluntary or involuntary, no funny business on this side at any rate.

He had got that far in his analysis, he was out of the train and on his way to walk straight to his office in Whitehall, when he suddenly remembered another factor, and he went round by back streets to the river so as to have time to think it over. The factor he had remembered was the Committee's report—adverse to Durrant's. Someone had set aside that report. No mere rumour would have raised the shares in face of the news that had leaked out—the news that the Committee had reported in favour of Reynier's and against Durrant's. Only one man could set aside that report, and that one man was the Postmaster-General.

He saw it clearly now. At some hour of the yesterday, Wednesday March the 4th—or possibly late on Tuesday the 3rd—McAuley had squared the P.M.G.

Jack Williams grew more and more convinced as he walked briskly up the river side from Horseferry Road, with the rain still threatening but not falling, and the brave south-west wind ruffling the water against the tide. As he passed the Houses of Parliament his

conclusion was fixed. It was a good omen that he should have arrived at it just as he passed those august walls, which shed so benign an influence over meditations of this kind. Yes, he was absolutely certain. James Haggismuir McAuley had got his assurance in black and white with Halterton's name on it and had released the knowledge through his own channels. Billies would blaze and soar. He was glad he had given the order! He possessed his soul in peace.

All the morning the Rt. Honourable John Williams attended to the business for which he was paid by a grateful nation his £100 a week. His rapidity of decision, his excellent manner with subordinates, the health of his presence, pervaded the place. He commuted the sentence of one man, decided to hang another (on competent advice, of course), and read with real care the report on the trouble in the "C" division, summoned the clerk who had written the minute, grasped every detail, came to a wise decision, devoted all the rest of his time to the great Police Reform, and then went out to cross the Park toward the Club at lunch time feeling that he had earned his money—which indeed he had: he was a good workman.

He glanced at the general tape as he went in, holding it up to his face, paying particular attention to the news of the Royal Wedding in Italy, but with his right eye he was shooting glances at the other ribbon to catch the price of Billies. He had to wait a little time till they came round.

"12.56 p.m.; Pelham Pref. 108—109, Reefers 79 ex." so and so, and so on and so on . . . then, at last, Billies:—

"Dur. Imp. Tel. Ord. 35s.—36s."

Another man would have smiled. Jack Williams put on a troubled look as of slight grief, bent again for a moment over the news of the Italian Royal Wedding, sighed, and went on into the dining-room.

IV

JUST when Jack Williams was finishing his breakfast, his colleague, Wilfrid Halterton, was determining far off that he must ring up James McAuley, for the sixth time.

He was a little ashamed to be going on like this—but what was he to do? There was some misunderstanding, and it must be cleared up. If James Haggismuir McAuley could meet him face to face the extraordinary situation would straighten out—but James Haggismuir seemed so difficult to find just now. The telephone was never very satisfactory, but there it was. So after five early efforts—before nine o'clock—all failures, Wilfrid Halterton once more rang up the flat at the Marble Arch. He heard from the voice of a manservant that the great financier was in his bath. Wilfrid Halterton, who was himself not very far advanced in dressing, went back to his bedroom, sat on the bed, and thought matters over. At first he came to no conclusion—save this, which he reached in about ten minutes—that somehow, something had gone wrong. Then he went off again to the telephone, and this time the voice of the manservant answered that Mr. McAuley would be at the instrument at once. Next came the decisive voice, for once in a way irritated.

"Look here, Wilfrid, man, what's all this? Don't keep on ringing me up at these godless hours! I'm not dressed yet! What d'ye want? It is you, isn't it?"

"Yes. I want to see you. I *must* see you. There's some misunderstanding. I don't think you quite caught what I was saying to you last night at the Balcombe's—at least, *you* were at the Balcombe's—I was talking from the House, as I told you. I don't think you quite understood what I was saying, did you, eh? Something went wrong. Can I come round and see you this morning—now? In a quarter of an hour?"

There was a good long interval, in which no answer came, though Halterton filled it up with a few remarks such as "Eh? What?" and "I say—Exchange!" Then came J.'s voice again, a little lower, and with the irritation gone out of it.

"Look ye here, Wilfrid, all this is just a tangle. You get ye round here just after ten. Ye'll find me at breakfast. I don't understand what it's all about. Ye seem to have lost some letter from someone? Isn't that it? But no matter. . . . Come you round and see me at a quarter-past ten."

Before the Postmaster-General could say another word J. rang off. As for Wilfrid Halterton, he mused for a moment, standing before his wireless radiator, staring down at the glowing grid; he shook his head twice, and muttered: "Most mysterious!"

The short interval seemed interminable, and he got to the Marble Arch a little before his time, sauntered through the lounge, and did not ring for the lift until his watch assured him that it really was ten o'clock. He did not want to seem in a hurry, though if ever haste and anxiety were imprinted on drawn face and unquiet fingers they radiated from the various corners of that Minister.

He found J. sitting comfortably alone at his breakfast table. J. could not trouble to get up, but just nodded him towards a chair and asked him if he would care for a cup of tea. Wilfrid Halterton thanked him. It afforded a moment's reprieve during which he could pull himself together. He did so, and then, avoiding McAuley's eye, he said:

"I say, you know—you know what I've come about?"

"No, I'm damned if I do!" McAuley, abandoning his sausage, laid down his knife and fork and looked up squarely, compelling his guest to turn his face towards him.

"I'm damned if I do! I suppose ye want my advice about something? Ye spoke about some letter having gone wrong. Spit it out."

"My dear J.," said Halterton, glancing at the door and a little frightened by the loud voice, "it's quite simple. All I have come for is to ask you whether I could have another letter in the place of the one I had from you yesterday evening. I've mislaid it. It's very unfortunate. A thing like that ought not to be left lying about. Someone might find it. But anyhow, I must have a duplicate. You can see that, can't you?"

"I don't in the least understand you!" James Haggismuir McAuley pronounced these words very deliberately, with his sharp eyes trained upon the Postmaster-General like two small calibre gun-muzzles. "What letter?"

"Why," faltered the other, "the letter you gave me, of course."

"My dear Wilfrid, there have been plenty of letters between us."

The Postmaster-General suddenly got up and strode towards the door rather more rapidly than was customary to his step. He opened it, peeped round, satisfied himself that there was no one about, shut it again, came back, and said:

"Look here, I don't understand, either. . . . I must have a duplicate of that letter."

James McAuley put a clenched hand down on the table, either side of his plate, and cried:

"We're at sixes and sevens, man, somehow! Ye were talking last night on the telephone o' somewhat *you* thought I knew; but I don't—now, there! I don't know what it's all about."

Wilfrid Halterton's mind turned a somersault, and left him bewildered. It dazed him, and he hadn't yet found his feet. However, he acted with complete simplicity. He said:

"Why, the letter you gave me Tuesday night, J. After you got my letter accepting the contract. I took *your* letter, didn't I? That undated one, you know . . . you remember what was in it? Well, anyhow, that undated letter. You remember. The one signed by you. I put it in an envelope. . . . I put it in my pocket. . . ."

"This is all Greek to me," sighed J. "I've got *your* letter all right, of course. We both of us know that. And I'm sincerely grateful to ye for it, Wilfrid. It's made all the difference. And apart from that," he went on, as Halterton seemed about to interrupt him, "I think you've done well by the country. I'm sure"—this emphatically—"I'm as sure as I am of the daylight that ours is the only system that will work the thing as it should be worked. I don't deny it's to my advantage. Of course it is. Everybody knows it is, and that I've been urging for it. But you've done the right thing by the public, and they'll thank you, and so do I." He held out his right hand, open. Halterton took it, rather weakly.

"Thank you, J.," he said, "thank you. Thank you very much. But now look here.

There's some grievous misunderstanding. You *must* let me have a duplicate of that lost letter."

"There *is* some misunderstanding," answered J. in a voice now half an octave below that which he had used even at his deepest in this pathetic interview. " 'Tis a very grave misunderstanding. Ye've been mixing things up."

Then, before Halterton could interject a contradiction, a master thought struck the presiding genius of Durrant's Imperial Television Company.

"Look ye here, man, the best thing for ye to do is to get ye home and *write* down just what it is ye want. Somehow or other, mayhap, ye're mixing me up with some other body —or mayhap ye're getting confused between one document and another. Anyhow, ye think there was a letter, given you—by *me*. 'Twas not by me. It must a' been by someone else just before or after. 'Tis easy to get mixed up in such things. But there's no harm done. If there's something ye want *me* to do in connection with your contract, get ye home, I say, and put it all down fair on paper. Then we'll talk it over with all the facts before us."

Wilfrid Halterton was taken aback, breathless.

"You want *me* to write to you about what . . . what was offered me? You want it in my own handwriting? You want *me* to do that?" he said, in rising but somewhat tremulous accents. "In my own handwriting?"

J. shook his head.

"There's no making anything of all this!" he said.

He put his hand on his friend's shoulder. His friend dared not shake it off, though he would have liked to do so.

"Get ye home and put down whatever it is in black and white, sign it, and send it along to me; then I'll answer you. That'll be all square, won't it?"

"You deny that you gave me that letter?" answered Wilfrid, in tones higher up the scale than he had yet used. Then he jumped three notes, into B flat, and repeated: "You deny you. . . ."

"My *dear* fellow," implored the financier, "don't shout!" (Squeak would have been more accurate, for shriek is too grand.) "Just write it down, as I say. Write it down here, if you like."

Wilfrid Halterton had grown white and passionate.

"Very well," he said in a lower voice, half muttering, half hissing. "Very well. Very well. My word! I think I'm beginning to understand. But don't you make too sure! I *shall* find it, J. . . . Remember. . . . I *shall* find it!"

By way of answer J. caught the tall man's two hands and held them closely in his firm grasp.

"Look here, Wilfrid," he said, as he gazed wisely and benignly at him, but with great gravity in his expression, "I've known ye for some months now, and we have been good friends, I think? There's no one admires ye more than I do. But one can't have a fine brain working double pressure like yours without paying the price. Be advised by me. Get you back home. Get that brain of yours quiet again, and, as I say, put down on paper what you think happened; or if you don't like to do that, write down what you want me to do,

anyway. You may be sure I'll meet you. There!"

Still holding the wrists of those two hands in his own firm right grasp, he again put his left hand on the Minister's shoulder.

"Do what I tell ye," he said. "Ye are your own worst enemy, sometimes, Wilfrid. But no one wishes ye well more than I do."

I cannot describe to you Halterton's mood, for he could not have told you himself what it was. Bewilderment, anger, a misdoubting of himself and of his own senses, flashes of reminiscences from books he had read about dark intrigues—these and all manner of other zigzag emotions were playing forked lightning within him as he went off. That moment of intense anger had now turned to something too confused to analyse. By the time he had got down into the street his thoughts were beginning to settle. The fresh March morning, with the rain just hanging off, calmed him somewhat and appeased him; but he walked on in long strides down the Park towards Westminster, to give himself time to see things clearly. His secretary would be waiting for him in his room at the House of Commons; there was plenty of work waiting for him that morning. It would distract him: and it would settle his mind. But one thing he had fairly fixed by the time he had entered the Green Park, he would certainly put down nothing on paper himself. And he was wise.

Before he got to the Houses of Parliament half-formed questions and answers arose in his mind. Why had J. denied giving him that letter? The letter *had* been given, after all. He couldn't have dreamt it. Why had J. denied giving him that letter? He wanted to back out of the bargain. But suppose the letter was found? Well, perhaps J. was thinking of trying his luck—chancing it that the letter would not be found; and so keeping his freedom to appoint whom he would, and also his freedom to bargain further and to prevent the Post Office from backing out. J. had seemed reluctant to give him that letter at all, anyhow, at the beginning of all this.

The Postmaster-General's reflections had got as far as that by the time he was seated at his desk and his secretary was beginning to put his documents before him. He got no further in the course of the morning, for he was not one of those who can think of two things at once; and, indeed, the tension upon him was relieved by his pre-occupation with business and the taking of his mind from an anxiety which he was finding insoluble.

So things went on till an early lunch, which he ate by himself in the dining-room of the House of Commons. He was back in his room before two, and still worked on. There was plenty of work, and his secretary was a whale for work. Halterton worked right through the early afternoon, till the House met.

There were a few questions down for him early, after prayers, and he was on the front bench by three o'clock, facing the rather full benches of the Opposition, and finding some half-a-dozen of his colleagues at his side. By some coincidence Honest Jack Williams was lounging next to him on his right. Honest Jack Williams had seen a Young Friend of his, deputed for other duty, and his Young Friend had brought him the news: Billies had closed at 42s.; but honest Jack Williams decided to hold.

He had to decide on something more than holding the shares. He had to decide whether the boom had come to stay. James McAuley had got his contract all right. But was it pegged down? Or might it not come unstuck? No doubt the type was already set up to put it on the order paper. Perhaps the copies had even been struck off. But—though

voting on Government orders is pretty well a matter of course—especially if (as he guessed) the Chief Whip was interested . . . yet . . . yet—nothing is certain till it's been voted.

One or two men had told him casually in the Lobby that Halterton was looking worried. Honest Jack Williams, darting half a second's sharp glance towards his left along the front bench, without moving his head, caught the Postmaster-General's expression. Yes, James McAuley had the contract, but something had gone very wrong with the P.M.G.

There were questions asked of the Postmaster-General, and more than one person wondered whether a question with special notice could not have been got through in time asking him about the condition of the Television Contract; for there is nothing in which even private members are more interested than the movement of stocks and shares: and Billies had been blazing all day.

But the questions which the great statesman had to answer were of a simpler sort. Had his attention been called to the delays in the delivery of letters in the Derby district?

His attention had been called to it, and the proper steps had been taken.

Arising out of that reply, *what* steps had been taken?

No answer was returned.

Could the Postmaster-General give a date when he would introduce the long-promised measure for including the Antarctic Continent in the Postal Union? (The South Polar Golconda, I may say, though for the moment abandoned, was to be reopened again very shortly.)

The P.M.G. was giving the matter his fullest attention.

Arising out of that reply, was the Postmaster-General aware that the wireless service established in the previous year on the Antarctic Continent had broken down?

No answer was returned.

Had the Postmaster-General's attention been called to the insufficiency of the cable service to the Orkneys, and would he take immediate steps to double the line?

The answer to both questions was in the affirmative.

Arising out of that reply, was he aware that after a delay of more than three months nothing had been done?

No answer was returned.

Indeed, Wilfrid Halterton might be excused for not answering so many supplementary questions. The Treasury Bench was not very high, and bobbing up and down on it like a jack-in-the-box is, for a man over fifty, a bit of a trial.

His ordeal was over, and the questions now being fired were aimed at the Minister for Fine Arts, the old and popular Lord Papworthy: an Irish title—for though the name Papworthy has an honest Anglo-Saxon ring about it, Papworthy Castle and town have also a native name which was restored to it by the Irish Government after our splendid act of generosity in 1921.

Had the Noble Lord, the Secretary of State for Fine Arts, refused to purchase "Oblongs"?

Arising out of that reply, was it a fact that "Oblongs" was going to America, as that

other masterpiece, “Rhomboids” had gone?

And arising out of that reply, and arising out of that reply, and arising out of that reply.

Lord Papworthy stood up well to the volleys. The old boy remained amiable with his high, rich voice, though the private member who was putting the questions to him was angry, and even loud. The private member spoke from behind the Treasury Bench, and the Minister for Fine Arts, that amiable cherub of a man, with his benign, round face, had to play rubber-neck and look round over his shoulder, and though he still smiled, it irked him. The House, which is easily amused, was vastly amused.

The opportunity for Jack Williams was excellent, and he whispered, during the hubbub of “Answer! Answer!” a discreet word into Halterton’s ear.

“It looks all right with Billies?”

Halterton only looked embarrassed.

“Does it?” he whispered back. “I’d like to have a word with you, Jack.”

Williams was the man for embarrassed men to go to. Williams could always advise sanely and at once—and he was always right.

“When you like,” he answered quickly and in the same low voice.

“All right. Would it do now?” said the other. “But don’t come out immediately after me.”

“My dear Wilfrid, you’ll find me in my room when you like. I’ll be there all the time. There’ll be nothing but old Mother Boulger, when questions are over; and *you’ve* no more to say, anyhow.”

So out went Williams, behind the Speaker’s chair, slowly and sauntering, and saying a word or two to one of the permanent officials under the gallery, just to show that he was in no hurry.

Then after a due interval, and after passing plenty of remarks with this man and that as he left, Wilfrid Halterton rose in his turn and walked towards the main door to the outer Lobby, the door opposite that by which Williams had left. He had business apparently in the Lobby, and as he passed out through the swing glass doors he looked over his shoulder and saw Mrs. Boulger rising in all her ample majesty to make answer to the terrible attack which had been delivered from the Opposition back bench the day before by Mr. Boulger’s nephew by his first marriage, a promising lad.

Wilfrid Halterton buttonholed a man in the inner Lobby, spent a moment at the Post Office pretending to ask for a message there, and then turned down the steps and sought the Home Secretary’s room, still unhurried. He found Williams alone, as he had promised to be.

“Now, Wilfrid,” said Jack Williams heartily, and turning his chair half round, to face the new-comer, “what is it? How are things going? What’s all this about Durrant’s? I suppose it’s that you want to see me about? Sit down.”

“I do, Jack,” said Halterton, as he pulled up a chair. “I do indeed.”

He swung his clasped hands between his bony knees, and gazed down at the carpet, thinking what he should say next. Then he looked up.

Three studies of Lord Papworthy, Permanent Minister of Fine Arts: sketches made by Sir Archibald Rumm for the statue exhibited in the Academy of 1959, now standing in Papworthy House.

"You know, Jack," he said, "everybody always comes to you when there's a hitch."

"Thank you," said Williams.

"And there's been a hitch, Jack. You must have guessed that."

"It don't look much like a hitch," replied Williams a little dryly. "Billies are blazing."

Halterton got up and paced the room, after the manner usual to him when that mighty brain was fairly at work.

"Well, look here, Jack, it's like this" (and for perhaps the tenth time in forty-eight hours he looked at the door. It was shut securely enough). "It's like this . . ." He sat down again, and actually tapped the Home Secretary upon the knee. "I don't feel happy about J."

"What's the matter with J.?" asked Williams serenely. He didn't mind being tapped upon the knee; and he didn't mind what happened to him so long as he knew what was going on before anyone else did. "What's the matter with J.? He's in clover. One can see that. And what's more, he hasn't been keeping his mouth shut—he thought it better to talk, eh?"

Wilfrid Halterton had read in many books that when one was in a tight place and has asked for advice one should be quite candid and get it all over in the first burst. He honestly meant to follow the judgement of the books, but it was difficult.

"Yes," he said, "J.'s all right. . . . But I'm not all right."

"Well, Wilfrid, he hasn't got the thing, whatever it is, without a proper bargain, I hope."

"No. . . . But you see . . . you see. . . ."

"Look, Wilfrid," answered Jack Williams kindly and with due patience, but not without a little sigh, "you are asking me for advice, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," said the miserable Wilfrid, with a hint of tragedy in his voice, which the other duly noted.

"You're asking me for advice, and you're quite right. For I think I know what's the matter, and what ought to be done."

It was said at random, but it hit the bull's eye. He could see that, so he leant forward earnestly, putting a new note into his voice.

"And look here, Wilfrid, in things of this kind men must stand together. . . . You aren't quarrelling with J., I hope?"

"No, no," answered Wilfrid quickly, "not that!"

"Well, now tell me the whole thing clean out, and I'll give you the best advice I can. I shall probably be able to tell you what's the matter in five minutes."

"The matter," said Halterton, his hunger for sound judgement overruling his hesitation, "the matter is about J.'s letter."

"You mean," said Jack Williams (to whom this sort of thing was as familiar as his own face in the shaving-glass), "you mean some letter or whatever it was that J. gave you as against the contract, or promise of the contract? You mean—his arrangement with you?"

Halterton nodded. "More or less," said he. "That kind of thing. . . . His acknowledgement, you know. His acknowledgement. All that sort of thing. . . . And the bother of it is, I wrote a memorandum of my own on the top of the letter in pencil, just to make sure."

"Oh, you did, did you?" said Williams grimly. "A very useful precaution!"

"Yes. And now it's gone, with that writing of mine on it."

"Gone!" said Jack, really startled. "That's awkward! Things like that oughtn't to be left lying about."

He looked Halterton hard in the face, but then recovered from his surprise at the news and smiled so genially that there was no hint of blame.

"No, by Jove!" muttered the Postmaster-General.

"Well, there's one thing you've got to do, obviously. Ask J. for another one."

"I have," said Wilfrid, speaking slowly and solemnly—"*and he refused*."

"Refused!" jerked out Williams, with a sudden movement of the eyebrows.

"Yes," said Halterton, "refused—and what's more, he says he never gave me anything."

The Home Secretary yielded to habit and gave that low whistle which he had acquired in earlier days of Trade Union politics, whenever he had come across something that "had put him on to it."

"O-o-o-h!" he said. And then he leaned his chin on his hand, still looking steadily at

Halterton, and added, “D’you know what’s happened?”

“No, I can’t imagine,” answered Halterton, not meeting the other’s eye. “I’ve looked everywhere. I even looked under the carpet—though I don’t see how it could have got *there*. . . . I didn’t look in the lining of my coat. . . . I’m sure, though, that the lining wasn’t torn. There’s nowhere it could get under in the hall. Unless—perhaps,” he added, as a bright thought struck him, “unless perhaps there was room for a bit of paper under the umbrella stand. I’ve not looked there.” There was new hope in his voice.

“My dear Wilfrid,” answered the Home Secretary, in a rather lower and very even voice, “it is not under the carpet. It is not under the umbrella stand. Nor is it in the other world. Shall I tell you where it is?”

“But you don’t know!” wailed the other plaintively.

“It is on the person of James Haggismuir McAuley.”

“What!”

“On the person, I said,” repeated Williams a little severely, “on the person of James Haggismuir McAuley. In a pocket, I should say. Perhaps sewn on to his vest. But more likely in a pocket. And on the whole, I should say the inside left-hand breast-pocket of his morning coat—for it’s still the middle of the afternoon.” Then he leaned back and continued, with humour in his eyes: “There now, Wilfrid! I’ve told you. And so you know.”

Halterton looked at his colleague in a dazed way. Williams had been called the Wizard: Hiram Buggs, formerly of Warramugga and now First Baron Desportes had given him that name in his paper, just after getting his title. Though the Postmaster-General knew that Williams had helped him to get the peerage, he had never understood the admiring nickname. He began to understand it now; and great as was his own position, the fruit of his own great achievements, he felt an awe coming upon him at the genius of the statesman who sat before him so self-possessed and simple, yet wielding so tremendous an instrument of intelligence.

“Ah,” he said, after some moments to take it all in. “The breast-pocket—the inside breast-pocket . . . of the morning coat he was wearing . . . the left-hand one, I think you said?”

The Home Secretary nodded.

“That’s right,” he agreed.

“Well! Upon my word! So you say he’s got it? . . . Well. . . . I’m beginning to understand now.”

“I’m glad of that,” said the other, and the smile returned for a moment.

“Yes, I’m beginning to understand. . . . I see. For some reason or other he wanted to get the thing back.”

“Yes,” said Williams. “For some reason or other, he did.”

The Postmaster-General pondered, staring at the table. Then he looked up, and added, after a sudden thought: “But why do you think he has kept it? Why shouldn’t he have destroyed it? I can see why he said he didn’t remember anything about it. I can see all that now. But then, why didn’t he destroy it?”

“Because your pencil note on it is a valuable record. It gives him a hold on you.”

Halterton felt as though he had received a moderate blow in the pit of the stomach.

"Hold on me!" he faltered. "Yes. . . . I see. I begin to see . . . yes. . . ."

"Besides which," continued the Home Secretary cheerfully, "he liked to feel free to decide who to give the job to, eh?"

"What job?" said the other suspiciously. "I've heard of no job. . . . I never said anything about a job!"

"Oh, no, old chap," laughed Williams. "Anyhow, men hate to feel bound, don't they? Well, he's got it. You can swear to that."

Other things were still troubling Halterton. There was humility in his voice as he pursued their solution.

"But why on his person? Why in his pocket? And why in his *breast*-pocket, Jack? Why in his *left*-hand breast-pocket?"

Williams sighed gently.

"On his person, my dear fellow, because it is the only safe way to keep a thing without anyone in the world knowing anything about it. In a pocket, because if you have it sewn on to the inside of your vest, as I have known some do (old Bisher did that with the compromising letter in the Holt case, you remember?). You remember old Bisher, the Lord Chancellor twenty-five years ago?"

"I remember the name," said Halterton.

"Well, I knew the man, and that's what he did." But Williams did not also add that he knew the man who got it away from old Bisher, and how much it brought him.

"The reason I don't think that McAuley has done that is that he wants it for keeps. They only sew things on to the inside of their vests when they are only wanted for a few days—obviously."

"M-m-m, yes," assented Halterton. "Obviously. Yes . . . it would be a pocket . . . yes, you're right. But why a *breast*-pocket."

"Because," said Williams a little wearily, as though he were tired of teaching elementary lessons in politics to a fellow-politician, "because it is more difficult to pick a breast-pocket than an outside pocket—as you have discovered by this time."

Halterton actually blushed. "Yes, I have, Jack," he admitted. "You're right. It was in my side-pocket. Oh, the dirty. . . ."

Honest Jack Williams instructs a fellow-statesman in the art of politics.

"Don't, Wilfrid, don't," said the Home Secretary, putting up a checking hand. "Never get angry with a colleague for playing the game better than you!"

It is only the greatest men who understand this, and the men who understand it rise, as Williams had risen.

But Halterton had yet another question to ask.

"Oh, yes . . . and why on the left-hand side?"

"Really—Wilfrid—really—haven't you noticed that McAuley is a right-handed man?"

"Yes, I suppose so. I never noticed it particularly. But now I come to think of it . . . yes . . . I remember. He writes with his right hand."

"Most people do," said Williams.

And the next few seconds were spent by the one man in ecstatic admiration of a superior brain; by the other in a rapid review of the things he had learned, and of the further things he had begun to project.

At the end of the pause Williams turned his chair back towards the end of the table.

"I must send for Burton," he said. "I've a mass of work to get through, and I shall have to show myself downstairs again before the end of the hour. I shan't speak, but I must hear what Chillham will be saying. I've told you all I can tell you, my dear fellow! McAuley's got it, and I've told you exactly where he's got it: and what's more, if I am right about that

last little point, as I think I am—I'm pretty sure I am—it will be in the corresponding pocket of whatever coat he is wearing for some little time to come; that is, until he has occasion to make use of it."

"To make use of it," repeated Halterton in a hollow voice, half thinking he was talking to himself. "Make use of it . . . make use of it. . . ."

And he shambled out.

Lady Papworthy, highbrow political hostess.

V

LADY PAPWORTHY was the wife of that excellent elderly Lord Papworthy, the Minister for Fine Arts in Mrs. Boulger's second administration, whom we have seen standing up so well for his office against the angry admirer of "Oblongs."

Yes, Lady Papworthy was Lord Papworthy's wife; this affirmation (for which I make myself responsible) is more surprising than it sounds. Indeed, it has to be seen to be believed. For Lord Papworthy is a man of near seventy, with scanty white hair, a beneficent gaze from gooseberry eyes, and a manner kindly in speech and gesture and everything else—save on very rare private occasions where money is concerned; while Lady Papworthy is not much over twenty, dark, keen, and immediate. Moreover, she is not Lord Papworthy's second wife. Lord Papworthy had never, to human knowledge, been married before.

Then again, everybody knew who Lord Papworthy was. He was old Papworthy, to be sure, the man who had pottered about with pictures ever since he could potter, and he had begun to potter fifty years ago, before he had come of age. But no one really knew who Lady Papworthy was. And, what was really surprising, nobody cared. They were married. That I know on the word—and, much better, by the attitude—of Harry O'More, his young cousin and heir, who rather foolishly trembled lest another heir should be born. But beyond that I myself know nothing of her—and I don't care to know more than do others.

There are three men about London, all three bachelors, all three well-to-do, and each witty and vital in his own way, who may be trusted to tell you all there is to know about anyone, however dark; but of Lady Papworthy they told three different stories.

Limpey said she was a waitress who had caught old Papworthy when he went over to the World Art Conference, when it had been held at Toronto as the most suitable centre for the Art of the whole world to meet in, rather more than two years before.

Stingey said she was an artist's model who had caught him in Paris a year earlier and had followed him to Canada.

Mangey (whose nickname the ladies soften to "Manguey"—making the G hard, quite against their ordinary custom) frankly owned that he didn't know. He had begun by saying that she was the daughter of a Communist agitator who had caught old Papworthy on the boat out—but when he found that his informant, himself a Communist from Buda-Pesth, was telling lies, he retracted in his usual straightforward way and frankly admitted his error to everybody. He said that he would try and find out, but he did not succeed, and gave it up. And now, since Mangey doesn't know, nobody knows, and we've all given up betting. She's fun enough, anyhow.

Officially she was his secretary whom he had married, but she could not have been his secretary for a very long time, for no one had seen her thirty months ago, and no one (except Harry) was even quite certain where they had married. She spoke of her relatives

freely but not frequently. There seemed to be more than one of them: they were usually her cousins: they also seemed to be always travelling, and she often wished that they would come to England—but they never did. She never gave their names.

She was thoroughly up in things, especially in things literary, so long as they were modern, though she made no profession of knowledge to any language but her own—which by the way was English, spoken without any accent save what those who were perhaps her compatriots could call the "English" accent; and her voice when speaking it was low, restrained and sonorous.

Her husband called her Joan: so did the greater part of the coterie, a large one, which she ruled almost from the moment that she came to London. For as you may imagine, with such antecedents, or rather, lack of them, she was exactly suited to play her part in the position to which it had pleased herself to call her.

She did not give big dinners; she did not often give small ones, for that matter. Papworthy had to entertain, on account of his position, but he rarely entertained at his own house except at lunch. Joan Papworthy gave it to be understood that her health forbade her staying up late. She hardly ever went out in the evening herself, and the eccentricity added to her position.

That position was firmly established, even after so short a time. She knew what to say both to and about the writing men, nearly all of whom had come under her roof at one time or another, many of whom came there continually. And though she did not give many dinners, she gave innumerable cocktails; and she understood that art thoroughly. Nor was Lord Papworthy himself always absent from her re-unions. He would look in to, say, one in three or one in five, and smile and talk quite genially to this fellow or that, and then would happen to go through the door and not come back again. It was understood that he had gone to discuss a picture. They always asked after him on all those numerous hours when her drawing-room was crowded; and when he failed to appear his wife would explain in detail what particular piece of work was keeping him.

She herself never said a word on the matters in his province. She professed a complete ignorance of it, and spoke of his knowledge with the deference due to one of the first authorities in Europe. On the very rare occasions when he himself spoke at all of things outside that province he was equally respectful to her. He professed to know nothing about writing. Nor was it an affectation in him that he usually got the names of the writers wrong, even after he had met them three or four times.

When I say that he was Minister for Fine Arts in Mrs. Boulger's second administration, it should be also remembered that he had been Minister for Fine Arts in her first administration: Under-Secretary for Fine Arts in the administration but one before that: Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Fine Arts (the famous Algernon Cohen) in the Dark Ages. During his second Parliament, before he had come into his title, and even before that, in his first session when his father had put him into the House only a few months after he had come down from Cambridge, he had distinguished himself by asking questions upon the Government's purchase of pictures. He had kept steadily to that line for years, and, politically, it had been the making of him.

His complete mastery of the subject was best proved by his equal admiration for all modern painters whatsoever; and his almost equal admiration for all those of the past who were for the moment in the fashion. He had inherited pictures, he had bought pictures,

pictures of every sort and kind, pictures that told stories and pictures that merely lied, pictures which were only patterns and pictures which were not even that. It was his delight to stand in front of these pictures, the more recent ones especially, with his head slightly on one side, making movements with his thumb in the air to illustrate his delight in their lines, their values, their planes, their purpose, their colour, their Ubesmachtheit.

Among Lady Papworthy's more intimate dozen or so was a certain young man who combined an uncertain literary position in London with a small political one. Butler was his name, but not his nature; for he was tall, thin, black haired, with an unkempt romantic lock falling over his forehead, dreamy, gazing from large, dark, very deep eyes, not without fire in them; he stooped, he occasionally stammered: he sometimes exploded with indignation at this or that; as often he would remain silent when another had spoken to him, not from discourtesy but from abstraction. He would also sometimes interrupt the conversation of others, for he was full of zeal. Though his political position was a minor one, and certain to remain so (for his few friends could securely prophesy that he would never have office of any kind), and though he himself clearly never took any steps towards a career in the House, all that was of his own choice. He felt safe to remain a Member of Parliament as long as he liked—and he always swore that he hated it; his safety lay in his enormous popularity with his constituents in an artisan quarter of a northern industrial town.

When he emphasized with fervour his devotion to the Anarchist ideal they believed him, and they did right to believe him. They felt certain in their simplicity that they were right to disbelieve the mass of the politicians about him. To him they would never apply what working men now say of pretty well all other politicians: that there is no difference between this party and that—Anarchist or Socialist—it's all one—they're all on the make.

He added to his popularity by proclaiming loudly that he would never spend a penny upon the place, even if he had a penny to spend. And the constituents were the better pleased because the two neighbouring divisions of the town were represented by two millionaires, the one in the Anarchist and the other in the Socialist interest, who ladled out the stuff regardless.

In the House itself Reginald Butler was despised but half popular. It was amusing to hear his passionate appeals for "the Poor." He was unpopular when he went out crusading against what he called scandals—his favourite and harmless game.

He always failed, of course, and after failing he would denounce the white-washing committee which had frustrated his efforts, making some bombastic speech which the newspapers were careful to report briefly or not at all and to forget.

His colleagues forgave him, and waited eagerly till he should begin again, for they believed from long experience that he would never cross the boundary of the things that really matter. It cannot be denied that they got fun out of it—even those who were for the moment involved. They knew he would never hurt anyone, and they didn't think he meant to.

Yet, if ever a hunter of mares'-nests seemed earnest for the purity of public life it was this young man. No unfortunate Parliamentarian could interest himself in a new Company without Butler's scenting South Sea Bubbles. No salaried post ever fell to the most blameless dunderhead without his most distant connection with a Minister being ferreted out. In his crazy world public men would have had to live on air, and every investment by

them was a crime.

It was inept, but it had a tinsel of romance about it, and Joan Papworthy was devoted to him. Of all the literary crowd which she sampled week by week and sometimes for two or three days following, in her drawing-room, Reginald Butler was the one she seemed to have known the longest. She already felt as though she had known him all her life. And he for his part certainly wished to know her all his life.

His verse, she had been told by some, was exceptional. She tried to read it, so as to be able to quote bits of it to him, but she got the words wrong. He forgave her—but her only—for such slips. His political excitements she was the only hostess in London of standing to sympathize with—for women are less tolerant of folly than men—and he was grateful for that sympathy. He found in her the one soul who understood his abortive indignations. All through the Crude Oil[1] affair when, for once, he really did feel himself isolated, she stuck to him: and what is more, she spurred him on. Then, after the Committee had reported and the two men whom he had most vigorously attacked had been given, the one a first-class Embassy and the other the Exchequer, she consoled him during the grey days when he was creeping back to his half-tolerated position.

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[1] There is a common error here which I take this opportunity to correct. The "Scandal," as fools call it, should not be "The Crude Oil-Affair" but "The Crude-Oil affair." Carltonhurst, who got out of them at 118, asks me to put in this note.

As for Lord Papworthy, he cared for none of these things. He had been reproached—perhaps some of my readers have reproached him—for his complete indifference to that business side of public life which is its chief interest for the more active minds.

Just as he had never sold a picture, so he had never bought a share, the trustees of that great estate were enough for him, and after half-a-dozen futile attempts made by his colleagues in the House to interest him in this or that commercial venture he had been given up as hopeless.

I for my part do not blame him. If a man of great fortune (always over fifty thousand a year even in bad times), long lineage, no children, and with no taste for hazard, who happens to have one passion and to be able to satisfy it in office—if such a man choose not to take the financial opportunities which Parliament offers, but to remain cold to the movements of the market, I hold that he is perfectly free to indulge that eccentricity, and I think none the worse of him.

Lord Papworthy was not and is not alone in such an attitude; I doubt whether the Prime Minister herself, Mrs. Boulger, could have given you the price of more than three or four leading stocks, I should not even wonder if the same were not true of her husband—at least, since he took that bad tumble over Burgher's Deeps. But that was years ago—and anyhow the Boulger money was mainly Trustee money also.

The story of the now very important department of State which Lord Papworthy filled is an interesting one.

Until some years after the Great European War no one had dreamed of having in England a Ministry of Fine Arts; indeed, the term had a frenchified sound about it which

rendered it ridiculous. The Latins had always had Ministries of Fine Arts, and later on, even the more virile nations—the Germans of the Reich, the Danes and the people of Iceland—came to appoint statesmen to similar functions; but the thing long remained alien to the sturdy breed of this country.

It so happened, however, that when Dotty D. (that is what everybody called her), the old Duchess, Dorothy, the Duke's widow, had put her boy into the Government (it was she who had most to say about it) the young man insisted on being a Secretary of State for Fine Arts, or nothing.

He had imprudently been allowed to travel. His bear-leader had introduced him to strange cliques in foreign studios, and he had sunk up to the neck in oils and clay. He had been plasticine in his mother's hands as to everything else; but when she begged him, at twenty-five, to enter public life, he stuck to his bargain. Therefore was the new Ministry created, and people soon got accustomed to it.

After all, it's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, and it at least had the advantage of providing a number of new jobs out of the taxes for those who deserved well of their country at Westminster, for their dependants, their friends, their relatives, and those whom they might have cause to fear.

The young Duke at once established a custom in the Department, of which it is difficult to say whether it was good or bad for the country, but which took root and became a permanent institution. He bought largely. Not content to spend the money which was allocated to the purchase of works of art, and to occasional public exhibitions, he made his department the only one under a modern Government the head of which became expected, by custom, to spend more than he received.

The things—bronzes and marbles, paintings and etchings—that he bought, sometimes after passing through his own hands, sometimes without even that, were given to the National collections. The public had grown familiar with the little tab "Given by the Secretary of State for Fine Arts" stuck on to one picture after another in the great public galleries.

As I say, this new custom may have had advantages: just as had the old idea that an Ambassador in a foreign capital should spend more than his salary had certain national advantages: but it made the post very difficult to fill.

The young Duke himself gave it up after a few years to go off whale-hunting, for which, after the fatal accident with the Blubber Boiler, his name is better remembered than for his brief experience of politics. His successor will, I am afraid, be remembered only for the deplorable Herrenheimer Commission. The next in office, only obtained after a long and agonized searching by the Prime Minister of the day, was a gentleman from one of our great Dominions of whom no one had hitherto heard; but he was at least able to spend lavishly, and the tradition which the young Duke had founded struck deeper root than ever.

Then Good Fortune, which never forsakes the public life of a chosen people, came to our aid, and Lord Papworthy, a man already well over fifty, appeared as the ideal candidate.

This had been seventeen years ago, seven before Mrs. Boulger's first administration, that of 1950, and Lord Papworthy (who was, of course, as his father had been, a pillar of

the Socialist Party) then first became Minister and was an immediate success. Almost his first act was to buy the Woolson Vase and present it to the nation.

But when, four years later, the Anarchist Party was due to succeed in the regular rotation, there naturally came an acute anxiety as to what would happen to the Department of Fine Arts. Not only was there no one to compare with Papworthy, there was actually no one able to fill the place at all. There were plenty who would have liked the salary, but none of them could—or if they could, would—have spent money for the benefit of the galleries. There were plenty who could and would spend money on pictures, but not at the price of political burdens and the headship of a department. They preferred a shameful idleness to such onerous service of the State.

The obvious remedy was that Lord Papworthy should think better of his political principles, and join the Anarchist Party. The change was duly made, and he continued under the sober and well-administered reign of Lord Mandon's Anarchist premiership to preside over the new black steel and glass building in Whitehall.

When the time had come for Lord Mandon to change about, and hand over the salaries to the Socialist party again (the moment known in political circles as "musical chairs"), it was as evident as ever that no suitable candidate for the Ministry of Fine Arts was available except, of course, the now firmly-established Lord Papworthy. In the world that counts, the men and women who care about painting and sculpture, and who know that they know about it, are numerous and have power. Those of them who care, care for it much more than they care about the other activities of Westminster; and they all insisted upon Papworthy. The humbler people, young and old, who earn their money from the people that count by painting their portraits and things even more startling, made it clearly understood by their clamour that there could be no question of anybody at all except Papworthy.

It seemed necessary at this critical moment that Lord Papworthy should again reconsider his principles and remain in office by turning Socialist again. After all, he had been of this political persuasion only four short years before, and it would be easy for him to pick up the broken threads of his Socialist principles.

Lord Papworthy, another portrait from "Great Englishmen of Our Time."

But it was now evident that with every new change of Government, so long as Lord Papworthy survived—and the rubicund old boy was a fine healthy man—there would have to be some arrangement made by which he could be installed irremovably, once and for all, at the Ministry of Fine Arts.

One of the most interesting of the many constitutional discussions which add such dignity to our public life was thrashed out on this occasion; some of it in the columns of *The Times*, the more important of it more privately in Mrs. Boulger's own study.

You will remember that this third tenure of the office by Lord Papworthy was at the beginning of Mrs. Boulger's first administration. One set of authorities on constitutional practice were for setting up a special rule *ad hoc* to fit the case of the Minister of Fine Arts. They suggested that the tenant of the day should change his party with each election. The other set—in my judgement the more reasonable—suggested that he should sit as a member of the Government when his own party was in power; and then, when he had passed into Opposition, should still sit as a member of the Government, though as a member of the Opposition. When his party should come in again, he should continue to

hold office as a member of the Government party, then, if God granted him life, when he went into Opposition again, he should still sit once more as an Opposition member of the Ministry—and so on, until God should cease to grant him life. And as to what would happen then to the Ministry of Fine Arts—or the Minister—God only knew.

It was this last party which carried the day. They had behind them the wise precedent of the Nationalist Government which many men not far advanced in middle age could remember from the days of their youth, when it had been decided for the first time, on the highest constitutional authority, that Ministers in active opposition to each other on the main points of national policy should draw their £100 a week in the same Cabinet.

To tell the truth, Lord Papworthy by this time could never clearly remember which of the two parties was in power, as he always sat on the same bench in the House, and on the same corner of that bench. If he sometimes made a mistake, alluding to himself as an Anarchist when he should have called himself a Socialist, or the other way about, nobody minded, because he had become a national institution.

Such had Lord Papworthy been for now so many administrations, when, as I have said, some two years ago he appeared on his return from Canada with a wife. I have told how his first cousin once removed, and heir, suffered a brief alarm. It was soon fairly evident that there would be no baby rival to his claim. But in other things more important than children the marriage was a success, as I hope I have also made clear. It gave the Ministry of Fine Arts new life. The brilliant circle surrounding young Lady Papworthy lent to the appreciation of the new schools, from miniature to architecture, and from enamels to large wrought-iron gates, a life and splendour which were not to be found in any other Cabinet in Europe.

The fact that her receptions and her more private gatherings were literary and of the drama, as well as of the arts, gave them the more vitality. And what gave them unity as well—an important point—was the continual presence of Reginald Butler.

So much for Lord and Lady Papworthy. Pray bear them well in mind. Remember their complete indifference to the interests of party, their devotion to the things of the spirit, and to the Muses. Remember also the haunting presence in Papworthy House of Reginald Butler, whose misguided whimsies on the purity of public life were to play so considerable a part in the fortunes of Mr. Williams, the Home Secretary; Sir Andrew McAuley, the Attorney-General; his brother James Haggismuir, the controller of Durrant’s; Mrs. Boulger herself; and most of all Wilfrid Halterton, the Postmaster-General to His Majesty.

VI

WHEN WILFRID HALTERTON had left him, on that Thursday evening in the House of Commons, the Home Secretary worked on an hour or two, then he gathered his papers together and looked at his watch. He decided that he would get a pair and not dine in the House. He had an idea of doing some private business that evening, and it is often unwise to do one's private business in the House itself. He got his pair, and went across the street to the little club which he shared with some of his fellow-members to take his chop. While he was waiting for it he began his business by telephoning. It was more private than telephoning from the House. He telephoned to James Haggismuir McAuley.

They greeted each other cordially over the instrument. No one could be more useful to James Haggismuir McAuley than Jack Williams, and Jack Williams hoped to find one connection, at least, with James Haggismuir McAuley very useful indeed in the near future.

"Doing anything to-night?" said Williams.

"No. I'm trying to get through some work at home."

"I'm just having a chop at the Corner Club by myself. I'm fed up. I don't want to go back to the House—there's nothing on. Could you come round here after dinner and walk round the cloth with me—just a hundred or two up?"

It was something of a compliment to be asked casually by Williams like that to play billiards, for the Home Secretary's fame as a billiard player stood high among the amateurs of his set, though not approaching professional form.

"I see. What'll you give me? Or what? I can't play a man like you scratch. And I can't get round much before nine. Will that do?"

So it was settled. Settled as Jack Williams had desired. Settled as things usually were settled when Jack Williams had the doing of them—even when he had the doing of them side by side with such a brain as that of the financier who was about to play billiards with him.

In the interval between his meal and the arrival of his friend Jack Williams read the evening paper, which expressed the views of his other grateful friend Lord Desportes. Even as he did so he was clinching down in his mind, one after the other, the points which he had so frankly made for the benefit of Wilfrid Halterton, for Jack Williams was well able to do two things at once, as many men of even lesser talent can; he could read—and understand what he was reading—and at the same time he could consider a problem in his mind. So while he absorbed Buggs's views on international affairs, and currency, and things like that, things on which Buggs's views were always pronounced and lucid, he was settling every step in his conjecture upon James McAuley's action in Halterton's case, and approving wholly of his conclusion.

Yes, that document would be on J.'s person! It would be in a pocket; it would be in an

inside breast-pocket, and it would be the inside left breast-pocket of the morning coat. Or, if he had dressed for dinner, of the evening coat. What is more, he was prepared to bet a man of so many interests as James Haggismuir McAuley had an inner pocket to his dinner jacket: but had it a button . . . ?

In the same pocket would be something else a good deal more important to Jack Williams than what the unfortunate Halterton was mourning. For side by side with that document there certainly lay in the same pocket, if Williams knew anything of human habits and particularly of public life, that other important document in which the Television Contract was pledged to Durrant's.

Reasoning of this sort is not infallible: if it proved wrong—well—he could always try again. But he was pretty sure he was right—and he was.

J. turned up punctually enough, and, with the sharp precision that characterized him, asked for the game.

"What are you going to give me?" he said.

"Oh, I can't give you anything on a 100, J.," protested Mr. Williams.

"Let's make it 300, then. You've got to give me something; you always do."

"All right, I'll give you 50," said Williams, rather reluctantly, and added, "We'll make it a quid."

"Half a quid," was J.'s determined answer. And it went at that.

There was no one else in the large billiard-room of the Club. All was in shadow, save where, from under their shades, the six lights threw their brilliance upon the green cloth. Jack Williams slowly took off his coat and hung it up upon a row of hooks that stood on the dark side of the room over the leather-covered bench that ran there, by the wall. Then he moved the plain marker to fifty. He himself took spot, and left it at zero. They tossed for the break and Williams won. He took up his cue, intent upon nothing but the three balls on the table, while James Haggismuir McAuley slowly took off his coat in his turn and hung it up side by side with the Home Secretary's—and all the while the Home Secretary kept his gaze fixed upon the lie of the table, his back turned to the two coats. There was plenty of time.

He played for a miss in baulk, carefully. While the other was making his first break of 20, until he missed his last stroke by a hair's-breadth, Williams watched the table unceasingly, his face still on the game and away from those coats, where they hung side by side from the pegs. It was his turn again. He did not seem to be playing with his usual skill; the break was a short one. There were three such alterations, at the end of which McAuley was leading by somewhat more than his handicap of 50, and was pleased to be so leading. Williams as though feeling the challenge, began to play more carefully. He piled up another 32. By this time McAuley was warm to his work, and his following turn went off magnificently, the red potted outwards in the middle and spot cannoning after it into the farther right-hand pocket.

And so on. . . . It seemed as though it would never end. Williams, audibly commenting his admiration, stepped back into the shadow. He stood there a moment with his feet wide apart, one thrust forward into the patch of light near the table, the other withdrawn towards the bench along the wall. In such a stance he then did three things simultaneously, one with his tongue, one with his eyes and one with his left hand; while his right hand

thrust his cue forward so that it showed in the edge of the light from the lamps.

What he did with his tongue was to say: “Oh, well played! Well played!” What he did with his eyes was to look eagerly on at the green cloth and follow the shock of the balls. What he did with his dexterous left hand at the end of his long left arm was to stretch well behind him towards McAuley’s coat and to convey the two envelopes in a flash from that inner pocket—crushed, alas! and mangled, but safe—into his own trouser pocket. It was all over between the moment when J. had begun aiming and the first touch of the cue on the ball. And that was that.

The Home Secretary’s excursion made no interruption in his activities as a player. He said again, without an interval for breath: “Well played!” and then walked right round to the end of the table to see how James Haggismuir McAuley might deal with the very interesting cushion position. The financier looked at the problem with his head on one side, the statesman looked at it with his head also on one side, and they frankly discussed it together.

“What would you do?” said J.

“I don’t see why I should help you to win half a quid off me,” said the other. “But I should play a follow-up with a top-screw.”

J. played that and failed.

“You had your own reasons for giving me your advice, Jack,” he laughed.

“No, no,” laughed Williams as genially. “You’ve left them perfectly for me. But I won’t rob you. I’d hate to rob you. Look here.” And he deliberately played at random. “Now that gives you your chance again.”

“Thanks,” said McAuley, accepting the gift without protest. After that they played faster and faster, one against the other, as thick as thieves.

Meanwhile in the House of Commons Laycock, a back-bencher Anarchist, was on his legs for the Opposition side; and when Laycock once began he was good for an hour and a half. The House was almost empty, the Postmaster-General sat alone on the Government bench, and in his unhappy mind there pranced a tormenting demon. He could not rest until he had seen Williams again. He must have further advice.

Wilfrid Halterton looked over his shoulder at a young back-bencher just behind him, a rising hope of the Socialist party, and whispered: “Will you carry on after this till I get back?” The young man nodded joyfully. Halterton hastily slipped out, made the necessary arrangements with the Speaker in a low word or two as he passed the Chair, asked in the corridor outside if anyone knew where Williams was, and learning that he was at the Club, went over there at once.

Williams, he was told, was in the billiard-room. Halterton hesitated: but he might yet get his chance.

He had no luck. As he went up towards the billiard-room, thinking that perhaps the game would soon be over, and that he might catch Williams alone for a moment, he saw young Hayling in front of him on the stairs. Still, he would try his luck; and he and Hayling came together into the room. The two players looked round; McAuley, who was unoccupied, nodded rather coldly at Halterton; Williams continued to score, not pausing to speak to the newcomers until his break should be over and the other should be in play.

Hayling and Halterton sat in the dark of the side benches just under the hooks where

the coats of the two players were hanging. Halterton, looking on at the game, suffered a little in soul to hear the geniality of Williams's tones as he addressed the financier, the little emphatic "Well played!" coming out once or twice jarred on him. Of course, the courtesies must be maintained, but still! Williams was the man, after all, who knew best what McAuley had done. Yet he must not think of that. He must do what he could to get Williams alone.

He tried to stick it out till Williams should be disengaged. But the thing went on too long for him. He glanced at his watch and found that he had already been away more time than would be tolerated. He sat in an agony for another five minutes, and then reluctantly went out, telling himself that he would come in again after the House rose and chance finding Williams alone. Young Hayling watched the game perhaps another five minutes after Halterton had gone, then he too went.

When Halterton and Hayling left the game was still 100 short, but the rest went quicker. Whether there was any lingering superstition in Jack Williams I know not, but at any rate he played his best, as though determined to make the evening a fortunate one all round. And, indeed, he ended with J.'s ten shillings stuffed into the same pocket with its little brothers, the crumpled envelopes.

"Have a drink?" said the Home Secretary, putting on his coat.

"Thanks, I will," said McAuley, putting on his.

Then when the whiskies and sodas had come and disappeared again Williams said he must be getting home to bed. "I arranged a pair before I dined," he said. "I shan't bother to go back to the House. I'll just take the train from the station downstairs, and get home in good time."

"Shall I drive you to Victoria?" said McAuley.

"No, thanks, it's very good of you. But I'd just as soon go by train at this time of night, and besides, it's a long way out of your way."

So McAuley, who quite agreed, went off alone to the Marble Arch flat in his car, and Williams within three minutes was in the train from which he would change at Victoria for Clapham.

The policemen of the "A" division were bawling, "Who goes home?" at the top of their fine deep voices through the corridors of St. Stephens not five minutes after the moment when the Home Secretary had got into the underground train for Victoria and James Haggismuir McAuley had got into his fast motor-car to drive home to his flat near the Marble Arch.

* * *

All during the short remainder of the evening Halterton had been chafing in the House of Commons. He must see the Home Secretary again. He could not rest until he had seen him again. He must get more advice. It was mere nerves, he told himself, and there his judgement was exact. The last dull nonsense had been spoken, it was eleven o'clock, the House rose. He was all agog to go, and as the cry, "Who goes home?" rang through the corridors he was up and off, so hurriedly that a colleague or two turned to watch him with a smile. Down the cloister, through the subway he strode off on those long legs of his, his face hollow with anxiety, determined to catch Williams this time and get some crumb of

further advice to quiet his nerves. The Postmaster-General legged it across to the Club again, and legged it up to the second floor, two steps at a time. The billiard-room was empty and dark. He came down, and heard from a fellow-member that Mr. Williams had gone out, and learned that he was just those few minutes too late. It was exasperating, but there was nothing to be done. Urged though he was by that itch to take further advice, restrained by the knowledge that disturbance on the telephone would only annoy his colleague and make him more difficult to approach again the next day, Wilfrid Halterton, after waiting irresolutely on the pavement, hailed a cab and drove off to his flat north of the Park.

He was a long time getting off to sleep. How he wished he could have seen Williams again. His mind was filled with uncertain plans that led nowhere—now half deciding to force the truth out of McAuley the very first thing next morning, now fairly convinced that he ought first to see Williams again, even if that great man should be late in getting to his office; now trying to plan some scheme entirely his own, which would recover the fatal document without a soul being the wiser; now losing himself again in a fog of contradictions.

But while Halterton thus suffered, James McAuley, less than a mile away, was going through emotions of a similar kind, but of different effect.

He had reached his flat. He was not a man who sat up late. He prepared for bed at once. He never changed his coat, even when he was putting on his things for the night, without taking the precaution that such a man would take, and which he intended to take during all the interval that would pass before this matter was settled, and the new contract actually at work. Before taking off his coat he felt for the two envelopes, to transfer them to the pocket of his pyjama jacket and to secure that pocket with a safety pin. James Haggismuir McAuley ran no risks, and a man asleep is vulnerable. It was not the first time in his life that he had had to watch over little documents as though they were a part of his very self.

The instinctive gesture was made, the hand plunged into the depths of that deep inside breast-pocket of his coat—and there was nothing there.

The blood left the keen, capable head of James McAuley. He felt dizzy, and had to sit down suddenly on the bed. Then there happened to him what might have happened to a weaker man. He thought that he would make sure—that he might have been deceived: he thought his very senses might have deceived him. He actually brought out his coat under the full light of the shaded wireless electric lamp over his dressing-table, and turned the fatal pocket inside out. There was but one indication of what had been. The little metal clip with which he had kept the two envelopes together was still there. It had been jerked off as whoever had done it had drawn those papers from their rightful place.

It was futile, it was especially futile in such a man; but intense emotion has this effect—James Haggismuir McAuley emptied all the pockets of his coat—and he was a man who carried many things upon him. Out they came upon the eiderdown—a small pad—a cigarette case—matches—but of course there was not a sign of either envelope. He ought to have known that. If they had gone from the one pocket where of necessity he guarded them, they were gone from him—for the moment at least—altogether.

Then his mind began to work actively again, as was its wont. He was out on the landing and downstairs, wasting not a moment over the lift, which might have delayed

him; he was down the six flights to the porch and had got a taxi before a full minute had passed after his slamming his flat door behind him. The way was clear enough at that time of night; he was at the Club in less time than it had taken him to go from it to his rooms. He mastered his voice and asked the porter, without haste and with indifference, whether anything had been found in the billiard-room—any papers? If so, they were his.

Even as he went into the Club he had thought he saw for a moment over his shoulder a familiar figure. He was right. It was the tall, lanky form of Wilfrid Halterton, off across the road to the cab rank. So he added another word to the porter.

"Has Mr. Halterton been in here again?" he asked of the porter.

"Yes, sir, he's only just this minute gone out."

"Was he looking for anyone?"

"Not that I know of, sir," said the porter to McAuley; then to the page:

"Where did Mr. Halterton go when he came in just now?"

"Mr. Halterton went up to the billiard-room, sir. He seemed to be looking about for something there, sir," answered the page in a touching treble. (For the porter was "Sir" to the page, just as McAuley was "Sir" to the porter—there is rank on rank in this world.) McAuley turned to the child almost roughly.

"Up to the billiard-room, did you say? Up to the billiard-room? Did he find anything in the billiard-room?"

"I don't think so, sir," said the child. "I didn't see him come down with anything. No, sir."

Without a word McAuley in his turn sprang up the stairs to the billiard-room. It might look odd to the servants, but he couldn't help that. The thing was all-important. He was on Halterton's track. Halterton was the man. . . . He was beginning to see clearly. . . . But he would satisfy himself.

He stood in that empty billiard-room with his chin in his hand, reviewing rapidly all that had happened. Why had Halterton come in as he did? He must have learned that he was there playing; he would have thought of the coat being taken off and hung on the nail—or even if he didn't think of it the sight of it would have reminded him. . . . Upon his word, he had never given Halterton credit for so much brains! But that was what must have happened.

But could Halterton have got hold of those envelopes with young Hayling sitting by? Hardly. Yes, perhaps he could. . . . At any rate, *somehow*, he must have got them. Perhaps he had taken them and then hadn't had a chance to put them in his pocket. . . . It hurriedly occurred to McAuley that the Postmaster-General, after taking the letters from the coat, might have thrust them in the gap behind the bench. He might have feared to be seen putting them into his own pocket. That would be why he had come back. . . . Or did he come back because he wanted to assure himself that no one had suspected him?

It was Halterton who had those letters, anyway! Sure enough! Who else but Halterton could know that they existed? Who else but Halterton could guess that they could have been in his—James McAuley's—close keeping? . . . But upon his word, he had not given Halterton credit for so much commercial sense! He almost admired the man, compared at least with what had been his common mood hitherto in the Postmaster-General's presence.

Well, there was nothing more to be done. If he lingered there, it would be noticed more than it had been already. He must be off. He came down, said a few words to the porter as he went out, got a taxi and went back home—to lie awake for hours.

VII

HONEST JACK WILLIAMS was compelled, as a professional democrat and plainly labelled "Trades Union," to travel third class on all occasions. For the same reason he must live in a small house, which he liked doing, and with only one maid, which he didn't mind. What was harder was that he could not have a big, comfortable car—indeed, no car at all. On the other hand, he was allowed to hob-nob with the rich, who delighted, some in his billiards, some in his funny stories, some in his financial tips—though he had a reputation for unloading and had stung several of them. He might drink all the champagne he wanted as publicly as he chose, so that it wasn't in his own house; and as for his reputation—now general—for having got together some mysterious mass of money, that only made him the more respected by his fellow Trades Unionists; who did not call themselves Anarchists or Socialists, but plain Amalgamated Transformers, at a minimum wage of 83s. a week of forty-eight hours. But third class, I say, was insisted on.

Yet on this night he risked it as he changed at Victoria; took a first-class ticket, and making a hardly perceptible sign to the guard with his left eyebrow, secured a compartment to himself.

In that privacy, when the train had fairly started he pulled out the two envelopes, badly crumpled, from his trousers pocket. He had kept his hand upon them most of the time since leaving the Club, for the pocket was not a convenient place for them, and he had no desire to lose either of them. He pulled them out, smoothed them as best he could, for the moment, and then put them very carefully into the inside breast-pocket of *his* coat, just as the lawful possessor of the one (and unlawful possessor of the other) had done before him.

If any of my readers are thinking of entering public life, I would take this opportunity of telling them that any documents that they may have occasion to purloin should thus be kept upon the person of the individual, and never entrusted to a safe or a locked drawer. Also, it is wise to keep them in the inside left-hand breast-pocket, and not a bad thing to have a loop or button for fastening same. The last was a precaution which James McAuley had not taken, perhaps because his purely commercial career had not given him so much experience as men obtain in the higher career of statesmanship.

When Jack Williams got home he did not go up to bed, late as it was. He had something to do before sleeping. The first thing he did was to fill a kettle with water and to put it on the electric heater till it boiled. Then he passed the flap of each envelope in turn back and forth in front of the spout so that it should be thoroughly steamed. And when they were thoroughly steamed he opened them with the ease that manœuvre ensures.

This done, he did not pull out the all-important contents of the two envelopes, but went out to rummage for the electric iron, called in the language of his wife "the flat iron." He brought with him at the same time a piece of folded flannel. Then within this folded flannel he placed the two letters and their envelopes and carefully ironed over the material.

That, I may further inform any one of my readers who may be considering entering public life, is the proper way of getting creases out of any documents which may have been rumpled in the process of acquisition.

All these things having been accomplished, Honest Jack Williams turned off the heaters, replaced the iron in the back room, leaving everything tidy, and then came back for a quiet perusal of his prizes. He leaned back in his chair, holding one in each hand, and surveying them with affection and pride.

They were not only symbols but fruits of victory to the great strategist. They were not only the fruits of victory but the instruments of inevitable triumph to come. He felt as Moltke felt when he held the two French armies of 1870 apart, with the Army of Metz in his right hand and the Army of Sedan in his left, and said to himself: "Both these armies are now securely mine."

I share what I am sure is my reader's admiration for the simplicity and boldness of the action which had secured such results.

For a long time past it has been a necessity for our modern statesmen to march with the times and to adopt the methods of their day. Dead and buried with the futilities of the forgotten Victorian deadness is all that pompous play-acting of indifference to personal gain and aloofness from decisive commercial manœuvre. The generation in which even a humble watering of shares was doubtful and a duplication of them condemned was one that substituted words for deeds, windy with copybook maxims and worthless with rhetoric. It gave us—as it could only give us—the little England of that day, with its pretence to dominion and its boast of government by a narrow social group, ignorant of real affairs. But hitherto there had clung to the *technique* of politics a sort of fossil respect for indirect approaches. To get hold of information against a rival, to have a particular photograph taken, or even to obtain possession of documents by roundabout ways, through underlings who might be deceived, was necessary to success in the great game; but to do the thing *oneself* bravely, at once, and finally, without risk of witnesses and without loss of time, had never yet been attempted. Jack Williams was the pioneer who took the last great step forward in the science of politics.

Therefore he had gained the reward which always awaits those who dare to be Realist, and who accept to the full all the conditions of their action and drive straight to its conclusion.

There he sat, with the two trophies of his genius displayed in either hand, mastering each in turn, and conscious that he was in impregnable possession of what could now give him unchallenged control. The whole great coming business of Television was in his power, as he followed the words of those two letters: the typescript signed by Halterton promising the contract to McAuley, the manuscript written wholly in McAuley's hand promising the post and salary to Halterton—two master keys that opened all the doors.

They were much what he had expected. He recognized in each the skilled hand of the financier.

He was particularly impressed by the mixture of kindness and deference of the manuscript letter, in which Halterton had been asked to sacrifice his leisure for the inadequate salary of £10,000 a year—free of tax. The other (the typewritten letter), which authorized McAuley to go on with the contract and was duly signed "Wilfrid Halterton,"

gave him a little more to think about. He read it twice to make sure that it would have been sufficient for McAuley to proceed upon forthwith, and he decided that it was. It was put in very general terms, and it was, as we have seen, quite short. But Williams, who understood these things better than anyone else, decided that it was adequate. There could be no going back from it. And if ever James McAuley got hold of that letter again the contract would go forward. Whoever was the possessor of that letter controlled the future of Television—so much was sure.

Honest Jack Williams mastering the Television Deal.

He had already told the Postmaster-General quite truly that there was no going back for him, Wilfrid Halterton, whether he had his promise safe in his pocket or not. The endorsement was there, and broad and genial was the smile of Jack Williams as he read the pencilled words in Halterton's own unmistakable hand:

"James McAuley's letter. Handed to me March 3, 1960. W.H."

The thing was already on the Order Paper, and even if the Postmaster-General desired to put a belated spoke in the wheel now he would not dare—so long as he imagined that McAuley had that letter in his possession.

Jack Williams folded each document again with a satisfied sigh, put each back into its proper envelope, unfastened, and slipped them into that inside left-hand breast-pocket—buttoned within. He spent about ten minutes communing with himself and reviewing the points of his policy. He was completely master, and now the thing to do was to work out the details.

The first point to decide was whether he should let Halterton in again. He decided that he would not. McAuley he would need, for McAuley pulled all the ropes of the Television business and understood its working. But Halterton he could do without.

The next thing to consider was what proposition McAuley should be offered? Control remained with himself, Williams, of course. McAuley should have his salary as Chief Permanent Commissioner when the Charter should have been granted and the monopoly in full swing. On the whole, Williams thought that about a third of his own share might usefully be offered to the man with a practical knowledge of the trade, the man whom he needed, the man in whose name the contract was made out, and the man without whom it would be difficult to go to work.

There was one more thing to be decided. When and how he should approach McAuley and tell him how things stood, tell him that the power had passed into his (Williams's) hands, and that all further steps would be dependent upon him.

He decided—being the great strategist he was (and see what talents are needed to rise as this man had risen in the service of his country)—on watching the development of the game, and not acting in the matter until the right opportunity appeared.

Having settled all this in his mind to his satisfaction, he at last went to bed and to sleep—it was nearly two o'clock in the morning.

Next day, after the usual happy breakfast with his wife, he did not go down immediately to the Home Office, but telephoned that he might be an hour later than usual, as he had business which kept him at home. He also telephoned to that friend, Mr. Gunter, who lived in his neighbourhood, and bade him step round.

Mr. Gunter we have had a glimpse of. Though he played but a small part in these great affairs, he played an interesting one, and he is a type. So you shall hear something more about him.

In the distant past, when they had both been young men in the same Trades Union, Jack Williams got knowledge, by an accident, of a most unfortunate slip on Henry Gunter's part. The young fellow, as he then was, had done something very odd with a cheque. It was the duty of Jack Williams, as his superior among the officials of the Union, to have prosecuted him. But Gunter had been sorely tempted, he was married, with young children, badly in debt—and he had fallen. What Williams had done on that long-past day was this. He had made up the loss on the cheque—it was a considerable sum to him in those days—no less than £15, out of his own pocket. Thenceforward he had protected Gunter, though necessarily reminding him from time to time of the knowledge he had.

In order, I suppose, to test him, Williams, as he mounted in his rapidly successful career, had arranged that the man who had now become his dependant should be subjected twice to similar temptation. In each case he had fallen again, and in each case Williams had forgiven him. My readers will not doubt me, however, when I say that after such experiences Mr. Gunter was devoted to his benefactor, and was ever ready to do his bidding.

The relations between the two men were rendered the easier by the contrasts in their characters; for Gunter, the ready victim of temptation, was a weak little man in physique as in will, and had taken to drinking rather too much since he had given up all hope of success in his humble life. Jack Williams had got him a small post and kept him in it by

influence: he quite rightly did not think himself bound to add to the restricted but sufficient income upon which the Gunter family was supported. On the other hand, though the Home Secretary in his private capacity sometimes required Mr. Gunter's services, he did not strain them. Mr. Gunter was normally of use to him principally as an agent whose name could be used in buying and selling stock by orders given over the wires. It was only on particular occasions that he was summoned—and this was one of them.

The Home Secretary took Mr. Gunter into his study, got him ready for dictation, and then read out to him for taking down first the document signed Halterton and then the document signed McAuley.

"There, Gunter," he said, when the copies were finished and the dependant had looked up for further orders, "that's all I want, except your signature here. Just write at the bottom of each, if you please, '*Copy made by me, Henry Gunter, of two documents presented to me for transcription on Friday, March the 6th, 1960, at 9.55 a.m. I hereby testify that I have read the originals and that these copies are exact.*'

"That's all. Thank you, Gunter."

Jack Williams nodded. It was a cheerful, kindly nod, nothing patronizing about it, worthy of the man. Gunter's task was accomplished, and he went out.

But there was one more thing for the Home Secretary to do before he went off to attend to the affairs of the nation. And what he did next I also particularly recommend (for the last time) to such of my readers as may be contemplating an entry into public life, in spite of the burdens which their services to their country at Westminster may entail.

Jack Williams darkened the room, and took from the cupboard two medium-sized printing frames for photographs. Into each he put photographic paper. On each he carefully laid one of the documents, face downwards, then closed the top, then clamped down the whole. For a time, which he exactly judged, stop watch in hand, he subjected them to a brilliant little light which he had among his apparatus, and when he had turned it off there was nothing left to do but to fix the prints. He then had a permanent negative record of the typescript and of Halterton's signature, and of McAuley's holograph note. He washed and fixed the sheets. Dried them with one of the new rapid driers, put them in an envelope, and his work was finished. He put the two prints and Gunter's transcript with the same packet as the envelopes, got his apparatus back into the cupboard and locked it. He then went off to the station for his office a serene and contented man.

VIII

In the Clarence flat of the Postmaster-General north of the Park, in the McAuley flat by the Marble Arch not a mile away—in each flat a perplexed and angry and disappointed man determined to recover his possessions. Each lay awake the better part of that Thursday night. Each came, with very different aptitudes, to the same conclusion. Each decided that he must most cautiously, stealthily, watch the movements of the other, himself remaining unobserved, and snatch his moment for recovering that one of the respective papers which was for each a matter of life and death.

Wilfrid Halterton only got to sleep when he had decided for the fiftieth time that by bending all his energies to it even he, who had little experience in such things, could count upon re-possessing the document, the damning document on which he had left the pencilled phrase which put him into the other's power. James Haggismuir McAuley decided, at once and remained decided, that he certainly would recover not one but *both* the documents which had been in his possession those few hours ago.

It was too early for gentlemen to be astir on the Friday morning when James McAuley and Wilfrid Halterton were, each in his own lair, preparing for the chase. Indeed, it was barely seven o'clock, but each was afoot, for each had told himself it was the early sleuth that caught the sinner; and as the Postmaster-General was beginning to slink along westward over the deserted pavement which fringes the Park, James McAuley was pursuing the same pace eastward towards the door whence the Postmaster-General had emerged.

It was the intention of the one to wait patiently at some corner whence he could command the exit from the Marble Arch flat; of the other to wait patiently at some corner whence he could observe the emergence of his quarry from the main door of the flat north of the Park.

But let something be noted in the action of James McAuley; indeed, I grant to Wilfrid Halterton the superior genius in obtaining high ministerial rank, I see in James McAuley another form of genius—the commercial. For while Wilfrid Halterton moved all exposed through the empty, shivering world, under the fire of any eyes that might be moving in the vast expanse of solid Park or through the desert of the Bayswater Road, James McAuley slithered in and out by passages and mews and back streets on his parallel progress. Hence, in spite of their common resolution, they did not meet.

But that accident could not be long delayed. The Postmaster-General, having reached the Marble Arch, had lingered and shuffled for some ten minutes, moving but slowly to and fro, watching the porch of James McAuley's flat, when a policeman, eager for advancement, told him, without courtesy, what he thought of the proceeding. The Postmaster-General waived the privilege of his office and most reluctantly moved off westward again, still glancing now and then over his shoulder at the forbidden exit.

With James McAuley things fared even worse. For the houses of Cabinet Ministers are not to be watched with impunity, except of course by people wealthier or even more important than themselves, and even then it must be done through known agents. Therefore the policeman spoke to Mr. James McAuley some five minutes before his colleague had dealt so severely with Wilfrid Halterton, and the policeman who spoke to James McAuley was not only without courtesy but actually rude, bidding him to hop it and never let him see his ugly face again. There was nothing for James but to regain his native door overlooking the Marble Arch; and after all, it was high time to get some coffee. He was at an age when it is not good to take long walks on a raw March morning before breakfast. He took the direct road back along the Park.

The same idea had occurred to Wilfrid Halterton, for coffee was also his beverage. He also went back along the Bayswater Road the way he had come.

Each took it for granted that the other was still in bed, when, about half-way between the two flats, James Haggismuir McAuley caught sight, at 350 yards range, of the unmistakable tall figure. Happily for him, Wilfrid Halterton's head was for the moment in the air. He often carried it so in moments of anxious doubt; the rest of the time, which was rather given to depression, he would cast his eyes upon the ground.

James McAuley turned abruptly round and gazed through the palings of the Park, which he was following. He made little doubt that his back view would be a sufficient concealment. He was wrong. Wilfrid Halterton had spotted his prey. There was no mistaking the inward turn of the toes and the separation of the heels, the special stance of James Haggismuir McAuley.

Financier keeping a cautious eye on a statesman.

The Postmaster-General with unaccustomed rapidity of decision popped down the steps of an open area until his eyes were just on a level with the pavement as he stood tiptoe on the steps, craning his head backward and playing the observant submarine over the level sea of the roadway. In that attitude he watched the further movements of the foe.

James Haggismuir McAuley stood by the railings with his back turned, stock still in the cold for an unconscionable time; then, very cautiously, he peeped round over his shoulders; it was with much the same gesture as is adopted by the domestic cat when it desires to observe without being observed. To his immense astonishment, Wilfrid Halterton had disappeared—for the two and a half inches of top head (the hat had been removed) which Wilfrid Halterton was showing like a periscope above the vast level of the London pavement did not catch McAuley's eye. He said to himself: "The man's gone home—but what was he here for?" For the moment the financier had half a mind to return and watch that flat again; but he bethought him of the policeman, and also of the coffee that waited him in *his* flat near the Marble Arch. "I'll even let it bide," he said to himself. "It'll keep."

Then he stepped out boldly and briskly westward in no further fear of being followed.

Wrong again. If the Postmaster-General had had any hesitation, it was dispelled by a rude shock. An elderly but decided domestic had seen from the window of her kitchen

below two long legs on two large tiptoe boots obscuring the morning light. She had armed herself with a sooty brush, rushed out, and struck home. The great statesman turned in confused terror and leapt like a boy to the level—there he stood quaking and hesitant. Breakfast called him, but so did business. Business conquered appetite. Wilfrid Halterton sacrificed *his* coffee and followed after the master of Billies at a vast distance.

The pavement was still so deserted that visibility was good. Halterton from far off saw his fox take cover in the Marble Arch flats, and then hesitated a moment what to do. He could not begin watching the door again, it might lead to all sorts of things. But there was nothing to prevent his going in and trusting to fortune. It is a common trust with men whose genius does not lend itself to rapid calculation.

The first time the lift went up it bore to his sixth floor the considerable though fasting burden of James Haggismuir McAuley. Next time it went up it bore the tall, spare, and also fasting figure of Wilfrid Halterton.

What was to be done next? It is not I who ask you the question, perfect reader. It would be no good asking you. You cannot move the people in this story at your will. That is my privilege. No, it was Wilfrid Halterton who asked himself the question—and like Mack at Ulm, Napoleon III at Sedan, and the Heavy Weight at the Count Eight—he was floored, without an answer. He could think of nothing better than to pace up and down the corridor, hoping that when his quarry came out he would be able to see without being seen. After all, thought the P.M.G., the moment the door began to open he could always pop round the corner of the corridor.

Statesman keeping a still more cautious eye on a financier.

The Postmaster-General had to wait a full half-hour, during which the lift went up and down more than once, and during which there passed him no less than five times, with increasing curiosity, the lady whose duty it was to sweep, dust, clean and hang about that particular floor.

At last the door opened, at a moment rather unfortunate for the Postmaster-General. It did not find him near any convenient corner in the course of his pacings, but on the very edge of the stairs, in the three yards between the lift and James McAuley's door. He heard McAuley's voice within; he could not risk running back; he dashed down the six flights of stairs with a rapidity worthy of a better cause and of more agile years.

James McAuley, all innocent of the flight downstairs, rang solemnly for the lift, awaited it, shot down in it, and behold, even as he came out and moved to the porch of the flats, there was the rapidly retreating figure of Wilfrid Halterton already upon the pavement.

The Postmaster-General had the imprudence to look round. Their eyes met, and with a strange cry which considerably startled the few people in the neighbourhood, Wilfrid Halterton ran down Park Lane as fast as he could for some twenty yards, at the end of which the Fates provided him with a taxi-cab. He jumped into it, shouting the first address

that occurred to him—Victoria. The deliberate taxi-driver was fain to ask which of the two stations; a monstrous piece of routine, for they had long been one.

"Any station!" yelled the agonized Minister. "Brighton if you like!"

The taxi-driver had no tastes in the matter. But the delay had given the hunt its chance; James McAuley was following in another similar vehicle which he directed in masterly fashion through the open window:

"Double fare!" he said, "double fare! . . . Drive faster, you idiot! No! Don't drive fast . . . just keep him in sight. Now . . . just keep him in sight."

In his anxiety the great financier kept on popping his head out every two or three seconds to make sure that all was well; and as rapidly popping it in again on those numerous occasions when Wilfrid Halterton upon his part popped *his* head out, with the object of seeing whether he were pursued. He was not quite certain. Sometimes he thought he was, sometimes he thought he was not. He arrived at Victoria—and then he conceived—it is greatly to the credit of such a man that he could make such a plan so rapidly—he conceived, I say, this excellent ruse.

The telephone boxes, which even for the wireless telephones of 1960 stand very much as they did in 1932, are, as ever, provided with glass doors. By a happy chance they are so dark during the daytime that an inhabitant thereof can see better what is going on outside than one outside can see what is going on inside. It is to the honour and credit of Wilfrid Halterton in these first hours of his new career as tracker that he bethought him of the telephone boxes.

He was rewarded. He had not shut the glass door thirty seconds when he saw James Haggismuir McAuley approaching from the pavement where the cab had set him down.

But what was this? James Haggismuir McAuley was doing something which might end in stalemate, and which perplexed his former friend sorely. For James McAuley in his turn had sidled into a telephone box three places down the same row, and thence looked out eagerly for his quarry among the gathering throng.

J. was just growing anxious at the apparent disappearance of that quarry amid the crowd of slaves whom the suburban trains were disgorging, when, by the chance of a side glance, he saw through those intervening thicknesses of the three telephone boxes and six panes of glass, what could not but be the eminent Cabinet Minister, so lately his partner in negotiations of great importance to the State.

James McAuley debated in himself whether Wilfrid Halterton had seen him, decided that the Postmaster-General had failed to connect, crept out of the telephone box with soft step and bent knees, and crawled round the corner of the nearest wall. His superior initiative inspired Wilfrid Halterton to behave in exactly the same fashion, and cautiously peering all round, he took cover round the opposing corner. There each stood and awaited developments.

You may, or you may not believe it, but it is perfectly true, that there came at this moment upon the scene a figure equally familiar to you with those of the two watchers; the genial, good-natured, brisk figure of Honest Jack Williams. It was often his custom of a fine Friday when he was usually up earlier at the office because of the earlier meeting of the House, to walk from the station cheerily through St. James's Park, observing the quaint birds which are harboured there and comparing their features with those of his

colleagues—a comparison which was to him a source of unfailing amusement. Thus it was that he ran plump into Wilfrid Halterton.

"Wilfrid—my dear fellow!" he said. "Is that you?"

It would have been futile to deny it. Jack Williams, hooking his hand into the arm of his victim, bore him away. But even as he did so his unfailing eye had caught, sideways and to the right, a face which he also knew very well—the face of the gentleman with whom Jack Williams had played billiards last night; and at that sight the active genius of Jack Williams—a genius which I frankly confess to be far superior even to that of Wilfrid Halterton or James McAuley—began to work like a turbine.

By the time the two, arm in arm, had got half-way down the Buckingham Palace Road opposite that sculpture of the horses on the Royal Stables which is one of the best things in London, Jack Williams, cheerfully chatting all the way, had thoroughly solved the problem.

These two Johnnies were watching each other! He was tempted to laugh out aloud! "And why were they watching each other?" asked Jack Williams inwardly, of Jack Williams. "Why," answered Jack Williams to Jack Williams, "because each of them thought the other had the letters." And as that final solution disclosed itself in all its radiance it was impossible for the Home Secretary to restrain a loud bellow of open laughter. He stopped in the street, with his arm still linked in his colleague's, and laughed his fill.

"Halterton," he said when he took up his stride again, "that was one of the funniest things I've heard in my life."

"What?" said the distracted and (alas!) foodless Halterton. He half resented being thus carried off, but also was half relieved by it; for the strain of the combined chase and hiding had already begun to tell on him. "What did I say that you thought funny?"

To tell the truth, he had not the least idea of what he had been saying, he had been answering at random. Jack Williams's sufficient retort was: "Slyboots!"—with which word he dug the Postmaster-General in the ribs and led the conversation rapidly on to one thing after another until it was miles away from McAuley and the memory of McAuley.

They parted at the Home Office door. Halterton, having nothing better to do, made his way to his room in the House of Commons, close at hand, and there got some coffee at last. He needed it.

* * *

Jack Williams had not long been seated at his desk before he got hold of the opening price of Billies, just as the market opened. They were still soaring. They were going to 50, eagerly bought on a rising market. His Mr. Gunter, who had just rung up the Home Secretary according to orders, assured him that "they" were safe—good for 60 before the end of the day. Mr. Gunter had been told that on the wire and repeated it like a parrot, with very little understanding what it meant. Mr. Gunter mournfully considered that if he only knew what "they" referred to he also might have had his little flutter. But he had his ungrateful duty to fulfil, and he reported that "they could safely be held until 60 at least."

Mr. Williams thanked Mr. Gunter very much and rang off. He possessed his soul in patience until lunch time, when he glanced at the tape and was delighted to see the figures:

58; 58s. 6d.—9d.; 3d.; 6d.; 59s.; 59s. 3d.; 59s. 6d. He held his chin thoughtfully in his hand and made his decision. He rang up Mr. Gunter from the Club (he knew perfectly well what he could afford to do and what he could not afford to do), and bade him pass the message on to sell "them" all. Every single one. And a very pretty little packet he had made out of them. It was but yesterday he had bought them at 35.

There were still a couple of hours in which he could work, and Williams went to work industriously. He joined a jovial company of five, who were his special cronies, at a round window table in the Club, a cheerful table even on a winter's day, and there cracked merry jokes about the little disputes that will arise between colleagues; funny stories about the most recent absurdity, the row between the Postmaster-General and outsiders whom he could not abide, and who had been pestering him. Jack Williams was very positive in describing to these jolly friends of his, who so often heard his confidences, Halterton's curious temper; how he hated to be put upon; how he always kicked against an assumption that he had made up his mind for good and all; how he was particularly annoyed that—well, he wouldn't go on, because it wouldn't be fair.

Old Muggridge, who was too rich to care one way or the other, and who always enjoyed this kind of thing, said: "Oh, I always said he would cut up rough with Durrant's sooner or later. They talked as though they had him in their pocket. That's what's up, is it? He's quarrelled with Durrant's, eh?"

Jack Williams looked down at his plate.

"Eh?" said Mangey, who happened to be there that day (he came from time to time, though he thought himself superior to that crowd). "Is that so, Jack?"

"Ah, Mangey!" said Jack with a very wise look, but a smile at the same time. "That would be telling!" And that was the end of the luncheon.

The company faded away, uncommonly quickly. Within three minutes the three telephone boxes at the Club were occupied. Mangey was in one of them, little Bonzer was in the second, and—doubtless upon some business connected with the Club—the Head Waiter was in the third. As for Lord Muggridge, he disdained such things, and he went his own way as though no telephones or Stock Exchanges existed. And so would you, my dear reader, and so would I disdain such things, if we were as rich as old Muggridge or old Papworthy. At any rate, we should we be great idiots to speculate if we were.

The good deed done, Williams, who really ought to have been at the House, thought there would still be time to look in before it rose, and wedged in a letter.

It was not a brief letter, but he was a rapid writer. It took him perhaps a quarter of an hour to complete.

It was one of those jocular things which he was fond of sending to Lady Caroline Balcombe, which he delighted to write and she to receive; and no one wrote a better letter than Jack Williams, full of gossip and fun; and in the gossip and fun of that day was more than a hint, pretty well an open statement, that Halterton and J. had quarrelled at the last moment.

"If you doubt it," he said by way of P.S., "ask 'em down to your little hut, and you'll have the time of your life. I guess you'll be down there for the week-end? And you can lay your silk stockings they're scrapping! Cop the state they're in—watching each other like cat and mouse!"

That letter was not posted, it was sent round by hand. Within twenty minutes after getting it Lady Caroline had, by telephone and in person, spoken to and invited two distinguished guests to that Norman Tudor and Concrete house, Sandlings Castle, in Herts., the largest of the Balcombe country places, the nearest to Town and the chief rallying-point of the Anarchist Party, whether in office or in opposition.

She had bagged them both. They would both be in time for dinner. Having heard from McAuley that he would arrive by train just before dinner, and would dress in Town before he started, she arranged to take the Postmaster-General down in her car, the most magnificent of the Balcombe motors—for Lady Caroline kept the finest of the seven for herself. As it purred on its way through the outer suburbs, Lady Caroline with Halterton at her side was a happy woman. And by the time she reached Sandlings, well before dusk, she was radiant.

Nor did that excellent politician let either of her guests know that the other was to be present—and of such is the Kingdom of Heaven.

IX

On the way down in the car on that Friday afternoon Lady Caroline made herself pleasant to the Postmaster-General.

It was not difficult to make herself pleasant, for he was most obviously suffering, and all that he wanted was sympathy; a little love at large. Indeed, the suffering had been obvious to everyone who had watched him on the front bench during the last three days. Lady Caroline's task was the easier because, unlike her husband and unlike James McAuley, he also had been born in the purple: his father the owner of no small area of Essex clay in the days when this sort of thing was more valuable than it is now, and before it had become encumbered so much beyond its present power to pay.

All the way down—Sandlings is only thirty-two miles from the House itself and not fifteen from the last northern suburbs of London—she attempted to discover, as discreetly as she could, what truth there might be in the news that Williams had given her of the P.M.G.'s quarrel with McAuley of Billies. And when I say discreetly, I mean discreetly. I cannot describe the process, because I have never myself been a wealthy hostess advanced in years; but I have watched it from the outside.

There is a kind of bird the name of which would be familiar to bird-bores (there again I am at a loss to give you a description, but a bird it is, and I have seen it), and this kind of bird flies round and round, making wide circles in the air, to reconnoitre its prey swimming in the waters below. It does so at such a height that the victim does not suspect anything. Such was the manœuvre of Lady Caroline Balcombe during that brief hour in her enormous car.

But she did not learn much. She hardly could, considering that neither stocks nor shares nor Television, nor even the name McAuley, could be pronounced. What she did discover was that the Postmaster-General was even more unhappy than she had imagined. He was not one to conceal his misery from a sympathetic woman, at any rate from a sympathetic woman of sufficient standing, and though it was an added agony to him not to be able to tell her the whole tale (for he dared not), he admitted to her tender inquiries that he had most grievous cause for anxiety.

So far, so good. As they neared the house she fell silent and considered her plan. She had given her two guests two rooms some way apart, but on the same side of the big corridor which leads from the landing in the Barbican Tower to the Edwardian Tudor Wing opposite the Keep, and is reached by way of the archway in the new 14th century manner which is so familiar to all of you from the pictures. Those who know that great house (and I am taking for granted that you have at least some acquaintance with it) will recognize by this description that neither of the rooms were in the latest part, where every bedroom has its own bathroom, as custom now demands. But there was a bathroom in between the two rooms, one of which was called Bidewell and the other De Clair, from two Templars formerly in the families of two long-past tenants in chief. (For you will

remember that the castle was held in Grand Sergeanty. It had added to the price which Mr. Balcombe had paid—and quite rightly.)

All this is not to say that there was no bath for McAuley or for Mr. Halterton. There was a bath all right. It was the one which stood half-way between the two rooms. And all this Lady Caroline had planned with lucid intelligence. Not too near, if indeed they had quarrelled, for their proximity might lead to a rumpus; but not too far to prevent their giving signs of hostility and mutual suspicion.

She had done more. She had—with promises of reward—told the maid deputed to that particular section of the chatellery to keep her weather eye peeled.

When all these things had been accomplished, and she had sent Halterton up to dress (dismissing him with the kindest of smiles, which made him sure of her support and friendship in whatever trials he had before him), she bade him be sure to be down early, as she also would be, because she would like to say something to him before the other guests should join them.

He would; and he did come down early. What she had to say to him was unexpected.

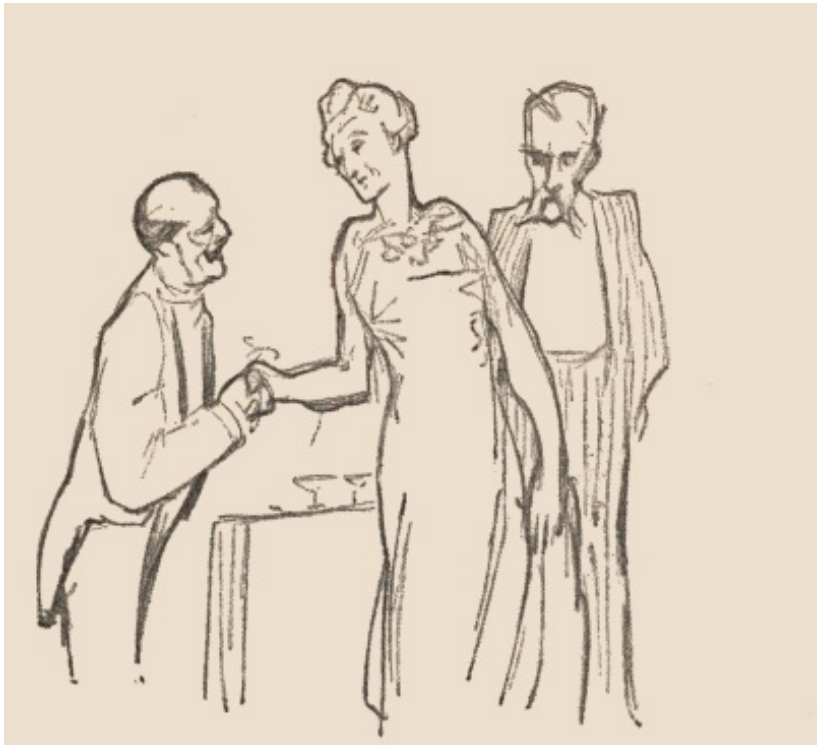
"Mr. Halterton," she said, almost putting her hand upon his shoulder in the acuteness of her sympathy, "I have asked a friend of yours down here, whom I know you will be glad to meet. He'll be coming down by the train that gets in just in time for dinner; he told me he would dress in Town. It's Mr. James McAuley—the younger McAuley, you know—the Attorney-General's brother."

Yes, Mr. Wilfrid Halterton knew well enough. Oh, he was delighted to hear that Mr. James McAuley was coming. She watched his delight, which was that of a man compelled to walk the plank; she was the more inclined to credit the Home Secretary's information.

They had not long to wait. James McAuley appeared. Halterton did not even attempt to escape. She had compelled him to remain at her side; and she greeted the new-comer in his turn with so much sympathy that Halterton positively felt a touch of elderly jealousy. For such are Postmasters-General of a certain age. She excused herself volubly for putting them so far apart at the dinner table. She said she knew they would have a lot to say to each other when the women had gone away.

But they had not. When the women had gone away Halterton listened to the hearty wit of Mr. Balcombe, seven places down on the right-hand side of the table, while McAuley listened with an equal lack of enthusiasm from four places down on the left. And between the great financier and the great statesman intervened an enormous cup all made of gold, and bearing upon it the figures of gods and goddesses (marine) from Elkington's, but after Benvenuto Cellini.

Nor later, in the long interval before bedtime, did these two gentlemen confer. They did indeed happen to pass one near the other twice in their various movements through the rooms; and at each conjuncture each gave a rapid glance towards the lining of the coat which the other was wearing, the place where a pocket might be—but that was all.



Lady Caroline Balcombe, the great lady of the Anarchist Party, graciously receiving a political opponent.

Night, or to be more accurate, early morning fell upon the six towers and the one high turret above the three acres of the roof. With the new day, when the rich wake to their labours, that is about 9.15 a.m., Lady Caroline Balcombe, drinking her early tea in bed, was visited by that faithful dependant to whom had been assigned the task of keeping her weather eye skinned; and she had a tale to tell. Things had happened. This is what had happened.

Mr. James McAuley, at the preposterous hour of 8.30, had slithered out of his room in a dressing-gown, and had moved noiselessly over the thick carpet of that passage past the bathroom. He had ascertained with infinite precaution that the door was bolted, had heard the water running within. The gods favoured him! He went on as noiselessly as before, and gingerly opened the door of the Postmaster-General's room. It so happened that as he did so the excellent woman whose eye had been kept peeled in the confident expectation of reward watched him from a distant post, peeping round a corner of the staircase, which is within thirty yards. She saw James McAuley go into that room. She saw his hand stretching out towards the table on which he had perceived certain papers lying, she heard loud protest coming from the bed within. She saw McAuley shut the door precipitately but noiselessly, and wing his way back with astonishing rapidity to his own quarters.

So far so good. The hunt was up. Then the good woman waited, and was again rewarded. Out of the Postmaster-General's room there came the tall figure of that statesman, clad in a dressing-gown, and it repeated, but in the other direction, the

manœuvre which had just now been performed by the master of finance. There was the same noiseless approach, the same trying of the bolted bathroom door, the same expression of satisfaction at hearing the water running, the same further advance towards the door of the bedroom beyond, the door behind which McAuley was surely now no longer hidden, since clearly he was taking his bath.

But Wilfrid Halterton's manœuvre differed from that of his City colleague; it differed with the difference in their character. The Postmaster-General did not attempt to open the door. He stopped, listened carefully, to make quite certain that there was no one within, before he should begin his investigation of the room, and make, as he hoped he would make, the capture of his all-important envelope. He satisfied himself from the stillness that the room was indeed empty. Yet in his nervousness he could not help wondering whether in spite of all indications J. might not be there after all.

He opened the door with infinite precautions, and was immediately informed. For the protest that met him was astonishing. The door was flung open, and James McAuley, half dressed, came through it roaring:

"What the devil are *you* doing there, Halterton?" he cried; and the joy of the watcher on the corner of the staircase was complete.

"What the devil are you doing?" he shouted again. "Spying about!"

"I . . . I thought it was . . . er . . . my door. I made a mistake," said Halterton.

"Mistake nothing!" bellowed the financier, whose language had caught something from his frequent crossings of the Atlantic. "Mistake your aunt!" With that he slammed the door, and the unfortunate Minister went back empty-handed, bitterly regretting his audacity.

The Right Hon. Wilfrid Halterton, Postmaster-General, drawing a covert.

This was the tale which the excellent woman, who had been mistress of all details from her point of vantage, communicated to the mistress of the castle, thereby amply earning the reward which she immediately, out of a nice little chain bag on the dressing-table, obtained.

It was true, then. Lady Caroline was satisfied.

It would be no good ringing up the brokers until just before ten. Even so Lady Caroline was rather pressed for time. But she managed it. And by the time she had got down to the room where several of them were already come for breakfast she had sold her Billies. She was a little surprised to hear that she could not get anything like the price she had expected from the reports of the day before. Still, they assured her that she was in fair time, though the shares were crashing. She had made a packet all the same, so she had not wasted those fifteen hours. Good strategy had obtained its victory, as it usually does.

The Saturday and Sunday lay rather heavy on Lady Caroline's mind. They yielded no fruit, not even the fun of open rough-and-tumble between the two men. She longed to know more. She was too wise to attempt further knowledge. She had the pleasure of seeing the Postmaster-General behaving rather oddly so far as the mind behind Durrant's was concerned, and the man behind Durrant's behaving rather oddly so far as the Postmaster-General was concerned. It amused her, still more it informed her, to notice the

way in which they watched each other. What they were after she did not know, but so much was clear; each was attempting to come upon the other by surprise, for the trick was repeated half-a-dozen times in the course of the day. She had the further pleasure of seeing from a distance, when she and a few of the others were out together in the Park, something that looked very like a quarrel between the two, and then a sudden separation between them—but that was all.

They went back separately on the Monday morning: Halterton rather ostentatiously by a train which left before anyone was up, as he had warned his hostess he must do on account of the work that awaited him in Town in the department; McAuley as ostentatiously waited on to show that there was no hurry at all for him to get to London.

Lady Caroline even kept him to lunch, seeing that he was willing to stop. She had him almost to herself, and as they sat together she was not averse to saying a few unkind things about Mr. Halterton. She only regretted she had not forced herself to come down early enough to say a few unkind things to Halterton about Mr. McAuley. However, she had learned pretty well all she wanted to learn; or at least all that she could learn under the circumstances.

She was curious, when she was quite independent and everyone had gone, to discover again from her brokers what was happening to Billies. She had been delighted to learn that they were still tumbling down, with an eagerness and a haste that consoled her for the price she had got. If she had waited, she would have got out on the wrong side. As it was, she had a little scoop and was fairly content. She had got out at 46s., which was nearly 11s. a share.

She was in a happy mood, therefore, when she came into the House, rather late on the Monday afternoon, and her content was increased by watching the added gloom of the Postmaster-General’s face.

X

THERE stands in London in a backwater of Mayfair an excellent house of the 18th century. Between it and the street is a wide courtyard, built for the sweep of great coaches coming up to the Portico, and behind the house is a discreet garden, large enough to be shared by a couple of ancient trees. A man lived there who was to play a great part in the adventures of the Postmaster-General; a friend, an intimate friend, but a loyal friend and a friend of his own age. This friend bore to the world the name of Arthur Lawson; he was by birth a Jew from the eastern boundaries of Lithuania, and this was his story.

A lifetime ago, when he was still a delicate and nervous child, shrinking from the hostile townsmen of the Russian city in which the close-bound Jewry of his people huddled, his father had died. His mother had already died in giving birth to his only brother, a child seven years younger than himself. The family had been miserably poor—miserably poor even according to the standards of that place and time—where poverty was appalling. The father's whole being had been concentrated upon one thing; the study and exposition of the sacred books of his people. He had lived on the gifts of others almost as poor as himself, who revered his learning and still more his reputation for holiness, which was indeed well deserved, for the old scholar, in so far as he could out of the mist of manuscript and print which wrapped his soul all about—in so far as he could out of the past in which he lived and the problems which absorbed him—said and did good, saying and doing good in that ritual fashion and with that wealth of traditional phrase and exact ceremony which his people loved and demanded. But he was dead, and the two boys, the little child Jacob and the older boy Aaron Levina, had been taken over by an old sharp, duty-doing woman, of whose origin nothing was known, whom the boys had been taught to call "Aunt Reba," who had kept their father's house for years, and who lived for him and for his children.

She had produced in this crisis of their wretched fortunes a little sacred hoard, accumulated with God knows how much care and in what silence. On that, dole by dole, they lived; on that, of which no mortal except Aunt Reba herself knew the place or the amount, she still maintained the tiny household, doing everything herself. She was determined that Aaron should be worthy of his father, and he had been designed for the same great office, in spite of the same great poverty. It was her glory, and was already beginning to be his, that it should be so.

Aaron at thirteen years old already showed aptitudes excelling even in that keen, restricted, intelligent, fearful world of his, surrounded everywhere by hatred, anger and contempt. His master praised him, comparing his youth to that of the elders of story. It seemed, as the lad grew in repute and stature, as though something had been saved. All crashed: a mob rose, murderous against the Jews. It had risen, at first, in a moment of blind passion and popular rising against the only few well-to-do in that ghetto, money-lenders to whom too many of the Gentiles of that town were bound. They escaped unhurt,

but the wretched community was laid waste. The poor houses were sacked, the Synagogue looted of its pathetic treasured ornaments, and its building burned, while the flames lit the torrent of a hurried, driven, terrified exodus, as they lit the maimed and the dead of that blind and cruel fury.

In that dreadful night Aunt Reba had saved the boys. She got them to Riga, by the offices of one of her people whom she there knew; she found some cranny for her and for them in an outgoing ship. A good part of the little hoard had to go, for the refugees were bled white by the Swedish captain of the craft. After three days of slow steaming through the calm Baltic (it was still bitterly cold, though the ice had gone) and three more days of tossing in the fury of the North Sea gales, this human wreckage of three, the child, the boy, and the old woman, had come to London, and had there found, as such will always find through the intense patriotism of that people, shelter at least, and the first necessities of food. But Aunt Reba still paid, and owed no man a penny.

Through such gates had it been that Aaron Levina in his fourteenth year entered manhood.

He began his new life by being taken on, without wage for his keep and for learning of the trade, by an employer from among his own people, a childless old man who kept a little shop in the heart of Whitechapel. It was a little shop which bought or sold anything that came to hand, things not grand enough to be called curiosities, still less to be called antiques—just what the thrifty, bent, grizzled, spectacled old man, Aaron's employer, could get hold of by keen judgement and could hold for profit. There was clothing; there were, occasionally, second-hand fittings of boats, compasses, cases of instruments, lengths of chain, all manner of them; there were ornaments too, some of them strange and foreign, some few of gold in an outlandish make. Many of tarnished silver, and now and then would pass through his hands some cheaper gem. And for Gentiles of an evening at the back of the shop upon the quiet there would be small advances (for the master had no licence for such a trade, but small advances there would be) and interest taken, and taken heavily and even harshly—but from the Gentiles only. The law was strictly observed, and where his own people were concerned, his brethren and Aaron's, he would no more have charged usury than he would have robbed them. For it is forbidden. And when the old man heard the names of rich men who were of his own kind and who like himself should have kept the law, but who broke it from greed, and who despoiled even those of the sacred blood, he spat by way of contempt and hatred.

From very early morning till very late at night the boy Aaron slaved silently—but always with a hidden anger in his heart against the outer world. He picked up English rapidly, reading in every moment of time he could snatch from the very brief free hours of his nights, and he earned unaided from such efforts as he deserved to earn, deserving as had his father before him through an unswerving tenacity. For the childless man whom he served, finding it more and more necessary, took him in to the petty business, until at last, when he had been but four years in London, he was already holding his own among his comrades, and could almost pass as one who had been born in the security of that haven which his people find among the English. The business began to prosper in its tiny way, as it could not but prosper in such tireless hands as were young Aaron Levina's, even in his 'teens. Aunt Reba, very old when she had suffered that dreadful trial, and now beginning to fail, could be looked after. Aaron could now provide her with small luxuries. He could

pay for a little help from neighbours.

But what was a dearer thing to Aaron's heart, what was his only consolation and his one joy in those beginnings of a most humble prosperity, after such bitter memories, was the nurturing of the child of his brother.

That dreadful day and night of the Pogrom had both seared and branded him. It had seared him so that he could love but very few. It had branded him with the mark, as it were, of a vocation; a special duty to remain proud of his blood and hostile to all other. It had filled him with a hatred beyond that of his kin for the brutish and abominable Goyim, who do these hellish evils without cause. His contempt for the intelligence of those outside the law and the Covenant was not religious; though exact in observance, religion was not his motive. It was experience. He knew them for what they were. But that stupidity of theirs did not excuse their wickedness.

The horrid cruelty which had stabbed his soul in its first youth was more vivid but not less effective than the continual sneers, the frequent insults, which even when not directed at himself were the lot of his people. If such feelings were concealed among the wealthier companions of his later life it was from cowardice—he could swear—not from charity.

Even here in London, safe, he never forgot what a burden some inexplicable enmity against his people laid upon him and his.

So formed, so he remained, cast in that mould; and all his high talents—they were, in their way, genius—all his iron tenacity, were conditioned by this mood. The vast fortune which he was to acquire changed him not a whit. He owed it to himself and to his blood to keep that spirit unswerving; in the agony of his isolated soul all its affection, all its intensity, was focused upon the little brother.

On that brother his whole being was concentrated. It was that brother, he thought, who had really inherited his father's spirit. And the boy was beginning to pass for learned. But not in the learning which his father had known; rather the learning of the latest kind; figures, for their own sake, measurements. A little later in the evening classes of the University he eagerly began to get the beginnings of science.

When, later, the elder brother saw how the younger advanced in these things and was made for them, he triumphed. Glory was coming to the Levinas. And with that glory as an end, and with the good of the child as the absorbing passion, he still toiled unceasingly. It was for this that he earned—though the occupation was native to him and welcome enough—a name for close dealing beyond his fellows. It was well for him that he could earn that name, for it was a promise of what was to come.

When the old master died Aaron Levina was in his twenty-fourth year; and Jacob, at seventeen, getting his first little triumphs of praise from his masters, hearing that one of these days he would be a great physicist, inventing things, discovering things, probing, theorizing, and all the rest of it.

The business still prospered. Aaron would not dream of letting Jacob work in it. He hired an assistant, a Gentile, whom he drove in blinkers and drove hard. He hired another assistant and took the lower part of the house next door, and doubled the shop. So things stood when old Aunt Reba died in her turn, very old and at peace.

A year or two passed. Aaron Levina was doing more, elsewhere, in some mysterious fashion, in some office which he visited an hour or two on every day but the Sabbath, and

wherein he was closeted at accounts during all the first day of the week, when the quiet of the Gentile holiday gave him full leisure. He was buying and selling other things than flotsam and jetsam. It had begun with fragments of the precious metals, and those occasional gems. It had gone on to larger operations.

Then it was that there befell that which was to bring him into permanent though distant relation with Wilfrid Halterton.

Young Jacob's school was the big County School building on the westward side of the Mile End Road. The class was over; rather late, he was crossing the big street under the glare of the lamps, upon his way home to his brother, when that short sight of his and that nervous manner betrayed him. He did not see the policeman's arm lowered, he went forward, hesitated just that fraction of a second which is fatal, and was hit. The near mudguard of a big car had caught him and spun him forward into the road, where he lay huddled in a heap, knowing nothing.

The brakes shrieked, the door of the car was impulsively flung open, and there leaped out a young man, very tall, eager in manner, most anxious and alarmed and disturbed, who rushed forward in his fine evening clothes and big fur coat, into the cold and through the mud. He went down on one knee beside the boy, still lying motionless, while a crowd gathered, and two policemen forced their way through it.

The young man who had thus jumped out in his solicitude had been Wilfrid Halterton, the Wilfrid Halterton of all those years ago, those years when his family was at its wealthiest. He was not yet dreaming of politics, still up at the University, and going back in his car on that Friday night to rejoin his father in Essex after a dinner with his friends in London.

The policemen were taking notes, the boy's comrades, many of them of his own kind, were eagerly volunteering information. Young Halterton, uncertain, bewildered, full of compassion, wondering what to do, was told by the policemen that an ambulance was coming; they told him also whither the maimed child would be taken, to the London Hospital. At the same time he heard from one of the scholars who was more voluble than the rest in his eagerness to inform where the child's brother, Aaron Levina, lived.

Young Halterton was shocked and pitiful beyond words. He could not dream of going on that night at all. He had felt a wave of relief on hearing that this lad lived; but at the first low groan his heart was torn. I must excuse him. His emotion may sound exaggerated; but remember that Halterton was then very young, and had a generous feeling of shame, as though his wealth were in some way to blame for the tragedy his car had caused among these poor people.

He saw the poor boy's face, twisted with pain in the glare of the arc-lamp, the clear-cut Sephardim face which meant nothing to him of race—he was ignorant of these things; the large, dark eyes opened for a moment and then closed again. He burned to act and save. How to act he knew not. He had to make up his mind; and after some seconds of that shilly-shallying that was native to him he got something of a plan.

"Look here, Roberts," he said to the chauffeur, "I can't go on. I must stay here and see after this. I shall stand by this lad; I must do all I can." Then, turning to the policemen, he said: "I was on my way to my father's house, down in Essex. I must let him know. I must stand by here, too, I must do all I can. What?"

The policeman was taking the number of the car. The ambulance had arrived.

"That's all right, sir," he said. "You send your man to telephone, and give me your name, and all that. My colleague'll go with your man, and then we can send him on."

"Thank you," said Halterton, most grateful for the leave. It helped him to think—but as he looked at the huddled figure on the stretcher his heart bled.

"Roberts," he said, "will you go with the officer, and ring up my father? Tell him what's happened. Then you'd better go on home, and I'll find my own way down somehow to-morrow. Say I'll telephone him again myself in an hour or so. Only when you've telephoned you go on home with the car."

And so it was. And young Wilfrid Halterton tramped with the policemen, following the ambulance to the hospital, and there spent an hour or more, making sure that all was attended to, and hugely relieved to know that the boy now knew where he was and could speak a word or two, feebly; still more relieved was he to hear, as he did after waiting long enough, that there was no immediate danger—though it was grave.

"If I were you, sir," said one of the policemen, "I'd look up Mr. Levina in the 'phone book and let him know."

But though there was a whole regiment of Levine derivatives in the telephone book, this particular Levina was not there. Perhaps there was some mistake. Anyhow, now that he was reassured he must go and find the brother.

But there was no necessity. Others had been before him. A little knot of the wounded lad's competitors and fellow-scholars all volubly pressed round Wilfrid Halterton as he strode, long-legged, through the narrow streets. They brought him to the door of the main shop and living house, where he banged loudly. The place was shut up, but the assistant had been left on guard. Aaron Levina had gone out to see a client.

"I'll wait for him," said Wilfrid, sitting down by the light of one naked bulb, amid the mass of heaped incongruous things. The group which had followed him hung about in the street outside.

Where that client of Levina's was no one knew. Halterton waited and waited. At last he asked for a sheet of paper and an envelope, and he wrote these words out of his full heart:

MY DEAR SIR,

I am exceedingly sorry to tell you that my motor-car, passing the Council School in the Mile End Road this evening, knocked down a young gentleman, who, I find, is your brother. I am waiting here to see you, and am most anxious to do so. I wanted you to have the news first from me, and I want to be able to assure you personally that he is in no danger. They assured me of that. But I am afraid the accident is grave.

It is not a very easy thing to write, but I do beg you to believe me when I say that I am going to do everything I can—everything in my power—everything. It is a terrible business. Believe me, I will do everything; *only tell me what should be done and I am wholly at your disposal. I cannot bear to think of the boy's drawn face as I saw it. It is still with me.*

Do come as soon as you can. They are going to try and find you, and I shall wait here until you do.

He sent the note off with a bevy from those outside to search for Aaron, and one well-feed messenger to bear the envelope, and wait Wilfrid Halterton did. He waited and waited. An hour passed and more than an hour. But the reason he was kept waiting was not that Levina could not be found; Levina had been found, but upon hearing the news he had dashed off to the hospital, and he was there now, protesting, insisting, crying over Jacob, his little Jacob, and learning at first confusedly, then more clearly when he questioned them, what had happened.

In the midst of his grief he was filled with a great bitterness. Evil was upon him. Evil was always upon him, and had been upon him and his, through these accursed outer people; evil coming from their malice, or their greed or their spite, or their indifference or their contempt. The rich Gentile would pay, of course; there would be damages, of course; but what solace was that? It would be accursed money, as the man himself was . . . there his mind halted. Would to God the thing had never happened! The child would be a cripple now, and where were all those dreams?

They had got him into a little bare room of the hospital, a little waiting-room, apart. He asked to be left alone. And sitting there on the one chair of the place, he sobbed in agony. Then after the exhaustion of this he bethought him of the note and opened it. And as he read it there was a struggle in his mind.

He was not acquainted with goodness, but goodness meant for him the half-faded memory of his father, Aunt Reba, the dead man who had left him the business, and—very much less—one or two acquaintances, hardly friends. The world was not good. Men were not good. Least of all were the Goyim good. And little he cared whether they were good or no.

Then he read the note again. It was genuine enough. He knew men, and he knew it was genuine enough. Well, he must go and see this fellow.

The streets were deserted now. No little crowd accompanied him as he hurried back to the two shops. He put the key in the door. Halterton stood up at once, his tall, thin frame somewhat too big for the place.

“Mr. Levina?” he said.

“That’s my name,” said Levina in a curt voice.

“Mr. Levina, I’ve told you what I could in that note—you got my note?”

“Yes,” still briefly, and still in that curt voice.

“Mr. Levina, you will not be offended, I know, if I do something which I want to do. You won’t mind my doing it?”

Young Mr. Halterton meant well, and because as yet he was unstained by the world usually did things wrong.

“What’s your name?” rapped out Levina.

“Halterton—Wilfrid Halterton. I was on my way to my father’s place in Essex—Chilham, you know. That’s where my father lives. I was on my way down there—that’s why it happened.”

“Sit down, Mr. Halterton,” said Levina, taking a chair himself. Though he was fully master of himself, yet he was still shaken. He could not be as angry as he was, the tall man opposite to him seemed too much of a fool for that; but there was much anger in him still.

“You won’t mind my going and seeing your brother when I’m allowed to? I asked the hours. I could ask after him to-morrow, anyhow.”

“Yes,” said Levina.

Then Halterton went on in a much more hesitating voice:

“Mr. Levina, will you do me a personal favour?” Levina made no answer. It did not seem the moment for personal favours.

“I mean, will you let me ask you to have no question of insurance between us, or anything of that kind? I want to do what I possibly can—everything I can—everything!”

“I don’t see what you . . .” began Levina in an even but almost threatening voice.

“Please,” said Wilfrid Halterton eagerly. “Please! If you only knew what I’ve been feeling these last few hours!”

And Levina was astonished to see tears in the eyes opposite to his own.

He had seen them cry, these alien people, at least, he had seen the poor ones cry before now. He had seen them cry, always at their own distress, and usually at the distress which he himself had caused, and for which he cared nothing—why should he care? All the debt was on their side—immensely on their side. Why should he pity or forgive? They would always begin again. Yet when he saw these tears something changed in him.

“Mr. Halterton,” he said at last with difficulty, “it was not your fault.”

“God knows it wasn’t,” said Halterton, from his heart. “I’d kill myself if it was, I think! But you will let me see him?”

“Of course, Mr. Halterton. It’s nothing to do with me. But of course I would if it did depend on me.”

“And you’ll let me do all I can?”

“Moneysh!”—Levina almost hissed the word, speaking without parting his teeth, which showed between his lips.

“No! No! No! Mr. Levina—all you or he need is there freely—but God knows I mean . . .” He looked anxiously at the other, thinking he saw the sudden scorn sinking somewhat. Then he added: “But all else I can do in the way of friendship—there may be lots of things.”

Levina was silent again, but he managed to say “Yes” at the end of a very long silence.

“I do mean it,” said Halterton, “I do indeed.” And with that, giving the hour at which he would certainly be at the hospital, he said good night and went.

The next morning they met again at the hospital, but in the interval Wilfrid Halterton had rung up his father and gone down there in a hired motor and had had a talk, late into the night. He had told his father what he meant to do, and the old man thought it quixotic; but after all, Wilfrid’s money was his own, and even though he thought it quixotic, he was half proud of his son for feeling thus.

“I should have done the same at his age,” he thought to himself. “The young people are better than us. I hope when he gets to my age he won’t be as dried up as I am.”

With that the old boy had gone to bed, protesting no more, and next morning Levina and Halterton met again at the bedside of the boy.

That was the beginning, all those years ago. More than thirty years ago. Much

followed on it.

The lad was a cripple. Not a wreck, but never to be straight and hale again. Wilfrid Halterton watched the convalescence. His solicitude had grown, he had really taken every trouble. And in spite of a fixed pride, Aaron Levina was grateful. He was grateful in that inner hidden depth of his closest being, which had hitherto held but two emotions, closely intermingled; his devotion for his people, and his passionate love for the brother who was now to be a cripple for life. The constant solicitude, the constant attention of the Gentile, which Halterton was always pressing on him during the convalescence, moved him, and formed a habit, until a new distant but strong affection of gratitude at last became part of Aaron Levina's spirit. In all those millions in England who were not of his kind, there was only one man whom Aaron Levina would have crossed the street for; there was only one man whom he was glad to welcome, and that man was Wilfrid Halterton. Here again I must ask my readers to understand and excuse what they may think exaggerated. They are dealing with a type unfamiliar to them, not of our blood. You and I would not feel such strongly fixed enduring gratitude for one brief episode in early youth. Aaron did. It was part, I suppose, of that strange tenacity which all see, and most fear, in men of his race.

They met but rarely after Jacob was back at his work again. Each was a little shy of the other. But Aaron would write at regular intervals and call to renew his thanks. What made a new and final step in the affair was the question of Jacob's going to the University.

There could be no question of money relations, which Halterton by this time would have dreaded even to mention.

But he was his own father by this time; the old man had gone, he himself was a man of some position, not very wealthy indeed, but of some position. He had just got into Parliament, the family fortune (though lessened) was still large; his old College would listen to him, it was beholden to the name of Halterton. It was through Wilfrid, then, that young Jacob was accepted, and went up to Cambridge.

Aaron had insisted that he should go up as Lawson, for Aaron still prospered, and much more through that little office of his than through the shop; and Aaron was Arthur Lawson by this time—at least in the West End of London, where he had taken a house. Jacob, who was of another view in these things, stood out, but at last compromised. He would not be James, he would still be Jacob; but as for Lawson—well, let it go at that. So it was Arthur Lawson, rapidly growing wealthy, and Jacob Lawson, his brother, who in the vacation lived at Arthur's side under his roof and was more and more his pride and his idol.

Of greater importance still to the relations of Wilfrid Halterton with Lawson was what happened four years later. The young physicist was brilliant enough—but Fellowships do not go by talent. There was another candidate besides himself, a young Englishman of some standing and a Blue—not without private means and good relations. Halterton made just the difference. And Jacob Lawson became Fellow of Merrion College; and, as you may imagine, the Blue and the friends of the Blue put it down to a Jewish conspiracy.

Having taken the plunge, the College went the whole hog and boomed the new Fellow for all they were worth. Thenceforward Jacob Lawson had a real claim to fame, and maintained it. And thenceforward what Arthur Lawson felt for Wilfrid Halterton was as permanent and as deeply rooted as human feeling can be.

Yet the two men were not intimate. Their characters were not possessed of things in common. Of all the trades, the trade of the politician was the one Arthur Lawson looked on with the most contempt. Of all frailties in character, impulsiveness and hesitation were the frailties with which Arthur Lawson had the least sympathy—and found to be the most common in the alien ruck around him: as common in their race as they were uncommon in his own. All that didn't lessen by the least his fixed devotion to Halterton, but it prevented close communion.

Moreover, with the passage of the years the complete difference in their occupations and in their circle of friends told more and more. So did the growing desire of Arthur Lawson for seclusion, as his fortune swelled and swelled. That fortune was in six figures before he was forty; it had become enormous before the day of the Television Contract. Halterton's own slipping back in the way of money—and he had invested badly—had not helped; for though Lawson, like all such men, made no sort of connection between wealth and worth, yet Halterton's embarrassments made him shyer. All these things separated the two men; but they saw each other from time to time, on Lawson's own initiative. His old feeling remained deeply rooted and as strong as ever.

Arthur Lawson would be beholden to nobody. He had refused a peerage, with a contemptuous phrase that was still remembered against him. He saw less and less of his fellow-men; he had become more and more a legend or fable, so that even his great wealth was exaggerated in whispers and rumours about him. But whenever he turned his eyes upon that hobbling figure of the very distinguished brother whose company was everything to him and whose fame was the one delight of his life, he remembered Halterton.

Halterton himself, as may be imagined, had less place in his mind for Arthur Lawson. He was one of those men with whom familiarity and constant intercourse is necessary if intimacy is to be maintained. But as I say, the two men saw each other two or three times a year. Lawson would not allow a drifting apart, and Halterton was glad enough that it should be so.

Thus things stood between the Millionaire and the Statesman in the days of the two envelopes, the game of billiards and the rest. But of all that Lawson had heard nothing beyond vague talk on the ups and downs of shares in which he did not deal.

XI

DURING that same week-end Lady Papworthy had not been idle. On the Saturday morning she had been visited all alone by the faithful Reginald Butler; she had been more gracious to him than ever she had been before. She had learned, for he told her everything, of yet another of those interminable mares'-nests of his. The ardent young poet was for ever crusading after such in his defence of sound morals in public life. He had just unearthed one, and was full of it, and she abounded in her support of his enthusiasm.

There had been a horrid deal between the corrupt Postmaster-General and the infamous McAuley! To the eternal shame of our public life, Durrant's, in the teeth of the Committee's report, had privately received a promise that the contract should go to them!

Reginald Butler continued to pour out his soul, lavish of detail. He was indignant, as only the flaming heart of the Mutt can be indignant.

Joan Papworthy's activities lay in all directions, and therefore in the direction of High Politics. But she was one of those political wives who are passengers—and there are almost as many of them as there are of the political wives who command the ship. She heard the news, but more from her attendant court of outsiders than from her husband—she never heard the key to the news, and she never heard even what was common property to those in the know till long after it had ceased to amuse.

If public life had an interest for her it had the interest of money, as it has for all of us. Her husband was very rich, but he did not allow her to be even moderately so. She had come to know him thoroughly on that point. It was the only resistant thing about him, and he would not change. Therefore political news that meant buying and selling stock had interest for her as it has for all of us; but she had not yet plunged even in her small way. It was enough for her to work on petty certainties, to buy when the risk was nearly over, to sell some two days after big public men had begun to unload. She made little, but she made it steadily. Hitherto she had almost doubled her insufficient allowance. She was on that scale.

Now she had news of the Television contract and the rivalry for it. She had heard of the Committee's report in favour of Reynier's. She had then heard—three days later—rumours of a check, but nothing more. This fresh instalment from her lover was something out of the way—a chance—a certainty.

She continued her deep communion that morning with Butler, and was loving and praising, as only the queens of literary and artistic coteries can be loving to their chosen favourite among the geniuses who crowd about their throne. The admiration in her eyes had seemed to him, as was his right, more than admiration. If she had known to what heights such communion of ideals would have carried him, she would not have gone so far; but she did go very far. Reginald Butler loved her after that morning's close enhancement of affection not only with the triumphant feeling of a lover but with a new

valour, as of a martyr, if martyrdom must come—and martyrdom comes galloping to Mutts. Mutts are its passion.

After he had softly left her room with bowed head, Joan Papworthy stood listening intently till she heard the front door slam behind him. She went immediately to the telephone, and bought Billies. She had no idea, poor girl, what they ought to cost her—when she was told rather doubtfully that they were about thirty, it meant nothing to her. All she knew was that the contract was fixed, and in her innocence, or rather in her considerable distance from the great world of which she believed herself to be the hub, she made certain that she had got in on the ground floor. The Other End of the telephone didn't tell her she had got in late, why should they? They had heard more than she had, and they were delighted to unload. Lady Papworthy's tiny transactions were hardly worth their while.

She risked more than she could afford to risk, since Lord Papworthy—having, as men of such artistic observation often have, that one solid thing about him, a sense of money—kept her allowance not only much too limited, but strictly accounted for.

However, she felt no risk at all on this occasion. It would be all gain. Had not her Reginald told her that Durrant's had the contract at last?

By midday, about an hour after Reginald had left her, she was already covering some five thousand Billies at forty shillings. A modest sum, you will say, for a Cabinet Minister's wife—but ten times more than she could afford, overdrawn as she already was on her modest quarter.

There was one thing at which Reginald Butler had always drawn the line—Print.

He was willing to denounce, he was willing to expose, he was willing to do anything of that sort—in spoken words, especially spoken words with those whom he knew would agree with his high motives. Mere babble. It got him all the glory he wanted, and all the inward glow of virtue, and it had no consequences. But Print is a serious thing. Print is indictable. So are words, for that matter, but for a very good reason best understood by politicians, lawyers and detectives, blackmailers, and many another type of man, print is more dangerous than speech. It can get you into the Courts.

But to-day, all glorified from Joan's recent radiance, Reginald Butler had passed the limits of prudence, he had soared into the high regions wherein men reach heaven through dreadful sacrifice; and print he would.

It was not easy. It was easy to determine that he would print—at least, easy in that new exalted mood of his, but it was not so easy to find someone who would take the risk of printing. He was flying for high game. The people he would attack were in power and armed also; and there is a fine provision in our law that the printers who strike off truth or falsehood about politicians shall be as liable to suffer for it as the wretched fellow who provides the copy.

Even Butler, though he was not very realist in these things, knew at the back of his mind that he had no evidence—no evidence in what may be called the base and paltry legal sense; but he had evidence before the high tribunal of impartial justice. Everything combined to assure him that the rumours now universal were abominably true. Halterton had received, had pocketed (Butler used the sneering words to himself, as he fed his anger upon the affair) a huge bribe. They all did it. They were each as bad as the others. But the

Postmaster-General seemed to have done it more shamelessly than the rest. Moreover, the thing could never have gone through unless the Treasury and the Whips had been squared; the Treasury because it had the last word in anything concerned with public expenditure, the Chief Whip because it lay with him whether the plot should be ruined by premature debate or not.

Butler's duty was now clear. He must act. He must rout out this nest of vermin.

A man such as Butler, knowing nothing of the world and thinking that he knows everything, could not know that the nest in question was the nest of a female horse. Had he been sane—and I fear such men are hardly sane, at any rate in these exalted moments of theirs—he would have known how temperately men regard the necessary adjustments of public life.

There had been nothing extraordinary in giving the contract to Durrant's—if indeed it had been given, and even on this he would have known perfectly well, had he had the intelligence to examine everything coolly, he had no certitude. The contract had to be given to one of the two companies, and Durrant's was certainly that which stood highest before the world. No man with a sense of proportion would concern himself much over whatever advantage—if advantage there had been—the Minister of the Department might obtain for an act which was, after all, an act of public service, and one the doing of which might make him merit well of his country.

As for the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Whip, it is of course possible to remember these gentlemen whenever an arrangement of this kind is being concluded. Dodgson, the latest and the best authority on modern constitutional practice, says as much in his "Recent Developments of Cabinet Government." But the thing is pure convention. They are not even obliged to accept whatever small routine offers are made to them. In the mass of small contracts they take no interest, and even in much the greater part of the large ones they are not so much as approached. The few exceptions aim at no serious personal advantage in what is a mere incident of life at Westminster, and the Chief Whip has the less reason to trouble in such matters as he is now permitted by custom to accumulate a large "personal fund" from the regular commission charged on honours.

In this case, had Reginald Butler known the world, he could easily have learned that neither the Chancellor of the Exchequer nor the Chief Whip had done anything upon a scale which the most exact censor of political morals could condemn. They had, of course, been familiar with the fact that Durrant's was the favoured company, and naturally it was McAuley's brother, the Attorney-General, who, because he was their colleague, had acted in the matter. He had met his two fellow-ministers at an informal breakfast at Number 11, and handed them, merely as a formality, an insignificant parcel of shares, worth no more than the nominal sum of £3,000 at par. What is more, it had of course been arranged that the shares should be owed for; he had been particular to tell them that they could pay when they liked. But small sums of that kind are not likely to live in the memory of men occupied in high affairs of State.

On such materials as this, or rather out of the fantastic rumours based upon such materials, the unfortunate Butler constructed the mass of nonsense which was to lead him to his doom.

But when men like this get the bit between their teeth there is no saving them. He spent something like one hour of violent inward fever casting about who would have the

courage, or who, as I should rather say, would be so foolish as to print that letter of his. He decided upon the quite insignificant and absurd Rashdell.

Rashdell was one of those men who, on a small private income, amuse themselves by publishing absurd little weekly sheets which nobody reads or buys, and which are of less effect upon opinion than the lightest word from anyone in an established position. Week after week would Rashdell's *Oriflamme* (idiotic title!) come out with all manner of innuendo, spite and wild concoctions directed against the greatest of our public servants. It was a marvel that he did not attack Mrs. Boulger herself. It had always been thought better to pay no attention to him, except upon one occasion, now many years past, when he had had the crass ineptitude to bring in the honoured name of the Lord Chancellor—accusing him of getting into a disgraceful row at a cocktail bar on the Continent.

He had served his term in the Second Division after a sentence which no one heeded and on which there was no public comment in any reputable paper. This experience, which should have warned him against pursuing his course, had only glorified him in his own eyes, and, alas! in the eyes of a man who, petty as he might be, was worth more than he—Reginald Butler.

What Butler was about to do was the more inexplicable as he would never have had that seat in the House, which he had kept since the beginning of the present Parliament, but for the kindness and patronage of Mr. Boulger, who had recommended Reginald's name to his great wife. She in her turn had approved of that name when she saw it in the list of possible candidates, and then suggested that he should be allowed to contest Mossborough, where he had a fair chance. He had come in on the regular quadrennial arrangement between the leaders, like dozens of other insignificants, though most of them carried heavier metal than himself. He had been known at once for a crank. As the House of Commons loves cranks for the fun they provide, it had been indulgent to his confused questions and excited tirades. But gratitude, common sense, everything which sane men and decent men may be expected to possess, were lost to Reginald Butler in such a moment at this—Joan Papworthy's eyes had done it.

He wrote the letter. He wrote it at his Club, drafting it half-a-dozen times over, and carefully putting the fragments away in his pocket, to burn them when he should get home. When at last it was constructed to his satisfaction, he went, greatly daring, round to the dirty little two rooms in a sort of slum off Fetter Lane where the *Oriflamme* managed to get itself printed by a petty firm which had nothing to lose and would take almost any stuff for you.

The letter was too long, and infinitely too violent; but even had it been short and its terms deliberately chosen, the matter of it would never have passed even from a sort of chartered lunatic, such as Butler was called by the great world when he fell into these moods.

The letter accused, in set terms and by name, Wilfrid Halterton of having taken a specific sum—the sum was mentioned—fifty thousand pounds; it accused the brother of the Attorney-General, James McAuley, of having offered the bribe and of having thereby acquired the contract for Durrant's. It accused the Attorney-General of having given vast sums—which were also specified—twenty thousand in one case, fifteen thousand in the other—to that dignified and honourable man, Sir Charles Claverhouse, perhaps the best Chancellor of the Exchequer we have ever had, and young Lord Cayton, Biston's son, the

Chief Whip, a man not only deservedly popular but a man of real weight, destined, as we all know, for very high office later on.

It was a mad letter. How even the wretched printers of that wretched sheet could have been got to take the risk, I cannot imagine. Rashdell, of course, was beyond redemption. He would print anything and believe anything. The pity is that such men are not taken more seriously, and that instead of a short sentence in the Second Division he had not been crushed long ago by a long term of penal servitude. If that young idiot Reginald Butler had had even just so much elementary usage of affairs as to look at the tape, he would have seen that Billies were toppling all over the place, he would have known that his accusations were absurd, from that indication alone. But the idiot had not even so much sense. He went his idiot way, and as fortune would have it—for fortune gets tired of such men—he had gone over the edge.

The letter was just in time to be set up. It would appear on the usual day of publication of the tuppenny-halfpenny *Oriflamme*. (The actual price, of course, was a shilling. At twopence-halfpenny it would have been beyond the means of the fool Rashdell—and would that it had ruined him long ago!)

Fleet Street had hold of it in that forenoon. Desportes had telephoned to one or two friends in the high political world and had heard their emphatic declaration that the thing should not be allowed to pass unnoticed. The letter was alluded to, of course, although its terms were not given in all the early editions of Desportes' evening papers on that day, Monday, March the 9th, the day when Halterton had gone back to his office so early, and McAuley had stayed on to luncheon at Sandlings with Lady Caroline; the Monday when Lady Caroline had entered the House so late, to feast once more upon Halterton's woe-begone face.

If Billies had hitherto been tumbling, Billies now avalanched. They were back at their old 23s. before ever those evening papers came out. And by the time the Stock Exchange closed they were at 18s.—16s. offered, and difficult to sell.

Honest Jack Williams registering importance in the Outer Lobby on an important Parliamentary day.

XII

THOSE who live in the country, and are far enough from a road to be able to hear the noise of living things, may be familiar with the multiplied murmur produced by the disturbance of a wasp's nest. It is as different from the chattering of apes in the tropics, as from the peculiar miauling of skunks in the climates which breed those imperial animals. It is an energetic, anxious, myriad sound, full of foreboding. That is why, as the oriental proverb has it, "A wasp's nest should be stirred with a long stick."

Upon the afternoon of Wednesday, March the 11th, 1960, after question time, the Inner Lobby of the House of Commons recalled, to such few of its members as were still country folk, this peculiar noise, and through that Lobby Honest Jack Williams came striding with his heartening smile, enough to reassure the most alarmed.

For two full days and the better half of a third the rumours had had time to grow. Reginald Butler's now famous letter had sprouted like those quick-motion vegetables in the cinema films designed for the instruction of youth. It was Lord Desportes' papers the day before yesterday, the Monday, that had done the trick. But later orders had gone out on that same Monday which forbade one word of further allusion in any of the morning papers the next day. The Television Contract, the Postmaster-General, James McAuley, the whole bag of tricks, might have disappeared into nothingness for all the English people at large were allowed to hear of them. But under the free political conditions which we alone of all nations enjoy you cannot prevent people talking. All the people in the know were talking, and Billies were nominally at 14s., but now quite unsaleable.

Among things exaggerated or merely absurd (and there was a vast group of these, involving every name in London) lurked here and there hard little lumps of fact, like the dear little pebbles that nestle in any pound of currants you may buy. And as these dear little pebbles announce themselves unmistakably to the teeth, especially the teeth of the aged, so did the bits of solid fact announce themselves for truth to those in the know, and especially to the older and more experienced of the same. One of these undoubted truths was that there would be a public statement made now, immediately after questions; another undoubted truth was that the authorities had determined to prosecute, not the wretched editor of the wretched *Oriflamme*, nor the wretched printer, but that ill-famed, self-appointed censor of public morals, the now highly unpopular Reginald Butler.

Some said it was the Postmaster-General himself who had written to the Prime Minister urging this course upon Mrs. Boulger as a public duty, others that it was a disinterested action on the part of the Rt. Honourable John Williams, Secretary of State for Home Affairs—and the latter were right.

Mr. Wilfrid Halterton proclaiming his honour, and that of the House of Commons.

It was Honest Jack Williams who had taken the initiative. He had pointed out to his Chief that if things like this were to be allowed to pass without due penalty, the whole character of English public life would be gone. It would sink to such a level as had been reached by the contemptible Parliaments of foreigners. That Great Lady, who, like her colleagues, appreciated the wisdom of the Home Secretary, had followed his advice. After all, the Home Office is not unconnected with public prosecutions.

But before anything was published of this intention there would be a solemn statement which would clear the moral air of these pestilent lies which folly and fanaticism—or something worse—had so widely spread.

A few moments after questions the tall figure of Wilfrid Halterton rose, not too securely, to its feet, and addressed the House. It began by assuring the House that the task before its owner was not an easy one. He went on by saying that he would be brief. He was encouraged by the murmurs of sympathy and approval which greeted him from all sides—even from the little Nihilist gang in the dark corner under the gallery. For when the honour of the House is concerned, all party differences disappear. Not only do the main groups of Anarchists and Socialists rightly feel as one man upon such matters, but even

that tiny group of Independents, Nihilists, and no one among them was more staunch than the inflexible critic Jeremiah Gulpher, who was almost the father of the House, having sat for the Marsh division a full twenty-eight years, and boasted to have had high tea with every farmer in the Fens. He had begun as the Independent Nihilist protestor for Agriculture, Independence pure and simple. But I wander—I must return to my pack.

Wilfrid Halterton, then, was on his feet, and had made his two opening points: (a) That his task was difficult, and secondly (b) that he would be brief. He next advanced, with the originality that is never lacking in our greater statesmen, a third proposition, (c) that it was distasteful and even painful for a man to have to speak of himself on such occasions; to which he added a fourth, (d) that his motive was not in any way that of clearing himself, but rather of refuting with indignation falsehood that affected the character of all that august assembly. The fifth point (e) was even more true, for he said that he hardly knew how to begin. And the sixth point (f) was truth itself, for he said that he wished from the bottom of his heart that he had not to undertake it. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine a more ungrateful position than that in which this great public man found himself, compelled to affirm that he had not received monies which in sober truth he had not received. The case is rare indeed.

All these six points came out duly ticked with their numbers attached to them on the tapes in the clubs, and were there received by eager watchers with the same sympathy as by the senators at Westminster. Wilfrid Halterton proceeded to the final matter with an emphasis which included several blows delivered with uncertain fist upon the empty polished wooden box which stands on the table in the House of Commons, especially strengthened with brass bands to withstand such assaults of oratory. He assured the House, and his beloved Country, and the universe at large, that the whole thing was a lie. If his personal assurance were further required, he would give it there and then. He had not received one penny from anyone interested in the Television Contract. That contract would be assigned in due course, when the long and careful deliberations which were now drawing to their conclusion should have reached a satisfactory end. As yet (and he struck the box again—unfortunately catching the brass edges of it, which was painful), as yet, he repeated (restraining a temptation to suck the injured knuckle) not a word had been written which might give to any of those who were tendering for the contract the least encouragement.

At this point he pulled out a piece of paper and read words which had been carefully drafted for him by the approved officer in the little room where such things are drafted.

“Nothing, I say here and now, can of course prejudice the decision which must at last be taken, and that soon. I hope, however, that in the matter of the vile rumours which have passed from one foul lip to another, I have cleared my own honour and that of this House.”

With that he sat down, vibrating in all his ganglions. In tones gloriously resonant, the Speaker called upon the Leader of the Opposition, who associated himself enthusiastically with all that had been said opposite. He also struck an original note when he affirmed that however much they might differ in that House upon matters of policy, they were all as one man in the defence of its high principles and traditions.

All this having been now settled and a sort of contented murmur having arisen to emphasize that settlement, things would usually have ended there and the public business

might have begun. But on so special an occasion there was one more word to be said, and it was said, of course, by Honest Jack Williams, who rose to tell them that his own complete disassociation from the department concerned, the very fact that he stood apart with no knowledge of the negotiations which any Television Contract would necessarily involve, the fact that he was, as it were, no more than a member of the general public in the affair, gave him—he thought—an opportunity to be of service. He begged to be regarded as the spokesman of Englishmen at large (hear, hear! twice from due north-west, and eight or nine times singly from other quarters of the compass). Merely as the man in the street he wished to congratulate his colleague the Postmaster-General, and also (if he might say so) the leader of the Opposition, on the good work they had done that day. There was one point, however, on which he could speak with more certain knowledge than the man in the street, whom otherwise he represented in this affair. He could assure them (and his respectful voice took on a greater solemnity) no colleague of his on the front bench—and of that he had personal knowledge—had any interest or share in any of these companies.

And I may add that of no one was this truer than of Jack Williams himself, for, as my readers may remember, he had sold every one of his Billies five days ago.

Before the end of the week two things had happened. Reginald Butler was under arrest for criminal libel, and a strong committee had been appointed to sit as soon as may be and investigate the charges that had been made.

Honest Jack Williams further emphasizing the honour of the House of Commons and of himself.

As for the trial of Reginald Butler, I will turn to that in due time. The strict impartiality of the law demands a certain delay in these matters—and it is useful, for it gives me time to add a line or two about what that strong Committee did as it sat day after day between the date of its appointment and the Easter Recess. First of all, let me tell you why I have called that Committee strong.

Those experienced in Parliaments apply to a committee the word "strong" to mean that its members are characters respected, permanent, of approved capacity in affairs, and at the same time, the most of them at least, personally particularly acquainted with the matter in hand, while a minority are men remarkable for their total ignorance of it. Judged by this standard, no committee could have been stronger than the Television Contract Enquiry Committee which sat in Committee Room No. 10—the walls of which are no longer bare, but have recently been adorned with frescoes representing either the signing of Magna Charta or the Great Plague—I forget which.

The Chairman was Sir William Wagge, octogenarian biscuit manufacturer, and among his colleagues were Lady Caroline Balcombe, Watson the former partner and still intimate friend of James McAuley, Henry Boulter, sometimes called the Potted Meat King, Raeburn, the Q.C. (a life-long friend and confidant of the Attorney-General), Pickwell, the highly-respected young Trades Unionist, for many years Secretary to Honest Jack

Williams, and by him advanced to a seat in Parliament, Lady Sellingham, Miller, Bergmann, and Thomas Roby, and Mr. Boulger himself. Whingate, who as Postmaster-General in the last administration, had dealt with the earlier stages of the television business, was also one of them—a personal friend of McAuley's, as was that other colleague of his, Watson.

The Committee examined five hundred and seventeen witnesses, all on oath, and of the most varied experience and interests. Some of them could only have been remotely connected with the affair, others not at all. There was a minority and a majority report. The majority report concluded that the whole crop of rumours, which they specified one by one, were without foundation, but added no more, leaving it to be understood that in the judgement of the signatories the matter might well be allowed to come to a natural end and be forgotten. The minority report, which was signed by only three members, none of them in close touch with the accused parties, or knowing anything of the contracts in question, was more emphatic, demanded further prosecution, and demanded a strengthening of the law against irresponsible libellers.

* * *

Let us go back to the unfortunate Reginald Butler as he existed in those days when the Committee first began to sit, and as the contempt of his monstrous action now exposed to the public contumely, even before the crushing weight of evidence before the Committee had begun to accumulate and the solemn declarations which were made in Parliament, had destroyed every shred of respect men might have had for him as a mere misguided enthusiast.

On the day after the declarations were made he could not bear to open his newspaper. He dared not trust any man. Even the landlady of his lodgings looked at him with such reproach that he thought to see in her the majestic figure of Britannia reproving an erring son. There was but one heart in the world to which he could turn. And in his misery, knowing well what public ordeal must be before him, he sought that private solace which only one other heart can give to the human soul in its moments of despair.

He would not write, he would not even telephone. He walked, slowly, disconsolately, but still with the prospect of close communion before him, towards Lord Papworthy's house in Repton Square.

It was only his nerves, of course, but he thought that even the liveried man at the door looked at him as he knew well the world was looking. He went in, still miserable enough, was announced, and entered the familiar room. She was there.

She was indeed! His face had just appeared in the doorway, his two hands were but just outstretched, when he was met by that which may be compared, as you will, to a jet of boiling water, a machine-gun nest, or a railway accident. With her strong lissom body taut, just leaning forward, her arms straight and at attention, her fists clenched, each slightly behind the line of her body, with all the energy of well-moulded limbs about to spring, Joan Papworthy gave tongue. "Gave teeth" would be a better phrase; and her gambit struck the unmistakable note of what was to follow.

"You stinking fool!" she said. Oh! That ever from those lips. . . . "Stinking! Stinking! Stinking fool! Do you know what you've done? Had you the least idea what you were

doing?" She put about five "s's" into "least." "Cretin!" And on that emphatic word she shot lightning from her eyes. "Oh! Get out! Do you hear? Get out! You make me sick!"

The unfortunate young man actually wailed.

"Oh, Joan. . . ." he began. And then, when he saw her advancing upon him, the first foot already out and suggesting the crouch of the jaguar, he fled.

What had happened he could not guess. He was too bludgeoned to pull his thoughts together. No bell rang, no one was summoned, he let himself out after a moment's trembling, fumbling fingers on the latch. He went down the street like a man maddened by a panic dream.

What had happened? What had happened? What had happened? Had her absurd old football of a husband. . . . But no, that could never have incensed her. Had someone been saying things of him? He was blameless. The whole thing was a nightmare, and at the same time a problem insoluble. But anyhow, the one prop he had in this world had gone; and he continued to walk on till he reached the Park, and then still on and on more rapidly through the drizzling rain that had now begun to fall and happily left him deserted. He walked on and on and on without noticing distance or direction. He walked on till he was soaked through and exhausted. Then, after sitting himself down on a bench and finding, when he got up again, that all his energy and power had left him, he shambled back to his rooms. He had been away just one hour, and in that hour his life had come to an end.

Inexperience and surprise of a poet at the mutability of womankind.

He had deserved it all. It was too late to redeem his own character. He was in that last hell, reached by those unbalanced men, happily so few and as I believe growing fewer,

who would recklessly play the part of saviour to a political system which needs no saving, and who imagine themselves, in these our secure and dignified days, to be back in the old times of the demagogue and the revolutionary.

* * *

As for Joan Papworthy, when she heard the front door shut below, and knew that her lover would not return, she collapsed on to the sofa and sobbed aloud. Then she rang up her brokers, and found that Billies were all down the well—even deeper than she had feared.

XIII

WILFRID HALTERTON, in the days when that Committee was sitting which was to re-emphasize the stainless brilliancy of his own honour, was miserable as he had never been miserable before.

What bitter irony it had been for him to stand up and disclaim the prospect of wealth which seemed indeed to have vanished. What irony to hear James McAuley exonerated by implication as fully as he was himself exonerated! James McAuley, who indeed in offering him a post had done nothing which savoured of corruption, nothing which was not fully consonant with the best principles, the best traditions of our public life—but who in purloining the letter had surely been unparliamentary. Wilfrid Halterton was wrong. He should not have felt thus about McAuley's clever ruse in the matter of that document. Williams had given him the wisest advice, consonant with the best traditions of public life, in bidding him smile and play the game and meet check by counter-check. But Halterton remained embittered and more and more agonized.

Meanwhile, to make it worse, Billies began to crawl slowly up again; not in time, alas! for poor Lady Papworthy! Settlement day had come, with a demand for a sum wholly beyond what the bank would allow her to overdraw. She had been compelled to confess to the master of her house; to rouse him on the only point that ever roused him—but a point which really roused him—the point of money.

Lord Papworthy had forked out in the end, and she had bitterly submitted to his sermon, as the price of her release. How paltry the sum should seem to him, she thought! Yet a sum which she had to earn by submitting to that rare upbraiding—during which the round, moonlike face was strongly over-coloured and the high voice sometimes almost inarticulate.

Billies, I say, had begun to creep up—too late for her—but just in time for the wiser and more sanely balanced. They had begun to creep up in time for the most sanely balanced of all, Honest Jack Williams. There could be no doubt now what would happen in the long run to Billies. The trail could only have one ending; as for the Committee, even if it were not the author of a unanimous report, it would only mean that the minority would be still more emphatic in its condemnation of Butler's despicable accusations than the majority—and we have seen that it was so. It was all plain sailing for the Bulls, and among the first of those who landed their fish—in his case a big wad, discreetly bought in little packets by many agents to avoid too sudden a jump—was the Home Secretary; acting, of course, through the usual channels.

When the vote had been given, long before sentence had been pronounced on the wretched Butler, even before the Committee had reported, Billies would have reached their peak and he would sell again, before the very large new flotation which would follow upon the granting of the Charter, and compared with the capitalization would be like the Round Pond to the Atlantic.

It was high time for Jack Williams to get hold of James McAuley, and tell him all, put him into a cleft stick and do his deal. He concluded that the whole thing would have blown over, and necessarily in his favour, by the time the House rose, which would be towards the end of the last week in July or at the beginning of August. By that time Butler would be safely in jail, the report would long have been out, and all the trouble would be ancient history.

The Charter would go through as a matter of course, the Chief Whip would see to the voting, the Treasury would not object, and as for Halterton, he was now caught in such a trap that he dare not say a word. He would have to be his own executioner, and to see by his own official act his own chance of reward destroyed. For Jack Williams had no intention of burdening himself with that managership which lay safely buttoned in his pocket. It was always an asset—that free power to appoint what General Manager he chose—and the promise of the letter was a further inducement, if further inducement were needed—for getting McAuley, the master of Durrant's, to do what he was told.

Therefore did Jack Williams find leisure in the midst of his official labours, even in those last strenuous hours when he was completing his plan for stamping out corruption among the police, to approach James; and he timed the approach exactly.

The wheels which had been set in motion by the Postmaster-General all those weeks before when he had put down the Order on paper were now turning regularly enough; the Charter had been granted with the contract in schedule; all that was required was the Postmaster-General's own order, and that, without the Postmaster-General having anything to do with it, was producible—as no one knew better than Jack Williams.

It was the middle of the delightful month of May, with the Butler trial coming on in a couple of days, that Jack Williams, having carefully watched the anxious and worried James McAuley's peregrinations, came upon him by a studied accident in the Park. He at once took the financier by the arm, as was his genial way with all men, and plunged right into the affair. He, Williams, had something to say. James McAuley looked over his shoulder to make certain that no one was within earshot, and led the Home Secretary cautiously to two chairs under a tree far from any of the paths. There he asked, in a voice not much over a whisper, what it was that Jack Williams could have heard? Had he news of the documents? He said nothing of them, but he hoped in his heart that Halterton had squealed.

Williams was very cheerful. He made no bones about it. He even talked so loud that James McAuley quaked to hear him.

"J.," he said, slapping the other on the back, "have you missed anything lately?"

"Missed anything, man?" whispered James Haggismuir McAuley, turning his head to the left towards his companion, but his eyes even more than his head. "Missed anything?" And his eyes, already narrow, grew narrower still. "What d'ye mean?"

"Anything like this?" said Williams loudly, suddenly displaying and holding well in the hand that was farthest from McAuley the two photographs of the letters.

I am sorry to say that Mr. McAuley made a snatch. But the photographs were back in their pocket like lightning, and the whole incident had only raised a happy, ringing laugh from that eupeptic Minister of State, the Rt. Honourable Jack Williams.

"Wait a bit," he said, "wait a bit! Well, you see, they've been found. Ah, my men are

smart, I can tell you!”

McAuley shook his head. “We know all about photographs, don’t we?” he chuckled. “The camera cannot lie, can it, man?” And he chuckled again.

Then Williams with his merry look played trumps. He pulled out the two originals and held them, as he had held their copies, high and far off, but plain.

James Haggismuir McAuley sickened.

“How . . . how . . . did ye know?” he gasped, eyes narrower than ever.

“I didn’t, fathead!” answered the other in genial raillery. “Know about it? Do you think I have time to bother about all these things with my big police reform on, and all the scallywags of the force threatening? No! They were brought to me. They were found.”

“Where were they found?” asked J. again.

“Oh,” answered the Home Secretary, repeating the ritual phrase, “that would be telling, wouldn’t it? Anyhow, there they are.” He put them back and tapped the outside of his coat. “And now they’re found,” he went on, “there’s nothing to stop us going ahead, is there?”

“How do you mean—us?” rather surlily, but still leaving an avenue open for negotiation in the tone.

“Why, us, you mug—you and me.”

Jolly Jack Williams had lost nothing of his jollity through years of official importance.

“You and me, lad!” he added. “Poor old Wilfrid’s out of it—eh?” and he dug the other in the ribs.

“Don’t!” said J.

Jack Williams leant back in the chair, silently contemplating the delightful sunlit heaven through the new green of the leaves. He was letting the thing simmer in the mind of James McAuley. It was a quick mind, and the decision would be very soon reached. There came first of all a sigh, then a cough, a hesitant cough, and then the simple words:

“Fifty-fifty?”

“Don’t be silly, J.,” answered the master mind contemptuously. “Fifty-fifty, your grandmother! Fifty-one per cent., those are my terms. Fifty-one per cent. for the control. I’ve got my own men to hold for me—there’ll be several names. And as for your share of the forty-nine that’s left, why, it’s for you to settle that. I won’t be too hard on you! You know as well as I do that you can’t bag the whole forty-nine. You’ve not got a crowd to hide behind. But you can get a good fair whack, say twenty per cent. And I’m your man—when it comes to flotation.”

It is a weakness, perhaps the only weakness, of these great captains of finance that there is no limit to their desires. It is the practice of perpetual accumulation that breeds this foolish lack of proportion in them. They would be far happier if they could understand that with a thing of infinite possibilities like this, even a minority share is a vast fortune anyhow, and remain content with that. But they hate to see themselves losing control.

Needs must when the devil drives! James McAuley yielded. He could do nothing else. There was no other course open to him. And when there is no other course open your wisest man, like your most foolish, takes the only course there is.

“Very well,” said James McAuley. He sighed again, more deeply.

And they walked back, most of the time in silence, but still together. J. was rapidly calculating in his mind what proportion of the forty-nine he could safely count on, and how much of it must be left to the dear public.

And so the two wandered on, beneath an open heaven.

* * *

That evening the photographs went snugly back into the locked cupboard at Streatham.

XIV

THE trial of that unfortunate nincompoop, Reginald Butler, took but little of the public time, and need take little of ours. It was all over in two days, and we can get it all over in a very few pages.

It need not have taken one day, or half one day, for he had no evidence and no case. But the matter was of considerable moment. It was now many years since it had been thought worth while to prosecute anyone for attacks upon the integrity of Parliament, the proudest and most justified of reputations. Moreover, since the taxpayers' money was available unlimitedly, it was only reasonable that at least two days of expenses, fees and lawyers' incomes should be provided. They might even have spun it out to three days, or four, with such excellent reason for doing so, had it not been for the fact that the Attorney-General was booked to appear in a still more lucrative case on the third day.

Who shall be upon the Bench, even in cases of this high national importance, is happily a matter of pure hazard. Were it otherwise, the impartiality of justice would be suspected by evil minds. No consideration of persons, of party politics at Westminster, of services to men in high places, still less any pliancy of character, enters into the appointment of a judge; yet if there be the least hint of choosing one for a political case, there will always be the danger of malicious criticism. Some here, therefore, suggested that the judge for cases where men of great wealth or position have been attacked should be chosen after the fashion favoured by the gypsies—the drawing of a name out of a hat by a blind child—but it was felt that this proceeding would be beneath the dignity of justice.

The great lawyer and deeply respected man who was to try Butler for criminal libel was Sir Henry Chasible—Mr. Justice Chasible, as he preferred to be called with a fine respect for tradition.

It looked at one moment as though Mr. Justice Honeybubble would have been given the duty. His forcible personality would certainly in that case have rendered the trial even more memorable than its general character would make it. But Mr. Justice Honeybubble had broken down, and was in need of repose for some weeks, having overstrained himself through the intensity of his summing up in the recent case of Sligo v. Jay. Still, he was an astonishing man for his years. He was surprisingly energetic for a man of eighty-seven—but he had, for the moment, overstrained even his powers. Therefore was it that Sir Henry Chasible was seated on the Bench during those memorable two days. The universal respect with which he was regarded, even beyond the large measure justly lavished upon his colleagues, was due to many things combined. First, and most important, he was a very wealthy man, nor was the wealth mercantile in origin, but landed; a thing somewhat rare in the first generation of a great legal family. It was inherited land. The more praise was due to a man who, occupying such a position, sacrificed himself to the drudgery of judicial work—but with Henry Chasible his country always came first.

Sir Henry Chasible.

Then, for what it was worth, he wore a moustache, and for my part I think these details are of some importance in the estimation of character; for how rarely do we find a judge with the courage to adorn himself after this fashion!

Further, in his non-official capacity, he was a deeply religious man, practising with devotion and exactitude every precept and every rite of the Catholic Faith, which could boast no more devoted son. While, also in his non-official capacity, he was a fearless opponent of the Roman perversion and schism. Indeed, Sir Henry Chasible, apart from using his extensive patronage upon his Rutland estates in the Catholic cause, had been instrumental in preventing the ruins of Rabbly Abbey being purchased by Romanist fanatics, himself advancing all the money for, and largely subscribing to, the National Trust which was formed for the preservation of the venerable pile (as the Poet Laureate has called it).

He had sat in his time in the House of Commons as an Anarchist, though strongly in the Right Wing of that party, and regarded as almost a Socialist by his more advanced brethren. Later, upon leaving the House, and in the interval between this and his elevation to the Bench, he had frankly joined the Socialist party, his sympathies with which were known (though of course he could not now express them except in his unofficial capacity)

to have strengthened with the years. Everything in the man tended to emphasize his conservatism as he advanced in life.

The reason that Reginald Butler's trial demanded so brief an attention from the authorities was, as I have said, that the unhappy fool had no case. It simplified matters, but simplified them if anything a little too much, for it left little opportunity for that vigorous denunciation in which the Attorney-General excelled.

The miserable fellow in the dock would have been ably defended, if defence had been possible, by Mr. Charles Carrick, who chivalrously undertook the case for the paltry fee which alone was available—partly because he felt, as did the Bar in general, that a man under the weather like Butler had a special right to the best talent and partly because it was a case the participation in which would put Counsel right in the limelight; and such occasions are of service to a rising young barrister.

But it would be nonsense to pretend that Carrick had any case. He could do little but plead for mercy by some pitiful description of his client's honest motives and genuine aberration.

He did not, of course, actually plead lunacy, which would have been almost as unwelcome to Butler himself as to the authorities who were so naturally interested in the case; but he was prepared to show that the pinchbeck-Byron figure was surrounded by unreal dreams, living in a world that was not. The great statesmen whom he had so abominably and falsely accused, though they bore the names of real men, were for him but wraiths of the imagination.

The appearance of the Attorney-General for the Crown in the case was criticized by some, applauded by others. His younger brother was indirectly involved; I say "indirectly," because the indictment had not a word about James McAuley, but only brought in the specific point of the accusation against Halterton of having given a contract for a consideration; further, it was thought better that the name of the Chancellor of the Exchequer should not be dragged into the affair, though the Chief Whip was not himself averse to the publicity of it.

Sir Andrew McAuley, Attorney-General, cross-examining the infamous traducer.

The etiquette of the Bar had been very strict on these matters in the past, and had more than once prevented a great law officer of the Crown appearing when members of his family were supposed to be, or actually were, involved in any accusation, and might have prevented Sir Andrew McAuley from being seen on those days in Court. On the other hand, there are two precedents—that generally known as the Periscope Case, and the other still more generally known as the Soap Scandal, in both of which the Attorney-General of the day had appeared for the Crown, although in the one case his father, and in the other his son, had been widely mentioned in connection with irregularities involved.

But Andrew McAuley's main reason for appearing was a simple and, I think, a very fine one. He was determined to stop all these malicious rumours that had been current about his younger brother, and to exorcise them by the power of his name. No other man would thus have sacrificed so much for family feeling. The point has always since been remembered in his favour. Another reason for his action was the very considerable sum which he could give himself out of the taxes for his trouble.

Tartle, his Junior, was not called upon to plead, but did useful work in prompting and acting as a go-between during the trial. Indeed, the work he did was, though not of a public nature, of some effect upon the result. It happened thus:

Sir Andrew McAuley was coming to the conclusion of his great speech, which was to

conclude with the historic phrase, “This is a Court of Justice, and I demand Justice.” It was indeed nearly half an hour earlier, at the beginning of the famous peroration, “When I see this man my heart bleeds for him”—a touching allusion to Wilfrid Halterton, which has since passed into more than one anthology of English literature—that Samuel Tartle was discreetly handed from the back of the Court a piece of paper. It was small, and not very clean, for it had passed from one to another on its way to him—a thing which should not have been done, for that piece of paper contained very private information, and the information was such that Samuel Tartle with difficulty concealed his dismayed astonishment.

The information which that piece of paper contained must now be given in all its magnitude.

Each of the political parties, as we all know, is rightly possessed of a large fund—subscriptions given by the public—which is kept in the honourable keeping of some specially designed member of the crew who can be trusted to account for it exactly, and to use it wisely. He gives, of course, no receipts, nor does he keep (if we may believe his evidence on oath) any memoranda of such payments. Indeed, by a constitutional fiction he is permitted, whenever the funds may be alluded to in examination before a committee or even before a judge, alternatively either to deny that the fund exists, or to plead complete ignorance of the amount it contains, as of the names of those who have so generously contributed to it.

The startling of Mr. Tartle.

Now these funds cannot be allowed to lie idle. They must, like other money, earn their interest and be put to profitable employment while they are waiting to be used for the general purposes of State to which they are assigned—such as incidental expenses of candidates, the persuasion of men not directly engaged in political work but occupying what might be called “key position” (Joe Billingham, for instance, of Nuneaton, the trainer, and that universal favourite Jerry Cobb, who keeps “The Swan” on the Meddinghurst Road), the payment of gambling debts and many other uses. Numerous are the purposes for which these important funds are used.

They are sometimes very large; in fact, Longpenny House in Longpenny Square was built out of but a fraction of one such fund—which is some indication of their scale.

That is the first point we must bear in mind—that such funds must be made to earn interest. The second point is that Prime Ministers have secretaries.

The Prime Ministership of Great Britain (including the six counties of Northern Ireland, the town of Berwick-on-Tweed, and the Channel Islands—but not the Isle of Man) is perhaps the highest seat of a purely temporal kind to which a human being can aspire; nobly filled at this present moment by the ample form of Mrs. Boulger.

The Secretaries attached to this most exalted of all mortal posts are, as may be imagined, of various kinds. Their number has necessarily increased with the development of the British Constitution since the year 1900, and to the original six of our grandfathers' time there have been added another thirty-three, which a brief calculation will show to make a total approaching forty. They are housed for the most part in that row of low buildings the encroachment of which upon the Horse Guards Parade has been so much criticized in the Press and the contract for which was given to the Minister of War's step-daughter's friend, W. H. Gar . . . but I have no space to go into all that.

Now among these thirty-nine secretaries there are three of special importance—the Private Secretary, the Confidential Secretary, and the Secretary. The last is a man drawn, nearly always, from the higher ranks of the Civil Service. He is commonly a man of family, as the occasion demands, and it is also consonant with his position that he should have his career all before him and be in the earlier years of his public activity.

The gentleman who filled this position during the session of 1960, and had filled it now for more than a year, was Danver—Teddy Danver—as good a man as could have been chosen for the post, with that mixture of freedom in speech where freedom is admissible and of discretion when discretion is necessary, with all that exact knowledge of how things may be told to fifty people if the fifty people are well chosen and yet never get to the public ear, and also, I ought to add, with all that healthy sense of humour which is invaluable for preserving a man's sense of proportion in the difficult game of public life.

On the morning of the second day of the trial, towards the end of the morning, at the moment when, far off at the Old Bailey, Sir Andrew McAuley was beginning his great peroration, the two minor Secretaries who sat beyond the green baize door in the outer office, ready to attend Danver's whistle at the speaking tube whenever it should sound, were startled by a maniac noise from within.

They each looked round with sudden fear that their chief might have been seized with some temporary affliction. Loud roars and shrieks and interrupted coughings, followed by the bellowing of their names—"Bill! Ha-ha! Ho-ho! Bill, Garry, come here! Garry! Bill! Oh, my God!" and then more laughter, louder and louder, explosive, cataclysmic, as Bill and Garry rushed through the green baize door. They saw, within, their respected superior leaning back in his chair with his mouth so wide open as to be cavernous, roaring, bellowing, and shrieking with laughter—laughter that shook the whole of his considerable frame. He was just reaching the stage of exhaustion when they broke in.

"You can't guess!" he whispered, spluttering and hoarse with the effort he had just gone through. "You'll never guess! No, you'll never guess! You couldn't! Oh, my God!" And he tried to laugh again, but it hurt him so much that he checked himself with an effort. "Oh, it's too good to be true! What *do* you think they've done now?"

"Who?" said Garry and Bill together in anxious astonishment.

"Why, the Heavenly Twins!" (The Heavenly Twins, I should mention, was the slang term in that office for the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Chief Whip, those gentlemen who had been very justly remembered by the Attorney-General at breakfast some little time before in the matter of the Television Contract.)

"Oh, God be praised!" went on the Head Secretary of all, the Very Secretary himself, in panting tones and with hardly any breath left in his body, "God be praised, Who has

allowed me to live to see this day!"

"What have they done?" said Garry.

"Which has what done?" said Bill.

"What has which of them done?" said Garry again.

"Oh, you'll never guess!" repeated the Chief, with dancing eyes delightedly. "No one'll ever guess! This kind of thing only happens once in a million years! *They have been using the secret party funds to rig the market for Billies!*"

Garry, who was very young indeed, and still preserved some middle-class illusions on the nature of public life, whistled. Bill burst into laughter louder than his chief's, but out of respect to his chief, less prolonged.

"Well, they've got to be told, you know."

"Who?" said Garry.

"They," answered the Chief, with a nod.

And then to Bill, "You know."

"Yes," said Bill, "I know."

"You'd better take it yourself, there mustn't be too many people seeing it."

Bill was at the Old Bailey about a quarter of an hour later. He had jotted the information down simply and clearly enough upon a sheet of paper, and folded it in two; he did not put it in an envelope. He was determined that it should be appreciated immediately.

When he got to the door of the Court he remembered too late that he had nothing on him to show who he was. He only hoped that the official guardian of that portal would believe him.

"I have come from the Prime Minister's secretary," he said. "Would you let me in? I want to pass a note up to the Counsel for the Prosecution."

He was believed, and entered. As the door opened upon the dense throng within, above the heads of which he heard the loud booming of Andrew McAuley's majestic eloquence, he saw that there wasn't a dog's chance of getting through.

"Would you pass that on, to one of the Counsel for the Prosecution? There. That man there. Mr. Tartle. Do you think you could get it passed up to Mr. Tartle?"

The man thus addressed took it from him and handed it to another before him in the press. That other passed it on to another, crumpled somewhat but still intact. Tartle took it, opened the fold, read the dozen words or less boldly scrawled in pencil, and it had on him the effect I have mentioned.

What was he to do? He must show it to his chief, but he could not interrupt this final passage in which the jury were being reminded of the black-hearted Butler's admission that he had no evidence, that he depended wholly upon the wretched tittle-tattle of Fleet Street public-houses, as it had been conveyed to him by his disreputable friend. He had admitted—having chosen to go into the box himself in spite of his Counsel urging him not to do so—that he had gone by nothing but common sense and common knowledge, and other clap-trap of that kind.

While Sir Andrew was proceeding to shed tears of blood over the sufferings of Wilfrid Halterton, while he recalled to the jury the picture which that great statesman had made

standing with bowed head, his sensitive honour touched to the quick, by the mere mention of the foul accusations that were made, Samuel Tartle was in an agony to make known the contents of that note. He had to wait till the last famous phrase was pronounced—"this is a Court of Justice, and I demand Justice"—until the Attorney-General, at a blood-pressure dangerous for his age, sat down again in a cloud of forensic glory.

But Mr. Samuel Tartle, that distinguished Junior, who had been so happily spared the trouble of opening his mouth, and had the more easily earned his money, need not have been so worried. The Secretary's message had been carried up by the Secretary's deputy secretary to higher quarters still in that discreet fashion which deputy secretaries well know.

Outside in the passages men who professed to understand the inner things of public life were giving each his opinion, not upon the verdict, for there could be no question on that, but upon the sentence. One bald-headed old boy of sporting character, who had often come out on the right side of the ledger about these things, said it would be two years. The more general opinion varied between one year and six months. A fool remarked that they would not make a martyr of Butler. Another fool said they would certainly make an example. A third fool, who seems to have been rather less of a fool than either of those two, said that it would depend upon what they thought would be best. No one, anyhow, went below six months, and as I say, the favourite was twelve, with something like five to three against eighteen months, and higher odds against two years.

Those who listened to the summing up would, at the beginning of it, have leant to the severer conclusion; for the noble, dignified, religious face of Mr. Justice Chasible had been full of that awful severity which the occasion demanded.

He began by telling the jury that the law had ordained the institution of Criminal Libel for the terror of evil-doers and as a substitute for the degraded practice of the duel, which still obtained, he was sorry to say, among nations less civilized than ourselves, but which had here happily disappeared. He told them how the law was chary of using this last drastic weapon, but that there were occasions when nothing else would serve. All governments would be thrown into confusion, and all the high traditions of our public life would fail, if it were thought that men might with impunity spread, not in the heated criticism of a moment nor through the pardonable exaggeration arising in the violence of political debate, but deliberately, such malicious falsehoods against the statesmen whom Providence had chosen for the conduct of this mighty country. "Upon the purity of whose public life," he added, "and upon the standard of whose morals, all the civilized world has modelled itself"—and here the Judge made a passing allusion to our identity in this matter with our dear cousins of the United States, an *obiter dictum* which men of Sir Henry's standing are permitted to pronounce, to the great advantage of the foreign relations of the Commonwealth.

"As a terror to evil-doers," repeated that great and (may I say?) holy Judge, "As a terror to evil-doers"—in a stern, rising voice. Then, as though conscious that restraint would be of even greater effect than the giving of full rein to indignation, he checked himself, and added in colourless but strong tones:

"You have, gentlemen of the jury, to judge of the facts *and* the law. It is in this that an action for libel, even for criminal libel, differs from any other." And he briefly quoted the provisions of Fox's Act: "If in your judgement the prisoner had good cause to say what he

did, it being substantially true, and to the public advantage that he should say it, you will then bring in a verdict of not guilty. But if you, etc. . . . etc. . . . You will then . . . etc. . . . etc. . . bring in the contrary verdict."

With these words the solemn voice was still.

The jury, without leaving the box, proclaimed their decision through the mouth of their foreman, a man with a tenor voice, a cockney accent, and a flourishing public-house at the corner of Leadenhall Street; an admirable specimen of that sound common sense which makes our jury system the envy of the world.

Then it was that a great hush fell upon the Court, to hear the Judge's admonition of the poor wretch behind the spiked railing—and the sentence.

The admonition was short. The judge emphasized the heinousness of the crime, and above all its lack of adequate motive. He was willing to believe that fanaticism had pushed the miserable creature before him beyond the point of sane judgement. But the law could take no account of that. It was its duty to protect His Majesty's subjects of every grade, and particularly those who had undertaken the arduous and thankless task of government, from such poisonous falsehoods as those which the prisoner had quoted and disseminated. Under the circumstances he should not be doing his duty if he did less than inflict upon the culprit a fine of fifty pounds.

The foreman of the jury, an admirable specimen of that sound common sense which makes our jury system the envy of the world.

Oh, the wisdom and the power! And to this day there are perhaps not more than two thousand five hundred men in England who remember what had been done on that

occasion with the Party Funds.

* * *

Reginald Butler left the Court a free but friendless man—friendless unless we admit as friends three or four base and insignificant fanatics, the out-at-elbows Rashdell, of the *Oriflamme*, another who was one of Rashdell's drunken satellites, and a third poor tub-thumper in whose eyes the now broken Reginald was still a hero.

He was called upon by his Committee to resign his seat. He refused, but after a week of returning to the House and suffering from the silent contempt which such men are justly condemned to suffer, he despaired, and gave way. He resigned.

The literary work by which he had hitherto supported himself, tolerated so far on account of his amusing reputation for extreme views which no one until now had taken seriously, fell from him as suddenly as the conversation of his acquaintance. At last, some said from the generosity of Halterton himself, some through the influence of Lady Papworthy, he got a small but regular place on one of the Desportes papers to write on the current drama. He owed the post neither to the woman he had served nor to the man that he had maligned, but to the action of an editor whose dramatic critic had died of delirium tremens. This editor had been harshly ordered to get the next one at half the price. He had almost decided that such a person was unfindable, when Butler was proposed to him as a man now starving, who would work for anything. It was thus that Reginald got just the wherewithal to pay for the poor lodging and insufficient meals as dramatic critic to the *Gaper*, which he is to this day.

He was not, of course, allowed to sign his own name. He was given a pseudonym "Dr. Johnson"; and pitiful as was the pay, they worked him hard.

He has continued to try and do his duty there, poor fool, though he finds that constant attendance at innumerable plays of great similarity blunts the dramatic sense, and would take all savour from his life if any savour were yet there. He has a fault, which is that very often he misses the earlier part of the performance. May I take this opportunity of saying that he is not to be blamed? His frequent late appearance in the stalls is simply due to the fact that he cannot always raise in time the money to take out of pawn that evening uniform which is insisted upon by managers.

The last state of those who impugn the honour of public men.

XV

ARTHUR LAWSON took very little interest in the stock market. There was a time, years before, when he had speculated. He had liked the excitement while he was still young, he had liked to win on the game—as indeed he had. He might have remained at it, as do many of his fellows, all his life, had not three convergent pieces of success, only one of which was on a gamble in shares, the other two being on an accidental piece of early information and an unexpectedly large commission on an unexpectedly large order with which he had been entrusted, put him into the possession of a lump of money upon a different scale from the increasing fortune he had hitherto enjoyed. He had moved up at once on to that plane, the leaders of which can be counted in two figures; and then on to that highest group of all in which less than a score of men act as the basis of finance. He was behind national loans, great underwriting, and solid issues of the largest kind; and was also the chief in the very great banking house of Schwartz.

This was the moment of transition in which he had bought that isolated house in Mayfair which had not its like in London, and with which he was everywhere now associated.

But in the very great position which he now held, and which amplified, as these things do, year after year, automatically, his distaste for the uncertain things of the market grew. He had no hobby. He was the sort of man who, if he had had a hobby, would have made it take up all his life in the place of his business.

He found himself lonely. He tried to fill his hours with the world-wide responsibilities which lay upon him. They did not suffice. Had he known Wilfrid Halterton more intimately, and had it been possible for the two men to be really in communion with each other—from difference of blood and traditions it was not—he would have liked to have strengthened the bond there. He did indeed now formally call upon the Postmaster-General rather more often than he had done in the immediate past—but still, never more than three or perhaps four times in the year.

Those who imagine that such men are soaked in the thought of money, and especially of money that changes, know nothing of their kind. While all the world had been talking of the ups and downs of Billies during these exciting weeks, he had heard nothing but a sort of confused noise like the murmur of small and distant waves. It did not interest him. It had something to do with the Post Office, but he did not connect the matter with Wilfrid Halterton, though he knew that his friend was for the moment the head of the Post Office. The name of Halterton stood in his mind for a permanent and fixed gratitude, rooted there for half a tenacious lifetime. He had for the whole political world such contempt, and lived so much aloof from it, that he hardly cared to remember which ephemeral office the man now held. For Arthur Lawson Wilfrid Halterton was still the eager, young, impulsive man whom he had put into a shrine nearly forty years since as the man whose heart had been so moved for his brother.

To have that brother with him as much as possible was now the one object of Lawson's life. He got him down from Cambridge every week-end during term. He was perpetually suggesting this and that which might be done with his wealth for the scientific equipment of the College. He had already benefited it largely. He was never tired of listening to everything Jacob had to tell him, from the stories of the Common Room to the last developments in physical research; things which from any others' lips would have been tedious to him.

But though Lawson on this high mountain peak of international finance had bothered no more about Billies than about the price of Danish butter, he could not remain ignorant of the scene in the House of Commons, the public denials of the accused, the Committee, and the trial—especially the trial. It was a subject that bored him, but he could not help knowing the main lines of it, in company with all England.

In that week-end after the conclusion of Butler's ordeal Jacob was sitting with his brother as usual, and Jacob had an interest in this affair of which everyone was talking—an interest which had indeed nothing to do with politics, a professional interest in the new developments of Television. It would have bored Arthur stiff to have heard anyone else holding forth on that subject, especially as it had got mixed up, in some way at which he held his nose, with the stench of Westminster. But from Jacob it was as interesting as an absorbing book. Anything that made Jacob's keen, brilliant eyes keener and more brilliant entered at once into the soul of his brother. That brother listened and questioned, got into the matter as a man gets into some intricate plot, heard a comparison between the various systems, and heard—incidentally—the name of Dow's Patent.

"That's the whole point," Jacob was saying. "That's the whole point, Aaron."

He spoke eagerly, as might a man spotting a distant mark at sea.

"It's because Reynier's were supposed to have Dow's that they were thought the only possible people. Of course, now Durrant's have got the contract—I don't know why, I suppose they're better than the others—anyhow, now Durrant's have got the Charter, Reynier's will have to sell Dow's Patent to Durrant's, if they've got it. Whoever's got it will have to sell to Durrant's. There'll be no other market. But that's not the interest—the interest is in Dow's thing itself. Isn't it extraordinary, Aaron, how men tumble upon these things? It comes quite by chance . . . of course, it couldn't be done without patience and research, still, it's luck when such things do come; and then, when some chance man has tumbled upon them, everything is plain sailing. And what's more, when the thing has been found, it's found for good. Nothing can replace it—nine times out of ten. . . ."

"I don't see why some new invention should not be even better than Dow's," said the other.

Jacob shook his head.

"Look here," he said, "I'll read you a passage in Colman's description; it's the best I know. I've got it down here in my commonplace book, for my lectures. It's the most recent book, too." He read the passage. The other took it in clearly enough. This unfortunate man Dow, who had died in such poverty and whose patents were now held by Dow's Limited, had hit upon the one Intensifier which made long-range Television a practical proposition.

Professor Jacob Lawson, of Merrion College, Cambridge.

"You know, Jackey," said the elder brother, "a layman like me can't see why some totally new and better thing shouldn't appear sooner or later."

Jacob put away his book. "Perhaps—sooner or later," he said. "One never knows. But they have been at it for years. And Dow solved it. These things have a way of being final. You remember the case of the secondary battery, Aaron, away back in the 19th century, more than two lifetimes ago?"

Arthur shook his head. It astonished Jacob that any man should be ignorant of such elementary things.

"My dear Aaron!" he said, "surely you know that they have never been able to better lead? Surely you know that's why we've never had a cheap and light and durable electric storage to this day? Surely you know that if we could have found something else it would have changed the world?"

Arthur smiled slightly but happily, as he never smiled but at his brother's enthusiasms.

"I can't help it, Jackey," he said. "It's too late to learn. But I believe every word you say."

Then they went on to talk about the luck of scientific discovery, Jacob enthusiastic for the discoveries, and Arthur wondering why he said not a word about their reward; for reward, so far as Aaron could remember, only about one in a dozen ever received.

And from that they went on to the old subject of money. But it soon dried up, for whenever that nerve was touched Jacob went into his shell; he was content, he was *perfectly* content with what he had as a Fellow of Merrion. It was ample. And the older brother for the fiftieth time gave up the attempt. In his heart he thoroughly agreed. "Better a dinner of herbs. . . ." Only he did not say it in English. He said it, still smiling, in the

ancient tongue. And his brother smiled back at him, and replied in the ancient tongue: "Blessed be God."

Next day Arthur Lawson again bethought him of Wilfrid Halterton, but not in connection with the conversation on Dow's Patent. His mind still did not connect the two ideas. He understood vaguely now that Durrant's would have the monopoly. He supposed Durrant's had been chosen for good reasons. But at any rate, Halterton had been in the glare of publicity, and that was never pleasant. It was his duty to go and see that friend, and at the same time to congratulate him upon his success.

It was not so very long since he had last made one of those pilgrimages to Halterton's house for one of those formal conversations which had become a ritual of his life. It was a little early for him to call again in the same fashion, but he thought the circumstances demanded it.

After all, there had been an accumulation of bother. Halterton had come out of it very well, with the hearty sympathy of his colleagues, and for the matter of fact, of the public at large. But these things were a strain; perhaps, thought Lawson, more of a strain for those other people than it would have been for him and his, who were used to the hostility of the world, and were steeled against it. He mused within himself. What must it feel like? Something like what he remembered it felt like years and years and years ago in his boyhood, when after the insults of the Gentiles in the streets, to which he was inured, he found among his own fellows in his own little day school that some accident had lost him the friendship of a few, and made him wretched for a day or two.

Anyhow, clearly he must call upon Wilfrid Halterton and assure him that the sympathy which all had felt for him during his recent ordeal had been stronger with him than with any other. He must congratulate Wilfrid Halterton upon the general support he had had and on the higher position in public life which must be the consequence of it.

He was in such a mood when, after making his appointment, he arrived and found Halterton alone in his flat—and at once he was shocked by the change in the man.

Lawson did not say to himself that Halterton looked older. It was not that. Though indeed he did look older—ten years older. It was more that he looked broken. He fell into nervous gestures as he talked. His eyes were never still. His mouth was drawn, and his strained expression seemed permanent.

Moreover, he greeted Lawson with quite unexpected warmth, as men will when they feel themselves ill-used by the world and half abandoned, and find before them an assured friend. And Lawson, upon his side, by nature reserved, and in the case of Wilfrid Halterton always formal, went more than half-way to meet him. He took the Postmaster-General's hand in his, and held it longer than men hold another man's hand in a mere greeting. As he held it, he looked deeply into the other's eyes, so that Halterton's fell before his. Then, just as Lawson was beginning to speak, the Postmaster-General suddenly sat down like a man with a great burden on his shoulders, who cannot maintain his attitude a moment more; one might almost say that the long frame collapsed into the low chair. He was up again in a moment, almost with a start, ready to blush for his ill-breeding.

"I beg your pardon, my dear fellow," he said. "I am sorry. You see, I am not myself." He sighed openly and deeply. It was nearly a groan. "I am not myself. I can't think why I sat down like that and left you standing. But do sit down, my dear fellow. I'm so glad to

see you.” He put out his hand again, half forgetting that he had but just made that gesture. And once again Lawson took it, and this time he did not let it go.

“Halterton,” he said (he never called him Wilfrid) “I didn’t expect to find you like this. What’s the matter? I had come to congratulate you.”

“Congratulate me? Oh! God!”

In the silence that followed the very rapid mind of Arthur Lawson moved at double its customary pace. He was revising at a gallop the very little he knew, the unheeded details of the affair which had reached him—and he thought he already half understood.

Grave spiritual ordeal of the Right Hon. Wilfrid Halterton, M.P., Postmaster-General.

When he spoke, it was with such a voice as this acquaintance of three decades standing did not know he could use. It was a voice at once grave and deep with a profound affection; it was full of the years. And in that voice Arthur Lawson took upon himself to say things which not an hour before, as he approached the house, he would have thought himself incapable of using. His ritual broke, and what he said was this:

“Halterton, you know that whatever I say to you will be said from the bottom of my heart? Do you trust my wisdom?”

The Postmaster-General nodded, if raising the bent head slightly and sinking back again could be called nodding; and the glance which he lifted in that same gesture for a moment to the other’s face was permissive. He had as much respect as any man for

fortune, and anything that this vastly wealthy man could say was sure to be wise. But Arthur Lawson's wisdom had no connection with his fortune. It was something that went back through generations. It had been annealed by suffering and strengthened by isolation.

"What I want to say to you is this. You must speak. I can see that as plainly as though you had already told me things of which I know nothing. That is my advice. You must speak. You must tell someone, and believe me" (he had never spoken so unreservedly before to anyone in his life, not even to one of his own people) "there is no one to whom you could speak more openly and clearly or with more advantage than myself. You know that everything I have is at your disposal—but that is nothing. What you want is a word from a man who knows men. It's not a nice kind of knowledge. If you have not got it you are fortunate. It is the tree of death. But those who have got it can help you. And you can help yourself too. But there's only one way. Tell me everything."

There were twenty men, at least, there were perhaps fifty, whom Wilfrid would have told you that he knew much better than Arthur Lawson. There was one man after another to whom he had said this or that. He had told too much to Jack Williams; he had grumbled to that colleague and to this relative; it had only got him deeper into the morass. He wished he had never touched political life at all. He wished he could be rid of it now—only he dared not. And in the midst of it all was that strong feeling of injustice.

He had been robbed of his due. He had given that which he had to give, and for which they had come, and by an abominable trick he had been despoiled of his side of the bargain. What was worse, he felt himself permanently in the power of others.

When he spoke, it was from this bitterness, festering within him and come to a head. He rose and, hands in pockets, began to move up and down the room, a lank, drawn-out despair; and as he moved he spoke. He told Lawson all. He told him of the agreement, which Lawson as a man of the world found reasonable enough—he had heard of fifty such between politicians and the City. Sometimes you did not know which was which, thought he, so closely was Parliament mixed with share-shuffling.

Halterton told him of the filching of the letter. He told him of the conversation with Williams. He told him what he had suffered since; he told him how keenly he had resented Williams's continued friendship with McAuley; the two men were more together than ever. He told him how he regretted having gone to Williams at all, and by the time he ended Arthur Lawson not only knew what had happened, he also knew what was to be done.

"I can't tell you how glad I am you have spoken, Halterton," he said. "And now I am going to give you some further advice. Do you think you'll take it?"

"Yes, certainly," said Halterton. "I can trust *you*, thank God!" he added bitterly.

"Well, the advice I have got to give you is very simple. Sit tight for a few days and leave it to me, will you?" He smiled very slightly as he said this, but gravely confident in spite of the smile.

"Let me see. To-day's Sunday. Don't expect to hear from me till Wednesday, or perhaps later—but it won't be much later—if I know anything of the way things are done. And I think I do."

Wilfrid Halterton was even more sure of that. He was profoundly sure that men with untold millions knew how things were done. It was perhaps the most fixed article in his

creed, and the more fixed because he himself had no idea how things were done.

Arthur Lawson was a man who, having come to a decision, had to act. He had blamed himself for his impatience in the past, after one or two slips due to it, but that intense craving for action following upon an intellectual conclusion had upon the whole served him well.

"I am going back home now, Halterton," he said, rising. The other rose with him, and once more they joined hands.

This time Arthur Lawson did a thing so unusual with him that it marked a sort of epoch in the other's life, and he himself when he discovered what he was doing was astonished. He put his left hand upon the other's, which he was grasping with his right, and let it lie there as a man may in the most solemn moments of pledging loyalty and service. It was a gesture of not ten seconds; it was over and it was never to be repeated. The men were elderly, they had never held such communion before, but at the end of those ten seconds Halterton felt as a sleepless man feels when sleep has come upon him; as a drowning man feels when he again drinks in the blessed air. His face was renewed.

Aaron Levina was about to do a thing as profitable to his own lonely heart as could be done. His isolation was not broken; he still remained what he had been before that brief interview; but he felt that with *one* of the Goyim at least, the only one of them whom he had ever approached with devotion, he had made a link. It mattered not. He would make no other. He was of his own people. What had he to do with the outer swarms? But he would save Wilfrid Halterton.

XVI

THE first thing Arthur Lawson did when he got home was to begin to question his brother again about Dow's. His plan was already made, and he was preparing the first step. But Jacob could not tell him what he wanted to know. The scientist reiterated all that he had said to his brother upon the absolute necessity of Dow's Patent; but he had nothing more to add, except emphasis. There was no rival. There were plenty of Intensifiers, which had worked well enough at the short ranges, but it was not a question of increase in power, it was not a question of scale. Long range involved a totally different principle; and Dow, and Dow only, had solved the problem.

As for the appearance of an alternative, there was no sign of it, and he did not see how, as knowledge stood, there could be one in the near future. These discoveries are haphazard, but they always come following upon a certain known set of conditions; they are led up to. There was no set of conditions yet known which could produce anything not now covered by Dow's Patent.

Then Arthur Lawson asked again, a question which showed how completely he was of his own world, and how little in that of his learned brother, whom for that very reason he looked upon with admiring awe. For the question Arthur Lawson asked was this. "Do you think Dow's are bound to Reynier's, Jackey?"

"Good heavens, Aaron—Arthur I mean!" (and he smiled), "I'm sorry. That's more your line of country than mine. People went about saying Reynier's had it, but I never saw any proof, or heard from anyone that there was any proof. It's got an independent office—not that that means anything."

Arthur Lawson mused.

"All right, Jackey," he said at last. "That's all I wanted. Anyhow, if Durrant's have got the contract—and everybody now knows they have—there's nothing left but the vote, and that's a matter of course. As Durrant's have got the contract, there is no other market now, even for Reynier's to go to. If Reynier's control Dow's—Reynier's will have to sell to Durrant's or amalgamate. They'll want their price."

"I suppose so," said Jacob, shrugging his shoulders and turning again to his beloved work. "It's not the kind of thing I understand."

Arthur Lawson looked at his watch. It was not yet seven, he could catch the man he wanted. The man he wanted dressed carefully, and dressed every night. But he did not dress before seven. Arthur Lawson rang the bell, gave the number to the servant and waited.

* * *

The man whom Arthur Lawson wanted, the man whom he wanted immediately,

because time was everything, the man who must be set to work now because to-morrow morning was Monday and the work of the world would begin, was a certain dull and rather large, well-set-up young gentleman called Guy des Cuoyes (to rhyme, as is only right, with *sepoy*).

The des Cuoyes were Channel Islanders, and very proud of their lineage. You might guess that from their insistence upon the little "d" in the *des*; and Cuoyes, let me tell you, is a real place, or rather two real places, Cuoye le Grand and Cuoye le Petit, in a wild part of the Cotentin. But property in these villages the des Cuoyes had had none for generations past. They had left France for Jersey in the religious troubles of two and a half centuries ago.

Young Guy des Cuoyes' father, the General, had done the right thing by him. He had put him into his own old school, and sent him to the University. As his only income was the recognition of his services made to him by his grateful country for special work in India, it died with him. And as he had died just after Guy had come down from Oxford, more than seven years before, the young man found himself in London with all those excellent habits which the University teaches its more successful sons, but without the income which such habits demand.

He had fallen on his feet more or less, and the better for having no close relatives. It was the father of a friend of his, a friend whom he had made at Oxford, who gave him his chance—an odd chance but sufficient. He was given a place in that father's large business, the main purpose of which was the buying and selling of houses, and as a side line, advice on refitting or the laying out of grounds, and the rest of it.

But young des Cuoyes' special branch of activity had nothing to do with that. It was yet another side line, in which only two other men were employed with him, and for which he was particularly well paid. It was his business to find things out. He had just enough brains; what is more important in such things than brains, he had, hidden under his conventional Public School mark—industry. He had no acting power, but he had what comes next to it, and that is (a thing not at all incompatible with industry), a partly assumed but much more real perpetual boredom, or, let us say, a lack of enthusiasm; and further, what is more important still, no excess of affection. Further, he had what is almost the most important thing of all in that trade, a large and good acquaintance. Lastly, he had what *is* most important of all, a presence; a presence big, blonde, up-standing, accompanied by a slow voice and eyes as slow as his tones—and he dressed beautifully.

Guy des Cuoyes had not been two years in this general employment, and doing fairly well at it, when he had come across Arthur Lawson. Arthur Lawson had occasion to make certain inquiries. He knew where to make them. The firm had sent des Cuoyes. On finding, as Lawson did at once, what the lad's talents were, he had, I am sorry to say (but Arthur Lawson had no scruples in such things) bought him over his employer's head.

The thing was done in gentlemanly fashion, at least as far as des Cuoyes was concerned. The young man informed his employer that he had come into a considerable private income, and happily could live henceforward as a gentleman; for which trade, indeed, he felt himself to be born. He need do no more work. The excuse had the added advantage that it covered his tracks. He could do the findings out under better camouflage than ever; for was he not now a young gentleman of large private means with nothing to do but shed his glory upon the town? The terms that Arthur Lawson had given were

satisfactory to both, and characteristic of the senior of the pair. He gave young Guy a good permanent salary, under contract, and he also paid extra by the job. He had reasons for that, as may be guessed; they were satisfactory reasons, and they worked.

In consideration for so much Guy had to be constantly at the beck and call of his employer. His time was mapped out, he knew his leisure as a soldier knows his leave: outside those gaps of leisure, which were carefully arranged for, he must be within reach of the telephone at all hours; and leave word of every movement, so that he could be found at a moment's notice. Men in Arthur Lawson's position can afford themselves such luxuries, and they are well worth the price paid.

Now on this occasion the job was very particular, for Guy des Cuoyes had not only to find out things, but he had to bring them off: and to bring them off at full speed. Within a quarter of an hour of receiving the call on that Sunday evening he was in the little room at the back of the house where Arthur Lawson went through such rare private affairs as he chose to do under his own roof, and talking with his employer so easily that anyone looking on would have thought them equals. It was a relation in which Arthur Lawson delighted; for in truth, of the many things he despised, he despised most that alien habit around him of making rank dependent upon wealth. And among all the things he admired, efficiency at a job, and particularly at this kind of job, stood very high. Highest of all stood the arts and learning.

There was a battle impending, and time, time, time—time and exactitude, were the conditions of victory. So Lawson was brief, and very much to the point.

"Guy," he said, "have you ever heard of Dow's Patent?"

"The Television people?" said Guy. "Yes."

"Do you know what they are?"

"No."

"Well, that doesn't matter. What you have got to get on to is this. Have you got a note-book? Don't put it down *en clair*—use whatever code you're using just now."

Guy des Cuoyes faintly smiled, as young employed men will when they are told by their employers something which they were taking for granted anyhow. He pulled out his little book and his pencil. Lawson continued.

"First: find out who really *is* Dow's. Some say it's independent, some say Reynier's have got it. It may be something between the two. Find out exactly how it stands. Secondly: buy it."

Guy des Cuoyes, lounging back in the deep chair, slightly raised his eyebrows, as though he might want to ask a question.

"Buy it," went on Lawson emphatically. "And on any terms. Offer anything you like."

Guy began to speak.

"No," interrupted Lawson. "Don't let's waste any time over that. If they name a price, pay it. If they want you to name a price, use your judgement, and clap fifteen per cent. on top of what you think they are expecting. Get the thing in writing, and bring it back to me. . . . But listen here, Guy"—and Arthur Lawson leant forward, half frowning—"I've got to have the thing in writing by to-morrow, Monday, night. Here. Before dinner—at about this hour. There's not a moment to be lost. You'd better set to work to-night, and be

at it first thing to-morrow. Wait a minute; then there's something else quite different. Do it after, but do it as soon as ever you can. Find out as much as possible about Durrant's Television and the contract. How far they've gone. That's all. . . . No, that's not all," he said, relaxing again. "I'll tell you where you come in. There's five hundred for you, in notes, when you bring me the bit of paper from Dow's, and five hundred more when all my plan is completed—so now you know."

It was four times more than Guy had ever had before, even for the biggest job, and if he had ever allowed himself to show the least sign of surprise, he would have done so then. But he did not. He took it as calmly as he took all things. For he met all this with his superb indifference. They passed apparently unheeded over that large blonde head, with its dull, contented expression, so empty to the onlooker and so full within.

"There," said Lawson, getting up; and Guy got up, more slowly, with him. "That's really all. Now you know, and we needn't talk any more."

"That's all right," said Guy, in the tone of a man conferring a favour, and shaking hands as warmly as self-respect and the Public School tradition would admit. He sauntered out, waiting for the man in livery to come and open the front door for him, and then proceeded with magnificent leisure down the slopes of Mayfair.

On the next day, Monday, there came at the expected hour the expected message, and immediately afterwards the expected man, to Lawson House—for I am sorry to say that Lawson had changed its old name; but after all, he had twenty times the wealth of the old owner.

Des Cuoyes brought with him, loose in his pocket, with proper nonchalance, a scrap of paper in another man's handwriting, and clipped on to it a full page of typewritten statement which was signed. He sank down again into that familiar low chair, and Arthur Lawson, standing up on the rug, read both the documents which he had been given. The first, in the unknown handwriting, he glanced at to see that it was what he wanted, and nodded with a firm satisfaction upon his thin-pressed lips.

Then he read carefully the typewritten statement. Then he pulled back a small Meissonier to the left of the mantelpiece (Meissoniers had come into fashion again). It covered the door of a small cupboard, such as those in which careful men keep their cigars for warmth and for dryness. Therein also Arthur Lawson kept a supply of cigars going—and occasionally other things. Thence he took an envelope, opened it, verified the notes, handed them over to Guy des Cuoyes, and Guy des Cuoyes, not to be outdone in courtesy, actually got up from his chair and as he took the envelope said: "Thank you."

"You've done that job well," said Arthur Lawson.

"Thank you," said Guy, sinking back into his chair.

"What is he like?" said Arthur Lawson.

"He's one of those funny men one never hears of—what? He lives in a huge big house in Bayswater, and he's always buying things. He's got a sort of collection, a sort of Zoo. I heard all about him. He was the man who got stung for the Hegguy Gyroscope, but he got home again on the Bailen Deep-Sea apparatus. That did well, you know. And then he was three screens behind the Palatine Group Hotels for a short time. I don't know what he got out of that. He's always got about a thousand irons in the fire."

"I mean, what does he look like?" said Lawson.

“Oh, just fat,” drawled Guy. “Like a pig—what?”

“There was no question of Reynier’s?”

Guy wagged his head slowly in negation. “Never had been,” he said. “He knew his market, he was waiting for the top of it. Durrant’s thought they were sure of it, they were in no hurry.”

“We were,” said Arthur Lawson quietly.

“Yes,” said Guy.

“I heard another thing,” said Guy. “Durrant’s are going to approach Reynier’s to-morrow, and make them an offer for this Dow’s Patent. . . . Great sport—what?”

Lawson screwed his eyebrows together, trying to make out the signature on the written memorandum before him.

“He writes an impossible fist,” he said.

“Yes—you might almost think he was an educated man, but he isn’t.”

“I can’t make out the name.”

“Not what you’d expect,” said Guy. “The name’s Murphy. F. X. Murphy.”

“What’s X for?”

“Xavier,” said Guy shortly.

“Odd,” frowned Lawson.

“It doesn’t matter,” said Guy.

“You’re right,” said Lawson. He folded what did matter, the memorandum, and put it in his pocket-book.

“Well, that’s that,” said Guy, getting up to go, with the ease that had already made him well-to-do and would at last made him rich.

“Not quite,” said Lawson. “Wait a minute. What about completion of Dow’s sale?”

“He’ll complete at once,” said des Cuoyes. “He said any time before the end of the week. Shall we say Thursday?”

“I’d like it the day after to-morrow,” said Lawson. “Can you bring it me here at this time on the day after to-morrow?”

“Certainly,” said Guy. “It’s only a matter of money. And it’s your money. Even a lawyer will hurry for money.”

“I only want the proof of transfer by Wednesday,” said Lawson. “I want it by Wednesday before the offices close. Send it round here—you need not come yourself. So long as I have the proof of transfer the formalities can wait.”

Then des Cuoyes, who was a little anxious for his dressing time, and had begun to look at his watch, really moved to go, but he was detained yet another minute.

“By the way, Guy, there’s one more thing, and it’s important, and it will save you coming again if I tell you now. You know Jack Williams, the Home Secretary? You know McAuley of Durrant’s?”

“I’ve met them both,” said Guy. “Williams has got some hold on J. But I don’t know what it is. I could find out.”

“I’m sure you could,” said Lawson.

“Get them to dinner on Thursday if you can; if not, as early as possible. By that time they will have had their disappointment over Reynier’s, so they will be mystified about Dow’s, anyhow. Keep a table for 8.30 at the Palatine. Tell them you want to see them about Dow’s. And make them understand that you are the man who can deliver the goods. You understand?”

“Oh, yes,” answered Guy leisurely.

“Very well. Now when you have got a table, there is to be one empty chair. And not a word about me, you understand? We shall see each other before then, and I’ll tell you where and when I come in.”

“Right,” said Guy. And with as near an approach to rapidity as he ever allowed himself, he moved out, only delaying by so much as was necessary to give the gilded underling time to open the outer door; then, once again, he sauntered out down the slopes of Mayfair to his bath, his glad rags, and his happy evening—what?

XVII

At the early hour appointed, ten o'clock, on the Tuesday morning, then, Arthur Lawson appeared in James McAuley's flat, and was shown into his study. It was a great moment for J. He was a big man in his world, but Lawson was a mountain compared to him; and by the standards which to McAuley were the only standards in the universe, by the standards which Lawson counted no more than the dust, and despised as he despised all those who held them, Lawson was to McAuley a man to be worshipped, and a man necessarily possessed of almost unlimited power.

How graciously was Lawson welcomed! Almost with the deference of a courtier, though such deference is difficult to assume by men untrained to it; almost with the courtesies of a Court, though such courtesies are difficult to be assumed by men untrained; and of course he was asked to sit down at once, and of course all had been made ready for him.

But Arthur Lawson would not even sit down. And Arthur Lawson did not relax his face. He had no special reason for courtesy, still less had he any intention of spending a moment more of his time than was necessary. He had come as an enemy, or as a judge, or as an executioner.

"I need not detain you a moment, Mr. McAuley," he said, impassively, and standing erect. "I have come on a very simple matter. Will you be good enough to hand me the letter which some short time ago you handed to my friend Mr. Wilfrid Halterton, the Postmaster-General, and afterwards stole from his person?"

James McAuley made a very rapid calculation; and I am proud to say for the honour of British finance refused to react to the word "stole." He did not change colour, either, at the general accusation. He did not start, he heard out Arthur Lawson's brief sentence as he might have heard a common greeting.

What passed through the financier's mind passed through it so rapidly that the sentence I am here writing runs sluggishly compared with the process of his thought. Yet I must put down that process to explain what followed. James McAuley was working this, then, in his own great mind, on these lines.

"This man has unlimited wealth. Therefore he has unlimited powers of doing me harm. He knows part of the truth, but not all of it. If I could stand out—and it's a risk to stand out—but if I *can* stand out there is a great fortune awaiting me, though less than I had hoped for. I shall be able to have something less than half, perhaps a third, of the new flotation. I can't give this man the letter—I haven't got it. If I tell him where it is, it will draw the lightning off me and make it strike Williams. I should not mind that, as a piece of personal gratification. But on the top of that, Lawson might then very well, when he has saved his friend Halterton, let me in for better terms than Williams would. After all, I *am* Durrant's, and I practically own Dow's. They've got to come to me. Whenever I get that

promise of contract back, as I certainly could if Lawson brings his full weight to bear upon Williams. . . . I'll tell Lawson all."

To think out all these steps reads long, yet there was hardly a pause between the asking of Lawson's question and McAuley's giving his answer. The answer was thus.

"It's no use your asking me and looking on me like that, Mr. Lawson. I haven't got that document. I haven't got yon other document. I have not got Halterton's letter to me either. Mr. Williams the Home Secretary has got them. I won't say how—but he's a smart man."

It was Arthur Lawson's turn to pause.

"You're not deceiving me, Mr. McAuley. I can see that. Will you be good enough to make certain where Mr. Williams is at this moment. You will be good enough to tell him that Mr. Arthur Lawson—he will know my name"—McAuley smiled genially at that, and nodded—"wishes to speak to him. To see him immediately. Upon the matter of the new Television Charter."

"Aye, Mr. Lawson, I will do that. I'll go to the private line in the next room—now, at once."

"I will come with you," said Mr. Lawson.

McAuley smiled again, because he did not like it. They went together into the next room, and Lawson listened carefully. McAuley rang up the Home Office.

"Is Mr. Williams in? . . . He is? . . . Will you ask him to come to the telephone to speak to Mr. McAuley a minute—Mr. James McAuley." J. waited patiently, smiling up once again at the stern face above him, but got no answering smile, nor any word. Then the machine went on again. "Eh? Is that you, Jack? There's Mr. Arthur Lawson—ye know Mr. Arthur Lawson—he's wanting to come and see ye about that matter of ours. . . . No, no . . . he'll not be waiting, he's on his way now—he asked me to let you know. . . . No, no, ye must be there. . . . I tell ye, man, it's necessary, absolutely necessary. . . . Well, yes, that's it—ye'll understand when ye see him, and ye won't be sorry ye've done as I bid ye. He'll be with you now. . . . No, he's not with me—he'll be on his way to you." He put up the receiver.

How even a financier may become an anti-Semite.

"He'll be waiting for you, Mr. Lawson," he said.

"Thank you," said Mr. Lawson, and he moved towards the door. James McAuley followed him into the passage and to the outer door of the flat. He opened it for the great man with a bow, and stood there, still smiling, and held out his hand. But Arthur Lawson did not take that hand.

"Good morning," he said.

McAuley, with the first heat he had shown that morning, slammed the door. And in ten minutes Arthur Lawson had reached the Home Office.

He had met both these men, of course, casually enough. He had divined them, but superficially and without interest; he had pigeon-holed them in his steel trap of a mind, under the heading "politicians"—the one by profession, the other by relationship; but he had a clear distinction between them in the matter of character. He was expecting a reception from Williams very different from that which he had got from McAuley—and he was right.

A lesser man might have expected that McAuley would forewarn and arm his partner; but Lawson knew better. He fully understood why McAuley had given way; why he had told the whereabouts of both those fatal letters.

McAuley had thrown himself upon Lawson's mercy—but that Williams would give way as McAuley had given way Lawson did not believe. There would be a struggle. But Lawson held the trumps; whereas for McAuley it had only been a change of masters, and

a change which he had preferred.

The Home Secretary received Arthur Lawson in his big room. He was sitting in his official chair at his huge official table, looking official with the pomp and majesty of his office upon him. He did not rise. He greeted his visitor courteously enough, and waved his arm towards a chair, but for the second time that morning Arthur Lawson refused to sit down.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Lawson?" said Williams, using the fairly civil but impersonal tone which is used by these exalted men when they are to be consulted upon very exalted business.

"I have come to tell you that, Mr. Williams," answered Lawson quietly, but with clear-cut syllables. "I have come to obtain from you two documents that you have in your possession, after having obtained them, I presume, by fraud. And I shall be much obliged if you will let me have them with the least delay, as I have a great deal to do this morning. One is the engagement given by my friend Mr. Wilfrid Halterton, the Postmaster-General to Mr. James McAuley—whom I believe I may now call your partner—promising the contract for the new Television business to Durrant's Company; the other is the signed letter which Mr. McAuley gave to Mr. Halterton promising him in return the General Managership of the new Television Corporation at a high salary named and free of tax."

So much he said, and it was to the point.

"Can't I persuade you to sit down, Mr. Lawson?"

"No, thank you. I make no doubt, Mr. Williams, that these documents are now upon your person. Be good enough to hand them to me."

Jack Williams folded his arms upon the table, looked up deliberately and soberly into the great financier's face.

"You are under a complete misapprehension, Mr. Lawson. I won't say more than that. I have plenty of experience of things like this. It is not the first misunderstanding I have come across in my life by a thousand. You are under a complete misapprehension. If you desire to do anything in this matter, I can only refer you to Mr. Halterton himself, and to Mr. McAuley. They are the principals, and I have nothing whatever to do with it."

"That," said Arthur Lawson impassively, "is a lie. Be good enough to give me the documents."

I am sorry to say that Mr. John Williams, in spite of all those years of experience in the lofty rhetoric in public life, in spite of all his knowledge of the great world, in which he was himself so great a figure, reacted to that word "lie."

It does not sound credible, still less does it sound as though I were doing justice to one of our first statesmen, but he did react to the word, and slipped. He gave himself away.

"You shall not have them, Mr. Lawson," he said angrily. And with that he put on such a bull-dog look that the issue was certainly joined.

"You have admitted you have them and you refuse to give them to me, here and now?" said Lawson.

"I refuse to give you them at any time," said Mr. Williams. "And if those whom I have the honour to advise accept my advice—and I am pretty sure that they will—they will have no more to do with you either, Mr. Lawson."

“Think carefully what you are doing, Mr. Williams,” said Lawson, drawing a step back and half turning as though about to go. “You are in a vulnerable position.”

“I am the best judge of that,” answered Williams. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Mr. Williams,” said Lawson, and he went out.

Williams had concealed no one in a cupboard during that interview; he had had no dictaphone at work; it was not for him to establish a record; he desired these brief five minutes to be as though they had not been. He was impregnable.

John Williams was not one of those impressionable men who vaguely fear the power of great wealth. No clearer brain has been at work in the great field of public life in our time. He knew all the real factors in the case: of imaginations he took no account at all.

The real factors were simply these. Lawson, as everybody knew, was acquainted with, might be called a friend of, Halterton. Perhaps for that reason, perhaps from love of power, perhaps from the mere desire to increase his enormous wealth, he desired to obtain control over the coming Television Corporation. How he had got his information, how much he knew, Williams could not guess, and it was immaterial to the issue of the struggle. Williams saw all the factors clearly, he gave each its exact weight, and he repeated to himself again: “Impregnable.” The contract had been set going, there was only the vote to come. There was no evidence producible against him. All the evidence against others was in his own hands. The vote would be taken in quite a few days, its result was a matter of course. Less than ever could Halterton interfere now, and in any case he would not dare to do so, no matter what millions were behind him, for they could not save him.

With that Williams, using a will as strong as was his intelligence, dismissed the matter wholly from his mind and rang for his secretary. He would spend the next hour in further close work upon the big police reform. He had it at heart that no one should be in future able to use the word “corrupt” in connection with that great public service.

* * *

During Wednesday the troops stood to arms on either side. The only incident was one pleasurable rather than otherwise to Williams. It was a note from one whom he knew vaguely to be a wealthy young man about town, and in touch with a good many people, asking him to dine at the Palatine on the morrow, Thursday, at 8.30. The note told him that McAuley would be there to meet him. The note hoped that Mr. Williams would be able to get away from the House for the purpose of the dinner, as Mr. McAuley had especially asked that his friend might be present. Mr. des Cuoyes added in a postscript that his object in asking Mr. McAuley, whom he had first asked to dine alone with him, was to discuss Dow’s Patent, on which he had certain information which would be useful. Mr. McAuley had told him that he had taken the Home Secretary’s advice on the affair, and it was on this account that he hoped Mr. Williams would be present.

Jack Williams telephoned to James McAuley, heard all about it, and said he would be delighted to come.

As for McAuley, when he had received, a little earlier in the day, *his* little note of invitation from the amiable des Cuoyes, it had at first somewhat intrigued him. He knew, of course, that Dow’s would have to come to them, but he had not expected the approach to come from that quarter. Des Cuoyes, of course, knew everybody, and might well

enough have interests in the property, or perhaps he was coming to speak for those who had. Anyhow, he would do well to meet him. He accepted, and in writing to accept he asked whether it would be possible for Mr. Williams to be asked too. Then des Cuoyes sent that note to Williams. So it all fitted in well enough; but had McAuley not asked for Williams to be present, des Cuoyes would have asked him just the same. He always obeyed orders exactly.

The replies to his notes reached des Cuoyes on that same Wednesday evening, before he had begun the sacred ritual of dressing for dinner. He made the Great Sacrifice, he postponed his dressing. And at Lawson's he was sent, with high rewards, to seek whatever might be hidden in Williams's house.

Next Lawson telephoned to the Postmaster-General.

"I won't come round, Halterton," he said, "but I thought I would give you the information at once. You may take it that the thing is done. I have not yet got the documents in my hand, but I am in a position to reassure you finally. Come round here to my house at ten o'clock on Friday morning. We can then talk it over till eleven. Some other things have to be done, which you will learn of. They will be final. They will be over in good time to let you get down to the House by noon for the short Friday sitting."

* * *

At 8.30 on the next day, Thursday evening, the intolerable music of the Palatine filled the air, the still worse food was just beginning to be served at the hideous little tables, and wine, more than half of it I am glad to say imperial, was standing in its shining little metal buckets beside those same little tables, all over the place.

At one of these little tables sat, in an easy self-possession which was that of a white and stupid-looking god, the admirably dressed des Cuoyes. It was a table for four, but he was as yet alone, when there came to him the two guests whom he was awaiting, and he stood up to receive them.

"Won't you sit opposite me, gentlemen?" he said. "You will be more comfortable in the seats near the wall." And he pulled the table a little towards himself, eagerly helped by the waiter. "You are very punctual, I am sure—what? I am afraid I was a little early. No, waiter, don't take that chair away. Don't fuss."

So there stood the empty chair.

"Sit down, Mr. McAuley, please sit down. Will you have a cocktail, Mr. Williams. I know you'll have a cocktail—I know what your cocktail is." For des Cuoyes did know. But he didn't know McAuley's. McAuley named it and was provided.

They talked of many things. They had come near the end of the meal. They were eating the tepid ice, and the band was playing "Hell's Bells," with all its vigour, when above the din des Cuoyes mentioned for the first time the word Dow's.

"I didn't want to bother with it during dinner," he said, "because really I have very little to say. There's a man going to look in who knows much more about it than I do. But the point is that we—that is, he, rather—wants of course to approach you about it. It's a mere matter of routine. Now that Durrant's is going to get the contract, Dow's will be working with you, of course, and I don't think you'll find them difficult."

"No," said McAuley, courteously enough, but much to the point. "You admit, Mr. des Cuoyes, you have not got anyone else to sell to, have you? What do you think, Williams?"

Honest Jack Williams thought a moment, and said: "Well, it's not my business, and I don't pretend to understand it, but I rather agree with you, J. So far as I know, and from what you've told me; and I think Mr. des Cuoyes is of a mind with us. You know Dow's and it knows you. It's simply a matter of terms."

"Oh, we won't quarrel about that," des Cuoyes said largely, and quite at his ease. "Besides, it isn't really I who can settle *all* the terms."

"Hullo!"—he got up—"here's Sir Andrew! Mr. McAuley, here's your brother the Attorney-General. Sit down, Sir Andrew!" and he pulled up a fifth chair from an empty table and set it with the others opposite.

"I thought you wouldn't mind my asking my brother to come in at the *end* of this meal, Mr. des Cuoyes," said J. rather haltingly. "He could help us on the legal side."

"By all means!" said des Cuoyes. "Take some wine, Sir Andrew. We'd just begun to talk of Dow's Patent."

"I had thought," said McAuley at this point, "of going to Reynier's first. There's still some arrangement there, isn't there?"

"I don't think so," said des Cuoyes, shaking his head. "Only an expired option. There's no obligation to renew it."

"Won't you give us the name of your friend that's coming?" said Williams at this point. But answer had he none, for des Cuoyes at that same moment looked over his shoulder again and said:

"Ah, there he is! Keep your seats, gentlemen, keep your seats." And he went up, threading his way through the tables to a tall distant figure which had just come in through the main door. "I'll bring him to you, gentlemen!" he called over his shoulder as he went off.

He was back in a moment, leading the figure which least of all had been expected in that place and at that hour by the three men, two of whom sat there appalled, hesitating, waiting; for the tall, spare, dark figure which moved easily towards them behind Guy was that of Arthur Lawson.

"Sit down, Mr. Lawson," said Guy genially.

Lawson sat down, nodded slightly to the three men opposite, as though he were meeting them for the first time, and sat silent, but with his eyes still fixed upon their faces.

Coffee had just been served. Guy des Cuoyes sipped his, and then suddenly pulled out his watch.

"I say," he said, "do you know it's a quarter to ten—what?" And he got up. The McAuleys and Williams half lifted themselves. "Don't move, please," drawled Guy. "I've only just remembered there's a man I have got to talk to. I will be back in a minute, what?" And he strolled leisurely away. Nor did he return.

Then there was silence in hell for the space of about a minute and a half.

It was broken by John Williams.

"Mr. Lawson, now that Mr. des Cuoyes is not here, may we ask why you have come? No one was expecting you."

“I have come to ask you for those documents, Mr. Williams,” answered Arthur Lawson in his quiet voice.

McAuley leaned forward, anxiously expecting the issue. He had heard all about it from his partner in a long conversation the day before. He had admired Williams’s courage, he had been half persuaded by his clear tabulated reasoning. Yet still vaguely, instinctively, his mind, which he humbly admitted to be less than that of the master mind that had convinced him, dreaded the enormous power of the wealth that sat opposite, inscrutable, self-contained. You never know what millions might not do.

“Well, Mr. Lawson,” answered Williams in a low tone, so that only they four could hear, “you won’t have them! You don’t know where they are, you don’t know who has them, it is not your business, and you can do nothing. We were on the point of arranging about Dow’s when you came in, and when Mr. des Cuoyes comes back we shall finish our arrangements.”

Young Mr. des Cuoyes strolling off with the nonchalance of an English gentleman.

“You mean, you will have possession of Dow’s Patent, and be able to go forward?”

“That’s it,” said Williams, still in a low tone, but with rather brutal confidence. “We have got Dow’s in the hollow of our hand, and nothing can stop us.”

“I don’t agree,” said Lawson, half an octave lower than he had yet spoken.

“And why don’t you agree?” asked James McAuley, with a sort of frightened sarcasm.

“Because,” replied Arthur Lawson simply, “I am the owner of Dow’s Patent.”

Then there was another silence, and the information sank into the three minds of those who had just received it as a flat stone sinks swaying slowly downwards and settles in a clear, deep pool.

The silence was broken at last by a remark still simpler than that which had introduced

it. The remark was made by Mr. Williams, and the remark he made was:

"Oh!"

As for Mr. McAuley, he said, in something not much louder than a whisper: "Well, well, well!"

"Now," said Arthur Lawson, "what about it? You cannot move without me, and I have not the least intention of allowing you to move. I don't care if Dow's Patent is never used at all. And let me tell you something more Mr. Williams. I have *proof* of what you did, and *proof* of what Mr. McAuley did before you in the matter of the two documents. I shall not hesitate to publish the truth if you compel me to do so, and I shall not count the cost."

Williams and McAuley were thinking; Sir Andrew wished he had not come. It was Williams, as usual, who got to the end of his thinking first.

"You won't be too hard on us, Mr. Lawson?"

"I must have those documents," said Arthur Lawson. "I must have them now, before I leave this room and before you leave it. What I shall do with them is my concern."

"Mr. Lawson," broke in McAuley anxiously, "you won't mind if Mr. Williams and my brother and I have a word or two together?"

"Not so long as you don't go out of my sight," said Lawson. "You can talk where you are."

There was nothing for it. They laid their heads together and in low tones Williams, still the master mind, Sir Andrew only once whispering agreement, made James McAuley understand that the battle was lost. It was he who spoke.

"Very well, Mr. Lawson," he said. He unfastened that little button which was in the inner left-hand breast-pocket of every coat he wore, he drew out the two envelopes, which had seen so much, and which came out untorn but a little frayed. He handed them over the table.

Arthur Lawson slowly and deliberately pulled out the contents of each, carefully verified them, put them back, and then held the two envelopes firmly in his hand and rose.

"Thank you, Mr. Williams," he said. "Thank you, gentlemen. I fancy Mr. des Cuoyes will not be back this evening. Good night."

* * *

Honest Jack Williams did not get home that night till well after two. On his way there, in a belated taxi, for all those miles, he muttered over and over again to himself Arthur Lawson's words, "I have proof." An awful doubt arose in his mind, as he tiptoed in at the door, lest he should wake his wife, and very softly shut it behind him; and his first action was to go at once into the side room where was the little cupboard with the photographs and the attested copies. He switched on the light. The little cupboard on the wall opposite stood wide open, and it was empty.

XVIII

At about a quarter to ten the next morning, Friday, Arthur Lawson was jotting down under two or three headings a memorandum upon a card.

He had no need to think out his plan; it was simple, as his plans always were, and he had settled it long ago. What he wrote down on that card was nothing more than this:

1st. W.H. Persuade him to take not less than??

2nd. Chief villain.

3rd. Persuade W.H. Trust.

Such headings do not need to be written down you say. You are right. It was a habit or fad. He always did it.

That done, he rang up Wilfrid Halterton, and having got him, reminded him he was expected at ten.

"I would never have arranged to come to you," he said, "only it's a question of time for what I'm doing afterwards. You'll understand when I see you. I wanted you here for fear I might be just too late for the next thing I have got to do. Come in at once. That's right. You'll find me all alone in my study."

Arthur Lawson spent the intervening few minutes until Halterton should arrive in sending for his secretary and asking her to look up in the index—the card index—under "Williams, J." at what hour the politician usually reached his office. She came back with the news, "Never later than 10.30, Mr. Lawson; sometimes earlier, but never later."

"Thank you," said Lawson. And as though he had not the best memory in London, he solemnly pulled out his card again and jotted down "10.30, or as soon after as possible," after the word "villain." Five minutes later Mr. Halterton, who had whizzed through the Park, was announced.

* * *

Meanwhile, at the Home Office John Williams was considering and reconsidering and counter-considering.

It was the devil of a business! He could see no way out. "I never did like Jews!" he muttered to himself. But it was a little late in the day to act upon that sentiment. One thing grew up larger and larger before him like a storm-cloud. He mustn't be caught until he had thought out all the possibilities. So! When Lawson said he had proof of this double purloining of documents he wasn't bluffing! He said he would spend without reckoning, and so he had. It was he who had those photographs by now!

Would Lawson try to give up the contract altogether? Hardly. There were plenty of other preliminary documents. Was Lawson standing out for some enormous price for Dow's Patent? Hardly. These millionaires like to add to their millions, but the whole

episode hadn't looked like that, it had looked like some kind of revenge—heaven knows what for! Was Lawson going to come with a set scheme? If so, what sort of chance was there of Williams coming into that scheme?

He knew the brain against which he was pitted. He himself had talked to poor Halterton of "the game." He must have his own plan perfectly clear before he could play his part. He must be ready to meet Lawson's attack at any point . . . he would have to think out all the possible directions from which that attack might come . . . it was bewildering enough, and the acute necessity for delay began to torture him. He sat there at his big table, for almost the first time in his life, at any rate for the first time in the last active political years, almost at a loss for invention. He felt that to anyone who could have seen him thus he must have presented that sort of dull, vacant anxiety which he had noticed in so many of his colleagues, which he had secretly laughed at in so many of his colleagues, when *he* had been preparing the attack.

So he sat, postponing all work, staring at the leather of the table-top, and sinking deeper and deeper into irresolution.

* * *

A mile away, in Lawson's study, the master of the house was ending his persuasion of his friend. He had already got up as though to go out, and yet Wilfrid Halterton, though getting up at the same time, had not given him his reply.

"I shall have to act as though you had answered, Halterton," he said. "I can't wait much longer. It's perfectly plain sailing. You've a right to it, and I intend you to have it. It'll be in my name, and I shall pay the dividends over into your bank automatically, anyhow. After all, you're quite willing to have the managership, after you retire; that's what you didn't want to get about, isn't it?"

"Yes," answered Halterton, "it is. But . . . but . . . but. . . . This is different somehow . . . actual cash, you know, and shares."

Arthur Lawson smiled his slight smile.

"You oughtn't to be in politics, Halterton," he said dryly. "There aren't many politicians who get nervous at the word shares—and as for cash! But I tell you again, you can't avoid it. The shares'll be in my name, but they'll be secured under a Trust, and I have told you where the dividends will go. I'm determined that you shall be secure. So that's that. Do you mind waiting for me here till I come back? I may be half an hour, I may be a little more. But I'll see that you're in time for the House at noon. There'll be only a little winding up to be done."

"Very well," said Halterton, "I'll wait."

And he sank down into the big low arm-chair which des Cuoyes had filled those few days ago, and all his long body took on an attitude of relaxation, and his face was changed too. He had been saved!

* * *

Before that big desk at the Home Office John Williams still pondered and pondered. Then, in the midst of his pondering, right across that huge dark storm of doubt and

hesitation which had so pitifully clouded him, came the stab of a lightning flash . . . . He suddenly remembered. . . . Lord! the Katanga business of the year 'thirty-eight, just after he had got into the House.

He suddenly felt cold. He also felt slightly sick. . . . By God, yes! He had been frightened to death at the time, for Lawson had got caught, and Lawson might have lost heavily. And Lawson knew about him, Williams, and that altered cheque. But when Lawson came out on the right side of the ledger, and when one month after another passed and nothing had happened, the fear dulled down, and at last he had snapped his fingers at it.

Why, in politics men forget anything after a year or two. And this was over twenty years. . . . But it was still deadly. It never occurred to Honest Jack Williams in those days that Arthur Lawson would ever be more than the pretty big thing he had already become all those years ago. Now he was on top of the world. But what was much more important was that under no conceivable circumstances—till this dreadful week—could he have thought of Lawson as an enemy. He was far too much above him for that, and in much too different a kind of world. But here was Lawson as an enemy—at any rate, preparing to attack—and as the full implications of that half-forgotten Katanga deal developed before the unfortunate Home Secretary's mind, like the threatening arms of an octopus, it maddened him.

It was an unfortunate moment for what happened next. For what happened next was the appearance of the messenger, who handed him a card and a name—and the name was the name of Arthur Lawson.

The Home Secretary just managed to control himself, and to speak in a quiet voice.

"Tell him I'm not at the office," he said.

The messenger went out, and Honest Jack Williams with his strict regard for truth, saw to it at once that his words should not be a lie. Through the little side door behind his chair, the door in the corner near the window, he slipped out into the passage by which a man can get at the small winding staircase and avoid the main hall on his way out.

How to turn even a Home Secretary into an anti-Semite.

But Arthur Lawson had had occasion to enter the Home Office before, and he had thought of all that. Therefore it was that, even as Honest Jack Williams stood within a yard or two of flight and safety, he saw the austere figure of Arthur Lawson fixed before him in that passage.

"Mr. Williams," said Arthur Lawson, "be good enough to come with me."

In constitutional theory Honest John Williams was at that moment responsible for the whole machinery of the Executive. The King can do no wrong. But his Ministers are responsible to the House of Commons; and this particular Minister had been granted—by the House of Commons, I suppose, if not by them, then by himself, after arrangement with Mrs. Boulger—constitutional power by which all manner of things could have been done to Arthur Lawson.

But it has been remarked by more than one great authority that there is often a great difference between constitutional theory and practice; and the Home Secretary accompanied Arthur Lawson like a tame dog.

He was led through the hall, an exit that he did not usually take—it is reserved for lesser men. Lawson motioned him to get into the big motor-car outside, and gave the driver an address. It was the address of the offices of Durrant's. On the way the conversation between the two men was brief and conducted in very short sentences, and without heat. It referred to the Katanga affair. And that interesting financial operation had been thoroughly recalled to Williams's memory long before they reached the City, so that in the last bit of the drive up Queen Victoria Street Lawson had time to change the subject.

"By the way, Mr. Williams," he said, "I'll tell you why I'm taking you to Durrant's. I want you to be good enough to go up to Mr. McAuley's office—you'll find he's in—and

give him this note. Don't think me rude—I haven't sealed it up. It's quite simple. It's only suggesting that he should make me an allotment of a certain number of shares when the new flotation comes on. You'll find he'll be delighted to do it. Delighted to give you a little word for me to that effect. It must be signed by him, of course."

"But I don't know," began poor Williams, as the car drew up at the door of the big offices.

"I do," cut in Arthur Lawson sharply. "I know how he values Dow's Patent—and other things. And you might tell him," he added, looking out of the window as Williams stood on the doorstep, "that you and I are both unfortunately pressed for another engagement, and that" (he looked at his watch) "I shall have to be off in exactly ten minutes. I only want a line or two—signed. Mr. McAuley knows the value of even a few lines in a man's own writing and signed."

Arthur Lawson, alone in the car, leant back in an attitude rare with him. The morning had morally fatigued him. But he was going through with it. It was like driving a pack of cattle. He wouldn't stop and let them spread.

It was not fully eight minutes when Williams appeared again.

"Thank you, Mr. Williams," said Mr. Lawson, taking a fine embossed envelope from his hand. "Pray come in, and we'll be going on to my house. But wait a moment——" He pulled out the paper within bearing McAuley's signature, and nodded contentedly as he read it. "Yes, that's right," he said, and folded it up again. Then he pushed back the glass for a moment, said to his chauffeur, "Home!" slid forward the front pane again and leant back again at his ease.

"You *won't* be hard on us, Mr. Lawson?" said Williams again anxiously. There was no reply. I am not sure even whether Lawson made a slight movement of his head. The Home Secretary hoped he did. And thus did the great financier, one of the very greatest of our financiers, conduct to Lawson House one of our most exalted statesmen.

There was little more to be done. Mr. Williams was motioned through the front door with just enough courtesy. He was not driven through it. The host proposed to lead the way, as he knew it better. Mr. Williams found himself once more in the presence of Wilfrid Halterton, who half rose, and then sank back again, as though not eager for any renewal of friendship.

But when the door of that little study was shut, the master of the house pulled a small table forward, asked Halterton to take a chair at his side, Williams to sit opposite him, and then began.

"Mr. Williams, I have brought you here on a matter of important business, and I shall not detain you long. I have asked Mr. Halterton to be here, that he might hear my proposal and what I hope will be your acceptation of it."

Williams bowed slightly, but the grievous anxiety of his expression remained, beneath the surface of his large good-fellow face.

"Mr. Halterton and I were talking over these matters just before I had the pleasure of seeing you at the Home Office. I will speak for him—he has empowered me to do so. He thinks after what has passed that it would be better that I should speak for him—eh, Halterton?"

"Yes," said Halterton. "Yes, certainly."

“My proposition is a simple one. I already hold Mr. McAuley’s kind promise in the matter of the allotment. I trust he will not think it a detriment to have the name of Schwartz and Co. behind him, and my own name, for that matter. What I shall do with that property need not now concern us. I calculate that it will provide, after the new Television scheme shall be in full working order, a permanent income, allowing for taxation, equivalent to or greater than that which Mr. Halterton was to have received as your General Manager. It will be a more permanent possession than a salary, and will happily not involve Mr. Halterton in work that might not suit his age. Leisure is an invaluable thing.

“However, as there has been a distinct promise that Mr. Halterton should have the General Managership, which I shall take it you now prefer to fill in another manner. . . .”

“I never said,” broke in Williams, “I mean, McAuley never said. . . .”

“In another manner,” repeated Lawson, frowning severely, “compensation in cash must of course be forthcoming. But I know I am speaking Mr. Halterton’s own kind intentions when I tell you that no more than two years’ purchase will be demanded. That is, the sum of twenty thousand pounds. When Mr. Halterton shall have received a letter from Durrant’s Company advising him of the change of intention and of the Directors paying such compensation, and when I shall have received the shares to be allotted to me —for which, you will understand” (he spoke these blunt words staccato) “I do not intend to offer any consideration save Dow’s—I will exchange for them my property in Dow’s Patent. Until that time I retain everything in my possession, and will not listen to any further negotiation.”

The Right Hon. John Williams, M.P., Secretary of State for Home Affairs, accepting some reduction of fortune.

He rose, and Halterton rose with him.

John Williams hesitated a moment, rose at last, and did not make for the door. He looked appealingly at the tall, dark, erect figure before him. Lawson could have sworn that he was going to hear those pathetic words again: “You *won’t* be hard on us?” He heard them in another form.

“Where do I come in?” said Honest John Williams.

“Mr. Williams,” said Arthur Lawson, as he opened the door for him, “that is between you and Mr. James McAuley. I have no doubt your conversations will be rendered easier by the legal acumen of the Attorney-General, who is a colleague of the one and a brother of the other. There is still a very large majority of the ordinary shares, and the world is all before you—or them.”

And at dusk of that day it was the Sabbath.

The End

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

Some illustrations were moved to facilitate page layout.

[The end of *The Postmaster-General* by Hilaire Belloc]